



Begun c. 1611–12,  
completed by 1618

Oil on canvas  
95 1/2 x 82 1/2 inches (242.6 x 209.6 cm)

**PETER PAUL RUBENS**  
Flemish, 1577–1640

**BIRD BY FRANS SNYDERS**  
Flemish, 1579–1657

## LOOKING QUESTIONS

What are the brightest parts of this painting? The darkest?

Which parts look very real? Why?

Where is this scene taking place?

This painting is telling a story.  
Who are the main characters?  
How can you tell?

Compare the man (Prometheus) and the bird (eagle). Which is bigger? Are they placed vertically, horizontally, or diagonally?

Look for a burning torch and a chain. How might these objects be important to the story?

Read the story of Prometheus.  
Which scene is depicted here?

## PROMETHEUS BOUND

This large painting shows the punishment of Prometheus, a story from ancient Greek mythology. Prometheus, a Titan (giant), created humans from clay, carefully **modeling** them after the gods. Unhappy with seeing the humans suffer from cold and darkness, Prometheus asked Zeus, king of the gods, to give them fire. Zeus refused, fearing that people would become too powerful and try to overthrow the gods. In spite of Zeus's decision, Prometheus took a glowing ember from Mount Olympus and carried it down to earth so that humans could keep warm, see at night, cook their food, and work with metals. Furious, Zeus chained Prometheus to a rocky crag on Mount Caucasus (KAW-kaw-sus), where an eagle tore out his liver every day. Because Prometheus was immortal, his liver grew back every night, only to be devoured again by the powerful bird. After many years, the hero Heracles (also known as Hercules) killed the eagle and set Prometheus free.

The artist of this work, Peter Paul Rubens, lived in Antwerp (Belgium), where he directed a huge workshop that produced altarpieces and ceilings for cathedrals and palaces all over Europe. This painting, however, with its unusual, diagonal composition, hung in Rubens's studio for many years, perhaps for inspiration. He created it in collaboration with Frans Snyders, an artist who specialized in detailed depictions of animals and flowers. Rubens rendered the brightly lit, dramatic form and soft flesh of Prometheus with loose brushstrokes; Snyders painted the dark eagle using tiny, nearly invisible brushstrokes.