

8. Second acquisition 1717–1718: Madame and Monsieur St. Martin

The purchases of asiatica for Augustus the Strong continued after the delivery of the first lot in March 1717, as it is stated in another group of letters dating from May 1717 to April 1718. The authors of these are the St. Martin couple, a husband and wife who were professional asiatica dealers in The Hague. The St. Martins are mentioned in Van den Bempden and Lagnasco's correspondence several times. The dearth of letters from Van den Bempden after March 1717 suggests that the task of acquiring porcelain for Augustus the Strong might have been re-assigned to the St. Martins after this date.

The St. Martins are noteworthy as being the dealers who helped to acquire a set of so-called birdcage vases. These Japanese porcelain vases shaped as a beaker vase are decorated with a metal cage around the body, with porcelain birds inside these cages (fig. 12). They are a group of particularly outstanding objects, which were even copied later by the Saxon potters at the Meissen manufactory. The 1721 inventory lists 20 of these vases, of which nine are still in the Porzellansammlung today:

N. 18. 20 round vases, broad and open at the top but tapering towards the bottom, having gilded outer bars that enclose copious birds and flowers in porcelain so as to create the effect of birdcages. There are handles halfway up on either side, each in the shape of a white elephant's head and trunk, that are cemented on. The gilding on these vases was applied from reinforced paper and does not adhere well. 1 is damaged and they are all 22½ in. high and 15½ in. in diam.¹²⁹

The letters and invoices do mention three pairs of five "rouleaux à cages", one purchased from a merchant named Mr. Flamen (n.d.) in Amsterdam for 1509



Fig. 12. Birdcage vase. Japan, Arita, 1690–1720.

guilders in October 1716,¹³⁰ one supplied by Madame and Monsieur St. Martin for a price of 1500 guilders in February 1717,¹³¹ and one bought from the recently retired VOC official Abraham Douglas (1665–1718) and his wife in August 1717.¹³²

The letters from the St. Martins to Count Lagnasco are more intimate than those of Van den Bempden, mentioning private details such as stays in Aix-la-Chapelle (a popular health resort), information on their overall wellbeing, or conveying greetings from other acquaintances. From this less formal tone, it can be assumed that the purchases made via this couple were probably not only intended for Augustus the Strong, but also included private acquisitions for Lagnasco himself, mostly tea, chocolate, books, or small fashion accessories. The porcelain, however, was intended for the king, and Madame St. Martin was eager to please her royal customer with her discoveries. That word of Augustus the Strong's plans for the Dutch Palace had reached Holland by 1717 is apparent from a note from Monsieur St. Martin, who confides to Lagnasco that his "wife wishes she had wings, so that she could see His Majesty's wonderful palace".¹³³

Madame St. Martin travelled regularly to Amsterdam to "see if there are any interesting things to discover", such as in late July 1717, when "the ships arrived from India".¹³⁴ Twenty-one VOC ships arrived in Holland on 30 and 31 July, four of them docked in Goeree, six in Rammekens, and eleven in Texel, their respective homeports.¹³⁵ The ships that mainly carried cargo for the southern VOC chambers of Delft, Rotterdam and Zeeland landed in Goeree and Rammekens, whereas Texel was the preferred port for the ships of the Amsterdam, Hoorn, and Enkhuizen chambers. Monsieur St. Martin mentions in his letters that after the ships' arrival, his wife planned to go to Amsterdam to inspect the cargoes,¹³⁶ which suggests that the ships he refers to had landed in Texel.

Of the 21 ships that reached Holland in late July 1717, only five of those that arrived in Texel were carrying goods for the Amsterdam chamber (see table 1).

Name of ship	Name of captain	Departure date	Place of departure	Arrival date	Place of arrival
<i>Koning Karel de Derde</i>	David Brouwer	1 November 1716	Batavia	31 July 1717	Texel
<i>Nesserak</i>	Francois Zegers	1 November 1716	Batavia	31 July 1717	Texel
<i>D'Uno</i>	Willem Dekker	1 November 1716	Batavia	30 July 1717	Texel
<i>Boekenrode</i>	Lambert Bot	12 December 1716	Ceylon	31 July 1717	Texel
<i>Middelwoud</i>	Jan de Heere	12 December 1716	Ceylon	31 July 1717	Texel

Table 1. Arrival of VOC ships in July 1717 carrying cargo for the Amsterdam chamber.

Unfortunately, the St. Martins' letters do not mention whether Madame St. Martin bought any goods from any of these ships. However, she describes the competition among buyers after her return to The Hague,¹³⁷ and her difficulties in finding appropriate wares during a second visit to Amsterdam.¹³⁸

The St. Martins had similar responsibilities as Van den Bempden, and although no commissions are mentioned, invoices and payments (or the lack thereof) make up the majority of the communication. Dealing with the St. Martins apparently went less smoothly than with Van den Bempden. More than once, Madame St. Martin apologises for letters not arriving at their destination, or the disappearance of whole deliveries such as one containing pieces of a "Japanese blue service [...], four candleholders and eight bowls with covers".¹³⁹ However, it is clear that the St. Martins had a considerable network of collectors and merchants, as well as access to nobility. This can be seen from repeated reports from Madame St. Martin of her efforts to persuade the Earl of Albemarle¹⁴⁰ to sell some of his porcelain to the king: "Milord [Albemarle] is in Voorst,¹⁴¹ but as soon as he is back in The Hague, I will not fail to see him on another pretext and then ask him if he would consider selling any of his porcelain. If so, I will do my utmost to get the best deal for you".¹⁴² The Earl of Albemarle, a favourite of Queen Mary II of England (1662–1694), had inherited most of the Queen's porcelain on her death. This royal provenance might have appealed to both the St. Martins and Augustus the Strong.¹⁴³ Nevertheless, Albemarle refused to sell. Two weeks after her first letter, Madame St. Martin wrote that:

