



The myth of Prometheus depicted by Jacob Jordaens in 1640

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Jacob Jordaens (1593–1678) was a Flemish artist who lived and worked in Antwerp, Belgium.

His painting shows a scene of the myth of Prometheus, the pre-Olympian god who was punished by Zeus, the king of the gods, because he had stolen the fire of the Olympian gods to give to mankind. Because of this Olympic fire, humans were endowed with the ability to think and feel, with which they could cultivate science and arts. He was chained to a rock of the Caucasus mountains and every day, an eagle came and ate part of his liver. Each night, his liver would regrow enabling him to endure his punishment for eternity (1). The myth of Prometheus has inspired artists and scientists alike and in medicine, has become the symbol of the regenerative capacity of the liver. Did the ancient Greeks, 2,500 years ago, know about the ability of the liver to regenerate and were they aware that this capacity was inexhaustible? This is not likely since they had no knowledge of the anatomy of the liver, let alone its functions. In their perception, it was characteristic of all gods that their organs and limbs would regrow after having sustained a loss. Like the mythological snake-monster with the nine heads, the Hydra; if you would chop off one head, two heads would regrow at the same place in return!

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