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INSIDE THE CREATIVE KINGDOM OF
GAURAVI KUMARI

+ DESIGN IN SEOUL | HERITAGE IN DELFT

Delft Reverie

Following childhood memories, **Henna Shah** returns to the blue-and-white world that first shaped her imagination

MY WORLD HAS long been etched in blue and white. Before I understood the word Delftware, these colours had already begun shaping my aesthetic sense. In my grandfather's Mumbai home, a teak showcase held a world within itself; crockery admired more than used, arriving from distant shores through the trade networks he navigated as a freight broker. His favourite piece was a blue-and-white oil dispenser with a sailing ship illustration and a cork lid. Years later, my uncle, whose work often took him to Rotterdam, added a delicately painted blue-and-white wall plate. These objects became familiar companions in my childhood. So, when the Netherlands finally found its way to my travel plans, Delft was non-negotiable. I wanted to uncover why this simple marriage of blue and white felt so deeply captivating.

Delft At First Sight

Arriving in Delft, I found myself in a town stitched together by canals and bicycles, where bridges tilt aside for passing boats. From the train station, I walked towards **Koninklijke Porceleyne Fles**, or **Royal Delft** (royaldelft.com), the last surviving factory from the original Delftware producers. Stepping in felt like crossing into the living memory of Dutch craftsmanship.

"The style originated in 17th-century Netherlands, when artists were inspired by the blue porcelain from China that arrived here through the Dutch East India Company (VOC)," said Tess Reedijk, a young *Plateelschilder* (handpainted earthenware artisan) at Royal Delft.



Delftware originated in the Netherlands in the 17th century, influenced by Chinese porcelain imported by the VOC.



* Handpainted Delftware pieces are signed on the underside by the individual painter. Above: Royal Delft is the last remaining factory from the original 17th-century Delftware producers.

Through Time

In the **Royal Delft Museum** (museum.royaldelft.com), the story of blue and white unfolded through objects. Glass cases held porcelain that once travelled along sea passages, early pieces made in China for Persian patrons who favoured cobalt blue against luminous white. Preparatory sketches revealed how patterns were drafted and transferred onto ceramics through charcoal tracing.

As I moved from one display to the next, I could almost sense the moment when Delft's artisans began experimenting for themselves, coating earthenware with a tin glaze to imitate that porcelain sheen. By the 18th century, they had shifted motifs towards Dutch pastoral scenes and developed a distinct visual language of their own.

As part of their permanent collection, Royal Delft Museum has a gallery devoted to the grand commissions of King William III and Queen Mary II. Delftware took on an almost architectural presence here—tall vases, tulip pyramids and fluted vessels with a theatrical elegance, each one reflecting a time when British royal patronage transformed the craft into a continental luxury.

The past then gave way to the present in the form of a dinner service designed exclusively for the current Dutch Royal Family. Kingfisher motifs, orange-blossom detailing and fine gold edging around the intertwined monogram of the present King and Queen reflect how the artform has adapted with time.

Keeping History Alive

Upon joining a guided walk inside the Royal Delft Factory, we stepped into the painting rooms where artisans sat before wooden tables, completely absorbed in their craft. What struck me first were their brushstrokes—not blue, as one might expect, but a muted charcoal that would transform into a deep cobalt only after firing. It felt almost magical, this idea that the pottery revealed its true colours only in the kiln.

"Every brushstroke I make still follows the centuries-old techniques passed down through generations at Royal Delft. A piece is only finished once it finds the right balance between form and feeling. Sometimes that happens in a day, sometimes it takes much longer. I'm proud to be part of something so deeply rooted



A Clockwise from here: Artisans at Royal Delft continue to hand-paint pottery using centuries-old techniques; the Royal Delft Museum displays historic blue-and-white ceramics; visitors can paint an original Delft piece at the museum's tile-painting workshops; inside the museum, centuries of blue-and-white Delftware and Dutch ceramic craftsmanship are on display.

in Dutch art history, yet still relevant today. For me, it is not only about perfection, but about the feeling that I'm contributing to a living tradition," said Tess, pointing to a colleague immersed in his work with near-devotional focus.

