Cultural Reflections on Porcelain in the Seventeenth-Century Netherlands

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One of the 17th century’s greatest admirers of Chinese porcelain was Willem Kalf (1619–1693), some of whose paintings demonstrate meticulous attention to its material and optical properties. His 1662 Still Life, now in Madrid, features an extraordinary Chinese jar with representations of the Eight Immortals (Fig. 1). Kalf, who probably had no understanding of Taoist iconography, may have been aware that this was not only an exotic object but also an antiquity of sorts, dating from a few decades earlier. As its material constitution was still unknown at the time, he could also have appreciated porcelain as a curious sample of the natural world, just like decorative tableware made from ostrich eggs or the nautilus goblets that also feature in his work. In this painting, moreover, the porcelain’s reflective sheen, rendered in meticulous detail with a scattering of dot-like highlights, is paired with other surfaces of various degrees of transparency: the drinking vessels, plate and half-peeled lemon.

Besides this very sophisticated example, porcelain features in hundreds of still lifes painted in the Northern and Southern Netherlands in the 17th century. In many cases, it may have been included as no more than a fitting container for the flowers or foodstuffs that artists wanted to represent, but it was also a subject in its own right among silverware, glass, and other precious goods. Assuming from the degree of connoisseurship that a work such as Kalf’s implies, one would expect there to have been some awareness among these paintings’ owners of the origin, history, and cultural significance of Chinese rarities. As the present book clarifies, uniquely for the Dutch situation, porcelain – either the Chinese original or a Dutch earthenware imitation that was also known as porceleyn – was a standard domestic good among all layers of society. Regardless of their social background, many Dutch people saw and handled it on a regular basis. Artists in particular lavished attention on its singular optical qualities. Moreover, potteries, especially in Delft, tried to recreate porcelain’s surface, which implied an even more accurate material knowledge; artisans then decorated the imitations of Asian ceramics with themes and styles that purportedly looked Chinese.

Even though – or perhaps because – porcelain was a common presence in Dutch houses, it was seldom discussed. In the light of the sheer volume of the China trade and the ubiquity of Chinese-style ceramics, references in literary sources are remarkably rare. Before the letters by Father François Xavier d’Entrecolles (1712–1722), a Jesuit missionary who visited the kilns in Jingdezhen to inspect the manufacturing process, European texts gave scant attention to porcelain’s origin, material, and shape, or to the decoration’s themes and styles. It is understandable that the Delft potters who had mastered ‘Chinese’ brushwork did not leave a written record – their imitations had to pass for authentic. Yet the contrast between the abundance of visual material and the paucity of written sources is without parallel in Dutch 17th-century culture, which was highly literate and developed a vibrant tradition of artistic theory. Oil paintings are therefore the most eloquent testimonies to the Low Countries’ fascination with porcelain.

This observation surprises all the more in light of porcelain’s many cultural and natural-historical associations. The artists’ interest seems to reflect the insight that Dutchmen handling a piece of Chinese ceramics would be touching a sample of the most
advanced chemical manufacturing that they would ever come across. They would have admired how the body, fashioned with extraordinary thinness, became transparent, resulting in a seemingly impossible combination of fragility and glittering hardness.

Modern science tells us that ordinary steel cannot cut porcelain and that it is a great isolator of heat and electrical current. In pre-modern Europe, by contrast, porcelain was associated with magic and medicine. Recreating it presented a serious challenge to Dutch-trained artisans and natural philosophers. Porcelain was thus an essential ingredient, and in material and quantitative terms by far the most substantial one, of the ‘Chinese century’ in the Low Countries: from the first baptism of a Chinese sailor in Middelburg in 1600, to the closing decades when the VOC reduced its direct trading with the Middle Kingdom. These exchanges impacted on various scholarly disciplines. But it was the reputation of Chinese medicine, chemistry and technical inventions that provided the main framework for the appreciation of porcelain.

**EMBLEMS AND CLASSICAL SCHOLARSHIP**

Art history’s standard approach for establishing the meaning of objects, iconography, seems inadequate to decode the cultural associations that were connected to porcelain in the Dutch context. First of all, rather than the objects’ imagery, it was their material quality that attracted artists and, probably, buyers in general. Even emblem books, which usually tried to identify thematic symbolism, foregrounded porcelain’s materiality, as two of the century’s most popular authors exemplify. Jan de Brune’s (1588–1658) engraving (Fig. 2) shows a gentleman checking the quality of a bowl by its sound: porcelain rings beautifully when struck, something that no European ceramic could do. The material’s combined hardness and fragility could express a characteristic contrast in the Dutch moralists’ ideology that emphasised the transience of visible reality; Jan Luyken (1649–1712) described the vases in his image as without real substance, only catering ‘to the eye’s desire’ (Fig. 3).

