

## EXPEDITION SILK ROAD: ART AND TRADE IN THE DUTCH GOLDEN AGE

By CHAEKI FREYA SYNN\*

During the seventeenth century, Amsterdam experienced unprecedented growth and affluence, and the city developed into the world's staple market playing an indispensable role in Silk Road trade. This era, which coincides with post-reformation Dutch society, also allowed artists to produce art works depicting objects from everyday life, moving away from the earlier religious subject matter. This paper intends to look into seventeenth century Dutch paintings from their social setting, especially focusing on the influence of the Silk Road in the art making process. The paper also looks into the Chinese side of Silk Road interaction and discusses how Chinese porcelain reflects cultural influence from the Dutch. The paper incorporates Silk Road as a methodology to discuss art works departing from earlier practices in art history. This approach allows us to understand art as a product of multi-disciplinary, multi-cultural experience. The methodology invites more discussion on numerous art forms which emerged along the Silk Road trading route to expand and explore the history of East-West cultural exchange.

**Key words:** Silk Road, Art, Trade, Porcelain, Dutch Painting, Landscape, Still Life, Seventeenth Century

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\* CHAEKI FREYA SYNN is an associate professor in the Department of Art at Keimyung University.

## INTRODUCTION

In the academic discipline of art history, research into the art of the Silk Road has remained marginal for numerous reasons. Art history (with its primarily Eurocentric viewpoint) has traditionally been divided into two primary areas of specialization, Western art history and Asian art history. As a cultural activity taking place between the East and the West, the study of the Silk Road fit into neither of the two disciplinary areas. It was viewed as an in-between subject matter leaving the area in an academic blind spot. In addition, the concept of the Silk Road itself has always been a bit of a misnomer. Its geographical boundaries, its historical time frame, and its cultural influence was vast, vague, and always in flux. Such conditions left the study of this cultural activity relatively scarce.

This study intends to reveal the often overlooked significance of the Silk Road in Western art history by particularly drawing attention to seventeenth century Dutch paintings and Chinese porcelain reflecting the cultural influence of the Dutch. During this century, Dutch society experienced unprecedented growth and affluence due to Silk Road trading. The era, coinciding with the post-Reformation, also brought about dramatic changes in the art world. The Protestant Reformation destroyed religious icons and other images and monuments, and medieval churches in Holland were stripped bare of their original decoration. As illustrated in *The Interior of St. Bavo, Haarlem* (Fig. 1), painted by Pieter Saenredam (1597-1665), altarpieces and statuary were removed, and the walls and ceilings were whitewashed. As the Reformation suppressed the creation of religious imagery, it triggered new ways of artistic expression in Holland. The new form of art was concerned with the realistic depiction of the world the Dutch people were experiencing at the time.

## THE SILK ROAD IN 17<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY DUTCH PAINTINGS

Former religious images gave way to new art forms, such as landscape paintings depicting actual topographical surroundings, still-life paintings describing actual objects with minute attention to detail, and genre paintings recording unpretentious scenes from daily life. These paintings were often discussed for their perceptual realism and exactitude, and it may also reflect the development of the new world view. As Smith has insightfully noted:

Indifference and constancy arose from the exercise of the reason; the individual must learn to judge things according to their true worth. Self-knowledge, insight into the deceptive essence of the world, and the abandonment of transitory things. To be in the world, but not of the world to learn the meaning of “Vanitas vanitatum et omnia vanitas” was thus the common personal and didactic exhortation. The significance of knowing oneself, of leading a moderate life.<sup>1</sup>

Such a change in thinking, along with the superior prosperity and economic growth, is well reflected in the paintings of the time including those of Vermeer. About a dozen of Vermeer’s paintings include an image of a map hanging on an interior wall. Of the paintings, five illustrate the provinces of the Netherlands including *The Officer and the Laughing Girl* (Fig. 2) and the *Love Letter* (Fig. 3). *Astronomer* shows a scholarly figure touching the celestial globe. Apart from being stimulating compositional features, maps offered a form of conceptual window onto a bigger world separate from the quiet familiarity of the home setting. Alpers, in her seminal study *The Art of Describing*, mentioned the mapping compulsion as a distinctive feature of the visual and scientific culture of the Dutch.<sup>2</sup> Map makers were referred to as “world describers” of the time. Both the Dutch map makers and painters possessed a determination to capture abundant information and understanding of the world on a two dimensional surface.

