

DUTCH TILES 1580-1800

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Many collectors probably consider tiles to be rather like pretty pictures because they are so pleasing on the eye. Small in size, they are often beautifully painted with picturesque subjects. In reality, however, tiles were never intended as pictures, nor were they made as individual pieces. They were produced as wall decoration, placed side by side to cover a (brick) wall in 17th- and 18th-century houses.

If you try to compose an overview of the history of the Dutch tile between 1580 and 1800, a number of general questions arise almost immediately. Why were tiles used in the Netherlands? Why were they only used after 1580 and not earlier? Who were their buyers? Where were they situated within a house?

In the 16th and (especially) 17th century, Holland was by far the most important and prosperous province in the northern Netherlands. Half the population of the Netherlands lived in that province, the majority in cities, surrounded by water. These cities were criss-crossed by canals, the ground level was low, and the water table high. Houses were always damp, walls were not insulated, and double (cavity) walls had not yet been invented. Moreover, there was usually only one open fire, which doubled up for both cooking and heating. This was insufficient to keep the walls dry, and the whitewashed plaster was constantly flaking. Wealthy homeowners covered their walls with oak panelling or leather, while, for the less wealthy, glazed tiles sealed the walls, kept the damp out and were easy to keep clean.

In 17th century Italy and Spain tiles had already been in use for 150 years. In comparison with those countries the northern Netherlands - then a mainly agricultural country - was somewhat 'underdeveloped'. By the end of the 16th century, however, prosperity had increased so much that the increasingly affluent population could afford the luxury of tiles and the necessary technical knowledge for producing them reached the north via Antwerp.

Initially they were expensive and, therefore, were

only found in the homes of the well-to-do. At this point it should be noted that at least half the population lived in one-room-dwellings, and any tiles would have been restricted to base boards. Up until 1650 it was mainly the burghers of the cities in the province of Holland who tiled their living quarters, although the growing prosperity of those such as carpenters, plumbers and small merchants, meant that they too were able to make use of tiles in their houses.

In Italy painted tiles were used especially for covering floors and, when Italian craftsmen moved to prosperous Antwerp in the early 16th century they brought this custom with them. The painted tile was thus used as a replacement for the lead-glazed floor tile. The inlaid decoration of lead-glazed tiles was thickly applied and remained visible even when the tiles were worn down with use, whereas maiolica tiles, with their thin, vulnerable layer of tin glaze, were totally unfit for flooring. The broad ornamental patterns of common floor tiles could take a lot of wear and tear, but delicately painted portraits and animals could be disfigured even by small scratches. Only the very wealthy could afford the extravagance of floors that had a relatively short life.

Then, around 1580, craftsmen emigrated to the north on account of the political situation in the Southern Netherlands taking their skills with them. Painted floor tiles were certainly never intended to appeal to the Dutch middle class, well known for their parsimony and for the care they bestowed on their possessions. On the other hand, the Dutch burghers were becoming wealthier and, by 1600 or so, they were more than able to afford to decorate their homes more richly. The new possibility had suddenly emerged around 1580 of decorating walls with painted tiles, the idea was devised either by the manufacturers or by their customers, in search of a practical way to decorate the interiors of their houses. The wall tile was, however, indistinguishable in composition and decoration from the floor tile. Tiles were placed within



Figure 1.

the hearth and alongside it to a height of eight tiles; they were also often placed on corridor walls and anywhere else that was likely to be whitewashed. Even in the homes of the rich, the area adjoining the sooty great fireplace was generally tiled to a width of three tiles.

The Dutch wall tile, as used in the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries, is made of tin-glazed earthenware, produced in specialized potteries: a piece of clay with a 13 centimetre (5 inches) square surface area, which is fired once to become an earthenware tile. This "biscuit" is very porous and has the same composition as flowerpots and bricks. After being fired, sorted, and checked for cracks, tiles were then glazed. Special skills were required of a good glazer who, using a scoop, would cover a tile with two splashes of ground white watery tin glaze. Because tiles are porous, the glaze then dried quickly. Excess glaze was removed from the edges. The dried glaze could then be painted in several colours.

