

An unusual conflagration of motifs

The British Museum painted cotton canopy stamped Saint Petersburg 1772

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The Indian painted cotton in the British Museum belongs to a series of large chintzes produced in the 18th century for a world-wide clientele.¹ Yet through its unusually complex decoration it stands out amidst better known types of designs and colour schemes. In an Indian context such large chintzes would have been used as decorative linings for tent panels and awnings, or as ground or floor coverings. When made for export, different themes were selected for household furniture or clothing in order to respond to the tastes of the Dutch, the English or the French. The British Museum painted cotton, like other chintzes, reflects the remarkable capacity of Indian craftsmen to adapt their skills to any type of requirement; this was the essence, the *stuff* of their contribution (Pl. 1).



1.
An Indian cotton canopy dated 1772,
5 x 5 m, British Museum,
Asia 1998. 5-5. 01. Brooke Sewell
Permanent Fund. Courtesy Trustees
of the British Museum.

The impressive size of the piece, five metres by five metres and the contrasting themes of its designs organized around a central roundel, all point to its use as a canopy rather than to that of a floor spread or wall hanging such as a tree of life. Canopies would have lined the inner ceiling of a ceremonial tent which in this case must have been of an unusual size.² Surviving canopies with a central medallion such as those in the Calico Museum do not exceed three metres square.³

¹ *British Museum Magazine* 16-9.

² *Sultan, Shah and Great Mughal*, no. 328 fig. 101. A Babur- Nama miniature, "Babur meets his cousins in the camp by the Oxus in 1504". The David collection 14/1980. Different tent shapes are depicted including an inside view of vertical panels known as *qanats*. *Encounters*, 6.8. An Akbar-Nama miniature, "Da'ud receives a robe of honour from Mun'im Khan". The Freer Gallery of Art.

³ Irwin & Hall, 66 & 67, nos. 356 & 1001, 2m54 x 2m17 and 2m13 x 191.

The presence of different figures, be it Chinese women, Company soldiers or Japanese-looking characters, could in a certain manner recall an earlier awning commemorating a possible meeting between Dutch and Danish traders in an Indian context with festive entertainment by the local rulers. 1654 would have been the date and Tranquebar the location on the Coromandel Coast.⁴ In this example the canopy could be viewed as the two halves of a lining for the pitched roof of a tent. It would indeed be difficult to imagine a crowd trespassing, sitting or eating on such a figurative cotton. In a similar manner the two 17th century figural panels of the Metropolitan Museum and the Victoria & Albert Museum would have hung as an ornamental panel if not for a tent at least to decorate a wall.⁵ In their own context temple hangings of southern India depicting the exploits of the gods were also viewed off the ground! The surprisingly good condition of the canopy suggests that it has hardly been used, if at all.

The above title *An unusual conflagration of motifs* conveys the intricacy of the different motifs used in its composition: lions, winged putti or cherubs, a variety of birds and flowers, pairs of Chinese belles with mirrors, soldiers, bamboo groves, erotic vignettes, Sino-Japanese scenes of merriment with buildings, gardens and the sea. All these motifs appear to be unconnected as well as the unexpected stamp on the reverse of one corner; it reads: *Saint Petersburg* in Cyrillic writing with the date 1772. By that date the Coromandel Coast production of chintzes had been well established for many decades. Whatever the time gap may be between the date of production and that of the Russian Custom stamp, such a piece belongs to the 18th century. The date of 1772 is not necessarily a help for dating the work, and not too much credit should be given to it at this stage of research. Since the early days of the East India companies in the 17th century *Orientalism* had become a way of life for wealthy Europeans. Furniture, lacquer, textiles, ceramics, wall paper, all reflected the craze for patterns and designs emanating from Asia, these in turn influencing most European decorative arts.

