

The Ceramic Collection at the National Museum of Indonesia, Jakarta: A summary of the presentation made to the Southeast Asian Ceramic Society on April 16, 2018

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The National Museum of Indonesia in Jakarta, has an impressive ceramic collection that was formed primarily from the private collection of Egbert Willem Van Orsey de Flines (1886-1964). He was a Dutch national who arrived in Indonesia in 1913. He donated his collection of over a 1000 pieces to the museum in 1929 and continued to build on it as curator of ceramics until his permanent return to Holland in 1959. By the time he left Indonesia, the ceramic collection totalled around 5,000 pieces. Whilst Chinese ceramics form the main part of the collection, it was also pioneering at that time in the collecting of Southeast Asian ceramics, particularly Thai and Vietnamese wares.



Egbert Willem van Orsey de Flines (1886-1964), in the 1950s

Van Orsey de Flines collected 'foreign' ceramics from across the Indonesian archipelago, not only for their beauty, but primarily for what they could tell us about the history of a place—social, cultural, economic and political. Ceramics had, for many centuries, been the treasured possession of the local Indonesian people. They became precious heirlooms known as '*pusaka*', looked after and kept from generation to generation both as prestige items demonstrating family status, and as ceremonial objects used in traditional religious rites. As a repository of heirloom items, the collection is an important archive for the history of the country. It tells a story about the dynamics of intercultural contact that occurred in the Indonesian Archipelago and the region, from the first millennium through to the 17th century. Although the collection does have Chinese wares from the 18th-20th century, and a collection of Japanese export ceramics, they are significantly smaller than the earlier periods. Van Orsey de Flines felt that the ceramic trade had by then become heavily influenced by European taste and produced to order for the European market, and therefore, for him, the importance of Chinese trade ceramics of the

18th century onwards terminated as far as historical and ethnographic studies of Indonesia were concerned.

Foreign ceramics made their way into the Indonesian archipelago from around the late 2nd/1st century BCE- 1st century CE with the arrival of Roman-Indian rouletted ware from Arikamedu, Tamil Nadu, India. The earliest Chinese ceramics that the collection hosts are from the Han (206 BCE -220 CE) through to the Sui dynasty (581-619). The ceramics represented are typical of the era, lead-glazed earthenware and some stoneware for the Han and celadons and examples of early white wares for the Period of Division through to the Sui. The Han items are somewhat controversial, however, due to the absence of scientific archaeological data as to where they were obtained. Textual sources from China in this period tell us of thriving sea routes, ports and wealthy merchants. We know of Chinese envoys reaching Indonesian shores by the 3rd century, sailing on ships that were crewed by Indian, Malay and Indonesian sailors; trade stretched from China across to the Bay of Bengal even in these early days. The Buddhist monks and Hindu brahmins that travelled on these ships, carrying them on their journeys between India and China, are also evidence of this, and at this time in Indonesia we have the first records of early state formation on Sumatra, Java and Kalimantan.

Chinese ceramics of this early era, however, were probably not part of a regular trade exchange network, unlike the next period of the Tang to Five Dynasties (7th-10th century), when shipwreck evidence confirms that ceramics were being imported into the archipelago in commercial quantities. Ceramics from this period in the collection included white wares, *Sancai*, Changsha, brown-black wares, 'Dusun' or 'Martaban' jars made at the Guangdong kilns and refined Yue wares from Zhejiang as well Yue-type wares from Zhejiang and the southern kilns of Guangdong and Fujian. In the Yue wares we see the beginning of a two-tier quality of ceramic being imported into the archipelago intended for different markets—a trend that will continue through to the 17th century and is seen represented in the collection.

In the Song and Yuan (11th-14th century) the Chinese government encouraged the expansion of trade and commerce, pushing ceramics, amongst other products, as a major trade commodity. With a shift in maritime policy, Chinese traders now sailed directly into the region and maritime trade routes expanded. With Quanzhou as the major export port of the era, the produce of the kilns from this province and those surrounding it, is reflected in the ceramics on display in the museum. The two-tier level of import is expressed again for instance, in refined Qingbai wares from Jingdezhen, probably intended for the court or those with powerful positions connected to the court, as well as the less refined but no less charming Qingbai wares produced at the southern kiln sites of Guangdong and particularly Fujian in this period.