The painter or decorator began by "pouncing" the tile using a transfer pattern or spon: the outline of the drawing was pricked through a piece of paper the size of the tile, and the spon was placed on the tile and dusted with powdered charcoal. The outline thus produced on the tile was redrawn with a fine brush (*trekker*) and then gone over with a larger brush dipped in specified colours (*dieper*). Craftsmanship rather than creativity was required of an accomplished tile painter, who usually spent about three years as an apprentice acquiring the necessary skills. Each painter developed a characteristic style and the work of individual tile



Figure 2.

painters can thus be recognised. In a second firing, the so-called *glost* firing, the glaze is fused in a glass-like layer to the ceramic body. The maiolica, faience or Delftware tile was produced by this method; called after cities in Spain, Italy and Holland, the countries in Europe from where this technique originates.

Before we come to the history of painted tin-glazed tiles in the Netherlands, I would like to take a step back, to 16th century Antwerp.

Utilitarian objects and tiles made of lead-glazed earthenware were produced in 16th-century Antwerp, but there was also a flourishing industry producing

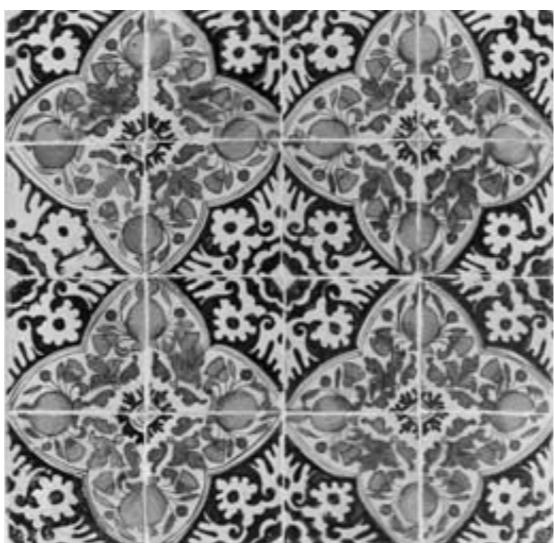


Figure 3.



Figure 4

more luxurious ceramics of tin-glazed pottery. This was developed early in the 16th century by Italians who had emigrated to Antwerp and who were more sophisticated than the Netherlanders in preparing clay, applying tin-glaze, and adding painted decoration. These specialist craftsmen set the style for maiolica in the north: the forms, motifs, and colours all derived from the tiles manufactured in the workshops of Venice, Faenza, and Urbino, cities where the Italians had learned their craft. In the first half of the 16th century, these Italians enjoyed great success in wealthy Antwerp and for the first 50 years or so, Antwerp tiles remained very 'Italian' in appearance, often decorated with a

portrait head within a roundel.

Beside these figurative tiles, ornamental tiles were also manufactured with a decoration of stylized leaf-motifs probably based on Turkish and Persian tiles, whose existence the Italians must have been aware of. Their products looked fundamentally different from the lead-glazed floor tiles the Flemish craftsmen had made up till then.

The manufacture of lead-glazed floor tiles required only a few simple steps: shaping, drying, firing. The finished products, however, were porous and subject to wear. To protect them and make them waterproof, the red clay tiles were coated with a mixture of clay and lead oxide before firing. During the firing, at a

