

## Porcelain's White Gleam: Iconoclasm and Encounter between the Netherlands and Asia

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### The Encounter Between the Netherlands and Asia: Image Strategies as a Seafaring Nation

New sensations are sought in an era of globalization. As Lévi-Strauss said, geographic discoveries then lead to secondary discoveries.<sup>1</sup> Europe's dramatic encounter with Asia in the 19th century can also be seen in regards to Netherlands from the latter half of the 16th century through the 17th century. In fact, it was Chinese porcelain that played an indispensable part of both wealth production and image strategy.<sup>2</sup>

In 1602 the Dutch East India Company was established in Holland and would become the front line of that strategy. Grasping command of the seas, Holland imported three million pieces of porcelain from Asia during the course of the 17th century. In the 1970s, a startling discovery was made. A massive number of Chinese porcelains were recovered from the cargo vessel *Witte Leeuw*, which sank in 1613 off the coast of St. Helena while sailing back to Amsterdam.<sup>3</sup> The majority of these works were Ming porcelains, with white grounds and underglaze blue designs of landscapes, and still life subjects such as flowers and birds (fig. 1). Our eyes are dazzled by the white gleam of the porcelain body. The appeal of Chinese porcelains to Dutch sensibilities was not limited to the period in the 17th century when artists were painting still life and genre scenes. The period from the end of the 16th century through the first half of the 17th century marked a major transformation in Dutch sensibilities, thanks to their encounter with Asia. It was such a massive change that, in fact, it can be called a sensibilities revolution.

Previous research indicating the connection between Chinese porcelains and Dutch art has focused on which porcelains were depicted in still lifes, or in genre

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<sup>1</sup> Lévi-Strauss, Claude. *The Other Face of the Moon*. Japanese translation by Kawada Junzō, Tokyō: Chūō Kōron Shinsha, 2014, pp. 34-40.

<sup>2</sup> Jörg, C. J. A. *Porcelain and the Dutch China Trade*. The Hague: Springer, 1982, chap. 1; Finlay, Robert. *The Pilgrim Art: Cultures of Porcelain in World History*. Berkeley/Los Angeles/London: University of California Press, 2010, pp. 210-211.

<sup>3</sup> Van der Pijl-Ketel, C. L. (eds.). *The Ceramic Load of the 'Witte Leeuw' (1613)*. Amsterdam: Rijksmuseum, 1982.

scenes. There was not, however, much research on the connection between these porcelains and deeper levels of Dutch aesthetics consciousness. In this presentation I would like to consider white gleam of the porcelain ground itself.

## **White Gleam – Birth of a New Aesthetic**

The impact of the external on cultural changes occurs all the time, no matter the period. A single factor's deep penetration into a cultural interior is not based on the strength of the strike, but rather on its resonance (fig. 2). This resonance is set off by the complementarity of two forces that occur within that culture, namely, the culture's independent development and external impact.

Let us consider the changes in an interest in that white gleam from the vantage point of changes occurring in northern Europe itself.

When you visit a church in the Italian stronghold of Catholicism, your eyes are drawn to the religious painting and sculpture that adorn the church interior. It is natural to assume that a church would be filled with religious imagery closely related to Christianity. And yet, when one steps into a Protestant church north of the Alps, the impression is completely different. There are no paintings or sculptures adorning the church interior, rather, the walls are painted a stark white. The Reformation that occurred at the beginning of the 16th century brought about this change. Unlike the Catholic Church, the core belief of Protestantism is that rather than through religious imagery, one encounters the heart of the faith by directly reading the Bible. This led to the iconoclastic push, removing all religious imagery, whether painting or sculpture, from churches, which spread across northern Europe from Germany to the Netherlands. The massive iconoclastic movement that occurred in the Netherlands in 1566 is well known today.

After the images were removed, the walls were painted white (fig. 3). A Catholic priest visited the Zurich cathedral and saw this phenomenon, stating, "there was nothing at all inside and it was hideous." He was struck by fear at that scene. Today we think of white as a neutral color, or have an image of it as something pure. This means that it is hard for us to understand the shock that painting the walls of a church white struck in the hearts of the people of the day. And yet the change in this awareness of white was in fact epoch-making, surprising.

