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Wares

Interaction between Oriental Porcelain and Delft Faience

The first sizeable consignment of Chinese porcelain to come onto the market in the Netherlands was part of a cargo seized from a Portuguese ship; it was auctioned in Middelburg in 1602. A similar auction took place in Amsterdam in 1604 and this one was an international event. The large profits being made from this porcelain prompted the young Dutch East India Company or *voc* (Verenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie, incorporated in 1602) to include it among the items it purchased in Asia. The porcelain trade was soon well under way, with tens of thousands of pieces shipped to the Netherlands every year. The imports consisted largely of 'kraak porcelain', a type characterised by the cobalt blue Chinese designs under the glaze and a border divided into wide and narrow sections. Plates, dishes and bowls in various standard sizes were shipped in large numbers, along with bottles, wine-kettles and vases. There was great interest in this porcelain in the

Wine-kettle with overhead handle. China, kraak porcelain, early 17th century, height 20 cm. The decoration in underglaze blue shows auspicious symbols and flowering plants in six panels. Groninger Museum, Groningen; photo by John Stoel.





Beaker vase, China, transitional porcelain, 1635-1645, height 37 cm. Decorated in underglaze blue with a Kylin (an auspicious mythological animal) in a landscape. Groninger Museum, Groningen; photo by John Stoel.

Netherlands. The moneyed bourgeoisie which emerged at the beginning of the seventeenth century was keen to confirm its status with a luxuriously furnished interior and it was prepared to pay a good price for this exotic porcelain. In practical terms, porcelain was superior to all the other kinds of ceramic known at that time; it was strong, smooth, non-porous, easy to clean and able to resist hot foods, and even large dishes were comparatively light and thin. The contrast of a blue decoration on a white ground was an additional attraction.

Porcelain competed successfully with majolica, a collective name for a type of earthenware first produced for local use in many Dutch cities at the end of the sixteenth century. Dishes and plates in majolica were covered on the back with a transparent lead glaze to make them watertight. The front was given an opaque tin glaze which turned white in the kiln; coloured decorations were then applied onto the glaze with metal oxides. The arrival of Chinese porcelain caused a sharp decline in the demand for the refined, luxury types of majolica and the manufacturers were forced to concentrate on the cheaper versions or on the production of wall tiles for houses, a logical choice given the great urban expansion taking place at the time.

Transitional porcelain

The range of Chinese porcelain products was limited, however, and after a while this proved something of a problem. Once the Dutch market was awash with plates, dishes and bowls, there was a demand for other porcelain items such as beer tankards, salt-cellars, candlesticks and mustard-pots; in other words, Western designs which were not of course part of the standard Chinese export range. Initially the demand could not be satisfied because the VOC was not allowed to buy in China itself and was dependent on supplies available in the South-East Asian markets. However, the establishment of a trading-post on Formosa (present-day Taiwan) in 1624 made it possible to trade on the Chinese south coast on a regular basis, using Chinese middlemen. At that time the Company could more or less rely on porcelain orders being dispatched correctly and on time. Besides the traditional kraak porcelain, new types could now be ordered, though they did have to be specially made in the Chinese porcelain kilns in inland Jingdezhen, in the Province of Jiangxi. These orders were accompanied by patterns, in the form of European ceramic, glass or metal objects. Sometimes, too, wooden moulds were made in the Netherlands or Batavia (present-day Jakarta) to ensure that the Chinese potter produced the exact form required. Interestingly, all these new objects based on Western models were decorated with Chinese designs. This was, of course, just what the purchasing public wanted; after all, it should be quite clear that this was exotic Chinese porcelain and not ordinary European ware.

This type of porcelain, made between approximately 1635 and 1650, is called 'transitional porcelain' and it is far superior in quality to kraak porcelain. Though polychrome enamelled pieces are sometimes found, most are decorated in underglaze cobalt blue. Kraak porcelain plates, dishes and bowls were still produced alongside this transitional porcelain.

Shortage and replacement markets: Japan and Delft

The middle of the seventeenth century brought a dramatic change in the market situation. The civil wars in China between the supporters of the old Ming dynasty and the new Qing rulers resulted in a shortfall in supplies of Chinese porcelain on Formosa after 1645. The VOC therefore needed an alternative source, which it found in Japan where porcelain was produced on a small scale in kilns near Arita in Kyushu. However, they were not equipped to cope with the large VOC orders, and though a number of kilns quickly reorganised and specialised in export porcelain for the VOC there were constant problems. In the eyes of the Dutch traders, the quantities supplied were often too small, the cost price too high and the quality not on a par with Chinese porcelain. The Japanese potters complained about the speed with which they had to supply the articles and about the constant whittling down of the sometimes pre-agreed price. Most of the pieces made in Arita at that time copy the decorations of Chinese kraak and transition porcelain in underglaze blue in order to have easy access to the Dutch market.

