

Asian Ceramics in the Netherlands



Willem van Mieris (1662-1747), 'Interior with apes', 1719, oil on canvas, 26.6 x 48 cm, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden, Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister.

Keramik, Leeuwarden: Prinsessehof Leeuwarden, Issue 2 (summer 2002).

Asian Art >
General

The Netherlands is often considered a Mecca for scholars and devotees of several types of Asian ceramics. The abundance of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Asian porcelain in the Netherlands today is the logical outcome of Dutch prominence in the large-scale porcelain trade between Asia and Europe. Considering this abundance it is important that Dutch institutions are encouraged to study their own collections, that they make these available to international scholars and add new information to this particular chapter of 'Asian ceramics': seventeenth- and eighteenth-century export porcelains.¹ Four Dutch museums with impressive collections of Asian ceramics (Prinsessehof Leeuwarden, Groninger Museum, Gemeentemuseum Den Haag, and Rijksmuseum Amsterdam) have recently started up a cooperation project to these ends.

By Jan van Campen

Upon its founding in 1602, the Verenigde Oostindische Compagnie (Dutch East Indies Company, or VOC) established a direct shipping route to Asia, importing large amounts of Chinese porcelain to Holland. Crewmembers set up their own private trades, which caused an influx of porcelain in addition to the regular VOC imports. Although Spanish and Portuguese ships had been sailing to Asia for several decades before the Dutch began transporting porcelain to Europe and elsewhere, the Dutch imports seem to have had an immediate impact.

This direct sea route to Asia helps to explain the success of Chinese porcelain in Holland on the supply side. On the demand side, as wealth was fairly evenly distributed in the Netherlands, and amongst a relatively large part of the population, many were able to spend money on items of luxury such as porcelain. In addition, the members of the House of Orange, the princes and stadtholders who had only recently acquired their status as powerful state leaders, were looking for ways to express this new role. Deliberately choosing to portray themselves as princes of treasures of the East buying, amongst other things, large amounts of porcelain, their role was by no means insignificant. Their approach of showing off and impressing with overseas treasures is best conveyed by the lavishly decorated interior of Huis ten Bosch, the palace of the Dutch royal family in The Hague. Tribute bearers from all over the world presented their treasures, including Chinese porcelain, to stadtholder Frederik Hendrik (1584-1647). His wife Amalia was the first to have real porcelain cabinets, separate rooms especially designed to display large quantities of porcelain. Naturally, the Dutch nobility and wealthy citizens followed the Princes of Orange in their conspicuous consumption, and collecting Chinese porcelains became a Dutch craze from the early seventeenth century onwards.

To get an impression of the sheer quantity and extent of porcelain imports to the Netherlands, one should turn to the northern Dutch provinces: Groningen and Friesland. It is still rather a puzzle why exactly these parts of the Netherlands are generously endowed with the largest collection of Asian porcelain in the country. As a consequence, and notwithstanding that the large, well-known museums in The Hague and Amsterdam can boast large porcelain collections, the smaller museums of Groningen and Leeuwarden (the respective capitals of Groningen and Friesland) have the largest collections of Asian porcelain in the Netherlands, comprising dishes, bowls, numerous cups and saucers, teapots, and vases, all in astonishing quantities. The quality of these porcelains, which are painted in blue-and-white designs, or in a polychrome palette with enamel colours, sometimes in addi-

tion to the blue underglaze, varies from reasonable to outstanding. This clearly contrasts with the collections in The Hague and Amsterdam, which, formed in the nineteenth and twentieth century with the aesthetic eye of the time, only present the very best pieces as isolated works of art, thus more or less depriving these of their historical context.

This changed manner of collecting can partly be explained by the changed appreciation of Asian porcelain from the end of the eighteenth century onwards. European factories began to produce genuine porcelain in 1709, and soon proved to be better equipped to meet the latest fashions and demands of wealthy customers. Moreover, things Chinese were generally no longer as much *en vogue* as they had been in the seventeenth and the first part of the eighteenth century, and, by and large, came to be seen as objectionable frivolities. As early as 1719, Willem van Mieris commented on the craze for Chinese porcelain, in his satirical painting of an interior scene with an excessive amount of porcelain in which apes had replaced human beings. As apes are symbols of *luxuria*, and self-indulgence, this is an early critical note to an unrestrained porcelain mania.

