

Japan and the Netherlands – the first 400 years

By *Renate van Nouhuys*

Kômô mo
hana-mi kinikeri
uma ni kura

The red-haired as well
came to the cherry blossom
the horse was saddled.

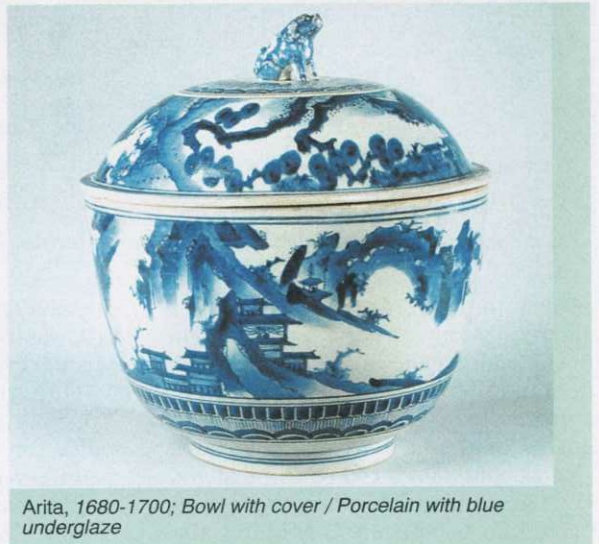
Basho 1679

... and the tall red-haired with their long noses stayed on until today

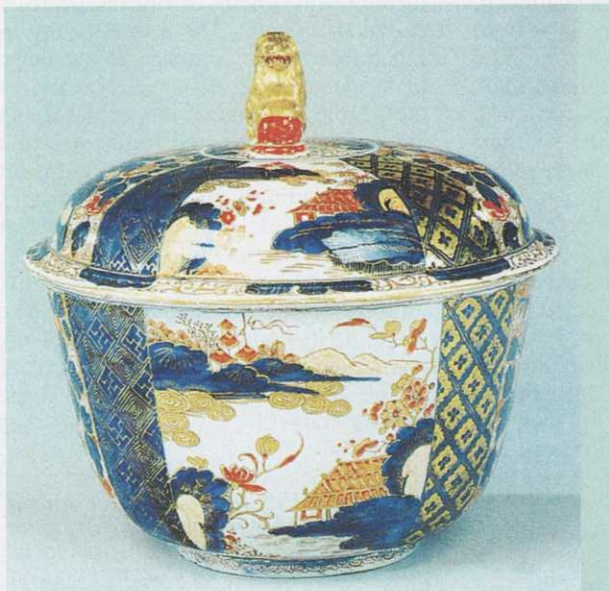
On April 19, 1600 the first Dutch ship arrived in Japan. This vessel "Liefde" (charity) had departed from Rotterdam in 1598 to sail to the East in order to start trading with oriental countries. The "Liefde", having been blown off its course by violent storms and buffeted by the pounding seas, drifted ashore in Kyushu at Usuki. Of its crew of more than one hundred members, less than a quarter survived, including the captain and the pilot as well as the Dutch merchant Jan Joosten. An area in central Tokyo still bears the name of Jan Joosten: Yaesu.

In 1609 the Dutch opened their first trading post in Hirado. But in 1641 they had to leave Hirado and were sent to the artificial island Dejima in the Bay of Nagasaki.

When the Japanese Government (Edo *Bakufu*) prohibited on the immigration of foreign people from 1633, closing the country off to the outside world (*sakoku*) in order to suppress Christianity, Holland was the only country among Western nations that was allowed to continue trading with Japan. During this period Dejima in Nagasaki remained the only window open to the world. Through Dejima both countries influenced each other in various ways. Japanese experts on all Dutch knowledge (*Rangakusha*) applied themselves to the study of Western science, patiently translating Dutch books and writings. Until the end of the 19th century, Dutch was the diplomatic language of Japan.



Arita, 1680-1700; Bowl with cover / Porcelain with blue underglaze



Delft, 1695-1720; Basin with cover / Delftware with blue decoration in the glaze and polychrome enamelled decoration

Arriving in Japan in 1995 from the Netherlands I was struck by the dualism of this country: the refined culture of the old and classical Japan so strongly contrasting with the modernization and industrialization of this high-tech leader amongst the nations of Asia and the world. I was amazed to see beautifully constructed modern architecture next to somewhat dilapidated old buildings, the busy avenues in the famous Ginza district next to narrow streets crisscrossed by electric wires. The contrast could not be bigger. Yet there lies a hidden charm under the old and new, the beautiful and ugly which infatuates the onlooker and "crawls under the skin".

