

Press Release
Zurich, 26 April 2007

Kunsthhaus Zürich presents 'Nicolaes Berchem. In the Light of Italy'.

From 27 April to 19 August 2007 Kunsthhaus Zürich will present works by the Dutch landscape painter Nicolaes Berchem (1622–1683). This is the first retrospective of the work of this artist, who shared with Jacob van Ruisdael the accolade of most important landscape artist when the genre was at its height in Holland. Forty-five paintings, a dozen drawings and twenty engravings will give the visitor an insight into an œuvre that revolved around a southern, Arcadian landscape that the artist himself never saw firsthand. In addition to this, Berchem's œuvre also includes religious, mythological and allegorical compositions, Mediterranean ports, winter landscapes and nocturnal scenarios. His hugely imaginative groups of figures were crucial to the later development of the irreal society games of the Rococo.

Two years ago Kunsthhaus Zürich presented the first exhibition of the work of Pieter Claesz, who almost single-handedly set the standard for still-life painting. Nicolaes Berchem was the son of Pieter Claesz, and became as skilful an artist as his father. But instead of devoting his attention to the secret geometry of a few, judiciously grouped wine glasses, silver goblets, tin plates and their reflections, Berchem – in the rolling mists of Holland, with its lowering clouds – imagined a distant, ideal landscape that he had never seen with his own eyes: bright blue skies, golden gleaming sunlight, a natural landscape that requires no helping hand and that supplies all the needs of the wandering herdsmen and their flocks. How was it that Berchem made such a success of this without ever travelling to southern Europe?

FROM THE OLD TESTAMENT TO A WORLDLY IDYLL

A vivid imagination alone is not enough to paint landscapes that will transport the viewer to southern climes. In the first place, this fantasy land must already exist in the collective cultural consciousness of the time. In Berchem's day, his compatriots were more familiar with the herdsmen and herds that populate the Old Testament than with the Arcadia of classical and contemporary poets. Berchem soon learnt how to configure expressive groups – and he took the components that worked well in his religious and mythological paintings and used them again in his landscapes, where herdsmen and travellers bring life to the hills and the meadows and draw the viewer into their welcoming universe. And the animals in Berchem's compositions are equally lively: evidently he knew the work of Pieter van Laers, the Father of Roman-Netherlandish genre painting, who returned to Haarlem at the time when Berchem was still training

as an artist. Van Laers' prints were the starting point for Berchem's own engravings. The earliest date to 1644 and soon became the best-known and, until well into the nineteenth century, the most widely used depictions of cattle.

LEARNING FROM OTHER ARTISTS

Berchem was a master in the appropriation and heightening of the traditional elements and inventions found in the work of other artists. When he set out on his career, the first generation of Dutch landscape painters had already discovered how to create a tonally coherent space by devising simple, natural-looking diagonal compositions. But the ethereal atmosphere of these fluid, swiftly painted riverbanks and clearings was only achieved at the cost of clear colours, sunlight and any real sense of physical presence. Having never visited Italy himself, Berchem did, however, experience firsthand the warmer atmosphere and more concentrated painterly style of the paintings that Claude Lorrain and his colleagues had recently been producing in Rome. The panoramic vistas of the Campagna in his own work owe their existence to the paintings of Berchem's fellow-artist Jan Asselijn, who arrived in Amsterdam, from southern Europe, in 1647. At the same time, Berchem also became friends with Jacob van Ruisdael, in whose landscapes he occasionally added some staffage figures.

PREFIGURING ROCOCO ART: PORT SCENES AND COURTLY EXCESS

Berchem's powers of imagination and audacious creativity are seen at their most extreme in his late port and harbour scenes, in which he reaps the benefit of Jan Baptist Weenix' radical new approach to the topic. In these compositions – so-called capriccios that were entirely the fruits of the artist's imagination – fairytale Oriental figures, theatrically clad players, ladies and their cavaliers in the very latest fashions disport themselves in the most unlikely manner against the backdrop of Mediterranean Italy. The dreamland of Arcadia is transformed into a modern, more up-to-date composite. In so doing, Berchem paves the way for the unreal society games of the French Rococo, the dreamy fêtes galantes of Antoine Watteau, and the more sensual tête-à-tête of François Boucher.

THE END OF THE FLOWERING OF DUTCH PAINTING

These immaculately finished paintings, with their beautiful colours, noble motifs and Classicist architecture, mark the onset of the last stage of the great flowering of Dutch painting, as it moved from realistic depiction to idealised invention. But in Berchem's hands painting still thrives in every fresh brushstroke, in the powerfully accentuated light and above all in the uninterrupted intensity of the atmosphere. These characteristics which he shared with other artists of his generation ultimately meant that their paintings stand as one of the high points in art history, that soon came to an end after his death.