For example, Matthew 23:27 states, "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within are full of dead people's bones and all uncleanness." (English Standard Version)

For Protestants, the church was made up of the religious and the worshippers, and thus was transformed from a "sacred space" to "community space/shared space" linking people, providing a place where worshippers could talk about the Bible. In

other words, after the removal of religious imagery from the church interior, it was not an empty space, rather it was a public space that served a social function. At the same time, changes occurred in how white was sensed. In the summer of 1524, Zwingli, who played a leading role in the destruction of idols or images, made the following surprising statement in Zurich Switzerland. “in Zurich we have churches which are positively luminous; walls are beautifully white.”<sup>4</sup> What this proponent of destroying idols had discerned was a new aesthetic understanding of white.<sup>5</sup>

It was Pieter Saenredam’s almost persistent depiction of church interiors that established paintings of the beautiful white walls of churches within Dutch painting (fig. 4). In fact, it completely changes the dim church interior, emitting a lovely gleam. I have long been taken by this white gleam.

Let’s look at Saenredam’s *Choir of the Church of Saint Bavo in Haarlem, with Imaginary Episcopal Tomb* (fig. 5). The right side of the organ seen through one of the arches is painted with an image of the Resurrection. Indeed, it is as if we are walking with them in the church interior. This method of stimulating the viewer’s senses works not only through the spaces depicted. The most impressive element is the whiteness of the walls. Saenredam was particularly effective at transforming church walls into a white gleam, but this method was not limited to him. The walls of Emanuel de Witte’s *Interior of the Oude Kerk* (fig. 6) are so white they almost hurt the eyes.

There might also be some who question whether the church walls seen in the paintings were actually painted on a white keynote. To answer such questions let’s look at Jan van Eyck’s *Madonna in the Church* (fig. 7). Here the walls are clearly not white.

Just because the walls were not adorned with sacred images did not trigger the thought to paint them white. It was the iconoclasm that provided the direct opportunity for emphasizing the white of the church walls. Iconoclasm (fig. 8) by Hendrick van Steenwijck the Younger and Dirck van Delen’s *Iconoclasm in a Church* (fig. 9) clearly reveal this idea. The area in the foreground where the paintings and sculptures have yet to be destroyed is cloaked in shadows, while the background of the painting shows walls hung with no sacred images, flooded with exterior light from above, the walls shining white.

The major aesthetic shift from shunning white to loving white is a phenomenon not only found in pictures of churches. It can also be clearly observed in the fields of genre painting, still lifes and portraits. Carel Fabritius, thought to have been Vermeer’s teacher, painted the small work, *The Goldfinch* (fig. 10). A small goldfinch is seen standing on a perch hanging on a wall. At first glance it looks like a perfectly ordinary

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<sup>4</sup> Dillenberger, John. *Images and Relics: Theological Perceptions and Visual Images in Sixteenth-Century Europe*. New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999, p. 178.

<sup>5</sup> Wandel, Lee Palmer. *Voracious Idols & Violent Hands: Iconoclasm in Reformation Zurich, Strasbourg, and Basel*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999, pp. 190-198.

still life of a bird. And yet, it appears differently if one focuses on the wall behind, not on the bird itself. To quote Svetlana Alpers,<sup>6</sup> it is not the meaning of the depicted painting but how it is depicted. In other words, a focus on how it is painted to create what sorts of visual effects. This is one of the specific features of Dutch art, in which the painters go to special pains via tricks to depict the subject in such a way that it adds to the viewer's enjoyment. The trompe l'oeil effect seen in *The Slippers* (fig. 11) by Samuel van Hoogstraten, a Rembrandt student who considerably influenced other genre theme painters, is one such painting technique. Rather than removing all impurities from a picture in order to reveal its true character, it is recognizing the meaning of delighting the eyes through characteristics not found solely in depicting the external form.

If we think like that, then we cannot overlook the conspicuous use of subtly varied wall color tones in Fabritius' *A View of Delft* (National Gallery of Art, London), *Portrait of Abraham de Potter* (Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam), *The Goldfinch*, and *The Sentry* (fig. 12, Staatliches Museum Schwerin). These works reveal a clearly defined aesthetic stance on white. The same quality found in Fabritius' paintings that emphasize a wall's whiteness can also be observed in Vermeer's works.

