



Nicolaes Pietersz Berchem

Haarlem 1621/22 – 1683 Amsterdam

Jupiter, impersonating Diana seduces Callisto

Oil on canvas

100 X 142 cm

Signed

Provenance: Coll. H.A.J. Munro in Novar 1854; Sale H.A.J. Munro in London 1878/6/1 (sold for 64 GBP)

Literature: Waagen II, 138; Hofstede de Groot IX, 1926, no. 36.

Nicolaes Berchem was the most prolific painter of Italianate landscapes populated by herdsmen and herdswomen and their cattle, of the Dutch Golden Age. They gained him a good reputation and procured him a good income. However, as a beginning artist Berchem showed a marked interest in history painting. One of his most ambitious early works in that direction was the *Nurturing of Jupiter* of 1648. (Mauritshuis The Hague) In 1647 Jacob van Campen noted Berchem's name down on a list of potential artists to receive a commission for some of the decorations of the Oranjezaal in Huis ten Bosch Palace at The Hague. For reasons unknown Berchem was not selected, but he found other ways to draw attention to his qualities as a new promising artist. Paintings with biblical or mythological subjects were much less in demand and usually were made only on commission. Except the court at The Hague, just the wealthy elite in the cities requested these subjects. Berchem could earn more on the free, open market with his Italianate landscapes with pastoral scenes.

This painting of *Jupiter impersonating Diana seduces Callisto* without any doubt was commissioned by a member of the cultivated urban elite well informed about the qualities of Berchem as a history painter. Its subject represents one from the series of extra-marital escapades of Jupiter, the willingly victims of which were so severely punished by Juno. Callisto was such a sinner who fell for the seductions by Jupiter in the person of Diana. Berchem illustrated the moment when Jupiter already had succeeded in talking Callisto into exposing her upper body. Soon after, he will rape her and much later after she had been exposed as being pregnant she was chased from Diana's chaste flock of maidens. She fled for the rage of Juno to a hiding place where she gave birth to Arcas. However, Juno tracked her and for punishment transformed her into a bear. She remained close to her son in the woods, where he grew up into a fearless hunter. When he came across her and aimed to kill her, Jupiter came to rescue and transformed both into the constellation of stars Greater Bear and Lesser Bear. Their story is written by Ovidius in the *Metamorphoses*, a book which at that time was widely read among the cultural elite and of which French translations were

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available. A Dutch translation in verse by Joost van den Vondel was published in Amsterdam in 1671. Ovid's *Metamorphoses* were so popular while he described the lives of the Gods so vividly depicting them as human beings subject to sin. The stories were published with a supplement of contemporary moralizing commentary, which especially addressed the Dutch Calvinist 'burgers', and many of them were selected as subject for a history painting, such as the present painting. The story of Callisto who fell for the seductive powers of Jupiter and as a consequence lost her maidenhood served as a deterrent to women not to follow her example. At that time it was considered a suitable subject to decorate the bedroom of a royal palace or the house of a patrician. Possibly the present painting was commissioned for the bedroom of the lady of the house in one of the new town mansions erected between 1665 till 1670 in the Golden Bocht on the Herengracht at Amsterdam to encourage her to a chaste monogamous life. The sensuous beauty of Callisto's nude breasts could serve to stimulate the erotic pleasures of the husband during sexual intercourse, which sometimes had difficult aspects, when it was an arranged marriage and the bride was less provided with corporeal beauty.

Berchem concentrated on the moment just after Callisto had denuded herself, thus encouraging Jupiter/Diana to take it a step further and rape her. In rendering the beauty of her body Berchem follows the ideals of his time: a perfect, almost translucent, marble white skin and plump breasts and a soft oval face with a light pink blush on her cheeks. The stark lit figures contrast sharply with the dark trees in the background. Behind Jupiter/Diana Berchem depicted his companion, the eagle. The face of the figures strongly resemble that of the ideal type he employed between 1665 and 1670 in his Harbor Views in Stockholm and Hartford (USA) The present painting probably dates from the same period, when Berchem resided in Amsterdam. Doubtless it originated before 1670, the year he returned to Haarlem. The quick sketchy brushstrokes around the eyes, the nose and the mouth also point in a similar direction, as well as the related style of painting of the drapery of the costumes which fall in rapidly painted fine folds over their body. The present work can truly be considered one of his most outstanding paintings of that period.

The noble, decorative elegance of Berchem's work was greatly admired in France in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Many of his paintings left Holland, especially in the second half of the eighteenth century, when they were highly appreciated by the French Royal court and the aristocracy. Important collectors such as Pierre Crozat and the Marquis de Marigny, the brother of Madame de Pompadour, owned paintings by him. Berchem's nude figure of Callisto inspired the artists Francois Boucher and Gustave Courbet. More than Berchem they exposed the sensuous beauty of the female nude in their paintings of Venus.

Pieter Biesboer