Tess shared that she is still one of the younger painters at the factory. "We don't work with short-term interns here, as this craft cannot be mastered in just a few weeks. It takes time, patience and repetition." Later in the afternoon, I learned about the distinction between handmade and handpainted Delftware, the former is shaped and glazed in Delft blue but decorated with transfer prints while the latter rendered entirely by an artist's brush, each piece carrying its

own individuality. A painter's signature, hidden on the underside, marks that personal touch. Pointing to one of her own creations, Tess added, "Each painter adds a bit of their own character and rhythm to the tradition. That balance between precision and personality keeps the craft alive."

High Tea, Delft Style

By that point, the thought of painting an original Delft blue piece myself seemed a distant aspiration. I had hoped to join one



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: COURTESY OF ROYAL DELFT (3); HENNA SHAH



From left: The Schiffmacher Collection at Royal Delft displays a curated selection of intricately hand-painted Delftware pieces; Brasserie1653 serves high tea in a 17th-century courtyard using original Delftware table settings.



of their tile-painting workshops, but none were scheduled for that week. So I carried my yearning for a closer encounter to Brasserie1653, where a high tea served on Delftware became an extension of my blue-and-white reverie.

A short walkway from the factory opened into a 17th-century courtyard, one of the last preserved fragments of Royal Delft's original architecture. Beyond it stood Brasserie1653, where I had reserved a vegetarian high tea. My table was set entirely in Delftware: delicate teacups, a painted pot, and a three-tier stand laden with warm scones, tomato soup, cucumber sandwiches and *petit fours*.

The teas ranged from Earl Grey to refreshing mint, ginger and lemon. There was something almost ceremonial about drinking tea from original Delftware while listening to the clinking of cups around me. As the soft murmur of conversations drifted from nearby tables, the boundary between object and experience seemed to dissolve.

Reimagining Blue And White

Before boarding my train back to Amsterdam, one plate in the museum shop seemed to call to me. It carried a Dutch verse suggesting that eating begins with the eyes, moves through the hands and ends in the heart. It felt as if the day

at Royal Delft had been distilled into that single piece—something I could carry home.

Yet Delft lingered with me long after I left the town. Days later in Amsterdam, I wandered into a **Heinen Delft Blauw** (heinendelftsblauw.com) store. If Royal Delft felt like history preserved, Heinen felt like history reimagined. The designs were playful and modern, yet unmistakably rooted in tradition. The *chai*-loving Indian in me couldn't resist a blue-and-white tea set. As the friendly lady at the counter wrapped it in careful layers for my flight home, she remarked, "You can even shop from us online, we ship to India. And you'll love our range of Christmas ornaments."

Back To The Beginning

When I returned to my family home, I instinctively reached for the two Delft blue pieces I had always known. Turning them over gently, I noticed details I had never thought to examine before, like the word "Delfts," marking them both as post-1950 pieces. The objects had not changed; it was me who now saw them differently. Understanding their lineage felt like unlocking a history that had been sitting in plain sight all along. I realised that art, however delicate, endures through its ability to build bridges across eras, lives and continents in ways no words ever could. 🌐

GETTING THERE

You can fly to Amsterdam from Mumbai or Delhi on daily flights operated by **IndiGo** (goindigo.in), **Air India** (airindia.com) and **KLM** (klm.co.in). From **Amsterdam Centraal station** (mijnstation.nl/amsterdam), take an hour-long intercity train to reach Delft.

STAY

ibis Amsterdam Centre Stopera offers spacious, canal-facing rooms and is conveniently located near the metro, providing easy access to Amsterdam Centraal. Doubles from ₹25,000; all.accor.com/hotel

Hampshire Hotel Delft Centre offers a true taste of living in Delft, close to the historic centre and 20 minutes from the station. Rooms follow a distinctive musical theme. Doubles from ₹15,000; hoteldelftcentre.nl