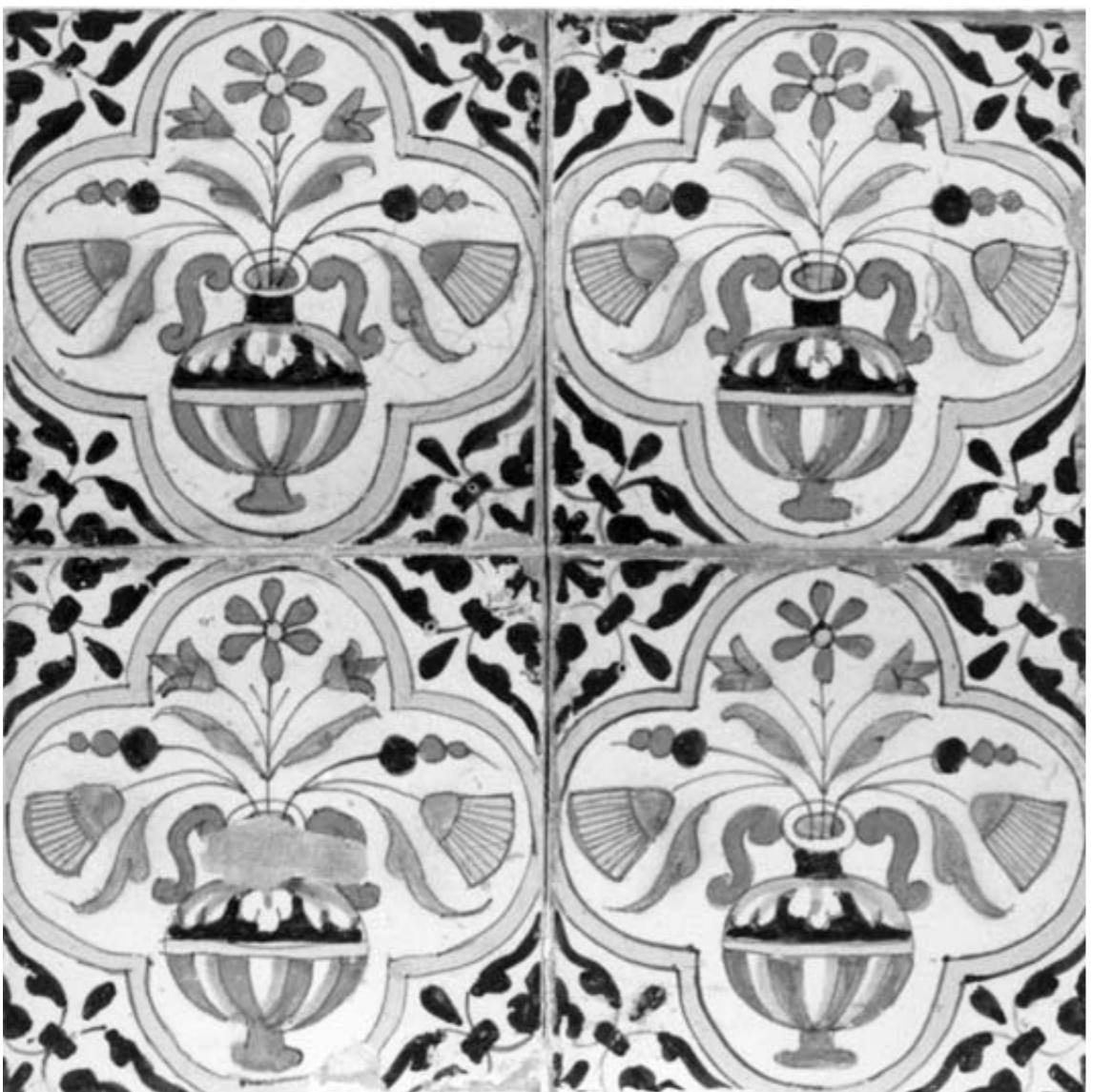


Figure 5.

temperature of about 950 degrees centigrade (1750 degrees Fahrenheit) this substance fused into a transparent glaze. Some of the tiles were coated before glazing with the application of a slip, which turned white or light yellow in the kiln. This method produced tiles of contrasting colours, which could be laid on the floor in patterns. Tiles were also decorated with designs stamped into the soft clay. The impressed areas were then filled with slip, so that the finished tiles would bear a light coloured motif against the red clay body. The decoration on these inlaid floortiles

consisted of stylized leaf motifs, heraldic symbols and sometimes of animals.

Around 1560 some Flemish potters began to produce tin-glazed tiles instead of inlaid lead-glazed floortiles. The decoration of these tiles consisted of highly stylized white leaf motifs set against a dark background, motifs that were very different from the multicoloured vines of Italianate designs because they were based on the designs used on inlaid tiles. In tin-glaze, which consists of a white layer covering a red- or buff-coloured ceramic body, the effect of white decoration against a dark background could only be achieved with negative, or a technique in reverse, in

which the background rather than the motif was painted; the leaf motif being left as a white reserve and the dark background filled in. (Figs. 1 & 2) Of course, this was a very complicated type of decoration and was only used in the early years, when tile producers were still heavily influenced by the inlaid floortile.

