



Short Notice

Vermeer's Jar

• CHRISTINA AN AND MENNO FITSKI •

Listening highlights accent the surface of the porcelain jar in the foreground of Johannes Vermeer's *Woman with a Pearl Necklace* (c. 1662-64), its alluringly shadowed presence counterpoised with the otherwise sun-drenched domestic interior (fig. 1).¹ The large porcelain vessel, a foreign commodity of evident value, dominates the tabletop littered with objects likewise obtained from far-flung locales. The panoply of global luxuries, not least the painting's titular pearls, would not have escaped the notice of seventeenth-century Delft viewers, whose homes were increasingly full of things sourced from all over the world. Vermeer's fellow guild members, Delftware artisans well practised at imitating foreign ceramics, however, would have been captivated above all by the porcelain's exceptionality.

Neither has the jar gone unnoticed in modern scholarship. It has been commented on by a number of authors, who have identified it in various ways but always as Chinese: 'a carrack-style ginger jar,' 'a large vase decorated in blue-and-white [that] references authentic Chinese wares very convincingly,' and 'a large Chinese Ming-dynasty Wanli-period jar.'² This essay offers a new identification of the jar's material prototype as Japanese, and provides the larger context for this object's production and circulation in

< Fig. 1
JOHANNES VERMEER,
*Woman with a
Pearl Necklace*,
c. 1662-64.
Oil on canvas,
56.1 x 47.4 cm.
Berlin, Staatliche
Museen zu Berlin,
Gemäldegalerie,
inv. no. 912B.
Photo © Staatliche
Museen zu Berlin,
Gemäldegalerie/
Christoph Schmidt

the seventeenth century, as well as the interconnected global trade network from which it came. In so doing, it exemplifies the benefits of a material culture analysis conjoined to the study of painting.³ It is only fitting that this Short Notice in honour of Gregor Weber engages issues that build on his scholarship; namely, the insights that can be gleaned when attending closely to material objects in paintings, and particularly their conscious selection and adaptation in Vermeer's works.⁴

Vermeer's Shadowed Jar, Unveiled

While the jar is to some extent occluded by shadows in the picture – probably consistent with the appearance of the painting in the seventeenth century⁵ – its silhouette is clearly discernible. Vermeer delineated the bulbous shoulders of a jar with a short-waisted, straight neck, topped with a narrow-rimmed lid and round finial of slightly flattened profile. Enhanced images (figs. 2a-3b) provide greater legibility beyond the outlines of the object, revealing a considerable amount of detail.⁶ We can clearly see the overall design concept on the jar, as well as visible blue-and-white decoration.⁷ The design consists of plant motifs within cartouches that have diagonally-sided corners, divided by a vertical segment with further detailing.



^ Figs. 2a, b
*Woman with a Pearl
Necklace* (fig. 1).
Enhanced black-and-
white image, with
detail of lidded jar.

Photo: Staatliche
Museen zu Berlin,
Gemäldegalerie /
Walter Steinkopf; Public
Domain Mark i.o

v Figs. 3a, b
*Woman with a
Pearl Necklace* (fig. 1).
Enhanced colour
image, with detail
of lidded jar.

Image enhancement:
Frans Pegt.



Below this band of cartouches is a double line, just visible on the left-hand side of the jar, which demarcates the uppermost decoration of the jar's body. While the specific motif on the widest section of the jar is not clearly visible, we can detect shapes against a white background, combined with darker areas.

These composite elements of Vermeer's painted jar fit remarkably well with a very specific Japanese prototype (fig. 4).⁸ The outlines of the pieces are identical, with the curved body, straight neck, and rounded lid with characteristically shaped knob. The decoration scheme of the Japanese jar also accords closely with Vermeer's painted rendering. The jar's cartouches have diagonally cut corners and floral motifs that form a band around the shoulder, punctuated by sections of ribbon-like cross-shaped panels. The main decoration of the body (the section occluded by shadows and drapery in Vermeer's version) consists of a figure in a landscape within a cartouche, flanked by ribbon motifs similar to those on the jar's shoulder. In the same fashion as Vermeer's jar, this central section is demarcated from the upper register by a double line.