In the many still lifes that depict porcelain, such references are usually present only implicitly: perhaps
when combined with fresh flowers or fruit, such as Pieter Claesz’s (c. 1597–1660) still life featuring spots of rot on the apples in a Wanli bowl, the association with transience was underscored (Fig. 4). Yet often it simply seems to have been the painter’s attraction to porcelain’s optical qualities that motivated his choices. When a Chinese ceramic object appeared in a more elaborate setting, such as Abraham Bloemaert’s (1564–1651) Lot and his Daughters (Fig. 5), Jacob Campo Weyerman (1677–1747) explained that it was included for its visual allure; he also highlighted its appropriateness in amorous adventures, as a gift for a female lover.9

Classical antiquity, which was the habitual basis for learned discussions, likewise failed to provide the right interpretive framework. Humanists were obviously at a loss when approaching the foreign objects from their erudite background. Around 1550 two renowned philologists, Hieronymus Cardanus (1501–1576) and Julius Caesar Scaliger (1484–1558), tried to relate porcelain to Pliny’s account of the ‘myrrhine vases’.10 In the Netherlands, Johannes Pontanus (1571–1639) and Bernardus Paludanus (1550–1633) took up this theme again. Pontanus, who famously noted in Rerum et urbis Amstelodamensis historia (1611) that the VOC had imported so much porcelain to Amsterdam that it seemed like an ordinary household good, addressed the vasa myrrhina and admitted a certain resemblance except in the matter of colours, wherein Pliny described the beauty and variety of hues, ‘and’, said Pontanus, ‘what Pliny calls colours are not seen on the porcelains of our time, which, so far as I know, have only blue mingled with white’.11

The inadequacy of emblematics and classical scholarship to discuss the Dutch reception of Chinese ceramics confirms that the materiality of porcelain, more than the shapes or decoration, conjured up new intellectual associations through its sheen, translucency and hardness. To understand these we should involve the artists’ interest in materials, in chemistry with its medical and even alchemical associations, and in porcelain as among the exotic creations of the natural world.
PORCELAIN: A CREATION OF NATURE OR ART?

We may begin our analysis with Jan van Kessel’s large series of the Four Continents (1664–1666), which features porcelain prominently as part of an encyclopaedic display of the world’s treasures. What first catches the eye is that Chinese ceramics do not occur in the context of the continent of Asia, but in relation to Africa (Figs. 6–9). The left-hand side of this polyptych’s central panel (Fig. 8) displays a set of related objects: a sizeable porcelain dish, a multi-fluted goblet in Venetian style in the foreground and a bottle containing a bright pink liquid. The juxtaposition of glass and porcelain may have referenced actual European experiments in recreating porcelain, which had initially taken place in 16th-century Italy: most of these involved glass making. Porcelain’s transparency made potters conclude that sand or ground glass was an essential ingredient. Venetian studios even produced a smoky kind of glass called porcellana contrafatta: it imitated porcelain’s colour and sheen but none of its hardness. In van Kessel’s composition, the putto brandishing an alembic and a barometer may furthermore have conjured up the association with chemistry in general.

On the image’s right-hand side, by contrast, various Chinese dishes are displayed among shells, gems, and coral (Fig. 9). This ensemble seems to refer to the etymology of the term porcelain that related its constitution to seashells, harking back to Marco Polo’s day when the term porcellana derived from a type of thin white shell resembling a piglet (porcellino). This contention, which was repeated in travelogues up to the 17th century, may explain why van Kessel associated porcelain with Africa and its beaches. Yet the inclusion of coral and gems reflects the much wider lexical field that the term porcelain could cover in early modern inventories, ranging from
mother-of-pearl and crystal to any kind of valuable ceramic.\footnote{3}

In fact, the first contacts between Europeans and East Asians involved a profusion of theories about porcelain’s origin and manufacture. They are summed up in Thomas Browne’s (1605–1682) widely read work of popular science, *Pseudodoxia* (first ed. 1646), which depended on the reports of, among others, the Dutch explorer Jan Huygen van Linschoten (c.1563–1611).\footnote{16} The book relates a number of common erroneous assumptions about porcelain, beginning with someone who had joined Magellan’s circumnavigation, Duarte Barbosa (c.1480–1521): it was supposedly made from ground seashells, eggshells, egg white and other materials that matured for a century underground, increasing in value with the years. According to the humanist Guido Panciroli (1523–1599), beaten eggs and gypsum were useful ingredients too. For a more reliable account, however, the *Pseudodoxia* referred to an envoy from Batavia to China in 1615, who identified a specific clay from the region of ‘Hoang’ as essential. Although he witnessed the production with his own eyes, he found that its details were a secret to be passed on from father to son: porcelain was ‘made out of earth, not laid under ground, but hardened in the Sunne and winde, [in] the space of fourty yeeres’. Only in 1665 were the Dutch informed in more detail on the origin and transport of the clay, when Johan Nieuhof’s (1618–1672) famous travelogue appeared.\footnote{17}

