



Amsterdam, Accra, America

Glass beads, pearls, and ersatz gems in the Dutch Atlantic

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The ways in which bodies are adorned are profoundly meaningful, but also complex, as they respond to factors rooted in both practical need and social custom. In the early modern Dutch Atlantic, disparate regions in Africa, Brazil, the Caribbean, and North America became linked to an extensive Dutch trade network that introduced natural and manmade commodities sourced from Europe and Asia. As these local Atlantic communities became entangled with the competing economic agendas of European trading companies, preexisting body adornment practices began to incorporate a range of globally sourced goods, the meanings of which were subsequently shaped by local traditions. In the visual arts, these factors also collided with culturally embedded conventions that complicate the reception of these vital social signifiers, the materiality of which could signify a range of social and cultural practices.

Detail of fig 7

Glass beaded adornments were potent markers of identity for many of the local communities with whom the Dutch traded, but they were also commodities that linked Dutch and African merchants in competitive commercial networks. The importance of glass beads for trade meant that Dutch merchants and bead manufacturers had to have a sophisticated knowledge of market demands, even if they often lacked a thorough understanding of the cultural implications of the beads they were producing and trading. As I will discuss in more detail below, Jacob van Loo's (1614-1670) *Glass bead factory* – a rare representation of a Dutch glass bead factory from the seventeenth century – showcases the processes and techniques used to make glass beads, emphasizing their importance as trade commodities by picturing the specialized labor force and dedicated equipment needed for their production (fig. 1).¹ Although little is known about the circumstances of the painting's commission, it is certain that the colorful striped tube beads being cut by the young man on the lower left are of the same type that circulated as commodities in Dutch Atlantic markets, making Van Loo's painting an important starting point for reassessing the world of Dutch glass beads and the geographies they tied together.

Implicit in Van Loo's painting is the notion that African and American consumers, who required beads of a particular quality and type, were the driving force behind the production of glass beads in the Dutch Republic. Churning out large quantities of beads using innovative



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Jacob van Loo, *The glass bead factory*,
1629-1670, oil on canvas, 163 x 215 cm,
Copenhagen, Statens Museum for Kunst
(photo: Statens Museum for Kunst)

Italian techniques, bead factories like the one pictured by Van Loo had to keep up with market demand or be driven out of business by competitors. Taking up the perspective of consumers, particularly African consumers, in the global bead trade, I will reevaluate the glass beads that adorn the figures in Dutch artist Albert Eckhout's (1610-1665) painting *Woman and child of African descent* (fig. 2). This painting is part of a series of eight figural works given to the Danish king Frederik III in 1654 by Johan Maurits (1604-1679), a former governor-general of Dutch Brazil. In brief, the series purports to depict the people with whom the Dutch had contact during the period in which they occupied Brazil, roughly the second quarter of the seventeenth century.² Traditionally, scholars have understood the garments, adornments, weapons, and tools that decorate these figures as signifiers in a visual paradigm aimed at ordering the people of Brazil and Africa according to Eurocentric conceptions of civility. These attributes were meant to assist a European audience in reading each figure according to a shared understanding of artistic conventions, whereby Europe was assumed to be at the top of a transatlantic hierarchy. In examining the jewelry that adorns the figures in *Woman and child of African descent* and *Mameluke woman*, also part of the series, I argue that, far from simply supporting

a Eurocentric iconographical program, Eckhout's painted glass beads, pearls, and gems shed light on the tensions between material objects as critical forms of cultural knowledge and as representations responding to broader visual archetypes. These tensions come to light especially in colonial imagery like Eckhout's, where disparate notions of social capital collide.

In an effort to disentangle the material culture represented in Eckhout's paintings from the iconography that orders the series, this essay begins by considering European-made glass beads as critical – although not well understood – trade commodities, which were shipped by the millions by the Dutch West India Company



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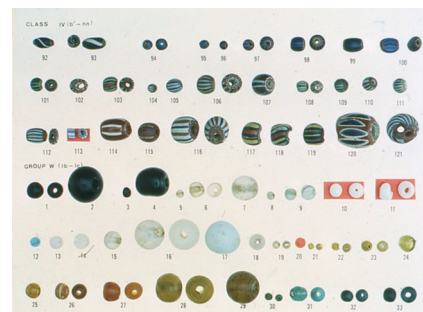
Albert Eckhout, *Woman and child of African descent*, 1641, oil on canvas, 282 x 189 cm, Copenhagen, National Museum of Denmark (photo: John Lee)

(Geotroyeerde Westindische Compagnie, or WIC) and the Middelburg Commerce Company (Middelburgsche Commercie Compagnie, or MCC) to ports in Africa and the Americas. The glass beads carried on Dutch ships were made in Venice and Bohemia (now Czech Republic), but also in Amsterdam, the latter being known for its bead production from the late sixteenth through the mid-eighteenth centuries, as I will discuss. I then turn to how glass beads – both African-made beads that predated European intervention and later European imports – may have generated meaning among consumers in West Africa, especially in regions contiguous to Igbo Olokun at Ile-Ife, the principal site of glass bead production prior to the arrival of European trading companies. This shift in focus presents new interpretive possibilities for understanding the glass beads in Eckhout's painting of an African woman and child by decentering the series' iconographical program in favor of a more sustained study of beads as intercultural mediators. In the second half of the essay, I examine the pearls and gems that adorn Eckhout's representations of an African and *mameluke* woman, respectively. In the context of contemporary European attitudes towards precious gemstones – real and counterfeit – these painted adornments become surrogates for the long-standing prejudices and anxieties that informed the Dutch colonial project.