The central roundel

The lion

The central roundel with its sand-coloured ground encompasses the profiled figure of a *lion rampant* surrounded by a garland of paired putti ou cherubs, all within a final necklace of alternating broad and narrow oblong shapes which could recall lotus petals. The lion is facing right, a raised scimitar in its left paw and a bunch of seven arrows with a ribboned snake in its right one (Pl. 2). A slanted crown rides on its head and from the back of it a prolific mane spreads out onto its shoulders. Its regular curls recall those of Ming marble lions in the Chinese Forbidden City of Beijing.⁶ All claws are visible and its long tail ends in a broad tuft. A similar if unusual tuft is placed halfway down it. The background consists of a dense pattern of elongated flowery branches similar to regular chintz floral patterns of the period.

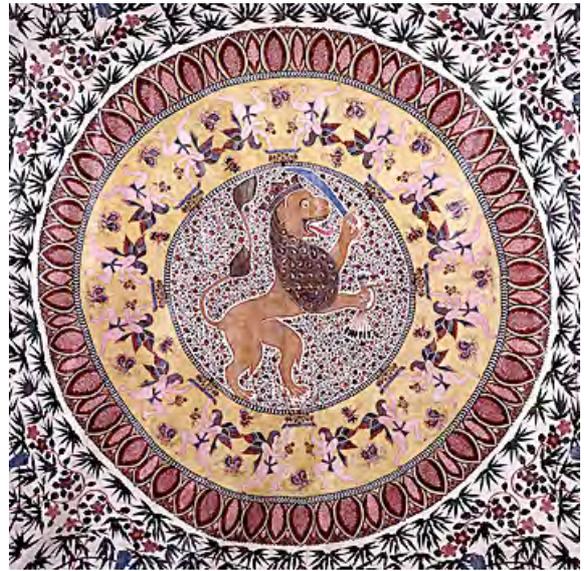
This lion has been described as a Sri Lankan lion since it is the present emblem of the Sri Lankan State, but it has none of the features which could connect it with the lion in the roundel. On the other hand there is enough evidence to interpret the lion in the roundel as the *generaliteits-leeuw* symbol of the United Provinces, the Netherlands of the 18th century. Since most of the Dutch provinces already had a lion in their coats of arms, the lion eventually became the symbol of the Dutch state with the addition of a sword to symbolize its newly conquered independence in 1648.

⁴ *Purs Décors?* no. 223. Hartkamp-Jonxis (a).

⁵ Victoria & Albert Museum No. 687-1898, Crill fig. 14. Metropolitan Museum of Art No. 20.79, Irwin & Brett fig. 2.

⁶ There are two bronze lions, one male the other female, in front of the steps of the Hall of Supreme Harmony; other marble examples figure in front of smaller pavilions inside the Forbidden City. *China*, fig. 64.

The seven arrows representing seven provinces were placed in the left paw of the lion with or without the addition of a ribbon, the ribboned snake noticed earlier. A similar crowned lion figures on a palampore in the Victoria & Albert Museum, holding a straight sword in its right paw as it stands in a walking position.⁷ There are other images of this type of a lion rampant on its hind legs and holding seven arrows in one paw and a sword in the other with its unusual tail feature. Such a lion used to decorate the impressive helmet of Dutch grenadiers.⁸ But in this case the raised sword is held in the right paw and the arrows in the left one; furthermore the lion faces left. Identical lions with such features also appear on silver *ducatons*, the Dutch *ducaton*. From 1602, date of its foundation, the VOC, the *Verenigde Oostindische Compagnie*, used Dutch silver ducats for trading purposes. But by 1726 the Company decided to strike its own coinage using this very design of a lion, to counteract a certain form of smuggling regular *ducatons*⁹. At first the



2.
Canopy detail of central roundel.

Dutch government opposed this move but relented by 1728 and permitted such coinage to circulate on its Far Eastern Asian market. The last of such issues is dated 1751. The motto inscribed on the coin belongs to the Dutch Republic and reads: *Concordia res parvae crescunt* which could be translated as: small deals grow with consensus.