At the beginning of the Eighty Years' War in 1585, Antwerp was looted, and many specialist potters went north. And so we find that this industry began to flourish in the province of Holland. Understandably, the Flemish potters initially made the same product but they soon started to produce wall tiles, while continuing to use the decorative patterns of their Antwerp background for floortiles.

Gradually we see that the decoration is pushed back to the corners, and that the central decoration becomes figurative. With the so-called 'quatre-foil' tiles (Fig. 3) named after the Gothic quatre-foil motif, the pattern covers only half of the tile. The other half is filled in with pomegranates and marigolds and oak leaves. The quatre-foil is only completed when four tiles are joined together.

In the case of *Figure 6A* the decoration has been pushed to the four corners. While it very much resembles that on the previously mentioned quatre-foil tiles, it has been reduced from four tiles to a single tile. Analyzing the decoration of these tiles again, the quatre-foil is Gothic and several centuries old and the leaf motifs painted in reverse have been developed from decorative patterns appearing on 15th and 16th century inlaid floortiles. With every new sort of tile, there is a very small change. Tile decorators were simple craftsmen to whom tradition was more important than renewal.

At the beginning of the 17th century we constantly see a tendency to overdecorate tiles with colourful designs. Apparently, it was the fashion, but it was also meant to make tiles look luxurious and expensive. They were meant to appeal to prosperous middle class people, intended as the prospective buyers.

During the Middle Ages, square floor tiles were sometimes laid diagonally. The disadvantage of this system was that the edges of a floor had to be lined with half tiles. With painted tiles, the effect of the diagonal floor pattern was achieved by painting a diamond on each tile and (Fig. 4) a complete pattern consists of four adjoining tiles. This is a major step towards reducing the ornament to a corner motif and the beginning of the evolution toward the single tile as the unit of decoration. The tiles in *Figure 5* are

decorated with flowerpots, showing how in about 1625 painting in the negative was discarded, and painted leaf motifs began to be used as a corner ornament.

Wall surfaces covered with tiles were generally smaller in area than were tiled floors. With the shift to wall tiles, a synthesis took place between the early ornamental tile and the figurative Italian tile from Antwerp. This was the first step, the next followed when pattern-makers began to think in terms of a single tile rather than blocks. These developments led to a change in the decoration of tiles in favour of figurative designs. When this trend peaked in about 1650, tile decoration consisted of a single figurative element per tile, combined with a minuscule corner ornament. Dutch tile makers, shifting to the figurative, thus left the Middle Ages and the floor behind and began to exploit fully the potential of the new technique.

When clay preparation techniques improved around 1620, this clay was used exclusively for tableware, before being introduced into tile manufacture from about 1650 onwards.

Early floor tiles were almost 2 centimetres (three quarters of an inch) thick, a thickness necessary to withstand being walked on. With the shift from floor tiles to wall tiles circa 1580, it was no longer necessary to make the tiles thick enough to withstand heavy pressure, but the technical problems of shrinking and warping prevented manufacturers from reducing tile thickness to less than 1.5 centimetres (five eighths of an inch). Continuing improvements in clay preparation enabled a few firms at the turn of the 18th century to reduce the thickness of their tiles to scarcely more than 0.5 cm (three sixteenths of an inch). Reducing tile thickness resulted in savings not only in material and labour, but also in transportation. Most important, however, this made it possible to put at least twice as many tiles in the kiln for each firing. This resulted in a great reduction in fuel costs and allowed plants to increase production without building additional kilns.

From about 1625 taste changed and sombre colours began to be preferred to bright ones. Clothing became simpler and predominantly black. Painters like Rembrandt and Van Goyen adopted a more monochromatic palette. These changes naturally affected tile decoration and from this date most tiles were painted in a single colour, blue. Gradually, the area painted also reduced. Blue was popular for several reasons. As a neutral colour, it went well with the new sober fashions, and moreover, it was easy to handle in



Figures 6 A and B.

the kiln, seldom causing problems (such as running of the glaze).

Then from the beginning of the 17th century, the United Dutch East India Company (VOC) imported large quantities of blue-and-white porcelain from China.

Figure 7



The product sold very well, and soon not only the Netherlands but all of Europe was flooded with Chinese blue-and-white. This was undoubtedly also a major factor in the choice of blue as the colour for decorated tiles. In addition, the designs with which they were decorated were now also greatly simplified. Often the diamond or roundel motifs around the figurative decoration were now omitted. Of the cornermotifs in reverse, only a few strokes of the



Figure 8.



