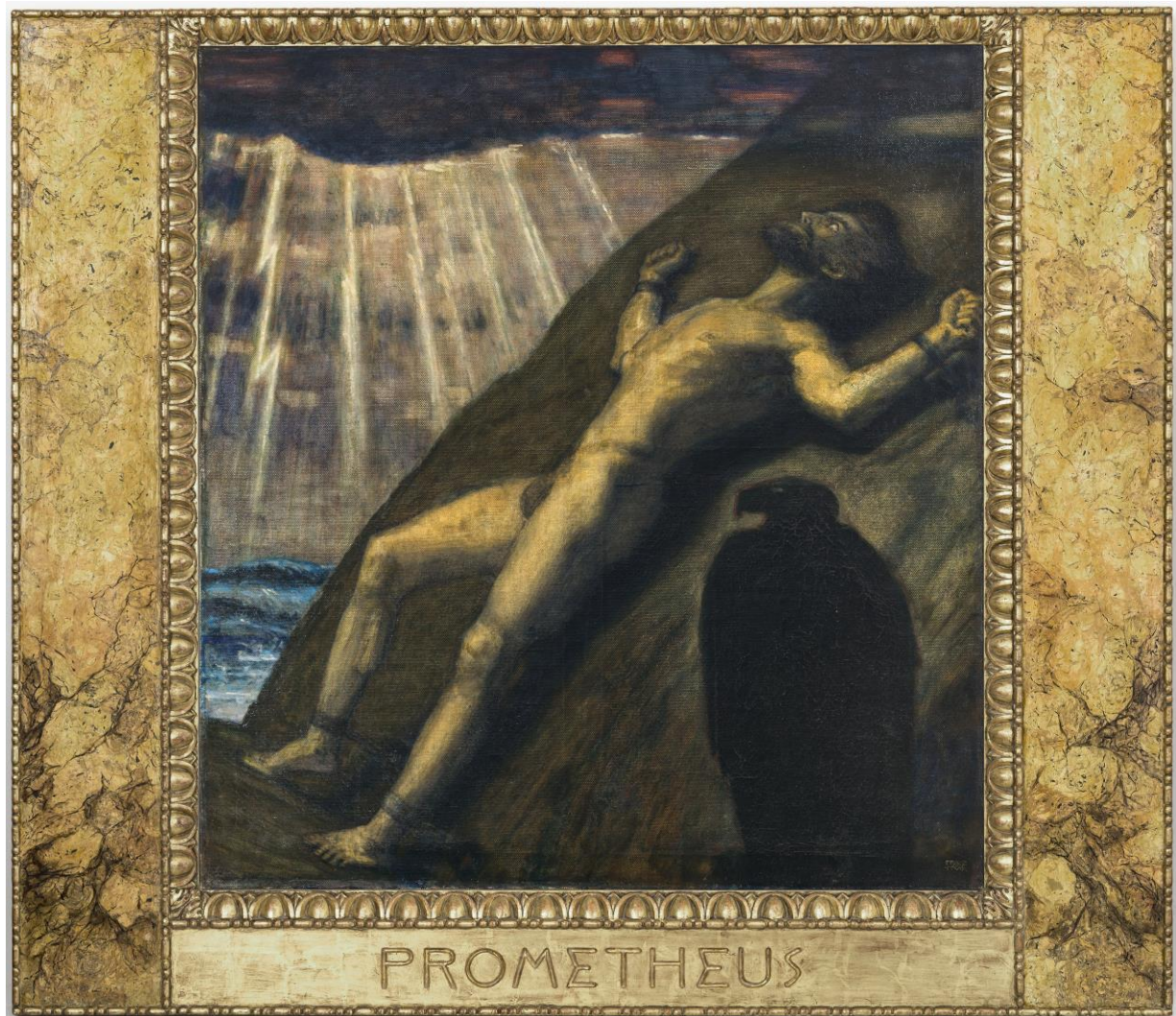


KUNKEL FINE ART

Zeichnungen, Gemälde und Skulpturen
des 19. und 20. Jahrhunderts



Franz von Stuck (1863 Tettenweis - 1928 Munich)

Prometheus, c.1926

Oil on canvas

105 : 97 cm

Signed lower right: "FRANZ VON STUCK"

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Provenance:

- Estate of Franz von Stuck (1863-1928), Munich 1928
- Mary Heilmann-Stuck (1896-1961, by inheritance from the aforementioned), Munich 1928-1961
- Albert Franz Heilmann (1921-1981, by inheritance from the aforementioned), Munich 1961-1981
- Heirs of Albert Franz Heilmann (by inheritance from the aforementioned), Munich 1981-1996
- Sotheby's, Munich, Auction German and Austrian Paintings and Drawings after 1800, December 3rd, 1996, lot 208 (with detailed provenance information)
- Vera Heilmann, Breitbrunn am Chiemsee 1996-2011
- Ritthaler Gallery, Hamburg 2011
- Christie's, London, 19th Century European Art Including Orientalist Art, 22 May 2013, lot 59
- Van Ham Kunstauktionen, Cologne, Modern Art, 28 November 2013, Lot 134
- Private Collection, Germany