There exists a small group of porcelain teapots, cups and saucers made to order and decorated with the features of the coinage dated 1728¹⁰. The date appears to be a coincidence and the destination of these *famille rose* pieces of porcelain is not clear (Pl. 3). The painting on the porcelain is



3.
Famille rose cup and saucer dated 1728.
H: 3.6cm, W: 10.4 cm.
Franks collection, F.797.
Courtesy Trustees of the British Museum.

⁷ Irwin & Brett, no. 81, pl. 78.

⁸ Stevens, pp 70-1.

⁹ Personal traders found it profitable to bring ducatoons to Batavia and exchange them for a bill of exchange which could be cashed at a profit back home. Thus the reason for the minting of this type of VOC coinage.

Information kindly given by Arent Pol, curator of Medieval and modern coins, Geldmuseum, Utrecht.

¹⁰ *Ancient trade ceramics*, pp 86-7.

typical of the Kangxi production of the time¹¹. On the coat of arms, the lion faces left, the arrows are held in the left paw, all according to the original Dutch pattern. But in these ceramic examples the ribbon flows vertically in a whimsical manner. With these different examples of lion depiction, one notices that the lion of the canopy looks right whereas on the helmet, the *ducatoon* and the pieces of porcelain, the lion faces left suggesting that the lion on the canopy is a mirror image of the standard Dutch depiction.

The garland of cherubs

A fanciful band of sixteen cherubs in pairs between two chevroned circles surrounds the Dutch lion; a thin cloth covers their loins (Pl. 2). Each pair carries a tray of flowers with one hand above their heads, while the other holds a separate bunch of flowers; eight small butterfly-looking insects fly above the cherubs' paired wings. Similar but larger insects fill the empty spaces between the cherubs at leg level. The use of butterflies and other fanciful insects as fillers are a standard feature in Safavid and Mughal decoration from the 17th century, echoing the European practice. They appear regularly on single page Mughal paintings and on their borders. As to the Baroque use of cherubs it is much in evidence across Europe in the late 17th and early 18th century, and although they may look strange on an Indian painted cotton, yet there are a number of chintzes where they do occur as on a pelmet in the Tapi collection,¹² on other palampores and on Armenian church hangings also made on the Coromandel coast.¹³ The pair of cherubs blowing trumpets in one corner of the canopy also belongs to the same group of motifs.¹⁴ In nearby Pondichéry a striking wood sculpture of a cherub in the shape of a wall bracket is dated to around 1700 (Pl. 4).¹⁵ Furthermore in the churches of Goa on the Western coast of India, both cherubs and seraphim with added painting and gilding decorate altars, altar screens¹⁶, wooden candle-sticks and mirror frames.¹⁷



4.

A tek bracket with gold leaf, Pondichéry, for the French market, 1690-1720, 10 x 30 x 15 cm. Musée des Arts Décoratifs de l'Océan Indien, Saint Louis de la Réunion, no. 990-684.

¹¹ Comments kindly provided Christiaan Jorg.

¹² The Tapi collection, T. 05. 44, 70 x 24cm, T. 05. 45, 69 x 24cm.

¹³ Raynal, vol. II, p. 59.

¹⁴ Crill no. 35, p. 77 (V&A, IS.46-1956). *Or et trésors d'Arménie*, nos. 70 and 81, AD 1778.

¹⁵ *La route des Indes*, no. 67.

¹⁶ Old Goa, the Sé Cathedral, Chapel of the Holy Cross of Miracles, the Church of Saint Cajetan, the main altar.

¹⁷ *Museu de Arte Sacra*, pp 98-103.

When seen at a distance the whole composition of the roundel creates the optical illusion of an eight-pointed star shaped by two superimposed squares of the cherub motif. Such an effective pattern was only possible by using stencils with care so as to produce a geometric pattern. A final circular necklace of hanging ogival petals, rounds off the roundel of the canopy. Forty four small clusters of bamboo foliage surround the area outside the roundel. As a transition they introduce the four bamboo groves beyond them.

