Nicolaes Berchem’s *Nurture of Jupiter*¹

The seventeenth-century Dutch painter Nicolaes Berchem (ca. 1621–1683) is known primarily for his pastoral paintings with Italianate landscapes and setting suns. Although popular during his lifetime and up until the end of the eighteenth century, today Berchem is underappreciated. Most of the art-historical literature focuses on his pastoral works or technical aspects of his drawings, and little attention has been paid to the intricacies of his mythological and allegorical paintings. Berchem’s small panel painting *The Nurture of Jupiter* (figs. 1, 2) at the High Museum of Art fosters an exploration of both the mythological and allegorical aspects of Berchem’s work. The High panel also offers a starting point for investigating his creative process and copying practices.

**Biography**

Berchem was born in 1621 or 1622 in Haarlem as Claesz Pietersz.² His father, Pieter Claesz, was a painter and his son’s first teacher. For a last name, he took Berchem, the Flemish birthplace of his father. Between 1634 and 1639, Nicolaes Berchem studied with three different masters: Jan van Goyen, Claes Moeyaert, and Pieter de Grebber.³ He spent his subsequent career living in either Haarlem or Amsterdam, moving back and forth between the cities several times. In 1646 he married Catharina de Groot, with whom he had several children.⁴ Their son Nicolaes Berchem the Younger was also a painter, but in 1672 he died in Paris at the age of 22.⁵ Nicolaes Berchem died in 1683 and is buried in the Westerkerk in Amsterdam.⁶ Berchem was a popular artist during his lifetime, aided by his ability to change his style to keep up with current tastes. Berchem’s popularity only increased after his death, and until the second half of the eighteenth century his works consistently went for the highest prices at auction, especially in France.⁷ The mannerist style of his later works made him popular with Rococo artists.⁸ In the nineteenth century, Berchem’s popularity waned, and today he is relatively unknown to the general public.

The most contested part of Berchem’s biography concerns the Italian influence in his work. Because he is best known for his pastoral landscapes with Italianate hills and sunsets, it was long assumed that he had traveled to Italy sometime at the beginning of his career. However, there is no proof that he ever traveled across the Alps, and it is more likely that he never visited Italy and instead relied on the works of fellow artists to gain a sense of the Italian landscape.⁹ Berchem did make at least one trip abroad; in the 1650s, he traveled to the area of Bentheim Castle in Westphalia with fellow artist Jacob van Ruisdael.¹⁰ Berchem also produced many drawings and prints, often with subjects similar to those of his paintings.

**The Myth of the Nurture of Jupiter**

Our starting point in exploring Berchem’s mythological and allegorical works is the High panel, which depicts the nurture of Jupiter. This myth seems to have been a favorite of Berchem’s, as he painted many different versions. There are several ancient authors, both Greek and Roman, who recorded this myth, including Callimachus, Pseudo-Apollodorus, and Ovid.¹¹ These three sources were accessible in printed editions in the seventeenth century, which means Berchem would have had direct access to these texts. Alternatively, he could have accessed the myth through the writings of contemporaries. The mythchronicles how Jupiter was hidden on the island of Crete by his mother, Ops. Jupiter’s father, the Titan Cronus, had already eaten his other children.
in an attempt to halt a prophecy that had predicted Cronus’s dethroning by his son. After giving birth to Jupiter, Ops handed Cronus a large stone instead of the baby. Cronus proceeded to eat the stone without realizing the switch. Jupiter was subsequently brought to the island of Crete and placed in the care of the local nymphs for safekeeping. One of these nymphs had a goat, who nursed baby Jupiter. According to the various classical texts, either the nymph or her goat was called Amalthea. The broken horn of this goat would later be transformed into the cornucopia. During Jupiter’s stay on Crete, the Curetes, male followers of Ops, danced and made loud noises to drown out the crying of the infant Jupiter so that his father would not find him.

