Roundel - October

Object: Roundel
Place of origin: Norwich (made)
Date: ca. 1480 (made)
Artist/Maker: Unknown
Materials and Techniques: Clear and coloured glass with painted details in brown/black pigment and yellow (silver) stain
Museum number: C.134-1931
Gallery location: Medieval & Renaissance, Room 10a, The Françoise and Georges Selz Gallery, case WN EXP

Public access description
This roundel is one of three acquired by the museum in 1931 (Museum nos.C.133-135-1931). Originally they would have formed part of a set of 12 roundels depicting the ‘Labours of the Months’. Another roundel from this set, depicting the month of January or February is now in the Burrell Collection in Glasgow. The original location of these roundels is unknown but they are believed to have come from the old parsonage at St Michael-at-Coslany in Norwich.

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 century.

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. These ‘Labours’ are found all throughout Europe and the occupations depicted are fairly 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 as these months are traditionally associated with major festivals in the Church year and the slaughtering of animals for winter food.

Some of the ‘Labour 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.

The figure of a young man wearing a short red tunic and yellow hose which are patterned with trefoils occupies the centre of the roundel. His head is covered by a capuchon, indicating cool weather conditions. He has a pouch attached to a belt around his waist. Over his shoulder is a wicker basket containing seed that he strews across the fields. He is probably sowing seed for wheat that will be harvested in the spring. On many roundels the particular month being illustrated is indicated by some text but not on this roundel. A mid 15th century English poem of the Labours of the Month says for October: ‘here I sow my wheat’ and that is the month most likely illustrated in this roundel.

Because of their small size roundels were within the means of a large number of consumers at the end of the medieval period. The majority of roundels that have survived, both in England and on the Continent, are executed simply in silver stain and brown-black pigment. These were the most affordable of this type of roundel. The roundel here incorporates coloured (pot-metal) glass which would therefore require more labour and skill in its construction. Also, the price of coloured glass (most likely imported from the continent) was higher than clear glass. These types of small stained glass panels are considered to be ‘deluxe roundels’.

Descriptive line
Roundel of clear and coloured glass with yellow (silver) stain and brown painted details. Depicting a young man sowing seeds and illustrating, probably, the month of October, from a series of the Labours of the Months. Made in England (Norwich), ca.1480

Physical description
The figure of a young man wearing a flashed-red short tunic over yellow hose which are patterned with trefoils occupies the centre of the roundel. His head is covered by a capuchon, indicating cool weather conditions. He has a pouch attached to a belt around his waist. Over his shoulder is a wicker basket containing seed that he strews across the fields. He is probably sowing spring wheat. In the left background is a stylised tree and flowers.

Dimensions
Diameter: 29.2 cm, Diameter: 32.9 cm including metal rim

Museum number
C.134-1931

Object history note
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Historical context note
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URL
http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O7620/october-roundel-unknown/