### **Vermeer and Chinese Porcelain – The White Gleam that Symbolizes Asia**

The background walls seen in such works as Dresden's *Girl Reading a Letter at an Open Window* (fig. 13), the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam's *The Milkmaid* (fig. 14) and National Gallery of Art, London's *A Young Woman Standing at a Virginal* (fig. 15) all have either white or no color as their base tone. All of these walls are shielded from the gaze. This is in complete contrast to many 17th century genre paintings, in which the background is sunk in darkness, or another room is seen, or a window looks out on an outdoor scene, in other words, "an Entrance for the eyes" or see through space (fig. 16).

A plain white wall blocks the gaze, cuts off the sense of distance to the figures in the painting, and helps create an extremely flat composition. The white wall itself thus has its own role in creating a pictorial effect. While this flattening of the pictorial space has been previously discussed; it can also be found in paintings by the Caravaggeschi in Utrecht, which Vermeer may have visited during his study years.<sup>7</sup> A planar quality erases motifs as links with such allegorical tales as the Prodigal Son,

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<sup>6</sup> Alpers, Svetlana. *The Art of Describing*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983. The author referred to Kōfuku Akira's Japanese translation published by Arina Shobō in 1993.

<sup>7</sup> Ozaki, Akihiro. "Fuerumē-ru kaiga no heimensei – sono eroteishizumu ni miru sei to zoku" [The Planar Quality in Vermeer's Paintings – The Sacred and the Secular Seen in that Eroticism.] Kurihara, Takashi, and al. (eds.). *Kūkan to kata ni kannō surushintai* [The Body that Senses Space and Form.] Sendai: Tohoku University Press, 2010, pp. 199-221.

stages the work in a tavern and thus furthers the shift to a plain genre scene. In other words, the planar quality of a picture is an update of the earlier version, a means of creating a painting that matched the age.

The table in the foreground of *A Girl Reading a Letter at an Open Window* features a Chinese porcelain work on top of a Persian carpet that rises almost like a wave.<sup>8</sup> Cobalt blue designs are painted on the pale white porcelain (fig. 17). Then a transparent glaze is applied on top of the designs. The work emits a jewel-like gleam as it reflects light. The deep curve in the upper part of the depicted ceramic work reveals just such a gleam. The ceramic work is depicted here with a painting technique that differs from that by other still life painters, with its pictorial motifs not clearly delineated. Rather it seems that the white was supposed to create a painterly effect.<sup>9</sup>

The porcelain dish was placed on a diagonal, and hence some of the fruit stacked in it fell to the carpet below. On the other hand, the profile of the woman reading a letter by the open window is faintly reflected on the window glass. Her expression indicates that the letter is by no means pleasant. There is a sense of suppressed sorrow.

When we look at Vermeer's paintings there is one work that we immediately think of, and that is Dirck Hals' *Woman Tearing a Letter* (fig. 19). Dirck was the younger brother of Frans Hals and always remained in the shadow of his genius brother. The woman standing by the window turns absentmindedly to look at someone not there, tearing up the letter she holds. The painting on the back wall shows a tempest-tossed ship, with the empty chair often seen in Dutch art placed beneath it. Conversely, Dirck painted a diametrically opposed image of a woman. She stands and laughs, holding a letter in her left hand, the picture of a calm-faced woman in an interior setting (fig. 20). A seascape on the back wall depicts a boat sailing on a gentle sea. While not a pair of paintings, they do exude diametrically opposed moods. This is the opposite of Dirck van Delen's *An Interior with Ladies and Cavalier* (National Gallery of Ireland) with its tight group of figures, and walls covered with pictures further shrinking the space. In Hals' work there is one figure, and the background is simply depicted. Indeed, Hals' work seems just like a Vermeer.<sup>10</sup>

Dirck Hals' inventiveness did not stop at just that. He also took a new approach to the connection between women and seascapes. In Dirck's seascapes the storm-tossed scenes evoke thoughts of shipwrecks. In Dutch painting in general, storm scenes were used to convey the moral lesson that love will fully succeed by

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<sup>8</sup> *Gemaltes Licht: Die Stilleben von Willem Kalf 1619-1693*. Exh. cat., Berlin: Deutscher Kunstverlag, 2006, p. 33. Carpets and tapestries were not used as floor coverings until the end of the 17th century.