However, it proved impossible to satisfy the Dutch demand for oriental porcelain completely. Potters in Delft spotted the gap in the market and made the most of it. Before long they had switched most of their production from majolica and tiles to a new type of ceramic, known as faience. The term is used to refer to earthenware which is covered on the back *and* front with a white tin glaze in imitation of Chinese porcelain. The blue decoration was also copied, while a lighter and thinner body was obtained by using different firing techniques. In other words, they endeavoured to copy every aspect of Chinese porcelain right down to the last detail. And their efforts paid off, firstly because of the continued shortage of Oriental porcelain and, secondly, because the end-product was attractive, of high quality and cheaper and so, all in all, an excellent alternative. The number of faience factories in Delft soon multiplied from a mere handful to about thirty in 1670 and that was the origin of the now world-famous 'Delft blue'.

As one might expect, at first most Delft faience was painted with Chinese-

Dish, Japanese porcelain, 1660-1670, diameter 35.5 cm. Decorated in underglaze blue. The panelled border and the design of birds in a river landscape imitate Chinese kraak porcelain. Groninger Museum, Groningen; photo by John Stoel.

Dish, Delft faience, marked De Dissel factory, c.1670, diameter 22.5 cm. The decoration in blue of an insect on a rock and large flowers exactly copies the Chinese kraak porcelain model. Groninger Museum, Groningen; photo by John Stoel.



style decoration. Every effort was made to produce exact copies of kraak and transitional porcelain and from a distance it is often almost impossible to spot the difference between a Delft dish and a Chinese one. Gradually, however, the Delft producers began to move away from the Asian model. By combining all kinds of Chinese motifs and interpreting them in their own way, they arrived at a new style known as *Chinoiserie*.

Polychrome Delftware

An important innovation emerged at the end of the seventeenth century, namely the use of enamel colours in the decoration. Technically this did not pose a problem. They were applied to the tin glaze and fired at a temperature of between 900 and 1000° C in the so-called '*grand feu*' or 'big fire'. These enamels turned green, brown, yellow or purple according to the metal oxides used. Red was more difficult and burnt easily. The potters were already familiar with this process from the majolica-making days and so we might well wonder why it was not applied to faience sooner. Again the answer lies in the Chinese model. Dutch customers were under the impression that porcelain always came with a blue decoration, which explains why the

Coffee urn, Japanese porcelain, c.1700, height 37 cm. The exuberant shape follows an unknown metal (?) European model, the decoration in overglaze enamels of the Imari type shows cranes and a pine in low relief. The three legs are shaped as Japanese women. In the base a hole for a tap. Groninger Museum, Groningen; photo by John Stoel.



faience imitations were only in blue. They learned better when new types of export porcelain began to arrive from Japan and later also from China.

All kinds of variations on the Chinese blue and white models copied for the VOC began to appear in Japan around 1660. One example was decoration executed entirely or partially in enamel colours. New and highly-typical Japanese styles developed from these early enamels and at the end of the seventeenth century there were two dominant types of polychrome export porcelain: Kakiemon and Imari. The first is sparsely decorated in different enamel colours depicting a flowering twig, birds, a dragon or another mythical creature. The second type, conversely, is intricately decorated all over with flowers, birds, Japanese figures or fabulous creatures in underglaze blue, iron red and gold. As we have seen, polychrome porcelain was made in China for the Dutch market as early as the 1640s, but in too small quantities to become widely known. Only after 1683, when the civil war had been settled in favour of the Qing dynasty, the porcelain kilns were producing on a large scale again and exports had resumed, did coloured Chinese porcelain become an increasingly important part of the export range. Of the many new types of porcelain which then came onto the market, the so-called '*famille*



Jar, Delft faience, c.1700, height 33.5 cm. Decorated in enamels imitating Japanese Imari. In the two large panels a *chinoiserie* design of birds and flowering plants. Groninger Museum, Groningen; photo by John Stoel.

verte is the most important. It was decorated predominantly in green enamels with 'Long Elizias' in a garden landscape, flowering plants or figural representations derived from Chinese woodcuts.

It was not long before both Japanese and Chinese coloured porcelain was in great demand in the Netherlands. The fact that it was scarce and expensive once more triggered a market for imitations. This meant that the Delft potters had to start learning new techniques again, given that the red and gold burnt at high temperature. So a process was developed for these enamels whereby they were fired for a second time at a lower temperature of around 600° C, in the so-called 'muffle'-kiln. Other pastel-colour enamels which had to be applied in detail and in fine nuances were also fired in this '*petit feu*' or 'small fire'.

As soon as China began exporting porcelain again, the VOC stopped purchasing Japanese porcelain and switched back to Chinese porcelain, which was now brought into Batavia in huge quantities in Chinese junks, making it unnecessary for the Company to buy it in China. Yet business did not live up to expectations, because private individuals also started buying up porcelain in Batavia and shipping it to the Netherlands, where an extremely varied, ever-changing range of high-quality porcelain was now available. Delft earthenware was also competitive because it offered a wide choice of designs. So in 1690 the VOC decided to cut its losses and left the porcelain trade entirely to private individuals. The Delft manufacturers took advantage of the situation and flourished, the coloured faience proving more than a match for the blue.