A Japanese Covered Jar with Chinese Ancestry

The jar, one of the earliest types of porcelain exported to the Netherlands from Japan, has a complex ancestry that blends a number of influences and styles. First, the overall design concept has Chinese origins, which may explain why Vermeer's jar has been identified unanimously as Chinese until now. The decoration within cartouches separated by narrow bands is typical of Chinese Kraak (or carrack), the prevailing style for Chinese export porcelain up to the sixteen-forties. These Kraak elements are combined with landscapes in the then upcoming Transitional style, named after the period spanning the sixteen-twenties



and -eighties that saw the transition from the Ming dynasty (1368-1644) to the Qing dynasty (1644-1911). The jar's decoration exemplifies an intermediate stage blending both Kraak and Transitional styles, also employed by artisans in Japan. A later and overall more purely Transitional-based design, for instance, can be seen on a Japanese jar in the Rijksmuseum collection (fig. 5). A Chinese lidded jar (fig. 6) with a comparable design concept, however, differs significantly from Vermeer's jar in details of shape and decoration, definitively ruling out a Chinese prototype as the model.⁹ Specifically, the silhouette of the Chinese lid is less rounded than that of the Japanese jar, and the neck is topped by a protruding lip, unlike both the Japanese jar (fig. 4) and Vermeer's painted rendition. Furthermore, the cartouches on the shoulder of the Chinese jar have an entirely different lobed shape, and the section below contains evenly scattered motifs – in contrast to the relative areas of dark and light density that can be seen on both the Japanese counterpart (fig. 4)

Fig. 4
Lidded Jar, Japan,
c. 1660-70.
Porcelain, h. 31 cm.
Groningen,
Groninger Museum,
inv. no. 1986-390.
Photo:
Arjan Verschoor



Fig. 5
Lidded Jar, Japan,
c. 1670-80.
Porcelain, h. 34.1 cm.
Amsterdam,
Rijksmuseum
Amsterdam, inv. no.
AK-RBK-1972-208.

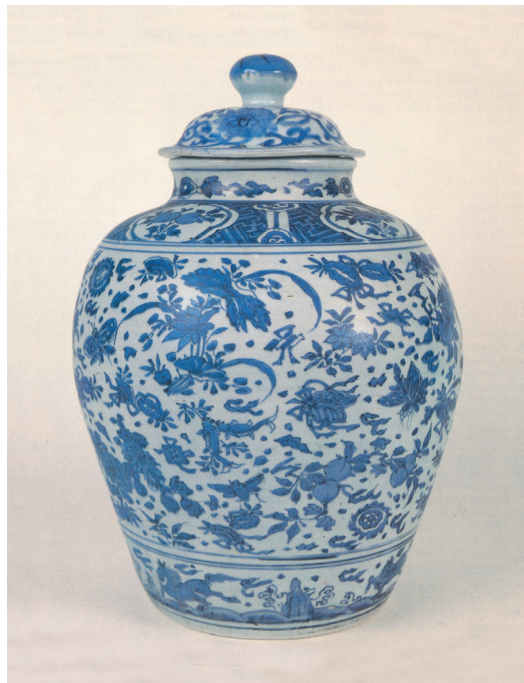


Fig. 6
Lidded Jar,
China, c. 1640-45.
Porcelain, h. 48 cm.
Current whereabouts
unknown.

and Vermeer's jar. The Chinese example illustrated here is part of the so-called Hatcher Cargo, salvaged from the remains of a Chinese junk that sank around 1643, which demonstrates that this type was available on the market in the sixteen-forties.¹⁰ Thus, while the Japanese jar (fig. 4) evinces the incorporation of older Chinese elements, its design concept is singularly new. In short, the shape of the cartouches, the wide divisions with cross lines in between, and the overall decoration scheme of Vermeer's painted jar dovetail with a distinctively Japanese, not Chinese, prototype.

Exigencies of Trade

To better understand the presence of the lidded jar in Vermeer's painting, we must look at the circumstances of the market for porcelain in Asia. The unrest in China after the fall of the Ming dynasty severely impacted the export of porcelain. Extensive warfare meant that both domestic Chinese trade routes and porcelain

manufacturing kilns in Jingdezhen were adversely affected, and the Dutch East India Company (Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie, *voc*) was no longer able to order porcelain to specification. Fortunately, by the sixteen-fifties the relatively young porcelain production in Japan had reached a level of sophistication that made it able to accommodate special orders. Thus, it was to Japan, not China, that the *voc* directed its new requests for Asian porcelain from the mid-seventeenth century on. The abrupt cessation of the Chinese porcelain supply in these years was also an important catalyst for Delftware in Vermeer's hometown of Delft, and its eventual dominance of an industry devoted to the imitation of the widely covered Asian commodity.¹¹

The first porcelain exports from Japan came to the Netherlands through the network of private trade from around 1655 onwards. This becomes evident from *voc* records of 1656, when the board of directors in

Amsterdam initiated the official Japanese trade by sending out a request for a 'consignment of porcelain, as found to be brought over by many individuals'.¹² VOC records from 1661 further state that 'Japanese porcelain has been exceptionally profitable again this year in Holland'. A specific VOC request that same year was sent to Japan for, among other objects, 'large bowls and pots'.¹³ Vermeer painted *Woman with a Pearl Necklace* in the years 1662-64; this means that the Japanese covered jar he depicted was a highly desirable and expensive piece from the very latest available range.

