SPHINX FINE ART



Abraham Jansz. Begeyn (Leiden 1637 - Berlin 1697)

An Italianate Landscape with a Herdsman and his Cattle Resting near a Tree

traces of a signature ‘AB’ (in ligature) ‘e...n.’ (lower left)
oil on panel
31.9 x 25.3 cm (12½ x 10 in)

This idyllic scene depicts a shepherd and his herd bathed in golden light at rest under the shade of a tree. The herdsman, lost in idle thought, is entirely oblivious to the viewer’s gaze; only the direct inquisitiveness of his two cows suggests intrusion upon this moment of very private solitude. The relaxed and lethargic posture of the human figure and the searing heat of the midday sun suggest that he intends to remain in the shade for some time longer. Lying nestled in the lush grass, the sheep take full advantage of this period of rest. Behind them, a simple cottage and a purple tinged mountain recede into the distance.

Both in style and subject matter the present work demonstrates a clear Italianate influence; Abraham Jansz. Begeyn has defined forms through bright patches of colour and intensive *chiaroscuro*. This is particularly evident in the plant in the foreground which, combined with the strong, golden light, evokes the heat of the day. Light is realistically rendered with bold colours in the foreground fading as the space recedes, lending the painting depth and perspective. Begeyn has also paid great attention to detail and texture, as is evident in the coats of the animals and the differing foliage whether oak leaves, blades of grass or young ferns.

A Dutch painter and draughtsman, Begeyn established his artistic career with paintings of Italianate harbour scenes dominated by richly dressed Dutch couples, lively animals and Oriental merchants. He then progressed onto landscapes, and in both genres the influence of his master, Nicholaes Berchem (1620-1683), a prolific member of the Dutch Italianates, is clearly manifest. Berchem's landscapes often idealise rural life and are characterised by a receding background, varied and saturated colours, and a warm, southern light. Such trends, apparent in *A Shepherd and Shepherdess with Flocks,* are echoed in the present work and reveal the inspiration Begeyn drew from Berchem, although Begeyn's direct arrangement of colours and uniform light distinguish his own personal style from that of his master.

In 1655, Begeyn became a member of the Guild of St. Luke in Leiden. He was registered in Amsterdam in 1672, but was shortly afterwards recorded in London, where he painted at Ham House, Surrey, together with Willem van de Velde the Younger (1633-1707) and Dirck van den Bergen (1645-1690). In 1681, he was in The Hague where two years later he became a member of the painters' confraternity Pictura. From 1688, he was appointed court painter to Frederick III, Elector of Brandenburg, later Frederick I, King of Prussia. The Elector commissioned him to draw views of his country estates and of villages and towns in Germany.

Begeyn is noted mainly for his intricate views of villages and towns and for his southern seaports and Italianate landscapes. Later landscape compositions focussed more on the representation of ruins and architecture than figures making this present work a fine example of the former type of landscape painting he pursued.

Provenance:

Anonymous sale, Zurich, Koller, 27 November/1 December 1984, lot 5039;
With Robert Noortman, Maastricht/London, by 1986;
Offered, Amsterdam, Sotheby's, 1 June 1987, lot 63;
Private collection, The Netherlands.

Artist description:

Begeyn was a Dutch painter and draughtsman. In 1655 he became a member of the Guild of St Luke in Leiden, and subsequently worked extensively in the Netherlands, England and Germany. From 1688, Begeyn was court painter to Frederick III, Elector of Brandenburg (later Frederick I, King of Prussia).

Begeyn lived at a time when there was a great public interest in topographical pictures, and he is mainly known for his views of villages and towns and for his Italianate landscapes and southern seaports. Some of the drawings he executed during his travels in Holland and Germany were reproduced in prints, such as the drawings made of the House Honselaarsdijk, which were etched by Abraham Blooteling. For the Elector he most notably made a series of drawings of Cleves and of Regenstein (1697), which he later used as preliminary studies for paintings.

In his Italianate landscapes, Begeyn was a very close follower of Nicolaes Berchem, who, according to Houbraken, was his teacher. Monumental landscapes, with large rocks and ruins in the foreground and the landscape gradually receding in the background, were inspired by paintings made by Berchem around 1660. Another favourite theme, also influenced by Berchem, was of a southern coast or seaport, with oriental merchants, richly dressed Dutch couples and lively animals in the foreground. Some of Begeyn's works are difficult to distinguish from Berchem's work, and sometimes motifs or entire compositions are copied from Berchem, as in Begeyn's *Italian Coast* (1659; Brussels), an exact

replica of the composition of Berchem's *Harbour Landscape*. It is not known whether Begeyn visited Italy; he may have done so in the company of Otto Marseus van Schrieck, who specialised in painting plants, herbs, insects and small reptiles in a highly detailed, 'encyclopedic' manner. The foreground details of some of Begeyn's landscapes seem to have been influenced by this style. Begeyn gradually paid more attention to the ruins and architecture in his works than to the figures. (Van Gool especially praised his knowledge of perspective.) Johannes Lingelbach sometimes painted the figures for Begeyn, as in *Peasants with Cattle near a River* (London, National Gallery; formerly attributed to Berchem). Begeyn was killed in Berlin, when he fell from scaffolding where he was working.