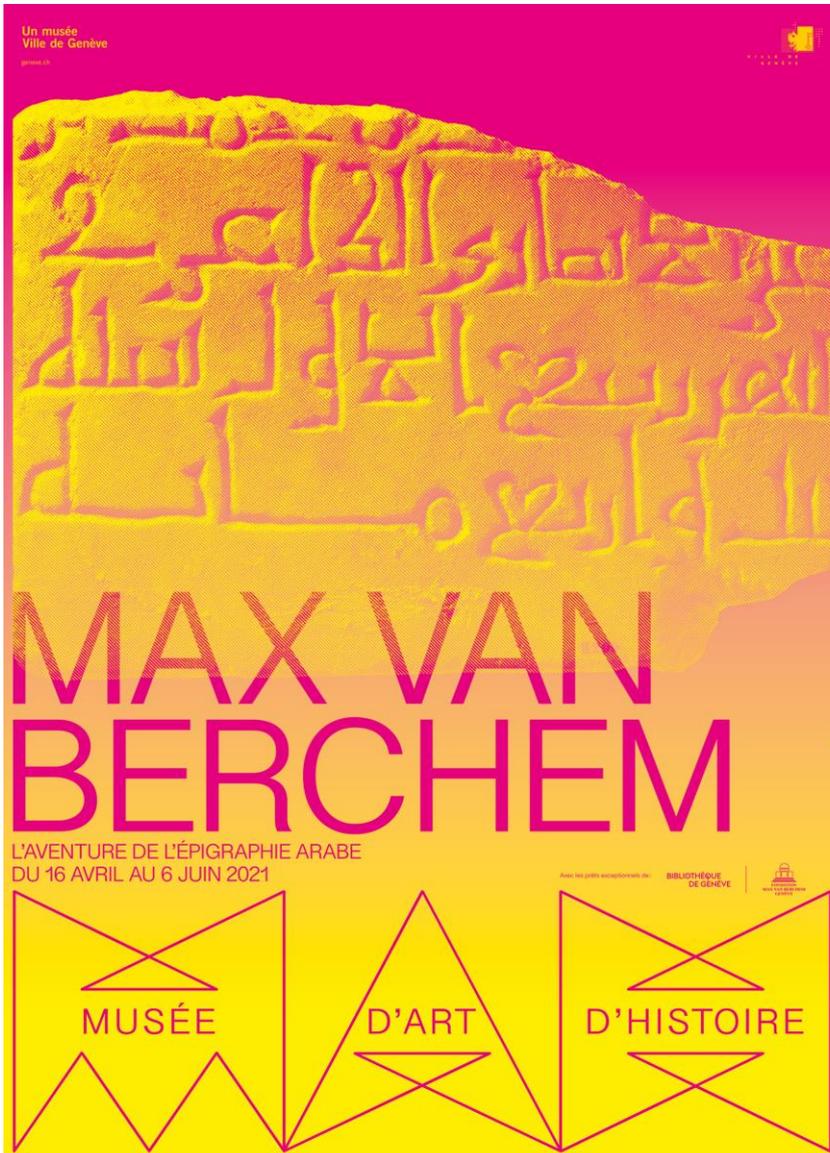


## PRESS KIT

MAX VAN BERCHEM. THE ADVENTURE OF ARABIC EPIGRAPHY  
FROM 16 APRIL TO 6 JUNE 2021



MUSEUM OF ART AND HISTORY  
RUE CHARLES-GALLAND 2  
CH-1206 GENEVA

T +41 (0)22 418 26 00  
MAH@VILLE-GE.CH  
MAHMAH.CH

MAHMAH.CH/BLOG  
MAHMAH.CH/COLLECTION  
f @ t MAHGENEVA

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## The adventure of Arabic epigraphy

Just a century ago, Max van Berchem (1863-1921) died of illness and exhaustion a few days before his fifty-eighth birthday. This man, whom few Genevans remember today, was the founder of Arabic epigraphy; the study of inscriptions in Arabic. The Musée d'art et d'histoire pays tribute to him today with an exhibition that reveals the importance of his work for the understanding of Islamic civilisation and art in the early 20th century.