If similar associations were indeed pertinent to van Kessel’s image, it presented porcelain as both a creation of artefact (related to glass making and chemistry) and a creation of nature (among shells, coral, and gems). This was not an incorrect characterisation: porcelain was on the one hand the result of the advanced stage of Chinese chemistry and ceramic industry; on the other hand, its main

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*Fig. 6*  
Jan van Kessel (1626–1679), *The Four Continents: Africa*, 1664. Oil on copper, 48.6 x 67.8 cm (central panel). Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen – Alte Pinakothek, Munich, inv. no. 1912. © bpk | Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen.
Fig. 7
Detail of Fig. 6 (central panel).
Fig. 8
Detail of Fig. 6 (central panel, detail of left-hand side).

Fig. 9
Detail of Fig. 6 (central panel, detail of right-hand side).
Fig. 10
Adriaen van Utrecht (1599–1652), Allegory of Fire, 1636.
Oil on canvas, 117 x 154 cm.
Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium, Brussels, inv. no. 4731. © Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium, Brussels, photo: J. Geleyns / Ro scan.
ingredient, kaolin, was only found in the region of Gaoling at the time. In Europe, collections of curiosities expressed this dual nature, as porcelain could feature among the artificialia as well as the naturalia, something confirmed by its presence in depictions of galleries. According to the classifications of natural philosophy, porcelain might be associated more specifically with the element of fire: one of van Kessel’s works depicted chinaware – or another kind of ceramic that imitated its blue-and-white aesthetic – in relation to this element, together with gold and silver vessels; and Adriaen van Utrecht’s (1599–1652) painting of the same theme (Fig. 10) featured three dishes of chine de commande. The analogy was not without technical relevance, as enamelling, which involved firing at a high temperature, was eventually used for the decoration of both porcelain and metalwork.

MEDICINE

The various myths regarding the origin of porcelain also involved expectations about its purported curative characteristics. The hygienic quality of its impermeable surface, its origin in an unfathomable chemical process, and the general Asian provenance connecting porcelain to spices and tea made the association with medicine somewhat obvious. A 1685 painting from the school of Gerard ter Borch (now in the Apothecaries’ Society, Stockholm) demonstrates how a Dutch pharmacist would line up his pots in a row: the white ceramic’s sheen, reflecting associations with chemistry and perhaps Asia, would have constituted an adequate backdrop for the performance of medicine. At least one Amsterdam apothecary, Jan Jacobsz Swammerdam (1606–1678), displayed a sizeable set of Chinese porcelain that attracted visitors even from abroad. The Dutch had only a vague inkling of Asian medicine at the time, but for some it seemed to suggest the Middle Kingdom’s superiority. In 1683 the doctor and botanist Willem ten Rhijne (1649–1700) wrote the first detailed European account of acupuncture. This art succeeds in ‘totally removing those pains to which the flesh is heir’, according to the Amsterdam humanist, Isaac Vossius (1618–1689), whose De artibus et scientiis Sinarum (‘On the Arts and Sciences of the Chinese’, 1685) also extolled Chinese knowledge on the circulation of blood. When in 1709, the Chinese doctor Chou Mei-Yeh visited the Netherlands in the company of a VOC official, the Amsterdam mayor Nicolaas Witsen (1641–1717) had his pulse taken.

Witsen had a great interest in Asia: by 1670 he had consulted another Chinese visitor for his book Noord en Oost Tartarye. He contacted the Chinese community in Batavia to translate an ancient inscription from his art collection, which in all probability also included porcelain. In any account, the reputation of Chinese medical knowledge seemed to confirm the much older suggestion, dating back to the Middle Ages, that porcelain could have apotropaic qualities, in particular that it would break upon coming into contact with poison (cups were therefore set in metal mounts).

Unsurprisingly, the aforementioned Pseudodoxia expressed scepticism about porcelain’s alleged properties, only admitting its beneficial value in cases of dysentery:

the properties must be verified, which by Scaliger and others are ascribed to China-dishes: That they admit no poysion, That they strike fire, That they will grow hot no higher then the liquor in them ariseth. For such as pass amongst us, and under the name of the finest, will onely strike fire, but not discover Aconite, Mercury, or Arsenick; but may be useful in dysenteries and fluxes beyond the other.

