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Karl Sterrer

Vienna 1885-1972

Bacchus

Signed and dated (lower right): 'K. STERRER. / JUNIOR. / 1911.'

Oil on canvas

35 x 25 5/8 in. (89 x 65 cm.)



Provenance

Rudolf Schmutz (1933-2017), Vienna, until 2022.

Exhibited

(possibly) 1995 Krems, Kunsthalle Krems, *Wasser & Wein. Zwei Dinge des Lebens. Aus der Sicht der Kunst von der Antike bis heute*, 20 May-29 October 1995

This striking and highly original painting of the mythological figure of Bacchus is an important example of Sterrer's interest in the human body that dominated his *oeuvre* during the later years of the First World War, into the early 1920s. Liberated from the social constraints of the old Habsburg Monarchy as the war broke down the old taboos, Sterrer gave free rein to his fascination with the human form, also seen in many of his female nudes of this period. Bacchus, the Roman god of wine is also called Dionysus in Roman mythology. The name Bacchus originates from the word for berries, *bacca*; demonstrating his connection with wine and grapes. He was known for his *Bacchanalia*, festivals which induced intoxication, ecstasy and freedom through wine, music and frenzied dance. Here we see Bacchus smiling whilst watching two of his followers lost in a swirling dance, the woman's head thrown back in ecstasy.

Sterrer's work from this highly prolific period and his interest in the depiction of the human body recalls the work of Ferdinand Hodler and his celebrated Symbolist paintings, such as *Die Nacht* (1889), which were shown at the exhibition of the Vienna Secession in 1904 where the young Karl might have admired them.

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Sterrers figures show a characteristically vivid and almost sculptural character. Indeed, the art of sculpting made a lasting impression on Sterrer who, in his early youth, would often assist his father, the sculptor Karl Sterrer the Elder (1844-1918). During several visits to Italy between 1910 and 1911 he eagerly studied Michelangelo's work and was profoundly influenced by the monumentality of the Florentine master's large-scale mural paintings.

Karl Sterrer graduated from the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna in 1907, having studied under Alois Delug and Christian Griepenkerl. From early on, his work was influenced by Anselm Feuerbach and the Munich Secession. In 1908, he received the prestigious *Prix de Rome* before undertaking trips through Europe including Switzerland, France, Spain and Germany. Around 1910, Sterrer was one of the first Austrian artists to be interested in the early manifestations of German Expressionism. In 1911 he was made a member of the *Wiener Künstlerhaus* (until 1931) and received – among others – the *Kaiserpreis* in 1914 for his monumental *Holy Family*, executed in 1913. From 1915, Sterrer worked as an official war painter, traveling to the Russian and Italian frontlines where he mainly painted and drew aviators and portraits of fighter pilots, as well as posters for war bonds. A certain formal rigour and earnestness is particularly evident in his wartime portraiture at this time. From 1921, he taught at the Vienna Academy and was twice appointed its director with Leopold Hauer, Hans Fronius, Rudolf Hausner, Karl Glatt and Max Weiler among his students. In 1957 (when he was seventy-two years old), he was awarded the Great Austrian State Prize for Fine Arts, as a long overdue tribute to his early career. Apart from his nudes and portraits, Sterrer painted a large number of landscapes, which exhibit a more lyrical character reminiscent of German Romanticism. His works are shown in the collections of the Belvedere, Vienna, Dresden State Galleries, and Carnegie Institute, Pittsburgh, where he exhibited regularly in the 1920s and was – together with Henri Matisse and Glyn Philpot (fig. 3-4) – a member of the Jury of Award for the 29th International Exhibition of Modern Painting in 1930, then the most important annual exhibition of modern art in the USA.

The work will be included in the Karl Sterrer catalogue raisonné by Prof. Josef Seiter currently in preparation