<sup>9</sup> It also shares the "beads of light" depiction that is considered the secret of Vermeer's paintings. It was Karel van Mandel who early on focused on the gleam emitted by materials. See Miedema, Hessel and Van Mander, Karel. *Den Grondt der Edel Vry Schilder-Const.* Utrecht: Haentjens Dekker & Gumbert, 1973, chap. 10, 22.

<sup>10</sup> Franits, Wayne. *Dutch Seventeenth-Century Genre Painting: Its Stylistic and Thematic Evolution*. New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 2008, pp. 33-34.

overcoming difficulties. And yet, this interpretation does not fit here. The image connecting the love letter in the picture with thoughts of shipwrecks can be seen as reflecting the state of affairs of Holland, which had risen to great nation status through its seafaring trade<sup>11</sup>. In that case, the arrangement of depicted motifs evokes knowledge of these factors and becomes a tale of the time.

When considered like that, Vermeer's *Girl Reading a Letter at an Open Window* appears to be a different work. In fact, X-ray images of this painting reveal a picture of Cupid hanging on the white wall in the background. The bottom edge of the frame is about the same height as the woman's head, and it also serves as the vanishing point for the picture's perspectival rendering. In other words, the theme of the painting is clarified by the picture-within-a-picture. And yet, possibly because he hated making the painting subject so glaringly obvious, that area of the picture was painted over in the final work. However, that does not mean that he changed the meaning of the painting, this was a match for how love themes were depicted in that period. The still life motifs, such as the Chinese porcelain in the foreground, and the letter-holding woman weave the tale.

Then there is *A Girl Asleep* (fig. 21), another work painted around this same time. The wall behind the woman is shadowed, and hence extremely hard to read, but a painting hanging there depicts the god of love Cupid and a mask of unfaithfulness. In the foreground, on the other hand, a white porcelain water jug and a large Ming dynasty plate are placed on top of a Persian carpet. Several pieces of fruit are stacked on the large dish. A maid sits behind the fruit dish, leaning her head on her hand as she naps. Another room is seen beyond the half open door, and a mirror hangs on the wall in that room. There is no sign of a person on the other side of that door, but there is something suspicious feeling about the half open door. And here too the answer to that question can be found in X-ray images of the painting. Such images show that originally a man was depicted beyond the door. Based on the presence of Cupid, the man was probably the woman's lover. The sleeping woman's face appears peaceful. Whether faithful or not, there is nothing that would seem to harm the progress of that love. The large dish is placed an angle so that its contents can be seen, but unlike in *Girl Reading a Letter at an Open Window*, here the fruit has not fallen out of the bowl. This arrangement of motifs does set the painting mood or narrative clearly. Then, with the erasure of the male figure in the final version, undoubtedly the presence of the "unoccupied chair" in the right foreground stimulates the viewer's imagination. This positioning suggests that the lover has shipped out to distant Asia, source of the

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<sup>11</sup> Cieraad, Irene. "Writing Home, Painting Home: Seventeenth-Century Dutch Genre Painting and the 'Sailing Letters'." Sandten, Cecile, and Tan, Kathy-Ann (eds.). *Home: Concepts, Constructions, Contexts*, Trier: De Gruyter, 2016, pp. 45-62. This article is extremely important for its indication that the letter motif can be read in a social history context rather than a didactic context. Dr. Anna Grasskamp, one of the symposium speakers kindly sent me a PDF version of this paper.



Chinese porcelains.<sup>12</sup>

The theme of love and the outside world, both linked to distant Asia, can be seen as one of Vermeer's favorite methods. *The Woman with a Pearl Necklace* (pl. 22) in the Gemäldegalerie, Berlin, shows the effectiveness of Chinese porcelain to a surprising degree.