The author admitted that porcelain’s failure to demonstrate medicinal qualities might have been due to the fact that the Chinese had severely limited the export of their finest dishes. By 1723, in any event, Weyerman held the less lofty view that porcelain contributed to the taste of the food:

All food and drink that is served in porcelain acquires a better taste and delights the eye .... Conserves appear much shinier in a porcelain dish than in a silver one, and fruit acquires a new gloss by the porcelain’s celestial blue.

Weyerman’s writings on China were of a satirical nature: yet his many remarks on the medicinal properties of Chinese imports, especially tea and ginseng, probably reflect beliefs widely held in the early 18th century.

CHEMISTRY

The range of associations connected with porcelain, even though not always helpful, may have contributed to the Dutch enthusiasm for its recreation. It was a German prince who funded the solution of the ‘secret’ of making porcelain, but collectors and artisans in the Netherlands had laid the groundwork. Various scholars seem to have intuited correctly that the use of specific clay was necessary. Indeed, Paludanus’s scientific collection already contained kaolin, if we...
may believe Duke Frederick I of Württemberg who visited in 1592: inspecting ‘two chests of all sorts of manufactured objects produced in India, China, and both Indies’, he found the ‘clay from which porcelain is made’. Paladuanus had personally met the Portuguese traveller Damião de Góis (1502–1574) who had described Asian ceramics ‘made of shells so expensive that one piece costs several slaves’, yet the Dutchman took a critical stance and emphasised that porcelain was merely a clay product. Johannes Blaeu’s Great Atlas (1655) likewise confirmed that, in contrast to popular beliefs, a certain type of clay ‘very clear and shiny like fine sand’ was the main ingredient of a procedure that was otherwise kept secret. Yet in their attempts to reconstruct the manufacturing process, the Dutch failed to locate the right materials. The VOC ultimately tried to import white clay from South Africa, which proved inadequate; Weyerman, in the early 18th century, still noted that kaolin was ‘as valuable as gold, pearls, and gems’. In the end, Delft studios bought inferior materials from Britain and the Spanish Netherlands to make the faience imitations which, in order to mimic the brightness and sheen of porcelain, had to be fired at least twice: in addition to a white tin glaze covering the brownish body, a transparent lead glaze protected the decoration. Yet mastery of these operations turned Delft into the capital of Europe’s ceramic industry. Unsurprisingly, two Dutch potters, Gerrit van Malsem (1682–1733) and his stepfather, eventually contributed to the solution of the secret of porcelain in 1708. They had been invited to Saxony to work with the young alchemist Johann Friedrich Böttger (1682–1719) and the scientist Ehrenfried Walter von Tschirnhaus (1651–1708) who was himself schooled in Leiden and on friendly terms with eminent Dutch scholars.

Many historians have dwelled on the remarkable story of this team’s discovery, which was both a sophisticated feat of analytical chemistry and the result of an alchemist’s belief in transmutation. To relinquish the belief that glass was an essential ingredient, Böttger’s background was essential, in that he believed that simply by firing clay he could ‘transmute’ the raw material into something as transparent and valuable as porcelain (he intuited correctly that all clays turn vitreous once fired at a sufficiently high temperature). In fact, throughout the 18th century porcelain makers continued to emphasise that mastery of the ‘arcanum’, the procedure of porcelain manufacture, involved the broad range of experiments associated with alchemists’ studios. Potters’ marks, for instance, referred to the current symbols for chemical elements; a bowl from an 18th-century Danish porcelain factory, inscribed with an epigram extolling the material’s qualities, even depicted a Faustian figure in his laboratory, inspecting a distillation vessel. It is worth questioning to what extent the Dutch appreciation of Chinese porcelain was inspired by a similar interest in natural-historical experiments. The Middle Kingdom’s reputation for alchemy had been already discussed in the early 17th century. By 1685, Vossius extolled Chinese chemia (chemistry or alchemy), which he said had been evolving for 2,000 years if not the 4,600 that some had claimed for it, and he highlighted that it served the pursuit of longevity. In fact, one of the most conspicuous cultural parallels between 17th-century Europe and the Middle Kingdom was the shared interest in alchemy. The recognition of this parallel, however, actually hampered the exchange of information. The Jesuits were the main agents in the exchange of scientific knowledge between East and West, and the Low Countries played an important intermediary role by publishing and illustrating their writings. Yet the missionaries gave short shrift to chemistry, as they feared being associated with alchemy, which they sought to eradicate rather than promote as a superstitious practice. Thus the situation arose that while Tschirnhaus’s group frantically sought the formula for porcelain, of the Europeans who could do so none simply asked the Chinese. The Jesuits’ reticence, obviously, only contributed to the far-fetched scientific expectations that Europeans already tended to attach to porcelain.

