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Beyond Blue and White

The Hidden History of Delftware and the Women Behind the Iconic Ceramic

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A blue-and-white *woordenlijst*

> "It will be necessary as we proceed to make use of certain terms, the meaning of which should be defined with as much exactness as possible. It may be premised that considerable confusion exists in the nomenclature of the art. This has arisen partly from the want of precision in the language employed by writers, and partly from diversity of usage."
>
> —Jennie J. Young, *The Ceramic Art: A Compendium of the History and Manufacture of Pottery and Porcelain*, 1878

Call it **Dutch Delftware**, **Delftware**, or just **Delft**, this tin-glazed earthenware was made in the town of Delft from approximately 1620 to 1850. Potters around the world had made tin-glazed earthenware for millennia, but the artisans of this small Dutch community in Holland took the medium to new heights and created multitudes of forms, from everyday dishes and bowls to ornamental garnitures and monumental "vases with spouts" unlike anything seen before. Delftware's glazed surfaces could be decorated with an infinite variety of styles and motifs inspired by everything from Chinese imported goods to European engravings and often—though not always—in shades of blue and white.

Dutch tiles (sometimes called Delft tiles) are frequently associated with Delftware but were actually produced in factories throughout Holland. These squares of tin-glazed earthenware were used by the Dutch for practical as well as decorative purposes—around fireplaces, along baseboards, covering sections of walls—in areas prone to smoke, dirt, and dampness. Dutch tiles were also decorated with a myriad of motifs, from blooming roses or instructive religious scenes to children at play.

As Europeans and Americans began to fall under the spell of collecting blue-and-white, from masses of dishes, bowls, and vases to tiles—a Chinamania—in the nineteenth century, a new term was permeating the English lexicon: **ceramics**. First used by erudite collectors and enthusiasts beginning around 1850, the word is an adaptation of the French *céramique* and derived from the Greek *keramos* (pottery). Ceramics refer to objects made of clay that have been permanently hardened by heat. Generally grouped by their material composition and firing temperature, most ceramics fall into three basic types: porcelain, stoneware, and earthenware.

Earthenware, formed from natural clay in warm shades from sandy buff to terracotta red, is the oldest form of ceramics. Dating to at least the tenth millennium B.C.E. in Japan, Jomon potters—mostly women—are believed to have crafted some of the first vessels. Fired at relatively low temperatures (800–1100°C), it stays porous unless glazed, and its softer, less dense structure often requires thicker forms for stability. While more prone to chipping than other ceramics, its accessibility and versatility have made it a staple in cultures worldwide for thousands of years.

Tough and dense, **stoneware** is prized for its hardness, as its name suggests. Its clay varies in tones from red and brown to slate gray and black, depending on mineral content. Fired at higher temperatures (1100–1300°C), it becomes vitrified, forming a smooth, nonporous body that can hold liquids without the need for glazing. Strong and adaptable, stoneware became a preferred material for everything from tableware to durable storage vessels.

Porcelain stands apart with its luminous white clay and mysterious balance of delicacy and strength. Fired at the highest temperatures (1200–1450°C), it develops a smooth, nonporous, translucent quality that is both refined and hard, producing a bell-like resonance when tapped. Made of *kaolin*, a fine white clay, and *petunse*, a feldspathic rock, porcelain was perfected in sixth-century China. For centuries, its production remained a closely guarded secret, fueling Europe's obsession and relentless attempts to replicate this prized ceramic.

Yet, despite the clear distinctions between ceramic types, the potters of Delft pushed the boundaries of tradition, developing earthenware so exquisitely delicate and refined that it was often mistaken for porcelain—and earning the seventeenth-century moniker ***Delft porcelyne***.

Between 1602–1682, at least 3.2 million pieces of Chinese and Japanese porcelain were imported by the **Dutch East India Company** (Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie). By 1730–1789 that number had exploded to 42 million. When its ships returned from East Asia to the cities of the Dutch Republic, their cargo was packed with wooden crates marked with the company's distinctive interlocking initials: **VOC**. These containers carried riches from the East including spices, silk, exotic plants, and animals, as well as blue-and-white porcelain for sale throughout the world. Established in 1602, the VOC was the uncontested leader in international trade in the seventeenth century, making many Dutch very, very wealthy.

Homes of burghers, prosperous Dutch citizens in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, prominently featured ***kasten***, tall and broad cabinets with deeply molded cornices. Often made of rich exotic woods, kasten served as storage for valuable household items such as silverware and linens. But a *kast* was also a vehicle for the proud display of prized objects, denoting power, wealth, and influence. Chinese porcelain and sparkling Delftware were prominently placed across the top of the kast as well as symmetrically arranged on mantels and above doorways.

