

en Self



This is Zeeland

Anonymous, Stephanus Versluys (1694-1736), governor of Ceylon, 1729-1736 (oil on canvas). Collection: Zeeland Society, Photo Ivo Wennekes.

Liberated oppressors

Following the victory over the Spaniards in 1576, Zeeland becomes independent and joins the Republic of Seven United Provinces. At the beginning of the 16th century, Zeeland is a prosperous region because of its close relationships with Flemish cities. These connections also mean that many Flemish merchants, artists and artisans flee to Middelburg after the Fall of Antwerp in 1585. The huge influx of entrepreneurs and capital give the city an enormous cultural boost.

The Dutch East India Company (VOC) and the Dutch West India Company (WIC) both have branches in Zeeland. The Zeeland branch of the VOC accounts for a quarter of its activities. Zeelanders manage overseas trade colonies and appoint administrators.

Before the establishment of the WIC in 1623, Zeelanders already have plantations on the Antilles and the northeast coast of South America. The trade in enslaved people from West Africa to South America is an important source of income for Zeelanders. Both the Zeeland branch of the WIC and the Middelburg Commercial Company are involved in the slave trade.

Traces of the Zeeland's VOC enterprises can be found all over the world. In the 17th century a Fort Zeelandia is built in Taiwan and there is still one with the same name in Paramaribo.

Even after the French occupation, when the VOC and WIC have been disbanded, Zeeland continues to be aggressive overseas. The colonies – the Dutch East Indies, the Antilles and Suriname – and also trade posts on the west coast of Africa, continue to be profitable.



Louis de Fontaine, Portrait of Lucas Schorer (1657-1707), Commander of Sint Eustatius and Saba (1698-89) with an Enslaved Servant, 1721 (oil on canvas). Collection of the Zeeuws Museum, Photo by Anouk van Riet.

Unknown boy with commander

A black servant boy proffers a cup of tea to a wealthy gentleman. The metal collar around his neck indicates that the boy is a slave. The velvet straps on his shoulders represent the reins of a harness commonly worn by infants at the time, an allusion to the boy's dependent status. Unfortunately, we do not know the boy's name.

The subject of the portrait, Lucas Schorer, was born in Middelburg on 4 December 1657 into an influential family with shares in the Dutch West India Company. In 1686, he was appointed commander of the Caribbean islands of Sint Eustatius and Saba. After surrendering Sint Eustatius to the French without a fight in 1689, he left for Saba, where he appears to have acted as commander until he was dismissed in 1696 for mismanagement. He remained in the Antilles until his death, though it is unclear how he supported himself.

We do not know exactly when Schorer died, but it is unlikely that he modelled in person for this portrait, which was painted in 1721. There is no evidence that the French painter, Louis de Fontaine, ever went to the Antilles. It is also uncertain whether one of Schorer's servants modelled in person or whether the artist based him on another boy.

The painting was probably commissioned by a relative of Schorer's in the Netherlands since de Fontaine painted an almost identical version of this portrait a year earlier.

Family Portrait

Temporarily on show in the exhibition on Salomon Mesdach at the Stadhuismuseum, Zierikzee 16.01 — 15.06.2025



Salomon Mesdach, Balthasar van Vlierden (1552-1625?) and his wife Catharina Nieuwels (1548-1615) with their daughter Gillina van Vlierden (1582-?), her husband Guillaume Sweerts (1571-?) and four of their children, 1612 (oil on panel). Collection Historical Museum of The Hague.

In the 1580s the Van Vlierden family flees from Antwerp to Middelburg. At the time of their departure, Balthasar is already an established merchant. He is one of the first investors in and governors of the Zeeland branch of the Dutch East India Company.

Balthasar and his wife have one daughter, Gillina. In 1604 she marries Guillaume Sweerts, a merchant who has also fled to Middelburg from Flanders. They have five children together. The four in this painting are called Balthasar, Philip, Guillaume and Catharina or Gillina.

They are an illustration of the influx of Flemish families to Zeeland during the Eighty Years' War and their significance for Zeeland's economy.

Salomon Mesdach, the painter of this family portrait, portrayed many members of Middelburg's elite. He was active from at least 1612 to 1634. This family portrait is his earliest known work. It is also one of his few signed works.



Portretbeeldje van een VOC-schipper, mogelijk Schipper Meertens, Guangzhou, China, 1750-1760 (dried clay, bamboo, wood, paint). Collection: Zeeuws Museum, Photo Ivo Wennekes.



