

A view not seen



1. Three views of a Chinese Jingdezhen porcelain cup, *famille rose* painted with a depiction of the Cape of Good Hope (now Cape Town) showing Dutch East India Company (VOC)¹ ships in Table Bay, c.1760, H 6.5 cm. Private collection.

The aim of this short paper is to consider the painted scene of mid-18th century Cape of Good Hope on a Chinese cup, comparing the depiction with the reality of that landscape, and seeking to explain the circumstances under which this cup was decorated, most likely, at the southern port of Canton (now Guangzhou).

There are several factors that hardly need questioning in relation to the circumstances, under which this cup was decorated, namely, it would not have been of interest to the local Chinese population, the scene depicted would not be known to the painter or painters who decorated it, and the finished product would not have been made for sale in the East. These assumptions suggest that the painter would have needed an image from which to copy the scene depicted. A cursory glance at the cup against a modern photograph of Cape Town from a vantage point roughly as on the cup reveals striking differences in the relative scale of the rock formations of Table Mountain, Devils Peak and Lion's Head in particular.^(1,2,3) The vast expanse of the 'table' is barely hinted at on the cup, the three peaks of Devils Peak hardly match reality, whilst Lion's Head is perhaps the closest to reality, most likely by accident rather than design.

To explain these differences, two forms of research were attempted: to seek explanation in the literature how such decorated wares were procured at the time, and whether any possible sources for the scenic motif could be found to suggest the templates provided to the porcelain painters at either Jingdezhen or Canton, where the cup was decorated. In addition, a search for similarly decorated ceramic wares were made in museums and in dealers' catalogues.

A promising solution to how these differences may have occurred was presented in the following explanation of the customary behaviour of seamen on visiting Canton in C. S. Woodward (1974)²:

At Canton there was no difficulty in having the subject of one's choice enamelled onto blank or partially decorated porcelain during the time one's ship was in port so that much interesting marine porcelain was specially commissioned. Colours at the masthead, the ships of a dozen nations proudly adorn the porcelain of the period and the Dutch flag is encountered at anchor in the harbours of three continents, peacefully sailing across nursery seas or listening triumphant to a merman's trumpet blast of victory.

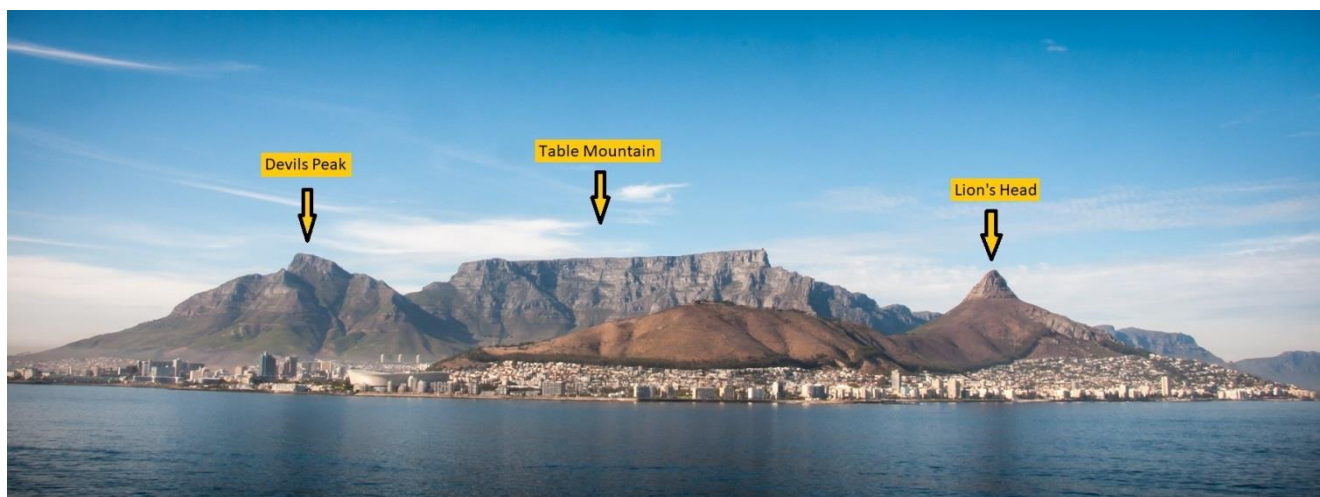
Woodward continues to elaborate on the practice in more detail:

Directors of the various East India Companies and ship-owners all over the world made a point of acquiring a suitably decorated dinner-service from Canton. Captains, too, delighted in entertaining important passengers and brother officers from appropriate porcelain. Some, like Captain Souza of the Portuguese East Indiaman *Brillante*, owned complete dinner-services, portraying their ship or a related subject; others contented themselves with tea-and-coffee services or sets of dessert plates; yet others probably restricted their enthusiasm to one or two commemorative plates; but a captain on the Canton-run without a single porcelain reminder of his life at sea must have been rare indeed.