Glass beads in the Netherlands. Production and distribution

Jacob van Loo's *Glass bead factory* is the only painting of which I am aware that pictures the types of beads being produced in the Netherlands and sold in Africa and the Americas (fig. 1).³ Van Loo has depicted a working glass factory that features the tools and activities needed for the profession, specifically highlighting the production of beads. In the left foreground, a young man cuts drawn glass tubes into smaller pieces. Three iron spits stand behind this young man, two of which, according to Karlis Karklins, hold large beads shaped by the *a speo* method, an innovative Italian technique for rounding large beads.⁴ Though the darkness of the painting makes it difficult to make out some details, Karklins has identified the beads on the spits as types that were commonly made in Dutch factories: opaque brick red and navy blue with white stripes (compare to beads in fig. 3).⁵ These beads correspond in appearance to beads found in large quantities in archeological sites in and around Albany (originally a Dutch colony called Beverwyck) and other regions where Europeans traded (fig. 4).⁶ Although a precise matching of the beads' place of manufacture has proven difficult, there is little doubt that they are European, if not Dutch, in origin.⁷ The foregrounding of the *a speo* method, then, is conspicuous in that it calls attention to a technique that seems to have been used primarily for beads being exported to Africa and the Americas.⁸

Glass beads were produced in large quantities in many Dutch cities beginning in the second half of the sixteenth century, when Italian glassworkers began migrating to the Netherlands, setting up glass factories, and sharing their knowledge with local glassmakers.



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Glass beads from the Boeren-Wetering II, Amsterdam, late 17th century, Amsterdam, Allard Pierson – The Collection of the University of Amsterdam [APM19330,034], from the collection of W.G.N. van der Sleen (photo: Allard Pierson)

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European glass trade beads, c. 17th century, Peebles Island Resource Center, New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation, Waterford, N.Y. (photo: from Peter P. Pratt's unpublished book, *Glass Trade Beads Among the Five-Nations Iroquois*)

Thanks to the archeological research of Karklins and others, much is known about Dutch glass bead production, which seems to have begun in Middelburg in the 1590s, culminating in Amsterdam during the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, before declining by the end of the century.⁹ Over the course of the seventeenth century – the peak of glass bead production in the Netherlands – glassworks also cropped up in Haarlem, Rotterdam, and Zutphen, suggesting that glass-making was, for a time, a formidable industry during this prosperous period of Dutch history. The evidence of bead production in the Netherlands is both archeological and archival. Beads and bead waste have been recovered in large quantities at the Waterlooplein and in the Keizersgracht in Amsterdam.¹⁰ Karklins's analysis of samples from these sites reveals 30 different types of beads, of which there were 270 varieties, all made from drawn glass.¹¹ The Dutch-made beads recovered from these sites, some of which are now housed in the University of Amsterdam's Allard Pierson Museum, comprise a range of colors – including red, blue, green, and black – and are often striped (fig. 3).¹²

Jan Baart's archival research has uncovered the names and locations of a number of bead-producing glassworks throughout the city, although it is important to note that not all glassworks produced beads.¹³ Furthermore, Baart notes that not all of the bead deposits are the result of factory waste. On the contrary, bead deposits were also found in domestic cesspits, suggesting that a number of Amsterdam residents may have owned glass beads.¹⁴ In fact, excavations at Waterlooplein reveal that 'nearly every household had glass beads'. Despite the overwhelming evidence that many Amsterdammers owned beads, there are no known records of them in household inventories, according to Baart. This discrepancy between the rich and varied bead deposits in Amsterdam and the lack of documentation in probate inventories is mirrored in the visual record, where adornments made from glass beads are noticeably absent in portraits of early modern Amsterdam residents.¹⁵ Though more work needs to be done to better understand the Dutch domestic market for the type of beads seen in Van Loo's painting, their popularity in African and American markets can be established with certainty due, in part, to the extensive records left by European trading companies.

Although private traders were active in American and African trading posts in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the Dutch West India Company (WIC), established in 1621, and the Middelburg Commerce Company (MCC), established in 1720, monopolized the lion's share of the Dutch glass bead trade. Notaries diligently describe the quantities and prices of every piece of cargo loaded onto WIC ships, cargo that included utilitarian items, like metal basins, fishhooks, and tools, as well as textiles and glass beads. Of the latter category, visual descriptions are typically quite brief, including only a bead's color and sometimes its pattern. A 1721 cargo list from the WIC ship *Duijnbeeck*, for example, lists 351¼ pounds of 'wit en blaau corael' (white and blue glass beads) at 5½ stuivers per pound, for a total cost of 96 guilders and 12 stuivers.¹⁶ Given the stunning variety of beads being made in Europe

at this time, ‘white and blue beads’ is not descriptive at all. Are the beads big? Are they small? Is each individual bead comprised of white and blue? Or is the cargo list describing a barrel of white beads and blue beads that have been mixed together? Where are these beads made? Are they of Dutch origin? Italian? Explicit descriptive information is rarely provided.

In some cases, ship manifests list the type of bead, which can bring some clarity when it comes to origin. Generally speaking, the inventories from the ships of the Middelburg Commerce Company, which dominated African trade in the eighteenth century, were more descriptive. For example, the cargo list from the ship *Africaanse Galeij*, which was headed to the West African coast in 1737, carried beads like *magriets* – which were made in Venice – and *olivets* (some described as ‘robijn’ [ruby] and some described as yellow), which were also Venetian, or Venetian-styled, beads in the shape of olives (fig. 5). This particular list also includes 79 pounds of different types of ‘pijp coraal’ – tube beads of the type pictured in Van Loo’s painting, which could be from anywhere – as well as beads described as ‘fisheyes’, which may be a version of what would today be called ‘flush eyes’. For those merchants who dealt in beads, these names may have provided all the visual information that was needed.

