Print - The Peasants' Feast

Object: Print

Place of origin: Germany (made)

Date: 1546 - 1547 (made)

Artist/Maker: Beham, Sebald, born 1500 - died 1550 (maker)

Materials and Techniques: Engraving on paper

Museum number: E.185-1892

Gallery location: Prints & Drawings Study Room, level E, case I, shelf 10, box A

Public access description

From around the 1520s in Germany, the Netherlands and Switzerland, images of peasants feasting or dancing, usually to excess, became popular. They depict church festivals and weddings, typically feature drunken behaviour, and often end in fights. This emerged from a longer tradition in poems and in farces performed at banquets and carnival processions. The peasants in this set by Hans Sebald Beham have names (based on the names of the months), recalling the practice of using named participants in the poems and plays.

Beham's peasants appear in different formats, suggesting a wide-ranging market and different uses. These engravings are of small size and were perhaps aimed at collectors or were pasted into books. Larger versions of these same peasants appear in a frieze on the wall in an engraving by Frans Huys entitled The Lute Maker's Shop.

Descriptive line

The Peasants' Feast or The Twelve Months, engraving from a set of ten, Hans Sebald Beham; Frankfurt?, Germany, 1546-1547.

Physical description

The twelve months represented by couples of peasants dancing at a village festival, with four supplementary scenes. March and April.

Dimensions

Height: 4.9 cm platemark, Width: 7.2 cm platemark

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Object history note

See also 27797:4, 22712, E.908-915-1888, 24041 in which some of the same figures and scenes are repeated. These sets correspond to Pauli 175, 176, 155-166, Bartsch 164, 165, 166-177, Aumüller 177, 178, 179-190.

Historical context note

Some historians have argued for these images as moralising caricatures but they may have also been merely describing popular events. There is evidence of such images in positive settings, including an external wall-painting for a wealthy goldsmiths house (Haus zum Tanz in Basel) designed by Holbein around 1520 and sculptures on fountains and bookbindings to religious books.

Beham's peasants appear in different formats, suggesting a wide-ranging market and different uses. Large pictorial woodcuts covering more than one sheet might have been displayed on a wall. A woodcut made in 1528 with a poem in Latin by Hans Sachs must have aimed at a literate audience. As engravings of small size, these sets of couples were perhaps aimed at collectors or were pasted into books. Larger versions of these same peasants appear in a frieze on the wall in an engraving by Frans Huys entitled The Lute Maker's Shop.

URL

http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O922663/the-peasants-feast-print-beham-sebald/