Following the same line of thought, we can explain the emergence of seascapes and still-life paintings. It is interesting to note that we find many seascape paintings in the interior scenes depicted by artists at this time. Vermeer’s *Love Letter*, Dirck Hals’ *Seated Woman with Letter* (1633) and Hals’ genre scene of *Gentleman Smoking and Playing Backgammon in an Interior* (Fig. 4) all include seascape canvases on the wall of what appears to be a home or a tavern. Israel provides a good explanation of the general reception of such paintings among the common people at the time.

Life in Dutch society was very different [than other parts of seventeenth century Europe], for the Republic was the entrepot of world trade, with evidence of ships and the sea everywhere ... [I]t was a society in which no one could live without continually sensing the interaction of land and sea, town and country, one town with

<sup>1</sup> Pamela Smith, “Science and Taste: Painting, Passions, and the New Philosophy in Seventeenth-Century Leiden,” *Isis -A Journal of History of Science Society*, University of Chicago Press, Vol. 90, No. 3, Sept. 1999, p. 438.

<sup>2</sup> Svetlana Alpers, *The Art of Describing: Dutch Art in the Seventeenth Century*, University of Chicago Press, 1983.

the next, soldiers and seamen with burghers, the exotic with the mundane, and the foreign with the local. Art, by encompassing all of this, and reflecting it on everyone's walls, and in every tavern and public building, made explicit, and heightened awareness of, what everyone saw and felt.<sup>3</sup>

Such a strong international mindset was a natural response to the global trade the Dutch people enjoyed during the Golden Age. The trade brought home many exquisite objects including the oriental rugs we often find in Vermeer's paintings. Walter Denny notes two specific paintings featuring oriental carpets: While *A Maid Asleep* (Fig. 5) portrays two dissimilar seventeenth century Turkish Anatolian mats, *Young Woman with a Water Pitcher* displays a densely textured carpet of Persian origin.<sup>4</sup> The continued reappearance of oriental carpets in Dutch interior paintings of the time allows us to speculate over whether they were a fundamental part of the Dutch lifestyle. However, we find Vermeer himself utilizing at least one of the carpets in more than two paintings. Since oriental carpets were one of the most outlandish commodities at the time, it is more likely that the painters provided customers with the carpets they owned for image-making purposes.

If carpets in interior paintings reflect the trading items of the time, it is logical to look more deeply into Dutch still life paintings. Still-life motifs occur fairly frequently from the Middle Ages, but several objects portrayed in the early artworks are figurative of some superior religious meanings. For instance, the lily symbolizes the purity of the Virgin Mary, while a skull or a watch signifies mortality. Food decays and flowers wither while silver is useless to the soul. As we can see from the vanitas imagery, many items may function as a visual reminder of worldly vanity. Seventeenth century Dutch still life paintings may not be completely devoid of such religious connotation or moralizing meaning, but they nevertheless had literal significance celebrating the material pleasures of luxury items as they were. Still life paintings indeed were a convenient opportunity to show off the manual dexterity of the master painter by realistically depicting diverse textures and light effects. Initially, the items illustrated were almost always ordinary and mundane, as we can see from Pieter Claesz's minimal depiction of a piece of meat (Fig. 6). Nonetheless, around mid-century, when

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<sup>3</sup> Jonathon Israel, *The Dutch Republic: Its Rise, Greatness and Fall, 1477-1806*, New York: Oxford University Press 1998. p. 563.

<sup>4</sup> Walter Denny, "Islamic Carpets in European Paintings." *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History*. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000.

Amsterdam became the sociopolitical and economic capital of the Netherlands, a category called “ostentatious still life” emerged. This portrayed affluent and exotic items and was advanced as a subgenre of still life. Willem Kalf (Fig. 7-1) and Van Beyeren became prominent artists in the field. The paintings highlight trade in fruits and luxurious items such as Venetian glassware, Chinese pottery (Fig. 7-2)<sup>5</sup>, and silver-gilt utensils. These imported objects, faithfully documented in the art of the era, show the cosmopolitan trace of luxury in the households of the traders who had wagered their wealth to import them. Besides ceramics, there were satin fabrics, exceptional woods, fine silk, and oriental carpets.

