

Broken porcelain illuminates destructive Dutch colonial legacy

Bernard Appassamy | 16 September 2015
4 Comments



A vase of flowers explodes. Glass shards and shredded petals fly in slow motion. Then, enchantedly, all the pieces come together, reverting to their original shape, only to be struck by the same invisible force before it explodes once more.

The opening [credits](#) to SBS TV's Danish series *The Legacy* leave no doubt. This is a story of destruction, of lives and relationships ravaged and left to mend for themselves.

For around 30 years, I have been caring for a box of Chinese Ming porcelain shards also rooted in violence. Since I've started taking measure of my mortality, they have, in contrast, gained potency, each piece a time capsule bigger than me, and more precious than anything I could lay claim to.

On 6 March 1615, when Mauritius was still uninhabited, a cyclone thrust three of a fleet of four tall ships of the Dutch East India company (VOC) against the coral reef that surrounds the island.

As the ships were ripped apart and thousands of Ming porcelain pieces on board smashed, the crew fought for their lives. A total of 75 men, including Admiral Pieter Both (pictured), the first governor-general of the VOC and leader of the fleet, drowned.

He was returning home after his tenure in the Indonesian port of Bantam. In tribute to Both and his crew, one of Mauritius' most iconic mountains was named after him. At its peak, a giant boulder shaped like a head continues to balance ominously.

In 1979, a search succeeded in locating Both's shipwreck off Flic en Flac [beach](#), bringing to the surface a number of intact artefacts. Then, some time in the 1980s, word spread that Ming shards from another ship from the fleet were washing up north of Flic en Flac at Albion beach.

I picture that Sunday afternoon when, barefoot in almost tepid water and with our heads down, my mother and I were scanning a secluded rocky end of Albion. I can't remember who found the first shard — distinctly antique and Chinese — but we shared tremendous joy. That shard was followed by more, and we gathered them in a plastic bag, dripping, with some attached to seaweed.

Many locals have since picked up such shards at Albion. Some have been set in glass as paper-weights or in precious metals as jewellery, or assembled artistically.

The Japanese offer a unique view on broken porcelain. *Kintsugi*, literally 'joining in gold', refers to the meticulous art of reassembling broken pieces of the same item with a mixture of lacquer and gold. The cracks in the repaired vessel are thus highlighted not camouflaged; the gold honours the breakage which is seen as part of the object's life, not ending it.

As I researched this story, it became clear the Ming shards also stood as a metaphor for the destructive practices of the VOC in and beyond Mauritius, and the eventual implosion of the VOC. To claim and maintain their monopoly and colonies, the VOC, as well as their European competitors, sometimes resorted to harrowing massacres against established indigenous populations.

I sought answers. What kind of man was Both? Should we hail him, on the merit of his successful career from the VOC perspective, an ethically unquestionable, tragic hero?

If there is a hero in this story, could it be the Ming porcelain for surviving the epic journey from China to Mauritius through Indonesia, then that devastating night, and over three and a half centuries under seawater to offering itself as free shards on the shores of Albion?

Both had spent a month in Mauritius on his outward journey. In a [letter](#) dated 14 October 1610 and addressed to the VOC Board, he reports on the crew and the trip.

In the manner of *Kintsugi*, Both alludes to the damaging narrative of the VOC, but also bonds a treasure of testimonies and insights not least of which is the first recorded birth on Mauritian soil.

... tell Mr Jan Harmans that Anneken, who he has recommended so much, has — on the roadstead here — given birth to a daughter who has been baptised here and named Mauritia.

Both comes across as benevolent and extending prophetically a reconciliatory hand.

The last paragraph of the letter gives a voice to the husband and father that the admiral also was, and to the gifts he was sending his family with the letter.

I risk speculating that Both's wife, Sophia, and their children, Hendrick and Elisabeth, paid their own tribute by carrying out Both's creative vision for his own collection of free Mauritian beach mementos.

My lords, I have taken the liberty having a long piece of ebony cut in the form of a spear and two small pieces, one for my son, another for my daughter as toys; also [sent] a box with all sorts of sea-shells in order to make a fountain after my return, God willing ... I pray that You Honourable Sirs will allow Captain Claes Sijmons, bearer of this [message], to deliver [these things] to my wife in Amersfoort in order to tell me [her] of my health. From Your Honourable servant Pieter Both in the ship 't Wapen van Amstelredam, in the roadstead of Mauritius.

 Bernard Appassamy is a Sydney writer and artist who grew up in Mauritius.

Pieter Both image from [Rijks Museum](#).

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Gordon | 15 September 2015

A fine picture of Pieter Both. And an altogether interesting, and if I may say healing, story.

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What a fascinating story - but a teaser. There must be a book in this somewhere.....n'est ce pas?

John | 19 September 2015

A very interesting article, thanks. I too have a box of the same Ming pieces collected from the rock pools at low tide on Albion beach with my parents as child in the 70's. I hadn't realised Pieter Both led that fleet and drowned with it. Now, with the clearance of my parents' house, I'm faced with storing the collection or or finding a new home for it.

Tom | 03 April 2017

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