



W. K. Schubert 87.
Schmidt
Kraus

LULLO | PAMPOULIDES

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WILHELM KUHNERT

1865 - 1926

PORTRAIT OF A MAN

POSSIBLY PRINCE KWAKU DUA III (1870 - 1931)

LATER KNOWN AS PREMPEH I

(OTUMFUO NANA PREMPEH I) KING RULER OF THE ASHANTI EMPIRE

1887

Pencil on paper, signed to the bottom right 'W. Kuhnert 87. / . Aschanti Kuaku.'

30 x 23.5 cm

Provenance: Collection of the artist, and by descent; Sold Nagel, Stuttgart, Sammlung Wilhelm Kuhnert, 7 February, 2024, lot 53

Kuhnert studied painting at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Berlin from 1883 to 1887. Clearly fascinated by Adolph Menzel's exceptional technique and realism, he soon began to paint studies from life, nature and animals as preferred subjects.

The interest in depictions of animals, which became the defining theme in his *oeuvre*, was first developed by studying exotic animals in Berlin Zoo. However, he soon developed the desire to observe and paint wild animals in their natural habitat: in 1891, aged just 26, he embarked on his first self-financed expedition to Africa, sponsored by Hans Meyer of the Bibliographic Institute in Leipzig. In total, Kuhnert travelled to Africa three times under his own initiative and at his own expense. He also visited Ceylon in 1906 and, in 1911, accompanied King Friedrich August of Saxony as an advisor on a trip to Egypt and Sudan.

Kuhnert's travels reshaped the Western perception of Africa like no other painter of his time. He was one of the first European artists to explore and document the then largely uncharted territories of German East Africa, including present-day Burundi, Rwanda, Tanzania, and parts of Mozambique. In often challenging conditions, Kuhnert sketched the local flora and fauna, using these drawings as the foundation for his monumental paintings, which he later completed in his Berlin studio and exhibited with great international success.

Kuhnert's work was notable for its almost scientific precision. His wildlife depictions became widely popular through zoological books, magazines, and even advertising. Less well-known, however, are his portraits, which are significantly rarer.

From the outset, Kuhnert's direct, reportage-like style stood in stark contrast to the academic painters of his day, particularly those specialising in Orientalist subjects. He was one of the first to provide Europeans with a naturalistic view of Africa. His versatility as an artist is further demonstrated by the portraits presented here, coming from the estate of the painter's heirs.



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This striking drawing of a young man, signed and dated 1887, provides important evidence of Kuhnert's early fascination with Africa and its history. Although the exact circumstances of the drawing's creation remain unknown, Kuhnert inscribed the portrait with the terms "Aschanti" and "Kuakú." These key details allow us to identify the sitter as Prince Kwaku Dua III, who later became known as Prempeh I, King of the Ashanti Empire.

Prempeh I reigned from March 1888 until his death in 1931, during which time he valiantly resisted repeated attempts by the British Government to incorporate the Ashanti Empire into the Gold Coast Protectorate. In 1895, the British arrested him, and he was subsequently exiled to Sierra Leone and later the Seychelles. Prempeh was only allowed to return to Kumasi in 1925, and in 1926 he was officially recognised as the Chief of Kumasi.

This portrait not only highlights Kuhnert's skill as a draughtsman but also provides a glimpse into a significant historical figure at a pivotal moment in African history.



Prempeh, last of the Ashanti kings, Ghana, 20th century.

From *Peoples of All Nations, Their Life Today and the Story of Their Past, volume I: Abyssinia to the British Empire*, edited by JA Hammerton and published by the Educational Book Company (London, 1922)