

PAN

AMSTERDAM

LAWRENCE STEIGRAD FINE ARTS



A Carnival Parade on a Frozen Canal

signed S. v. d. Leij in the lower right
oil on canvas
20 x 30 inches (50.8 x 76.2 cm.)

PROVENANCE

Private Collection, Maryland

The earliest known carnival celebrations occurred in Den Bosch at the end of the 14th or start of the 15th century. Basically, an adaptation of a pagan celebration, it was largely eradicated during the Reformation until the early 19th century when it was revived as a backlash against French rule.[1]

During Carnival normal life was suspended and given over to excessive feasting, carousing and drinking. Celebrants routinely donned costumes and hid identities behind the anonymity of masks that allowed the freedom to act outrageously without fear of consequences. Stemming from its medieval roots a ceremonial transfer of power from the town's mayor to the chosen Prince of the Carnival occurred for 3 days, providing the opportunity to freely criticize the government and symbolize the power of the populace.[2] "The reversal of the social order ... [was] in fact the essential core of the carnival celebration" with the parade constituting its most important element. Although the parade

typically had a set starting point it basically traveled “from nowhere to nowhere.”[3]

In a remarkable depiction Simon van der Ley has captured the carnival parade’s boisterous nature with its participants skating and marching along a frozen canal through the center of town. At its head is the chosen Prince identifiable by his three plumed hat and crown, carrying a marotte topped by a miniature fool’s head. His so-called Council of Eleven (the council of the Kingdom of Fools during carnival) follows in his wake, distinguishable by the single feather in their caps. Government authority is mocked by the two uniformed figures in sledges wearing bird and donkey masks pushed to the forefront by the entourage. On the far left a fool has knocked a gentleman to the ground, while a lizard man threatens him with his rod. Always held between February and March the temperature is frigid, here personified by the white clowns in the center right. Presumably their battle represents the banishment of winter in favor of the coming spring. Along with Dutch flags are the carnival flags of the procession with blue, purple and green traditional choices. Under a wintry sky spectators watch from the bridge, street, and along the snow-covered ice’s edge.

Van der Ley is known as a painter of city views and landscapes working in the middle of the nineteenth century. The Campbeltown Museum, Scotland owns A View of Rotterdam done by the artist. Seeking out the picturesque Van der Ley traveled to various other Dutch towns including Dordrecht and Amsterdam. Views of Auxerre and Abbeville in France are also known. This work with over 50 figures and measuring 50.8 x 76.2 cm. of the highly unusual subject A Carnival Parade on a Frozen Canal in mid-nineteenth century Holland constitutes one of his most compelling.

[1] Benjamin Garstka, “Carnival in the Netherlands, Custom and Tradition Explained” at www.iamexpat.nl, February 25, 2014.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Fen Vlaanderen, “Wat is carnaval?” at <https://www.fenvlaanderen.be/carnaval/wat-carnaval>.