'Dutch Porcelain'

Intriguingly, in order to specify the exact requirements for the 1661 VOC request for Japanese porcelain, Delftware models were sent to Japan. In June 1662, the factory in Nagasaki

received 'two cases ... of Dutch porcelain ... as samples for Japan to have copied there'.¹⁴ The Dutch traders must have swiftly placed orders with the Japanese porcelain producers, for the outgoing shipment of porcelain on 4 November 1662 already included pieces made after the models. This meant that Japanese porcelain fashioned after Delftware examples arrived in the Netherlands as early as 1663.

What did these models of 'Dutch porcelain', the contemporary term for Delftware, look like? There are Delftware jars bearing strikingly similar designs to those on the Japanese porcelain jar (fig. 7).¹⁵ The resemblance is remarkable – the shape of the jar and overall design concept of cartouches, double line, and interspersed ribbon cross-shapes. Despite these shared characteristics, however, two key factors argue against the possibility



Fig. 7
Jar, Delft, late
seventeenth century.
Earthenware,
h. 40.3 cm.
Museum Arnhem,
on loan from The
Cultural Heritage
Agency of the
Netherlands,
Amersfoort,
inv. no. AB 8317-2.
Photo: Tom Haartsen



Fig. 8
 CORNELIS DE MAN,
*Still Life with a Delft
 Jar*, c. 1665-1706.
 Oil on canvas;
 151 x 129 cm.
 Frankfurt am Main,
 Historisches Museum
 Frankfurt, inv. no.
 B.1953.03.
 Photo: CC-BY-SA 4.0:
 Historisches Museum
 Frankfurt/ Horst
 Ziegenfusz

that Vermeer's jar was modelled after a Delftware example. Japanese porcelain jars of the period literally outshine their Delftware counterparts in their glossiness,¹⁶ an aspect Vermeer represents on his painted jar through very pronounced highlights, presumably the observed effects of light from a second, unseen window. Additionally, the Japanese porcelain jar conforms the most closely to Vermeer's painted rendition in the height of its neck and, most significantly, the distinctive shape of its lid. As a counterpoint, note the entirely different lid silhouette of a Delftware jar in a painting by Cornelis De Man (fig. 8).¹⁷

While the material prototype for Vermeer's jar was Japanese porcelain, the secondary question as to whether a Delftware jar could have served as a model for the Japanese porcelain jar, or the other way around, is complicated. On the one hand, there is the argument that the Japanese porcelain

jar is stylistically more indebted to Chinese porcelain, particularly in the way that the landscape and figures are rendered, which weakens the case for Delftware serving as the precedent for Japanese porcelain. On the other hand, the trade documentation points to Delftware being copied in Japan, and the painting on the Japanese jar (fig. 4) is perfunctory compared to the elaborately detailed Delftware depiction (fig. 7), which might suggest that the latter came first. But it is also conceivable that the Delftware piece was an elaboration of a Japanese model. Moreover, the inclusion of such a fashionable piece of Delftware may allow us to date De Man's painting (fig. 8), currently broadly dated to c. 1665-1706, more securely. While acknowledging the difference between material objects and their translations into paint, De Man evidently chose to depict the Delftware jar in exacting detail, rendering a veritable portrait of the object. The question remains why Vermeer, by contrast, chose to portray the Japanese jar in an occluded manner, though this kind of obscurity – the paradox of the jar's shadowed presentation despite its prominence and foregrounding – is consistent with Vermeer's general evasiveness.

In this essay, we have identified a specific Japanese jar as the closest prototype for Vermeer's jar – in contrast to its previous attribution as Chinese – on the basis of distinctive design elements, such as the diagonally cut cartouche shapes, the wide divisions with intervening cross lines, and the way that the older Chinese elements have been translated into an entirely new way of rendering. Further research from various angles of expertise, engaging specialists across disciplines, is needed to unravel the thought-provoking, multi-faceted, and entangled stories of not only these material objects, but also their representations in paint.

