

The cultural crossroads: St. Petersburg, Batavia, Amsterdam

The archives and libraries of the Netherlands, Indonesia and Great Britain preserve many collections of Malay written documents: witnesses to the long history of presence and activity of Dutch and British trading companies in the Malay Archipelago. Our exploration of these documents brought us to three cities – St. Petersburg, Batavia and Amsterdam – and conjured past images of their 17th and 18th century histories.

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St. Petersburg collection

Outstanding Russian collector and scholar N.P. Likhachev (1862-1936) possessed a rare erudition and sophisticated knowledge in the fields of history, palaeography, diplomacy, sphragistics and numismatics; he made a great contribution to these fields and built an extremely rich collection of rare documents, manuscripts, seals, icons, pictures, charters, coins, ex libris and autographs. Among all these objects one can find both western and oriental samples including a rare collection of old Malay letters from the archives of the Dutch East-India Company (*Verenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie* – VOC). As indicated in Likhachev's notes, he bought the Malay letters in 1910, from the auction house Muller in Amsterdam. A number of the letters that are in Chinese were purchased earlier, in 1890, from a famous Paris antiquarian, Saffroi (image 2).¹

All but one of the letters had come from the family archive of Joan van Hoorn; most had been addressed to him as director-general of the Dutch-Indies (1691-1704) and as governor-general of the Dutch-Indies (1704-1709). The one exception was the letter addressed to his predecessor, governor-general Willem van Outhoorn (1691-1704). However, one could consider this letter to be a family heirloom as well, because Joan van Hoorn married Susanna Angela van Outhoorn, daughter of Willem van Outhoorn, in 1691.²

VOC and Joan van Hoorn

Monumental changes occurred in the China Sea region in the course of the 17th and 18th centuries, as a result of dynastic transformations in China and Japan, and the expansion of European maritime trade in Asia. These global forces found their expression in new port cities. The port of Batavia was established in 1619 as a typical colonial castle town at the site of the former port of Jayakarta, or Sunda Kalapa. Its rise came at the expense of nearby Banten, which had served as the terminus of Chinese, Indian, Arabic and European trade on Java.

Joan van Hoorn was born in Amsterdam, on November 16th 1653. In 1663 he departed to the Dutch-Indies with his father Pieter van Hoorn, *Raad extra-ordinair van Indie*, on board of the ship "Alphen". At the age of twelve he started his career as *onderassistent* in the VOC, and eventually worked his way up to *Directeur-Generaal* of the Dutch-Indies in 1691, and *Gouverneur-Generaal* in 1704. He is known for amassing a huge fortune during his lifetime, and famous for establishing the first coffee plantations on Java. The Dutch had already brought coffee plants from Mocca and Yemen, but only after some experimenting in the Priangan area south of Batavia, by van Hoorn, did the cultivation of Java coffee become a huge success. Joan van Hoorn ended his career in the Dutch-Indies in 1709; he was succeeded by Abraham van Riebeeck, father of his third wife. Soon after he sailed to Amsterdam, as an Admiral aboard the ship "Zandenburg". He died less than a year after his return.

Batavia and Malay Letters

By the beginning of the 18th century Batavia had become known for its luxurious way of life, high class citizens, cosmopolitan nature and eclectic cultural mix of residents. Every indigenous merchant visiting the city was provided with a translator to help with writing diplomatic letters to neighbouring port principalities. Moreover, in the Malay world great symbolic value was attached to the exchange of official letters, especially where the status of the sender and the recipient were both significant. The writing of diplomatic correspondence was elevated to an art, including in itself the

arts of calligraphy and illumination (embellishment of text with gold or silver), and written according to the rules of composition as defined in the *Kitab Terasul*. The letters were brought to Batavia Castle where they would be ceremoniously presented to the *Gouverneur-Generaal* and the members of the *Raad van Indie*. Many surviving letters from the VOC archives, beautifully illuminated with gold leaf, still bear witness to those days. Some can be found among the collection from St. Petersburg (image 3).

