

Blue and white: Willem Kalf and the 17th-century fascination with Chinese porcelain

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Willem Kalf

*Still Life with a Chinese Bowl, Nautilus Cup
and Other Objects, 1662*

(detail)

[\[+ info\]](#)



fig. 1

View of room 21 of the Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza

If you pay a visit to the Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza's collection of Old Master paintings and stop to examine some of its still lifes, your attention will probably be powerfully drawn to a particular feature: pieces of exquisite porcelainware from the Far East enjoy pride of place among flowers, fruits, shells and other sumptuous objects in the oil paintings of Jacques Linard, Ambrosius Bosschaert I, Balthasar van der Ast, Jan Jansz. van de Velde III and, in particular, Willem Kalf [fig. 1].

It is no coincidence that the emergence of still life as a genre in its own right came at a time when large numbers of rare and costly items, mainly brought by the Dutch East India Company, were arriving in Europe. Painters, besides showing off their technical skills, reflected and intensified viewers' desire to own such pieces.

Out of all the imports that found their way into Europe, Chinese porcelain, exotic and delicate, ornamental yet functional, had the greatest impact on painting. It was depicted not only in sumptuous still-life scenes or *pronkstilleven* but also inside dressers and accompanying portraits and genre scenes, arranged on shelves and mantelpieces; it was even considered worthy of being carried by biblical and mythological characters in certain representations.

fig. 2

Willem Kalf

*Still Life with a Chinese Bowl,
Nautilus Cup and Other Objects*, 1662
Oil on canvas, 79.4 × 67.3 cm
Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza,
Madrid, 203 (1962.10)



***Still Life with a Chinese Bowl, Nautilus Cup and Other Objects*, 1662**

No other painter depicted Chinese porcelain with such dedication as Kalf. His works – particularly those of his Amsterdam period, to which the three paintings in the Thyssen-Bornemisza collection belong – reflect his firsthand knowledge of these imports, which he carefully arranged, using extraordinary light effects to portray them emerging from dark interiors. Possibly the most enthralling of his porcelain paintings is *Still Life with a Chinese Bowl, Nautilus Cup and Other Objects* (1662) [fig. 2], which was described in 1943 as the best still-life painting in the world¹ by Theodore W. H. Ward, who had gifted a large group of Dutch and Flemish still lifes to the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford. Ward had wanted to add this canvas by Kalf to his own collection, but in 1962 it joined that of Baron Thyssen-Bornemisza in Lugano.

1

Quoted in Fred G. Meijer, *The Collection of Dutch and Flemish Still-life Paintings Bequeathed by Daisy Linda Ward* [exh. cat.], Zwolle, Waanders, 2003, 16.

fig. 3

Paulus Willemsz. van Vianen
Tray with *Diana and Actaeon*, 1613
 Silver, 50 × 40 × 6 cm
 Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam,
 BK-16089-A



The canvas attests to the fascination felt not only by Kalf but also by 17th-century Holland for these sumptuous objects in circulation at the time. Arranged on a marble table and a tapestry from Herat (now Afghanistan) are a *façon de Venise* glass with red wine, a nautilus cup with silver gilt mounts, a Römer glass with white wine and a chased silver tray. According to Uta Neidhart, the tray is crafted in the style of Paulus van Vianen [fig. 3], a Dutch silversmith, medallist and painter who worked at the court of Emperor Rudolf II.² On it are a knife with a polished agate handle and a delicate lidded Chinese bowl with a silver spoon with lobed decoration inside. An orange, a lemon with its peel hanging in a spiral revealing its shiny pulp, and, at the corner of the table, some peach stones alluding to the passage of time or vanitas complete the array. Further into the background it is possible to make out, albeit with great difficulty, what appears to be a glass dish on a small box and another glass, all of which may be part of a pentimento.³

2

Uta Neidhardt, 'Ein Prunkstilleben von Willem Kalf als Leihgabe in der Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister', *Dresdener Kunstblätter*, Dresden, 1994, 1–3.

3

Sam Segal and Ubaldo Sedano, *Willem Kalf: Original y copia* (Contextos de la colección permanente no. 5) [exh. cat.], Madrid, Fundación Colección Thyssen-Bornemisza, 1998, 50.

4

Stadsarchief Amsterdam, notary H. Schaeff, notarial archives 422, 26/07/1653, 213ff; The Montias Database of 17th-Century Dutch Art Inventories, inv. 1156.

