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Patterns of Contact - Designs from the Indian Ocean World: A Curator's View

Carol Kaufmann

Background

“Patterns of Contact: Designs from the Indian Ocean World” held in 2014 at Iziko Museum, Cape Town, presented a rare and exciting opportunity for public and private collections to showcase rare objects depicting the visual culture of the early colony of south east Africa and how it was influenced by its contact with the Indian Ocean world. This was done through the exhibits and background stories of works of art, rare maps, ceramic and porcelain objects, silks, cotton textiles, highly-prized pieces of furniture and cabinets. As a curator with an interest in the early colonial history and archaeology of the region of South- East Africa, and since Cape Town was selected as the *World Design Capital* in 2014, I welcomed this call to showcase some of our lesser known treasures within a new context.

The exhibition included unique artefacts from later Iron Age sites along the Limpopo Valley and further afield, representing the extensive interactions between Indian Ocean populations and southern Africa. These artefacts were provided by the Iziko Collections, the Cecil John Rhodes private collection housed in the Groote Schuur Estate Museum and the Collections of Parliament, all located in Cape Town. In addition, Dutch style oil and landscape paintings from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were on display from the Michaelis Collection at the Iziko Town House Museum.

The exhibition focused pertinently on the roots of design in South Africa resulting from the pre-colonial contacts with East Asia by way of the Arabian Peninsula and the Mediterranean World. At the same time, the exhibit was made current by including twenty-first century work of contemporary artists and designers, including the continuous screening of two short films – *The Dutch Postal Stones of Madagascar* (Tetteroo Media) and *Standfast* (Fort Rixon).

With an emphasis on design, *Patterns of Contact* exhibited the visual culture of descendant Cape populations highlighting the link between the origins of Cape Town's cosmopolitan community and the long history of contact with the Indian Ocean World, primarily through the mercantile operations of European Colonial powers.

The Old and New Worlds came to know each other through voyages of discovery that began in the late 1500's. With the formation of the Dutch East India Company (*Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie* or the VOC) in 1602, regular trading voyages to India and Batavia (modern Jakarta in Indonesia) commenced around the Cape of Good Hope. By 1652, a new vibrant and brutal cosmopolitan society had emerged that would greatly affect the southern tip of Africa, namely Cape Town.¹

¹ Nigel Worden, Van Heyningen, E and Bickford-Smith V., *Cape Town in the Making of a City* (Cape, South Africa: David Philip Publishers, Claremont 1998). pp. 12-88. 151

A Chinese Map

Located adjacent to the introductory panel, was an imposing silk-painted hanging map carefully installed against an ox-blood red background². The significant aspect of this early map was the depiction of Africa by fourteenth century Chinese cartographers. The spectacular copy of the original was presented by the Government of China to the Parliament of South Africa on the occasion of Nelson Mandela's inauguration as the first democratically elected president in 1994 (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Installation view of Chinese Map.

The *Da Ming Hun Yi Tu*, the *Amalgamated Map of the Great Ming Empire*, by an unknown cartographer is dated circa 1389. The original map, from which this unique copy has been made, is housed in the First Historical Archive of China in Beijing and it is a derivative of an even earlier map dated 1320, which is no longer in existence. As an illustration of the Chinese Ming Empire (1368-1644), it is arguably the oldest world map in existence that accurately reflects the shape of the African continent. Given the vintage of the map, features such as the Nile River and the southern African escarpment are surprisingly recognizable. A great lake can be seen covering almost half of the continent's land mass leading researchers to suggest that this view may have been based on an Arab legend that "further south from the Sahara Desert is a great lake, far greater than the Caspian Sea". We now know that Lake Victoria is the largest African lake and is in fact only a fifth of the size of the Caspian Sea.

²The map is almost three metres high and more than three metres long.

Art and Islam at the Cape

The exhibition included an extremely rare prayer book in Arabic script known as the *qutab*, although it reads as phonetic Afrikaans, the new *Cape Creole* language. Wooden sandals, silken textiles, Malaysian and Cape silver and a set of Iznik-like patterned enamelled jugs inscribed in Kufic script are a reminder of the rich contribution of skilled artisans and their descendants, during the two centuries of migration.

