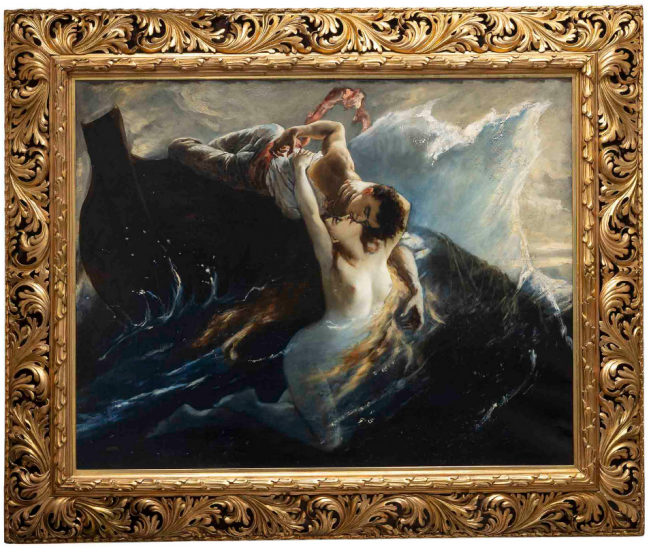

OIL PAINTING GUSTAV WERTHEIMER "KISS OF THE SIREN" 1879

Gustav Wertheimer, "Kiss of the siren", signed and dated on the original frame, 1879

Dimensions	142 × 110 cm

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Gustav Wertheimer studied at the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna under Hans Makart and continued his training at the Academy of Fine Arts in Munich under Wilhelm von Diez. After initial successes in Vienna—particularly at the 1873 World's Fair—he lived in Paris part-time from 1874 and then permanently from 1881. At the same time, he continued to exhibit regularly in Vienna and Munich. In 1883, he was awarded a gold medal at the International Art Exhibition in Amsterdam; further internationally recognized honors followed at the Expositions Universelles in Paris in 1889 and 1900.

In his early creative phase, Wertheimer was strongly influenced by his teacher Makart. However, artistic exchanges with the lively Paris art scene soon enabled him to establish his own style. By 1878 at the latest, he has been acquainted with the famous French painter Suzanne Valadon, who modelled for him on several occasions and is likely to have been a lasting source of inspiration.

In the same year, Wertheimer presented a small oil painting entitled “Der Welle Umarmung” (The Wave's Embrace) at the Künstlerhaus Wien – a work that already refers to one of his central themes: the mythical siren who lures the unsuspecting sailor to his doom with an intoxicating kiss. At the end of 1878, Wertheimer announced that he was working on a large-format painting entitled “Susanna.” In 1882, he finally exhibited the work “La baiser de la sirène” at the Paris Salon, where it immediately attracted attention. The painting was shown in Munich in 1883 and in the United States in 1886, where it was also sold. Today, “The Kiss of the Siren” resides in the Indianapolis Museum of Art.

In terms of style and composition, this painting can be seen as a developmental step between “The Wave Embrace” (1878) and “La baiser de la sirène” (1882). Wertheimer experimented here primarily with the position of the boat and the posture of the main figures. The scene is dramatically condensed: the sailor's hands are convulsively curved, his body unnaturally twisted, his face a mask-like void – completely under the spell of the siren. She, in turn, is completely fixated on her goal: her slightly open mouth barely touches the lips of the doomed man, while her eyes avoid his gaze. With a firm grip, she pulls him into the dark depths of the sea. Her chestnut-brown hair shimmers between gold and black depending on the light – an interplay of sun and water. In this work, Wertheimer placed particular emphasis on the positioning and posture of the figures and the rising movement of the ocean wave.

Apart from the title of the work and a stamp from a Viennese canvas maker, there are no references to previous exhibitions on the back of the frame and canvas. It is possible that Wertheimer saw Suzanne Valadon not only as a model

but also as a personal muse, which lends the work a particularly intimate dimension.

