



**UvA-DARE (Digital Academic Repository)**

**[Review of: T. Mostert & J. van Campen (2015) Silk Thread: China and the Netherlands from 1600]**

van Noord, W.J.L.

*Published in:*  
Newsletter - The Oriental Ceramic Society

[Link to publication](#)

*Citation for published version (APA):*  
van Noord, W. (2016). [Review of: T. Mostert & J. van Campen (2015) Silk Thread: China and the Netherlands from 1600]. Newsletter - The Oriental Ceramic Society, 24, 36-37.

**General rights**

It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

**Disclaimer/Complaints regulations**

If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: <http://uba.uva.nl/en/contact>, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.

# NEWSLETTER



NUMBER 24 · MAY 2016

THE  
ORIENTAL  
CERAMIC  
SOCIETY

## NEW BOOKS

### *Silk Thread: China and the Netherlands from 1600*

Tristan Mostert and Jan van Campen, Rijksmuseum Amsterdam, Nijmegen (Van tilt Publishers) 2015, 248 pp, 195 colour illustrations, ISBN 978-94-6004-250-8, hardback, €24.50.

Over the past 400 years the relationship between China and the Netherlands at times has seemed to hang by a single thread – a silk thread, as the Dutch saying would specify. The title of this book, the third in the Rijksmuseum's 'Country Series,' is therefore aptly chosen, especially since silk was initially associated with China even more closely than porcelain.



Dish from the *De Witte Leeuw* shipwreck, porcelain painted in underglaze blue. Jingdezhen. Shortly before 1613. © Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam NG-1978-127-4010-W.

The *Country Series* uses objects from the museum's collection to explore the shared history of the Netherlands and countries with which it had an overseas relationship from 1600 to the present. For Asia, *Silk Thread* was preceded by *Bitter Spice* on Indonesia and will be followed by volumes on Japan, Sri Lanka and India. It is an initiative of the History department to provide a balance with the aesthetic displays in the recently reopened Rijksmuseum which tend to take a more art-historical approach in the label texts. Historian Tristan Mostert worked with curator of Asian export art (and of the *Asia > Amsterdam* exhibition, see *Newsletter* 23, 2015, pages 30–31) Jan van Campen to tell the stories behind the objects, stories of bewilderment and diplomacy but also of exploitation and violence. In turn,

these are stories of supply and demand, elucidating how particular items of Chinese art and craft became available on the Chinese, and by extension the European markets.

The introduction acknowledges that museum collection policies can filter history in such a way that they actively mould visitors' perceptions. Rather than claiming to outline the entirety of Sino-Dutch relations, the book exposes this filter, taking the Rijksmuseum's collection as the primary guide in selections and subject matter. From the main narrative of Sino-Dutch encounters and perceptions emanates the history of how the magnificent Chinese collection belonging to the Rijksmuseum came into being. Although the whole period from 1600 to the present day is discussed, most chapters focus on the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the heydays of the VOC (Dutch East India Company).

What 'China' is to the Netherlands changes over time, as the Dutch made many failed attempts to set foot inside the mysterious empire, being restricted to the southern coastlines at first. A map would have been helpful to illustrate this point. Encounters with the Chinese and their arts ranged from embassies to the imperial court, waging war at Formosa (now Taiwan), living with the Chinese in Batavia (now Jakarta) and trading with them in Canton (now Guangzhou). These encounters added to the perceptions of the distant Chinese empire back in the Netherlands through illustrated travelogues and the presence of things Chinese in Dutch homes. Running throughout these stories is the

connecting thread of the objects garnered through these situations and accounts of how they ended up in the Rijksmuseum. All is beautifully illustrated by the many images of mainly ceramics, prints, lacquer, paintings, and photographs, although not all images are referenced in the text.

Much of the material discussed in the book has been published before at some point, albeit mostly in Dutch. *Silk Thread* is the first survey of its kind, bringing together all these Sino-Dutch stories and Rijksmuseum objects for the English reader although a few typos and occasional unusual wordings have slipped through the final editing stages.

The book presents a successful framework to get to the history behind the art, resulting in an intriguing interweaving of an exciting historical narrative and a beautiful collection catalogue. The next volume in this series *A Narrow Bridge* (on Japan), launched earlier this month, promises to be at least as interesting and worthwhile.

*Willemijn van Noord*