Portrait figurine of surgeon Bartholomeus Nebbens (1685/89-1734), Guangzhou, China/Jakarta, Indonesia, 1714-1719 (dried clay, bamboo, wood, paint). Collection: Zeeuws Museum, Photo Ivo Wennekes.

The cantor

This is one of the last monks who lived in Middelburg Abbey. The score at the top of the painting indicates that he is a cantor. He is 34 years old. His coat of arms has not been identified yet, so we do not know his name. The inscription under the score 'Opinionibus Regitur Mundus' can be translated as 'the world is governed by opinions'. This is certainly applicable in the turbulent times in which this portrait is painted: Middelburg is under siege in 1572.



Monogrammist M.D., Portrait of the cantor (inside of the light wing of a triptych), 1572 (oil on panel). Collection: Centraal Museum, Utrecht.

Two years later, on 22 February 1574, the city is surrendered to William of Orange. All clergy members must leave Middelburg and their property is confiscated. This cantor or someone close to him probably imagines that he will soon be able to return and hides the portrait in one of the graves in the abbey church. It is not until the 18th century that it is recovered during the emptying of old graves.



Portrait figurine of lawyer Petrus Gerardus Dobbelaar (1737-1787) as teenager, probably Jakarta, Indonesia, c. 1746 (dried clay, bamboo, wood, paint). Collection: Zeeland Society, Photo Joris Luyten.

Portrait figurines

Merchants from the Dutch East India Company commission portraits by Chinese artists. Many of them commission paintings, but occasionally someone commissions a miniature sculpture of himself. The attention to detail is remarkable. Although many portrait figurines must have been made in the 18th and 19th centuries, only around thirty-five survive. They consist of a bamboo core covered with a layer of clay. It is not fired, but simply dried, making it very brittle.

Fringe



Bojan Fajfrić, Thoughts Unsaid, 2015 (video still). Collection: Zeeuws Museum.

The lighthouse at Westkapelle plays an important role in Dutch modern art history. It begins in 1908, when Piet Mondrian takes his first steps on the road to abstraction with his series of paintings entitled *Lighthouse at Westkapelle*.

In 1971 the conceptual artist Bas Jan Ader arrives in Westkapelle. The lighthouse is visible in the background of a series of photographic works and a film in which he refers to Mondrian's work.

But there is also a painful history attached to the village of Westkapelle. In 1951 a camp is opened for Moluccans*, which a few years later is the scene of dramatic events. When the government decides to cease providing the camp with food, several residents steal from farms and the local grocer. The police intervene and open fire on the residents, wounding several of them. All the male residents are imprisoned. The women and children are left behind in isolation in the camp for several months with nothing to eat. Although these events remain almost unknown to the general public, they mark a meaningful period in the history of relations between the Dutch and the Moluccans.

Bojan Fajfrić (Belgrade, 1976) connects these two stories – one of shared memories by those involved and the other an iconic work of conceptual art – through a re-enactment. In partnership with the local Moluccan community, he makes a reconstruction of Ader's work.

* Moluccans are the original inhabitants of the Maluku Islands. Moluccan soldiers in the Royal Netherlands East Indies Army and their families come to the Netherlands following Indonesian independence in 1949.



Bas Jan Ader, On the road to a new Neo-Plasticism, Westkapelle, 1971. © the Estate of Bas Jan Ader / Mary Sue Ader Andersen, 2017 / The Artist Rights Society (ARS), New York. Courtesy of Meliksetian | Briggs, Los Angeles.

Black

In the 16th and early 17th centuries, black clothing is noble, formal, expensive and pious. Those who can afford to wear black are keen to have themselves portrayed in it. Dyeing fabrics black has long been the most difficult, most expensive and most labour intensive dyeing technique for textiles. To achieve a deep black, wool and silk are dyed several times with different colours. First the fabric is dyed blue with a vat dye then stained red with a brush. Indigo and woad containing indigotin provide a deep blue. Madder containing alum gives an orange-red. Tannic acids from various wood sorts are also used in combination with iron salts. Applied layer upon layer, they result in the deepest and most expensive black.



Jacket with pagoda sleeves, traditional costume of Scheuven, c. 1665 (silk). Collection: Zeeland Society. Photo Ivo Wennekkes.