A recently rediscovered cache of letters sent from Elmina to the Netherlands around 1800 sheds some light on the types of beads that were traded in West Africa in the early nineteenth century. One of these letters contains a request to Amsterdam beadmaker ‘Rijfsnider and Sons’ from J.A. Marrée, Secretary to the Council of Guinea at Elmina.¹⁷ Marrée writes: ‘Send me without delay at the very first opportunity a sufficient quantity of beads as per the enclosed example’. He continues, ‘and above all give consideration to the red beads, send large ones thereof in case these are to be got’.¹⁸ He then instructs that the beads should come on a cord, and that the red beads should sit between the yellow and black ones. The beads he encloses, which are today part of the Prize Papers in the National Archives in London, represent a range of colors and patterns, from single-colored and striped tube beads, to rounded multicolored beads of various patterns and sizes.¹⁹ The specific nature of Marrée’s instructions and the wide variety of beads contained in the letters suggest that the Dutch were indeed responding to a discerning market in West Africa in which the material qualities of glass beads – especially color – generated meanings of local significance, as we will see in the following section.

Glass beads in Africa. The importance of color

By the time European trading companies were shipping glass beads to Accra and other African ports along the Gulf of Guinea, they were encroaching on, but also expanding upon, a millennia-long tradition of glass bead production, which began to the east in Yorùbáland.²⁰ In Nigeria bead production has a long history that extends to at least 1500 BCE, and very likely as early as 8000 BCE given the existing

In Middelburg Anno 1737. —

f. 26

Factuur van Goederen medegegeven door de
Volgende op Half Winst of 16 Pento. met het
Inget. Schip de Africaanst Galeij. Capteijn Dirk
Magt. m. gedeputeert tot Africa.

Voor Rekening Abraham Suidor.

4
A
S

Cent Rist met Witte Fijne Coraalen.

123 Mas. 378 Wit pijp Coraal. R. Steep.

12 ————— 301. Wit pijp Coraal.

3 ————— 71 ditto met Bl. & R. Steep.

3 ————— 51 Blaauw R.

141 Mas. 3608. 7 1/2 ft. — 22. 10. —

St. 1 Pento. 4. 6.

Voor de Rist. 14. 6.

£ 23. —

Voor Rekening Jacobus Dommé.

IB. { Cent Pak met 50p. Lerpactuans. f 2. — £ 16. 13. 4.

Cent ditto. 401. prince Saajen. f 3. — 20. —

36. 13. 4.

Voor Rekening Johannes de Kijffer.

IF. Cent Pak met { 18p. prince Saajen. f 3. — £ 9. —

Cent ditto. 61. Schuur Saajen. f 12. — 12. —

21. —

Voor Rekening Joos & Crabbe Reijndraam.

IER. Cent wat daarin.

79 E diverse Soort Lipp Coraal. 11 ft. — £ 7. 4. 10.

12 pak. Blauwe Viscoogen. 9 ft. — 13. —

24 Mas groot Margriet. 16 ft. — 3. 4. —

22 — Rond. 9 ft. — 1. 13. —

9 — Geslepe Coraalen. 13 ft. — 1. 13. —

3 — — — — — 13 ft. — 6. 6. —

105 — Pypst. 4 ft. — 3. 10. —

14 — Robijn Overt. 16 ft. — 1. 17. 4.

18 — Geel Overt. 14 ft. — 2. 2. —

Transys & Vervolg £ 22. 8. 8 £ 80. 13. 4.

technologies at that time. By 1000 CE bead production in ancient Ile-Ife, the sacred ancestral center of the Yorùbá, and especially at Igbo Olokun, which was close to the northern wall of the ancient city, was supplemented by trans-Saharan trade, which introduced North African, Islamic, and Arabic influences.²¹ Igbo Olokun is associated with the deity Olokun, a female goddess in the Yorùbá pantheon, who, it was said, brought people to work in her bead factory and from whom contemporary beadmakers are thought to descend.²² Sculptures excavated from Ile-Ife show figures clad in beaded regalia, with beaded crowns and necklaces, some of which were originally painted to resemble red and blue glass beads like the ones excavated at Ile-Ife.²³ Recent archeological excavations show that beads produced in Ile-Ife circulated as prestige gifts and as trade items within Yorùbáland, but also beyond its borders.²⁴ Furthermore, it is now recognized that Ile-Ife was both a primary and secondary site of glass bead production: in primary production, raw materials were gathered and made into molten glass in crucibles, many of which have been excavated at Igbo Olokun.²⁵ In the case of secondary glass production, broken or second-hand glass would be remelted to make new glass. During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, it has been suggested that this included unwanted or damaged European trade beads, which would be remelted and transformed into beads that were better suited to local tastes, if necessary.²⁶ The manipulation and subsequent reconstitution of European-made glass in response to local preferences parallels a similar practice in the textile trade, whereby imported textiles from Europe and South Asia might be cut into strips or unwoven in order to repurpose their individual fibers.²⁷

In many West African cultures, the color of glass beads is closely linked to their performative efficacy, potentially impacting a wearer's 'temperament, empowerment, protection, potentiality, desire, wealth, and well-being'.²⁸ These critical forces are expressed and empowered through the tactility and, above all, color of beads, which are grouped into three main categories, described in Yorùbá culture as *funfun*, *pupa*, and *dúdú*, but often inadequately translated as white, red, and black.²⁹ Each one of these 'chromatic groupings' comprises a range of colors. For example, white could also include silver and grey; red could include pink, orange, and yellow; and black could include blue, indigo, purple, and green, among other cool or dark colors. The color of beads, Henry Drewal has written, can 'define and reveal the nature, character, or personality of things, persons, and divinities (...) serv[ing] as visual warnings of forces and actions in the world for which one must be prepared'.³⁰ This was especially true for Yorùbá orishas, representations of which might be decorated with beads that match their temperament, as is the case with the mischievous orisha Eshu, who is adorned with blue and red glass beads in the staff figure at the Yale University Art Gallery (fig. 6). The broader inclusivity of Yorùbá chromatic groupings allowed for the incorporation of European glass trade beads, which expanded the existing Yorùbá palette of colors, while maintaining their connection to the temperaments of *funfun*, *pupa*, and *dúdú*.³¹

