

4. The Dutch East India Company

Of the professional trading companies that brought the porcelain to Europe, the *Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie* or *Vereenigde Geoctroyeerde Compagnie* (Dutch East India Company, VOC) was the primary supplier. Until its dissolution in 1799, the VOC exclusively dominated the Dutch trade with and within Asia. The VOC was established in 1602 as an amalgamation of six rivalling Dutch trading companies. These *voorcompagnieën* (pre-companies) had traded with



Fig. 7. Map of the VOC's trade zone. 17th century.

Asia from as early as 1595, and were financed by wealthy merchants with the additional support of private moneylenders.⁴⁴ While the sea route to Asia via the Cape of Good Hope had been a Portuguese discovery,⁴⁵ by 1600, Dutch and English traders with their well-equipped and heavily-armed ships had gradually come to dominate the European-Asiatic sea trade.

After the fleet returned investments were reimbursed, profits were divided, and the pre-companies, which only existed for the duration of a single voyage, were dissolved until the next fleet departed. The VOC, however, was founded as a permanent venture to put an end to the rivalry between the pre-companies, which had a negative effect on the market. The States of Holland supported and enforced their merger into a unified company under the direction of Johan van Oldenbarnevelt (1547–1619), Land's Advocate of the States of Holland.⁴⁶ It was not until the intervention of Stadtholder Maurice of Orange (1567–1625) that the merchants in the province of Zeeland, fearing a majority of Amsterdam merchants, agreed to join the unified company. The charter (*octrooi*) of the VOC, signed on 20 March 1602, marked the formal creation of the Company, and granted it the monopoly on all commerce in the trade zone (*octrooigebied*) (fig. 7) east of the Cape of Good Hope and west of the Strait of Magellan for 21 years.⁴⁷ Domination of global trade contributed significantly to a 17th-century commercial revolution and cultural flourishing in the Netherlands, known as the Dutch Golden Age. The Peace of Westphalia in 1648 resulted in their mastery over world trade, which brought great wealth to the republic.

4.1 The structure of the VOC⁴⁸

The VOC charter also defined the Company's structure. The former six pre-companies were changed into six chambers: Amsterdam, Zeeland (with its headquarters in Middelburg), Rotterdam, Delft, Hoorn, and Enkhuizen. Of the VOC's 60 directors, 20 came from Amsterdam, 12 from Zeeland, and seven from each from the other chambers. These directors selected the Board of Directors, the *Heeren XVII* (Lords Seventeen). Eight of the Lords Seventeen came from Amsterdam, four from Zeeland, one from Rotterdam, one from Delft, one from Hoorn, and one from Enkhuizen. To address the concerns of the Zeeland chamber, when the seats were allocated, an additional, seventeenth seat was established, which was rotated between representatives of Zeeland, Delft, Rotterdam, Hoorn or Enkhuizen.

The sailing and trading seasons dictated the VOC's entire administrative organisation. On average, the VOC sent 25 ships to Asia annually.⁴⁹ Ships departed from Europe at least twice a year: the so-called Christmas fleet left between December and January, whereas the Easter fleet sailed in early spring.⁵⁰ The Maluku Islands (Moluccas), also known as the Spice Islands, were of particular interest to the

VOC due to the cloves, mace and nutmeg that grew there. The islands were only accessible for six months a year due to the monsoon season. Ships thus had to arrive in Batavia in time to sail the stable monsoon winds between October and March. Journeys from the Spice Islands back to the Netherlands were only possible from April to October.

The VOC ships did not leave China and Japan and sail directly to the Netherlands. With Batavia as the VOC's central trading hub and administrative centre in Asia, the ships usually stopped at this Indonesian settlement before embarking on their homeward journey. The route went via the Cape of Good Hope – a VOC trading post had been established there in 1652 as a midway port – where ships could revictual. Depending on the condition of the ship and the weather, the overall voyage from Batavia back to the Netherlands took at least five months.

The Lords Seventeen convened two or three times a year to decide on the VOC's general policies, such as the allocation of wages for the employees, the repatriation of overseas staff, the number of vessels and equipment to be sent to Asia, and which goods the next return fleet should bring back with them. The first meeting in the annual agenda usually took place after the fleet had arrived back in the Netherlands in late summer or early autumn. In this meeting, the Lords Seventeen decided on auction dates for the six chambers, how much of the wares would be sold, and for what price. Once they had decided on the auction dates, the information could be distributed among trading centres in both the Netherlands as well as the rest of Europe. That Augustus the Strong dispatched Count Lagnasco to The Hague in June 1716 can therefore be seen in the context of the arrival of the VOC fleet, a factor he surely took into consideration when planning his acquisition mission.

