

Engraved map with fine original hand-colour, with loss to lower central part of image, skilfully repaired in facsimile.

THE SO-CALLED FIRST EVER JIGSAW

Europe divided into its kingdoms, etc. 1766. By J. Spilsbury.

Author
SPILSBURY, J[ohn]

Publication date
1766

Publisher
Spilsbury, Engraver, Map and Print Seller in Russell Court, Covent Garden,

Publication place
London,

Physical description
Engraved map with fine original hand-colour, with loss to lower central part of image, skilfully repaired in facsimile.

Dimensions
430 by 470mm (17 by 18.5 inches).

Notes
The emerging children’s culture of the mid-eighteenth century produced toys and games that were often as ornamental as they were practical, and the demand for increasingly unique and interesting items had eventually resulted in jigsaw puzzles.

The invention of these is widely attributed to John Spilsbury (1739-1769), a British cartographer, engraver and map-seller who, in 1766, affixed a world map to a wooden boardand carved each country out. There are, however, earlier references to these sorts of geographical games made by a Madame de Beaumont in Paris. Her sets were typically expensive, and were of the style popular among the elite, for whom these items were made into symbols of status. In Jane Austen's 1814 novel 'Mansfield Park', for example, the poor protagonist is mocked by her wealthy cousins because she "cannot put the map of Europe together".

The cartographic jigsaws of John Spilsbury were also designed initially as games for the elite, his first one being presented to the children of King George III and Queen Charlotte, but were later sold to boarding schools as well, as teaching aids for geography classes. As pupils put the pieces together, they would learn how different countries connected to one another. During the 1760s, he created a variety of sets, including jigsaws of England, Wales, Ireland, and Scotland, together with puzzles of the four continents.

The present example, dated 1766, is the first of Spilsbury's maps to be transformed into a puzzle, and is thus mistakenly believed to be the first ever jigsaw, Madame de Beaumont being widely overlooked. Furthermore, Spilsbury had appeared in Mortimer's Universal Director for 1763, where he is described as 'Engraver and Map Dissector in Wood, in order to facilitate the Teaching of Geography', suggesting that was already making jigsaw maps by this time, although no earlier 'dissected map' survives. His map of Europe nonetheless remains an important marker in cartographic history, the present example being made even more unique by the fact that it remains undissected.

Cartographically, the map covers the whole of Europe, extending from Iceland in the upper left-hand corner down to the island of Cyprus in the lower right-hand corner. Each kingdom is distinguished by colour outline and colour wash, with its principle cities, rivers and bodies of water identified by name. In the upper left-hand corner, there is a scale bar beneath which Spilsbury's imprint is to be found. When dissected along the national borders, the map would be transformed into a puzzle of fifty pieces.

Exceedingly rare; we are only able to trace one institutional example: the British Library, lacking four pieces; and one example appearing at Sotheby's in 2018, lacking three pieces.

Bibliography

Provenance

Price:

Inventory reference: 17685

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