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Perpetual Calendar with the Twelve Labors of the Months
Silver-plated frame and 12 painted images on parchment
Germany, late seventeenth century or early eighteenth century

12 paintings on parchment and a diamond-shaped silver-plated frame, decorated in a late Renaissance style with antique vases, foliage, scallop shells, and two winged putti, with a large rectangular viewing window in the center for the image of the month, and smaller openings at the top and bottom for the year and day (year and day on paper are modern replacements). Dimensions: frame 258 x 214 mm, each painting, approximately 86 x 62 mm.

This unique object presents a “modernized” version of a medieval tradition. Both the Labors of the Month – activities from everyday life typical of the different times of the year – and the perpetual calendar were at home in fifteenth-century Books of Hours. The former appeared in small pictures accompanying the written calendar, and the latter could be computed from the calendrical tables. This fascinating object “updates” the Labors of the Month with Renaissance imagery and provides as well a mechanical means for changing the day, month, and year for easy home viewing.

PROVENANCE

1. A dating to the late seventeenth or early eighteenth century and a localization in Germany are indicated by the style of the frame, in particular the way in which the acanthus leaves fold around its outer edges, as well as the costumes in the painted scenes.
2. Private European collection.

ILLUSTRATION

The silver frame is decorated in a late Renaissance style with antique vases, foliage, scallop shells, and two winged putti. In the center is a window for displaying the painted calendar scenes; above and below this window are two smaller openings for displaying the year and the day. The three windows open from the back, so the scenes and numbers can be changed and providing storage for those not in use.

A perpetual calendar is usually thought of as a calendar that makes it possible to find the correct day of the week for any date over a wide range of years. The same term is used, however, to describe devices that can be set by the user to display the current day, month, and year. Portable metal “calendarium perpetuum” were popular during the eighteenth century, often very handsomely engraved, with movable wheels that allowed the user to change the day of the week, the month, and the year. Our “calendar” is much simpler, since there is no rotating mechanism for changing the day, month, and year; instead, one had to open the back of the frame, and manually change the year (at the top), the date (at the bottom), and the month, in the middle. The months are clearly the most important, and the only decorative element, of this calendar. We have identified no other examples of calendars designed to be manipulated

like this, nor have we found any other mixed media examples such as this one (metal, parchment, paper).

Subjects as follows:

January, a man feasting by a fire;

February, a masked clown at Mardi Gras;

March, a man pruning a vine;

April, a man with his dog sowing seeds in a field;

May, a noble lady playing a mandolin;

June, a noble lady caressing a lamb in a field;

July, a peasant lady with a tankard and a rake;

August, a peasant drinking from a tankard, his open shirt revealing his belly;

September, a noble lady with a hunting rifle, holding a piece of fruit and game birds;

October, Bacchus holding a glass of wine;

November, a noble lady with a hunting rifle and dog;

December, a noble lady in the kitchen by a fire, pointing to a pig's head on a plate, a bird and rabbit hanging in the background.

There are six women and six men in the scenes. The ladies are seen hunting, playing music, caressing a lamb, and standing in the kitchen. There is also a female peasant drinking beer and harvesting in July. The gentlemen are seen feasting in January and celebrating Mardi Gras in February, while the peasants prune in March, sow seeds in April and drink after harvesting in August. Bacchus holds a glass of wine in October.

The cycle of illustrations called the labors (or occupations) of the month can be traced back to antiquity. They were particularly popular during the Middle Ages and Renaissance from the twelfth century on, although examples as early as the ninth century are known (Hensch, 1999). As sculptures, they are found decorating the portals of many cathedrals, and they were also depicted in stained glass. Their most-famous use is in the pages of illuminated manuscripts, especially in Books of Hours, where they are found decorating calendars, usually accompanied by the signs of the zodiac. The subjects of the labors of the months in most medieval manuscripts follow accepted conventions, although there were often exceptions to accommodate local conditions. The scenes usually combined activities of peasants and agricultural work, with the leisurely pastimes of the nobility. The common medieval schema can be summarized as follows: January, feasting; February, keeping warm; March, pruning; April, picking flowers; May, hawking; June, mowing hay; July, reaping wheat; August, threshing;

September, treading grapes; October, sowing; November, thrashing for acorns; December, slaughtering pigs (Wieck, 2017, p. 14, also listing the numerous alternative scenes for each month).

The tradition of the Labors of the Month continued after the Middle Ages; see for example the paintings, now in the National Gallery, London, from c. 1580 Venice, likely meant for door panels, or the c. 1690 drawings by Jonas Umbach from Augsburg, now in the Metropolitan Museum, New York. The selection of genre scenes depicted in our calendar marks a clean break with the medieval tradition, combining imagery from the Italian and northern Renaissances: for example, the substitution of Bacchus drinking wine in October for the treading grapes, and the masked clown at Mardi Gras or Carnival.

LITERATURE

Henisch, Bridget Ann. *The Medieval Calendar Year*. University Park, Pennsylvania, 1999.

Wieck, Roger. *The Medieval Calendar: Locating Time in the Middle Ages*, New York, 2017.

Webster, James. *The Labors of the Months*, Princeton, 1938.

ONLINE RESOURCES

Labors of the Month, Italy (Venice) 1580s, painted on canvas and glued on wood (intended for decorative use, such as door panels), National Gallery, London

<https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/italian-venetian-the-labours-of-the-months-january>

Jonas Umbach, Augsburg, c. 1690, *January* (one of a series representing the labors of the month), New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art

<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/334994?sortBy=Relevance&ft=Jonas+Umbach&offset=0&rpp=40&pos=11>

"Labors of the Month," The Digital Medievalist

<https://www.digitalmedievalist.com/things/manuscripts/books-of-hours/labors-of-the-months/>

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