Etching.

THE GREAT FROST OF 1683–84

Erra Paters Prophesy or Frost Faire 1683/4.

Author
[FAITHORNE, William; after James NORRIS]

Publication date
1684

Publisher
[William Faithorne],

Publication place
London,

Physical description
Etching.

Dimensions
241 by 173mm (9.5 by 6.75 inches).

Notes
A pirated issue of James Norris's altogether better print of the same name, and same year. Attributed by the British Museum to William Faithorne (c1620-1691), but a bit rough and ready even for him. Erra Pater was the name attributed to the author of an astronomical almanac, or "Prognostications" first published in 1535, and reprinted twelve times before the civil war alone. Some editions claim that he was "a Jewish doctor in astronomy and physick, born in Bethany, near

Mount Olivet", but it is likely that such claims were an attempt to imbue the work with a sense of enigma and exoticism. It seems that his prognostications included foreseeing a great frost, as the verse beneath the image reads:

"Old Erra Pater or his rambling Ghoul,
Prognosticating of this long strong frost,
Some Ages past Said ye yet Ice bound. Thames
Should prove a Theatre for Sports and Games,
Her Watr'y Greene be turn'd onto a Bare
For Men a City seen for Booth a Faire,
And now his Straglling Spirit is once more come
To Use Mortals and foretell their doome,
Then Maids grow modest ye Dissenting Crew,
Become all Loyall the Falsehearted true,
Then you may probably and not till then,
Expect in England such a Frost agen"

The River Thames has been known to freeze over on several occasions, especially during the "Little Ice Age" of the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries, upon which the inhabitants of London took to the solid ice for business and pleasure. The most important of these "Frost Fairs" occurred in 1595, 1608, 1683-4, 1716, 1739–40, 1789, and 1814. In 1684, during the Great Freeze of 1683-4, which was the longest in London's history and during which the ice reached depths of around 28cm, the diarist John Evelyn recorded the attractions of the Frost Fair:

"Streetes of Boothes were set upon the Thames… all sorts of Trades and shops furnished, & full of Commodities… Coaches plied from Westminster to the Temple, and from several other stairs too and fro, as in the streets, sleds, sliding with skates, bull-baiting, horse and coach races, puppet plays and interludes, cooks, tippling and other lewd places, so that it seemed to be a bacchanalian triumph, or a carnival on water".

Many of London's printmakers capitalized on this carnival atmosphere by producing souvenirs of the great event. These generally consisted of depictions of the fair, often accompanied by a short verse. This print, which may have been produced by printmaker William Faithorne, shows the mysterious figure of Erra Pater standing on the banks of the frozen Thames, upon which various activities and attractions are labelled, including "a coach crossing the ice" and "roasting ox". In the background extends London's skyline, already impressive at the end of the seventeenth century with multiple turrets and towers interspersed among the shorter buildings.

Bibliography
BM 1931,1114.359

Provenance

Price:

Inventory reference: 18162

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