Kalf's height of development as an artist, when he began depicting Chinese porcelain in his works together with other select pieces which he modified and reorganised to create various settings, coincided with his return to the Netherlands following a short but fruitful sojourn in the French capital. It is tempting to establish a connection between the change in his still lifes and his stay at the home of Johannes le Thor in 1653. Le Thor was a jeweller, merchant and director of the Dutch West India Company in Amsterdam, as well as the owner of a considerable number of paintings, silverware, Turkish rugs, Asian porcelain and other curiosities.⁴

fig. 4
Jan Jacobsz. van Royesteyn
Nautilus Cup, 1596
Toledo Museum of Art, Ohio,
1973.53

↓



fig. 5
Detail of the Chinese bowl

It seems unlikely that Kalf would have owned such valuable articles as there is very little trace of him in archives or notarial deeds of the time and nor is his last will and testament known. Like many other painters, he must have turned to collectors to depict objects that did not belong to him. Various artists may even have had access to the same piece, or at least to others that were extraordinarily similar. The nautilus cup in this painting is also featured in a still life by Pieter Claesz. dated 1636, albeit with certain alterations to the design. Although there are similar surviving examples, such as one in the Toledo Museum of Art in Ohio [fig. 4], none features the figure about to be devoured by the sea monster, which is depicted by both artists. The Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza also owns two nautilus cups, which are on view in room 21 [fig. 1].

Kalf's still life is arranged in a triangular layout in which the objects are larger the closer they are to the centre, rivalling with the Chinese bowl in beauty and importance [fig. 5]. As Lucius Grisebach explained in detail, this blue and white porcelain object appeared recurrently in the output of the artist, who portrayed it from different angles and with minor variations on at least five occasions.⁵ It is decorated with pairs

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See Lucius Grisebach, *Willem Kalf, 1619–1693*, Berlin, Gebr. Mann, 1974, 265–69, figs. 124, 125, 126, 150 and 151.



fig. 6

Willem Kalf**Still Life with Chinese Bowl, 1662****Oil on canvas, 67 × 54.7 cm****Staatliche Museen zu Berlin,****Gemäldegalerie, 948F**

of figures in relief representing the Eight Immortals of Taoism clad in bright gold and red outfits. The lid is adorned with flowers and stylised leaves and is topped with the relief of a Fu lion, an auspicious and apotropaic element. The object, characteristic of the end of the Ming dynasty or the transition to the Qing dynasty (1620–1683), has a rather unusual shape for Chinese porcelain. It is generally termed ‘sugar bowl’, a use suggested by the spoon accompanying it and further borne out by the records of the East India Company, which specifically refer to the export of ‘porcelain pots with sugar’.⁶ Nevertheless, some historians do not believe it was used for this purpose given that sugar was not yet refined then. The catalogue of the auction where this picture was sold in 1778 describes the piece as a punch bowl.⁷

There is a similar painting on canvas dated the same year in the Gemäldegalerie in Berlin [fig. 6]. In it Kalf reproduces some of the exquisite items, among them the Chinese ‘sugar bowl’. This time he depicts them with slight variations and with the lid in a different position, providing the spectator with a view of a different pair of Immortals. These eye-catching figures are taken from one of the most popular Chinese legends, that of the Eight Immortals or *Pa Hsien*, whose main characters achieve immortality through alchemy. The two who occupy a prominent place in the paintings are Lü Dongbin and He Xiangnu (right to left, respectively). The former is the patriarch of the *Pa Hsien*, portrayed as an old man attired in the dress of the academic class whose emblem is a double-bladed sword that can be carried in the hand or hung down the back. He Xiangnu is the only woman in the group. She usually wears elaborate tunics and carries a bamboo spoon, which is sometimes replaced by a long-stemmed lotus flower or fly swatter.

6

Letter to Holland, dated 4 January 1636, from Batavia. Quoted from Tijs Volker, *Porcelain and the Dutch East India Company, as Recorded in the Dagb Registers of Batavia Castle, Those of Hirado and Deshima and other Contemporary Papers, 1602–1682*, Mededelingen van het Rijksmuseum voor Volkenkunde series, Leiden, no. 11, Ministerie van Onderwijs, Kunsten in Wetenschappen, Leiden, E. J. Brill, 1954, 39.

7

Sold, lot 43, Amsterdam, 16 March 1778.



fig. 7

Anonymous
Bowl with Landscapes and the Eight Immortals, about 1620–40
 Porcelain, 16.5 × 14.5 × 9.8 cm
 Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam,
 AK-MAK-563

On the trail of the Chinese 'sugar bowl'

Tracing the objects Kalf used in his compositions is by no means an easy task. Not only has it not been possible to link most of the pieces to their 17th-century owners, but the artist constantly introduced variations in their design. That is why, despite their undeniable resemblance to some real-life objects, possible identifications are merely hypothetical.

