

Press release

Baur Foundation, Museum of Far Eastern Art



THE BLUE OF THE SEAS DIALOGUES BETWEEN CHINA, PERSIA AND EUROPE

23 November 2017 – 25 February 2018

Responding to the interest in the relations between the Far East, Asia and Europe, this exhibition reconsiders the trade of Chinese blue-and-white porcelain whose commerce was popularised during the 17th century by the Dutch East India Company. This century is known for having been the Golden Age of the Low Countries. Its successful maritime dealings with the Indies made the newly-fledged Republic of the United Provinces one of Europe's greatest commercial powers. And its openness to different modes of thought also attracted many writers, thinkers and scholars, creating a cultural centre in which the arts and literature flourished. The middle class of merchants made wealthy by trade with the Indies were primarily those who commissioned works of art and bought exotic curios. Naturally, this commerce with the East affected the life and art of the United Provinces, with Chinese porcelain in particular exerting a strong influence on interior decoration. These wares were also included as symbols of wealth in still-life paintings and Vanities, works that reflect the use of this precious tableware and its impact on daily life.

When the supply of porcelain wares shrank drastically as a consequence of political strife in China at the end of the Ming dynasty (1368–1644), Chinese ceramics were temporarily replaced by Japanese and Persian copies. For centuries, Persia had imported porcelain from China, wares that had inspired its potters and painters of miniatures.

Visitors to the exhibition will discover dialogues between still-life paintings that feature items of blue-and-white porcelain, highly prized by an expanding Europe ready to embrace the exotic, and the porcelain wares by which the paintings were inspired, as well as their copies in Persian faience, and miniatures from the Islamic world that include images of these ceramics.

In a multicultural dialogue with the collections of the Baur Foundation, and in particular with the ceramics from the Thérèse and John-D. Blum donation received in 2002, and the bequest made by Ambassador and Mme Charles Müller accepted in 2004, visitors will find many precious works lent by the foundation's European partners. We are fortunate to have been loaned high quality paintings from the Fine Arts Museums in Besançon, Chambéry, Cherbourg and Lille, from the Prado Museum in Madrid, from the Rietberg Museum and Kunsthaus in Zurich, from the MAH and the Cabinet d'arts graphiques and Galerie De Jonckheere in Geneva, as well as ceramics from the musée Ariana in Geneva, the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, the musées Guimet and des Arts décoratifs in Paris, and from private collections.

The exhibition has been made possible by the support provided by a private Genevan foundation and De Jonckheere, Geneva – Monaco.

Exhibition curator: Monique Crick

Guest curator: Yolande Crowe

Design: Nicole Gérard

Authors of the catalogue: Monique Crick, Yolande Crowe and Alice Frech

The VOC in the wake of the spice traders

A small kingdom that faces out onto the Atlantic, Portugal was the first country in Europe to send its men and ships into unknown seas. Having set out in search of spices, on their way they also discovered the gold and slaves of Africa, the precious stones of India, the silk and cotton fabrics of Asia, and the white ceramic that had been praised by Marco Polo, the *porcellana* of China. The discovery of the route to Asia round the Cape of Good Hope transformed the way that world commerce was handled, as well as the quantity of goods bought and sold. During the 16th century, Lisbon became the market place for the produce of the Indies, and it was there that the Dutch went to buy them for distribution across Europe using their proficient merchant navy.

Freed from the rule of the Habsburgs in 1581, the United Provinces saw their prosperity threatened by the closure of the port of Lisbon in 1584 by Philip II of Spain, who had also become king of Portugal in 1581 following the union of the two Iberian kingdoms. Taking advantage of the experience of the Portuguese and the current political circumstances, the republic of the United Provinces endeavoured to win for itself, using force, partial control of the seas and to put an end to the maritime trade monopoly held by the Portuguese. In March 1602 it created a merchant company, the *Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie* or Dutch East India Company, that had its monogram VOC stamped on all its properties and currency. It was administered by the “Lords Seventeen” who represented the six Chambers of Commerce in the United Provinces. Between 1595 and 1795, this body organised 4800 voyages to Asia.

