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A Dutch colonial ebony cabinet with brass mounts

Batavia (Jakarta), 2nd half 17th century

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H. 80.5 x W. 91.2 x D. 54.3 cm

Provenance:
With Francesca Galloway, London
The Edith & Stuart Cary Welsh Collection

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Jan Veenendaal classifies the robust carving on this cabinet as 'Batavia Type I'. This type of decoration emerged in the period from 1680 to 1720, and features deeply carved floral motifs. Although we use the term 'high relief' to indicate the significant difference, 'half relief' would be more appropriate. A comparison could be made with Dutch and also Batavian silver, which is now adorned with deeply embossed large flowers after a period of primarily engraved decorations. In this period, the Dutch had a fondness for flowers in gardens and indoors. For example, Dirck van Ryswyck (1658 - after 1679) was known for his marquetry in touchstone. Jan van Mekeren (1658 1733) created particularly rich cabinets with marquetry on the doors in various exotic woods of vases filled with a selection of flowers. These artists, like the VOC merchants who ordered textiles in India, had a wide choice of Dutch books with engravings of both European and exotic flowers for inspiration. The floral motifs on the furniture arose through an interaction of Dutch and Indian artistic conceptions. Although these pieces of furniture were also found in South India and Sri Lanka, we nonetheless refer to this style as Batavian, because around 1900, when there was a lively interest in it, so many examples were found in and around this historical city. Ebony and coromandel furniture, adorned with large flowers, was used by residents of Batavia, Colombo, and the VOC settlements in South India but was only sporadically present in the Netherlands at that time. In other words: we see here a unique furniture style that originated in Asia and was beloved by the Dutch there, their Indian descendants, and wealthy Indonesians, Peranakan Chinese, and Sri Lankans (Sinhalese and Tamils).

The present cabinet is a result of a unique and new style that emerged from a fusion of Asian and European ideas. To learn more about who the furniture makers were, we must look to South India, where in the seventeenth century a continuous series of wars and famines alternated. For example, in 1661, the situation in Tanjore was so dire that the entire region was abandoned by the population. Two years later, driven by hunger, cotton painters sold themselves to the Dutch. They were mainly transported to Sri Lanka to improve the production of chintz. Although the starved Tamils were weak and carried many contagious diseases, the Dutch were the main customers of the traders in enslaved people. Craftsmen were especially welcome in Batavia and other VOC settlements. Contemporary documents indicate that there was a large influx of enslaved people capable of making the new style of furniture in Batavia. An important point here is that craftsmen of the same profession lived in the same villages or city districts. Often, they were also from the same family. This means that furniture makers and woodcarvers lived together and that when a disaster struck their area, they all left together. In this way, an entirely new textile industry emerged in Sri Lanka due to the aforementioned exodus of textile painters. It is quite possible that an entire community of woodcarvers and furniture makers from the Kammalan caste was shipped to Batavia simultaneously. This would explain how the sudden demand in the rapidly expanding city of Batavia could be met so easily. An additional reason is that from 1657 the local industry was supported by import tariffs on household goods.

On the Coromandel Coast, beautifully carved gravestones were used to cover the graves of the Dutch. As early as the beginning of the 17th century, large gravestones were shipped from Sadraspatnam (India) to Batavia, Colombo, and the Cape (South Africa). In Sadraspatnam and Negapatnam, many of these gravestones are still in situ. In Jakarta, Colombo, and Cape Town, a number can also be found. From 1680, these gravestones were carved with a frame of flowers, some of which are the same as those on the ebony and calamander furniture from Batavia, like the present cabinet. On the doors of the present cabinet and others alike, within an arch-shaped space, flowers

are arranged on branches that seemingly sprout randomly from the base. Above the arches, two slender snakes facing each other are carved out. Snakes have a special meaning in Hindu mythology. For example, they can turn into arrows and protect their owner. In the Javanese version, they can still take revenge, even if the evil has already occurred. When the snakes face each other, they are made by an Indian craftsman. When the snakeheads are turned away from each other, the carving is done by a Javanese woodcarver. The snakes refer to Naga, the Sanskrit word for a deity or class of entity or being, taking the form of a giant snake. In Hindu religious culture, Nagas are considered nature spirits closely associated with water, rivers, lakes and seas as protectors of springs. Hence, they are regarded as protectors of valuables, which is perfect for a precious cabinet with possibly even more precious contents.

Sources:

Jan Veenendaal, Wonen op de Kaap en in Batavia 1602-1795, Titus M. Eliëns ed., Waanders, Zwolle, 2002, pp. 30- 32

Jan Veenendaal, Aziatische kunst en de Nederlandse Smaak, Waanders, Zwolle, 2014