**Berchem’s Nurtures of Jupiter: Innovation and Copying Practices**
Over the course of more than thirty years, Berchem painted six different versions representing the myth of the nurture of Jupiter. As time progressed, these paintings became increasingly intertwined, with key motifs and figures present in multiple versions. The two earliest renditions stand somewhat on their own, as they do
not include the many cross references present in the later paintings. Berchem’s earliest depiction of the myth is also his largest. Titled *The Education of Jupiter*, the 79.5-x-103.1-inch canvas hangs in the Mauritshuis in The Hague (fig. 3). The painting is signed “Berrighem,” an early spelling of “Berchem,” and is dated 1648. It depicts baby Jupiter asleep on the lap of a nymph, whose hand alerts us to the presence of the goat beside her. Also depicted are several more animals and a satyr carrying a bucket of milk. This is the only painting for which a related drawing survives (fig. 4).\(^1\) The drawing shows Jupiter sleeping, his head resting upon a bundle of cloth. However, this is not a straightforward preparatory drawing but instead is based on a small ivory statue of a sleeping infant by Artus Quellinus the Elder made in 1641 (fig. 5).\(^2\) Berchem’s drawing shows the infant from two different angles. In the rendition at the left, the infant still has the cloth draped over the top of his head as it is in the ivory, but Berchem removed this detail in the final painted version. Aside from this drawing, there are no other known preparatory drawings for any of the Jupiter paintings. This absence is entirely consistent with Berchem’s wider oeuvre, as he seems not to have made (or at least saved) one-to-one preparatory studies for his paintings. As we shall see shortly, Berchem had an indirect method of preparing for his paintings.

Berchem’s second rendition, *The Infant Jupiter with the Nymphs on Mount Ida* (fig. 6), dates to the 1650s and currently is housed in the Wallace Collection in London. This version is the most pastoral in that the scene is set within a wide Italianate landscape inhabited by many cows and sheep. The most prominent figure wears a striking red dress and stands with her back to us. With her right arm, she points to the valley where the main scene takes place. The young god rests upon a white cloth as he suckles directly from the goat. Jupiter is accompanied by several nymphs and a satyr. This painting, too, reveals its early date in the spelling of the signature, “CPBerighem.”

The remaining paintings are dated to the 1660s and 1670s. As we shall see, these works are closely interrelated and show how Berchem’s style evolved from earlier in his career. Since there is no established chronology for these works, we shall start with the work in the High Museum (see fig. 1). The main characters of the myth are depicted at
the bottom right, where we see Jupiter suckling from the goat while resting on the lap of a nymph. Beside them sits a man who points toward the child, emphasizing Jupiter as the key figure in the painting. Behind them, a group of figures dances around a tree to the sound of a tambourine. These figures might represent the Couretes, making loud noises to cover up the sounds of the young Jupiter. These dancing figures will appear in each of Berchem’s later renditions of this subject matter. The figure group at the left includes a lady with a wreath of reeds who leans upon an amphora from which a stream flows across the bottom of the panel. Behind her, a figure dressed in blue presents a cornucopia, which forms the central visual point on the left-hand side of the painting. The winged figure who floats up behind the cornucopia is a unique appearance in Berchem’s paintings of the nurture of Jupiter, and we will return to a possible interpretation of this figure.

The painting in the High is most closely related to the version found in the Alte Pinakotheck in Munich, which has the title *Jupiter Nursed by Nymphs* (fig. 7). Both works are small (the High painting is 8.7 x 9.5 cm, and the Munich panel 7 x 11 inches) and are the only Jupiter paintings Berchem made on panel. The works are painted in a comparably sketch-like manner, with certain areas of the paintings not having the refinement that one might expect from a finished painting. In the case of the High panel, it has therefore been speculated that it might have functioned as a sketch. In the center foreground of the Munich painting, we see a nude nymph helping Jupiter to drink from the goat, which he does in a similar manner to the High panel. Rather than milking the goat, Jupiter suckles directly from the animal’s udders and furthermore does so in a rather awkward manner, one that perhaps does not reflect the position of divinity usually accorded to Jupiter. The goat in the Munich version looks identical to the one in the High painting, as it shares all the same markings. At the top left is a group of figures that includes a satyr, a nymph with a cornucopia, and a nymph with a basket full of produce and flowers. This latter nymph points toward Jupiter and the goat, again emphasizing these figures as the focus of the painting. Although neither painting bears Berchem’s signature, due to their style and their connections to the other Jupiter paintings, there is no doubt as to their authorship.
The next painting is Berchem’s most elaborate and survives in great condition. *The Nurture of Jupiter* (fig. 8) is currently held by Adam Williams Fine Art Ltd. in New York and, with its size of 36.6 x 34.4 inches, is considerably larger than the High panel. The work clearly shows Berchem’s later style, which may account for the presence of the many putti, flower garlands, and curtain at the top of the painting. The main scene of the suckling Jupiter is located at the bottom left-hand corner. The naked nymph lying to the right gestures toward the god. A flute player is shown from the back as he accompanies the group of dancers in the background. In this version, the dancing figures have been transformed from the Couretes into worshipers of Priapus, around whose statue they circle. Perhaps the most skillful element of this painting is the warm light that shines from between the clouds behind Priapus. The large vase taking up the top right-hand corner of the painting is similar to vases in several other paintings by Berchem.\(^{15}\)

