

DelftWare WonderWare

For over 400 years, blue and white Delftware has been the Netherlands' most iconic national product. Initially intended as a faithful imitation of Chinese export porcelain, Blue Delft has never lost its appeal. Indeed, it is today attracting more interest than ever and is inspiring a stream of new products from contemporary Dutch designers. At a time when a sense of national identity is being replaced by an increasing focus on developments at the European level, the Delft Blue feeling is proving to be the ideal vehicle for the expression of national pride.

Titus M. Eliëns, Head of Collections

Ongoing exhibition at the Gemeentemuseum Den Haag, opened December 2012 (www.gemeentemuseum.nl)

THE GEMEENTEMUSEUM DEN HAAG has one of the most important collections of Dutch Delftware anywhere in the world. A new presentation of this collection opened on 1 December 2012 and is now a key attraction of the Hague museum. Together with the accompanying Dutch/English-language book *Het Wonder van Delfts blauw. DelftWare WonderWare*, the new exhibition offers a fascinating overview of the 400-year-long history of Dutch Delftware.

How Kraak porcelain conquered the Netherlands

Chinese export porcelain began to flood into the Netherlands in the early seventeenth century and had a decisive influence on the development of the blue and white earthenware we call Blue Delft. This Kraak porcelain – also known as 'Wanli' porcelain, after Emperor Wanli (1573-1619) – was made by the Chinese potteries specifically for export and was different in quality from the porcelain they produced for the internal Chinese market. Portugal had been the first European country to have trade links with the Far East and Portuguese traders transported the Chinese export porcelain on ships called caraccas. This term was corrupted to kraaken in Dutch and hence produced the expression kraakporselein (Kraak porcelain).

At the end of the sixteenth century, the Portuguese trade monopoly was broken by the Dutch. In 1588, the Northern Netherlands had won their independence from the great Habsburg Empire (which included Spain and Portugal). Shortly before that, the port of Antwerp, Europe's main international trading centre, had been seized by the Spaniards, bringing trade to a halt. To secure the spice trade and in search of new opportunities, the Dutch now looked for their own sea route to Asia. Following the successful 1595-1597 expedition of Cornelis de Houtman and his discovery of the shorter route to the Indies (today's Indonesia) via the Cape of Good Hope, the Portuguese hegemony was broken once and for all.

Dutch ships regularly clashed with Portuguese caraccas and captured their precious cargos of trade goods.

These included the blue and white Kraak porcelain, which was soon in great demand on the Dutch market. Its popularity was established by two auctions of goods seized from caraccas. When the cargo of the Sao Tiago was auctioned in Middelburg in 1602

and that of the Santa Catarina in Amsterdam in 1604, large quantities of porcelain appeared on the Dutch market for the first time. The success of these auctions persuaded the Dutch trading companies – united in 1602 to form the Dutch East India Company (VOC) – to make porcelain, rather than spices, precious metals and textiles, their main focus of attention. Between then and around 1645, over three million pieces of Kraak porcelain were shipped to the Netherlands.

The development of Blue Delft

The popularity of the blue and white export porcelain inevitably posed a substantial threat to the Delft earthenware industry of the day. With no access to kaolin, the Delft potteries were unable to manufacture true porcelain. However, they did manage to produce a new kind of earthenware that successfully imitated the shiny surface, shapes and oriental-style decoration of Chinese porcelain. The blue and white colour scheme was imitated by coating the pieces of earthenware with a white tin glaze, to which the distinctive blue paintwork was then applied. Blue delft was soon recognised as a good and – at a tenth of the price – much more affordable alternative to Chinese porcelain.

At first, the Delft potteries sought to produce faithful imitations of the oriental shapes and decorations used in China in the successive stylistic periods. Imitations of Wanli porcelain are almost exact copies of the Chinese originals. Image 1 shows flatware and a 'Persian' bottle featuring the typical division of the decoration into vertical panels of varying width, filled with floral motifs and Taoist symbols suspended on ribbons. At the top, the decoration on the largest dish includes the double peach that in China symbolizes longevity.

In the Transitional porcelain of the following stylistic period (1619-1662), these panels disappear. They are replaced by continuous decorative schemes, such as oriental scenes in garden-like settings, and the change is quickly reflected in the products of the Delft potteries (image 3). Among the motifs typical of this Transitional style is the stylised tulip that appears on the neck of the bottle on the left. The jug is an item of European shape, which has been decorated with an oriental tableau by the painter in Delft.

When Emperor Kangxi (1654-1722) came to the throne in 1662, the Chinese porcelain factories began to develop a new product range and this, of course, quickly influenced the Delft potteries. A favourite motif of this period is the elegantly dressed oriental woman known as a 'Long Eliza'. She is shown here on two delftware bottles that are direct imitations of Chinese originals (image 2). It is important to realise that the Delft potteries adopted such motifs without any awareness of their original significance.



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The fusion of stylistic elements from East and West led to the emergence of what we now call 'Chinoiserie': the fashionable new 'Chinese' style that appeared in Europe around this time. Because of the international popularity of its products, the Delft pottery industry played a major role in both the development and the dissemination of this fashion.

Masters of mass production

Although we now tend to discuss pieces of Delftware as if they were unique items, it should be remembered that surviving examples represent only a tiny fraction of the huge numbers of objects produced by the Delft potteries in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The Delft pottery industry employed a form of mass production and served a number of different markets. The majority of its products were everyday household objects, but purely ornamental wares also represented a substantial part of its output.

It is hard to say how many pieces were manufactured by the Delft potteries over the years, but it is possible to make a cautious estimate of production capacity per kiln. It took about a week to fill, fire and empty each kiln. A kiln loaded with flatware could hold around 4275 items. Therefore, assuming an annual production capacity of 52 kiln-weeks, each kiln could produce approximately 220,000 plates a year. A 1668 fire brigade inspection report says that there were 26 potteries in operation at that date, with a total of over 41 kilns between them. Assuming, therefore, that all the potteries produced only flatware, they could have produced a total of around 9 million items in that year. This assumption is, of course, entirely unsubstantiated; however, the calculation gives some idea of the annual production capacity of the Delft pottery industry. Its products certainly must have numbered in the millions.

A minuscule proportion of them are now on show in the DelftWare WonderWare exhibition at the Gemeentemuseum Den Haag. For a more detailed account of the history of Dutch Delftware, see M.S. van Aken-Fehmers, T.M. Eliëns and S.M.R. Lambooy, *Het Wonder van Delfts blauw. DelftWare WonderWare*, Zwolle/The Hague, 2012.

Fig. 1: Delftware in Wanli style, 1660-1720.

Fig. 2: Two bottles with 'Long Elizas' in Kangxi style, 1687-1701.

Fig. 3: Delftware in Transitional style, 1680-1685.

Photography: Erik and Petra Hesmerg.



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