This presentation, in the gallery overlooking the Hall of Armour, brings together a selection of works from the MAH collection and historical and documentary evidence of the incredible scientific adventure that was the life of Max van Berchem. Born of the ties that have united the MAH and the Max van Berchem Foundation since its creation in 1973, the project benefits from exceptional loans from the Max van Berchem Foundation and the Bibliothèque de Genève. The latter holds the library bequeathed by Max van Berchem and his scientific archives donated by his family in 1972. For its part, the MAH holds part of the researcher's collection, donated by his widow in 1921.

2

### 1. Exhibition route

#### a. Max van Berchem and Geneva: the birth of a vocation

Max van Berchem was born in 1863 into a wealthy Genevan patrician family and, together with his two brothers, Paul and Victor, were educated in Switzerland and Germany. An accomplished musician, the great music lover's other great passions were the outdoors and mountaineering. His university studies in Germany, initially focused on oriental languages (Hebrew, Arabic, Assyrian, Persian...), were enriched by courses in art history and led to a thesis on territorial property and land taxes under the first caliphs in 1885.

Deeply attached to the Swiss heritage, he took numerous photographs which he entrusted to the Swiss Society of Historical Monuments. He played a role in raising awareness of the importance of Switzerland's architectural heritage in an original way: in a conference entitled *L'art à bicyclette (Art on a bicycle)*, he explained his method of combining photography and sport. He was involved in the restoration of St. Peter's Cathedral and St. Gervais Church in Geneva, where he supervised the surveys and photographic campaigns on a voluntary basis, in collaboration with the architect-restorer Albert Naef and the photographer Fred Boissonnas.

After two trips to Egypt and Syria in 1886 and 1888, where he was confronted with the destruction of numerous Islamic monuments in cities undergoing rapid expansion and modernisation, Max van Berchem discovered his vocation.

#### b. The work of a lifetime: the *Corpus Inscriptionum Arabicarum*

The *Corpus Inscriptionum Arabicarum* was born of this desire to safeguard, in the manner of a historian, an endangered heritage. This ambitious publication project proved to be too vast for one man. The scientist soon had to entrust certain parts to other researchers under his supervision in order to carry out on-site surveys, sometimes before the destruction of buildings, objects or sites, to classify them, to study them systematically and scientifically and to publish them.

*"Muslim monuments are neglected, their still magnificent ruins will soon be no more than the shapeless remains of a glorious and artistic past, their historical inscriptions*



*are disappearing, all the texts engraved on mosques, tombs, caravanserais, madrasas, castles or bridges must be immediately recorded, monuments photographed, all Muslim regions explored, all the numerous movable objects that adorn museums or private collections studied and these texts systematically published so as to make a living commentary of Muslim institutions. »*

Quickly recognised as a specialist in Arabic epigraphy, Max van Berchem developed an intense correspondence - thousands of letters - with an international network of orientalists, to whom he always replied in detail, sometimes sending them *"almost scientific memoirs"*. They sent him photographs, surveys, offers of service, requests for identification, dating, corrections to their publications, etc. Even T.E. Lawrence, the famous Lawrence of Arabia, wrote to him for his opinion on an inscription discovered at Akaba (now in Jordan).

In addition to the scientific work of study and research in the library, the realisation of the *Corpus* requires fieldwork and numerous journeys, sometimes lasting several months, by boat, train or on horseback, in areas that were still politically unstable, with equipment adapted to recording the inscriptions by stamping:

*"A ladder is often necessary, as well as a chisel to remove the whitewash; when the stone is soft or crumbling, a wooden instrument must be used. Finally, as we often have to enter private homes, climb over walls and force instructions, we will use a certain amount of diplomacy, aided by a few dollars, which are very legitimate means for such a disinterested cause. »*

The photographs, which are on glass plates, are treated with the utmost care to ensure that they reach the publisher intact.