The bamboo groves and corner scenes



5.

Canopy: detail of bamboo grove.

The design of the four bamboo groves with entwined growths on a sand-coloured ground appears to shore up the central roundel in a similar manner to pendentives shoring up a dome (Pl. 1). Each group of ten trunks is wedged into a sandy mound on either side of which a variety of wild quadrupeds either are in combat or graze peacefully (Pl. 5). A subdued erotic scene occupies the final lozenge of each lower corner (Pl. 6). The presence of large white rabbits or hares on two of the mounds is rather puzzling and will be discussed in the next section. On either side of one bamboo grove a crouching rabbit looks backwards as if something was about to happen. On another, two rabbits are about to escape from either side of the mound as they witness a tiger devouring a gazelle and another tiger approaching with its two young cubs! A further scene depicts a menacing tiger stalking a group of two does and one gazelle. The fourth scene includes a prancing tiger with a doe in its jaws while a gazelle with its head turned back, is escaping the scene. Such wildlife scenes are not unusual and often feature on Mughal wall paintings.

Although the animal chases differ in their actions from one scene to the next, the bamboo groves have been organised as four single mirror motifs with six birds in flight or perched on a branch. Yet the two rock formations on either side of their base are slightly different and their position alters from one grove to the other. The differences reside in the shape and position of the birds, possibly mynas, as they perch on their own blue rock formation. The two flowery branches of peonies which spring from these Chinese-looking rocks delicately fill the space between the bamboo groves and the four repeat scenes which occupy the middle of each side of the canopy.



6.
Canopy: detail of erotic scene.

On smaller palampores, such as one example in Amsterdam just over 3 metres high, the bamboo grove is the only subject and stands at the centre of the field with rocks on either side of it.¹⁸ A peacock flies across the composition, but does not appear in the bamboo grove of the British Museum design. Obviously the patterns of several stencils have been selected and placed differently from one painted cotton composition to the other. As to the regular presence of bamboo designs in an Indian context it could be explained by the influence of Chinese painting or wall paper, a favorite item in European *orientalist* decoration of the day.¹⁹ 1772 gives a terminal date as a reminder that by that date European fashion had been increasingly governed by a fascination for all goods coming from Asia. Stately houses were crowded with Asian lacquers, wall papers, ceramics, embroidered silks and painted cottons. A fan depicted an idealized oriental bazaar, a kind of *capriccio*, and a few porcelains and paintings carry depictions of European customers in porcelain and tea shops.²⁰ Around 1700 the VOC alone, as the most important provider of Asian goods, had about one hundred ships at sea. Other East India Companies also competed with the VOC, all be it in a lesser manner, with a plethora of goods which would combine to shape the *Orientalist* taste of the day.