NOTES

- 1 The jar does not appear in Vermeer's 1676 estate inventory. See Pieter Roelofs and Gregor J.M. Weber, *Vermeer*, exh. cat. Amsterdam (Rijksmuseum) 2023, pp. 292-95.
- 2 Respectively, Timothy Brook, *Vermeer's Hat: The Seventeenth Century and the Dawn of the Global World*, London 2008, p. 77; Thijs Weststeijn, 'Cultural Reflections on Porcelain in the 17th-Century Netherlands', in Jan van Campen and Titus Eliëns (eds.), *Chinese and Japanese Porcelain for the Dutch Golden Age*, Amsterdam 2014, pp. 223-25; and Yoriko Kobayashi 小林頼子, *Ferumeru zensakuhinshu フェルメール全作品集* [Complete catalogue of Vermeer's works], Tokyo 2018, cat. 15.
- 3 The genesis of this analysis was a query by Christina An to Christiaan Jörg grounded in her dissertation research for *Johannes Vermeer, Asian Porcelain, and the Primacy of Painting in Seventeenth-Century Holland* (Boston University, defended May 2022). We wish to acknowledge Christiaan Jörg for first identifying the jar as Japanese, in conversation with Menno Fitski, and to express our gratitude for his invaluable insights. Our ongoing collaboration illuminates the value of multi-disciplinary, cross-cultural collaborations across areas of expertise. We also wish to thank Suzanne Lambooy and Eline van den Berg, whom we consulted for this Short Notice.
- 4 See Gregor J.M. Weber, 'Vermeer's Use of the Picture-within-a-Picture: A New Approach', in Ivan Gaskell and Michiel Jonker (eds.), *Vermeer Studies, Washington 1998 (Studies in the History of Art, vol. 55, Symposium Papers xxxiii)*, pp. 294-307. Weber's identification and analysis of Vermeer's pictures-within-pictures argued compellingly for a new understanding of their semantic charge and signification within the paintings.
- 5 With thanks to Katja Kleinert, Curator for Dutch and Flemish Art of the Seventeenth Century, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin – Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Gemäldegalerie, for this insight (email correspondence to Christina An, 19 June 2018).
- 6 With thanks to Katja Kleinert for providing the scanned and enhanced black-and-white photograph in 2018 (fig. 2a), which allowed the decoration of the vase to be evinced clearly, and for allowing the image to be reproduced for this publication.
- 7 The blue-and-white decoration is especially evident in the colour photograph enhanced by Rijksmuseum photographer Frans Pegt (figs. 3a, b).
- 8 Christiaan Jörg, *Fine & Curious: Japanese Export Porcelain in Dutch Collections*, Leiden 2003, p. 33, no. 17.
- 9 The Private Collection of Captain M. Hatcher, sale cat. Amsterdam (Christie's), 14 February 1985, no. 171.
- 10 For the Hatcher Cargo see *Fine and Important Late Ming and Transitional Porcelain, Recently Recovered from an Asian Vessel in the South China Sea: Property of Captain Michael Hatcher*, sale cat. Amsterdam (Christie's), 14 March 1984. With thanks to Christiaan Jörg for providing this example.
- 11 See Jan Daniël van Dam, *Delftse Porceleyn: Dutch Delftware 1620-1850*, Amsterdam 2004, pp. 27-31.
- 12 The Hague, National Archives (hereinafter NL-HaNA), Archive of the VOC (accession no. 1.04.02), Resolutions Heren xvii, inv. no. 104, fol. 102, 7 October 1656, 'partije porceleijn, alsoo bevinden dat bij veele particulieren veel overgebracht wort'. The directors had become aware of Japanese porcelain through confiscations of unlawful possession of it in the private luggage of crew members upon their return to the Netherlands.
- 13 NL-HaNA, 1.04.02 VOC, Minutes of the meeting of the Amsterdam Chamber, inv. no. 352, fol. 12, 19 September 1661, 'Japans Porceleyn, 't welck also desen jaere weder ongemeen gerendeert heeft' and 'grote commen en potten'. See Cynthia Viallé, 'Japanese Porcelain for the Netherlands: The Records of the Dutch East India Company', in *The Voyage of Old-Imari Porcelains*, exh. cat. Arita (The Kyushu Ceramic Museum) 2000, p. 177.
- 14 NL-HaNA, Archive of the Dutch Factory in Hirado, Japan (accession no. 1.04.21), Invoices of incoming and outgoing cargo, inv. no. 786, fol. 11, 22 June 1662, '2 Cassen ... met hollants porceleijn ... tot munsters voor Jappan omme aldaar, daar naer te doen maken'; another case has other pieces of 'Dutch porcelain' ('hollands porceleijn'), *ibid.*, fol. 32, 22 June 1662.
- 15 Christiaan Jörg identified the similarity first in his catalogue entry for the Japanese lidded jar (see note 8), in which he described the Delft piece as a copy of the Japanese example.
- 16 The glossy layer of lead cover-glaze (kwaart) has only been found on Delft pieces dating from 1670 onwards. See Titus M. Eliëns (ed.), *White Delft: Not just blue*, The Hague / Zwolle 2013 (*Dutch Delftware: History of a National Product*, vol. 5), pp. 158-59. With thanks to Femke Diercks for this information.
- 17 Eline van den Berg observes that De Man's Delftware jar certainly seems modelled after a pre-1680 Asian prototype, a kind of fusion of Chinese Kraak and Japanese elements.