It is with the final painting that the cross-references among the works really come into focus, although we have already seen many repeated elements, such as the dancing figures. This painting, *Pastoral Scene: Education of Jupiter* (fig. 9), is in the State Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg. Berchem himself once copied the work, and the replica is held by the Prague National Gallery, while a second copy by another hand can be found in Castello Sforzesco in Milan.\(^{16}\) The two copies have a horizontal rather than vertical format but the same composition with the figures restricted to the top left-hand corner of the canvas.

The Hermitage work pictures two figures we have already come across in the other paintings. The flute player seen from the back can also be found in the New York version, whereas the nymph with a billowing shawl pointing toward the right is very close to the figure at the top left of the Munich panel. Once again included are the wildly dancing nymphs and satyrs. Rather than suckling, Jupiter here is depicted asleep on the lap of a nymph, just as he was in the much earlier Hague version. The right half of the canvas is taken up by a hilly landscape with several woolly sheep and some goats. In the bottom right of the Hermitage version, we find a large calligraphic signature “N Berghem.” The two copies of this work in Prague and Milan are unsigned.

Despite the many similarities and interrelationships between the works, as chronicled above, it is unclear how Berchem was able to create these close connections without the use of preparatory drawings as records of his designs. Although I cannot offer an answer to this question, it is possible to elaborate on the function of the High panel as a sketch and thus discover more about Berchem’s creative working process.

**Berchem’s Creative Process: From Myth to Allegory**

Unlike Berchem’s other paintings depicting the nurture of Jupiter, the High Museum panel includes an additional character: the winged figure. It is this figure that highlights a connection between the High panel and a painting in the Hermitage, St. Petersburg, with the title *Allegory of Autumn* (fig. 10). In the top left-hand corner, this work includes the same winged figure in a comparable pose, although it has gained a multitude of flowers. The Hermitage painting contains many additional elements that relate to the myth of Jupiter and the High version, in particular. In the center of the painting, a woman with a cornucopia is closely related to the figure at the left in the High panel: she has the same posture and a similarly cut garment. The Hermitage work also includes a woman milking a goat while a young boy peeks over her shoulder, figures that could refer to the nurture
of Jupiter. Behind this grouping, two figures dance exuberantly in a manner reminiscent of the Couretes. Furthermore, both pictures contain a woman with an amphora from which a stream springs. Besides the cornucopia, the main element in the painted allegory that refers to Autumn is the group of satyrs at the far right, who are transporting buckets of grapes on the back of a donkey. Due to these compositional and iconographical connections, I believe that the High painting served as a study for the Hermitage allegory, despite their different subject matters. This relationship between the paintings provides information on Berchem’s practice of turning mythological subjects into complex allegories. On the other hand, it allows us to consider Berchem’s mythological paintings as containing allegorical elements.

Annemarie Stefes has already noted Berchem’s use of myths as preparatory subjects for his more complex allegorical works. She connected several drawings with mythological subjects to Berchem’s painted *Allegory of the Expansion of Amsterdam* (fig. 11).
Berchem used his drawings of *Psyche Received by Jupiter* (fig. 12) and *The Triumph of Amphitrite* (fig. 13) as figure studies for the final painting. He reused the figures’ poses in both drawings but changed their identities.\(^1\) Stefes found that a similar process of creation preceded the painting of Berchem’s *Virtue Conquers Violence*.\(^2\) We can now conclude that Berchem proceeded in a comparable manner when preparing for the *Allegory of Autumn*, but rather than using preparatory drawings, it seems that Berchem used the small High panel to create figures that could be repurposed.