The 1654 to 1668 inventory of the collections of Amalia of Solms-Braunfels, the wife of Frederick Henry of Nassau, Prince of Orange, listed 'two little round pots with lids and figures on them',⁸ though not specifying their location. The members of the House of Orange underscored their role as rulers of the United Provinces through the visible consumption and display of overseas treasures in the Huis ten Bosch palace in The Hague. Inside it they created Chinese porcelain rooms designed specifically to exhibit these pieces.

Two other bowls that were presumably similar to the one depicted by Kalf are now housed in the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam and in the Peabody Essex Museum in Salem.

The piece in the Rijksmuseum [fig. 7], which is dated to around 1620–40, comes from Jingdezhen (in southeast China) and is painted in underglaze blue. The body displays a continuous landscape from which emerge four pairs of Immortals in relief with their attributes, and running around the edge of the bowl are a few floral volutes. The lid is decorated with a scene with two men playing 'go'⁹ and a third accompanied by his servant. The knob of the lid ends in the shape of a Fu lion whose paw leans on a post with an openwork sphere containing a marble. It belonged to Herman Karel Westendorp (1868–1941), a scholar of Asian art, collector of porcelain – though chiefly Japanese – and president of the Royal Asian Art Society of the Netherlands.

⁸

Quoted in William R. Sargent,
Treasures of Chinese Export Ceramics
 from the Peabody Essex Museum,
 New Haven, Yale University Press,
 2012, 45.

⁹

'Go' originated in China at least 2,500 years ago and is believed to be the oldest board game still played.

fig. 8

Anonymous

Lidded bowl, about 1625–50

Porcelain, 15.2 × 14 cm

Peabody Essex Museum, Salem,

AE85967.AB



fig. 9

**Detail of the pair of Immortals
in the Peabody Essex Museum**

fig. 10

**Detail of the pair of Immortals
portrayed by Kalf**

There is a practically identical object, slightly smaller and with a few faded motifs, in the Peabody Essex Museum [figs. 8, 9], an institution that houses one of the most comprehensive collections of Asian export ware. The red, black and gold pigments that are still visible match the shades used by Kalf in his still life [fig. 10]. This surviving example shows that pieces of this kind were decorated without being fired – that is, the figures were cold-painted, a technique that did not achieve lasting colours.

fig. 11

Francisco de Zurbarán
Detail from *Saint Hugo in the Refectory*,
about 1655
Oil on canvas, 262 × 307 cm
Monasterio de la Cartuja de Santa María
de las Cuevas, Seville



The long journey

Until the 17th century, Chinese porcelain items were exceptional, rare and costly objects and any found in Europe were in royal collections. In the 16th century Portugal controlled the maritime trade in spices and Asian luxury goods. In 1580 Philip II took over this monopoly and evidently amassed the largest collection of Chinese porcelain in Europe. However, objects of this kind are considerably less present in Spanish paintings than in Flemish, Dutch and Italian pictures of the 16th and 17th centuries,¹⁰ though we find them in unusual contexts such as on the Carthusian monks' table alongside Talavera earthenware in Francisco de Zurbarán's *Saint Hugo in the Refectory* [fig. 11].

¹⁰

On Chinese porcelain in 16th- and 17th-century Spain, see Cinta Krahe, *Chinese Porcelain in Habsburg Spain*, Madrid, Centro de Estudios Europa Hispánica, 2016.

After coming by Portuguese nautical charts, various Dutch – and also English – companies soon competed with Spanish undertakings, setting out on their own expeditions to Asia. Their intention was initially to take over the spice market, though they ended up dealing in a wide range of goods such as porcelain, lacquer and textiles. One of the first pieces of news the Dutch received about the porcelain made in China came from the *Itinerario* of Jan Huygen van Linschoten (1596):

To tell of the porcelains made there, is not to be believed, and those that are exported yearly to India, Portugal and Nova Hispania and elsewhere! But the finest are not allowed outside the country on penalty of corporal punishment, but serve solely for the Lords and Governors of the country and are so exquisite that no crystalline glass is to be compared with them.¹¹

But substantial amounts of porcelain were not received in Holland until 1602, when the Portuguese carrack *San Jago* was captured off the island of Saint Helena and its cargo was confiscated and subsequently auctioned at Middelburg. The following year the Dutch seized another colossal vessel in the Straits of Malacca, the *Santa Catarina*, whose cargo included 'an untold mass of porcelain of all kinds'.¹² Its sale at auction in Amsterdam generated huge earnings and attracted buyers from all over Western Europe, among them Henry IV of France and James I of England.