Four pairs of Chinese beauties

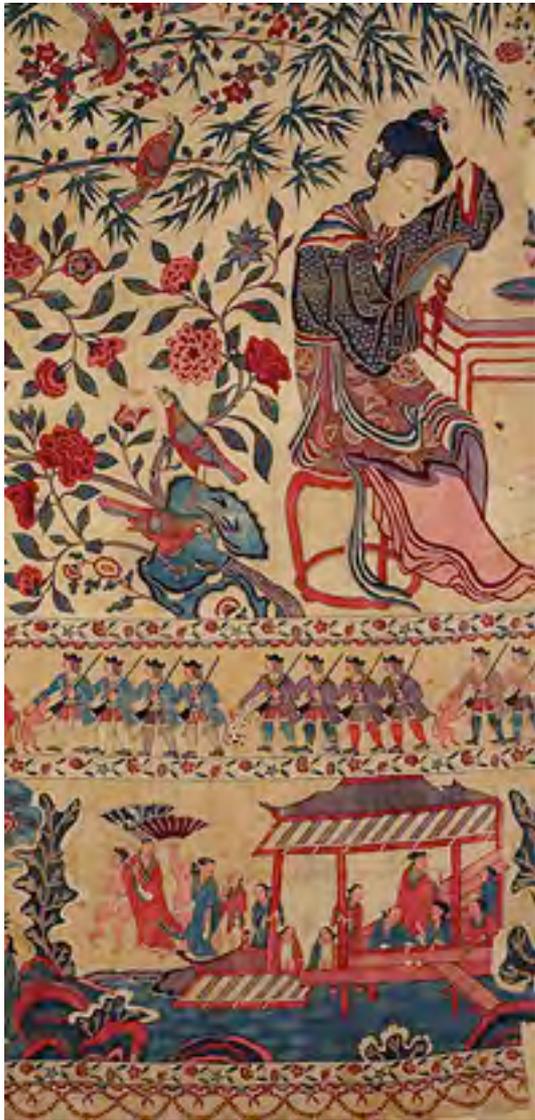
The middle of each side of the canopy displays a pair of Chinese ladies sitting on Chinese chairs on either side of a dressing table, each pair separated by the angled bamboo groves with rocks (Pl. 7). Such a theme is not unfamiliar and it is recorded both in the Victoria & Albert Museum (Pl. 8) and in the Tapi Collection in India (Pl. 9).²¹ Let us first consider the women; their clothes and head dress appear to be Chinese. The two figures are in fact mirror-images of each other, one with a red shirt the other with a blue one. They are holding up a mirror in one hand and arranging their hair with the other. A saucer and a vase with flowers stand, as if in mid-air, on a backless table. This

¹⁸ Hartkamp-Jonxis (b), Palampore BK 1980-801, 339 x 801cm, 18th century, pp 28-331, no. 8.

¹⁹ Artcurial, no. 283. Seven panels of wall paper with rocks, bamboos, birds and flowers.

²⁰ *Encounters*, no. 1.4. Design for a fan about 1700.

²¹ Irwin & Brett, no. 48, pl. 46, *the Tapi collection* T.05.45.



7.
Canopy: detail of two Chinese belles.

8.
Chinese belles, detail: Victoria & Albert museum
IS152-1950.
Courtesy Trustees of the Victoria & Albert Museum.

9.
Chinese belle: T.05.45. Tapi collection.
Courtesy Praful and Shilpa Shah.

type of simplification is also noticeable with vase necks in the corners of certain palampores.²² As to the clothing on the Victoria & Albert Museum palampore the shirts are the same colour. The third example from the Tapi collection appears to be a slenderer and more graceful figure with a rock composition by the foot of the stool. In all three examples two rabbits lie on the ground at the feet of the two women; the finely drawn uncoloured British Museum rabbits on the mounds and between the seated ladies are difficult to relate to any similar representation on textiles, and a plausible source might be found on blue and white Chinese export porcelain from the Transitional or early Kangxi periods, mid to late 17th century. They figure on a number of small dishes and incense burners; the shoulder of large vases can be decorated with series of panels containing a white rabbit.²³ Traditionally in Asian cultures hares or rabbits are the guardians of medicinal herbs which are connected with the idea of immortality, but in the present case they do not appear to carry any special message, and are used as pets or just fillers.

The corner scenes

As to the erotic scenes in lozenges on a white background, at the four corners of the main composition, they could be the conclusion to the make-up scenes of the four pairs of Chinese women: a discreet scene of love making (Pl. 6). The couples with entwined legs appear to look rather grim as they sit uncomfortably on plain benches. In only one of the lozenges has the outline of the scene been well centered so as to show the struts of the bench and the whole slipped foot of the woman. A repeat scene of a ferocious nature, a tiger biting into the bleeding neck of a gazelle, lines both sides of this very lozenge.