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Cargo list from the ship *Africaanse Galeij*, Middelburgsche Commercie Compagnie, Zeeuwse Archief, 1737, inv. no. 20, 168.2, p. 26 (photo: Zeeuwse Archief)

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Artist unknown, *Staff with figure representing Eshu*, Yorùbá, late 19th-20th century, wood, hide, glass beads, fiber, metal coins, and cowrie shells, 39.4 x 9.5 x 8.9 cm, New Haven, Yale University Art Gallery, Charles B. Benenson, B.A. 1933 (photo: Yale University Art Gallery)



It is unlikely that Dutch traders understood the cultural nuances of Yorùbá chromatics, and yet they were no doubt sensitive to the shifts in market preferences that were driven by local practices and customs. In this sense, glass beads participated in the kind of 'double hermeneutics' that often occurred in cross-cultural trade, whereby objects and ideas simultaneously 'crossed boundaries and remained estranged', as Francesca Trivellato has argued.³² Despite such symbolic misalignments, however, mutual understanding could develop through the process of trade itself, which enabled economic transactions to occur even while the cultural impetuses of that trade remained distinct.³³ Indeed, Dutch merchants were keenly attuned to the shifts in bead preferences in

the markets they were serving, just as African merchants were savvy negotiators who sought the best beads at the best prices.

Presumably stemming from an interest in fostering successful economic relationships, Pieter de Marees's 1602 *Beschryvinghe ende historische verhael vant Gout Koninckrijck (van Gunea (Description and historical account of the Gold Kingdom of Guinea))* is an incredibly valuable source for the Euro-African bead trade. Likely a ship's surgeon, De Marees seems to have gleaned that a better understanding of the customs of the people living around the Gulf of Guinea would facilitate trade.³⁴ Although De Marees does not always understand the significance of the cultural practices he witnesses and his European positionality often colors his accounts, his descriptions of beaded adornments and their incorporation into the customs of the Akan peoples are nevertheless a critical source of information. As will be seen in the discussion to follow, since De Marees's ethnographical interest is driven in large part by the 'pragmatics of trade', his text offers a compelling lens through which to view glass beads, which were critical intercultural mediators, despite the fact that their local African significance often 'remained estranged' in European consciousness.³⁵

De Marees has much to say about the role that beads played for the different African peoples he encounters, although it is not always clear if he was aware that the glass beads being shipped to the Gulf of Guinea were supplementing a local glass industry that predated European intervention. For example, he frequently identifies glass beads as a commodity brought by European traders. In his short account of Cabo Verde, he writes, 'Around their necks they wear paternoster made of Seahorses' teeth with variegated corals [glass beads] or beads, *which we bring them*' (emphasis mine).³⁶ In a chapter on men's garments, De Marees writes, 'Around their necks, they hang a string of beads [or *Madrigetten*] of diverse colors, *which are brought by us Dutch*' (emphasis mine).³⁷ There is only one instance in which De Marees reveals any awareness that glass bead production pre-dated European intervention. Referring to the Rio de Ardra, he writes: 'Along this River, nothing else of importance is found besides some little blueish-green and black stones from which they grind beads'.³⁸ Adam Jones suggests that he is referring to *akori* beads, which are opaque blue, green, or black drawn glass beads of local African production.³⁹ That De Marees suggests the beads are made from stone rather than glass may indicate that he was unaware that glass beads were also produced locally.⁴⁰

Though De Marees may be uninformed about local glass-making production, his repeated reference to the working of beads through 'polishing' suggests that local artisans had a deep familiarity with various bead-making techniques. In one passage, De Marees observes,

They take a great quantity of Venetian Beads of all sorts of colors, but prefer one color to another. They break them into four or five little pieces, polish them on a stone in the way children polish cherry-stones, string them on Tree-bark in bunches of ten, and trade extensively in this commodity.⁴¹

Here De Marees describes a practice commonly associated with post-firing glass production, beginning with the breaking of beads – presumably tube beads – into smaller beads that could be polished down to reveal colors or shapes beneath. Chevrons, for example, which are drawn beads made from multiple layers of different-colored glass and which were popular in West Africa, were typically ground on either end to reveal a star-like shape beneath. Perhaps this is the process that De Marees is describing.⁴² Notably, the above passage also suggests De Marees's awareness that local consumers did indeed have color preferences, although he does not mention what those preferences were. His observation that these beads were traded 'extensively' seems to indicate that bead-trading networks established during the heyday of Ile-Ife bead production may have still been in use by the seventeenth century.

De Marees also makes a number of observations about beaded adornment, but – again – his awareness of the cultural significance of beads in West Africa sometimes seems superficial. Of the men he encounters, he writes, 'Generally they (...) wear a string of polished Venetian beads mixed with golden beads and other gold ornaments around their knees, in nearly the same way as young ladies in our Lands wear their Rosaries around their hands'. As for the women, De Marees describes a woman labeled as 'melato' as 'a Portuguese woman living in the Castle d'Mina, half black, half white and yellowish: (...) They dress very nicely and hang many Paternoster and other Beads on their bodies'.⁴³ It is interesting here that De Marees compares the beads worn by both men and women on the Guinea Coast to rosaries and paternoster, which suggests that he was aware beads were deployed as signifiers in African cultural systems, even if he did not describe the specifics of those systems. Nevertheless, the persistence with which De Marees describes the types and qualities of the beads preferred by African consumers – polished, gold, Venetian – reminds us how closely his ethnographic interests were tied to his economic ones.