It is very likely that the painting was sold in 1903, when nearly a hundred of Wertheimer's works were auctioned at the Hôtel Drouot in Paris after his death. The auction catalog contains an entry under lot 19 with the title “La Sirène” (dimensions: 110 × 137 cm) – a format that corresponds to the present work



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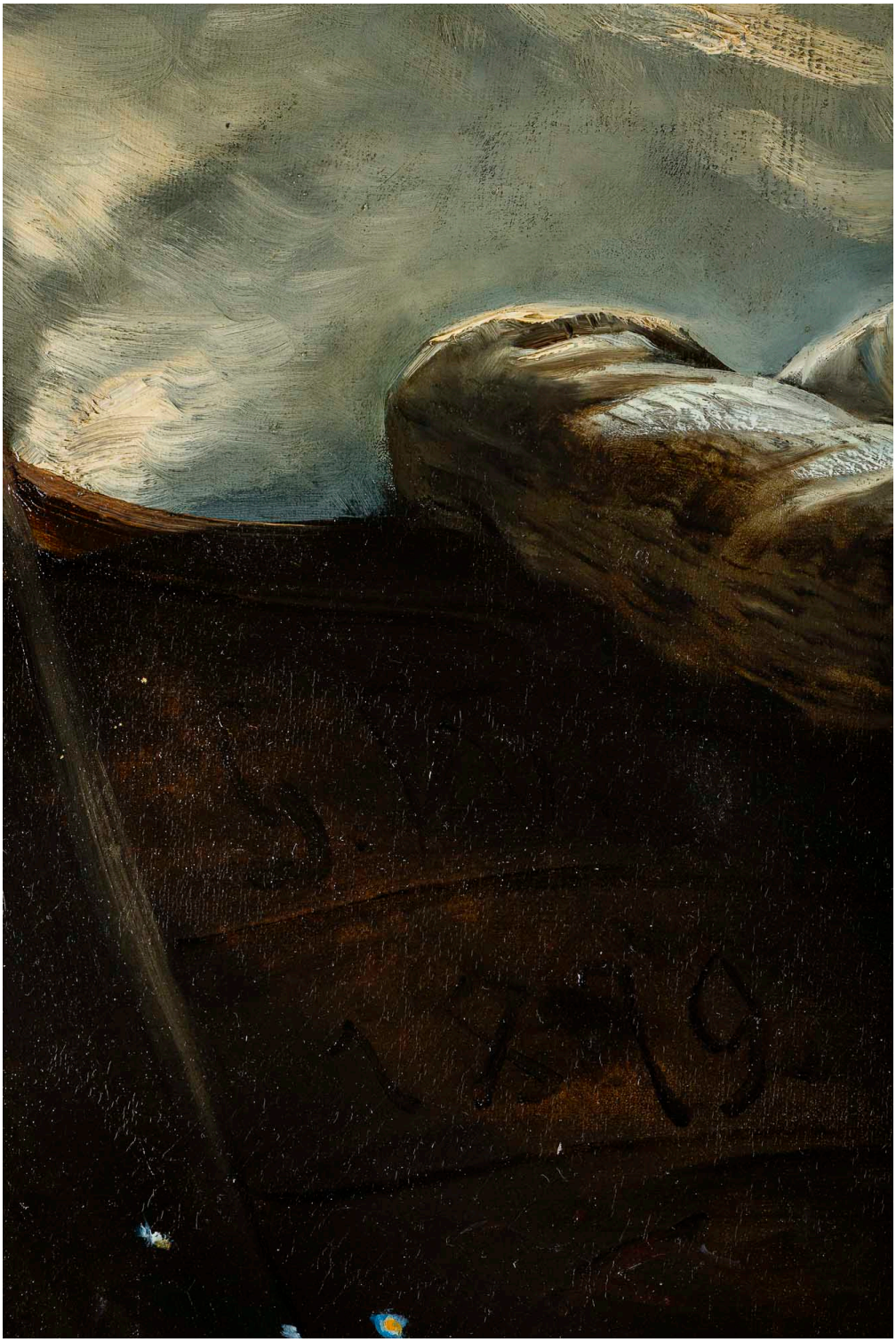

