

East and West meet in Chinese export art

Rosalien van der Poel

China played an important role for the Netherlands in the 'overseas world' as long ago as the seventeenth century. According to Tristan Mostert and Jan van Campen, authors of a book on Sino-Dutch relations since 1600, entitled *Zijden Draad. China en Nederland sinds 1600*, 'no country or region appealed more to the imagination and never before had expectations of wealth and trading opportunities run so high'.¹ Like their American, British and other European contemporaries, the Dutch all came back from their commercial adventures in China or their years spent in the Netherlands East Indies, for example, with Chinese art objects specially made for export. These were generally luxury goods produced to order from materials unknown in Europe at the time. The decorations, colours, and excellent craftsmanship with which these 'exotic' luxury goods were made drew great admiration and aroused people's curiosity about their country of origin, in what was at the time the almost impossibly distant China. Besides westerners' fascination with Chinese export art, according to the deputy director of the Guangdong Museum, this transcultural exchanged in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries also prompted a dialogue between Cantonese and European culture. 'The encounter and dialogue brought a new form of civilization and created a new fashion, forming a new taste of culture, bringing a curiosity of the civilization of mankind.'²

Dutch sea trade with China

After the old silk routes from Europe through Persia to Asia came to be regarded as dangerous, Europeans went in search of new routes to the East. The seas and oceans provided the answer. The Portuguese were the first to sail to Asia via the Cape of Good Hope, and they were awarded the Imperial court of Macao, near Canton, by way of thanks for their help in fighting piracy.³ Early in the second half of the eighteenth century the Spaniards, Dutch, British, French, Danish, Swedes and Austrians all had trading houses in Canton, in economic and cultural terms the most important city in southern China.

The Netherlands has had important trade relations with China for centuries. The United East India Company (1602-1799) (VOC) opened a *hong* or *factorij* (trading post) in the southern Chinese port city of Canton on the Pearl River delta in 1727. From there, it was able to conduct its lucrative trading operations directly between China and the Netherlands. Between 1757 and 1856, Canton was in fact the only base for trade with the west.

¹ Mostert & Van Campen 2015, 19.

² Preface to exhibition catalogue *Chinese export fine art in the Qing Dynasty from Guangdong Museum* 2013, 008.

³ Crossman 1991, 15.

After the disbandment of the VOC in the late eighteenth century, the Franco-British wars caused a decline in Dutch trade with China.⁴ And although the flag continued to fly above the Dutch *hong* in Canton during the time of French rule, there was no revival of the glorious era of trade in the seventeenth century (fig. 1). The *Nederlandse Handels Maatschappij* (Dutch Trading Society, 1824-1964), one of the forerunners of ABN-Amro Bank, began overseas trade voyages in 1824. Between 1825 and 1830 it undertook five direct expeditions to Canton. Although these initiatives were commendable, Dutch trade was overshadowed by that of the British and Americans. Research by historians Leonard Blussé, Frank Broeze (1945-2001) and Hendrik Muller (1859-1941) has shown that the Netherlands' leading position in world trade (principally in tea) had become a thing of the past by around 1830.⁵ Later in the nineteenth century the Netherlands would regain a foothold in China, boosted above all by the Cultuurstelsel ('Cultural System') introduced in Java in 1830. The many nineteenth-century Chinese export goods in the Netherlands provide convincing evidence of these extensive trading activities.

1856 was an important year in the history of the official Dutch representation in Canton. After the Dutch *hong* had been consumed by fire during the 'Arrow War' (1856-1860), the base for Dutch trading activities on the southern Chinese coast was relocated to a 'substantial Dutch house on Praya Grande', which served as the Dutch consulate in Macao and, later, to the Dutch missions in Hong Kong, Shantou and Amoy (Xiamen).⁶ China remained an important trading partner for the Netherlands, thanks to Dutch colonial activities in the Netherlands East Indies, which included banking and insurance, shipbuilding, and sugar and tobacco plantations. And it remains so to this day.

