

## A study into 300 years production of wall tiles in Utrecht From 1600 till 1900

From the beginning of the seventeenth century until 1980 the town of Utrecht is known for its production of white and hand-painted tiles. A form of continuity that is seldom seen in this industry. Several millions of tiles ascend the city borders of Utrecht. At first the tiles mainly find their way to the houses of the upper middle class. Then distribution mostly finds place to the middle and eastern regions of the Netherlands and as from 1770 mainly to the rural regions. From the first half of the nineteenth century many deliveries are to rural German regions bordering Holland. By then there is also a great supply of tile pictures available, mostly tailored to be placed in hearth mantelpieces. After 1855 Brasil and the East Indies part of the Netherlands are interested too. As from 1860 there is a specific demand in Great Britain for the Utrecht products that are still traditionally handmade, but are no longer available because of the industrialisation in Great Britain.

In 1616 the first delftware and tile factory is started in Utrecht just behind the western city wall. A couple of bills have been saved that refer to deliveries to the town hall. In 1642 a second delftware and tile factory is set up within the city wall at the southern side of Utrecht. Its owner Van Oort is related to Wijtmans, a well known Rotterdam tile maker.

From halfway the seventeenth century it is inevitable that in Utrecht and other places only tiles are produced, because with tens of potteries the Delft industry has specialised in delftware production.

Around 1664 the eldest Utrecht tile factory is moved to the northern side of the city, just outside the city gate along the river Vecht, the important access to Amsterdam over water. At the end of the seventeenth century this company is obtained by the Amsterdam Van Maurik family. Production now is mainly aimed at white and flamed tiles and series of decors of children at play, little landscapes, escutcheons of towns, miniature animals and little horsemen. The company is closed in 1719.

Now there is no more competition left for the other tile factory where by then the third Van Oort generation is in charge. Fifty years before its founder and his son have started a second tile factory in Amsterdam which shortly after got its orders from Portugal. In the first quarter of the eighteenth century special deliveries are registered from the Utrecht parent company, for instance to St. Petersburg. Traditionally this tile factory is known especially for its very fine painted decors of shepherd and mythological scenes. But the decors of little landscapes on a typical mound and small houses with smoking chimneys are popular articles in various countries during several decades. Then from the second quarter of the eighteenth century tiles inspired by biblestories displace the 'shepherd'tiles. Tiles decorated with children's games painted in the typical Utrecht way stay popular over all centuries, the drawings keeping up with the time.

Because succession within the Van Oort family fails to occur the tile factory changed ownership. However, halfway through the eighteenth century the industry would be disappearing gradually hadn't a second entrepreneur presented himself. This investor starts a competitive company some hundreds of meters north in the Utrecht inner city providing a lot of opportunities for new talents. This 'breeding ground' is particularly succesful. The old company

of formerly Van Oort is taken over in 1764. Because of its highly qualified painters the joined tile factory survives undamaged even the French period around 1800.

Immediately after the merger an important production of tile pictures was set in motion. At first with decors of cows or horses and their companions among more specific orders such as clock decorated tile pictures. Then the painters also concentrate on more complicated works with decors of rural scenes or the bible as a source of inspiration. For a complete furnishing of a hearth mantelpiece with tiles the customer can choose for instance from a wide range of individual tiles decorated with miniature rural or bible scenes, pillar tiles and border tiles, but also from diverse tile pictures decorated with bouquets of flowers. If preferred everything is delivered polychromed.

By then there are so many decors of ornament pictures in supply that around 1815 it is necessary to collect them in a book of models. The one copy that survived is the eldest we know up till now. Until well after 1900 decors occurring in this book, and which sometimes for over a hundred years were part of the Utrecht supplies, will be sold. After the removal in 1844 the production of the tile factory mentioned before increases to one million tiles a year. A mounting demand from overseas territories proves that attending expositions pays off. Competition from other cities has now been reduced to a neatly handfull of companies which sometimes do not avoid cooperation. Influencing occurs less or no longer on the basis of familiar relations as was common until the first quarter of the eighteenth century. Now it is rather a matter of exchange of knowledge by apprenticing to someone in the line of business or by an experienced painter who switches companies because of better payment. Because of the fact that ranges of model 'sponsen' from a company that closes its doors are bought by one of the remaining suppliers, on a regular basis there is a strong similarity between succesive series.

Less than two kilometres away from the only remaining company the Ravesteyn brothers are looking for additional income besides their roof tiles factory. In 1844 they decide to try to gain a firm chance of succes in the wall tile industry. In the first years it is very difficult to distinguish themselves manifestly from the other Utrecht tile factory that has been in the market for over two hundred years. When the last mentioned closes its doors in 1855 employees and models become available and a quality improvement can be made.

Thus they can carry on when Jan Schillemans, their opposite neighbour, begins to stir. Around this time Jan Schillemans is also looking for expansion in addition to his production of floor and roof tiles and he reaches the same decision as the Ravesteyn brothers did ten years earlier. Here too the assortment is extended with wall tiles. The foreman who came over from the company that was closed in 1855 advertises that Schillemans is in full production within the near future and that orders can be placed to everyone's wishes.

At first both companies range of supplies were rather the same. The company of the Ravesteyn brothers distinguishes itself amongst others by the decors of the 1815 book of models they took over while at Jan Schillemans a new oeuvre is developed for the interiors of many new to be built churches and chapels. Both companies attend national and international markets which result partly in deliveries overseas, whereby Ravesteyn is able to place a great amount of production in Brasil, specifically in Rio de Janeiro. After that for Ravesteyn the export to Engeland starts because of a demand for traditionally made tiles. They are also able to make smaller series for example for the British hearths which measures are deviating from the norm, but also for their own country with a range of equilibrists.

However, at Ravesteyn as well as Schillemans the most important successes lie in the rural regions of especially the middle of the Netherlands and bordering Germany. Increasing wealth has the population longing for a more luxury decorating of the living rooms. Tiles and tile pictures for some decades are unprecedentedly popular and can be applied in endless variations. Again two coloured bible decorated tiles and tiles decorated with rural little landscapes are preferred, complete with tile pictures and ornamentation. For the bible tiles they can fall back on diverse examples of drawings or series of model 'sponsen' which additionally are obtained from for instance companies that were closed down earlier.

The ambitions are high and Schillemans is even prepared to make a huge investment to take into production high quality delftware just like Rozenburg in The Hague. At the time of completion of the new development finances appear to be insufficient and next the company comes into the hands of J.W. Mijnlief owner of the neighbouring bricks factory. He will succeed in fulfilling the promise and he enters into the market beautiful manually painted earthenware besides the ancient assortment of wall tiles. Mijnlief takes advantage of the upcoming interest in tableau works in shop furnishing but also at outside walls and wainscot of tiles inside porches and corridors in the then popular Jugendstil style. The future seems to be unlimited for the company that meanwhile is producing under the name of Faience- en tegelfabriek Holland.

Ravesteyn, the competitor, also puts on a good show in the last years of the nineteenth century by producing one and a half million of tiles with 40 employees. Amongst others the book of models they printed containing 400 decors was an underlying condition to that. Within a year they recover from an all destroying fire in 1904 and soon after that the company is renamed as Westraven.

This book ends around 1900 when both companies are at their climax. Because of the implications of the first world war production processes will be ended. Then only Westraven is able to restart and will be connected with Utrecht until 1994 with an additional important production of pottery and building ceramics.