The *Corpus* was published through the French Institute in Cairo and many of van Berchem's closest collaborators were German, Austrian or Turkish: the First World War, however, dealt a fatal blow to this vast undertaking. The worries, the difficulties, the hard work of the last few months to publish a new volume of his great work, following four years of war that disrupted his international network of scientific collaborators and jeopardised his work, took their toll on Max van Berchem's health. The publication of the Cairo inscriptions alone took him almost fifteen years and he had just finished the two volumes of the Jerusalem inscriptions when he died in 1921.

Today, specialist libraries throughout the world preserve the successive volumes, classified by sites and/or monuments, of this scholarly work, published over the years. It should be noted that the work on the *Corpus* did not end with its creator. In 1973, the Max van Berchem Foundation took over the work initiated by the Genevan and today finances research: the last twenty-five years have seen the publication of seven volumes on the inscriptions discovered in today's Palestine. It also supports the online *Thesaurus of Islamic Epigraphy*, a worldwide survey of Arabic inscriptions.



### c. Max van Berchem and the discovery of Islamic art

Max van Berchem's reputation as an epigraphist soon brought him into contact with collectors and curators who wanted to decipher the inscriptions on their objects and benefit from his expertise. These inscriptions provided information that made it possible to date and locate the objects geographically or to discover the sponsors of the objects. Max van Berchem thus participated in two major exhibitions that were to become landmarks in the study of Islamic art. The first was organised in 1903 at the Musée des Arts Décoratifs in Paris by Gaston Migeon, curator at the Musée du Louvre, and gave for the first time a global and historical vision of Islamic art. The second exhibition was organised in 1910 in Munich by the collector, archaeologist and art historian Friedrich Sarre; due to its size (3,600 objects presented) and its ambition to break with the clichés of orientalism by presenting Islamic art in a scientific and modern manner, this exhibition was to become one of the most important milestones in the history of the study of Islamic art.

## 2. Three emblematic works

In addition to a set of archives that retrace the formidable adventure that was the creation of the *Corpus Inscriptionum Arabicarum* (notebooks containing architectural and landscape sketches, publications, travel guides, family photos, correspondence, etc.), the Museum of Art and History is exhibiting a number of objects of the type presented in the exhibitions of 1903 in Paris and 1910 in Munich, in order to illustrate Max van Berchem's participation in the scientific study and appreciation of Islamic art.

### a. Epitaph



#### Epitaph Ascalon (1015)

Engraved stone

Inv. 8200

Purchased with the help of the Museum Auxiliary Society, 1922

MAH, photo: F. Bevilacqua

From the very beginning of the preparation of this exhibition, one work stood out: this epitaph is the only lapidary work in the Museum of Art and History with an Arabic inscription. Dated 1015, it was purchased in Basel in 1922 with the help of the Museum's Auxiliary Society, with an uncertain provenance - Syria, near Palmyra? Or Jordan, near Petra? In preparing this exhibition, we were surprised to discover in the archives of the Max van Berchem Foundation the exact stamp of this stele, not taken in the museum, but shortly after its discovery in Ascalon (then in Palestine) in 1893! For the first time in 127 years, the two objects have been reunited for this presentation at the MAH.



b. Candlestick



**Bronze Candlestick**  
Egypt, 16th century  
Engraved and drilled bronze  
Inv. AD 1410  
Purchase, 1963  
MAH, photo: F. Bevilacqua

5

The 1910 Exhibition of Islamic Art in Munich featured candlesticks of this form, which is relatively common in Islamic art. The inscription on the foot, 'Lasting power and prosperity', repeated once, is written in thuluth, one of the six canonical styles of Arabic calligraphy. In contrast, the notched characters on the upper edge of the foot are in Greek script, indicating the name of one of its owners, Markos Krotiras, and the date of its ownership, 1727.