The *modus operandi* of Chinese export art

For a long time, Canton was the place where East and West met. We know of the cultural context of Chinese export art largely as a result of the observations and reports of early nineteenth-century contemporaries, foreign residents of Canton, Hong Kong and Macao, travellers to these cities and western traders. Alongside these 'eye-witness accounts', English- and Chinese-language newspapers from the time give a fragmented and subjective insight into this global export art market.⁷ It is known that in Canton the Dutch rented living and office space in a narrow strip along the Pearl River.⁸ There, like other westerners, they

⁴ The Netherlands was under French rule from 1799 to 1815.

⁵ Blussé 2004, 63-67. Broeze, Bruijn & Gaastra 1977, 294-297. Muller 1917, 327-350.

⁶ Muller 1917, 358. Van der Putten 2004, 81-82.

⁷ Eye-witness accounts by European visitors to China from before and after the Opium Wars (1839-1842 and 1856-1860) by M. De Guignes 1808, C.T. Downing 1838, W.H. Medhurst 1840, A. Borget 1845, O. Tiffany Jr. 1849, C.H. Lavollée 1853, J.F. Davis 1857, R. Fortune 1857, M. Yvan 1858, W.C. Hunter 1882, J.D. Ball 1892, and H. Borel 1896.

⁸ Foreign missionaries had more freedom of movement in China.

did business with Chinese merchants who had formed a *co-hong*, an Imperial organisation which, in accordance with Chinese state regulations, regulated trade with foreign merchants until the first Opium War (1841). Although the westerners were forbidden from leaving the territory apportioned to them, they were able to visit studios and shops in China Street and New China Street, where they could have anything they wanted made, either in a Chinese style, with Chinese decorations on a basic European form, or entirely following a western example.⁹

Along with Chinese tea, porcelain and silk, the most famous Chinese export goods, more than fifty other items were exported overseas, including spices, art and craft objects made of lacquer (mainly Coromandel lacquerware, named after a coastal region in southeast India, where many European trading companies stored their Chinese wares), silver, ivory (such as the artistic concentric ivory spheres, or 'devil-work spheres'),¹⁰ glass, bamboo, enamel and paper (screens, furniture, dinnerware, fans, hand-painted wallpaper and other paintings, boxes, bed linen, embroidery and clothes).¹¹ The fascination with luxury goods from the 'overseas world' and with Chinese goods was huge, as was the impact of these items of contemporary fashion and interior decoration in Europe and America. Many of the imported Chinese objects were ordered by private individuals. Wealthy citizens sometimes ordered entire dinner services with specific motifs. Coats of arms were also very popular. In these 'chine de commande' commissions, the decoration would generally be based on a European design. Almost without exception, seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Chinese products were highly prized, and the Dutch were also very interested in Chinese habits and customs.¹² In the late eighteenth century, therefore, there was a growing demand for images of that distant, unknown empire.

Chinese export painting

From the 1770s private merchants, sailors and other passengers on Dutch vessels brought back paintings specially made for a western market. These 'Chinese export paintings' as they were known would often feature an image of the ship or a well-known Chinese port, or take the form of albums with colourful pictures of Chinese subjects such as street traders, clothes for men and women, fish, butterflies, flowers, birds, local boats, dignitaries and production processes for tea, silk and porcelain. (figs. 2, 3, 4) A painting such as this reminded

⁹ Van Campen 2005, 21.

¹⁰ De Bisscop 2009, 12.

¹¹ Williams 1856, 134-5.