The artwork painting of a turkey pie and oysters by the Dutch still-life artist Pieter Claesz is a good example of an “ostentatious still life (Fig. 8).” The individual objects placed on the table are literal depictions of seventeenth century trade items. The oysters might have originated in Holland, but olives and lemons must have come from a place of warmer weather. Other “fruits” of Dutch achievement in trade are the Chinese ceramic Kraak and the Persian table weave. The rolled printed paper from the almanac is used to wrap pepper and salt, which were expensive commodities at the time.<sup>6</sup> The pastry which has been broken open with a silver spoon may have contained expensive overseas spices. Soaring above the rest of the items is the extraordinary turkey dish, a huge meat pie decorated with the head of a wild turkey from the New World. The meaning of the turkey and the opulent nautilus wineglass would have been obvious to contemporary Dutchmen. In 1626, only a year before the painting was completed, Peter Minuit bought Manhattan, and New Amsterdam rose across the Atlantic. The overall meaning of the painting is clear: it is a celebration of seventeenth century Dutch internationalism, trade and affluence.

Lastly, I would like to mention the floral still life paintings of the time. At the start of the 1600s, we see the emergence of floral still life with exceedingly sophisticated and accurate representations of flowers. Painters such as Jacob Vosmaer are known for their “bouquet” images (Fig. 9). Just like the ostentatious still life, we find such bouquets showing rare flowers from diverse continents in a single vase. It is more interesting to note how the artist showed all the flowers in a single moment of blooming. It may seem like just a vase of pretty flowers, but it carried a code of power and

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<sup>5</sup> We see the continuous appearance of Kraak porcelain. Kraak ware is almost all painted in the underglazed cobalt blue style that was perfected under the Ming dynasty.

<sup>6</sup> The most important goods of all were spices, which were highly valued by people across Eurasia. These spices were cultivated in Arabia (cinnamon and frankincense), in India (pepper and sugar) and in the islands of Indonesia (nutmeg, mace, and cloves).

wealth as we can see from the earlier still life paintings.

As such, seventeenth century Dutch paintings can be explained as a reflection of Silk Road trade in many aspects. The emergence of seascape paintings, the appearance of map images in art works, genre scenes containing the images of everyday life, still life or flower paintings carefully depicting the highlights of global trade, all are indebted to the Silk Road culture. Not only the emergence of particular genres (such as seascape or still life), but also the strongly realistic character prevalent in the art works can be explained in terms of a more pragmatic world view influenced by the trade and commerce that flourished through the Silk Road. In this sense, the cultural context of the Silk Road can provide a more holistic understanding of the entire artistic phenomenon of the time compared to the limited approaches based on strict formalism or religious iconography.

## **CULTURAL INFLUENCES REFLECTED IN CHINESE PORCELAIN**

Cultural exchange is always a two-way process, and it is necessary to mention the other side of the story to complete the whole picture. In this section, I will draw attention to some individual pieces of Chinese porcelain which testify to the influence of their Dutch counterpart. These are the works of art that lie at the periphery of art historical studies as they belong to neither Western art history nor Chinese art history. For this reason, the research draws information mainly from non-traditional sources including auction house sales records and museum collection lists. The works are small in number, and it is difficult to find individual records pertaining to individual pieces.

One of the first examples is a plate (Fig. 10) bearing the Dutch East India Company's VOC (Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie) logo.<sup>7</sup> The plate is painted in Kraak style in cobalt blue and white, and is estimated to have been made around the 1660s. The work shows that the ceramic artist started to incorporate the special requests of the Dutch buyer and a Dutch symbol is being used to make a unique product. Another plate (Fig. 11), in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, illustrates a storm scene, which is assumed to be the storm which took

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<sup>7</sup> "Plate with Monogram of the Dutch East India Company" *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History*, New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art. Accessed November 5, 2016. <http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/works-of-art/2002.447.40/>

place on October 4, 1690. The plate was made for the Dutch market around 1692, and the plate is known among scholars to be the earliest topical subject dealt with in export porcelain.<sup>8</sup> The scene is depicted in three dimensional space, as opposed to the more two dimensional design of the typical Kraak decoration.

