

General Information

Title: *Salt Mine*

Artist: Johann Esaias Nilson

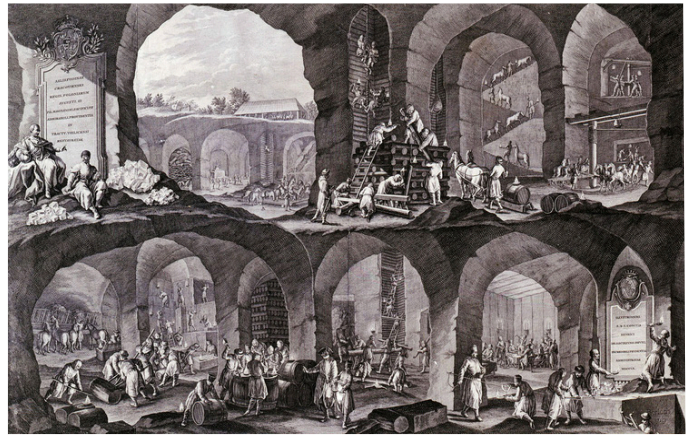
Date: 1760

Size: 21 x 33 1/4 inches

Medium: Engraving

Acquisition #: 70.200

Additional Work by artist in collection: No



Artist's Biography

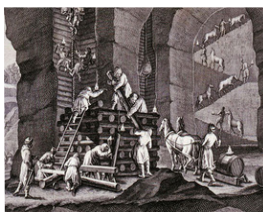
Johann Esaias Nilson was born in 1721. He died in 1788, after a life filled with a successful and illustrious career. The German printmaker's influence on the Rococo period's decorative arts earned him the name "the German Watteau." The art of Antoine Watteau was one of the developing forces of the Rococo 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.

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.



Detail of upper class figures dining in the mine.



Detail of workers in the mine.



Detail of lower-right inscription glorifying Count Heinrich von Brühl.



Detail of upper-left inscription glorifying King Augustus III.

Completed by: Michael Diane Wood,
Summer 2018

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.

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.

References:

- <https://artsandculture.google.com/entity/m0gc80>
- <http://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/24936220.pdf?refreqid=excelsior%3A4e594b4c-4cf74365a827b3ab047ef089>
- http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/search_the_collection_database/term_details.aspx?bioid=113169

<p style="text-align: center;">SALT ART K-5</p>	<div data-bbox="933 174 1276 224" data-label="Caption"> <p>Rock-salt statue of Pope John Paul II in a Chapel of the Wieliczka Salt Mine.</p> </div> 
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