As well as Qingbai, white wares from kilns such as Dehua, Longquan, Cizhou, lead-glazed wares from the Cizao kilns in Fujian, and in smaller quantities, Jizhou, Jian, Jun ware are all represented. Underglaze copper red and blue and white from Jingdezhen made its way into the archipelago in this period, the latter particularly in large quantities. What is evident is that the quality of ceramics imported into Indonesia in this period, was as fine as anything being sent to the courts of the Middle East. In contrast, Europe at this time had

very little access to Chinese porcelain, in fact the first ceramics were just making their way into Europe in the late 14th century as evidenced by the famous Fonthill vase. The National Museum houses comparable vases to the Fonthill vase. Both the quality and the quantity of ceramics imported to Indonesia in this period, reflects the increasing sophistication of state formation and commercial development during the Kediri, Singosari and Majapahit kingdoms of East Java, highlighting Indonesia's position as a fulcrum in the world trade system of the 14th century.

During the Ming (1368 – 1644), a huge number of export wares were collected and displayed. Underglaze blue and white, polychrome overglaze enamel, Zhangzhou/Swatow ware, Longquan, Dehua and lead-glazed wares etc and from huge double-gourd vases to the tiniest of jarlets. The items tell an important story of cultural exchange in this period, reflecting the ebb and flow of ceramic export during the Ming Ban, capturing the two defining cultural influences of the era on the design of Chinese ceramics - Muslim and European - and revealing how an object can embody a new meaning and value in different cultures to the one it was created in.

Again it is important to emphasize ceramics of high quality were being imported into Indonesia during the Ming period, as well as huge volumes of coarser wares. Unfortunately, many of those high quality ceramics are no longer part of the Museum collection, but when we look at articles written by van Orsey de Flines in the 1930s, the exceptional quality of underglaze blue and whites, particularly from the reign of the Yongle emperor (1402-1424), tell a story of the wealth and importance that the Majapahit kingdom still had in the early 15th century, coinciding with the famous treasure ship voyages of Zheng He fame and instigated under the Yongle emperor. This is emphasised also by many fine pieces in museum collections around the world, originally collected from Indonesia.

The impressive Southeast Asian ceramic collection that van Orsey de Flines gathered covers Vietnam and Thailand in the main, but also Myanmar and Cambodia too. His collection of these wares was recognised as unique, collected at a time, when there was little interest in them and also of a quality not seen in their country of origin where they were made mainly for export. The bulk of mainland Southeast Asian ceramics were exported during the 14-16th century, seemingly taking advantage of the apparent downturn in the volume of Chinese ceramics being exported as a result of the Ming Ban. Vietnamese ceramics, however, start to arrive in the archipelago from earlier periods, with the earliest represented in the collection coming from the Ly dynasty (11th-13th century). The display of the Vietnamese ceramics represents the evolution of form and decoration from the 11th-16th century, ranging from small boxes that were so popular in Indonesia through to large and elaborate objects with exquisite designs.

The National Museum also houses fragments of Vietnamese tiles that were produced in large quantities and in various shapes, decorative designs and techniques. Their importance lies in the fact that these tiles have only been found in East Java; physical evidence of the close relationship that existed between Vietnam and Majapahit, and documented in textual sources of the period. Ceramics made for a localised order reveals East Java's wealth, the specialised nature of the international trade environment, and

reactivity of the Vietnamese kilns in being able to satisfy specific customer demands. It has been proposed that these tiles were used as single decorative entities in traditional Javanese architecture for the Majapahit court and surrounding buildings. The commission of these tiles is believed to be influenced by imported Persian tiles, fragments of which have been recovered from Trowulan, the capital of Majapahit.

Ceramics from Thailand came from the two main ceramic centre for regional export, Sukhotahai and Sawankhalok (Si Satchanalai). Again a range of wares were collected from utilitarian, roughly potted jarlets through to refined celadon wares.

During the mid-17th century as China's porcelain exports were suspended during the transition from the Ming to Qing dynasties, the Dutch traders, now omnipresent in the region, turned to Japan to fulfil the European market's voracious appetite for ceramics. Imitations of Chinese Kraak and Transitional wares, celadons made for the Southeast Asian markets are amongst the earliest Japanese export wares on display dating from the mid-17th century. Japanese ceramics became highly popular in Europe.

The scope of the collection is reflective of the range of ceramics entering Indonesia from the first millennium through to the 17th century and beyond. As such, the significance of the ceramic collection in the National Museum of Indonesia created by van Orsey de Flines as legacy for the Indonesian people in recording their historical and ethnological development, should not be overlooked and must be treasured and protected.

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