Another collection in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, is a candlestick made of porcelain (Fig. 12).<sup>9</sup> As such utilitarian European candlestick forms were unknown in China at the time, it is speculated that the wooden models were sent to Chinese potters to make the porcelain versions. It is likely the candlestick was made around 1700-1710. Christie's auction house sales catalogue records an image of a Chinese Dutch-decorated "Crucifixion" saucer dish.<sup>10</sup> We also find a similar plate with the Crucifixion image in the collection of the British Museum. The museum records that the saucer was collected by Mr. Andrew Franklin, a career diplomat whose time in China and Taiwan bred a life-long fascination with Chinese art. The saucer was made in China around 1740, probably for the Dutch market. We can confirm that the Chinese artist who made the saucer managed to incorporate Christian iconography to satisfy Mr. Franklin's appetite.

A plate in the collection of The Victoria and Albert Museum is worth mentioning for it is inscribed with the specific names and dates of the owner.<sup>11</sup> The plate is decorated with a Dutch East India Company ship with a Dutch flag waving at the top. The inscription says that the plate was made for Jacob Ryzik, captain of the ship *Vryburg*, in the year 1756. The porcelain is painted in polychrome enamels with gold and demonstrates the highly skilled craftsmanship of the time. It would be the Chinese equivalent of the Dutch seascape painting which we saw earlier in this paper.

A unique punch bowl (Fig. 15) is interesting for it shows the port of Canton with flags from around the world, including Dutch, American, British, and Swedish.<sup>12</sup> The

<sup>8</sup> Le Corbeiller, Clare, & Frelinghuysen, Alice C. (2003). "Chinese Export Porcelain" *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin*. Winter. p. 21. Accessed Sept. 24, 2016. <https://www.metmuseum.org/pubs/bulletins/1/pdf/3269266.pdf.bannered.pdf>

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> Christie's, "A Chinese Dutch-decorated 'Crucifixion' saucer dish" The Decorative Arts Sale, March 22-23, 2011, Amsterdam. Accessed September 5, 2016. (sales catalogue) <http://www.christies.com/lotfinder/Lot/a-chinese-dutch-decorated-crucifixion-saucer-dish-mid-5414450-details.aspx>

<sup>11</sup> Victoria and Albert Museum internet archive. Accessed November 3, 2016. <http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O74921/plate-unknown/>

<sup>12</sup> Fuchs II, Ron (2014). "The Reeves Collection of Ceramics at Washington and Lee University" *Incollect*. Accessed September 20, 2016. <https://www.incollect.com/articles/the-reeves-collection-of-ceramics-at-washington-and-lee-university>

scene depicts trade offices located at Canton harbor. The multi-story buildings are adorned with classical columns and the architectural structure indicates three dimensionality with diagonal lines moving into space. It is known that paintings of similar port views replaced Hong bowls as souvenirs of the Chinese trade<sup>13</sup>. Bowls of similar design are currently in the collection of the US Department of State reception room, as well as at the Metropolitan Museum.

In later years, we find more significant results of cultural exchange. As opposed to typical Chinese paintings using ink on paper, an oil painting created in the mid-1800s has an eye-catching composition reminding us of the earlier Dutch paintings. Dutch painters, such as Jacob van Ruisdael, would fill two thirds of their canvas with sky (Fig. 17), and we see a Chinese painter named Youqua (active 1840-1879) painting a panoramic view of the waterfront at Canton in a similar composition (Fig. 16).<sup>14</sup> Such examples show that not only particular symbols or topical scenes but also certain kinds of aesthetics were also transmitted through the Silk Road. Here the painter, free from any need to satisfy his client, is incorporating foreign aesthetics for his own interest and purpose. The process involved him taking a more active role in cultural translation.

There are numerous examples scattered around museums, private collections and auction houses worldwide showing such cultural influences. These works deserve more scholarly attention as they illustrate the cultural link between East and West. I would like to wrap up the chapter by mentioning a bigger picture that connects the seventeenth century trade to the modern era. The seventeenth century porcelain trade led by the Dutch continued for more than 200 years, and VOC monopolized the tea trade with Japan until 1854. The Japanese traders would wrap porcelain with tea wrapped in paper to prevent breakage. Japanese woodblock prints used to decorate the wrapping papers caught the eyes of many artists, and among them were Vincent van Gogh. We can see that van Gogh made a copy of Utagawa Hiroshige's *Ohashi Bridge, Sudden Shower near Atake* in 1887, indicating his interest in simplified color planes, flat space, and unique perspectivalism. Such interest, which was later known as Japonism in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, played an important role in inspiring many modern artists to paint more simplified forms aligned with twentieth century modernist reductionism.