A woman stands in front of a white wall, holding up a pearl-threaded ribbon, posing in front of a small mirror hanging on the left wall. The combination of beautiful young woman and mirror frequently appears in pictures as a traditional image of "vanity." Here, however, Vermeer does not necessarily make the didactic meaning his main thrust. As previously indicated, the arrangement of the things in a painting can determine its meaning in various ways. Harriet Stone interpreted it as "display."<sup>13</sup> The differences created by display are definitive. Display itself brings knowledge in the classical sense of episteme into the picture.

Looking once again at *The Woman with a Pearl Necklace*, and close examination reveals the presence of a large Chinese porcelain work, discretely placed on the table beneath the mirror (fig. 23). This Chinese ware is sitting in shadows but still exudes a mysterious gloss. The woman facing the mirror is at the same time paired with the large Chinese porcelain. Indeed, it is almost as if the woman is showing herself dressed in her finery to the Chinese porcelain. For the viewer who senses that, the mirror in this picture, more so than being intended to reflect the woman, has the same function as the window in *Girl Reading a Letter at an Open Window*. In fact, the mirror reflects nothing. As in the case of the *Girl Reading a Letter at an Open Window*, it is the silently present Chinese porcelain that hints at the safety and location of the lover.

Vermeer has shut the woman into a wall-enclosed space, making an extremely flat effect. By shining a strong light on the wall behind the woman, the whiteness is emphasized. This plays out as the woman depicted against a white ground. Further in terms of white walls, the wall in *The Milkmaid* is particularly impressive. A sturdily built maid pours milk into a ceramic pot. The white milk, maid's collar, her white headscarf, and bright white window are all set against a glowing white background wall, and all overwhelming emphasize whiteness. While of course colors other than white are used, the white is striking for its echoing in the background wall.

There are many elements in Vermeer's paintings that evoke a sense of Asia. The gown worn by the *Girl with a Red Hat* (pl. 24) is reminiscent of a Japanese kimono known as a "Japons rok," while the hat seen in *Girl with a Flute* (fig. 25) is reminiscent of the hat worn in European wearing Chinese Dress (fig. 26). And yet, even just in terms of Chinese porcelains, the fact that they are porcelain does not only represent

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<sup>12</sup> This same way of thinking can be found in Brook, Timothy. *Vermeer's Hat: The Seventeenth Century and the Dawn of the Global World*. London: Profile Books, 2008, pp. 55-57.

<sup>13</sup> Stone, Harriet. *Tables of Knowledge: Descartes in Vermeer's Studio*. Ithaca/London: Cornell University Press, 2006, p. 35.

Asia. Their coloring was also important. In other words, the many Chinese porcelains have cobalt blue designs on white grounds. White is the base note in those works. The white wall resonates with the ceramics, all emphasizing whiteness. As previously indicated, the aesthetics that consider white to be beautiful came to be emphasized amidst the iconoclasm of the 16th century.

If we look at Vermeer's oeuvre in terms of the whiteness of their depicted walls, we notice that while there is some difference in shading, quite a number of the works have such walls. The previously touched upon *Girl Reading a Letter at an Open Window* has had the Cupid painting in the background painted over to make a white wall. The intention of that act was undoubtedly in the end linked to the iconoclasm and its destruction of paintings. Then we might ask, where did the white walls originate? One reason, as previously noted, was the whiteness of church walls, and that may have been what set off the white in the church paintings by Saenredam and others.

The awakening to the beauty of whiteness in the latter half of the 16th century was not limited to churches; it was also actively added to pictorial spaces. They added that luster to paintings too. Wouldn't that seem to indicate that there was greater shift in tastes at work? In Vermeer we sense elements reminiscent of the method of applying pictorial motifs to a white ground, as seen in ceramics. The white of the walls heightens the effect of the Chinese porcelains that frequently appear in Vermeer's works, and of pure white Delft ceramics (figs. 27, 28). The Chinese porcelains (fig. 29) seen in the 17th century set off the development of Delftware, on which potters spent endless effort to create something that resembled the Chinese wares. The Delft white ware born from this process was in imitation of white porcelain. Cabinets made of Japanese lacquer were disassembled and used as walls, and carpets were used as wall adornment. It would not be unreasonable to consider that the sensibility of the Dutch to freely repurpose these elements was also activated by the white ground of ceramics.

