



THE LOVE NETHERLANDS GUIDE N. 003

Delft Blue Pottery

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The blue in Delft Blue is actually a trick of the kiln: painters work in dark grey and black tones made from cobalt oxide, and the signature bright blue only appears after the glaze is fired at around 1,000 degrees Celsius. That means a Delft painter has to picture the finished colour entirely in their head while working, with no way to see it until the piece emerges from the oven. This is Guide 003 in The Love Netherlands Guide series.

What Delft Blue Actually Is

Delft Blue (in Dutch, Delfts Blauw) is tin-glazed earthenware decorated in blue on a white background, produced in and around the city of Delft from roughly the early 17th century onward. It is a type of faience, meaning the reddish clay body is coated in an opaque white tin glaze that hides the earthenware underneath and gives painters a clean surface to work on.

Crucially, the term describes a style and a place of origin rather than a single company. At its height in the late 1600s and early 1700s, more than 30 potteries operated in Delft. Today only one of the original factories still makes hand-painted Delftware continuously: De Koninklijke Porceleyne Fles, founded in 1653 and better known as Royal Delft.

How It Began: A Dutch Answer to Chinese Porcelain

Delft Blue owes its existence to trade. In the early 1600s, ships of the Dutch East India Company (the VOC) brought vast quantities of blue-and-white Chinese porcelain into the Netherlands, and demand outstripped what could be imported. When civil war in China disrupted supply around the middle of the century, Delft's potters - many working in former breweries left empty by a declining beer trade - stepped in to imitate the look using local materials.

They could not replicate true hard-paste porcelain, whose recipe was still a secret in Europe. Instead they perfected tin-glazed earthenware that copied the prized white-and-blue palette. Early designs borrowed heavily from Chinese motifs, but over time Delft painters added their own subjects: Dutch landscapes, windmills, ships, flowers, and scenes of daily life.

How a Piece Is Made

Traditional Delftware is shaped from clay, dried, and given a first firing to produce a porous biscuit. It is then dipped in the white tin glaze, which dries to a chalky, absorbent surface. Painters work on this raw glaze with cobalt-based pigment, often transferring an outline by dusting charcoal through a pricked paper template known as a spon before filling in the detail freehand.

Because the unfired glaze soaks up paint like paper, there is no correcting a stroke once it is laid down. The painted piece is then coated in a clear glaze and fired again, during which the cobalt develops its blue and the surface fuses into the glossy finish that defines the style.

Spotting Genuine Delftware

Because "Delft Blue" is a style, a great deal of blue-and-white pottery sold as Delftware is mass-produced and printed by transfer or decal rather than painted by hand - much of it made outside the Netherlands. Genuine hand-painted pieces usually carry small irregularities in the brushwork and a maker's mark on the base.

Royal Delft pieces, for example, are identified by a distinctive base mark combining the initials "JT" (for founder Joost Thooft, who bought the factory in 1876), the word Delft, and a small painted plume. Many workshops also add the painter's own initials and a date code, so a truly hand-decorated piece can often be traced back to the individual who painted it.

Where to See It Today

The Royal Delft factory in Delft runs a museum and working studio where visitors can watch painters at work and see historic pieces, including large decorative plaques. The city's Prinsenhof museum also holds significant Delftware collections, and the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam displays notable examples, among them tall tulip vases with multiple spouts originally designed to show off individual blooms.

One showpiece worth knowing about is the painted copy of Rembrandt's "The Night Watch" made in Delftware tiles at Royal Delft - a reminder that the craft was never limited to plates and vases, but extended to ambitious wall-sized works.

Myths Worth Retiring

Myth: Delft Blue is porcelain. In fact, classic Delftware is tin-glazed earthenware, not true porcelain. The white surface is a glaze covering ordinary reddish clay, which is exactly why potters could make it without China's secret porcelain recipe.

Myth: If it's blue-and-white pottery, it's real Delft Blue. The name refers to a specific style and origin, and much of what is sold today is machine-printed and made elsewhere. Hand-painted work from Delft's surviving workshops carries maker's marks and small brushwork imperfections that printed pieces lack.

Myth: The painters work in blue. The pigment goes on as dark grey and black cobalt oxide, and only turns blue during the glaze firing - so the artist never sees the final colour while painting.

Frequently Asked Questions

Is Delft Blue always blue and white?

The classic and most famous palette is blue on white, but Delft potters also produced polychrome (multi-coloured) faience and a black-glazed ware. The blue-and-white version simply became the international signature of the style because it echoed the prized Chinese porcelain that inspired it.

How can we tell a hand-painted piece from a printed one?

Look at the base for a maker's mark and, where present, the painter's initials and a date code. On the surface, hand-painted work shows slight variations in line thickness and small imperfections, while transfer-printed pieces have uniform, mechanically even patterns and often a faint dot texture under magnification.

Where is the best place to buy authentic Delftware?

Buying directly from a working Delft pottery such as Royal Delft, or from a reputable dealer who can name the factory and show the marks, is the surest route. If a price seems far lower than genuine hand-painted work usually costs, it is very likely factory-printed rather than hand-decorated.