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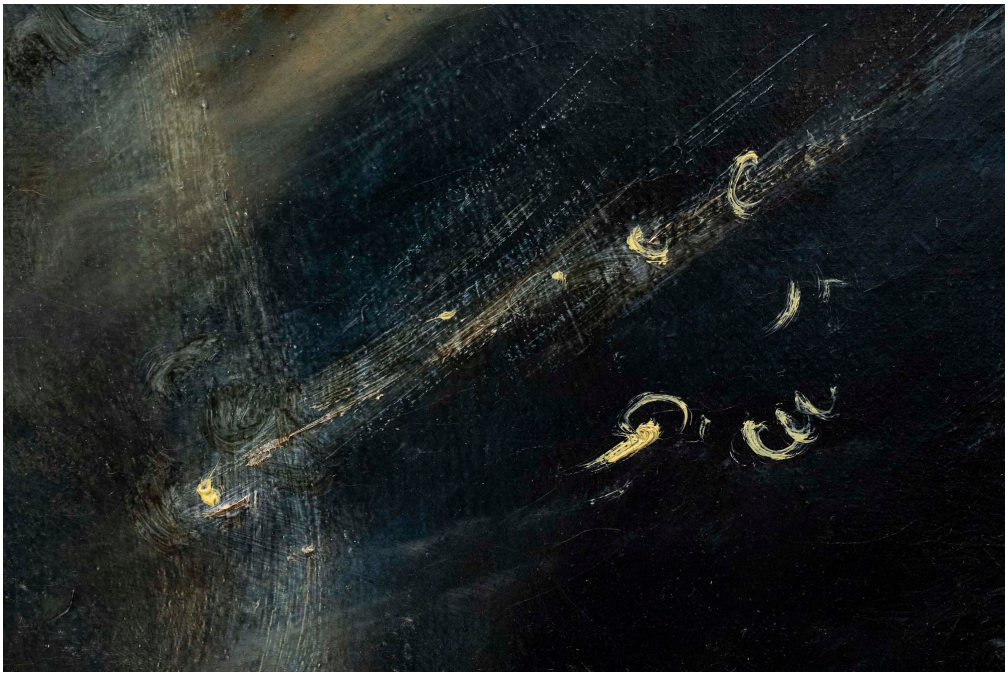

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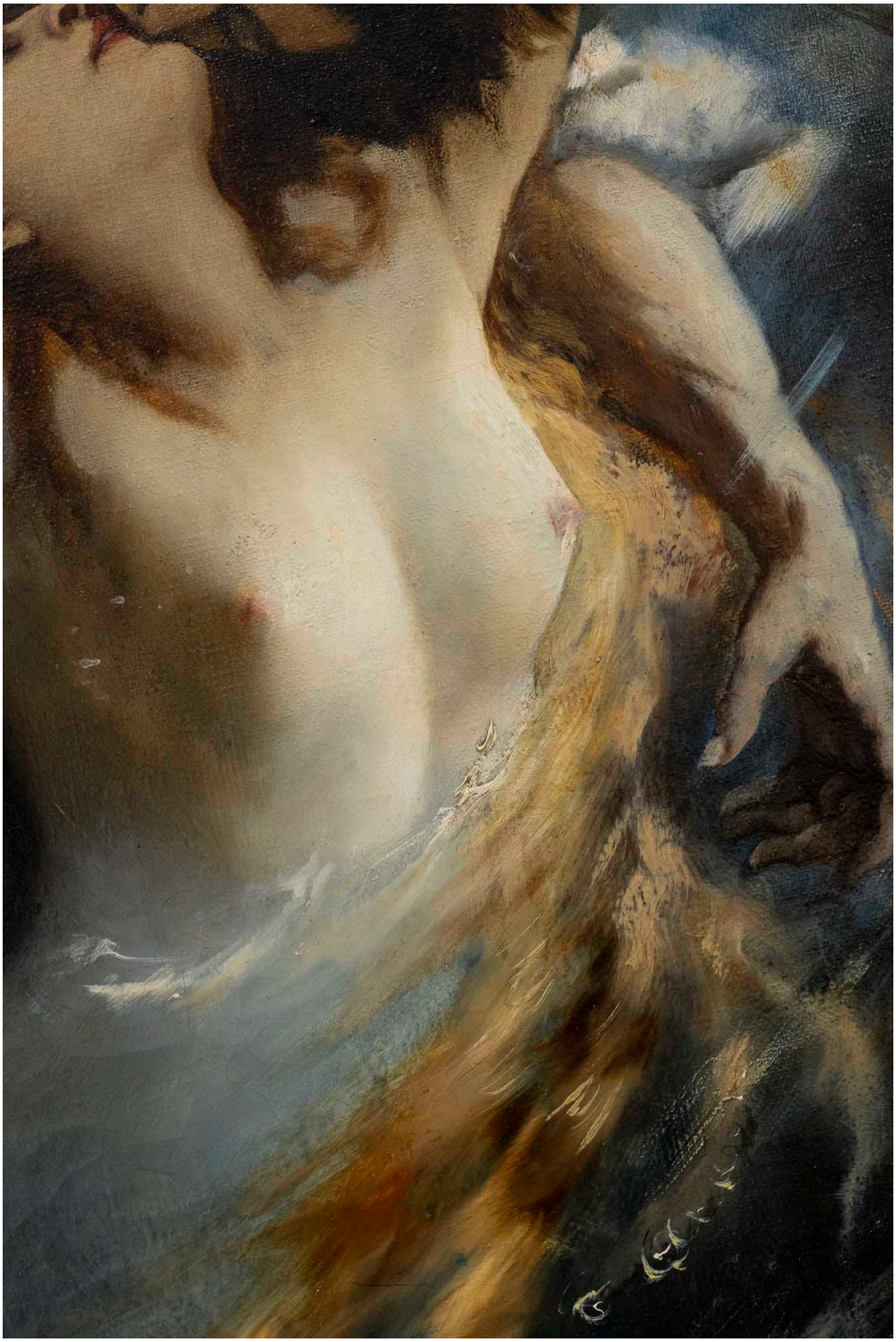