The Dutch government gave the VOC the monopoly of trade with the East Indies as well as of exploration of the vast “commercial zone” that lay to the east of the Cape of Good Hope and west of the Magellan Strait. Its charter gave it the right to conclude treaties, raise troops for armed conflict, charter ships for purposes of both trade and war, construct forts and, above all, the duty to supersede by any means possible the Iberians’ monopoly of control of the seas by attacking their ships and the offices of their colonial agents. It also created a solid commercial network by establishing its own trading posts along the routes to the Indies, often in the same countries as its Iberian rival. With the enforced colonisation of Indonesia, the VOC’s expansion, directed with energy and method, heralded a new chapter in East-West trading relations. Expanding with remarkable rapidity, the company dispossessed in little more than a century the Portuguese *Estado da India* of almost all its holdings in India, South-East Asia and Japan. Whereas the 16th century had been the golden age for the conquistadors of Portugal, the 17th was its equivalent for Dutch merchants and officials. With its thirty-odd possessions in Asia, and money from Europe, Persia and Japan to ensure its affairs were concluded satisfactorily, the VOC was the largest commercial company during the 17th century. Its monopoly on cloves, mace, nutmeg and cinnamon, which it bought at low prices in the places of production, brought it huge profits when they were resold in Europe.

But it was precisely this extensive commercial network that brought a considerable rise in costs during the 18th century, while its income fell with the declining interest of Europeans

for spices in relation to tea from China and textiles from India. The VOC was eventually nationalised in 1799 after almost two centuries of glory.

Chinese porcelain in Europe

Before the glory of the Portuguese maritime ventures to the East, a few rare Chinese ceramics had found their way to Europe as princely gifts, often passing through the Middle East. Italian paintings from the late 15th century depict some pieces of blue-and-white porcelain. These exotic wares, made from a mysterious material, were most often set in gold or silver mounts on their arrival, then kept in cabinets of art and curiosities – *kunst- und wunderkammer* – whose number began to grow from the second half of the 16th century. For their owners, such cabinets were a microcosm of the world and the exotic works that they contained, for example, coconuts, ostrich eggs and nautilus shells, had to be transformed into works of art before they could be included. Naturally, collections of this sort were the prerogative of the highest social classes, those who took an interest in the arts and sciences.

For the famous blue-and-white Chinese porcelain wares and porcelain in dazzling coloured enamels to be appreciated in the courts of Europe, it was necessary to wait for the Portuguese to arrive in Asia. But, although these ceramics were admired and sought after, the Portuguese did not make them the subject of a well organised commercial venture. This situation changed with the creation of the VOC, which popularised the wares in Europe. Although the company's principal market was spices, the profits to be made by importing porcelain were not to be scorned. These elegant and delicately decorated wares quickly lost their exclusiveness as they spread among the rising class of prosperous merchants. Displayed on shelves and in glass cabinets, or used domestically, they made apparent the prestige of their owner. Trade in Chinese ceramics grew rapidly, with more than 12 million pieces exported from Batavia to Holland between 1607 and 1682.

With the capitulation of the Ming dynasty in 1644, resistance to the Manchus was triggered in the south of China, leading to the destruction of the Jingdezhen kilns, meaning that the VOC was no longer able to satisfy the European demand for Chinese porcelain. In order not to lose its monopoly, it turned not only to the Arita kilns in Japan but also to Persia where copies of *kraak* wares esteemed by European travellers were made. However, these ceramics imported as substitutes into the Low Countries and various colonial trading posts were not as attractive to a clientele accustomed to the delicacy of Chinese porcelain. In the end, reopening of the Jingdezhen factories and the maritime trade with Batavia quickly relaunched Europe's imports of ceramics from China, all the more so as the Dutch East India Company issued licences to Chinese and independent Dutch merchants to trade in them. The number of Chinese pieces imported up until the company was dissolved in 1799 was around the 30 million mark.

