Asian Ceramics in the Netherlands

By Jan van Campen

The Netherlands is often considered a Mecca for scholars and devotees of several types of Asian ceramics. The abundance of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Asian porcelain in the Netherlands is the logical outcome of Dutch prominence in the large-scale porcelain trade between Asia and Europe. Considering this abundance it is important that Dutch institutions are encouraged to study their own collections, that they make these available to international scholars and add new information to this particular chapter of ‘Asian ceramics’: seventeenth and eighteenth-century export porcelains.1 Four Dutch museums with impressive collections of Asian ceramics (Princessehof Leeuwarden, Groninger Museum, Gemeentemuseum Den Haag, and Rijksmuseum Amsterdam) have recently started up a cooperation project to these ends.

The museums are now working on the website publication of their complete collections of kraak porcelains.1 Rather than publishing a selection of the most attractive objects, with lengthy and extensive commentary, in a catalogue, we have to make as many kraak ware objects as possible accessible on the website for scholars and all interested in these ceramics all over the world. The kraak ware collection of the four museums is expected to be available on the website in autumn 2003. Another cooperative exhibition, scheduled for this year, will consist of highlights from the four porcelain collections. Objects have been deliberately chosen to show up clearly as possible the various collecting accents and historical development of the collections. Hopefully, the exhibition programme and website will help to gain wider recognition for the importance of these Dutch collections of Asian porcelains.

Notes
1 ‘Ceramics’ is a generic term for earthenware, stoneware, and porcelain.
2 Porcelain is much harder than stoneware and earthenware and requires high oven-temperatures.
3 Porcelain is a type of Chinese export ceramic produced from c. 1506 to c. 1650.
4 Kraak porcelain is a type of Chinese export ceramic produced from c. 1506 to c. 1650 and was originally developed for the Portuguese and Spanish traders as a light ware, with standard forms which enabled them to store the objects economically in their ships. The thin body is often warped in the kiln and always painted in underglaze blue, while most sucreries can destroy a difference in vessels, all in astonishing quantities. The quality of these porcelains, which are painted in blue-and-white designs, or in a polychrome palette with enamel colours, sometimes in addition to the blue underglaze, varies from reasonable to outstanding. This clearly contrasts with the contents in The Hague and Amsterdam, which, formed in the nineteenth and twentieth century with the aesthetic eye of the time, only present the very best pieces as isolated works of art, thus more or less depriving these of their historical context.

This changed manner of collecting can partly be explained by the changed appreciation of Asian porcelain from the end of the eighteenth century onwards. European factories began to produce genuine porcelain in 1759, and soon proved to be better equipped to meet the latest fashions and demands of wealthy customers. Moreover, things Chinese were generally no longer as much in vogue as they had been in the seventeenth and the first part of the eighteenth century, and, by and large, came to be seen as objectionable frivolities. As early as 1709, Vaniotti ver Mories commented on the craze for Chinese porcelain, in his satirical painting of an interior scene with an excessive amount of porcelain in which apes had replaced human beings. As apes are symbols of luxuria, and self-indulgence, this is an early critical note to an unstrained porcelain mania. Some observations in a famous early-nineteenth-century travel account may help to gain understanding of the abundance of porcelain in Groningen and Friesland, developing in this period.2 In 1833 Jacob van Lennep and a friend walked through the Netherlands, and observed that rich farmers and citizens in the northern provinces had recently taken a remarkable fancy for luxury items. Tellingly, while explicitly mentioning porcelain when describing the interiors of inhabitants in these areas, Van Lennep makes no reference to porcelain in other parts of his travel account. In his eyes, as a member of the Amsterdam haute volée, porcelain displays were out of fashion, an indication of bad taste, and— in keeping with Van Mieris’ painting a hundred years earlier— representative of moral degradation. Due to the fall in demand amongst the elites in the west of the country, Asian porcelain flooded the market at the end of the eighteenth century. The wealthy inhabitants of Groningen and Friesland were probably only too happy to buy this beautiful porcelain, under the influence of Van Mieris’ painting (1662-1747), ‘Interior with apes; 1739, oil on canvas, 36.6 x 48.1 cm, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden, Verkehrsgalerie AfA Meissen.’