Some observations in a famous early-nineteenth-century travel account may help to gain understanding of the abundance of porcelain in Groningen and Friesland, developing in this period.² In 1823 Jacob van Lennep and a friend walked through the Netherlands, and observed that rich farmers and citizens in the northern provinces had recently taken a remarkable fancy for luxury items. Tellingly, while explicitly mentioning porcelain when describing the interiors of inhabitants in these areas, Van Lennep makes no reference to porcelain in other parts of his travel account. In his eyes, as a member of the Amsterdam *haute volée*, porcelain displays were out of fashion, an indication of bad taste, and – in keeping with Van Mieris' painting a hundred years earlier – representative of moral degradation. Due to the fall in demand amongst the elites in the west of the country, Asian porcelain flooded the market at the end of the eighteenth century. The wealthier inhabitants of Groningen and Friesland were probably only all too happy to buy this beautiful porcelain, and we can see how a difference in taste produced a steady flow of porcelain from the more progressive and traditionally richer western parts of the Netherlands to the northern provinces.

Kraak ware for the Netherlands

Four Dutch museums with important collections of Asian ceramics (Prinsessehof Leeuwarden, Groninger Museum, Gemeentemuseum Den Haag, and Rijksmuseum Amsterdam) have recently started up a cooperation project, by which they combine knowledge and manpower in order to improve research on the collections. They will hold joint exhibitions

to attract a wider audience and publish large parts of the collections on the Internet, making them available to scholars and serious collectors. This project will not only provide a good insight into the import of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Asian ceramics as a whole, it will also shed light on later collecting attitudes. By working together, these museums will provide a comprehensive overview of the export porcelains intended for Holland and the Dutch East Indies, Asian ceramics of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, as well as ceramics collected in the Netherlands in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Their first joint exhibition of ceramics was devoted to *kraak* ware.³ Though much was re-exported directly in the seventeenth century and, perhaps, even more left the Netherlands at a later date in the hands of foreign collectors, there still is no other place with such a comparatively high density of *kraak* ware. *Kraak* porcelain is a type of Chinese export ceramic produced from c. 1560 to c. 1650 and was originally developed for the Portuguese and Spanish traders as a light ware, with standard forms which enabled them to store the objects economically in their ships. The thin body is often warped in the kiln and always painted in underglaze blue, while most saucers and dishes have a typical decoration with alternating broad and small panels in the rim. It is exactly this type of porcelain that the Dutch began to trade in the early seventeenth century. Dutch trade started in 1602 with the capture of a Portuguese ship, San Jago, loaded with porcelain, subsequently auctioned off with much success. Whereas the Portuguese had restricted their porcelain trade mainly to the Asian markets, the enormous success of this sale incited the Dutch VOC to aggressively pursue an active trade bringing Chinese porcelain to the Netherlands.

Five scholars were invited to lecture on a symposium that accompanied the exhibition. They focused on the impact of the sudden increase of Chinese porcelain in Europe, the *kraak* ware imports being the first opportunity for Europeans to easily acquire Chinese objects. China was already beloved of well-read Europeans in the late sixteenth and seventeenth century: not much was known about the Chinese empire, but they were familiar with rumours of a mythical, rich country where a wise man reigned as emperor over contented subjects. The arrival of relatively cheap *kraak* porcelain, decorated with Chinese plants, flowers, animals, landscapes, people, mythological animals, and other motifs, enabled Europeans to acquire samples and proof of the incredible riches and miracles of this exotic country.⁴

The museums are now working on the website publication of their complete collections of *kraak* porcelain.⁵ Rather than publishing a selection of the most attractive objects, with lengthy and extensive commentary, in a catalogue, we want to make as many *kraak* ware objects as possible accessible on the website for scholars and all those interested in Asian ceramics all over the world. The *kraak* ware collection of the four museums is expected to be available on the website in autumn 2003. Another cooperative exhibition, scheduled for this year, will consist of highlights from the four porcelain collections. Objects have been deliberately chosen to show as clearly as possible the various collecting accents and historical development of the collections. Hopefully, the exhibition programme and website will help to gain wider recognition for the importance of these Dutch collections of Asian porcelain. ◀

Jan van Campen is curator for Asian export art and ceramics in Museum Prinsessehof Leeuwarden and for the Rijksmuseum Amsterdam.
j.van.campen@rijksmuseum.nl

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- ¹ 'Ceramics' is a generic term for earthenware, stoneware, and porcelain. Porcelain is much harder than stoneware and earthenware and requires high oven-temperatures.
- ² Lennep, Jacob van, *Nederland in den goeden ouden tijd*, M.E. Kluit (ed.), Utrecht: W. de Haan (1942).
- ³ *Kraak* ware is a type of porcelain exported, initially, by the Portuguese and, from 1602 onwards, especially by the Dutch. Its thinness, lightness, and standardized forms and decoration, made it cheap and easy to transport. The name *kraak* is derived from *caracca*, a Portuguese ship type of the time. The *kraak* ware that arrived in the Netherlands was booty from conquered Portuguese *caraccas*.
- ⁴ The results of the symposium have now been published in the periodical *Vor-men uit Vuur; Mededelingenblad Nederlandse vereniging van vrienden van ceramiek en glas* (Issue 180/181, 2003/1-2).
- ⁵ www.aziatischekeramiek.nl