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Ornamental shell festoons of the Oostkerk at Middelburg

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ABSTRACT

Two sculptured shell festoons at the exterior of the Oostkerk (built 1647—1667) at Middelburg (Netherlands) are regarded as an expression of the 17th century admiration for the works of Nature, as is equally evident from pictures and poetry of that era.

The Oostkerk (East Church) at Middelburg (Netherlands) was built as a Protestant Church between 1647 and 1667. Consecration took place July 6th, 1667. Its architects were, successively, Pieter Post and Bartholomeus Drijfhout († 1649), Aart van 's-Gravesande († 1662), and Louis Jolijt.

The building, based on an octagonal ground plan, has a dome of eight segments, crowned by a lantern. At the back a semi-octagonal structure with a smaller dome and a lantern are attached. This serves as a consistory and clock tower (fig. 1). The main entrance comprises a large doorway with a small door on either side. Over the central door is a triangular fronton in which a supine human skeleton is sculptured (Ozinga, 1929).

The style of the Oostkerk is 'classicized baroque'; i.e. it contains elements of classical architecture combined with components of a more capricious nature (Van Swigchem, 1967 : 7).

On six of the outer walls of the octagon, just under the windows, festoons, chiselled in limestone, are attached to the brickwork. Two of them represent compositions of skulls and bones, two others of flowers and fruit, and two of shells. All are executed in an accurate, naturalistic style.

The two shell festoons (figs. 2 and 3) comprise representations of various marine molluscs, approximately life-size. These are chiefly of oriental origin and include such genera as *Turbo*, *Cypraea*, *Strombus*, *Lambis*, *Cassis*, *Tonna*, *Murex*, *Pecten*, *Tridacna*, *Hippopus*, *Cardium*, and *Nautilus*; most of them are clearly identifiable. In addition each festoon carries two starfishes.

The representation of so many shells from eastern tropical seas in the

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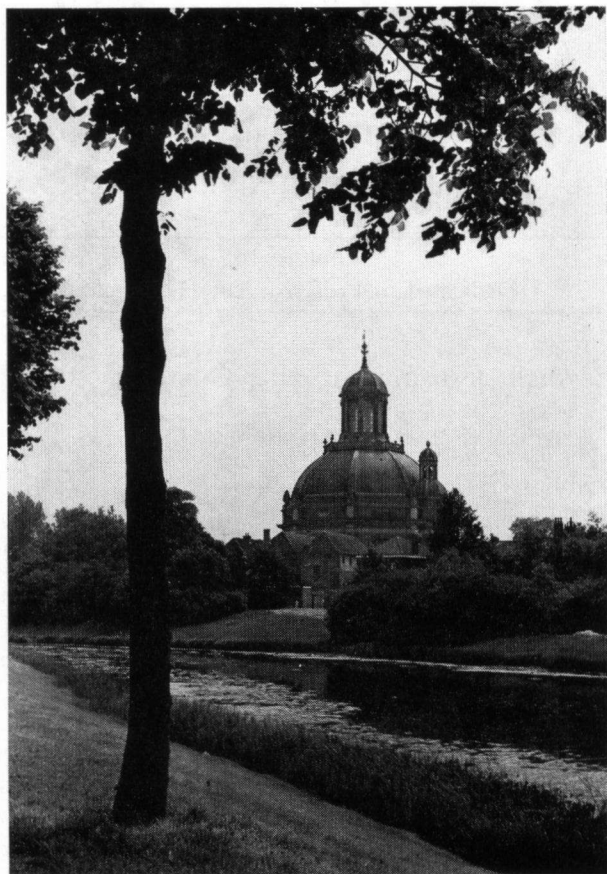


FIG. 1. Oostkerk at Middelburg.

(Phot. Documentatiecentrum Zeeuws Deltagebied).

