Arita Porcelain Today

2016 was an important year for Japanese porcelain and for Japonisme, linking the two afresh. While new publications, exhibitions, and conferences from around the world reflected a surging interest in Japonisme, several international projects celebrated the 400th anniversary of the “birth” of porcelain production in Arita, Japan.¹ One of these projects, the exhibition titled Arita Porcelain Today, on display at the Rijksmuseum, triggered a question that directly concerns the current state of Japonisme as a field of historical and theoretical inquiry: can Japonisme continue to be a conceptual framework for the global production and reception of Japanese and Japanese-style ceramics? Before attempting to answer the question in the light of the contributions of this exhibition, I will describe the exhibition itself, its accompanying catalogue, and the ways in which the exhibition presented contemporary Dutch-Japanese

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¹ The Hizen province (present-day Nagasaki and Saga prefectures), especially the area of Arita Sarayama, is known as the home of Japanese porcelain. Production was begun by Korean potters, brought to Japan as captives by the warriors of Toyotomi Hideyoshi (豊臣秀吉 1536-1598) after his invasion of Korea (1592-1598). 2016 is celebrated as the 400th anniversary of Arita-area porcelain because the first porcelain was fired in Arita in Tengudani 天狗谷, shortly after the Korean potter Yi Sam-pyeong (d. 1655), known in Japanese as Sanpei 三平, discovered kaolin (porcelain clay) in Arita Izumiyama. Among many other sources, see Takeshi Nagatake, Classic Japanese Porcelain: Imari and Kakiemon (Tokyo: Kodansha, 2003).