Chinese porcelain in 17th-century Dutch still lifes

A remarkable material, Chinese porcelain with blue-and-white decoration is the most extensively represented item of imported goods in still lifes. Artists were enthusiastic observers of fashions and answered to the desires of their clients, who considered the porcelain wares they purchased to be a sign of exoticism and rarity par excellence. Their inclusion in paintings was a sign of wealth and a comfortable lifestyle. The abundance of these images reflects the regard in which this new form of tableware was held. The variety of the pieces represented demonstrates that painters had access to them, whether in shops, in the homes of their wealthy clients, or at auctions. The artists sometimes placed greater emphasis on the plastic characteristics of these pieces than on the authenticity of their form and motifs. The great number of porcelain wares bears witness to the prosperity of the Low Countries but this display of affluence was also understood at the time as a vanity that invited reflection on temperance, moderation and the transience of life.

One of the first painters to include *kraak* porcelain in his paintings, Osias Beert (1580–1623) stands apart for the outmoded organisation of his still lifes, focusing on the harmony of filled and empty space. Almost a third of the works painted between 1600 and 1625 that include porcelain wares were by this artist or his workshop. They manifest a trend and present the commonest objects taken from cargoes: bowls, bottles, dishes and *klapmuts* in the work of Johannes Bosschaert (c. 1607–after 1628), Isaac Soreau (1604–after 1645), Balthazar Van der Ast (c. 1593–1657) and Jurian Van Streek (1632–1687), while the works of Jan Brueghel the Elder (1568–1625) and Ambrosius Bosschaert the Elder (1573–1621) show bouquets decorating different types of containers, such as bottles and *kendi* pots. Willem Kalf (1619–1693) preferred ostentatious still lifes, *pronkstilleven*, with outstanding pieces of tableware and porcelain from the previous century adorned with silver or bronze gilt, which no doubt came from the collection of an art lover as prosperous as he was enlightened. With the representation of different types of porcelain, Jan Van Kessel (1626–1679) and Jan Van Kessel the Younger (1654–1708) also excelled in the theme of *banketje*, the depiction of well laden tables.

The influence of Chinese ceramics on the Islamic world

Exported to western Asia and the Middle East from the time of the Tang dynasty (618–907), Chinese ceramics exerted great influence on local productions. From the moment of the first imports, local craftsmen recognised that wares for everyday use could also be attractive and occupy a luxury niche of the market, thus they attempted to improve the quality of their products. Although the solidity of Chinese porcelain and stoneware could not be reproduced, their appearance could be imitated. The potters of Mesopotamia set about investigating possible solutions, which resulted in the invention of a white glaze made with tin oxide that was used over a ground of different colours, thus the visual equivalent of porcelain. The addition of cobalt blue, corresponding to the contemporary fashion, furthered interest. This development marked the origin of faience as it would be known much later in Italian majolica.

The appearance of highly refined ceramic during the Song dynasty (960–1279) again fascinated foreign potters. This time they did not create a new glaze but a composite paste that more closely resembled white porcelain despite not being fired at such a high temperature. It was a sort of soft paste, a frit, like the one produced in Europe in the 17th century. After firing, the body of the piece was pure white and perhaps even translucent if sufficiently thin. With the accession of the Mongols to the Chinese imperial throne and the advent of the Pax Mongolica, trade between the extreme east and west of Asia grew. The influence of Chinese porcelain embellished with cobalt blue was felt across the whole of the Muslim world from the end of the Mongol age. In the 15th century, potters in Central Asia, Syria and Persia adapted the Chinese freehand decorations on tiles and three-dimensional goods. Trade continued during the centuries that followed, and wares of the 15th and 16th centuries were particularly present in the Persian empire, as evinced by the magnificent donation of ceramics made by Shah Abbas I (1571–1629) to the Safavid shrine in Ardabil. Imports of ceramics from China increased with orders made directly by the Dutch East India Company (VOC) from the time of its creation in 1602, and had a notable influence on the production of the Persian workshops in the province of Kerman. During the “Persian Interlude”, Safavid potters attempted to respond to the VOC’s orders and to local demand by creating copies of Chinese *kraak* porcelain to satisfy the demand of the markets controlled by the Dutch company.