The bald-headed man with blue eyes and a mustache, (could he be Dutch although his shoes look more Far-Eastern than European?), while reaching into the décolleté of the Chinese woman with one hand, rests the other on her shoulder. She tries to hold back the searching hand while her right one hangs limply over her waist. Her blouse and his trousers are plain, whereas slight variations of dots, circles or cross-hatching appear from one setting to the other in the patterning of his long gown and her loose trousers. Such scenes were most probably inspired by similar erotic designs on paper or silk which were available both in Islamic and Chinese lands. 18th century Chinese depictions are artistically set in graceful surroundings of elegant houses or gardens; evocative poems frequently enhance the page!²⁴ But in the case of the British Museum canopy the basic setting of a bench lacks any refinement! The four repeats are placed haphazardly within the space allotted to them. Similar themes may exist on other painted cottons, but they have yet to come to light.

The line of soldiers

A continuous line of soldiers carrying guns acts as a divider between the main composition and the outer band of decoration; their uniform and hat come close to those worn by Dutch soldiers of the time.²⁵ They are grouped in fours according to the different colours of their jackets: crimson, pink, red and blue (Pl. 10). The jacket with pockets falls open from the waist, the leggings are held by garters with ties, the hat design echoes a tricorn shape. The same soldiers also appear on the canopy from the Tapi collection with a slightly different alignment as a strutting spotted dog interrupts the line every four soldiers (Pl. 9). It is the same spotted dog which accompanies a

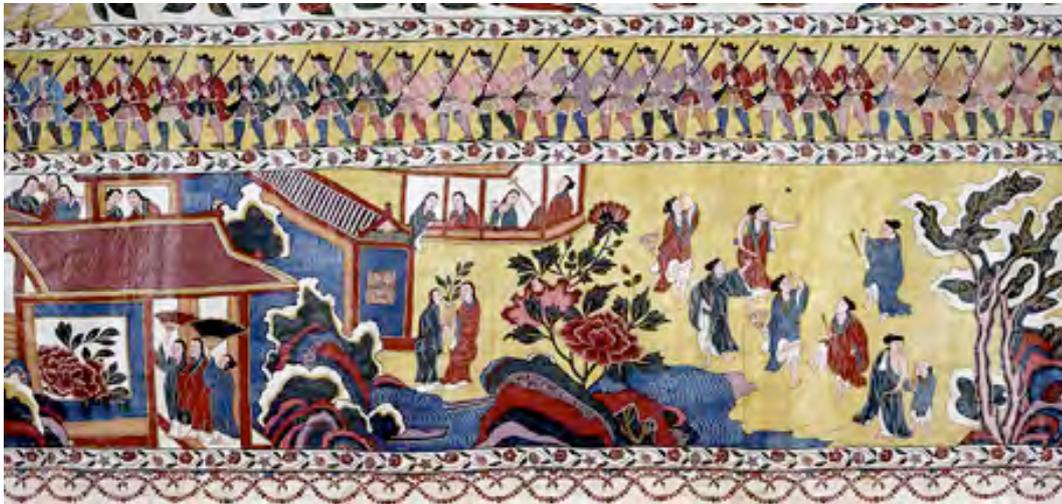
²² Irwin & Brett, no. 17, pl. 15, no. 18, pl. 16.

²³ Marchant, no. 24.

²⁴ Bertholet, p. 99.

²⁵ New York Public Library, no. 6 dated 1716.

soldier in two opposite corners of the British Museum canopy below the erotic scenes. The mechanical alignment of soldiers follows the usual display of aligned figures depicted on a painted cloth illustrating the embassy of Johannes Bacherus on its way to the court of Aurangzeb in the late 17th century.²⁶ In this case the escort is that of soldiers with turbans wearing brown coats with leggings and armed with sword and gun, the usual equipment of a Dutch soldier.



