

# The Prinsenhof Museum, Delft

## From Porcelain to Delftware

By Anne Pinto-Rodrigues

The picturesque city of Delft, in the South Holland province of the Netherlands, is home to a remarkable Dutch monument – the stately Prinsenhof Museum. While the museum was officially established only in 1911, the building housing the museum was built in the early 15<sup>th</sup> century as a monastery. It later came to be known as the Prinsenhof (meaning the Prince's Court) in the 1570s, when it served as the residence of William I, Prince of Orange (1533-1584), who is revered as the 'Father of the Fatherland'. William I played a key role in the Dutch revolt against Spanish rule, which paved the way for the formation of the Dutch Republic in 1581. The building is iconic in that it also bears witness to the assassination of William I in 1584. The bullet holes from the murder are still well preserved in one of the walls of the building.



The entrance of the Forbidden Porcelain: Exclusively for the Emperor exhibition, at the Prinsenhof Museum

Delft was one of six key ports of the Dutch East India Company (Verenigde Oostindische Compagnie / VOC) and the influence of the VOC is still very visible in the city. In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, as the Dutch dominated the trade with China, millions of pieces of finely-crafted, blue and white Chinese porcelain were imported into the Netherlands. The popularity of the imported porcelain among European royalty and the wealthy, motivated local pottery artisans in Delft to emulate Chinese porcelain.

This led to the creation of a close adaptation, which became famous in its own right as 'Delft blue' or 'delftware'. The main difference between Chinese porcelain and delftware was that the former was made from clay containing kaolin, which when fired took on a lustrous appearance; while the latter was produced from a local clay, coated with a tin glaze after firing to recreate the sheen of porcelain. The supply of porcelain to Europe was disrupted following the internal conflicts that ensued after the death of the Ming Emperor Wanli in 1620. It was at this time that the popularity of delftware surged. The permanent collection of the Prinsenhof Museum includes several displays where the imported porcelain is placed alongside early recreations made by Dutch potters.

Much of the imported Chinese porcelain came from the imperial kilns of Jingdezhen, located in Jiangxi province. The clay in this area was rich in kaolin and petuntse (another key ingredient, also known as porcelain stone), and the proximity to forests and a river meant a plentiful supply of wood and water for the kilns. The porcelain wares made for the emperor were of the highest quality possible and underwent rigorous scrutiny. Only those pieces that passed the evaluation would be sent to the royal court in Beijing, nearly 1,400 kilometres away.

Currently, the museum is hosting the exhibition *Forbidden Porcelain: Exclusively for the Emperor* on until 9 July 2017. This exhibition centres around the porcelain that was specially made for Chinese



An imported Chinese porcelain platter (R) from the early 17<sup>th</sup> century placed next to a similar-looking Delftware reproduction (L) from the mid-1600s. Photo courtesy of the Prinsenhof Museum

emperors by the imperial kilns of Jingdezhen, but was later discarded and destroyed, as it did not meet the high standards expected of imperial wares. For centuries, fragments of the rejected porcelain objects lay buried in the area around the imperial kilns in Jingdezhen. When the area's buildings were demolished in the 1980s, these fragments were excavated, studied and pieced back together. This is the first time these reassembled porcelain wares, originally made for the Chinese emperor, are being seen outside Asia.

The exhibition focuses on artefacts spanning the reign of the Ming dynasty (1368 to 1644) and includes vases, plates, ceremonial/religious ware used in temples, wine cups, bowls and interestingly, bird feeders and cricket boxes. In porcelain wares made for the emperor, the dragon motif was shown having five claws, while in products made for general consumption, the dragon motifs were three-clawed.

To this day, the cities of Delft and Jingdezhen continue to be centres of pottery production. Their centuries-old relationship is reflected in the twin/sister-city status they share.



A reassembled platter from the time of the Ming Emperor Chenghua (1464-1687) that was destroyed most likely because the dragon in the motif had six digits on the right upper limb, instead of the customary five digits used in wares made for the emperor. An artefact in the Forbidden Porcelain exhibition on loan from the Archaeological Institute, Jingdezhen, China

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**Anne Pinto-Rodrigues**, an Amsterdam-based writer and blogger, recently visited the Prinsenhof Museum. Anne chronicles her experiences of interesting places and people on her blog No Roads Barred [www.noroadbarred.wordpress.com](http://www.noroadbarred.wordpress.com)

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