¹² Van Campen 2010, 38.

westerners who had travelled to China of a great trading voyage, the years that the owner lived and worked in 'the East', or a relative who had contacts in China.¹³

In this way, thousands of paintings made their way to the Netherlands in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Over the years, many of them have ended up in regional and national maritime and ethnographic museums, libraries and archives. There are eighteen public collections in the Netherlands that include Chinese export paintings.¹⁴ These collections are distinctive in terms both of their size and quality, and the equal of famous collections in America, Britain and China. Indeed, the Netherlands has some unique early albums of watercolours and a rare group of oil paintings depicting Chinese winter landscapes.¹⁵

The term 'Chinese export painting' (*yang wài huà* or *wài xiāo huà*) was first used in 1950, by analogy with the term 'Chinese export porcelain', and to distinguish the genre from literati (traditional) Chinese painting (*wén rén huà* or *guó huà*).¹⁶ Chinese export painting is a creative mix of western and Chinese painting conventions. The rules of style and composition, colour, shading and brushwork, and for painting in linear perspective, were completely combined to create an independent art form with its own repertoire, a Eurasian quality, and shared cultural values. The paintings were made in oil on canvas, in watercolours on paper, in gouache or painted behind glass. Unique paintings, sets of watercolours both large and small, albums and loose plates, the Dutch collections include all kinds of examples.

It is important to bear in mind that Chinese export paintings are the result of extraordinary cultural and trading relations, and most of them were made specially for western clients. In general, one can say that the scenes are constructed, sometimes skilfully copied, the composition or colours skilfully adapted by painters to their own tastes, or those of the client. Clearly, the blend of western and Chinese painting conventions yielded an entirely unique style of painting. These paintings were regarded mainly as export items with little artistic value, and above all as mass-produced commodities. This, and the fact that they cannot be unequivocally classified in either western or Chinese art, explains why this

¹³ The painting exhibited in the kitchen at MOA | Museum Oud Amelisweerd is a typical export painting view of a Chinese port. This painting is on loan from Museum Volkenkunde, part of the National Museum of World Cultures, cat. no. RV-B3-1. Almost identical scenes feature in the collections of the Greenwich Maritime Museum, the Martyn Gregory Gallery in London and the Guangdong Museum in Guangzhou.

¹⁴ Van der Poel 2016. Over the past ten years Van der Poel has looked into collections of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Chinese export painting in museums, archives and libraries in the Netherlands. His collection-based study is described in his doctoral thesis, which he defended in November 2016.

¹⁵ Van der Poel, appendix 1. The albums and paintings are part of the collection of Museum Volkenkunde, part of the National Museum of World Cultures, cat. nos. RV-360-377 to 360-383 and RV-360-349a to 349g.

¹⁶ Jourdain & Jenyns 1950; Wilson & Liu 2003 10; Dikötter 2006, 26, 39.

transcultural art form was for a long time regarded as inferior and less valuable, and has not therefore received the attention it deserves.

In recent years, Dutch museums have come to appreciate their collections of Chinese export painting. A sense of urgency has emerged as regards the need to digitise collections, and collaborate with universities, research institutions and other cultural partners. This trend has been prompted above all by the conviction that these historically meaningful collections must be able to stand the test of time and remain available to future generations.

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Dr. Rosalien van der Poel works as Head of Office and Protocol and Coordinator of Leiden-Asia Year 2017 at the University of Leiden. In 2016 she published her doctoral thesis *Made for Trade – Made in China. Chinese export painting in Dutch collections: art and commodity*. Her knowledge of the Dutch public collections of Chinese export paintings makes her an expert in this field (she is accordingly China research associate at Museum Volkenkunde).

FIGURES

Fig. 1

Quayside in Canton showing the *hongs*; left to right: Austrian Republic, America, Britain, Holland. 1810, anonymous, oil on copper, 11.9 x 15.5 cm, Groningen Museum, cat. no. 1978-0366.

Fig. 2

Dying and drying silk. 19th century, anonymous, watercolour on pith paper, 25 x 24 cm, Tropenmuseum/National Museum of World Cultures, cat. no. TM-3728-506

Fig. 3

Mandarin ducks. 1830-1865, anonymous, watercolour on pith paper, 22 x 34 cm, Museum Volkenkunde/ National Museum of World Cultures, cat. no. RV-1239-378e.

Fig. 4

Butterflies and insects. 1851-1856, anonymous, watercolour on pith paper, 27 x 18.5 cm, SAB City Archive and Athenaeum Library Deventer, cat. no. DvT V.4 KL-12.