EXHIBITION AND PUBLICATION

The exhibition will be presented in the historic surroundings of the Collection under the guidance of Christian Klemm, Keeper of the Collection at the Kunsthaus. The exhibition has been organised in collaboration with the Frans Hals Museum in Haarlem, where it was conceived by Pieter Biesboer, Director of the Department of Old Masters and one of the leading experts on seventeenth-century Dutch painting. After Zurich the exhibition will travel to the third partner in this collaboration, the Staatliches Museum Schwerin (1 September to 2 December 2007). The catalogue (176 pages, 150 illustrations) will be on sale in the Kunsthaus Shop or can be ordered for CHF 49.-. An English edition will be available from booksellers for CHF 56.-.

Exhibition and catalogue are supported by the Ernst von Siemens Kunststiftung and the Truus and Gerrit-van-Riemsdijk Foundation.

VISITOR INFORMATION

Kunsthaus Zürich, Heimplatz 1, 8001 Zurich

Tues–Thurs 10 a.m.–9 p.m., Fri–Sun 10 a.m.–5 p.m.

Admission: CHF 12.-/8.- (concessions and Members)

Children and young people up to the age of 16: free entry

Public Holidays: Whitsun 26–28 May and 1 August (National Day) 10 a.m.–5 p.m.

Public Guided Tours: Sundays at noon

Private Guided Tours by arrangement. Please telephone +41 (0)44 253 84 12 (Mon–Fri 9 a.m.–12 noon)

Recorded programme information: Tel. +41 (0)44 253 84 97

Additional information: www.kunsthhaus.ch

Advanced Ticket Sales

Schweiz: Kombi-Ticket RailAway/SBB with reduction on rail travel and admission available at SBB stations and by phoning Rail Service on 0900 300 300 (CHF 1.19/Min.); group rates also available. Magasins Fnac, Tel. +33 1 4157 3212, www.fnac.ch

Other Advanced Ticket Sales Points

France: Magasins Fnac, Carrefour, Tel. 0892 684 694 (0.34 €/min.), www.fnac.com

Belgium: Magasins Fnac, Tel. 0 900 00 600 (0.45 €/min.), www.fnac.be

For further information and visual materials, please contact

Kunsthaus Zürich

Diana Battelli, Press and Communication

Tel. +41 (0)44 253 84 13

diana.battelli@kunsthhaus.ch

**Nicolaes Berchem. Im Licht Italiens
Kunsthhaus Zürich
27. April bis 19. August 2007**



CAT_03.jpg
Italienisierende Landschaft mit Brunnen und Hirten, um 1645/46
Holz, 36,8 x 48,4 cm
Dulwich Picture Gallery, London



CAT_10.jpg
Winterlandschaft, 1652
Leinwand, 66 x 82 cm
Kunsthhaus Zürich
Betty und David M. Koetser Stiftung



CAT_14.jpg
Landschaft mit Ruine, 1653
Leinwand, 41 x 64,5 cm
Privatsammlung



CAT_16.jpg
Italienisierende Landschaft mit störrischem Esel, 1655
Leinwand, 82 x 100 cm
Herzog Anton Ulrich-Museum, Kunstmuseum des Landes Niedersachsen, Braunschweig



CAT_17.jpg
Landschaft mit Krabbenfischern bei Mondlicht, 1645
Leinwand, 60,3 x 80 cm
Privatsammlung (durch Vermittlung von Trafalgar Galleries, London)



CAT_18.jpg
Italienisierende Landschaft mit Figuren und Tieren, 1655
Holz, 32,5 x 44 cm
The Royal Collection, H.M. Queen Elizabeth II., London



CAT_20.jpg
Landschaft mit Schloss Bentheim, 1656
Leinwand, 146 x 212,5 cm
Privatsammlung



CAT_21.jpg
Berglandschaft mit Wasserfall, 1956
Leinwand, 88,5 x 70 cm
Rijksmuseum Amsterdam
Leihgabe der Stadt Amsterdam



CAT_25.jpg
Landschaft mit Krabbenfischern, um 1658
Holz, 31,5 x 40 cm
York Museums Trust (York Art Gallery), angekauft durch F.D. Lycett über den National Art Collections Fund, 1955



CAT_037.jpg
Allegorie auf die Erweiterung der Stadt Amsterdam, nach 1663
Leinwand, 172,5 x 148 cm
Amsterdams Historisch Museum, Amsterdam



CAT_42.jpg
Der verlorene Sohn, um 1670
Leinwand, 106 x 97 cm
Musée d'Art et d'Histoire de la Ville de Genève, Genf



CAT_47.jpg
Der Überfall, um 1675
Leinwand, 95,3 x 105 cm
Koninklijk Kabinet van Schilderij Mauritshuis, Den Haag



CAT_D76.jpg
Eselreiter, 1644
Radierung, 177 x 193 mm
Rijksprentenkabinet, Amsterdam



CAT_D85.jpg
Schlafende Hirtenfamilie («Die pissende Kuh»), um 1650/52
Radierung, 208 x 264 mm
Rijksprentenkabinet, Amsterdam