In 1602 the Dutch companies that traded with Asia merged into an extremely powerful shipping company, the Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie (Dutch East India Company or VOC). Its headquarters were in Batavia (Jakarta, Indonesia), as not all wares were sent to Amsterdam but most of its ships called at various Asian ports. Unlike the Portuguese and Spanish, the Dutch did not gain access to southern China until they managed to establish themselves in Formosa (present-day Taiwan) in 1615. Bearing in mind that the country never traded directly with China, it is surprising, to say the least, that such a huge number of luxury items from China found their way into the Netherlands. In the 17th century most porcelain came from either Formosa or from Portuguese and Chinese carracks that conducted trade in Batavia.

11

Quoted from Julie B. Hochstrasser, *Still Life and Trade in the Dutch Golden Age*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2007, 124.

12

Ibid., 126.



fig. 12

Willem Kalf***Still Life with a Porcelain Bowl
and Nautilus Cup, 1660*****Oil on canvas, 64.1 × 55.9 cm****Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza,
Madrid, 202 (1930.37)**

fig. 13

Jan Jansz. van de Velde III (attributed)***Still Life with Chinese Dish, Rummer,
Knife, Bread and Fruit, about 1650-60*****Oil on canvas, 44.7 × 38.8 cm****Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza,
Madrid, 376 (1930.111)**

The exported pieces – chiefly bowls, cups, plates and *kendis*¹³ – were distinguished by their fineness and panelled decoration with naturalistic motifs and auspicious symbols such as the Eight Immortals of Taoism. This porcelain was mass-produced in Jingdezhen, a city ideally suited to its manufacture, during the reign of Emperor Wanli (1573–1620). It was called *kraakporselein*, as *kraak* was the Dutch term for Portuguese carracks. This was the type of porcelain most commonly portrayed by painters [figs. 12, 13].

During the transition period (1620–1683), porcelain ceased to be produced at the imperial kilns. The loss of the main investor, the empire, inevitably led Chinese potters to seek out new markets, and they continued to manufacture export ware adapted to European tastes. Around 1645, however, political instability in China triggered serious problems with supplies, and production even ground to a halt. It was at this point that Japan began exporting porcelain, and both the objects listed in inventories of the second half of the 1600s and those depicted in paintings might therefore be of the *kraakporselein* type, from the transition period, or Japanese; it is possible they are even copies or imitations.

13

The term derives from the Sanskrit *Kundika*, vessels used to contain water in Buddhist and Hinduist rituals.

Contact with China ended up changing Western tastes, giving rise to a completely new aesthetic in the early 17th century. Europe became inundated with hybrid objects, though they display an exceptional balance between Western and Asian. The records of the VOC attest to a growing desire to adapt the forms of European ceramicware: bowls and candelabra were taken to the country to be copied by Chinese potters, who were asked to produce porcelain with heraldic motifs, views or images based on drawings and prints. On arriving in Europe, many of these pieces were fitted with silver mounts for both aesthetic and functional purposes. Chinese porcelain furthermore had a direct impact on the Dutch ceramic industries, becoming a powerful source of inspiration for the blue and white Delft ware.

Apart from pieces that were commissioned expressly, Chinese porcelain was also imported to be sold by East India merchants and shops in Amsterdam. Establishments of this kind had existed in other parts of Europe since the second half of the 16th century. In Lisbon, for example, there were stores specialising in luxury Asian goods, all in the same street. This also became true of Amsterdam, where at least fourteen shops opened in the Warmoesstraat and Pijlsteeg streets.¹⁴ It is practically impossible to determine the identity of the customers who frequented them, because no accounting records of those shops have been found to date. It would be logical to think that they had a wealthy clientele, though Holland imported such huge quantities of Chinese porcelain that it ended up becoming affordable to the middle class too.

That was how it became possible for a few painters, such as Kalf, to demonstrate the role played by 17th-century Holland as a world power by means of a gesture – or rather a stroke of the brush – as simple as including a piece of Chinese porcelain in their works. ●

14

Jaap van der Veen, 'East Indies shops in Amsterdam', in *Asia in Amsterdam: The Culture of Luxury in the Golden Age* [exh. cat.], New Haven–London, Yale University Press, 2015, 137.