"[...] Milord made me understand that he does not wish to part with his porcelain, and I did not dare to make him any offer. I am convinced that I will have better luck with Milady [Albemarle], with whom I can speak more openly, which is what I will do once she has returned from Voorst".¹⁴⁴

Like her husband, Lady Albemarle declined to sell any of her porcelain. As it transpired, it was an easy refusal to accept because the Albemarles' objects were "the same that [Count Lagnasco] had, and the same as the pieces [Madame St. Martin] sent with the last shipment".¹⁴⁵ The St. Martins thus seemed to have been able to obtain objects similar to those in other noble European collections.

Besides nobility such as Lord and Lady Albemarle, the St. Martins also had connections in the VOC. Lagnasco's letters mention a certain Monsieur Douglas, who must have been Abraham Douglas, *opperhoofd* (chief trader) from 1701 to 1702 of the Dutch trading post Deshima in Japan.¹⁴⁶ Madame St. Martin reports a meeting with Douglas' wife, Johanna van Breugel (ca. 1660–ca. 1731), who

promised “to show her some beautiful things”.¹⁴⁷ Another set of birdcage vases became available in July 1717, this time from Madame Douglas:

I also saw five cages, which I believe I could have for ten, eleven hundred florins, and another lovely garniture of the same size as the others. The covers are with dragons and fish in relief and with birds, and one could have them for 1600 florins. Madame Douglas owns them, and although I have seen a lot, I have not seen anything as beautiful.¹⁴⁸

Abraham Douglas had arrived back in the Netherlands in July 1716 on the *Linschoten* and retired from the VOC after having served for 30 years in Batavia, Deshima, and at the Cape of Good Hope.¹⁴⁹ While we know of no documents describing the items he took back to the Netherlands, it is possible that it included a good deal of porcelain – maybe even the birdcage vases. That the St. Martins eventually bought them is stated in a letter dated 17 August 1717, in which Madame St. Martin states that she “took care of the shipment of the objects yesterday”.¹⁵⁰ An invoice added to the bottom of the letter shows that the “cages” were bought for a mere 1000 guilders, 500 guilders less than those acquired via Van den Bempden in November 1716 and February 1717.¹⁵¹

8.1 Porcelain acquisitions via the St. Martins

Other than the first acquisition via Egidius van den Bempden, for which an extensive specification with quantities and values exists (see chapter 7, esp. 7.1), only invoices for smaller amounts have survived for the second acquisition via the St. Martins. The second consignment of porcelain was not collected and stored in a warehouse for several months, as it had been when Van den Bempden was involved, but shipped as soon as each purchase had been finalised. The St. Martin’s letters consequently include invoices for smaller amounts and acquisition lists that contain partially identical information. These documents are additionally summarised in a specification that lists all the objects “delivered for the service of His Excellency the Count Lagnasco by Jean St. Martin”.¹⁵² It extends to two pages and lists 482 objects of different types, along with their prices, that were bought between April and August 1717, and will therefore be considered as the main specification of the St. Martin purchase.¹⁵³

On examining all the invoices, the focus of acquisitions was not on porcelain, but on import goods such as tea and chocolate, and luxurious fabrics. Textiles like satin, silk, *buccaran*¹⁵⁴ and gauze make up the majority of the objects, while only 22 items in the main specification can be identified as being porcelain vases. From their price, we can conclude that these were probably quite large

and intricately decorated, similar to those that could be identified in Van den Bempden's specifications (see chapter 11).

Comparing the prices in the main specification to the "list of wares coming from Holland and delivered to His Majesty",¹⁵⁵ two things become apparent. Firstly, not all products listed in the main specification appear in the later record. This applies to consumables such as chocolate and tobacco, which were apparently not forwarded to Augustus the Strong, but bought by the Count for personal use. Secondly, comparing the prices in the main specification and the later record, it becomes apparent that the amounts in the list sent to Augustus the Strong are higher than in the main invoice. This applies to all of the objects, except for "17 small pieces of bucharan", the price of which remained unchanged at 50 guilders.

The main invoice lists "one garniture of porcelain of 5 pieces" for 1600 guilders, and "5 porcelain cages" for 1000 guilders. In the invoice delivered to the king, the price for these wares has suddenly risen to 2500 and 1500 guilders respectively, an increase of 50-56%. A similar markup is detectable by comparing an invoice for "three garnitures" costing 3000 guilders¹⁵⁶ with the corresponding delivery list, which describes these vases as having "lions" and "monkeys" on their covers. They were ultimately sold for 5000 guilders (a 66.6% markup).¹⁵⁷ The inflated prices are not limited to porcelain, but encompass other purchases, albeit with a lower percentage that does not exceed 33.3%.

Lagnasco's correspondence contains no comments or queries about the differences in the amounts. The data that is available is admittedly too sparse to draw a conclusion from these price differences, but these observations could point to the St. Martins' profit margins, and their estimation of the market value of the objects. Eighteenth-century Dutch merchants had to consider factors such as supply and demand, market competition, taxes, and their own expenses when pricing wares. Seeing that the documents discussed above consistently indicate a surcharge of 50-60% on the initial price for porcelain, yet no more than 33.3% for other products, this data may provide an idea of how prices for luxury goods were calculated in early 18th-century Holland.