c. Box of photographic plates



**Société anonyme des plaques et papiers photographiques**  
Antoine Lumière and his sons, active in Lyon from 1892 to 1911  
Box for photographic glass plates that belonged to  
Isabelle van Berchem (née Naville, 1874-1962), Lyon, 1893  
Cardboard  
Inv. A 2006-30-209  
Gift of Louise Martin, 2006  
MAH



This box contained twelve dry glass plates, known as gelatin-silver bromide plates, taken by Isabelle van Berchem, Victor's wife, on her trip to Egypt in 1893 with her brother-in-law Max and the latter's first wife, Elisabeth. These extremely fragile plates are the subject of numerous notes in Max van Berchem's correspondence to his publishers and correspondents on how best to pack them so that they arrive safely without breakage.

d. Evening on the Nile

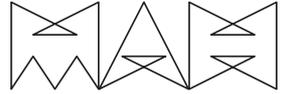


Étienne Duval (1824-1914)  
Evening on the Nile, 1870  
Oil on canvas  
Inv. 1923-202  
Gift of Alice van Berchem, 1923  
MAH, photo: N. Sabato

This painting, evoking a timeless moment with the distinctive sails of feluccas on the Nile at sunset, belonged to Max van Berchem and his second wife Alice. She donated it to the museum after her husband's death.



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|------------------------------|--|
| <b>Commissioner</b>          | Bénédicte de Donker  |
| <b>Collaborations</b>        | Max van Berchem Foundation, the Bibliothèque de Genève and prof. Charles Genequand   |
| <b>Contact</b>               | Press Office<br>Sylvie Treglia-Détraz<br>Museum of Art and History, Geneva<br>T +41 (0)22 418 26 54<br>sylvie.treglia-detrax@ville-ge.ch   |
| <b>Practical information</b> | Museum of Art and History<br>Charles-Galland 2 - 1206 Geneva<br>Open from 11am to 6pm<br>Closed on Monday<br>Free admission to the permanent collection<br><br>Website: mahmah.ch<br>Blog : mahmah.ch/blog<br>Online collection: mahmah.ch/collection<br>Facebook : facebook.com/mahgeneve<br>Twitter : @mahgeneve |



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With many thanks.

Museum of Art and History  
Press Office  
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CH-1206 Geneva



**Epitaph Ascalon, 1015**

Engraved stone  
Inv. 8200  
Purchased with the help of the Museum Auxiliary Society,  
1922  
MAH, photo: F. Bevilacqua



**Max van Berchem (1863 - 1921)**

Stamping of an epitaph fragment, 1894  
Paper, 20 x 34.5 cm  
Geneva Library



**Bronze Candlestick**

Egypt, 16th century  
Engraved and drilled bronze  
Inv. AD 1410  
Purchase, 1963  
MAH, photo: F. Bevilacqua



**Société anonyme des plaques et papiers photographiques Antoine Lumière et ses fils**  
**Active in Lyon from 1892 to 1911**

Box for photographic glass plates that  
belonged to Isabelle van Berchem  
(née Naville, 1874-1962)

Lyon, 1893  
Cardboard  
Inv. A 2006-30-209  
Gift of Louise Martin, 2006  
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**Étienne Duval (1824-1914)**

*Evening on the Nile*, 1870

Oil on canvas  
Inv. 1923-202  
Gift of Alice van Berchem, 1923  
MAH, photo: N. Sabato



**Author unknown**

*Portrait of Max van Berchem, ca. 1900*

Photography

Max van Berchem Foundation



**Attributed to Alice van Berchem (née Naville)  
(1873-1938)**

*Max van Berchem making an embossing  
in Jerusalem or Damascus? , 1914*

Photography

Max van Berchem Foundation



**Attributed to Max van Berchem (1863-1921)**  
*Camp of Max van Berchem and Edmond Fatio  
in Byblos (Lebanon), 1895*

Photography

Inv. 291.z406

Bibliothèque de Genève, photo: Max van Berchem  
Foundation