The Lords Seventeen also evaluated past sales in the autumn meeting and drew up a provisional list of products they wanted the various VOC factories (trading posts) in Asia to provide. The second meeting in the annual agenda was held in spring, usually in February or March. Again, dates for the spring auctions were decided, but in general, the VOC only offered spices at these. Reports from the VOC's numerous trading posts in Asia were also discussed at the spring meeting; replies were drafted in the third meeting in July or August.

The heart of the VOC's trading network in Asia was Batavia, today's Jakarta, on the island of Java. In 1624, the VOC was additionally granted permission to build a trading post on Formosa (today's Taiwan), which was key to the Company's trade with China. Another important factory was Deshima, an artificial island in Nagasaki Bay in Japan. The VOC was forced to move there from Hirado in 1639, and from then on, the island was the only place where Japanese and Westerners could interact until the middle of the 19th century.

While the VOC held the monopoly on porcelain imports to the Netherlands, and although porcelain was a popular product in Europe in the 17th and 18th centuries, ceramic wares were by no means a priority for the Company. Its main products included tea, metalwork, ivory, and spices like cinnamon, pepper and nutmeg. From the mid-17th century onwards, textiles such as silk from China or high-quality cottons (chintzes) from India formed a significant share of import wares. However, luxury items such as textiles and porcelain only made up a small part of the overall supply, and the VOC was only interested in a narrow spectrum of the very broad and diverse palette of wares on offer in Asia.⁵¹

4.2 Chinese and Japanese porcelain shipped by the VOC

The trade in Chinese porcelain began with the Portuguese in the middle of the 16th century and was continued by the Dutch from the early 17th century. After the VOC built the Fort Zeelandia settlement in Formosa in 1624, the Company was able to trade directly with the Chinese Empire. Before this, Chinese porcelain had been acquired from traders in Batavia. Nevertheless, Formosa was not part of the Chinese Empire yet, and shipments from China were heavily regulated and controlled by Chinese officials.

The export of porcelain from China to Europe did not start until around ten years after the Dutch had settled on Formosa.⁵² In 1634, the VOC governor of Fort Zeelandia, Hans Putmans (d. 1654), reported to the Batavian headquarters that the Chinese had brought a "good lot of porcelain".⁵³ Porcelain shipped at this time was decorated only in underglaze blue and mostly displayed motifs that were considered "Chinese" or "exotic", whereas the shapes were often modelled after European wooden examples brought to Asia by the Dutch. These objects catered to the European demand for tableware's, especially items that catered to the new fashion of drinking tea, coffee and chocolate.

However, at first the Dutch trade in Chinese porcelain was short-lived. The fall of the Ming dynasty in 1644 and the problems in logistics and production that befell China's porcelain capital Jingdezhen in the early Qing dynasty (1644–1911) resulted in a drastic decline in the Chinese supply of export porcelain. In 1662, the Dutch were expelled from Formosa, after the Ming loyalist Zheng Chenggong (Coxinga, 1624–1662) seized the island. Trade with mainland China was greatly restricted, with new policies that were not beneficial to the Dutch. In addition, the Chinese junk trade in porcelain with Batavia, on which the Dutch had heavily relied, ceased entirely.⁵⁴ The VOC had to look for other suppliers to satisfy the demand for porcelain on both the European as well as the Asian markets, so they turned their attention to Japan.⁵⁵

The Dutch must have realised as early as 1645 that they had to find another supply of porcelain, or otherwise an important source of income would be lost. They started exporting Japanese porcelain in 1657, when Zacharias Wagenaer (or Wagner, 1614–1668), chief trader (*opperhoofd*) in Deshima 1656–1657, sent a shipment of samples to the Netherlands.⁵⁶ The first pieces sent from Japan arrived in Holland in July 1658, and apparently did so well at auction that the Lords Seventeen issued instructions to have more wares brought back home.⁵⁷ In the following years, porcelain was ordered regularly, but the VOC knew only too well that they were paying steep prices for the Japanese products. The quality was not always up to the standards expected by the Dutch, and the supply was irregular. It is therefore understandable that as soon as Chinese porcelain became available again after 1683, the VOC stopped buying Japanese wares for the Netherlands, although private trade by VOC personnel continued. When Madame St. Martin (n.d.), the asiatica dealer to Count Lagnasco, reported in July 1717 that she had travelled to Amsterdam to purchase porcelain after “the ships have arrived from India”⁵⁸ (see chapter 8), it can be assumed that those cargoes only contained Chinese porcelain. Likewise, if Lagnasco bought any Japanese porcelain during his stay in the Netherlands, it must have arrived in Europe earlier than 1680 or as part of private trade. The acquisition lists, however, provide no reliable information about the porcelain’s provenance: which country it came from, whether it was newly imported, or if it had been in another collection before.