The porcelain trade in the eighteenth century

In 1729 the VOC, following the example of other European Companies, began trading direct with Canton, China's main export harbour (now Guangzhou). Porcelain was purchased in enormous quantities along with tea, silk and other items. In the space of just five years, from 1729 to 1735, the VOC handled almost 4.5 million pieces of porcelain, around a million more than in the whole of the seventeenth century. There was no longer any question of a shortage of porcelain in the Netherlands; indeed there was now such an abundance that it had lost its exclusivity. It became an everyday item, available at a reasonable price, intended for a mass market. Recent urban archaeological excavations have shown the extent to which porcelain penetrated all strata of Dutch society in the eighteenth century. It appears that even relatively poor households had a few Chinese teacups or plates.

In addition to all the advantages inherent in porcelain as a material, changes in eating and drinking habits also account for its enduring success. By the end of the seventeenth century, tea, coffee and – to a lesser extent – chocolate had become popular beverages and their consumption required tea and coffee services of thin porcelain. For meals, there was a growing appreciation of matching dishes and plates, stimulating the creation of large table services of Chinese porcelain consisting of many pieces, all with the same decoration. Porcelain now had a new role to play in the interior as well. By around the year 1700, a profusion of porcelain was already to be seen on wainscoting, mantelpieces and in the porcelain cabinets, whereby the total-

ity of forms and colours rather than the single item now helped create the desired effect, and this fashion was continued well into the eighteenth century.

The VOC concentrated on buying those commodities which were assured of a good market year in and year out, and which provided profits of between eighty and a hundred percent. Bowls, plates, tea and coffee-ware, services, pairs of ornamental vases, spittoons, chamber-pots and individual teapots were part and parcel of the inbound cargo. A good example of a typical cargo of this type is the porcelain retrieved by divers from the wreckage of the *Geldermalsen*, a VOC ship which ran aground on its way from China to the Netherlands. The treasure was auctioned as the Nanking Cargo in 1986 and it provided the Groninger Museum with a complete overview of all types of porcelain from this VOC cargo.

Naturally the VOC strove for a degree of variation when buying in China. It had to adapt annually to fashion and taste, if only to hold its own against the imports of competitors. So the VOC regularly sent sample items over to China to illustrate what it wanted to purchase or to have a copy made in porcelain. Sometimes these would be Chinese porcelain purchased by other Companies and popular in Europe, sometimes Delft earthenware such as the butter tubs with raised lips on either side dispatched to China in 1765, but usually they were in the form of drawings. Most of these drawings were of course lost in use, but one set of seven pages dating from 1758, containing twenty-three illustrations, has survived.

It is apparent from the order lists which have been preserved that the Company was very exacting as regards the wide range and fashionable shape of the porcelain; interestingly, far less importance was attached to its decoration. Almost all the items purchased were painted in Chinese style in underglaze blue, in enamel colours or in an imitation of Japanese Imari. With one or two exceptions, the VOC did not order porcelain with European-style decoration because the cost price was high and the profit minimal. Such *chine de commande*, painted after the example of Western prints, was bought in Canton as a souvenir or gift by members of ships' crews, or it was specially ordered by individual traders for a specific customer.

The decline of Delftware

In the light of all this, it is understandable that after 1730 Delft faience with Oriental motifs quickly lost market share. The transition to complete services decorated with European motifs provided little consolation, because in that market segment producers now had to compete with European porcelain and earthenware. The heyday of Delftware was over, the quality deteriorated and in the course of the eighteenth century most of the factories closed. Of course, the Chinese porcelain trade was exposed to the same competition, particularly after the 1750s when the Dutch became rather bored with Chinese decoration and switched to the fashionable hard English earthenware, such as Wedgwood which sold well in a number of shops in the Netherlands. Nevertheless, Chinese porcelain managed to hold its own much better than Delftware and it remained an established part of the inbound cargoes from China right up until the end of the eighteenth century.



Tea cup, Chinese porcelain, 1735-1740, diameter 8.5 cm. Decorated in overglaze enamels, showing Dutch merchants entering a porcelain shop in Canton. Museum Het Prinsessehof, Leeuwarden; photo by Johan van der Veer.

Saucer, Chinese porcelain, 1735-1740, diameter 12.3 cm. *Chine de commande*, decorated in overglaze enamels with a European couple after an as yet unidentified print. Groninger Museum, Groningen; photo by John Stoel.

Conclusion

So, as we have seen, the influence of Oriental porcelain on Delft faience was very considerable. The VOC had created a demand for porcelain, but a change of circumstances in China caused supplies to dry up. In order to take over that share of the market, porcelain had to be copied in high-quality earthenware and the Delft potters developed new techniques, forms and decorations. Delft faience flourished until Chinese porcelain again became available in sufficient quantity and variety.

Meanwhile, the production of Oriental porcelain was strongly influenced by the requirements of the new Dutch market. The potters in China and Japan reacted efficiently to the demands of the Company and of Dutch individuals. They supplied a very wide range, partly of Western forms, at a low price and decorated as required in Chinese or European style.

Even today, Oriental porcelain is still a distinctive part of Dutch culture and life. Decorative and utility pieces are found in many households – a marvellous example of the way the Dutch incorporate exotic elements into their daily lives.

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