

12 volumes. Folio. Letterpress title-pages with engraved vignette and divisional half-titles to each volume. Magnificent engraved allegorical architectural frontispiece title-pages to each volume, 597 engraved maps and plates, mostly double-page (some folding), engraved illustrations, all with mangnificent contemporary hand-colour, map of Holy Land supplied, lacking leaves Cc1-Cc2 from Asia volume, and divisional title from volume VI (as common) occasional browning and marginal staining. Superb publisher's Dutch gilt-panelled vellum, each cover decorated with gilt stylised foliate roll-tool panels, arabesques at inner corners and surrounding a large central arabesque medallion, the smooth spines gilt ruled in eight compartments each decorated with fleur-de-lys corner pieces around a central rose tool, yapp fore-edges, remnants of green silk ties.

"THE GREATEST AND FINEST ATLAS EVER PUBLISHED"

Le Grand Atlas, ou Cosmographie blaviane, en laquelle est exactement descritte la terre, la mer, et le ciel.

Author
BLAEU, Johannes

Publication date
1663.

Publisher
Jean Blaeu,

Publication place
Amsterdam,

Physical description
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Dimensions
540 by 340mm (21.25 by 13.5 inches).

Notes
An uncharacteristically fine and attractive example of "the greatest and finest atlas ever published" (Verwey).

The 'Atlas Major' 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 atlas was published simultaneously in five different languages: Latin, French, Dutch, Spanish, and German. Of these the French 'Grand Atlas' was the largest of the five editions, with the volume concerning France divided into two books to make a total of 12 volumes.

In his 'Grand Atlas' Blaeu was able to contain the world of the Dutch Golden Age in a book, an endeavor unparalleled for centuries.

Blaeu's great work was born 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. His great rivals, Henricus Hondius and Johannes Janssonius, had expanded and reissued Mercator's work. They reacted to Blaeu's move by issuing a rival 'Appendix' by the end of the same year. 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.
The house of Blaeu was so successful that in 1637 they moved into larger premises. The new building was the largest printing house in Europe, with its own print foundry and nine letterpresses. Unfortunately, Willem did not live long after the move and he passed away the following year. He was succeeded in business by his son Joan, who also inherited the lucrative and influential post of Hydrographer to the Dutch East India Company (V.O.C.). Over the next 20 years Joan expanded the 'Atlas Novus': adding a third volume in 1640 covering Italy and Greece; in 1645, a fourth volume on the British Isles; and in 1654 a volume relating to China, the 'Atlas Sinensis'. This is the first western atlas of China, based on the work of the Jesuit Marteo Martini. Janssonius managed to keep 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 consisting 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 numbers it is clear that Blaeu needed capital. The creation of the five editions took six years, from 1659 to 1665. It is estimated that 1,550 copies over all five editions were printed. If one totals up the entire print run, it comes to

just over 5.4 million pages of text, and 950,000 copper plate impressions.
Such a vast undertaking in capital and labour was reflected in the price of the work, with the French edition the most expensive at 450 guilders. The atlas was the most expensive book of its day: the average price of a house in Amsterdam at the time of publication was 500 guilders. The maps are embellished in the Baroque style, and are among the most beautiful ever made. Of particular note are the famous side-panelled maps of the continents, the 58 maps devoted to England and Wales (volume V), Martini's Atlas of China, the first atlas of China published in Europe (volume XI), and a series of 23 maps of America, including important early maps of Virginia and New England (volume XII).
Of particular note is the double hemisphere map of the world, newly prepared for the atlas by Joan Blaeu himself. Jerry Brotton suggests that this is the first world map in an atlas to portray the Copernican solar system.

Contents:
Volume I: World map, Europe and Scandinavia. 61 maps and plates, including views of Tycho Brahe's observatory.
Volume II: Northern and Eastern Europe. 39 maps and plates.
Volume III: Germany. 96 maps (3 folding).
Volume IV: The Low Countries. 63 maps.
Volume V: England and Wales. 58 maps.
Volume VI: Scotland and Ireland. 55 maps.
Volume VII: France. 37 maps.
Volume VIII: France and Switzerland. 36 maps.
Volume IX: Italy. 60 maps.
Volume X: Part 1. Spain and Portugal. Part 2. Africa. 41 (28 + 13) maps and plates, including 3 folding.
Volume XI: Asia. 28 maps devoted to China and the Far East. Compiled by the Italian Jesuit Martino Martini, this volume represents the first atlas of China produced in the western world.
Volume XII: America. 23 maps that helped to shape contemporary conceptions regarding the geography of the New World more than almost any other source. Included in this volume is a general map of the continent, famed for its side panels that contain costumed figures and city views, as well as a distinguished series of regional maps. The map of Virginia was the first version of John Smith's map of the area surrounding Chesapeake Bay to be published in continental Europe.

Bibliography
Brotton, 260-293; Hermann de la Fontaine Verwey, "Het werk van de Blaeus', Maandblad Amstelodamum 39 (1952), 103 quoted in Brotton, 265; Van der Krogt, 2:611-2; Shirley, British Library, T:BLA-1q.

Provenance

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