

NICHOLAES BERCHEM

(Haarlem 1620 - Amsterdam 1683)

Milkmaids and Shepherds with their Flock at the Mouth of a Grotto, a Drover Watering his Cattle beyond

signed 'Be*h*f' (lower right)
oil on canvas
104 x 130.4 cm (40⁷/₈ x 51¹/₄ in)

Provenance: Anonymous sale, Sotheby's London, 6 April 1977, lot 11 (signed and dated 1652).

Literature: Burlington Magazine, March 1977.

*Right against the Eastern gate,
Wher the great Sun begins his state,
Rob'd in flames, and Amber light,
The clouds in thousand Liveries dight.
While the Plowman neer at hand,
Whistles ore the Furrow'd Land,
And the Milkmaid singeth blithe,
And the Mower whets his sithe,
And every Shepherd tells his tale
Under the Hawthorn in the dale.*

- John Milton (1608-1674), *L'Allegro*, c.1631.

IN THE DARK SHADOWS OF AN IMMENSE OVERGROWN ruin, shepherds and milkmaids care for their livestock. The bucolic scene is one of industry and productivity, recalling the busyness of Milton's *L'Allegro*. Although materially poor, the milkmaids and their swains are full of vitality and surrounding them are images of abundance. Vegetables spill out of an overfull basket set on the ground; lambs nestle amongst the sheep and rams, alluding to fertility. The men and women are healthy and vigorous and their animals well cared for. The unceasing nature of their work promotes harmony and stability among the workers, and sheltered in this cavernous grotto, they are far from the corrupting influences of civilisation. Nicholaes Berchem's painting fits perfectly within a long tradition of artistic, theatrical and literary works idealising the pastoral way of life.

Central to the composition, three bare-footed young women wear rustic dress, their tight bodices revealing shapely figures, and their sleeves rolled up as they perform their chores. Two of the women are engaged in milking the cows and goats while the third winds sheep's wool onto a spindle, ready for spinning into yarn. Her pose is reminiscent of classical sculpture, as is her contemplative expression and the style of her hair, which is loosely knotted in a chignon. The wool she winds has been recently sheared by the rugged man to her left and his companion. Near them, a shepherd lies down savouring his last minutes of sleep, and behind, a pair of rickety wooden doors leads the eye towards the faint glow of fire coming from within a forge in the recesses of the grotto. Two blacksmiths are hard at work. To the other side of the central group of women, a man loads a barrel onto a donkey. In the background, a drover coaxes a cow away from a watering hole, his loyal dog following close behind.

The architectural details of the painting are indistinct, although the presence of stone blocks supporting an enormous arch indicates that there was once a large and impressive structure on the site. Although fanciful, Berchem's depiction may be inspired by elements of actual buildings and landmarks taken from his sketchbooks, or the works of other artists, superimposed to enhance their romanticism. The crumbling walls of this edifice are overgrown with weeds and the ground is littered with fallen stones. Through the arch can be seen more evidence of past magnificence,



Nicholaes Berchem, *Italian Landscape with a Small Bridge*, 1656, The Hermitage, St. Petersburg; Collection of the Duke de Choiseul, Paris, 1772 (Figure 1)



and the boundaries between what is natural and man-made are further blurred. A few distant figures with their livestock walk down a path carved out of massive rocks, on top of which appear to be the remains of a fortress. The dilapidated grandeur does not seem to intimidate the shepherds and shepherdesses who disregard it as they go about their work.

The crumbling architecture of the present painting is highly characteristic of Berchem's work and is used to heighten the drama and romanticism of his compositions. In his painting, *Italian Landscape with a Small Bridge*, in the Hermitage (fig. 1), a neglected and nearly collapsed bridge, choked by foliage, dominates the landscape and gives it a poetic appeal. The everyday activity of the men herding their livestock and heavily laden donkeys over the bridge, much like the mundane work of the shepherds and milkmaids in the present painting, is elevated by the rugged beauty and classicism of their surroundings. The sun bouncing off a statue adorning the bridge gives the scene a particularly noble air and speaks of past magnificence.



Nicolaes Berchem, *Milkmaids and Shepherds with their Flock at the Mouth of a Grotto, a Drover Watering his Cattle beyond* (Detail)

From the 1650s onwards, Berchem began painting in a purely Italianate style, defined by not only the presence of fragmented architecture and sculpture in his compositions, but by a soft Mediterranean light. *Milkmaids and Shepherds with their Flock at the Mouth of a Grotto, a Drover Watering his Cattle beyond* and *Italian Landscape with a Small Bridge* are two prime examples in which antique ruins are bathed in a warm light, heightening their romanticism. Such works demonstrate the influence of Cornelis van Poelenburgh (1586-1667) (see cat. no. 79), under whom Berchem studied. Considered one of the founders of Dutch Italianate landscape painting, van Poelenburgh's reputation was built on his signature enamel-smooth landscapes, which often included romantic ruins and statuary fragments, being among the first artists to render Italian sunlight and atmosphere convincingly, a skill demonstrated in paintings such as *Romantic Landscape* (fig. 2).