The contrasting images of two mosques, a small mid-20th century landscape, *Mosque and houses* (n.d.) by Florence Zerffi (1882-1962), and a contemporary photograph of a richly staged view of a figure inside a mosque, *Untitled Portrait IV, Halaal Art* (2009) by brothers Hasan and Husain Essop (b.1985), are evidence of the well established presence of Islam at the Cape.

Above a brass bound Indonesian made VOC sea chest, and against an ox-blood wall was an oil portrait framed by fragments of an ornate Zanzibar door, entitled *The Golden Shawl* (*Portrait of Sheik Rashid* 1945) painted by South Africa's most acclaimed artist, Irma Stern (1894-1966) while visiting Zanzibar in 1945 (Figure 2). At the time, she was unable to travel to her usual destination of Europe because as a German Jewess she was fearful of Nazi persecution. Being restless and bored with colonial life in Cape Town, she turned to East Africa for adventure and inspiration. Her lifelong fascination with Islamic art and culture had developed from her introduction to the so-called Cape "Malay" population of Cape Town, descendants of enslaved people and free blacks from South Asia.

Figure 2. Installation view with Batavian VOC sea chest, Cape made stinkwood chair (18thC) and portraits of Arab subjects in Zanzibar frames by Irma Stern (1895-1967).

Ceramics and Porcelain

In a small cabinet adjacent to the Chinese Map, shards of imported Asian ceramics, and strings of tiny colourful glass trade beads manufactured over a thousand years ago attest to southern Africa's early participation in the global economy. Imported wares from the Mediterranean world and East Asia excavated from later Iron Age archaeological sites (AD 1200 – AD 1700) in the Limpopo Valley and Great Zimbabwe are believed to have been introduced by Omani Arab merchants active along the Swahili and Mozambique Coast in the late tenth century³. Very small quantities of fine oriental ceramics occur in archaeological sites in South Africa, Zimbabwe and Mozambique. The inference is that ceramic items were more likely to have been gifts to African chiefs as tokens of goodwill for bilateral trade.

However, the glass beads found in profusion at these sites were highly sought-after as prestige objects. They have been identified as originating from Egypt (Fustat), Persia, India and China and were likely exchanged for African products such as ivory, animal skins, salt, slaves and metals, including gold. At Mapungubwe, pale turquoise beads were crushed, heated and moulded in clay forms to make unique, larger beads. These distinctively shaped beads are the famous so-called “garden roller beads” of Mapungubwe.⁴

For exhibition purposes, Chinese and Japanese export porcelain were presented in a glazed eighteenth century Cape baroque style armoire, manufactured purposefully for the living rooms (*voorkamers*) of wealthy citizens. VOC monogrammed porcelain is still prized today. At the centre of each dish is the monogram of the VOC or Dutch East India Company. Such dishes were ordered by the VOC from 1668 to the early 18th century and were for the exclusive use of company officials in Batavia, on board VOC ships and in Dutch settlements throughout Asia, and also the Cape.

Export porcelain was one of the most commonly traded commodities during the VOC period and was frequently used as ballast to weigh down the merchant ships passing around the Cape of Good Hope. All of the export porcelain on the exhibit was selected from the extensive Iziko Social History Collections (Figure 3).

³ Alex Duffey, “China unearthed in Africa: Chinese ceramics from archaeological excavations in Southern Africa”, *Artefacts* Vol 40 (2013): 1-20, p.10

154 ⁴ Carol Kaufmann, *Musuku Golden links with our Past* (Cape Town: Anglogold and the South African National Gallery, 2000) p.10.

Figure 3. Japanese under glaze blue porcelain dish with VOC monogram

The first time the Dutch saw porcelain in any significant quantities was in the form of booty captured from rival Portuguese trading vessels. The porcelain from the Portuguese ships (*carracs*) was of a type produced for export in Jingdezhen under the emperor Wanli who ruled from 1573 to 1619. It became known as *kraakporselein* since *kraak* was the Dutch word for the Portuguese *carracs*.

Chinese *kraakporselein* became popular and attracted an eager buying public. It was harder, thinner and more lustrous than the locally produced tin-glazed earthenware and stoneware, and also more decorative and colourful. Deep blue decorations were distributed over a pure white background. The introduction of porcelain, furthermore, came at a time when a growing wealthy middle class could afford, and wanted, a certain measure of luxury, thus ensuring a market for the porcelain despite its expense. *Kraak* style dishes and bowls featured prominently in Dutch still-life paintings, lending an exotic flavour to renditions of tables laden with luscious fruits and other treasured objects.