Figure 9.

brush remain. In tile "lingo" these strokes are called oxenheads (see Figs. 6A & 6B).

In the second quarter of the 17th century many different tiles were produced, decorated with designs of figures, animals and stylized flowers, all of them with different corner motifs but with "mockfret" and "oxenhead" predominant.

The panel in Figure 7 shows tiles with 'triple tulips' and with mockfret motifs derived from Chinese kraak-

porcelain. Figure 8 shows a panel of tiles with scenes from everyday life, and though the human beings are relatively large, the tiles look very sober because the corner decoration is so small.

Between 1625 and 1650 tile decoration reduced further. Until 1650 it was mainly the burghers of the cities in the province of Holland who tiled their living quarters. The urban middle classes, who had long favoured tiles, began to imitate the wealthy elite by covering their walls with fabric and leather. Houses had become larger - the typical middle-class home post 1650 had a separate kitchen and the living-room now came into its own. As it was no longer necessary to cook in the living room, tiles, so easy to keep clean, were no longer essential and after 50 years lost their appeal for the burghers. The new, separate kitchens were lined with tiles, but with a cheaper variety - either plain white or with minuscule motifs, such as children's games. The extent of decoration on a tile was not only a matter of fashion but also price; in general, and as one would expect, the more decoration a tile had, the more expensive it was.

The boom in tile production was, in part, the result of the new urban construction, but after around 1630-40 a more important factor was the adoption of tiles by segments of the population that had not used them before. In the preceding 100 years, the population of the "wet" provinces of Zeeland, Holland, western Utrecht, and Friesland had evolved from small farmers, producing for local consumption, into agrarian businessmen with a much wider market. Farmers became fuller participants in the Dutch economy; they rose to new heights of prosperity and they came into closer contact with the cities. By 1640 many had begun to enjoy the luxuries of life, such as tiles.

Farmers tended to be conservative and old-fashioned in their taste for interior decoration and even as late as 1640 they still preferred polychrome tiles. Thus we see a whole range of polychrome flower- and bird-tiles produced between 1640 and 1670. The tulip dominated, with the reduced "oxenhead" as a cornermotif.

Flowers and birds were often mixed on a wall. We see in Figure 9 twelve flower-tiles which are painted exceptionally beautifully and we can see how varied such a panel can be. The green pigment was often not very stable in the kiln and now and then the white tin-glaze around the green has become discoloured.

The decline of the urban tile market and the near monopoly of Delft in the manufacture of the quality