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<sup>13</sup> Le Corbeiller, Clare, & Frelinghuysen, Alice C. (2003). "Chinese Export Porcelain" *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin*. Winter. p. 48. Accessed Sept. 24, 2016. <https://www.metmuseum.org/pubs/bulletins/1/pdf/3269266.pdf.banned.pdf>

<sup>14</sup> "Canton: Common and Unusual Views," *Antique and Fine Art Magazine*. Accessed September 24, 2016. <http://www.antiquesandfineart.com/articles/article.cfm?request=17>



## CONCLUSION

The current study focused on clues suggesting artistic interaction between East and West, using art objects as empirical proof. It brought to attention cases from seventeenth century Dutch and Chinese art to show cultural interaction along the Silk Road. Seascape paintings, map images, and still life paintings depicting various trade items such as oriental carpets, Kraak porcelain, and many agricultural items bear witness to the specific results of Silk Road trade. The Chinese porcelain at the time shows how Chinese potters accommodated the needs of the Dutch market by including various texts or symbols originating from Dutch culture. They also made objects which were then foreign to the Chinese.

This study shows that the Silk Road as a methodology can bring socio-political context into our discussion of art and can lead us to a multicultural, interdisciplinary study not only in discussing seventeenth century Dutch art but many, many more. As mentioned earlier in this study, the historical, geographical, and cultural boundaries of the Silk Road are so vast that the current paper is only a small specimen which requires further exploration. The topics and stories to be revealed are endless, and the discoveries will contribute to a more balanced view than the Eurocentric tendencies prevalent in current scholarship.



Fig 1. Pieter J. Saenredam,  
*Interior of Saint Bavo, Haarlem, 1631*



Fig 2. Johannes Vermeer,  
*Officer and Laughing, c. 1655-1660*



Fig 3. Vermeer,  
*The Love Letter, c. 1666*



Fig 4. Dirk Hals, *Gentlemen Smoking and  
Playing Backgammon in an Interior, 1627*



Fig 5. Johannes Vermeer,  
*Maid Asleep*, 1657



Fig 6. Pieter Claesz,  
*Still Life with a Piece of Meat*, 1635

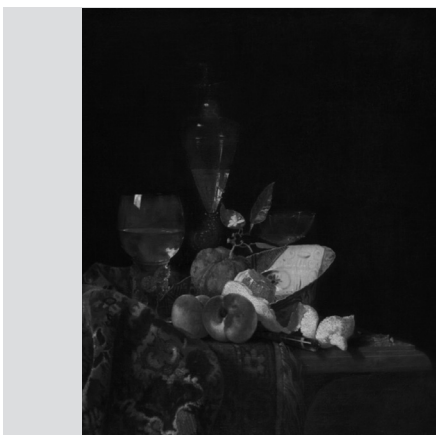


Fig 7-1. Willem Kalf,  
*Still Life*, 1660



Fig 7-2. 'Kraak' porcelain dish



Fig 8. Peter Claesz,  
*Still Life with Turkey Pie*, 1627



Fig 9. Jacob Vosmaer,  
*A Vase with Flowers*, 1613



Fig 10. Plate with a VOC logo,  
c. 1660



Fig 11. Chinese plate for the  
Dutch market, c. 1692



Fig 12. Porcelain candlestick,  
c. 1700-1710



Fig 13. Crucifixion saucer,  
c. 1740



Fig 14. Chinese porcelain plate for a  
Dutch sea-captain of the ship  
Vryburg, 1756.



Fig 15. *Chinese punch bowl*,  
c. 1785



Fig 16. Youqua, *A Panoramic View of the Waterfront at Canton*, c. 1845.



Fig 17. Jacob van Ruisdael,  
*View of Naarden with the Church at Muiderberg in the Distance*, 1647



Fig 18. Vincent van Gogh's copy (right, 1887) of Utagawa Hiroshige's  
*Obashi Bridge, Sudden Shower near Atake* (left, 1857)

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