Between commodity and attribute. Eckhout's painting of an African woman and child

In light of the social importance of glass beads as markers of identity and as commodities in and around the Gulf of Guinea, a reevaluation of the beads worn by Eckhout's representation of an African woman and child is long overdue (fig. 2). Most scholars agree that the African woman in Eckhout's painting is meant to represent an enslaved woman living in Brazil, an identification based on the objects that adorn and surround her, some of which – like the African basket and hat – point (imprecisely, as it were) to her African origins, whereas others – like the Dutch-clay pipe tucked in her waist band – firmly root her on occupied Brazilian shores. Her blue and white garment, on the other hand, is likely an Indian-made trade textile, entangling her in a complex and decidedly global market.⁴⁴ The woman is also adorned with jewelry: a pearl necklace and earrings and a beaded coral necklace, attributes that

also came to signify the African continent in European visual culture, as I will discuss in the second half of this essay.

Until this point, very little, if any, attention has been paid to the white beads worn on the woman's wrist and the dark, or black, beads worn by the young boy. As with the other painted attributes – the hat, the basket, the clay pipe, the blue and white textile – these beaded adornments are meaningful in the context of European iconographical traditions, 'othering' the figures by signaling their engagement with material culture earmarked for transatlantic trade and deemed as less valuable by European consumers. But what has not yet been considered is the role these beads may have played for enslaved people made to endure the horrific conditions of Dutch-occupied Brazil. In an African context, beads can provide protection against a host of external threats. For young children, especially infants, who were more vulnerable to disease and infection, this was especially important. Indeed, De Marees observes the practice on the Guinea Coast. He writes that when infants are two months old, parents 'tie strings of beads around the children's hands, feet and neck and fill their hair with little shells, which they greatly esteem; for they say that as long as the young child is draped with this net, the Devil cannot catch the child or carry it away'.⁴⁵ It is not hard to imagine that the capacity of beads to protect small children would have informed the adornment practices of enslaved men and women living in colonial Brazil, who had to endure daily violence and dangerous working conditions.

The notion that the beaded adornments in Eckhout's painting may have served a protective function is supported by the work of historical archeologist James Davidson, who has suggested that black and white beads held common meanings across many cultures in West Africa, some of which, he argues, were retained in diasporic contexts, a conclusion based on his interpretation of archeological mortuary data, American historical accounts, and African ethnohistorical and ethnographic sources. While black and white beads were employed in a variety of contexts in West Africa and its diasporas, he contends that they retained particular significance for mothers and children. Mothers, or soon-to-be mothers, would wear black beads, white beads, or a combination of both, because they were thought to have protective powers, among other attributes. Upon giving birth, the beads would be transferred to the child as an apotropaic charm, whereas postnatal women would wear white beads around their necks or wrists in order to signify breast milk, but also to express the 'victory' of giving birth to a live infant.⁴⁶ Surviving childbirth as an enslaved woman in Dutch-occupied Brazil may not have been cause to celebrate and it would be presumptuous to pretend to understand the emotional complexities of producing a living child in these horrific circumstances. It is indeed an unimaginable trauma that sits uncomfortably in the black and white glass beads worn by this woman and child. Recognizing these beads as purveyors of meaning within an African diasporic context – rather than mere signifiers within a hierarchical Eurocentric iconographical program – acknowledges the agency, however small, that enslaved

women could enact upon their own bodies and the bodies of their children. It is impossible to know if Eckhout would have understood the power of beads to protect and connect a mother and child, but his precise rendering of these white and black beads allows us, today, to begin to recover the implications of this practice.

From glass beads to pearls. Imitations and assumptions

To focus solely on the glass beads worn by the African woman and child in Eckhout's painting would be to ignore the woman's most conspicuous accessory: her pearl drop earrings and double-stranded pearl necklace with a pearl drop pendant. And yet it is the conspicuousness of this juxtaposition – glass beads and pearls – that warrants further attention. Framed by a double-stranded coral necklace, the pearl necklace appears stark white in comparison, certainly a more brilliant shade of white than the beads on her wrist.⁴⁷ Her large pearl drop earrings are of a type seen in portraits of elite Dutch women or, most famously, in Vermeer's *Girl with a pearl earring*, and yet there is no mistaking this woman for a wealthy Dutch sitter.⁴⁸ Eckhout has made every effort to capture the pearls' luminescence with dabs of white paint that purport to reflect the light of the Brazilian sun, a common visual effect used by artists to approximate the unique materiality of this natural gemstone. The glass beads, on the other hand, are more opaque, absorbing, rather than reflecting, the light of the tropics. Though scholars have noted the pearls' presence, there has been little attempt to unpack their significance. And there have been no attempts, as far as I am aware, to decipher how the visual contrasts between these two adornments can implicate the conflicting epistemological systems of African and European identity politics. As we have already seen, for African consumers, the physical attributes of glass beads, such as color, shape, opacity, size, and position, could signal a range of values, identities, and relationships. For Europeans, pearl adornments embodied equally complex – though decidedly dissimilar – social values, which this material juxtaposition calls attention to.

