

# No Delft Without China<sup>1</sup>

## The Dynamics Between Dutch Delft Ceramics and Chinese Porcelain

By Dorien Knaap

The introduction of large quantities of Chinese porcelain from the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century and early 17<sup>th</sup> century by the Portuguese and Dutch East India Company (VOC) would bring about a revolution in material culture in Europe. Porcelain was much thinner, harder and shinier than the coarse ceramics the Europeans had been making since the Middle Ages, especially the bright blue and white colours of Kraakware. The elegant shapes, together with the exotic oriental imagery of the porcelain, would cause a China mania all over Europe, everybody wanted to get their hands on it.

This development was part of Europe's economic growth in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. In the Netherlands, this is referred to as the Golden Age, when trade, art and the sciences prospered. In addition to rich merchants, a large and varied middle class emerged and all loved to display their wealth by furnishing their homes with fine furniture, rugs and tiles, paintings, silver objects and porcelain. At the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the Chinese were the only ones who knew the secret of making porcelain. In Europe, good quality Chinese porcelain was rare and expensive; only the rich could afford it. So what do you do if you cannot afford it? You fake it.

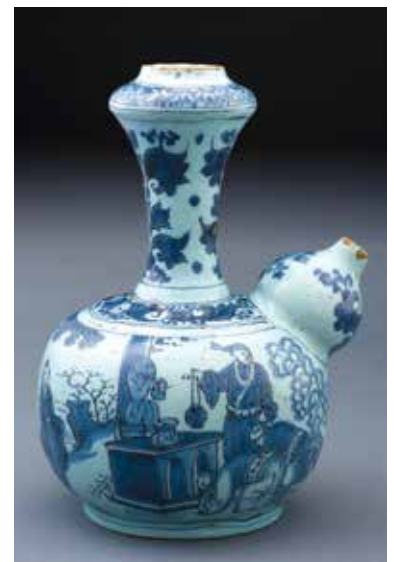
It was in the Dutch town of Delft that potters would rise to the occasion by developing a type of ceramics that imitated Chinese blue and white porcelain. They built on a technique that originated in the Middle East in the eighth and ninth centuries. A red/yellowish soft clay was glazed with an opaque white, tin-based glaze that covered the decoration painted in tones of blue, green, orange, yellow and purple. A transparent lead glaze gave the pieces some shine. They were then fired at a low temperature. The technique was introduced in Spain in the 10<sup>th</sup> century. From there it was exported from Majorca to Italy, where it received its name, majolica. By the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the technique had spread from Italy to northern Europe.

Delft potters made important technological improvements to majolica by using much finer clay and moulds to mimic porcelain's thinness. After an initial firing, the wares were dipped in a tin glaze to create a completely white body. After that, decorations, only in blue and white to copy the Chinese wares, were painted on and fired together to fuse them. For more shine, a layer of transparent lead glaze could be added before firing. The price? Ten times cheaper than real Chinese porcelain. The quality? Initially, probably ten times worse. But the average Dutch customer was not too picky. As long as a piece was affordable and breathed exotic, oriental blue and white imagery, there was a market for it.



*A Delft copy of Chinese porcelain, but the chipped and flaking edges along the rim that reveal the red clay underneath show it is not Chinese porcelain. Photo by Patricia Bjaaland Welch*

The Delft pottery industry took off from the middle of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, when the import of Chinese porcelain was disrupted between 1645-1683 because of internal political struggles. By 1680 around 30 Delft potters had specialised in the production of this new kind of pottery. There were a few other producers in Holland, but the industry concentrated in Delft as many potters had taken advantage of a sudden downfall in the local beer industry, leaving many factory buildings empty.



*17<sup>th</sup> century Delft kendi*

As kraak porcelain was the first Chinese porcelain to be imported on a large scale in Europe, these pieces were initially copied the most. The Trade Gallery of the ACM showcases a very nice example of this. The dish dates from the 1670s. At first sight it does not seem to differ much from the Chinese kraak porcelain dishes also on display. All are blue and white and have the segmented and paneled bordering, which is characteristic of kraak wares. But with a closer look, the differences become clear. First, the Delft dish is much thicker than the others and when you examine the

rim, you will notice that the glaze has broken off, exposing the red-yellowish clay underneath. But it is the imagery on the dish that gives away the fact that it is not Chinese. The Dutch painter of this dish wanted to copy a Chinese example, but he lacked the technique to do so. Therefore, the image is painted in a rather simple fashion and the figures look more like cartoons. There is also a Delft *kendi* in the Trade Gallery. Dutch customers liked not only Chinese-like decorations, but also the unusual shape of Chinese porcelains. As the Dutch were unfamiliar with the use of *kendis*, a piece like this was considered very exotic and would have been proudly displayed in a special display cabinet.

