

# BEAUTY, SEDUCTION AND SHARING

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Artworks from Gaudium Magnum Foundation  
Maria and João Cortez de Lobão

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**Nicolaes Pietersz Berchem**  
(Haarlem, 1621/1622 – Amsterdam, 1683)

**The Battle between Alexander  
and Porus at the River Hydaspes**

Signed on the lower right-hand corner: “N. Berchem”

c. 1670-1675

Oil on canvas

111 × 154 cm

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– Maria and João Cortez de Lobão

Nicolaes Pietersz Berchem, born in Haarlem in 1621/1622, was the son of the most renowned Dutch still life painter, Pieter Claesz, with whom he is thought to have learned the rudiments of the trade, but whose path he did not follow. Early in his career, he was influenced by the works of Pieter van Laer (1599-1642), a fellow Dutch artist, trained and active in Rome, where, along with other Dutchmen, he successfully practised the genre scene and helped popularise the *bambocciata* style.

In 1642, Berchem joined the Haarlem Guild of Saint Luke and made his name as a painter of some renown, devoting himself to an eclectic range of landscapes, winter and genre scenes, as well as historical paintings. Small-scale creations with non-religious themes that were starting to be viewed as having pictorial worth, receiving critical recognition and a place in the large European collections, made the painter's workshop specialisation commercially rewarding, in line with the fluctuating trends of taste and the opportunities of the art market. Berchem first devoted himself to bucolic landscapes of Italian inspiration, influenced by the work of his compatriot Jan Both (†1652); his work was also informed by another Dutch artist, Jan Baptist Weenix (†1663), who also trained in Italy and created port scenes and landscapes, with elegant figures and monumental compositions of fantastical architectures; and, after the death of Philips Wouwerman, in 1668, he turned to painting hunts and horses, as well as records of battles, at which he excelled, allowing him to secure a solid clientèle.

Although not one of the most popular episodes among Alexander the Great's military feats, the defeat of king Porus at the hands of the Macedonian armies, which Berchem is thought to have painted between 1670 and 1675, still inspired a significant number of artworks throughout the Modern Age, including opera – notably G. F. Händel's later creation, *Porus, King of the Indians*. In the first quarter of the seventeenth century, the textile factories of Delft produced a cycle of tapestries devoted to the theme, with cartoons by Karel van Mander II, commissioned by King Christian IV of Denmark, which included

a piece alluding to the battle. A similar cycle was also sent to Portugal a short time later, acquired by the Marquis of Fronteira for his palace in Benfica.

This painting, unique in the artist's production and indeed Dutch painting as a whole, reveals the enduring fascination with the figure of Alexander over a long period. Like that of other generals from Antiquity, the king's military wisdom, heightened by apocryphal ancient and medieval tales collected in *The Alexander Romance*, served as an exemplum of his leadership and military skill, in this case made even more appealing through reference to classical culture and the exotic climes evoked by his campaigns in India.

The painting depicts the first and most decisive incident of the battle, when Alexander caught Porus' troops by surprise, portraying a moving rabble of men and animals, bursting with sound and fury, around the central figure of Alexander. In the background, the elephants of the Indian army advance, as Plutarch described in his historical account, adding a further note of apocalyptic terror to a scene already thick with bloodshed and fire.

The first documentary reference to this magnificent work by Nicolaes Berchem dates from 1766, at the auction of the private collection of a prominent Amsterdam figure, Nicolaas van Bremen, meaning that its original provenance is unknown. Perhaps it is no coincidence that the creation of this work, showing a European prince's domination of an Indian ruler, coincided with a golden age of expansion of the Dutch East India Company (VOC), but according to a recent proposal, the theme and size, not to mention the heroic style, suggest that it was commissioned (directly or by someone in his name) by William III, Prince of Orange, later king of England and, in 1672, named *Stadtholder* of the Dutch Republic. His victorious enterprises against the powerful armies of France and England undoubtedly made him, in the eyes of his contemporaries, a new Alexander, worthy of celebration through the brush strokes of one of the most prominent artists active in Holland at the start of the last quarter of the seventeenth century.

MIGUEL SOROMENHO