Holland and Sweden in the 17th century

Some notes on Dutch cultural radiance abroad

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It is a well-known fact that the United Provinces during the 17th century became one of the politically most prominent states in Europe. So did Sweden about the same time. There are some similarities between the two states, above all their fight for the protestant faith. But the differences are much more important. Holland was part of Europe, where culture had a long tradition, whereas Sweden belonged to the outskirts of Europe, where culture came in slow waves. When Sweden appeared on the political scene, its soldiers and diplomats felt a need to fill the cultural gap. In culture Sweden was, especially in the first half of the century, a principally receiving country.

No wonder that under these conditions Holland came to be one of the most important donors. In return Sweden could offer products important to Holland and especially to Holland’s ship building industry. Sweden could offer wood and tar for ships, as well as iron and copper for guns.

In 1959 an exhibition called *Konstkatter från Hollands guldålder* (Art Treasures from Holland’s Golden Age) took place in the Nationalmuseum in Stockholm. In the introduction of the catalogue Th. H. Lunsingh Scheurleer wrote an excellent, concentrated survey of the cultural connections between Holland and Sweden. In this paper I would like to add some facts to the material he presents, showing Dutch influence in Sweden, especially in the field of the decorative arts.

The 16th century meant for Sweden a transition from the Roman Catholic to the Lutheran faith. The loss of its Catholic clergy resulted in the severance of its most important connections with European culture. This loss was only to a certain extent counterbalanced by the lively cultural interests of the new Royal family.

These interests were to a great extent focused on the Netherlands, chiefly the Southern provinces. Flemish artists and craftsmen travelled to Sweden, in order to work for the Swedish court. The most spectacular specimen of this work is the crown made for the coronation of Erik XIV in 1551 by Cornelius ver Weiden.¹ He had come to Sweden from Mechelen in about 1551. The crown’s ornament is in a typical Netherlandish, grotesque style with scroll works, one of the most fascinating works of goldsmith’s art in Sweden.

Other notable examples of artists from the Netherlands working for the Swedish court in the 16th century are the sculptor and painter Willem Boy

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from Flanders (†1592) and Eliseus Libaerts. The latter decorated armour for King Erik in Antwerp in 1564, but on his way to the Swedish court he was captured by the hostile Danes.²

The goldsmith Gillis Coyet the elder, who must have been in Sweden before 1566, came from Brabant. In 1574 he was appointed master of the mint, a post he held till 1599, when he was succeeded by Anthony Groth the elder, also from Brabant. He in turn was succeeded by Coyet’s son Gillis in 1614. Gillis Coyet the younger had a son, Frederik, who in 1643 entered the service of the Dutch East Indian Company. He was appointed governor of Formosa, but this honourable post brought tragedy over his head. During his governorship, in 1661, the island was attacked by the Chinese adventurer Kuo-hsing-ya (in Europe called Koxinga). After a period of brave resistance, Coyet had to surrender. He was granted an honourable retreat, but the Company put him behind bars: he spent nine years in prison.³ During Coyet’s service in the East Indian Company, his family had been ennobled in Sweden. Evidently in this connection Coyet ordered a lacquered shield in Japan, with his family’s coat of arms in the centre (fig. 1).⁴

The German influence upon Swedish crafts had always been strong. With Sweden’s new position as a military power in the Thirty Years’ War, this

1 Lacquer shield with the Coyet coat of arms, Japan, mid 17th century, Stockholm, Nationalmuseum. Foto Nationalmuseum.