

## 7. First acquisition 1716–1717: Egidius van den Bempden

Shortly after his arrival in The Hague in June 1716, Lagnasco contacted his Dutch correspondent Egidius van den Bempden, a wholesaler in Amsterdam with strong ties to the VOC. How exactly the contact with Van den Bempden was established remains unclear, but the Dutchman's duties encompassed several tasks, amongst others the payment of those merchants from whom Lagnasco bought porcelain. In a letter to Lagnasco dated 2 October 1716, Van den Bempden states that he had "received orders from Monsieur Steinh[ä]user to accept the things you buy, and to pay the dealers the value of their goods that you have bought from them. I do not doubt that this is also the most convenient method for you".<sup>116</sup>

The financial aspects of the porcelain deals make up a good portion of the letters, creating the impression that the payment modalities were rather laborious. All in all, Van den Bempden dealt with at least eight different dealers in The Hague and Amsterdam.<sup>117</sup> Not only did he have to ensure that they were paid the correct amounts, but he also had to obtain a receipt from each of them, which were sent to Chamberlain Steinhäuser, who submitted it to Augustus the Strong. Only after the king had authorised the payment from his personal account could Van den Bempden obtain and pay the agreed amounts. Exchange rates and fees between the various Saxon (ecus courants) currencies and Dutch guilders had to be taken into account, as did the mandatory payment through bills of exchange if the amount exceeded 600 guilders. For his work, Van den Bempden was paid a commission of 1% (360 guilders), on the overall cost of the purchases.<sup>118</sup>

As already stated in chapter 6.1, having enough money to hand was a constant problem, and payments were delayed occasionally due to the king's lack of instructions, as Van den Bempden confirms in a letter to Lagnasco on 23 November 1716:

You see [from the attached document from Chamberlain Steinhäuser] why he has not yet ordered me to pay you for the purchases you made for His Majesty the King of Poland [...]. Monsieur Steinh[ä]user told me that he cannot pay without being so instructed by His Majesty, as this would contravene His Majesty's express command.<sup>119</sup>

Some prices exceeded the allocated budget, making it necessary for Van den Bempden or Lagnasco to pay the difference out of their own pocket, in the hope that the king would reimburse them later. Considering the high demand for porcelain and the steep competition among buyers to acquire the most coveted objects, Lagnasco repeatedly had to pass on certain goods when he could not borrow the money.<sup>120</sup>

### 7.1 Porcelain acquisitions via Van den Bempden

A number of the specifications dated between October 1716 and November 1717 that frequently accompanied Lagnasco's letters provide detailed lists of which and how many items were bought, how much was paid to each dealer, and also suggest a use for the respective items. An extensive "general specification of acquisitions bought in Holland by the Count of Lagnasco for His Majesty"<sup>121</sup> lists lacquer cabinets, textiles, screens, and prints, in addition to 819 porcelain objects. The specification includes acquisition dates, dealer's names, prices, and overall quantities. Among the objects are six table services that differ in size and decoration. Evidence of a systematic approach to the search for and acquisition of the objects based on function and decoration, can be found in the numerous side notes in this specification, which point out which items are interchangeable or can serve dual purposes. In this way, the writer suggests that "3 large vases with covers" and "2 large basins with 2 jugs" could be used to "decorate a room or a gallery", and that the same objects could also be used in the "buffet of the 4<sup>th</sup> service",<sup>122</sup> which is described as being "old and very rich Japan".<sup>123</sup> Likewise, 23 plates would be, according to the author, ideal for "ornamentation around a fireplace, or as a frame for a mirror".<sup>124</sup>

The specification details the prices of all purchases, which total 38,220 guilders. Although no dimensions of particular pieces are provided, the prices give us an idea of the value of some objects. Garnitures – sets of vases with matching decorations usually made to embellish a room – and furniture seem to have been the most expensive. For example, the general specification states that on 20 October 1716, 24 porcelain urns and garniture vases were bought for 7639 guilders.<sup>125</sup> In comparison, the same document declares that the merchant Abraham Thiens (n.d.) delivered 409 porcelain objects,<sup>126</sup> as well as

12 lacquer works and three garments, for which he received only 6024 guilders. The discrepancies in quantity and price are obvious and highlight the fact that garnitures seemed to have been the costlier items, not only due to their size, but probably also because of their rarity and luxurious decoration.

The general specification lists at least 819 porcelain objects, of which 47 pieces are described as belonging to eleven garnitures comprising three or five vases each. Additionally, 29 “vases”, “urns”, or “flower pots” are mentioned, some with prices indicating that they were of considerable value. All in all, only 80 porcelain items could be interpreted as being the large, expensive, representative items particularly favoured by European monarchs. The rest of the purchases were smaller items – plates, bowls; containers for the consumption or storage of liquids such as cups, saucers, teapots and bottles; tablewares, and utensils like cruet sets, candleholders, sugar casters, compote holders and knives. Thus, roughly 90% of the overall purchases consisted of small items that were easier to stack, store and transport.

After finalising the purchases, Van den Bempden organised the packing and shipping of the royal acquisitions. Apparently, business was concluded as early as January 1717, but the purchases were kept at Van den Bempden’s warehouse until March 1717, when they were packed in 70 crates and barrels.<sup>127</sup> The reason for the delay is explained in a letter from Lagnasco in which he expresses his concerns about sending the goods to Dresden by ship, which proved to be quite risky not only because the Swedes were blocking access to the Elbe River, but also because winter made transport to Dresden difficult.<sup>128</sup>