10. Canopy: detail of outer border

The border scenes

The last series of decoration occupies the four outer bands or guards of the canopy. None of these scenes relates to the rest of the composition, except for a single lion in a square at each corner, almost on all fours and carrying a sword, which recalls the heraldic beast in the central roundel. Although it has been possible to discover links between the Dutch lion and the VOC, the putti and Baroque European style, even between Asian erotic scenes, there is no evidence at first sight which would help to relate the border scenes to the rest of the canopy. These are set against a sand-coloured ground similar to that of the central lion and the bamboo mounds. And yet by searching further East of India, along the maritime trail of the VOC, a particular type of document has provided a series of clues which might relate this part of the canopy to Japan. In the last few years several exhibitions have been concerned with international trade from Europe to the Far East where the VOC outpost in Japan on the man-made island of Deshima remained the only foothold of the Dutch on Japanese land for over two hundred years from 1641 to 1854.²⁷ The very small fan-shaped island off the shore of Nagasaki was often illustrated either by European visitors or by local painters. Several bird's-eye views of the island have been painted over the years, showing the transformation of both buildings and gardens.²⁸

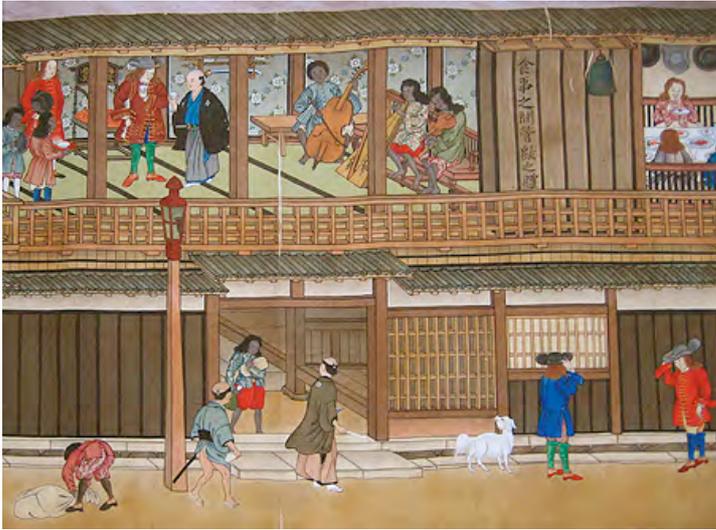
Further detailed pictures of the island have been painted on a series of Japanese silk scrolls presumably for the Dutch market. Already three such scrolls, one in the Victoria & Albert Museum, another example in the British Museum and a third one in the Rijkmuseum in Amsterdam, may enlighten the imagery of the borders.²⁹ Two-floor dwellings with storage on the ground floor and living quarters above with sliding windows, are set among attractive trees, luscious flowers and

²⁶ *Encounters*, pl. 6.6. Kit Collection, Tropenmuseum Amsterdam, A 9584.

²⁷ *Encounters*, pl.10.2. The Dutch factory at Deshima, V&A no. D. 151-1909, 351 x 434 cm square.

²⁸ *In the wake*, pp 56-59, nos. 34-40.

²⁹ Victoria & Albert Museum D.151-1905. British Museum 1944.10-14.022. Jacobs, p. 79.



11.
Scroll detail: British Museum 1944.10-14.022.
Courtesy Trustees of the British Museum.

European-looking gardens with tamed peacocks and geese; VOC members in late 17th century clothing entertain Japanese officials, or else eat out of blue and white dishes, smoke by the billiard room or listen to a group of Malay musicians while servants probably from Batavia busy themselves with various chores (Pl. 11). The Japanese scroll does provide a rosy picture of life on Deshima island! By far the most relevant parts of the scrolls are the buildings, the Dutch flag, the flowers and the sea at either end of the scroll. Some of these details might have inspired the border designers of the British Museum canopy. Yet need the whole of the borders be Japanese inspired? Could the open buildings often on two floors be Chinese rather than Japanese? The answer is given by comparing Chinese buildings on silk panels decorating European palaces and stately homes. These look more elaborate with different types of structures and more contrived decoration and shapes.³⁰ By contrast the fully flushed peonies on both borders and scrolls come very close to the blossoms reproduced on *famille rose* dinner services for the European market (Pl. 12), they in turn are also noticeable on Chinese paintings and silk embroideries.³¹



12.
Dish *Famille rose*, ca.1730. W: 22.7 cm.
Courtesy Trustees of the British Museum.



13.
Anonymous drawing of Japanese coolies,
Amsterdam Maritime Museum.

³⁰ Mosetti , Royal palace of Macconigi, 1756, p. 505.

