

Alexander Rothaug, *Centaur Abducting a Nymph*
1870 - Vienna - 1946

oil on panel, *circa* 1905
19 ½ by 35 inches (49.5 by 89 cm)
signed at the upper right: 'ALEXANDER ROTH AUG'

provenance: Hugo Arnot Gemälde, Vienna;
Private collection, Vienna;
sale Dorotheum, Vienna, March 16, 2009, no. 1;
Auktionhaus im Kinsky, Vienna, June 23, 2009, no. 62;
Private collection

note: Born into a family of artists, including his father, his first teacher, and his older brother, Leopold, Alexander Rothaug (fig. 1) was active as a painter, stage designer, and illustrator in both Austria and Germany. He trained first in sculpture at the Vienna Academy of Fine Arts but in 1885 switched to painting, studying especially with the orientalist painter Leopold Carl Müller. Following Müller's death in 1892, Rothaug went to Munich working primarily as a prolific magazine illustrator and had his first public exhibitions, but most importantly during the time spent in Munich he studied the work of the popular and sensational painter Franz von Stuck (1863-1928). Following in that master's diction, Rothaug produced a great many mythological and literary subjects as well as an occasional religious one, episodes from Wagner's Ring Cycle, and his own inventive allegories, costumes for operas and imaginary portraits of historical figures (figs. 2a -j). The artist, after travels to Italy, Spain, and Dalmatia was back in Vienna by 1897, where his work was exhibited and he became active in various artistic organizations. He practiced a kind of imaginative, heroic style in bright colors that combined elements of classicism, *Jugendstil* (art nouveau) and symbolism and was very suitable for the many large-scale decorations he produced for theaters, hotels, spas, and churches. As Gunther Martin observed, "Rothaug painstakingly depicted plump women and masculine musculature in motifs taken from classical mythology and turned into scenes of barbarian savagery."¹ There was also often an element of malicious humor in his depictions of the ancient subjects, and his focus on the aggressive, sexual relationship between men and women seems appropriate to the home city of Sigmund Freud. He was a master draughtsman and in 1933 even wrote a treatise on the depiction of the human body, *Statics and Dynamics of the Human Body*.

The credit for popularizing the subject of centaurs in the late 19th century goes to the Swiss symbolist Arnold Böcklin (1827-1901), who may have been inspired by Rubens, but in any case in 1873 exhibited in Munich an impressive large *Battle of the Centaurs* (fig. 3a). He then went on to paint and sketch other original centaur compositions as well (figs. 3b- d). Böcklin's work in turn inspired several scenes of lustful, combative, and decorative centaurs by von Stuck (figs. 4a- d), and this laid the basis for Rothaug's own devotion to the subject, and he produced a number of centaur paintings (figs. 5a-e). In classical mythology there are two major cases of abduction by centaurs. One is the abduction of Deineria, the wife of Hercules, by the centaur Nessus, who was then killed by Hercules. This abduction was the subject of one of Böcklin's paintings (fig. 3d). The other more frequent tale is that of the princess Hippodamia to whose wedding the centaurs had been invited but became intoxicated, and one of them, Eurytus, attempted to carry off the bride leading to the epic battle of the centaurs and humans. This latter abduction subject is sometimes given as the title of this painting, but as there is no wedding party and three other nymphs can be seen dancing in the background, the scene Rothaug chose to paint is best described

simply as *Centaur Abducting a Nymph*. Rothaug's grinning centaur has found a unique way of holding on to his prey by clasping the braids of her hair in his hands. Her rather violent reaction, obscuring her face, could suggest that Rothaug, whose composition is decidedly three dimensional, also knew such famous sculptural prototypes as the much copied sixteenth-century bronze by Giambologna (fig. 6a) or the Carrier-Belleuse of the 1870s on which the young Rodin collaborated (fig. 6b). Rothaug had carefully studied not only human anatomy but also the movement and attitudes of horses (fig. 7), which contributes to the immediacy of his presentation. As he often did, the painter made a small preliminary study or reduction of the composition on cardboard (fig. 8).²

Also typical of Rothaug, is that, in the manner of von Stuck (fig. 9a), he designed individual frames to complement the subjects of his paintings (fig. 9b). In this case (fig. 9c) a classical construction of golden columns is topped by a frieze of dancing nymphs and fauns which takes up the motif within the painting and adds a jaunty air to create what in German is called a *gesamtkunstwerk* (total work of art).

¹ Quoted in on line text by J.Belenger, "The Mythological Art of Alexander Rothaug," *Renegade Tribune*, April 27, 2017, p. 4.

² Sold Kunstauktionen Hassfurth, Vienna, October 24, 2011, no. 22, (4.9 x 9.1 in)