Exhibitions:

- 'Muenchener Kunstausstellung', Glaspalast 1927, no. 2610
- Kunsthandlung Gerstenberger, Chemnitz, March 1928, no. 4
- 'Ehrenaussstellung Franz von Stuck', Glaspalast, Munich 1929, no. 2699

Literature:

Heinrich Voss, Franz von Stuck 1863–1928. Werkkatalog der Gemälde mit einer Einführung in seinen Symbolismus, Munich 1973, p. 233, no. 593/97

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The story of Prometheus is one of the best-known legends in Greek mythology. It centers on the figure of Prometheus, the son of Iapetus, a Titan. At a sacrificial feast shared by men and gods Prometheus uses a cunning ploy to deceive Zeus. He cuts up a bull and divides it into two parts. He tricks the father of the gods into choosing the worst portion – the bones and fat of the animal – and acquires the best portion for mankind to feast on. Zeus in his anger avenges himself by withholding fire from men but Prometheus steals it from the gods, hiding it inside a hollow fennel stalk, and restores it to man. Zeus punishes Prometheus for his trickery by arresting him and has him chained to a rock in the barren mountains of the Caucasus. Here he is forced to endure the torment of a giant eagle sent by Zeus to feed in the daytime on his liver which is renewed again nightly. Generations later, the Greek hero Heracles comes to slay the eagle with an arrow and releases the suffering Prometheus from his torture. Prometheus is eventually pardoned by Zeus and granted his freedom.

Figures from classical mythology are frequently encountered in Franz von Stuck's oeuvre. In most cases, they exemplify the contrast between the Apollonian and the Dionysian by juxtaposing measure, order and harmony with ecstasy, excess and sensuality. In Stuck's work hybrid creatures such as centaurs and fauns are often used to illustrate these axioms while gods, demi-gods and heroes are almost always used metaphorically, symbolizing the momentous, eternally valid issues of human destiny.

Stuck's rare portrayals of the heroic sufferer, an individual doomed to perpetual struggle and exposed to existential agony or torturous passivity, are remarkable for their pathos and drama. Key examples from this body of work are the paintings *Sisyphus* (first version: 1899, second version: 1920, both now in private collections), *Hercules and the Lernaean Hydra* (1915, Museum Villa Stuck, Munich) and the present oil titled *Prometheus* (c. 1926). These works are almost square in format and their frames are based on Stuck's own designs.

Stuck never openly addressed political themes in his work but it is interesting to note that he executed all four above-mentioned paintings during or after World War I - with the exception of the first version of *Sisyphus*. He was profoundly patriotic and like many other German artists of the period had welcomed the Kaiserreich's Declaration of War against the Entente Powers in August 1914. Public approval for the war ran high and general propaganda encouraged him to believe in an early victory. But in November 1918, after four years of privation and unimagined horror, the war ended in a catastrophic military defeat for Germany. The defeat was accompanied by far-reaching political and social upheavals which were further aggravated by the Treaty of Versailles. A combination of factors plunged Germany into chaos and destitution - among them the sense of national humiliation inflicted by the infamous 'war guilt' clause forcing Germany to acknowledge sole responsibility for the war and for all loss and damage suffered by Allied nations. Added to this were major territorial changes and the divisive issue of war debts and reparations, obligations which the German government found itself unable to meet.

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Seen against this backdrop and in light of other works Stuck executed in the 1920s, such as *The Fall of the Nibelungs* (circa 1920, Private Collection) and *The Angel of Judgment* (circa 1922, Künstlerhaus, Munich), the present painting was obviously intended as a metaphor for the suffering of Germany and its people. The tense, naked figure of Prometheus lies spread-eagled on a rock chained by his wrists and ankles. The powerful diagonal of his body cuts into the pictorial space underlining the inevitability and pathos of his suffering. The smooth surface of his athlete's physique recalls ancient Greek sculpture while the tension in his posture betrays the turbulence of his emotional state. The sinister figure of his tormentor stands immobile nearby, waiting to inflict further brutalities on the defenseless victim. Condemned to passivity yet stoically defiant, Prometheus will one day rise up again. Gigantic waves and bright streaks of lightning heighten the drama of the scene. Stuck's portrayal of Prometheus emits a solemn majesty despite the general tone of somberness, not least because of its lavishly designed frame and archaic architectural language. The lateral surrounds are marbled and the almost-square canvas is bordered with gilt egg-and-dart molding. A panel or socle decorated with gold leaf bears the engraved title in majuscules, underscoring the importance of the work and transforming it into a Gesamtkunstwerk. Here Stuck returned to a process that he had already adopted in a number of other paintings. The first of these important works was *Sin* (first version: 1893, Neue Pinakothek Munich). He integrated elements of the framing solution for his somber, erotically charged portrayal of the *Sphinx* (1904, Hessisches Landesmuseum, Darmstadt) such as the neutral marbled socle bearing the title into the design of the present frame.

Two years after completing the present painting, Stuck suddenly died at the age of sixty-five. He was spared the fate of seeing his work misappropriated and abused only a few years later under the NS regime.