In fact, the Dutchman Huygen van Linschoten wrote *Itinerario* (1592), in which he makes fascinating comments about Asian countries. Comments such as "One can get whatever he wants" indicated the surprising riches of these countries and heaps praise on their porcelains, "It is much more graceful than a crystal glass."<sup>14</sup> The luster was overwhelming.

## **Willem Kalf and Chinese Porcelain – The Range of White Luster**

Chinese porcelains, called white jewels, became the object of envy in the West

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<sup>14</sup> Huyghen van Linschoten, Jan. *Itinerario*. Amsterdam: Cornelis Claesz, 1596. The author referred to Iwase, Shibusawa, and Nakamura's Japanese translation, published by Iwanami Shoten, 1968, pp. 224-225.



because for no matter how hard Wester potters tried they could not imitate them faithfully.<sup>15</sup> Chinese porcelains often appear in 17th century Dutch still lifes. Among these works, Kalf was particularly adept at combining various Chinese porcelains to create effective compositions. (figs. 30, 31). These were still lifes that combined large lidded Chinese porcelain jars and plates with melons, roses and other elements. But it is the white of the Chinese porcelains that draws the eye in these works. Chinese-style pictorial motifs drawn on a white ground. His works in Hanover and Madrid share the emphasis on white. And the emphasis on white is all about depicting light.

Chinese porcelains first became connected to mainstream Dutch paintings thanks to their frequent appearance in Willem Kalf's still lifes and Vermeer's paintings. But more so than their direct appearance, didn't Chinese porcelains move people's emotions on a deeper level? The white of Chinese porcelains became the white walls of churches caused by the iconoclasm, and undoubtedly this had a strong impact on the newly emerging aesthetic sensibilities of the Dutch. Indeed, this could be called a color awareness revolution.

This revolution in aesthetic sensibilities for white beginning in Iconoclasm in 16<sup>th</sup> century extended all the way from Saenredam, Kalf and Vermeer in the 17th century, to Piet Mondrian (pl. 32) in the 20th century.

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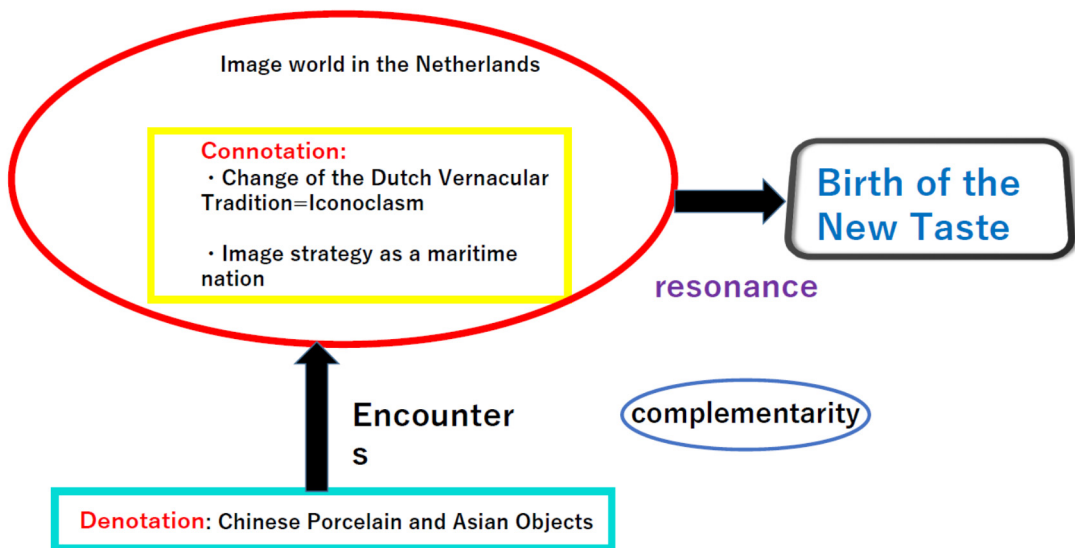
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