It is difficult to establish how precisely these associations contributed to artists’ interest in porcelain. Delft was the obvious focus point: according to Dirck van Bleijswijck (1639–1681), ‘nowhere in [the Netherlands] porcelain is made in a more subtle or refined manner as in this city, in which they appear to imitate the Chinese most successfully’. Delftware was called porceleyn and its dependence on Asian aesthetics was not something to be ignored: one of the potter’s studios was even named ‘China’. It is likely that this industry impacted the wider art world. Painters and potters shared a single guild and visited the same glassmakers to buy cobalt glass, the basis for the blue pigment of smalt. Johannes Vermeer (1632–1675) himself, whose interest in the natural sciences, especially optics, is increasingly being recognised, had a demonstrable interest in Chinese ceramics. In his Girl with Pearl Earring (1664), a large vase decorated in blue-and-white references authentic
Fig. 11
Johannes Vermeer (1632–1675),
Girl with Pearl Necklace, 1662–65.
Oil on canvas, 56.1 x 47.4 cm.

Fig. 12
Willem Kalf (1619–1693), 1655–1660.
Oil on canvas, 73.8 cm x 65.2 cm,
Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, inv. no. SK-A-199.

Fig. 13
Jurriaen van Streeck (1632–1687),
Oil on canvas, signed, 90.5 x 80 cm, formerly with art dealer Salomon Lilian, Amsterdam.
Chinese wares very convincingly and supports an intricate play of reflections (Fig. 11). The light falling through the window on the left bounces off the girl’s face and dress before hitting not just the mirror but also the porcelain vase. The vase’s left-hand side, furthermore, reflects the second window of Vermeer’s studio, which is to the left of the picture plane; the porcelain’s mirroring qualities thus help to widen the suggested space outside the frame, involving the viewer more completely. The painting is suggestive of the measure to which a Delft painter’s interest in optics extended to the experiments in artisan’s studios, attempting to recreate the reflective qualities of an unknown chemical substance.

One question that this association poses is whether painters would have imitated potters in their material experiments. One of the potters’ attempts required mixing ground Chinese porcelain through their clays. Replicating this procedure in oil painting would have been at least technically possible: artists often used silicate as a filler or preparatory layer. Yet this would not have contributed to the desired optical effects, as the refractory index of lead white (the most commonly used white) would have been so much greater than that of a silicate mixture. The pigment of smalt would have presented another, perhaps more obvious, parallel as it contained the cobalt used by both the Chinese potters and their Delft imitators. However, this cheap and unstable pigment seems to have been avoided in still lifes. As Arie Wallert’s research has revealed, depicting porcelain sometimes involved more expensive materials. Kalf, for instance, mixed ultramarine with verdigris to arrive at the right blue for a Wanli bowl in one of his still lifes (the purplish hue of the ultramarine was cooled with green) (Fig. 12). This comes as a surprise, as the cheaper azure, already of the desired greenish-blue colour, would have been a logical choice. Kalf may therefore have chosen ultramarine, which was made from ground lapis lazuli, for its scientific associations. As argued above, porcelain and gems were deemed to be closely related as precious naturalia coming from Asia. Representing porcelain by using ultramarine would then have expressed a painter’s involvement in the scientists’ search for the origins of the foreign material.

Whereas there is little doubt that porcelain’s optical qualities attracted masters such as Vermeer and Kalf, the association with chemistry and alchemy (which were not separate disciplines of knowledge at the time) is also worth considering. On a metaphorical level, painters sometimes thought of themselves as alchemists and of their art as ‘transmuting’ materials into precious figures: this had actually been commonplace in texts about painting since Giorgio Vasari had attributed Jan van Eyck’s invention of oil paint to alchemical experimentation. Hendrik Goltzius’s well-documented activities as an alchemist were even part of his artistic identity. Perhaps the repute of Chinese alchemy, and the idea that the manufacture of porcelain would be the outcome of an alchemical process, contributed to the attraction that this foreign material exerted on painters in the oil medium. Masters who focused on representing intricate reflections and surface textures, harkening back to van Eyck’s reputation, may have looked at porcelain with similar associations in mind. Alchemy was by no means an out-dated ambition by the late 17th century; yet among some, including Tschirnhaus’s patron Augustus the Strong, the desire to make gold was gradually replaced by the desire to make porcelain.