Textiles - Cotton and Dyes

Textiles were significant trade items and much in demand at the Cape during the period of Dutch government at the Cape (1652-1795). Indian cloth was key to this trade and the Dutch were quick to enter the lucrative market. Indian textiles were vastly used in the Asian exchange system to barter for spices from the eastern Indonesian islands of the Moluccas, ensuring a steady supply of prized condiments to the markets of India, West Asia, China and Europe.⁵

Merchant ships on the return trip to Europe were obliged to break their journey at the bustling Cape port which developed into an important centre for the distribution of textiles. From eighteenth and nineteenth century household inventories, which were deposited in the Cape Archives, it appears that a thriving trade in textiles existed informally amongst residents of the settlement who used their front rooms (*voorkamers*) from which to conduct business.⁶ There are some examples of trade textiles from both the Dutch and British East India Company in the Iziko Social History Collection and the Costume Collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.

Contemporary examples of hand loomed, indigo-dyed cotton fabrics, and patterned hand printed chintz made using eighteenth century designs, artisanal techniques and block printing were obtained from India and loaned especially for the exhibition⁷ (Figure 4). The deep and versatile blue dye extracted from the Indigo plant native to India was in plentiful supply when competing European traders and fortune hunters raced to the Indian Ocean in the 1600's.

Figure 4. Cotton across the seas - A selection of Indian *chintz*. Cotton, pigments. Hand printed using 18th century woodblocks and designs. On loan from Dominic Touwen Textiles

⁵ John Guy, *One Thing leads to Another: Indian Textiles and the Early Globalization of Style*. In *Interwoven Globe: the Worldwide Textile Trade 1500-1800*, ed. By Amelie Peck (NY: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2014).

⁶ The Cape Archives are a rich source of the domestic inventories of deceased estates, a legacy of the meticulous record keeping that was strictly enforced by the VOC administration. Further information was supplied by Dominic Touwen at a young designer's panel discussion on 1 November 2014, at ISANG.

⁷ Kindly loaned by Dominic Touwen Textiles.

Indigo cultivation spread rapidly to Africa and the Americas accompanied by abusive labour practices that were required to sustain extremely large scale export cultivation. The lucrative textile market in Europe fuelled both the Atlantic and African slave trades, ironically creating a further market for both indigo and cotton as clothing for un-free classes working on the plantations and enterprises of the colonisers.

Maritime archaeologists at Iziko Museums have recently retrieved indigo cakes packed for export in woven rattan baskets, from the cargo of a homeward bound Dutch East India merchant ship wrecked along the South African Coast⁸, providing tangible evidence of the trade in dye stuffs from Asia to Europe.

After 1600, when the rich resources of the Indian Ocean regions were more easily accessible to Europe and the colonised world, the new textiles and dye pigments became lucrative trading commodities. Access to blues, reds and yellows and their possibilities for secondary colours such as green and black, revolutionised fashion and costume in Europe and the New World. Cotton fabrics produced in India and Southeast Asia, absorbed the new, bright dye colours easily in contrast to the dull heavy linen and wool textiles in current use in Europe. The properties of cotton as a cheap, light and cool fabric combined with Indian, Chinese and Southeast Asian weaving techniques and designs transformed European and American tastes, fashions and markets up until the late 19th century. Colourful, affordable printed or embroidered cotton textiles became accessible to all classes and indeed democratised fashion.⁹

The iconic tree-of-life design featured prominently as the focal motif of spectacular patterned, vividly coloured Indian cotton cloths known as *palampores*.¹⁰ The design was so popular with the European market that it was also replicated in silk embroidery on large scale textiles, an example being in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston collection. Intricately painted and mordant-dyed, *palampores* were manufactured on the Coramandel Coast of India for the export market during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Patterns were usually very complex and elaborate, depicting a wide variety of plants, flowers, and animals, including peacocks, elephants, and horses. Because a *palampore* was hand-created, each design is unique. They became highly valued and were used as prestigious coverings and drapes for tester beds.