Could this mysterious attraction also have struck the first Dutch who came to Japan? How else could two countries and peoples so far apart geographically and in terms of cultural heritage have built such an extraordinary relationship over four centuries? How could the Dutch, with their straightforward and in

the eyes of the Japanese no doubt often rude manner, communicate with a people that has refined to the highest degree the act of "packaging" not only their gifts, but also their speech, their thoughts and their emotions?

Of course there were practical reasons for cooperation. The Dutch wanted trade, the Japanese wanted knowledge, technology. Both countries had, and still have, a special relationship with the sea: a friend giving food and providing a way to riches from far-away places, but also a dangerous enemy always threatening to take away the relatively small living area for an ever growing population. Dutch civil engineers were therefore highly welcome in Japan, building ports, dikes, canals and irrigation works. Today, that relationship has changed from a one-way street into a mutual exchange of technical knowledge. That is also the case with other expertise originally brought to Japan by the Dutch, such as medicine and the foundation of the Japanese shipbuilding, chemical and even electronics industries.

Maybe the Dutch sense of orderliness, their calvinist belief in the rewards of hard work appealed to the Japanese. Dutch straightforwardness inspired, if not admiration, at least enough trust that they were not seeking anything else than a mutually advantageous relationship. That was the reason why the Dutch were allowed to stay on when all other Western nations were expelled from Japan, giving the Netherlands a monopoly that endured for more than two hundred years.

In that period the trade in goods developed also into a cultural exchange that over time went far beyond purely commercial motives. It was the beginning of mutual "imitation and inspiration": from the introduction into Japanese painting of the Dutch handling of perspective and the Dutch technique of etching to Vincent van Gogh's fascination with Japanese colour prints, which influenced his later work when he was searching for new forms and freedom in the use of

colours.

These historical considerations have served to deepen even further my interest in the endless treasure trove of Japanese arts and crafts, to the point of deciding to try my hand at one of them: the difficult but highly rewarding art of *sumi-e*. But let me end with some remarks on another favorite of mine, that brings my story full circle, back to Dejima: porcelain.

Important written sources are the *Dagregisters* or daily account books of Dejima, letters from the merchants of the United East India Company or VOC and then the first scholarly books devoted to Japan written by members of the same circle of Company employers. From those daily accounts we learned that spices, cotton textiles, copper, tin and precious metals were the most important trade commodities, lacquer and silks later became popular as well. Initially, porcelain was not among the export products. On the contrary, it was used as a luxury article in the tea ceremony. The porcelain industry in Japan started to develop from about the middle of the seventeenth century, initially making use of porcelain pigments imported by the Dutch from China. The fall of the Ming dynasty in 1644 and the subsequent collapse of the Chinese export trade in porcelain led to the development of *Arita* porcelain, which in turn stimulated the manufacture of Delft earthenware in Holland. At first the Delft potteries imitated Chinese porcelain, but later they also followed Japanese examples. Dutch burghers and merchants eagerly bought this new tableware which was so exotic and had such bright decorations in blue and white. Its use on the table or as decoration in the interior added to their status as wealthy and important people. Therefore it is understandable that porcelain was soon depicted on Dutch still-life paintings not only as symbols of the knowledge of faraway countries but also of importance and wealth.

After 1650 the Japanese were already experimenting with polychrome porcelain decorations. The traditional

blue decoration was applied under the glaze and the additional colours red, yellow and gold over it. The first products were referred to as *Imari* porcelain, after the port from where they were shipped. The demand for Japanese products grew and from 1659 *Arita* porcelain was exported on a large scale. The shape and decoration of this early *Arita* porcelain was still derived from Chinese wares, although the Dutch clearly tried to influence the manner of decoration by asking for porcelain decorated with a "small flower". As a result of the export of this *Imari* and *kakiemon* porcelain, the potters in Delft also started experimenting with these new techniques, new decorations and they developed a style of their own. Basing themselves on Chinese and Japanese decorations, they mixed elements of these models and added their own Oriental fantasies, thus creating the style we call "*Chinoiserie*", which became very popular between 1660 and 1730. These pieces were sometimes rich and ornate in form, at other times simple, asymmetric and lucid with the characteristic of Japanese ceramics. Apart from the decoration, Japanese blue and white porcelain can be recognised by the always slightly bluer sheen of the white and by a blue which is more blackish than the blue of Chinese porcelain. The blue and white Delftware has a more cobalt-blue sheen.

Being a porcelain lover myself I am glad that so many beautiful pieces have survived to show the people of our "disposable plastic" era the extraordinary results of mutual imitation and inspiration between very different cultures. For me personally as well as for my countrymen it is also a source of new inspiration to continue on the 400-year old road into a future of ever stronger Japanese-Dutch relations of mutual respect and friendship! JJT

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