Panel - Labours of the Months

Object: Panel
Place of origin: England (made)
Date: ca. 1450-1475 (made)
Artist/Maker: Unknown
Materials and Techniques: Clear glass with yellow (silver) stain and details painted in brown pigment
Credit Line: Given by Art Fund
Museum number: C.125-1923
Gallery location: Medieval & Renaissance, Room 10a, The Françoise and Georges Selz Gallery, case WN EXP

Public access description
This roundel is one of six acquired by the museum in 1923 (Museum nos. C.123-128-1923). It was originally from a set of 12 roundels depicting the ‘Labours of the Months’. The museum purchased them from the sale of the contents of Cassiobury Park in Hertfordshire. They had probably been installed in the windows of the house when it was remodelled in the early years of the 19th century. We do not know where they were located before that date.

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. They 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 and man and a woman are haymaking. The man is using a scythe to cut the hay in the field and the woman holds a fork to toss the strewn hay into large piles known as ‘haycocks’. Lying on one of the haycocks behind them is a rake used to rake up the strewn hay. The hay was used to feed the animals that were to be kept over the winter months. This was a commonly depicted occupation in the Labours of the Months for either June or July. To the right of the woman is a scroll with the letters ‘Juli’, indicating the action depicted in the roundel is taking place in the month of July.

The paintwork on this roundel is very detailed and highly skilled, indicating the work of a prominent glass-painting workshop. The techniques employed include ‘stickwork’ which makes use of a stylus to scrape away areas of paint to produce highlights, as seen in the figures’ garments. Smear shading and stipple-shading are used to create depth in the background.

Descriptive line
Roundel of clear glass with painted details and yellow (silver) stain depicting a man and a woman haymaking in a field and illustrating the month of July. From a series of the Labours of the Months. Made in England about 1450-1475.

Physical description
In the centre a man holds a large scythe. He is wearing a straw hat. Behind him a woman stands holding a pitchfork. In the centre background are two haycocks with a pitchfork lying on one of them. In the distant background is a fortified townscape. On the right is a white scroll with the word ‘Juli[us]’ painted in brown-black pigment.

Dimensions
Diameter: 21.5 cm including perimeter leads, Diameter: 19.5 cm within the perimeter leads

Museum number
C.125-1923

Object history note
These six roundels (C.123-128-1928) were purchased from Cassiobury Park, near Watford, Hertfordshire in 1923. They had probably been installed during James Wyatt’s remodelling of the house for the 5th Earl of Essex in 1801-3.
Historical context note

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URL

http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O7614/labours-of-the-months-panel-unknown/