Antwerp and later also the Northern Netherlands are known during this period for their highly skilled black dyeing workshops. Only the richest families can afford a black wardrobe, contrasted with the whitest of Italian and Flemish bobbin lace for collars and caps. In the 18th century, black falls out of fashion but becomes popular again around 1900 in Zeeland's regional costume. Many Zeelanders wear black because of stricter religious beliefs and observance of mourning, but are also inspired by the richly decorated Victorian fashions with beadwork and black lace.



Anonymous, Adriaan de Loope (1579-1652), 1608 (oil on panel). Collection: Zeeuws Museum. Photo Ivo Wennekkes.



Anonymous, Jan van Borssele van der Hooghe (1553-1699), burgomaster of Middelburg (detail), Dutch School, 1678 (oil on panel). Collection: Zeeuws Museum. Photo Ivo Wennekkes.

Faith

In Zeeland's traditional costume there are more than twenty different kinds of caps for women, making it unique in the Netherlands. On the island of Zuid-Beveland things have been taken a step further. Here, in the course of the 19th century, differences emerge between the costume of Protestants and Catholics. We see this, for example, in the form of the outer cap. For Protestant women, this has the form of a broad shell, whereas the Catholic cap has a straight hanging strip on each side of the head. Both caps originate from the same basic form. The difference in appearance between Catholics and Protestants does not mean that they shun each other. In many small villages they coexist peacefully: they rely upon each other.



Jacobs en Zn. A school class with Catholic and Protestant children from 's Heer Arendskerke, 1905. Collection: Zeeuws Museum. Photo Ivo Wennekkes.

Forehead pins

For centuries, women and girls have worn tools used in their household chores on their clothing. Scissors, knives and needles in containers dangle from their skirts. The bodkin – a flat, blunt pin – is a special tool used for pulling cords or laces through a bodice. Sometimes the cords are first coated with earwax. For this purpose, the bodkin ends in a small spoon. After use, the woman sticks the bodkin into her hair, beneath the band of her cap so that she always has the tool to hand.

Over the centuries, this pin that is partially visible under the cap has become increasingly more decorative. They are made from silver or gold and are adorned with a floral motif or hung with a gemstone. When this tool ceases to have a practical function, you would expect it to disappear from the wardrobe, but nothing is further from the truth. In Zeeland the pin has grown larger, flatter and more beautiful. It has become known as the forehead pin and has taken on a symbolic value. For those in the know, it indicates the wealth and marital status of the wearer. Single women wear it on the left, and married women on the right. The number of engraved swans says something about the family's prosperity. In Zeeland's regional costume, there are forehead pins with two, three or even four swans. From the end of the 19th century, the pin disappears entirely from Zeeland's fashion.



Salomon Meesdach (attributed to), Janniken de Loope (1616-1665) (detail), 1627 (oil on panel). Collection: Zeeuws Museum. Photo Ivo Wennekkes.



Young woman presumably from Nieuw- en St. Joosland, c. 1875. Collection: Juwelier Minderhoud.

Chintz

Together with the first cargos of Oriental porcelain and spices, the Dutch East India Company imports a very special fabric: Indian chintz. This originally hand-painted, glazed cotton becomes extremely popular here. As demand increases, from 1664 the Dutch East India Company relays orders to bring back chintz for the Dutch market. Wealthier clients also place orders for specific chintz fabrics.



Chintz child's cap, 1800-1830 (cotton). Collection: Zeeuws Museum. Photo Ivo Wennekkes.

The chintz technique is extremely time consuming and demands great skill. The painting technique uses vegetable dyes that bind with the cotton fibres. The patterns of flowers, plants and exotic birds are applied by hand, one colour at a time. In the 17th century, due to the enormous demand for chintz, enterprising Dutch businessmen establish cotton-printing workshops here to produce the expensive fabric more cheaply. However, because they are unable to master the refined hand-painting technique, these European cottons are printed with wooden blocks. But they are no less popular.

When Zeeland's regional costume emerges around 1800, chintz is already out of fashion. But for Zeelanders in this period, the more colourful the better. They use chintz and European printed cotton for many garments. They are also an inspiration for decorating other fabrics with floral embroidery and exotic borders.



Anonymous, Arnoud van Ottere (1710-1753), lawyer with the VOC (detail), 1740-1750 (pastel on paper). Collection: Zeeuws Museum. Photo Ivo Wennekkes.