³¹ *Ancient Chinese trade ceramics*, p. 281, no. 125, *famille rose* soup plate, about 1730.

Two further details come close to a Japanese connection. In the middle of each band there is the depiction of *Kenari*, a ball game practiced to this day by groups of men here clad in blue or red robes some with a naked shoulder (Pl. 10).³² They gesticulate as they attempt to kick a ball and one or two servants on the side, smaller in size, hold a bottle. The different stances are model-stenciled figures, often in mirror-image position. Each of the four compositions is slightly different with some variations in the grouping of three men in red and three or four in blue. The second detail concerns several almost naked figures only clad in a loin cloth rendered either in blue or white. This is not another example of a putto, and the explanation for this depiction of almost nakedness is to be found on a Japanese illustration of coolies who on an anonymous drawing, are shown hardly dressed and unloading ships on the quay side (Pl. 13).³³

A number of other details would also deserve closer study. Pleasant entertainments such as dancing, listening to music, drinking, gambling, walking about even fishing, suggest further activities on the small island where life must have been more than tiresome. As always the painting enhances real life. Small variations on the Tapi canopy include fish in the water as opposed to ripples on the British Museum piece (Pl. 9).

Conclusion

In this first study of the British Museum canopy, it has seemed important to deal with the most obvious research, explaining the iconography of the lion, tracing the origins of the putti, the bamboo groves, the Chinese belles and suggesting the possibility that a Japanese silk scroll of Deshima could have influenced the borders of the canopy. The remarkable state of preservation of the canopy has allowed the sand-coloured backgrounds to remain fairly close to what may be called a mellow-yellow colour. Most painted cottons no longer show such a colour. Instead a pale shade of beige indicates the faded yellow. Yet this colour has survived in an unexpected field, that of 18th century ceramics from the Turkish town of Kütahya. The glazed decoration imitating standard patterns of Indian painted cottons, reproduced the whole range of chintz colours including yellow.³⁴

The next study will have to deal with a detailed historical background in an attempt to narrow down the dating of the canopy. 1772 is a helpful terminal date, yet certain details suggest the possibility of an earlier date for the production of such an intricate design (Pl. 14). The canopy might have been composed at a time when less pressure was put on the VOC by the increase of British presence and its rising power which led to the victory at Palashi in 1757.



14.
Canopy: Saint Petersburg customs stamp 1772.

³² *Kenari* means to kick a ball. The Chinese game of *Cufu* was introduced into Japan about 600 AD. The ball kicker wears special boots called *marishashi* which means to keep in the air.

³³ Jacobs, p. 82. Japanese coolies on Deshima, anonymous Japanese drawing.

³⁴ Crowe Y., Kütahya and caravans, forthcoming

Acknowledgements

This paper is dedicated to the memory of Henry Ginsburg who alerted me to the existence of this canopy. Grateful thanks are due to Richard Blurton of the British Museum, who gave me a free hand to work on it, also to Praful and Shilpa Shah, the Tapi collection and to Rosemary Crill of the Victoria & Albert Museum, who helped me with my endless queries, to Christiaan Jorg, the source of wise and friendly advice, to Arent Pol for specific numismatic references, to Amita Baig, Mrs Sarabhay, the Calico Museum and its staff, Philippe Neeser for his knowledgeable responses to Sino-Japanese iconography and to Elsabe Kalsbeek-Schimmelpenninck van der Oije, my link with the Netherlands.

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