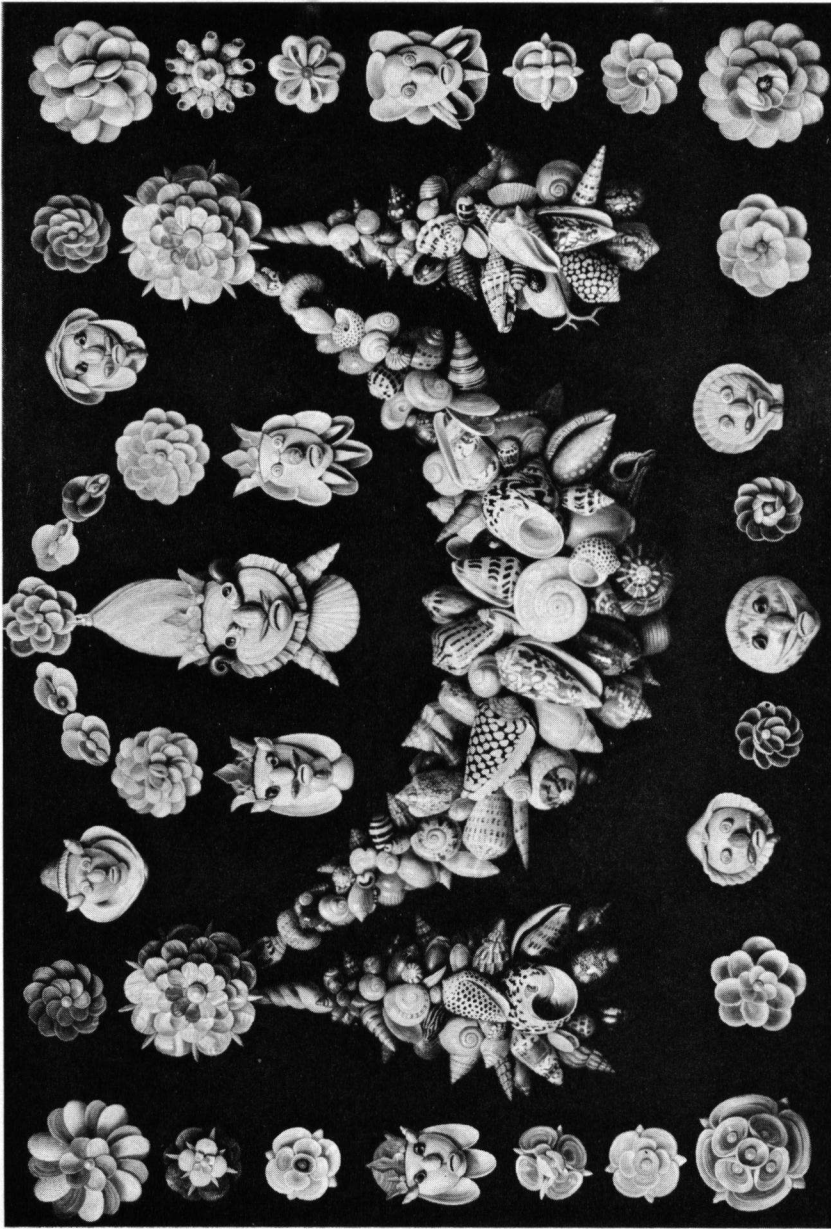


FIG. 4. Festoon of shells, painted on copper, by J. van Kessel. Signed: Joannes van Kessel fecit, 1656. Size: 40 × 56 cm. (Coll. F. Lugt, Institut Néerlandais, Paris).



FIGS. 2—3. Festoons of shells on the wall of the Oostkerk at Middelburg.

(Phot. Documentatiecentrum Zeeuws Deltagebied).

middle of the 17th century could only be effected after the seamen of the Dutch East India Company had brought home such curiosities from the island colonies in the Far East, Java and the Moluccas in particular.

From 1598 onwards the town of Middelburg had a chamber of the East India Company and equipped its own trading vessels. In the following years tropical shells became more and more familiar and appreciated in the Netherlands. They were exported as part of the East India trade at that time. Their popularity as objects for collectors is evident from the numerous private cabinets of natural history in the Netherlands, especially those at Middelburg and Vlissingen where amateur conchology flourished and found enthusiasts among all classes (Engel, 1939; Van Benthem Jutting, 1939).

Various colourful and beautifully shaped shells are also represented on many Netherlandish still-life paintings of the 17th century, among which those of the Middelburg painters Bosschaert and Balthasar van der Ast are internationally famous (Bol, 1955, 1960; Bergström, 1947; Hairs, 1955). In most instances shells fill up empty corners of the pictures; complete shell still-lives are very rare. We know of only two painted shell garlands resembling the festoons of the Oostkerk. They are both the work of the Antwerp painter Jan (or Joannes) van Kessel (1626—1679). One of them is reproduced in Cameron (1961 : 19, fig. 13), the other one here in fig. 4.

Sculptured flower- and fruit-festoons on 17th century baroque buildings, sacred as well as secular ones, are very common both in the Netherlands and abroad, but the representation of shells in garlands is unusual. In this respect the shell festoons of the Oostkerk are worth mentioning.

It has been suggested that the shells in these festoons were not merely decorative in function, but were also venerated as objects symbolizing the transience of life, the mortal remains from which life has departed. According to such a conception the shell garlands would be comparable to the festoons of skulls and bones.

I wonder whether this intention was present in the minds of the builders of this church? It is true that certain shells are used currently as emblems: e.g. the scallop (*Pecten jacobaeus*) in connection with the birth of Venus, and, later on, with St. James; the trumpet shell (*Charonia tritonis*) as the horn of Neptune; the sacred chank (*Turbinella pyrum*) as a container for holy oil or medicine in Hindu temples of India. The occurrence of so many different shells, however, does not indicate an emblematic significance in this case.

I am inclined to consider them as expressing a desire to pay homage to God by avowing profound admiration for the works of Nature.

This would not have been unusual in the 17th century. Various examples are to be found in literature. In his poem 'Strande' (The Beach) (1614) the poet Philibert van Borsselen (about 1575—1627), who lived in Zeeland, eulogized the beauty and diversity of shells as the work of the Almighty Creator. After having described in poetical terms many shells from 'Neptune's Realm' he concluded: 'let us, shell collectors, in church adore the true

God of the Sea, who can calm the high waves, and who led Jacob through the Red Sea'.

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