Until recently, art historical scholarship of pearl adornments has focused largely on iconographical analysis. Eddy de Jongh, for example, has argued that pearls can stand in as visual metaphors for a range of attributes associated with women, such as chastity, purity, luxury, and vanity, iconographical affiliations that were also mirrored in contemporary writing.⁴⁹ In his *Houwelick*, for example, Jacob Cats likens the shine of a pearl to a woman's virginity, warning maidens that even 'the loveliest of pearls will lose its erstwhile glow' if they fail to preserve it.⁵⁰ While the countless painted portraits of elite Dutch women wearing pearls could certainly have allegorical meaning for seventeenth-century Dutch patrons and viewers, these jeweled adornments were also closely connected to their perceived intrinsic value. In this sense, pearls were also displays of wealth – however subtle or ostentatious – and were thus highly effective vehicles for displaying status in a proto-capitalist society. The pearls worn by Oopjen Coppit in Rembrandt's famous

portrait might be described as typical adornment for an elite Dutch woman in seventeenth-century Holland, if such extravagant fineries could be described as typical. The four strands of pearls that encircle her neck are accompanied by four complementary strands around her wrist and a hair ornament designed to match (fig. 7). Pearl drop earrings, which hang gracefully from her ear lobes, round out the lavish ensemble. Pearls were the adornment of choice for elite women in seventeenth-century portraits, of which Oopjen Coppit's is one of many examples. Those who could afford them sought them out, paying lavish



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Rembrandt van Rijn, *Portrait of Oopjen Coppit*, 1634, oil on canvas, 207.5 x 132 cm, Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum (photo: Rijksmuseum-Stichting)

sums, as recorded by the diarist Samuel Pepys, who paid a high price for a pearl necklace ‘with three rows’ for his wife.⁵¹ Amalia van Solms, wife of Stadholder Frederick Hendrick, paid 10,000 guilders for two large pearls from which earrings would be made and 30,000 guilders for a necklace comprised of 20 pearls – exorbitant sums by any measure.⁵²

Although it is easy to discount these elite representations as ‘adjuncts of status and wealth – nothing more’, this dismissal ignores the critical role that pearl jewelry played in the symbolic economy of the social and economic elite – and for those who wanted to join their ranks.⁵³ Wearing pearls, that is, signified one’s affiliation with elite social groups. So powerful were pearls as social markers that those who could not afford them purchased glass imitations. Marlise Rijks’s research on counterfeit pearls and gemstones in Antwerp has uncovered considerable evidence that gold- and silversmiths catered to patrons seeking glass pearls and gems, as well as the real thing. Silversmith Hendrick Smith, for example, sold ‘pearls made of glass’, which were formed from broken crystal and ground mother-of-pearl.⁵⁴ Recipes for making imitation pearls had been around since antiquity, so it is no surprise that this practice would be revived in early modern Europe, a time when social status and identity could be externalized through material display. Distinguishing between fake and real pearls in painted images, of course, is entirely contingent upon the viewer’s assumptions about the figure who wears them.⁵⁵ Do the pearls worn by Oopjen Coppit in Rembrandt’s portrait represent ‘real’ pearls owned by the sitter? It is certainly possible, given her wealth, but there is no reason it has to be true. Even wealthy women owned fake pearls. Nevertheless, we rarely question such extravagances because they confirm the adornment practices that demarcate particular social groups: in this case, elite, wealthy women.

Therein lies the interpretive challenge of Eckhout’s painted pearls. Is it plausible that they represent real (or even fake) pearls owned by an enslaved woman in Brazil? Does the donning of these pearls suggest an attempt to join the ranks of the social elite? The horrific conditions of enslavement in Dutch Brazil, in which men and women were denied basic human rights – much less access to precious stones or a means of joining elite Dutch social circles – suggest otherwise. Rather, the disconnect between the woman’s pearl adornments and her low social position in Dutch Brazil signals to the viewer that these pearls are meant to be read allegorically, their stark luminescence more comfortable in the world of Eurocentric iconography than De Marees–ian ethnography.

In the seventeenth century, pearl earrings and necklaces were common attributes in European allegorical images of Africa, although the reasons for this are not straightforward. Frans Francken’s *Allegory of the abdication of Charles V* can stand in as one of many examples of this iconographical practice (fig. 8). Kneeling between America and Asia, the figure of Africa wears a pearl necklace and earrings, while clinging to a strand of pearls and a branch of coral in her left hand, demonstrating how, as in Eckhout’s painting, pearls and coral are often paired together to indicate the figure’s African origins. The use of pearls to signify the African continent is a strange choice since most pearls at this time were



harvested in the Gulf of Mannar, between the southeast tip of India and Sri Lanka – the domain of the Dutch East India Company (VOC), not the WIC.⁵⁶ Indeed, allegorical representations of the VOC were often adorned with pearls. As well, in his 1707 *Het groot schilderboek*, Gerard de Lairese advises artists to depict ‘a heroine with a scallop of mother-of-pearl on her head, in the nature of a helmet and thereon a coral branch; a breast ornament of scales, corals, and pearls about her neck’.⁵⁷ It is possible that pearls were simply meant to indicate the wealth that could be acquired through trade in both the east and the west, but Mónica Domínguez Torres’s recent research suggests that in the visual arts there existed an explicit connection between the pearl industry and the labor of enslaved Africans, who were sent to the Caribbean and Persian Gulf to harvest pearls.⁵⁸

Perhaps due to their connection with enslaved labor, by the mid-seventeenth century, pearled adornments, earrings in particular, became a part of a much darker iconographical tradition for elite patrons: as attributes for enslaved servants living in the Netherlands. Despite the fact that slavery was illegal in the Netherlands, but not in its

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Frans Francken (II), *Allegory of the abdication of Charles V*, c. 1635-1640, oil on panel, 132.6 x 170.7, Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum (photo: Rijksmuseum-Stichting)

colonies, many of the wealthy elite had 'servants', who were represented alongside them in portraits. These 'servants', who had been enslaved in the colonies and brought to the Netherlands, were, by law, entitled to emancipation once they reached the Dutch Republic. Separated from their families and with few opportunities to earn a decent wage, it is not surprising that many servants did not seem to have exercised this right.⁵⁹ Although the servants, or pages, represented in painted portraits may have been perceived as fashionable accessories – in much the same way that aspiring elites employed pearls – there is nevertheless ample evidence that many Dutch families had enslaved servants in their households. Many of these 'servants' are depicted wearing single pearl drop earrings in each ear, offering additional visual testimony of their enslavers' wealth, as seen in Jan Mijtens's 1665 portrait of Maria of Orange and Adriaen Hanneman's posthumous portrait of Mary Stuart (1664), which currently hang next to each other in the Mauritshuis (fig. 9). Both women are accompanied by young, finely dressed Black men wearing pearl drop earrings. In Hanneman's portrait, the princess's earrings match her servant's, although she wears two in one ear, perhaps to underline her elevated status. While the 'slave collar' has long been recognized as a conspicuous marker of enslavement for elite enslavers beginning in the second half of the seventeenth century, it is