By establishing this connection between the paintings in the High and the Hermitage, it might be possible to interpret the allegorical elements in the two paintings. The allegory of the Heritage painting revolves around the theme of bounty and fertility, which connects to the autumnal harvests. This is most obvious in the harvesting of grapes and the centrally placed cornucopia. The figures lifted from the myth of the nurture of Jupiter can also be brought to bear upon this idea, as the myth recalls the nourishment and raising of the infant god. This connection between the myth and the work’s overall subject is amplified by the fact that the cornucopia was created by Jupiter when the horn of his nursing goat broke off. In the *Nurture of Jupiter* version currently in New York, the dancing figures in the back are more explicitly connected to the worship of Priapus rather than to the Couretes. As Priapus was a god of fertility, this is a fitting addition and play on the subject matter, as the figures now can function both as protectors of Jupiter as well as representatives of a fertility cult. The presence of Priapus in the New York version also shows how Berchem included some of the allegorical elements in his mythological works.

Another such allegorical element is the presence of a water source depicted as originating from an amphora. The amphorae are located in the lower corners of the *Allegory of Autumn* as well as the High panel. In the Jupiter paintings in Munich, London, and St. Petersburg (as well as the one in Prague), running springs are depicted without the inclusion of amphorae. These springs of water could be allegorical in representing a literal source of fertility as well as more figuratively functioning as sources of inspiration. Nature is sustained by fresh water, as Jupiter is nourished by the milk of the goat. Finally, the myth of the nurture of Jupiter itself has been a source of inspiration for the artist.
In the composition of the Hermitage painting, there is a strong diagonal line running from the lower right-hand corner to the upper left-hand corner. The three figures on this line represent three of the elements: the bottommost woman with the amphora and reeds in her hair represents water, the central lady with the cornucopia stands for earth, and the winged figure portrays air. These figures also appear in the High painting, lending the possibility that this panel also includes allegorical references to the elements. This interpretation would explain the inclusion of the winged figure in both works as a representation of air, but it is likely that the figure carries more than one meaning. Although the presence of the floral wreath and the many flowers held by the winged figure in the Hermitage painting are perhaps not instinctively associated with Autumn, they do fit the theme of fertility. Even though it has not been possible to find a satisfying and conclusive interpretation for the winged figure, it is clear that Berchem used the figure in the High panel in preparation for painting his Hermitage allegory.

**Condition of the High Museum Painting**

Besides conducting historical research into the subject of the *Nurture of Jupiter*, I also investigated the current condition of the panel and its painted surface to discover how the painting’s current appearance might differ from its original look. A lack of awareness that the physical appearance of a painting might have changed over time can result in misinterpretation of the image. Fortunately, this painting has been quite well preserved and, once cleaned, will closely resemble its original appearance. Most of the technical information on this work was collected with the aid of High Museum painting conservator Larry Shutts and Michael C. Carlos Museum object conservator Renée Stein.

Berchem’s seventeenth-century painting is supported by a small panel, which consists of two horizontal pieces of wood. The joining of these two pieces is visible on the front, especially in UV light, just above the figures’ heads. The panel is relatively thin and has a shallow bevel, with the center of the panel having a greater thickness than the sides. Around the edges, thin batons have been added. The wood grain of these batons has an opposing direction to that of the two panels. The batons were added to counteract warping of the two panel parts. This has proved to be successful, as almost no warping has occurred. At first it was unclear whether the batons had been added before or after Berchem painted the panel, but closer inspection has revealed that they were included from the outset. On the painted face of the panel, it can be seen that the original painted image continues onto the batons. Since the panel is made from two pieces, it makes sense that additional measures were taken to prevent warping, which would have had destructive results for the image where the two pieces join. Considering the painting’s small size, it is remarkable that the panel consists of two pieces of wood rather than one. It is possible that the panel started out as a single piece and consequently was broken in half. Further research into the wood grain of the two pieces might offer more information. Over the course of its history, the back of the panel has gained a number of auction and ownership marks. These include a black stenciled number, a red wax seal, and a sticker identifying the panel’s painter and subject matter. The black number and wax seal might tell us more about the provenance of this object, but they have not yet been traced, as there is no centralized database nor publication that collects information on such ownership marks.