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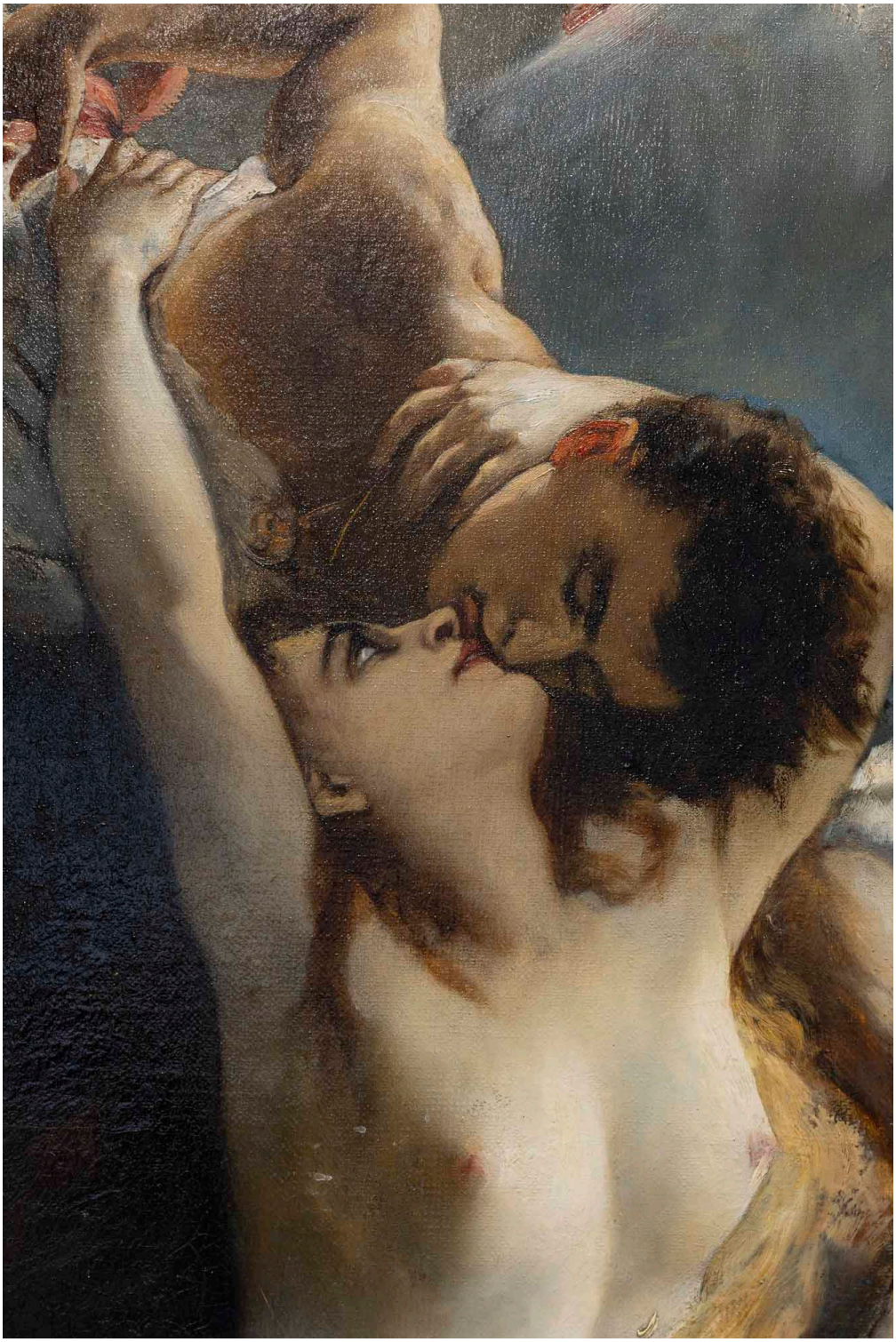

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