Jingdezhen had already resumed porcelain production before the political situation in China stabilised in 1683, which enabled the Dutch to recommence their trade with China. In 1692, however, the VOC decided to give up this direct trade between China and Batavia, leaving the transport of Chinese goods entirely to the Chinese junks, which was cheaper and less risky.⁵⁹

In order to protect the Company’s monopoly on Chinese imports, Company officials were permitted to transport only a limited amount of porcelain as personal goods on the homebound vessels. By 1694, the perk of shipping porcelain privately aboard VOC ships had been exploited so much that the Batavian government forbade this private trade in porcelain. The ban was revoked after local dealers protested.⁶⁰ Still, official porcelain trade by the VOC was suspended from 1694 to 1729, and the Company “[...]” entirely abandoned (or was forced to abandon) its position as supplier of porcelain to the Netherlands, leaving it to others to fill the gap for nearly thirty years”.⁶¹ As the VOC was a chartered company, investors could order products that the VOC would buy and transport on their behalf. The Lords Seventeen engaged in private trade themselves, including in ceramic wares, a detail that is also mentioned in the letters of Madame St. Martin after the fleet’s arrival in Holland in July 1717.⁶² Therefore Lagnasco

had been buying porcelain for Augustus the Strong at a time when only private traders were bringing porcelain to the Netherlands on VOC ships. These private enterprises complicate tracking such shipments today, as private consignments were not registered in the VOC's records. For example, the Nagasaki customs authorities recorded 181,926 pieces of porcelain exported in 1712, whereas the VOC company records do not mention a single porcelain object being shipped that year.⁶³

4.3 From ship to market: The VOC and asiatica dealers in the Netherlands

Professional trade in East Asian goods in Amsterdam and The Hague probably started with the onset of Dutch-Asian trade at the end of the 16th century, although not all dealers necessarily had their own shop. Moreover, a distinction must be made between those traders who dealt in East Asian wares in general, and those specialising in porcelain. The latter were operating in Amsterdam from at least 1625, although the term "porcelain" seems to have been deliberately applied to all kinds of ceramics, including earthenware and Delftware.⁶⁴ In Amsterdam, the highest concentration of shops trading in exotic wares from the Dutch trade zones in East Asia was on the Warmoesstraat and the Pijlsteeg, close to the Oost-Indisch Huis, the headquarters of the Amsterdam VOC chamber.

There were multiple ways that a dealer in the Netherlands could acquire porcelain in the early 18th century. After the VOC ships had docked in Holland, the cargo was unloaded and could be inspected by interested buyers at the Company's warehouse in Amsterdam.⁶⁵ The freight was usually sold at auctions, which were announced in catalogues and newspapers circulating in the cities. These were also of interest to Augustus the Strong: "Regarding the sales in Delft which started on the 6th of this month according to the *gazette flammande* you sent me, I wish I had been informed in time about this sale", the king wrote to Count Lagnasco in July 1716, and demanded to "at least see a catalogue of the results".⁶⁶ It is unknown which newspaper he is referring to, but it can be concluded from this remark that the auction results were published after the sales.

No VOC auction lists or catalogues from the early 18th century are known to exist, but the arrival dates of the ships and details of the cargoes they were carrying were announced in contemporary newspapers. For example, the *Leydse Woensdagse Courant* of 5 November 1727 reported the arrival of a fleet with a cargo consisting of "[...] one million pounds of tea, 12 thousand bales [of] silk fabrics, a large quantity [of] calico wares, silk, medicines, porcelain etc., which is estimated at seven million guilders".⁶⁷ The return of the VOC ships from Asia was therefore not only of interest to merchants: that the fleet's arrival and the

subsequent potential porcelain sales were publicised in the daily newspapers indicates their appeal to the general public.

In addition to this, estate sales were often announced in the daily press, with detailed lists of the goods on offer. An example is the auction of the possessions of the late porcelain trader Maria Wageveld (n.d.), whose heirs sold “all kinds of curious old and new porcelain, large and small wares”, including “*klapmutsen*, [...] butter dishes, plates, saucers, bottles, [...] coffee- and teawares [...]”.⁶⁸ Private sales were also regularly advertised in the newspapers, such as the announcement in April 1718 of the sale of a “large quantity of very old Kraak porcelain”.⁶⁹

Asiatica dealers would also buy directly from crewmembers who conducted private trade in porcelain. Although the VOC had relinquished the porcelain trade by 1694, leaving it in private hands, the Company still monitored those who imported porcelain privately. “[...] The general who arrived with the last fleet has not received his wares yet; the lords of the Company cause him and others a lot of trouble. I will be notified when they have been received”, wrote asiatica dealer Madame St. Martin to Count Lagnasco in September 1717, more than a month after the fleet had arrived in Texel (see chapter 8).⁷⁰ It is obvious that the merchants did not solely rely on the imports brought to the Netherlands by the VOC, but that the porcelain was supplied by a broad range of very different sources in the trading centres of Amsterdam and The Hague.