However, fundamental differences exist between original Chinese porcelain wares and Iranian creations made during the 16th and 17th centuries. Most important, the latter were made using a clay fired at a relatively low temperature. It is not stoneware or porcelain but a frit, a mixture of white pipeclay and feldspathic minerals. Neither the raw material nor high-temperature firing was available to the craftsmen in the Islamic world. Furthermore, the different intensities of the cobalt blue are delimited by the use of chromite – a spinel of iron and chrome – that creates a black contour that does not exist in the Chinese decorations. The choices of motif made by the Persian potters are difficult to explain but it is clear that they were influenced by the variety and exoticism of the Chinese decorations compared to the geometric motifs and miniaturist conventions to which they were accustomed. Another difference between the two productions is that a certain humour and creativity are apparent in the approach taken by Persian potters, differentiating them from the more traditional practice of their Chinese colleagues.

The art of the miniature in the East

A miniature is a painting on paper whose small size, elegance and finesse are key characteristics. Miniatures were used to illustrate works of literature or kept in albums called *muraqqa*. They are often accompanied by text and decorated with patterns in the margins. Persian miniatures stand out not only for their refinement of execution, but also for their sumptuous colours. These were made from mineral pigments: gold, silver, lapis lazuli, pale vermillion made from either natural cinnabar, mercury or sulphur, a yellow made from arsenic sulphide, a green obtained from malachite or verdigris, and a pale orangey red or orange from minium, red from iron oxyde. Organic pigments were also used, such as indigo, the black from charcoal mixed with oak gall, and crimson obtained from cochineal.

The art of the miniature flourished during the Mongol (1256–1388) and Timurid (1405–1507) periods. In the wake of their conquests, the Mongols took with them artists from China whose influence was felt in the representation of figures and organisation and treatment of space. The development of miniatures during the 14th century was linked to that of poetry. Persian miniatures blossomed once again in the first half of the 15th century. The fascination of China was felt all the more strongly in Timurid art when the dynasty's rulers entertained commercial relations with the country. A number of schools emerged, each with its own style: those of Shiraz, Tabriz and Herat had the greatest influence in Persia, as well as on the Ottomans and Mughals.

With the accession to power of the Safavid dynasty (1501–1736), which consolidated the Persian kingdom, Iranian art underwent renewal. During the 1590s, one fashion was the painting of court figures on individual sheets of paper, and another the depiction of elegantly dressed young people. At the start of the 18th century, the arrival of European travellers, merchants and missionaries, who reached the interior of the country, and the introduction of the books, illustrations and engravings that they brought with them, resulted in new influences, as did the painting of Mughal India during the reign of Emperor Akbar the Great (r. 1556–1605). The art of the Persian miniature was shaped by its successive artistic heritages and combined its models to form a specific and refined aesthetic.

Chinese porcelains and works by goldsmiths are often seen in miniatures. The miniatures in the Pozzi collection at the MAH in Geneva include images of white ceramics decorated with patterns that might be examples of these imported porcelain wares.

Useful information

Dates	23 November 2017 - 25 February 2018
Address	Baur Foundation, Museum of Far Eastern Arts 8 rue Munier-Romilly 1206 Geneva – Switzerland Tel. : +41 22 704 32 82 Site : www.fondation-baur.ch
Opening times	Open from Tuesday to Sunday from 2pm to 6pm (closed Monday), until 8 pm when guided visits are held (see below)
Tickets	Full : CHF 15.- Unemployed, handicapped and students: CHF 10.-
Exhibition curator Guest curator	Monique Crick, director, Baur Foundation Yolande Crowe
Design	Nicole Gérard
Press contact	Baur Foundation, Museum of Far Eastern Arts Audrey Jouany Deroire Tel: +41 22 704 32 82 Email: musee@fondationbaur.ch
Catalogue	<i>Le Bleu des mers, dialogues entre la Chine, la Perse et l'Europe</i> , par Monique Crick, Yolande Crowe et Alice Frech, Fondation Baur, Cinq Continents, Genève, Milan, 2017.
Cultural mediation	Anne-Sophie Kreis, mediation@fondationbaur.ch
Public guided visits:	Wednesdays, 6.30pm: 29 November and 13 December 2017 17 and 31 January 2018, 7 and 21 February 2018
Private guided visits:	Reservation required, please contact the secretariat