Apart from the vivid blue, orange, red and white accents of the shepherdesses' dresses in *Milkmaids and Shepherds with their Flock at the Mouth of a Grotto, a Drover Watering his Cattle beyond*, the painting's colour scheme is predominately executed in shades of brown, illuminated in parts by a soft golden glow from outside that slowly permeates the cavernous



Cornelis van Poelenburgh, *Romantic Landscape*, c.1620, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna (Figure 2)

ruin. The hazy vagueness of the grotto, in contrast to the realism of the figures and animals, heightens the enchantment of the scene. Berchem adopted his murky and largely monotone palette from his contemporary Jan van Goyen (1596-1656) (see cat. no. 89). This dominance of browns and ochre is replicated in a third composition in the Hermitage by Berchem, dating to the mid 1660s, *Italian Landscape with Two Young Women and Livestock*, which depicts a woman conversing with a shepherdess in an Italian landscape (fig. 3). Here the light in the foreground is dim, and the touches of gold in the sky are fading, indicating that the day is drawing to a close. Even the green of the trees has been muddied to harmonise with the varying browns of the dirt, rocks and livestock. The blue skirt of the woman on horseback, and the shepherdess's garments, which are identical in cut and colour to the ones worn by the young women in the grotto, stand in contrast to their surroundings. Again the figures and animals are painted with great attention to detail and naturalism, while their surroundings are more generalised.



Nicolaes Berchem, *Milkmaids and Shepherds with their Flock at the Mouth of a Grotto, a Drover Watering his Cattle beyond* (Detail)



Nicolaes Berchem, *Italian Landscape with Two Young Women and Livestock*, The Hermitage, St. Petersburg; Collection of Jean de Jullienne, Paris, 1767 (Figure 3)

Berchem was a highly talented and successful painter of pastoral landscapes and a member of the second generation of Dutch Italianate painters. These were artists who travelled to Italy, or aspired to, in order to soak up the romanticism of the country, bringing home sketchbooks full of drawings of classical ruins and pastoral imagery. Berchem's *oeuvre* is versatile and includes scenes of his native landscape as well as fanciful Mediterranean harbours and Italian ruins, night scenes, hunts, battles, complex allegories, mythological narratives and history paintings. Berchem's prolific output was estimated by Hofstede de Groot to amount to over 850 paintings, a figure no doubt inflated by numerous misattributions, but significant nonetheless. In addition, he is credited with more than 300 drawings and fifty etchings, mostly animal studies. His career brought about a number of collaborations with artists such as Gerrit Dou (1613-1675) and Jan Baptist Weenix the Elder (1621-c.1660).

Often landscape artists employed Berchem to enhance their work with his singularly charming depictions of figures and animals. He occasionally painted the staffage for his friend Jacob van Ruisdael's paintings, providing a welcome distraction from the monotony of the landscapes with his inventive characters. Berchem and van Ruisdael travelled through Westphalia together around 1650 and drew the countryside and landmarks such as the Castle of Bentheim, which figures prominently in both artists' work. Berchem clearly had a particular affection for animals and inserted them into his paintings wherever possible. This was not limited to pastoral works but extended to his mythological scenes, such as the *Education of Jupiter* belonging to the Hermitage, in which the artist gives the flock of sheep the most prominent positioning on the canvas (fig. 4).

Berchem was first taught by his father, Pieter Claesz., who instructed him in drawing. Arnold Houbraken claims that Berchem went on to study with Jan van Goyen, Claes Moeyaert (c.1591-1665) and Pieter de Grebber (1600-1653). Whether or not he had formal training with these artists, there are unquestionable parallels in their work. Berchem joined the Haarlem Guild of St. Luke on 6 May, 1642 where he quickly gained

pupils. He also taught his son Nicolaes (van) Berchem, who made a career of copying his father's works.

While it is obvious that Italianate landscapes play a significant part in Berchem's *oeuvre*, the question of when and even whether Berchem visited Italy is unclear. It is most likely that he went there between 1651 and 1653, although he may have gone two or three times in total. While there is no firm evidence of these trips, the presence of works by Berchem within the Colonna family collection from an inventory dated 1714, and a biography written by Nicola Pio in 1724 with a list of the collections that contained works by Berchem, provide support for the artist's presence in Italy. He often incorporated identifiable sites such as the waterfalls at Tivoli or the nearby Temple of Sibyls into his compositions.

Berchem's paintings of the 1650s idealising rural life, like the present work, are reminiscent of the work of Jan Both (1618-1652) (see cat. no. 67), a founder of the Italianate movement. Both travelled to Italy around 1637, where he met the French painter Claude Lorraine (c.1600-1682), with whom he collaborated on a series of landscape paintings. These compositions, incorporating travellers on a road, peasants at work or Roman ruins bathed in the evening light, were the hallmarks of Dutch Italianate painting.

Posthumously, Berchem's Italianate works were particularly exalted in the eighteenth century. More engravings were made after Berchem than any other Dutch artist, leading the French Rococo painter Jean-Baptiste Oudry (1686-1755) to muse that, 'one single picture of this brilliant artist can replace a complete course in practical training'.

Following pages: Nicolaes Berchem, *Milkmaids and Shepherds with their Flock at the Mouth of a Grotto*, a *Drover Watering his Cattle beyond* (Detail)



Nicolaes Berchem, *Education of Jupiter*, 1670, The Hermitage, St. Petersburg; acquired from A. R. Varlamova, 1969 (Figure 4)