As might be expected from a 350-year-old artwork, the painting has had several rounds of cleaning and varnishing. The last treatment of this object occurred before the High
Museum acquired the painting in 1980. Since the last cleaning, the varnish has yellowed. Certain areas seem to have been cleaned more recently or thoroughly than others; the figures’ hands and faces, for example, have been cleaned more than the dark areas in the background. Traces of older, yellow varnish also can be seen with the naked eye in low-lying grooves, from which it was not removed during cleaning. These are evident, for example, in the grooves in the coat of the central goat. It is possible that only certain important parts of the painting were cleaned, rather than the whole, as a quick and cheap method of sprucing up the painting in preparation for sale. However, this selective cleaning has resulted in a color imbalance, which is not reflective of the painting’s original atmosphere. More positive is the survival of the glazes in certain details, such as the cornucopia. Glazes are often early losses after a rigorous cleaning, and their survival indicates that the image generally has been well preserved. If the painting were to be cleaned, it would result in a closer approximation of the original colors of the image, although certain colors will have permanently changed over time. Cleaning the painting should, however, result in an improved tonal balance.

There are several areas where the paint has been retouched. One of these repainted areas is the bottom left-hand corner—this spot is the most logical location for a signature, so there is a slight chance that if the painting were cleaned a signature might appear. An area of the sky has been repainted in the Italian tratteggio technique, whereby the restorer introduces small, parallel brushstrokes in an attempt to complete the image without mimicking the artist’s brushwork. This difference allows the viewer simultaneously to determine which parts are original and to enjoy an uninterrupted image. Cesare Brandi developed the tratteggio technique at the Istituto Centrale di Restauro in Rome in the second half of the 1940s, which means that the patch of sky in the High panel was restored after this date. The presence of more than one different restoration technique suggests that the painting was in the care of different conservators at different points in the object’s history.

Infrared photographs of the painting were made in an attempt to find an underdrawing. From the resulting photographs it was not possible to see any underdrawing, although there seems to be something in the lower right-hand corner, which could possibly be a signature. Berchem did not make preparatory drawings for his paintings but instead made underdrawings on the ground, which can be seen with the naked eye in some of his other works but not in this panel. A close comparison between the High work and the panel in Munich could offer information about Berchem’s standard working method on panel; however, such research would be more fruitful if both works first were cleaned and examined by a conservator.
Bibliography


Notes
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2 Pieter Biesboer et al., Nicolaes Berchem: In the Light of Italy, 11. This is the most recent and most comprehensive publication on Berchem and includes a very detailed biography.

3 Ibid., 13.

4 Ibid.


6 Pieter Biesboer et al., Nicolaes Berchem: In the light of Italy, 31.

7 For more information, see Gero Seelig, “The Reception of Berchem’s Painting in Eighteenth-Century France,” in Biesboer, 59–68.

8 Lyckle de Vries, Stories in Gilded Frames, 133.

9 Biesboer, 21–24.

10 Ibid., 24.

11 Callimachus, Hymn 1 to Zeus, 42 ff.; Pseudo-Apollodorus, Bibliotheca 1, 4–5; Ovid, Fasti 5, 111 ff., 3, 439 ff. There are many other references to this myth by classical authors.


13 Sleeping Infant, Walters Art Gallery.

14 Eric M. Zafran, European Art in the High Museum, 103.

15 See, for example, Nicolaes Berchem, Abraham Receiving Sarah from the Hands of King Abimelech (ca. 1670), 42 x 37.4 inches, Musée d’art et d’histoire, Genève, 1826-0018.

16 Nicolaes Berchem, Jupiter’s Childhood, 29.5 x 34.6 inches, National Gallery, Prague, Inv. Nr. DO 4567; Anja K. Ševčík, et al., Dutch Paintings of the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries/National Gallery in Prague, 46; copy after Nicolaes Berchem, Pastoral Scene, oil on canvas, 31.9 x 39.8 inches, Castello Sforzesco, Milan, Inv. Nr. 1161; and Maria Teresa Fiorio, Museo d’arte antica del Castello Sforzesco: Tomo quinto, 25–26.


18 Ibid., 369–372.

19 Ibid.; Nicolaes Berchem, Virtue Conquers Violence, 1670, oil on canvas, 45.7 x 54.1 inches, Wawel Castle, Kraków, Inv. No. 1192; Joanna Winiewicz-Wolska, Dutch Painting in the Collections of the Wawel Royal Castle, 266–267.

20 Andrea Kirsh and Rustin S. Levenson, “The Varnish Layer,” 214–222.

21 Cesare Brandi, Theory of Restoration.