

## 12. Augustus the Strong's personal purchase plans

As someone who collected porcelain with a passion, Augustus the Strong will undoubtedly have been reasonably well informed about the quality and prices of East Asian wares. The 18th-century classification of East Asian wares as “Japanese” or “Chinese” is confusing, as it did not follow any rules, and there is no apparent reason why some objects were subsumed under “Japanese” or “Chinese”, other than their appearance and colour.

Although Augustus the Strong sent letters to Lagnasco in which he stipulated the information he required, there are no distinct statements about his preferred decorations, colours, sizes or shapes of porcelain. However, the existing sources might lend themselves to the interpretation that Augustus was particularly interested in the largest, most exclusive and rarest pieces. This was not limited to porcelain, but encompassed other products and materials, and even wild animals, as can be inferred from several remarks in his letters. An undated specification sent with a letter in 1716<sup>200</sup> lists a number of exotic birds that were available in Amsterdam at the time, along with their descriptions and prices.

When it came to porcelain, Augustus the Strong demanded detailed descriptions of the available wares. In 1716, the king asked Lagnasco to provide more specifics about the porcelain available in Holland: “You also tell me about some porcelain services that are being sold, but I would like to know whether these are table services or coffee services, of how many [pieces] they consist, their price, and if it is porcelain from Japan or China”.<sup>201</sup> It is not clear whether Augustus the Strong referred to those countries as the actual places of production. Because porcelain was categorised according to its colouring when inventorising the Dutch Palace five years later (see chapter 10), it seems more likely that by “Japan or China”, he was referring to the colour palette of the objects, and not so much to a geographic location.

Augustus the Strong's letters also reveal the king's intentions to acquire rare and exclusive porcelain elsewhere than the Netherlands. These were quite fantastic, and his gradual abandoning of his original plans reveal the limitations that even a king had to face when dealing with the VOC. In November 1716, Augustus the Strong ordered Lagnasco to explore the possibility of him buying a ship and sending it to Asia along with the VOC's fleet:

Inform yourself if there is not a way to find a ship in Holland that I could buy, which I could equip, and that could join the Company's fleet when it departs. The ship would sail under the Company's flag, and there would be no damage to its trade as it would only be making special acquisitions for me.<sup>202</sup>

One can imagine that Augustus' ideas raised a few eyebrows at the VOC, and it is no wonder that Lagnasco replied with an unequivocal rebuttal: "This is absolutely unfeasible and a prerogative that is not even granted to any subject of the [Dutch] Republic due to the great impact it has on commerce".<sup>203</sup> The Company, he writes, would permit an envoy to travel with them to Asia, and offered to buy and deliver goods on the king's behalf, as long as it did not interfere with the regular trade.<sup>204</sup> Augustus agreed to the terms:

I therefore take you up on your other [suggestion] which is to send a man on the Company's ships, whom I will put in charge of my commissions. One can be assured that I will not give him any [assignments] that will affect the Company's trade.<sup>205</sup>

Lagnasco dutifully reported back that he was doing his best to organise this undertaking, but advised the king to send at least four people in case one of them fell ill or died. He also stressed the importance of providing them with "drawings of those pieces that Your Majesty wishes to have", and of having among them a person who could "[...] prepare models of the necessary pieces on location [...], because otherwise the Indians there might not be successful".<sup>206</sup> With this statement, he was probably taking into account Van den Bempden's statement about the Asian potters' unwillingness to produce objects for foreign buyers according to European specifications:

[T]hey [the VOC] have tried unsuccessfully several times to send designs to have [porcelain objects] produced, because the Chinese and Japanese are of the attitude that they do not want to follow the designs that we sent them for the porcelain. There were also occasions

when we sent them porcelain shards for them to reproduce, but they did not make it as beautifully [...].<sup>207</sup>

After some discussion about the issues and the hasty preparations required to send four people at such short notice, Augustus agreed to the easiest solution, namely, providing the VOC with sketches and models, and having the desired objects shipped by them. "Mr. Hooft,<sup>208</sup> mayor of this city [Amsterdam] and one of the directors of the Company assured me that they would do everything to make arrangements and to transport [the pieces] at their risk", Lagnasco wrote in February 1717, "and because they are honoured to serve Your Majesty, they do not want to make any profit, but only [require] what the purchases will cost at the source as well as the transport costs".<sup>209</sup>

This generous offer to sell the pieces to Augustus the Strong without any surcharge was to his liking: "I find the conditions under which they may take care of these commissions to be very honest. As soon as I return to Saxony, I will start working on designs and a specification of things I would like to have".<sup>210</sup> Unfortunately, no designs by the king or a specification, which could have given a better idea about what porcelain the king was specifically interested in, are known. It is not even clear whether the plan to commission the VOC was realised, as it is never mentioned again in the sources. However, it must be kept in mind that Lagnasco left Amsterdam shortly after the plans were discussed, and that after the first acquisition was secured, Van den Bempden – who was involved in the VOC's business ventures – ceased to be the contact person in Amsterdam.