**CERAMICS AS EXOTICA**

In van Kessel’s image, as we have seen, porcelain was associated with Africa rather than Asia: this may have been for stylistic as well as iconographic reasons. Black people were not infrequently paired with porcelain in Dutch art. Jurriaen van Streeck (1632–1687), for instance, made a series of fulsome works featuring two categories of ‘commodities’ from the Republic’s trade: slaves, who were exported from West Africa to the Caribbean and porcelain, which was imported from Asia. Besides exposing the reach of the Dutch seaborne empire, the artist seems to have appreciated the visual contrast between the soft darkness of the black slave’s skin and the porcelain’s reflective sheen (Fig. 13).

As these images suggest, the porcelain trade was a main element of the incipient global commerce that had one of its main hubs in the Low Countries. As early as 1520, Albrecht Dürer acquired three pieces of porcolana from a Portuguese merchant in Antwerp. Confirming Pontanus’s statement that porcelain featured prominently among the goods imported by the VOC, a satirical poem by Simon van Beaumont (1574–1654) underscores the ubiquity of goods from the East and West in Amsterdam, describing a rustic visitor shopping for luxury items including ‘satin, damask, Turkish carpets, Milanese stockings, beautiful porcelain’, who ended up with...
Fig. 12
Willem Kalf (1619–1693),
Still Life with Silver Jug and a Wanli Bowl, 1655–1660. Oil on canvas, 73.8 cm × 65.3 cm, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, inv. no. SK-A-199.
some ordinary wooden crockery. Rembrandt himself eventually laid hands on porcelain specimens for his collection of ‘everything that came hither from the world’s four continents’, to quote one of his first critics.

There is no doubt that porcelain’s ubiquity in the Dutch Republic resulted from the increased interconnectivity in economic terms that came with ‘First Globalisation’ (to use Geoffrey Gunn’s phrase). When export porcelain was designed for the European market and when the VOC provided Chinese potters with detailed images, these works were de facto products of the collaboration between cultures, examples of the hybridity that typifies the cultural dimension of globalisation. It is, however, open to question whether the 17th-century buyers of porcelain in the Netherlands would have been aware of this hybridity or have evaluated it positively. There was, after all, a prosaic reality behind the Dutch shipments of ceramics from Asia and to the Caribbean: crates with porcelain were included as an adequate water-resistant, odourless ballast material. When Dutch colonists in Suriname used tableware in Jingdezhen style, it was probably not Chinese civilisation that was on their minds but rather the mercantile success of the VOC. Likewise, the Dutch viewers of van Streeck’s works would have thought of Dutch commercial virtues rather than of Chinese aesthetics or African identities. This hypothesis is confirmed by the fact that there are no Dutch still lifes that emphasise porcelain’s ‘Chineseness’ by depicting it next to Asian calligraphy or books. Although, for instance, various Dutch scholars collected Chinese texts, and they found the inscrutable characters a source of linguistic and philosophical speculation, these objects never feature in paintings.

Neither did Dutch paintings show Chinese applied art, paintings, and sculptures which, as archives reveal, were imported alongside the spices and tea. An initial survey of inventories of Dutch households points out that ‘Chinesen’ – Chinese figures on paper or silk, or perhaps sculptures – were not unfamiliar decorative items. The Antwerp city secretary Jacob Edelheer (1597–1657) even called his cabinet of exotica a ‘Museum Sinense’ (Chinese Museum); in Amsterdam, Witsen amassed a sizeable collection of Asian art. Furthermore, some of the delftware pieces themselves that carefully imitated and sometimes improvised on the original themes demonstrated that the Dutch public had become sophisticated in its taste for things Chinese. Delft ceramics, such as a candlestick from the pottery De Grieksche A, were at times decorated with fake characters. By the turn of the century, the apparently widely popular taste for Chinese calligraphy, painting, and porcelain was ridiculed in satirical journals such as Haagsche Mercurius and Amsterdamsche Hermes. This data suggests that porcelain may have conjured up more general associations than the scientific ones outlined above. We may attempt to sketch this broader outlook on the Middle Kingdom among the lettered collectors of Chinese art.

**PORCELAIN AND THE CHINESE UTOPIA**

The trade in Asian goods inspired some to develop a highly positive view of Chinese civilisation. Among all imports, books would have been only the tip of a far larger pyramid that included applied art, fabrics, ceramics, spices, and tea. Even though no one except the odd Asian visitor was able to read these texts, the suspicion that the Chinese had older written sources than the Europeans proved an irresistible source of speculation to some Dutch scholars, who engaged in Chinese chronology. This topic ultimately inspired Vossius to doubt the validity of the biblical account, as according to the Chinese texts, their history spanned 5,000 years, antedating the Great Flood. Others emphasised Chinese excellence in technical and scientific discoveries, such as Ten Rhijne, who wrote that ‘among the Chinese frequent examples are to be found of discoveries, especially in the arts, which other nations made independently whereas the Chinese had come upon them long before.’

