Roundel - Labours of the Months

Object: Roundel

Place of origin: Norwich (made)

Date: ca. 1500-1520 (made)

Materials and Techniques: Clear and coloured glass painted with brown/black pigment and silver stain

Credit Line: Purchased with the support of Sam Fogg Ltd., the Friends of the V&A and the V&A Director's Circle

Museum number: C.100-2011

Gallery location: Medieval & Renaissance, Room 10a, The Françoise and Georges Selz Gallery, case WN EXP

Public access description

This roundel is one of two acquired by the museum (Museum nos. C.99 to 100-2011). It was originally from a set of 12 roundels depicting the 'Labours of the Months', eight of which still survive. Until the 1980s, they were installed in Brandiston Hall in the county of Norfolk. Their original location is unknown but they may have been commissioned by the Norwich merchant, Thomas Pickerell for his house in that city. The other surviving roundels from Brandiston depict a king feasting, a man in front of a fire and various agricultural activities.

The depiction of the months and occupations associated with them appear early in the Medieval period on church facades and interiors. They also appear in illuminated manuscripts and start to become more common in stained glass in the 14th and, especially, the 15th centuries.

The occupations depicted in these 'Labours of the Months' are mostly agricultural and are thus intimately associated with the landed class and their agricultural labourers. However, it is not uncommon for the spring months of April, May and June to be depicted with scenes of courtship, hunting and bathing. These Labours appear in both religious and secular settings.

'Labours of the Months' are found all throughout Europe and the occupations depicted are standard but do vary in accordance with the local climate. Harvesting, for instance, began earlier in the year in Southern Europe. Feasting and drinking scenes, mostly aristocratic in form, appear in either December or January in all European countries. These months are traditionally associated with major festivals in the Church year and the consumption of large quantities of meat. Much livestock was killed at this time of year to provide food over the winter months.

Some of the 'Labours of the Months' stained glass roundels believed to have been painted in England share the same imagery. This imagery must have come from a common source, most likely from a series of woodblock engravings which may have circulated between the glazing workshops.

In this roundel a young woman, naked, sits in a round wooden tub filled with water. The tub is surmounted by a canopy with a green curtain. There is a black and white tiled floor, perhaps of marble, and a range of fenestrated arcading on two levels is behind her. This indicates that she is bathing either within an elaborate building or in a courtyard. Her high status is indicated by the bath and her surroundings. She also holds a spray of spring flowers in her left hand. Bathing scenes in Labours of the Month are unusual and there is no known source for such imagery. Such a scene could be associated with either the month of May or of June. None of the Brandiston roundels bear inscriptions describing the month which is depicted. The month of May is often depicted with scenes of hunting or courtship so June would be a more likely choice for this roundel.

The woman is painted in a style similar to that of the Netherlandish glass-painting workshops and suggests that this series of roundels from Brandiston Hall were produced by a workshop that employed both English and Netherlandish painters.

Descriptive line

Roundel of clear and coloured glass with painted and stained details depicting a female bathing; representing June from a series of the labours of the months, English, Norwich School, about 1500-1520

Physical description

Roundel, clear and coloured glass painted with brown/black pigment and silver stain depicting the month of June.

Dimensions

Diameter: 28.4 cm unframed, excluding hanging loop, Width: 30.8 cm framed, Height: 31 cm framed

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URL

http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O1241626/labours-of-the-months-roundel/