This explanation, though not quoting an historic source, seems perfectly reasonable, which leaves the question of how the motif or scene was made available to the porcelain painters to carry out their role



2. Composite image of the complete motif on the Jingdezhen porcelain cup in (1) above.



3. Cape Town from Table Bay today.

of decorating the ordered wares. A search for engravings in the literature of the Cape of Good Hope scene depicted on the subject cup, as a possible source to guide the decorators of the porcelain at Canton, revealed a range of depictions, all hardly truthful to the scale and shape of the rock massifs making up the Table Mountain range.

The coloured engraving (4) is based on a 17th-century painting of Table Bay with Dutch (VOC) ships in the bay in the background, and a British ship firing a salute in the foreground. The monochrome engraving (5) is similar to the former, but dated eighteen years later. The treatment of the great 'table' massif of the mountain in these engravings is along the lines of the decoration on the subject cup, not that it is suggested here that either of these engravings was necessarily used to guide the Canton painters. They do, however, suggest the degree of divergence from the true proportions of the mountain that were represented in the artwork of the time.

Examples decorated in a similar way to the subject cup are to be found in the Minneapolis Institute

of Art. The upper rim border on the Minneapolis cup is on the outside, whereas the border on the subject cup is on the inside of the rim. However, the detail of the designs and the scenic details are



4. Gerard van der Gucht after Samuel Scott, *The Cape Of Good Hope*, 1736, coloured line engraving. ©Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection.



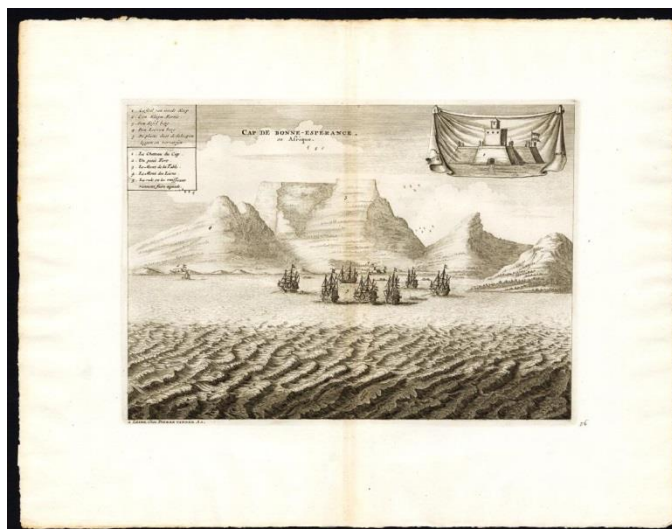
5. Illustration from the *London Magazine* in 1754.



6. Jingdezhen saucer from a coffee set, c.1760. © Minneapolis Institute of Art (82.110.2).



7. Jingdezhen cup from a coffee set, c.1760. © Minneapolis Institute of Art (82.110.1).



8. P. van der Aa (publisher), *Cap de Bonne-Esperance en Afrique*, copperplate engraving, Leyden c.1725.



9. Qianlong Jingdezhen tea-bowl and saucer, D saucer 11.8 cm, H bowl 3.6 cm. Africana Museum, Johannesburg.

remarkably similar.(6,7)

A third engraving is presented here, where the mountain is depicted with horizontal layers or strata, a feature that is absent in the examples so far discussed.(8) However, examples of Jingdezhen porcelain plates with this feature in the depiction of the mountain are to be found. The tea-bowl and saucer in the Africana Museum in Johannesburg show a form of horizontal strata that is depicted by dots.(9)

In conclusion, it is likely that engravings similar to those presented here were used by the parties who ordered the wares from Canton for decoration in enamels on blank Jingdezhen porcelain pieces to satisfy the commissions of, most likely, ship officers or Dutch East India Company officials. These porcelain wares were most likely proudly used on their ships and taken back to Europe to remind them of their great and hazardous voyages to the other side of the world, and perhaps even used as gifts to those at home, both domestically or to foster trade.

Patrick Hagglund, December 2020

Notes

¹ *Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie*, abbreviated as VOC, literally United East-India Company, known as the Dutch East India Company. Established on 20 March 1602 and dissolved on 31 December 1799. The area around present-day Cape Town was settled by Jan van Riebeeck for the Dutch East India Company in 1652, when it established a base there to service its vessels on their journeys to and from the Far East.

² Woodward, C. S., *Oriental ceramics at the Cape of Good Hope 1652-1795* (Cape Town & Rotterdam: A. A. Balkema, 1974), p.131.