10

Michiel Musscher, *Thomas Hees and his servant Thomas and nephews Jan and Andries Hees*, 1687, oil on canvas, 76 x 63 cm, Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum (photo: Rijksmuseum-Stichting)

noteworthy that pearl earrings are almost always depicted alongside it in the visual arts.⁶⁰ This pairing can be seen in Pieter Nason's portrait of Johan Maurits in Warsaw, who is accompanied by an enslaved servant, as well as in Michiel Musscher's portrait of Thomas Hees and his servant Thomas at the Rijksmuseum (fig. 10).⁶¹ The pearl earrings worn by Eckhout's representation of an African woman, then, belong to a multifaceted iconographical tradition in which pearls are attributes signifying the profit to be gained from exploiting the resources of the African continent, and also attributes of status for the elite patrons who extracted this wealth. These two strands of signification become conflated in Eckhout's painting of an African woman, where her strikingly white pearls signal her African origins, while also serving as reminders of her enslavement.⁶²

Albert Eckhout's painting of a *mameluke* woman and the stigma of ersatz gems

Whereas Eckhout's painting of an African woman and child draws upon iconography that had long been in circulation in Europe, his paintings of a *mameluke* woman and mulatto man do not share the same deep iconographical roots (fig. 11). In fact, as Rebecca Brien

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Albert Eckhout, *Mameluke woman*, 1641,
oil on canvas, 271 x 170 cm, Copenhagen,
National Museum of Denmark (photo:
John Lee)



has already noted, 'In the mid-seventeenth century, there was no set iconography for mestizos or mulattos, and representations of them are highly unusual despite their presence in every colonial city and outpost'.⁶³ The term 'mameluke', or *mameluco*, was the name given by the Portuguese to people of Brazilian and European descent, which the Dutch adopted. The term 'mulatto', on the other hand, was used by the Portuguese and the Dutch to describe people of Afro-European descent.⁶⁴ Owing to their European parentage, the mameluke woman and mulatto man in Eckhout's series are traditionally placed at the top of the series' four-part hierarchy, second only to Johan Maurits himself, whose portrait was originally part of the cycle.⁶⁵ As with the other paintings in the series, the figures' status is communicated through the perceived sophistication of their clothing and accoutrements. For example, the mulatto man wields a Spanish rapier and musket, and wears sewn garments while sporting a European-style coif and facial hair. The woman, on the other hand, wears a long white garment, a jeweled necklace with matching headband and earrings, and carries a basket of flowers, marking her as a Brazilian-style Flora, as Brienien has argued.⁶⁶ Lest a viewer mistake these figures for Europeans, they are distinguished by their bare feet, a clear signal of their inferior status in the eyes of European viewers. In light of the novelty of Eckhout's iconographical program, the mameluke's jeweled adornments deserve further consideration.

Eckhout's figure of a mameluke woman wears a necklace, earrings, and headband that appear to be comprised of pearls, small rubies, and a large emerald. The necklace features alternating patterns of white and red jewels with what appears to be a square-cut emerald in the center. From the emerald hangs a ruby surrounded by pearls, while additional pearls hang around the circumference of the necklace. The woman also wears earrings – clearly designed as a matching set – and a red and green headband lined with pearls of the same dimension as those in the necklace. Zacharias Wagener (1614-1668), a WIC employee who was Johan Maurits's steward for a time in Brazil, made copies of Eckhout's figural paintings in a personal sketchbook, often adding explanatory commentary on the opposite page.⁶⁷ Opposite his drawing of a mameluke woman, he writes:

The illicit intercourse of Brazilian women, both with Portuguese as well as Dutch men, results in the birth of children among whom it is common to find attractive and delicate men and women. They normally wear beautiful long white cotton shirts during the week, but on Sundays and holidays they dress up gaudily in the Spanish style, with adornments on their necks and ears, and their hands bear corals [glass beads] and a profusion of false stones. Given their elegant figures, some pass for Spanish ladies. Many of the women marry within their own caste, others, however (almost all of them) are very honestly and sincerely desired as legal wives, sometimes by fairly wealthy Portuguese men, and also by some Dutch men who are eager to wed.⁶⁸

It is clear from Wagener's lengthy description that he disapproves of the 'gaudy' way in which *mameluke* women dress, which is marked by necklaces, earrings, and bracelets made of 'corals' – the name given to glass beads by the Dutch – and 'a profusion of false stones'. In effect, Wagener creates an equivalency between the woman's costume jewelry and her social status in colonial Brazil: although she may be able to 'pass' for a Spanish woman, her true identity is ultimately revealed by the low quality of her adornments. Just as the 'real' pearls worn by Oopjen authenticate her status as one of Amsterdam's elite, so too do the 'fake' glass beads worn by the *mameluke* woman disqualify her from occupying a similar status. While this assessment may reveal more about Wagener's prejudices than it does about the jewelry with which Eckhout has adorned this woman, there is no reason to believe that Eckhout thought differently.⁶⁹ Put another way, given the low status of *mamelucos* in Dutch Brazil and the generally poor standards of living, it seems unlikely that this woman would be wearing jewels of such a high caliber and rarity. Instead, the dissonance between the woman's adornments and her status in colonial Brazil suggests that ersatz jewelry can act as a surrogate for duplicitous character, a position that is implied in Eckhout's painting, but made explicit in Wagener's commentary.