Eventually, Johannes Blaeu’s (1596–1673) work on Europe’s first detailed maps of China and Jacob Golius’s (1566–1667) seminal attempt to print the characters were just two expressions of an exceptionally vivid public debate on China in the Dutch Republic; thus the first European translation of Confucius was into Dutch (1675, by Pieter van Hoorn) and the first European tragedy set entirely in China was Joost van den Vondel’s Zungchin (1667), followed by Johannes Antonides van der Goes’s Trazil (1685).

It is likely that this debate on the Middle Kingdom was grounded implicitly on the physical presence of Chinese material culture in Dutch households. The interplay between material culture and intellectual discussions comes to the fore most literally in Vossius’s Variorum observationum liber (1685). Besides...
Fig. 13
*Juriaen van Streeck (1632–1687)*, Still Life with a Moor. Oil on canvas, signed, 90.5 x 80 cm, formerly with art dealer Salomon Lilian, Amsterdam.
his positive accounts of Chinese medicine and chemistry, Vossius also discussed ceramics and their decoration, the ‘small containers and vessels’, ‘pottery dishes’, and ‘simple household wares’ that despite being rustics (plain, for everyday use) were outfitted with imagery that surpassed the Western tradition. ‘Those who say that Chinese paintings do not represent shadows, criticise what they actually should have praised’, Vossius contended, arguing at length that the draughtsmanship of the Chinese was so much more subtle than that of the West that, even without using strong shadows, it managed to evoke depth and atmosphere. This was, in fact, a unique standpoint in a European context. Previously Matteo Ricci (1552–1610), founder of the Jesuit mission, had criticised Chinese brushwork for its lack of lifelikeness and his remarks were repeated by Nieuhof, whose artist’s sensibility should have made him a keener judge. Up to the early 18th century, d’Entrecolles, who had observed the hoo pri (porcelain painters) from close up, remained extremely dismissive of them:

save some of them, in Europe they could only pass for apprentices of a few months. The entire knowledge of these painters, and in general of all Chinese painters, is based on no principle at all and consists only in a certain routine helped by a very limited imagination.

When an English visitor, Sir Francis Child (1641/2–1713), saw the factories in Delft in 1697, he even stated that the Delft potters ‘paint better than the Chinese’ when decorating their ‘porcelain’, failing only in imitating the thinness of the ceramic body.

In fact, Vossius’s positive statements about Chinese ceramics and its decoration can be explained by his more general utopian vision of China. Not only did he state that the Chinese excelled in art and music, literature and science, but also he saw their civilisation as altogether superior: a realisation of a Platonic Republic in which the Emperor responded to the judgment of philosophers, who in turn responded to the people. It was in all aspects a stark foil to the European situation, which was riven by wars and religious disagreements during Vossius’s lifetime.

This Chinese Utopia, connecting ceramics to philosophy, foreshadowed the fashion for chinoiserie that would evolve in the 18th century, up to Voltaire’s philosophical sinophilia: by that time, the images on applied art, representing leisurely Chinese in paradisiacal gardens, seemed to confirm the idea that these people lived happier lives than the Europeans. In the later Dutch Republic, however,
1. For this chapter I am indebted to Suzanne G. Riemann-Wöhlbrandt 1990 (op. cit. note 98), p. 106.


12. C. de Staelen, 2013, organised by the University of Warwick.

13. It is interesting to compare quantities and diversity with the royal collections discussed by Canepa and Bischoff in Chapters 2 and 10.


23. Jan Luijken, Het leerzaam huisraad, vertaald in vrije konstige figuren, met godlijke spreuken en stichtelyke bewoorde zeeden. Antwerpen, 1575. It is interesting to compare quantities and diversity with the royal collections discussed by Canepa and Bischoff in Chapters 2 and 10.


27. K. Zandvliet 2006 (op. cit. note 25), no. 145. Estate inventory: Stadsarchief Amsterdam, notarial archive, inv. no. 5535, no. 60, 17 June 1693, f. 232 ff. With thanks to Cynthia Viallé for a transcript of this inventory.


30. Inventory of the estate of Johan Cornelis Speelman: Gemeentearchief Delft, notarial archive, notary Philip Basteels, inv. no. 2329, deed 101, 1 October 1688, and Weeskamer archive, inv. no. 7657–7592.

31. K. Zandvliet 2006 (op. cit. note 25), no. 66. Inventory of the estate made after the death of Jacob Jacobsz Hinlopen de Jonge, husband of Hester Ranst: Stadsarchief Amsterdam, notarial archive, access no. 01.2.061, notary Jacob Luijken, inv. no. 736–738.