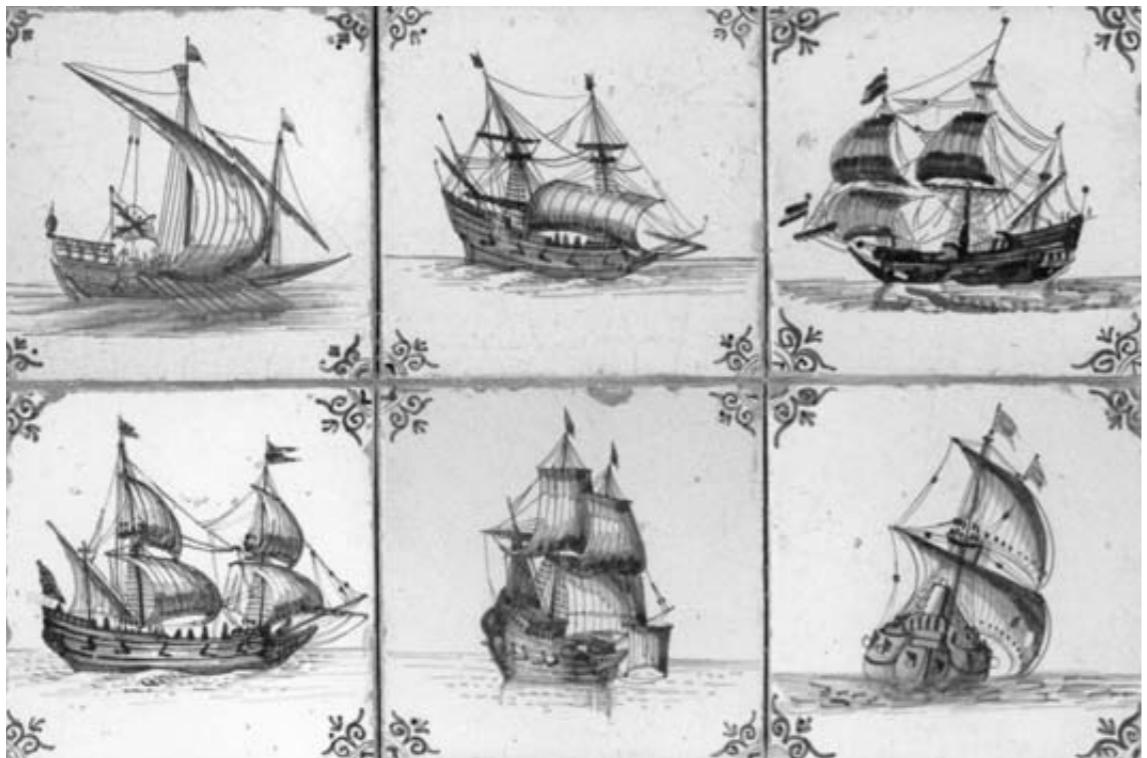


Figure 10.

Figure 11.

product known as Delftware led to the disappearance of the last small firms devoted to the old-fashioned mixture of tiles and maiolica in Haarlem, Leiden, Amsterdam, and other places. The entire maiolica, tile, and Delftware industry underwent a process of purging, concentration, and specialization.

From 1660 onwards, the production of faience was centred on Delft. Tiles were produced in Rotterdam, Amsterdam and the towns of Harlingen and Makkum in Friesland. Harlingen had been the site of small mixed maiolica and tile works since about 1600. The new demand from rural areas, also evident in Friesland, led to a sharp increase in tile production in that city. Small specialist centres like Gouda and Utrecht remained in existence, but after 1660 most Dutch tiles were made in Rotterdam, and Friesland.

From 1660 tile fashion changed again. The painted area continued to reduce, while new subjects also came quietly into fashion, adapted to the countryman's taste. As you would imagine people living in coastal areas or in northern Germany and Denmark were particularly interested in marine subjects. Figure 10 shows a panel with all kinds of ships, such as the three



Figure 12 A and B.

Figure 13.

masters, flutes and Mediterranean galleys that sailed to the Far East. These are made in the province of Holland.

After 1660, there was interest in exploring different subjects and in simplifying the painting on the tiles. This was when images of children playing came into fashion. Glancing at these tiles one can see that they are of cheaper quality (see Fig. 11) with the corner motif now only a dot.

Tile fashion changed around 1700 for the last time, when fully painted biblical and landscape tiles came into production alongside the still favoured minimally decorated variety. These latter tiles were being produced right up until 1900. In the north, in Harlingen and Makkum, tile producers restricted themselves to fully painted biblical and landscape examples, while in Rotterdam, in southern Holland, all sorts of tiles with genre and mythological scenes were made.

Figures 12A & 12B show two blocks of four Frisian biblical tiles, which must have been much more expensive than the poorly painted tiles showing children playing.

The landscape tiles in Figure 13 were made in Rotterdam. They are among the most beautifully painted tiles to be made in the 18th century. Tiles of this sort were placed in the dairy of one of the royal castles, rebuilt around 1700, by King William III and Queen Mary Stuart. The difference between these and the Frisian tiles is obvious.



Around 1700 manganese (in addition to blue) came into fashion and, occasionally, tiles were painted in blue and manganese. The manganese border of the tiles in Figure 12B was simply splashed on with a brush, which made the tile cheaper.

It is exceptional that an industry specialising in luxury products - and that is what tiles were - could survive for over 300 years. Throughout this long period the Dutch tile was a much loved element in the households of various different sections of the population. All in all the consumer of the decorated tile came, in the course of those 300 years, from lower and lower social groups. The divide between the consumer and the fashionable few became wider. Meanwhile, the decoration on tiles changed more slowly. However, the Dutch tile industry adapted in a wonderfully subtle way to new groups and their desires. This is the reason that for 300 years Dutch tiles were one of the most important examples of Dutch cultural expression.