But only the truly wealthiest and most powerful owned the grandest form of Delftware, a pyramidal flower vase often called today a ***tulipière*** or tulip vase. These towering multilevel vases, some almost five feet in height, were characterized by their profusion of spouts for individual flowers. The name was born in the nineteenth century during the resurgent interest in Tulipmania, though the objects themselves were developed in the late seventeenth century, well after the Dutch vogue for tulips in the 1630s had passed. These vases were, in fact, not only for tulips but a breadth of flowering botanical beauties, including jonquils, hyacinth, narcissi, peonies, roses, and irises.

No Delftware, from the grandest flower vase to the smallest butter dish, could be produced without the sanction of the **Guild of St. Luke**. Regulating the commerce and production of artists and artisans in Delft, it oversaw its members—from painters and art dealers to glassmakers and Delftware potters. The Guild's fixed and numerous rules and regulations were attentively followed by its members, including compulsory Master's tests and annual dues. Potters working in Delft who were nonmembers would be fined. Any Delftware produced by nonmembers of the Guild of St. Luke could be seized and destroyed.

Delftware potters and painters, ***plateelschilders***, were required to pass the rigorous master tests of the Guild of St. Luke in order to produce their works of art. To prepare for this role they apprenticed for six years honing their craft. The potters of Delft produced millions of pieces of Delftware from their wheels and benches, and each year sold not just in the Dutch market but around the globe, from Indonesia to Massachusetts, fueling the world's insatiable appetite for blue-and-white.

From the Dutch *winkel* (shop) and *houster* (keeper), the ***winkelhouder*** was an owner-manager of a Delftware pottery, overseeing its global business. Each pottery was required to have a single owner-manager, who had to be either a master craftsman or a winkelhouder. The winkelhouder, like the Delftware potter, was required to join the Guild of St. Luke and followed its lengthy list of strict laws. But there was no rule of the venerable Guild of St. Luke that said the winkelhouder couldn't be a woman.

Introduction

The pottery hums with activity. Braying horses strain their harnesses as they pull the gears of the mill, mixing heavy quantities of clay. Potters gently shape bowls while rhythmically kicking pottery wheels and the crackling fire spits and roars as plates and bowls continue their firing in the kiln. Painters sit side by side at long tables quickly applying cobalt decorations as assistants with baskets bring a constant stream of even more plates and chargers. It is 1769 in Delft, the heart of Holland's flourishing worldwide trade of Dutch Delftware—the eponymous blue-and-white tin-glazed ceramic that has entranced collectors since the 1600s.

In the center of this pottery is its owner, a woman.

Wearing a long wool petticoat, apron, and linen hood, she orchestrates the movements of her staff as they quietly attend to their numerous tasks, from dipping pieces in vats of thick white glaze to gently placing prepared plates and bowls on shelves for drying. Out of the corner of her eye, she notices two young boys in her workshop lingering and chatting when they should be shuttling bunches of small kindling to the awaiting kiln. She stops briefly to admire her newly finished works, recently cooled from the kiln, which sit on the broad open wood shelves lining the pottery walls. She lifts one piece of Delftware in particular to inspect—it was a specially commissioned work made for a patron under her direction. It is indeed beautiful and, with its final glazing complete with no cracks, meets with her approval and is ready for delivery.

Now, centuries later, the piece rests in an urban aerie high above the streets of Manhattan. Locked in bronze cases behind thick glass panels, it lies on

faded ivory velvet padding within a cache of blue-and-white Dutch Delftware. With its gently curved handle, protruding spouts, and a body adorned with cobalt flowers framing stylized rocaille panels of river landscapes, this uniquely shaped Delftware is nestled among a myriad of chargers, figurines, bowls, and vases. The afternoon light dances across its shimmering glaze. Unaffected by time, its cobalt painting remains as vibrant as the day it emerged from the kiln over 250 years ago.

Dutch Delftware was born in the 1600s, an age of piracy, when Dutch fleets audaciously commandeered galleons returning from the East laden with spices, silks, and porcelain. By the 1690s, Delftware had risen to international fame, becoming a symbol of royal favor in European courts. Nearly two centuries later, it captivated collectors once again as Gilded Age Americans, swept up in the craze of Chinamania and the enthusiasm of Holland Mania, voraciously sought blue-and-white ceramics as prized trophies.

But fashions shifted again, and for the last fifty years, the once-coveted Delftware in these cases has sat untouched. Now, the blue-and-white waits patiently, a silent testament to its enduring allure and the cycles of human desire.

Beyond Blue and White tells the story of a particular collection of Dutch Delftware. Its rediscovery in New York City opens the door to a ceramic journey from potter's wheels in the workshops of seventeenth-century Delft to museum shelves.