33. K. Zandvliet 2006 (op. cit. note 25), no. 66. Inventory of the estate made after the death of Jacob Jacobsz Hinlopen de Jonge, husband of Hester Ranst: Stadsarchief Amsterdam, notarial archive, notary Casper Ypselaar, inv. no. 5333–5335. With thanks to Cynthia Viallé for a transcript of this inventory.

34. K. Zandvliet 2006 (op. cit. note 25), no. 66.

35. It is interesting to compare quantities and diversity with the royal collections discussed by Canepa and Bischoff in Chapters 2 and 10 respectively.

Chapter 12 Cultural reflections

* I would like to express my gratitude to the research group, Art and Knowledge in the Pre-Modern Europe, Max Planck Institute for the History of Science, Berlin, which made this article possible by granting me a Fellowship in 2012.
De man, eer dat hy koopt, om niet te zijn bedrogen, / Hy

4. Of course, they may also have wanted to keep

Two overviews without any ambition to

3. Two overviews without any ambition to


1. The same Wanli bowl features in two of Kalf's

11. J. A. Page & I. Doménech (eds.), Beyond Venice: Gianlorenzo

12. With thanks to Dr. Alex Marr (Cambridge

17. For some examples see Frans II Francken,

10. S. Ostkamp, 'Krekels, kikkers en een lang

aan den Rijn: Canaletto, 1982, p. 355 (Letter of

13. On the etymology see in detail P. Pelliot,


15. T. Browne, Pseudo-dioica epidemia, dat is:

En hoort zoo aen 't geluyd, of 't fi js naer zijn keur, / 

16. H. J. Cook, Matters of Exchange: Commerce, Medicine,

17. J. Needham and Lu Gwei-djen,

18. Jan van Kessel (1623–1705), The Element of Fire, 

19. J. Berger Hochstrasser,


21. Apotekarsocieteten, Stockholm (as 'School of

22. H. J. Cook, The First Book, Containing his Description of the East

23. J. Nieuhof, Beschryvinge van verscheyde algemene dwalingen

24. I. Vossius, 'De artibus et scientiis Sinarum', in:

25. The doctor accompanied Johan van Hoorn, Governor-General of the Dutch East Indies, to the

26. Witsen (Amsterdam) to Vossius (London), 6 November (1670), Leiden University Library, UBL

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of early Dutch experiments in red stoneware. Tschirnhaus served in the Dutch Republic’s army and befriended Huygens and Spinoza, with whom he shared a special interest in lenses.


40. ‘Chemiam jam a bille mille annis apud Senas in usu fuisse constat. Quod si ipsos audierimus Chemicos, illi a 10 sexto quinto quarter mille annis ego accendere antiquissimi, nec aliorum primum hominum longoanotatum quam hujus scientiae beneficio praestare nequente, quoque promitentes, eaque aliis liberaliter spondentes, hominum longaevitatem quam hujus scientiae beneficio quaerent.’


42. See T. Weststeijn 2012 (op. cit. note 5), p. 103.

43. See Mr. de*** [Cornelis de Pauw], Recherches philosophiques sur les Egyptiennes et les Chinoises, II Vols, Amsterdam: Vlam, Leiden: Murray, & Berlin: Decker, 1773, Vol. 1, p. 375, who reproaches the Jesuits for failing to accurately portray the Chinese as determined alchemists. He criticises Kircher in particular, ‘homme capable de tout rêver et de tout croire’, for glossing over the alchemical activities of the Chinese Emperor.

44. D. van Bleijswijk, Beschrijving der stadt Delft, Delft: Bon, 1667, p. 736.

45. This studio was located on the north end of the Nieuwe Langendijk; see M. S. van Aken-Fehmers and M. S. van Aken-Fehmers, ‘Delft porcelain and lacquer rather than to ceramics. Amsterdam City Archive (Stadsarchief), DBK 564, fol. 32v.


50. Other items, nos. 143, 144, 145, and 150 may have referred to wooden boxes or porcelain statues’. Other items, nos. 143, 144, 145, and 150 may have referred to wooden boxes or porcelain statues’. Other items, nos. 143, 144, 145, and 150 may have referred to wooden boxes or porcelain statues’.
Chapter 13 Dutch delftware and Chinese porcelain

1. Cramer died in Delft in 1740. Citation taken from [1].


3. La Haye/Rotterdam 1690, Volume 2. [...]

Chapter 17 Chinese and Japanese porcelain for the Dutch Golden Age

1. L. A. Schledorn, 'Het Delfsche porcelein werd wijdt en zijdt getrocken: de handel in Delfts aardewerk', in: M. S. van Aken-Fehmers 2002 (op. cit. note 1), p. 107 and Fig. 2.