Only the wealthiest classes could afford to buy such luxurious and expensive imported fabrics, therefore, the few examples that survive are often quite rare.¹¹ Highly valued in the textile trade, *palampores* were primarily exported to Europe and to the Dutch colony at Batavia and what was then called Ceylon. However, to date, nothing similar has come to light at the Cape although it is possible they were used by high-ranking VOC officials here.

⁸ Jaco Boshoff, Iziko Maritime Archaeology Department. Personal communication, 11 July 2014.

⁹ Elna Phipps, *Global Colours; Dyes and Dye Trade*. In Amelia Peck, *Interwoven Globe*, p. 120.

¹⁰ Amelia Peck, *Interwoven Globe*, gives an informative account of the Indian textile trade and illustrates exquisite examples of surviving *palampores*, p.232.

¹¹ Surviving examples are to be found museum collections in Europe, USA and Great Britain.

Furniture

A selection of fine early colonial furniture showing Indian and Southeast Asian influences and timbers was selected from the Iziko Collections and loaned from the Groote Schuur Estate Collection. This included an early Indonesian VOC period ebony and rattan church chair with rich carving, a camphorwood VOC sea chest with brass escutcheons, an ivory inlaid document chest, a sandal wood cabinet on a stand with ornate brass fittings, circa 1700, a table casket in ebony and ivory, a Cape-made *tolletjie* (spindle) chair in Cape yellowwood, a magnificent late 18th century armoire in Cape stinkwood, satinwood and East-Asian woods, a Cape-made glazed cabinet for displaying a suite of Chinaware and finally, Rococo and Baroque style table and chair in stinkwood combined with Indian Ocean island timbers (Figure 5).

Figure 5. Unknown maker, *Church chair*, Ebony and rattan cane. Batavia 17th-18th Century. On loan from the Groote Schuur Collection.

Wood around the early Cape settlement was in short supply and had to be imported from as early as 1657. Across the Indian Ocean from countries like India, Batavia, Mauritius and Ceylon, came wood types such as teak, djati, amboyna, padouk, rosewood, sandalwood, satinwood and ebony while oak and pine were imported from Europe.¹² The limited supply resulted in craftsmen using what they could get their hands on and this may have resulted in the striking combination of indigenous stinkwood and yellow wood with the exotic wood types. This feature became a distinctive quality of Cape furniture¹³. There is evidence that Asian craftsmen were working as carpenters and were involved in furniture making at the Cape¹⁴. Determining the skills and origins of specific Asian carpenters has proved to be rather difficult and exactly what influence they had on furniture production is thus uncertain¹⁵

Origin of Some of the Exhibited Items

Over 3,000 wrecks are recorded along the southern African coast and 300 wrecks alone, took place in Table Bay. Dangerous maritime conditions were a major risk to the success of colonial trading expeditions.¹⁶ The Chinese export ceramics on show in the exhibition cabinet relating to the theme of maritime trade were excavated from two East Indian ship wrecks off the Cape Coast – the *Oosterland* and *Brederode*.

The former, built in Middleburg, Holland in 1685 was wrecked between Robben Island and Paarden Eiland in a storm in May 1697. The vessel had brought French Huguenots to the Cape of Good Hope on a previous voyage in 1688. However, nine years later on her return from Indonesia, she was wrecked in a storm. The richly-laden cargo included textiles, indigo, tropical woods, nuts, coconut shells, earthenware, porcelain and spices. The *Oosterland* was the first wreck to be archaeologically salvaged off Africa.¹⁷

¹² Matilda Burden, *Ou-Kaapse meubels: studies in syle* (Stellenbosch: Sun Media, 2013) p.8.

¹³ Deon Viljoen, Furniture at the Cape of Good Hope 1652-1795. In *Domestic Interiors at the Cape and in Batavia, 1602-1975*, ed. by T.M. Eliëns (Vlaeberg: Fernwood Press, 2002) p.161.

¹⁴ See Rob Shell, "Rangton of Bali 1673-1720: the short life and personal belongings of one slave", *Kronos* 18 (1991) 1-6.

¹⁵ Nigel Worden, Ethnic diversity at the VOC Cape, In T. M. Eliëns, *Domestic Interiors*, p.137

¹⁶ John Gribble, Past, Present and Future of Maritime Archaeology in South Africa. In *International Handbook of Underwater Archaeology*, ed. by Ruppe C.V. & J.F. Barstad (New York: Kluwer Academic/Plenum Publishers, 2002).

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