

Double-page engraved map of the world, with fine hand-colour in full, lower margin renewed.

“AN ELEGANT SYNTHESIS OF SCIENCE AND ART” (WOODS)

Orbis Terrarum Nova et Accuratissima Tabula. Auctore Nicolao Visscher.

Author
VISSCHER, Nicolaes Janzsen

Publication date
from 1658.

Publisher
Auctore Nicolao Visscher,

Publication place
Amsterdam,

Physical description

Double-page engraved map of the world, with fine hand-colour in full, lower margin renewed.

Dimensions
468 by 558mm (18.5 by 22 inches).

Notes

Nicolaes Visscher’s map of the world is based mainly on Willem Janszoon Blaeu’s wall map of the world of 1648. The differences between the two are principally decorative, although Visscher has

added two smaller hemispheres showing the earth from the two poles, reflecting contemporary demand for views of the world on different projections, based on Hondius's prototypes.

The outlines of Australia and New Zealand, remain unfinished and are amongst the earliest on a world map to be based on the discoveries of Abel Tasman in 1642 and 1644. The coastlines of western America and eastern Asia and similarly open-ended, perhaps still allowing for the possibility that they are contiguous.

Terra Australis has been completely eradicated, and Vissher's map was one of the first to dismiss the mythical southern continent so thoroughly: from both the main map, and the smaller south polar projection.

California is shown as an island, and Alaska and the lakes of Canada do not appear at all. The land of Anian appears in northwest America, first described by Marco Polo, the semi-mythical land was meant to be the first reached after traversing the Northwest Passage through the Arctic.

The map is significant for its magnificent border by Nicolaes Berchem, a painter of pastoral landscapes, and is amongst those early maps which set the precedent for the famously intricately decorated Dutch maps of the later seventeenth century. In the late 1600's, a period of great geographical discovery, Amsterdam became an international center of the arts and of cartography, with engravers and printers produced magnificent maps and charts of every kind. The fields of artistic production and mapmaking were arguably more seamlessly united during this era than any period before or since, as the strong competition among publishers meant that maps not only had to be scrupulously accurate, but also visually appealing. In this milieu, a number of venerable firms, including those established by Blaeu, Jansson, Hondius, as well as Visscher, competed for the ever-expanding market for maps and atlases.

In the border of this map, Berchem weaves together classical mythology and the elements: the corners show the rape of Persephone (fire), Zeus enthroned (air), Demeter amongst the harvest (earth) and Neptune in his chariot (water). The whole is presided over by personifications of the elements supporting the two polar projections. The cycle also roughly corresponds to the passage of the seasons.

The mapmaker
The family firm was founded by Claes Jansz Visscher, whose grandfather had been a fisherman, as his name suggests, and fishermen are a recurring theme throughout Visscher's engravings. He first emerged as a printmaker from number 8 Roomolenstteeg, Amsterdam. By 1605 he was working for Willem Jansz Blaeu on his monumental world map printed on twenty plates. Blaeu also published a number of Visscher's individual etchings from designs by David Vinckboons, who may have trained Visscher in the art of etching and engraving. By 1608 Visscher was signing his name as the creator and publisher of his own works. In 1611, he acquired a house in the prestigious Kalverstraat, between Dam Square and the Stock Exchange, and from there built up an impressive stock of maps, city views and other topographical prints. "In due course, he became Amsterdam's most productive and innovative print publisher. It is estimated that a thousand or so prints were produced in Visscher's workshop and more than four thousand others were printed from bought in second-hand plates, making the print publisher one of the largest in Europe. Later the print publishers Jodocus Hondius I, Cornelis Danckerts, Hugo Allardt, Frederick de Wit, Justus Danckerts and Clement de Jonghe also set themselves up in Kalverstraat, creating a huge concentration of activity in print making and print dealing" (Leefland).

Despite his formidable output and stock, we know little about Claes Jansz Visscher the man. He married Neel Floris (1588-1638) in 1608 and they had ten children, five of whom reached adulthood.

There is no surviving portrait of Visscher. As a strict Calvinist, he had burnished out all images of God from older plates he had purchased. Visscher's career is a perfect example of the social mobility that was possible during the Golden Age. Alongside the print business, he and his family made a fortune buying property in the booming Amsterdam real estate. Claes Jansz's son Nicolaes (1618-1679) joined the business, probably at an early age. After the death of his father in 1652, he continued the business until his own death, and was then followed by his son Nicolaes II until 1702, when his wife Elizabeth Verseyl successfully continued the business until her death in 1726. Thereafter the shop came into the possession of the publisher Andries de Leth.

Bibliography

Literature: Clancy, 'The Mapping of Terra Australis', 6.11; cf. Schilder, 'Australia Unveiled', 1976, page 202; Shirley, 'The mapping of the world: early printed world maps, 1472-1700', 406; Woods, National Library of Australia, 'Mapping our World: Terra Incognita to Australia', 2014, page 149.

Provenance

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