But it also tells the story of another rediscovery—that of the singular women behind this collection of blue-and-white who were as impactful, dynamic, and colorful as the Delftware itself.

Glimpses of their lives were gleaned from many separate spheres across a myriad of contexts and sources. While some were hidden in plain sight in reference books on ceramics, others were found deep in seldom-accessed files of museums, archives, and libraries. From combing overflowing closets of private archives in New York to sifting through the digital files of the modernist

Stadsarchief Delft (Delft City Archives), four years of research—digging through town records, newspaper articles, early travel writing, seventeenth-century guild ledgers, notarial records, and eighteenth-century court proceedings—uncovered its own treasure: the stories of these women's lives. I had set out to learn about this collection but along the way I found not a few, but many women who were also a part of this story.

Some of these women are well-known, having lived their lives in the public eye since birth, including Queen Mary II, who changed the course of British history and many say usurped her father's crown to become a reigning queen of England, or Alice Claypoole Vanderbilt, otherwise known as Mrs. Cornelius Vanderbilt II, a fearless self-made leader of New York society who raised the art of opulent living to new zeniths during America's Gilded Age. In revisiting their stories through the lens of Delftware, I hope they will be viewed with a fresh perspective, revealing new angles, nuances, and truths.

Others, although prominent in their time, are now largely forgotten, like Alice Morse Earle, the American historian who wrote sixteen bestselling books, fueling popular interest in collecting and early American history, or Elizabeth Colt, the indefatigable industrialist who not only maintained control of the Colt's Patent Arms Manufacturing Company through the Civil War and beyond but, as an art collector, was the first woman to have a museum wing named in her honor. By reintroducing these women and situating them within previously unexplored contexts—alongside the equally dynamic women they lived, worked, and collaborated with—I hope to illuminate the breadth of their influence, both individually and collectively, in shaping industries, culture, and historical narratives.

But most numerous were the women whose lives have been obscured in the shadow of blue-and-white's mythos. These are the countless daughters, sisters, mothers, wives, and widows from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries who served as everything from supporting household members to unnamed partners in business with their spouses in Delftware potteries. Some of them defy our notions of who an entrepreneur was in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries—many were Delftware pottery owners themselves. Their stories are perhaps the most inspiring of all.

Following the brick-paved streets along the canals of Delft, the gravel garden paths of Hampton Court Palace and the Het Loo Palace, the Dutch royal summer residence in Apeldoorn, and the yellow pine floorboards of the oldest surviving building in the upper Bronx, I retraced their footsteps, hoping to understand their inspirations and motivations. *Beyond Blue and White* tells the forgotten story of these women's ambitions.

There is a myth that follows women and art, whether in painting, sculpture, furniture, glass, or ceramics.

The long-held tale goes that women were not able to produce works of art for any number of reasons, because they were not strong enough, weren't a member of an artist's guild, lacked the training, the financial resources, business acumen, or simply the wherewithal. Museum labels, auction catalogues, and art histories seem to support this vision, rarely presenting the broader picture beyond the name of what may be the artist, head of workshop, or name of a maker or firm. The mythos seeps into the historic perception of artistic patronage, collecting, and the histories of museums themselves, casting a shadow over women's participation in the arts as the exceptions or oddities, instead of part of the fabric.

But with each piece of Dutch Delftware and every document I held, more and more women emerged from history. I began to imagine their presence—along the canals of seventeenth-century Delft, in the bustling shops of eighteenth-century London, within the opulent salons of the nineteenth century, and later in the twentieth-century museum galleries of New York. Connecting the dots across four centuries revealed a richer, more complete picture of inspiring female contributions.

These women appeared across the full spectrum of artistic life—acknowledged and integral participants—whether as artists, patrons, dealers, collectors, historians, pioneering preservationists, museum founders, or shopgirls selling blue-and-white pottery in the bustling salesrooms of seventeenth-century Delft.

The words Dutch Delftware may evoke the image of a monumental seventeenth-century blue-and-white pyramidal vase, or *tulipière*, with its numerous spouts brimming with spring flowers. These magnificent sculptures, icons of Dutch culture, reflect the artistic and technical mastery of an

era when the Netherlands ascended to global prominence in commerce, art, philosophy, and science.

Over time, the Dutch Delftware aesthetic seeped into the international consciousness, influencing design across interiors, fashion, and beyond—a legacy that endures to this day. It has been widely imitated but rarely rivaled, and the term itself became so ubiquitous that it is often mistakenly used to describe all blue-and-white pottery, regardless of its origin.

Yet, as we admire the intricate spouts and masterful painting of Delftware, perhaps we should look beyond the surface and ask: Who shaped its creation, its very existence, and its enduring appeal?

Who was this woman?