Likhachev's collection contains 54 documents, written in various languages: Malay, Javanese, Dutch, Chinese and Spanish; and in different scripts: Jawi, Pegon, Javanese, Chinese and Latin. Containing fine examples of Arabic calligraphy, they were composed by Sultans and nobility of various Malay Sultanates, such as Palembang (image 4), Cirebon (image 5), Banten, Japara, Bima on Sumbawa Island, the Sultanates of Bone, Gowa and Tallo on South Sulawesi, Bouton on Butung Island, Malacca and Manila. One letter was written by Joan van Hoorn himself in 1696 and addressed to Pangeran (Prince) Cakraningrat on Madura. Several letters depict trade relations; for example, a letter written in 1706 by the first Balinese captain in Batavia *Lampiden*, and a letter from the Spanish *Compania A'Olanda* in South Sulawesi. One letter from Agra witnesses the trading activities of Joan van Hoorn and his mission to India.³

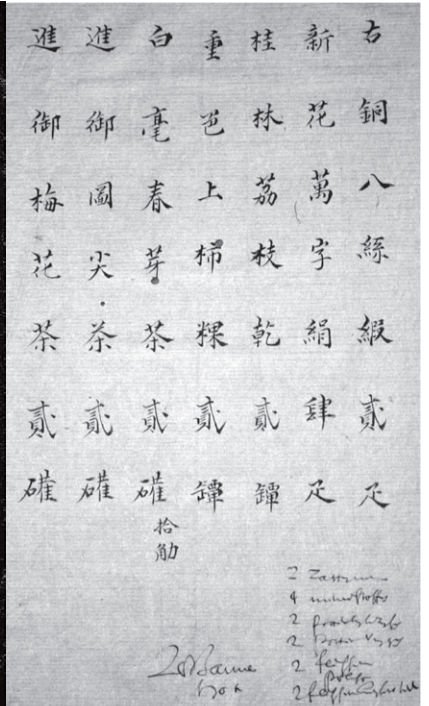
All the documents mentioned above date back to a rather early period, namely 1680-1710, which is when the so-called "old" Malay letters were created. Their style of composition, inscription and decoration is of utmost sophistication and elegance. Some of Likhachev's items, including the letter written by Joan van Hoorn himself, display the unique and beautiful flower decor, which is a distinguishable feature of Banten illuminated letters (image 6).

Whilst perusing through the illuminated letters one cannot help but notice the significance of one other particular person. Dutch artist and traveller Cornelis de Bruyn (1652-1727) combined his many talents in various arts and sciences, and was blessed with an adventurous and curious soul. He is mostly remembered for the written records of his extensive travels through Egypt, Persia, Jerusalem, Constantinople, India, Moscovia and Batavia, which are accompanied by fine drawings and portraits. After painting Peter the Great in 1704, he left Moscovia, and travelled through Persia, reaching Java in 1706. In Batavia he was introduced to the *Gouverneur-Generaal* Joan van Hoorn and painted his portrait, which is now exhibited at the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam.

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Notes

- 1 Opis 2. Arhiv RAN. *Svedenija o proishojdenii, sostave i opredelenii predmetov iz kolekcii Likhacheva N.P.*
- 2 Rhede van der Kloot, M.A. van. 1891. *De Gouverneurs-Generaal en Commissarissen-Generaal van Nederlandsch-Indie 1610-1888. Historisch-Genaeologisch Beschreven.* s'Gravenhage: Van Stockum & Zoon.
- 3 Katkova, Irina. 2010. "Pisma hollandskoj Ost-Indskoj kompanii iz kolekcii N.P. Likhacheva v sobranii IVR RAN". *Pismennij pamjatniki Vostoka*, 1-12.



1: Portrait of Joan van Hoorn (1653-1711). Painted by Cornelis de Bruijn. Rijksmuseum Amsterdam.

2: Chinese letter (1702). VOC collection in St. Petersburg.

3: Letter (1709) by Sultan Abual-Muhasin Muhammad Zain al-Abidin of Banten. VOC collection in St. Petersburg.



4: Lamp-black seal of Sultan Ratu Palembang (1709). VOC collection in St. Petersburg.



5: Letter from Cirebon (1688). Red wax seal of VOC.

6: Letter by Governor-General Joan van Hoorn to pangiran Cakraningrat at Madura (1696). VOC collection in St. Petersburg.