

Hans Thoma, *Wundervogel*

oil on canvas
31 5/8 by 37 1/2 inches (80.5 by 95.5 cm.)
signed with monogram and dated lower right: 'HT/ 1917'

provenance: Paul and Beth von Bleichert, Leipzig, probably acquired from the artist in 1917;
Paul and Beth von Bleichert, Zurich, late 1920s;
Thence by family decent until 2014

note: Hans Thomas was born on October 2, 1839 in the Black Forest region of Germany in the town of Bernau.¹ He was the son of a miller, craftsman and small land holder and studied briefly as a lithographer in Basle in 1854, before being apprenticed to a watchcase painter in Furtwangen. Returning home the same year, he started to draw and paint in his spare time. In 1859 he enrolled at the Kunstschule in Karlsruhe, where he studied until 1866 with Ludwig Des Coudres and the landscape painter Johann Willhelm Schirmer, by whom he was especially influenced. He spent his summer vacations drawing and painting in Bernau, and his landscapes, portraits and genre pictures from this time record his transition from amateur painter to accomplished artist.

In the autumn of 1866 Thoma moved to the Düsseldorf Akademie. Here, he met the painter Otto Scholderer, who introduced him to modern French art. In 1868, Scholderer took Thoma to Paris, where they were able to visit Gustav Courbet, whom Scholderer knew. Courbet's work impressed Thoma deeply. After his return to Karlsruhe, the influence of Thoma's visit to Paris is visible in his work. His portraits from this time are outstanding and not only recall the example of Courbet, but also that of such Old Masters as Piero della Francesca, Andrea Mantegna, and Lucas Cranach I, one of Thoma's favorite painters.

In 1870 Thoma exhibited paintings in Karlsruhe, but with little success. He then moved to Munich, where he became a fringe member of the circle of artists around the painter Wilhelm Leibl. While here he married Cella Barteneder, who had been his pupil. For a time, Thoma shared a studio with Wilhelm Trübner. Although Thoma maintained close links with Munich until at least 1876, it became obvious that the atmosphere of exclusive aestheticism that surrounded the Leibl circle did not suit him. He became interested in mythology and symbolism and especially the work of Arnold Böcklin. In Rome in 1874 he showed an affinity with the painting of Hans von Marées, whose influence endured in such later works as *Archers and Horsemen* (1887; Frankfurt am Main, Städelsches Kunstinstitut). From 1876 to 1899 Thoma lived in Frankfurt

¹ Biographical information taken from Eberhard Ruhmer, *The Grove Dictionary of Art*.

am Main, achieving only modest public success but making fruitful contacts with like minded artists. Here patrons offered him commissions for work on a larger scale, including a number of murals, such as the series of compositions on subjects from the Niebelung legend (1882; now Frankfurt am Main, Städelsches Kunstinstitut). Thoma's subject matter became more literary and his work moved closer in style to that of Böcklin. Thoma enjoyed increasing popular success, especially at the Munich Kunstverein exhibition of 1890. He was honored by both traditional and avant-garde groups of artists, being made an honorary member of the Munich Akademie and, in 1892, invited to exhibit paintings with the Munich Secession. In 1898 he was given an honorary professorship at the Berlin Akademie and, on his return to Karlsruhe in 1899, he became director of the Kunsthalle. Thereafter he exhibited frequently, mainly in Karlsruhe, Frankfurt and Berlin, and publications about him proliferated. In 1909 a Hans-Thoma-Museum opened within the Karlsruhe Kunsthalle. Thoma died in Karlsruhe on November 7, 1924.

Thoma's symbolist works are often suffused with his religious and spiritual view of nature and humanity. 'I was familiar with the Bible, and Nature often spoke to me as if in the words of a Psalm', he once commented.² It was following his meeting with Arnold Böcklin (1827-1901) in Munich in 1871 that Thoma's art developed away from objective realism towards a more symbolic interpretation of nature. From this time onward his paintings become progressively more literary.

In 1877 Thoma moved to Frankfurt, where he stayed until 1899. This was the most productive period of his career. In 1890, Thoma exhibited at the Munich Kunstverein and was recognized for his achievements by both traditional and avant-garde groups of artists. He was made an Honorary Member of the Munich Academy and an invitation to contribute to an exhibition of the Munich Secession followed in 1892.

Hans Thoma painted the motif of the "Wundervogel" (magic bird) for over forty years, from 1876 to 1917.³ The "Wundervogel" seems for the painter to be a symbol of friendship: he gave one drawing to his painter friend Philipp Roth in 1901 as a birthday present, and also his friend Henry Thode was in the possession of a "Wundervogel" painting.⁴

This fantastical creature with its wide wings and long tail, flying the skies in its iridescent colors, also may symbolize the freedom of artistic fantasy. In addition, Thoma was fascinated of the phenomena of flying. During this period of early aviation Thoma wrote, *In my paintings and in their space one should be able to fly.*⁵ The "Wundervogel" depicts floating in space and the feeling and desire for freedom.

² H.E Busse, *Hans Thoma, Sein Leben in Selbstzeugnissen, Briefen und Berichten*, Berlin 1942, p. 33.

³ Thoma painted two "Wundervogel" paintings in 1917: aside from this painting, another one was in the possession of Thoma himself. It was exhibited in 1922 in the National Galerie in Berlin. See Ludwig Justi, *Thoma Ausstellung. Gemälde von Hans Thoma aus deutschem Privatbesitz ausgestellt 1922 in der National Galerie. Betrachtungen und Verzeichnis*, exhib. cat., Berlin 1922, p.150, cat. no, 188.

⁴ See Bruno Bushardt, *Hans Thoma, 1839-1924*, exhib. cat., Georg Schäfer Collection, Schweinfurt 1989-90, p.132.

⁵ Erika Vogler, 'Hans Thoma - seine Grafik', in Museumsgesellschaft Kronberg im Taunus (ed.), *Hans Thoma in Frankfurt und im Taunus*, Frankfurt 1983, p.111.