**General Information**

**Title:** Salt Mine  
**Artist:** Johann Esaias Nilson  
**Date:** 1760  
**Size:** 21 x 33 1/4 inches  
**Medium:** Engraving  
**Acquistion #:** 70.200  
**Additional Work by artist in collection:** No

**Artist’s Biography**  
Johann Esaias Nilson was born in 1721. He died in 1788, after a life filled with a successful and illustrious career. The German printmaker’s influence on the Rococo period’s decorative arts earned him the name “the German Watteau.” The art of Antoine Watteau was one of the developing forces of the Rococo period. Nilson was originally trained as an engraver and a miniaturist but was also trained by his father as a painter. In 1752 he started his own publishing house. The influence of that venture brought an invitation to become a German court painter in Augsburg. Throughout the rest of his life he continued to wield his influence as a board member of the Augsburg Academy of Fine Art to further his publications and develop a reputation as one of the great Rococo artists.

**Historical Context**  
Johann Esaias Nilson’s *Salt Mine* depicts the workers of a Polish salt mine in Wieliczka, Poland. These European salt mines at the time of Nilson were producing large amounts of salt. The main function of salt was the preservation of meat, which made salt an invaluable tool for all classes of people. The salt industry brought wealth and prosperity to the lands with salt resources; however, the price of salt remained high, making it hard for the lower classes to obtain it. Nilson’s engraving shows both the prosperity and the classism of the European salt industry. Nilson depicted the bustling salt mine, full of workers, but in the bottom right of the print Nilson included well dressed, presumably wealthy, individuals sitting around a table as workers moved around them. He identified the lower class in this print as the men providing the physical labor in the mine. The art of the Rococo usually focused on the elegance of the upper class, but Nilson portrays workers as well. Despite the ironic usage of the working class subjects, the image still lacks a portrayal of realistic working conditions and the hard struggle of mine workers.

As mentioned, the mine being depicted in the print is the Polish salt mine, Wieliczka. This mine has become a historical land mark of Poland. It was a working mine for centuries, interestingly with a cathedral and other art carved out of the salt during the 13th and 14th centuries. At the time the print was produced, the mine was under the control of King Augustus III, who in turn was largely controlled by the powerful German Count, Heinrich von Brühl. These two figures have their names inscribed in the upper-left corner and the bottom-right corner of the print. A connection can be made between the importance of the salt mine and the relationship of these two rulers in order to find a meaning for this print. Nilson, being a German court painter, could have been commissioned to create this piece by Heinrich von Brühl.

**Technique**  
Engraving is the process of carving a design into a hard surface, usually metal or wood. The design that is cut into the surface can act as the finished product or the illustrations can be transferred onto paper as prints. The process of engraving was historically significant for the production of book illustrations, mapmaking, and artistic production. The different kinds of printmaking techniques made art more attainable for lower classes, which allowed for propaganda and messages of average life to spread more easily.

**Terms**

- Antoine Watteau— French painter whose brief career spurred the revival of interest in color and movement in the Rococo art period.
- Classism— prejudice against or in favor of people belonging to a particular social class.
- Engraving— a print made from an engraved plate, block, or other surface.
- Rococo— art period that focused on theatricality and illusion through ornate details and focused on wealth and the upper class. The use of pastels and gold created a dense exuberance that went beyond reality.

**Completed by:** Michael Diane Wood, Summer 2018

**References:**  
- [https://artsandculture.google.com/entity/m0gc80](https://artsandculture.google.com/entity/m0gc80)  
- [http://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/24936220.pdf?refreqid=excelsior%3A4e594b4e-4ef74365a827b3ab047e0f89](http://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/24936220.pdf?refreqid=excelsior%3A4e594b4e-4ef74365a827b3ab047e0f89)  
**SALT ART**

**K-5**

**BIG IDEA: Skills, Techniques, and Processes**

Enduring Understanding 1 VA.3.S.1: The arts are inherently experiential and actively engage learners in the process of creating, interpreting, and responding to art.

**Session activity**: Johann Esaias Nilson depicted the salt mine, Wieliczka, which produced salt and eventually held several salt-carved chapels. The architecture of the chapels was accompanied by sculpture and other features also carved out of the salt in the mine. Students participating in this activity will create art out of salt in order to call attention to the art making that even today decorates the halls of the Wieliczka Salt Mine, which contributed to it becoming an important historical landmark.

**Objectives**:
- Students will learn that diverse media can be used in art, even salt.
- Through discussion of Nilson’s print and the salt mine at Wieliczka students will develop an understanding of the art connections in culture, in this case the relationship of a print to an architectural landmark.

**Instructions**:
1. Introduce Johann Esaias Nilson and his print and discuss the various chapels and artworks in the salt mine and the way they influenced the heightened importance of the salt mine.
2. Separate portions of salt into different plastic bags.
3. Squeeze different food dye into each bag and mix into salt.
4. Each student will layer colors of salt into jars in order to create layers and patterns.
5. Place lids tightly on jars.

**Materials**:
- Salt
- Liquid food dye
- Plastic bags
- Small jars

**ART AND CLASSISM**

**Grades 6-12**

**BIG IDEA: Critical Thinking and Reflection**

Enduring Understanding 1 VA.912.C.1: Cognition and reflection are required to appreciate, interpret, and create with artistic intent.

**Session activity**: The Rococo art period focused on the wealthy class and exuberant life styles. There was very little focus on the lower class or the harsh reality of living a working class life. Nilson’s Rococo print is unique in that it portrays the workers of the Wieliczka Salt Mine, but even his portrayal of the working class is masked. His intention was to celebrate the successful and important salt mine, meaning the struggle of mine workers did nothing to further that message. During this activity students will research the way artists have portrayed social classes throughout history.

**Instructions**:
1. Students will each pick an artist who represents social class. See examples of artists to the left.
2. Students will research the way artists portrayed class and the reality of social context during the chosen time periods of the artists.
3. The students will each create two Power Point slides based on the research.
4. Slide #1: Students will focus on social and historical context.
5. Slide #2: Students will focus on the artwork and the way the artists either revealed aspects of class or tried to deny them.
6. The work will be submitted to the teacher and compiled into an overall PowerPoint show.
7. The PowerPoint will be shown to the class and each student will present his/her slides.

**Objectives**:
- Students will develop skills in research.
- Students will develop skills in PowerPoint.
- Students will develop an understanding of the relationship between art and social context with a focus on the depiction of social class by artists.

**Materials**:
- Access to a computer
- Access to research materials, such as library books or academic websites.
- PowerPoint
- Flash drive