From the 1670s onwards, Delft potters started to use colours on their wares, utilising the old majolica techniques. When Chinese exports ceased, the VOC introduced more colourful wares from the south of China and from Japan. Japanese porcelain was an immediate hit in Europe and provided new inspiration to the Delft pottery painters. The design that features a basket of flowers, much seen on Japanese porcelain, became a very popular theme on Delft pottery.

There are only a few known Delft pieces that are a true copy of Chinese or Japanese porcelain. Both the Dutch artist and consumer of Delft were totally unaware of the meaning or symbolism behind the imagery on this porcelain. Delft pottery painters therefore tended to paint their own interpretation, by combining different Chinese and Japanese motifs and/or adding traditional majolica designs that they were already familiar with. This makes Delft pottery one of the first and finest examples of Dutch chinoiserie. The potters even started to call their product *Hollants Porceleyn* (Dutch porcelain). Nowadays, this type of ceramics is referred to as faience.

The Delft ceramics industry was at its height between 1650 and 1725, when Delft potters were successful in producing tableware and a large variety of decorative objects, both in Dutch and Asian styles and all price ranges. Wares of the highest quality were much sought after and were even exported all over Europe.

The cross-cultural influences between European and Asian design would lead to the development of new products such as the so-called *kaststellen* or garnitures. This was a combination of three, five or even seven vases and/or lidded jars that would sit on top of display cabinets. Although the first inspiration for the vases was taken from Chinese altar sets, *kaststellen* became a totally European phenomenon, so popular that at one time Delft examples were sent to China to be copied in porcelain.



*Spirit keg depicting a Dutchman sitting on top of a barrel*

The ACM Trade Gallery has two very good examples of Delft copies in porcelain. One is a delightful piece, a spirit keg, with a cheerful Dutchman sitting on a barrel. Follies



*Dish with stag. Gift of Mr and Mrs Toshio Egawa*

such as this were very popular in Europe at the time and were usually made from low-fire ceramics. This piece was made in Arita in Japan in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and was quite likely copied from a Delft example.

Another typical Dutch design made famous by Delft potters is the tulip vase. The name is somewhat misleading as the vases were used for all kinds of flowers. They became very popular as they were collected by Queen Mary II (1662-1695), the wife of King-Stadholder William III (1650-1702). The shape of these vases varies, but they all have in common a large number of spouts where one or two flowers can be inserted. The vase in the ACM's Trade Gallery (shown on the cover of this issue) has a pyramid or pagoda shape. It was made around 1700 and is likely a copy of a Delft tulip vase in the Gemeentemuseum in The Hague, but there are a few differences. The Delft original is blue and white, like most tulip vases, yet this one is multi-coloured. When one looks closely, one can see that the Chinese painter struggled with copying the original design and probably decided to give his own interpretation – just as the Delft painters had done with the Chinese designs.

The Delft pottery industry slowly declined after the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. By that time large quantities of Chinese porcelain had been imported into Europe, making it affordable for all classes. At the same time, other faience industries were established in France and England, slowly pushing the Delft potters out of business. And in 1708, Johann Friedrich Böttger had discovered the secret of making porcelain, which led to the founding of the first European porcelain factory at Meissen in Germany. Only one factory in Delft, named The Porcelain Bottle, founded in 1653, would withstand all the upheavals. Although the production process of today's Delft is very different from that of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the blue and white decorations inspired by Chinese Kraakware are still being produced and can be considered part of Dutch national heritage.

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<sup>1</sup> *No Delft without China* was one of the slogans in *The World of the VOC*, an exhibition that took place in the Dutch National Archives in The Hague in the first half of 2018.

*Except where noted, all photos collection of the Asian Civilisations Museum*