

PIETER VAN BLOEMEN, CALLED STANDAART

(Antwerp 1657 - Antwerp 1720)

A Peasant Couple amongst their Cattle and Sheep

oil on canvas
48.2 x 58.5 cm (19 x 23 in)

Provenance: Sir Henry Percival de Bathe (1823-1907), no. 37 (according to a label on reverse);
A. L. C. de Witte, The Hague, c.1930s;
thence by descent to the previous owner.

ALTHOUGH THE FAINT OUTLINE OF A MOUNTAINOUS background can be discerned, the focus of this work is very much on the foreground, which is tightly packed with figures and animals.

A hulking brown and white cow wades through the stream, her bulk dominating the other more diminutive goats and sheep. The animal is exquisitely portrayed, the sinews of her body visible under her taut skin. Sheep and goats mill around, some of whom relish the chance to lap up some water before continuing on their journey. A female figure sits side-saddle upon a chestnut horse, which is being led by her husband. The unkempt state of their clothing suggests that they are in the midst of a long journey. A donkey wearing a decorative ornamental bridle completes the group. The edge of a slightly dilapidated building and an overgrown bush frame the work on the left-hand side and focus the viewer's line of vision onto the animal study in the foreground.

The present work recalls a number of van Bloemen's other paintings, including the Hermitage's *Mercury and Argus* (fig. 1). Despite its nominal status as a history painting, the actual focus of *Mercury and Argus* is a similarly studied portrayal of a herd of animals. Three large cows, all different breeds are portrayed in varying angles and poses, thus providing a comprehensive study of the animal. A cluster of sheep try to reach the straw on the right-hand side or refresh themselves from the pool of water in which they stand. A single goat watches the scene from the left-hand side, while beyond the herd the almost secondary figures of Mercury and Argus are depicted. Much of the background landscape is blocked off by a bank of trees, reminiscent of the technique used to spotlight the viewer's attention onto the foreground in *A Peasant Couple amongst their Cattle and Sheep*.

The focus of the Hermitage painting is very much on the depiction of the animals, rather than on the mythological narrative. That three cows are depicted, instead of the more classical depiction of Io as the only cow serves to highlight this subordination of narrative to detailed genre painting. Moreover, rather than depict a hundred-eyed giant, as Argus was reputed to have been, van Bloemen instead represents Io's guardian as a classically dressed shepherd. Precision of the narrative has evidently been sacrificed in favour of the artist's real interests.

Van Bloemen was born in Antwerp and trained as a painter under Simon van Douw (c.1630-c.1677). In 1674 he moved to Rome, a city



Pieter van Bloemen, called Standaart, *Mercury and Argus*, early eighteenth century, The Hermitage, St. Petersburg; gift of E. I. Shapiro, London, 1973 (Figure 1)

where he spent much of his working life and which exerted a significant impact upon his artistic development. He eventually returned to Antwerp in the 1690s where he became the dean of the Guild of St. Luke. He was the teacher of his younger brother Jan Frans van Bloemen (1662-1749) (cat. no. 76), a highly regarded painter of classical landscapes. The brothers travelled widely together often collaborating on works, with Pieter taking on the role of *figurista* in Jan Frans' *vedute*, a role he also performed for many other artists. A prolific painter, van Bloemen was at his best painting animals, although he also produced a wide range of landscape, genre, military and history scenes. His nickname, attached to him by the *Schildersbent*, the confraternity of Dutch and Flemish artists active in Rome, is thought to be a reference to the standards and banners that he so often depicted in his scenes of soldiers.

