

13 parts in nine volumes, Dutch text edition, folio (560 by 380mm), printed title, engraved allegorical title, nine printed or engraved titles within engraved borders, eight divisional titles, and 600 engraved maps, plans and views (most double-page) in contemporary hand-colour (general and engraved titles heightened in gold), many engraved and woodcut illustrations in text coloured, index leaf at end of each volume, contemporary Dutch vellum, gilt, central arabesques replaced with gilt arms of the van de Werve family, leather labels on spines, gilt edges, occasional light browning on a few maps and some text pages, several maps with small marginal repairs, some light staining at lower corners of volumes I and VIII.

“THE GREATEST AND FINEST ATLAS EVER PUBLISHED”

Grooten Atlas, oft werelt-beschryving, in welcke t’ aerdryck, de zee, en hemel, wort vertoont en beschreven.

Author
BLAEU, Johannes

Publication date
1662-1665.

Publisher
Joan Blaeu,

Publication place
Amsterdam,

Physical description
13 parts in nine volumes, Dutch text edition, folio (560 by 380mm), printed title, engraved allegorical title, nine printed or engraved titles within engraved borders, eight divisional titles, and 600 engraved maps, plans and views (most double-page) in contemporary hand-colour (general and

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Dimensions

Notes
A Dutch edition of “the greatest and finest atlas ever published” (Koeman).

The ‘Atlas Maior’ in its various editions was the largest atlas ever published. It was justly famed for its production values, its high typographic standard, and the quality of its engraving, ornamentation, binding and colouring. The atlas frequently served as the official gift of the Dutch Republic to princes and other authorities. It is one of the most lavish and highly prized of all seventeenth-century illustrated books. “In its sheer size and scale it surpassed all other atlases then in circulation, including the efforts of his great predecessors Ortelius and Mercator” (Brotton). The work was published simultaneously in five different languages, Latin, French, Dutch, Spanish, and German. What Blaeu managed to achieve was to contain the world in a book – an endeavour that in many respects would never be equalled.

Publication History

The birth of Blaeu’s great work originated in 1630, when he published his first atlas, the ‘Atlas Appendix’. The book consisted of 60 maps, and was billed by Blaeu as a supplement to Mercator’s ‘Atlas’, whose work by that time had been expanded and republished by his rivals Henricus Hondius and Johannes Janssonius. Hondius and Janssonius were so perturbed by the Blaeus’ move into the publication of atlases that they published a rival ‘Appendix’ by the end of 1630.

Over the next 30 years this great publishing rivalry would spur the production of ever larger and more lavish atlases. In 1634, Willem Blaeu produced his ‘Atlas Novus’, containing 161 maps, this was expanded in 1635 to two volumes, containing 207 maps. So successful was the house of Blaeu that, in 1637, they moved into larger premises; with its own print foundry and nine letterpresses the new building was the largest printing house in Europe. Unfortunately, Willem did not long survive the move and he died the following year. He was succeeded in his business by his son Joan, who also inherited the lucrative and influential post of hydrographer to the Dutch East India Company (VOC).

Over the next twenty years Joan expanded the ‘Atlas Novus’: in 1640 he added a third volume, including maps of Italy and Greece; in 1645, he published a fourth volume on the British Isles; and in 1654 he added the Atlas Sinensis, the first western atlas of China, based on the work of the Jesuit Marteo Martini. Janssonius during this time had almost kept pace with his more illustrious rival – in 1646 he published a four volume atlas, adding a fifth – the first folio sea atlas – in 1650, and in 1658 a sixth, which consisted of 450 maps, some 47 more than Blaeu’s similar work.

In 1662, Blaeu announced that he would auction his bookselling business in order to finance the imminent publication of his great atlas. From a brief look at the statistics it is clear why Blaeu needed the capital. The creation of the five editions took six years (from 1659-1665). It is estimated that 1550 copies over all five editions were printed, with Latin the longest print run of 650 copies. The print run came to just over 5.4 million pages of text, and 950,000 copper plate impressions! Such a vast undertaking in capital and man-hours, was reflected in the price. The largest edition (the French version) cost 450 guilders. These prices made the atlas not only the costliest ever sold, but also the most expensive book of its day. To give an of comparative value, the average price of a

house in Amsterdam at the time of publication was 500 guilders.

The Maps

Each map is illustrated and hand coloured. Of particular note are the side-panelled maps of the continents, the early maps of China in volume IX, and the series of 23 maps of America, including important early maps of Virginia and New England, in volume VIII. It has been suggested that the twin hemisphere world map, drawn especially for the atlas by Joan Blaeu, is the first world map in an atlas to portray the Copernican solar system (Brotton).

Contents

Volume I World, Arctic and Scandinavia. 90 maps.

Volume II Germany and Switzerland. 107 maps.

Volume III The Low Countries. 65 maps.

Volume IV England. 58 maps.

Volume V Scotland and Ireland. 55 maps.

Volume VI France. 66 maps.

Volume VII Italy and Greece. 67 maps.

Volume VIII Spain, Africa and America. 64 maps.

Volume IX Asia. 28 maps.

Bibliography
Jerry Brotton, A History of the World in Twelve Maps (London: Penguin, 2012); Koeman BL 57; van der Krogt 2:62.

Provenance
Provenance:

1. Coat of arms of the van de Werve family to binding, a noble family from Antwerp.

Price:

Inventory reference: 12237

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