It is difficult to parse if Eckhout and Wagener's assumptions about ersatz jewelry are representative of a broader cultural response to counterfeit gems in the early modern Low Countries. Generally speaking, the reception of counterfeit gems seems closely connected to the context in which they are presented. For example, as we have already seen, imitation pearls were welcomed into a symbolic economy whereby they acted as acceptable substitutes, though certainly not as desirable as the real thing. There are other contexts in which counterfeit gems were not only acceptable, but highly praised, as Marlise Rijks has argued. In sixteenth-century Antwerp, gold- and silversmiths made imitation diamonds, agate, crystal, pearls, amber, and emeralds, the latter being the most frequently counterfeited due to its rarity and expense.⁷⁰ Even Amalia van Solms's inventory lists ersatz jewelry, consisting of 'a pair of bracelets from counterfeited rubies and 60 diamonds'.⁷¹ Collectors eagerly sought these counterfeits for they spoke to their appreciation of artistic process, according to Rijks. They also provided connoisseurs an opportunity to demonstrate their ability to tell the difference between an authentic gem, made by nature, and a counterfeit, a source of man's artful imitation. Selling undisclosed forgeries, of course, fell into the domain of fraud and the seller would be held accountable.

It is in the context of disclosure that we might reconsider Wagener's comments about the *mameluke*'s 'false stones'. From the passage above, it is clear that Wagener objects to the 'illicit intercourse' between Europeans and Brazilians and that he is drawing a comparison between the woman's 'false stones' and what he sees as a fraudulent identity, a mixture of Brazilian and European parentage that that could potentially fool less-discerning eyes. Again, context is everything. Unlike in Europe, where counterfeit jewels were admired and sought-

after demonstrations of man's ingenuity, in colonial Brazil they were visual markers of inferiority and reminders of the elevated position Europe had claimed for itself. In short, for Wagener, and perhaps for Eckhout and for others, too, counterfeit jewelry resonated deeply with the racist tropes that inform the series at large as well as the colonialist agendas espoused by imperial European forces.

When we examine these ersatz gemstones alongside the glass beads and pearls in his painting of an African woman and child, we see how purposefully Eckhout employed these adornments and how closely they were intertwined with social capital in colonial Brazil, as well as in Europe. As we have seen, the Dutch bead trade bound together the heterogeneous geographies of the Dutch colonies and the wildly disparate social positions they embraced. Examining that trade lets us see both how the Dutch used beads to enter the economies of their colonies and how that effort met up with local understandings and uses of beads. On the one hand, a reevaluation of the Afro-European glass bead trade that centers the authority and preferences of African merchants and consumers – as I have tried to do in this essay – can help to reorient the terms of the conversation so that we may consider other subjectivities, and in the process recuperate a small portion of the profound cultural losses that accompanied colonial expansion. On the other hand, centering beads allows a reexamination of Eckhout's famous paintings of colonial subjects in terms of the resonances of their adornments, adornments that carry complex allegorical and social meanings in the fraught visual culture of the Dutch Atlantic.

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Notes

- 1 My thanks to Judith Noorman for sharing her notes on this painting with me.
- 2 Brien 2006; Van den Boogaart 1990.
- 3 Based on Jan Baart's research, Karlis Karklins suggests the Van Loo painting depicts Claesz Jacquet's glasshouse, The Two Roses, which was located on the Keizersgracht in the 1640s. Baart 1988, 69; Karklins 1993, 29.
- 4 Karklins 1993.
- 5 Karklins 1993, 29. Using the often-cited Kidd and Kidd classification system, Karklins identifies the bead types as *Ilal* and *1Vb35-36*. Kidd & Kidd 1970.
- 6 Figure 4 is a photograph from Peter P.

- Pratt's unpublished book, *Glass Trade Beads Among the Five-Nations Iroquois*. Many thanks are due to Paul Huey for traveling to the Peebles Island Resource Center in Waterford, New York and scanning the slide from which this digital image was made. Large quantities of European trade beads like the ones in Pratt's photograph have been recovered from archeological sites in regions that were once part of New Netherland. In many cases, photographs of these ubiquitous trade beads cannot be published because they may fall under the restrictions contained within the January 2024 NAGPRA (Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act) Duty of Care guidelines.
- 7 Karklins 1983; Bennett 1983; Huey 1983.
 - 8 On the importance of the transference of artisanal knowledge for the glass industry, see Dupré 2014.
 - 9 Karklins 1983; Karklins 1985; Karklins 1993; Baart 1988.
 - 10 Van der Sleen 1963, 260-263.
 - 11 Karklins 1985, 37-40. The bead types are varieties based on Kidd and Kidd's classification system. Kidd & Kidd 1970.

- 12 Karklins 1985, 36-40.
- 13 Baart 1988, 65-75.
- 14 Baart 1988, 74.
- 15 According to Baart, Frithjof van Thienen was the first to point out this discrepancy. Van Thienen 1930.
- 16 Second Dutch West India Company Archives, 1721, inv. no. 1304, pp. 214, 275. 'Coral' was the term used to describe glass beads and is not to be confused with *fijn bloedkoraal*, which was much more expensive and measured by the ounce. *Fijn bloedkoraal* beads are priced at 36 stuivers per ounce on page 275 of the above referenced document.
- 17 Van der Doe 2019, 43-44.
- 18 Van der Doe 2019, 44.
- 19 See photograph of bead sample in Van der Doe 2019, 45. I have not examined these beads in person.
- 20 For a history of Ile-Ife, including its decline in the long-distance bead trade at the end of the 15th century, see Ogundiran 2020, especially chapter 4. See also Ogundiran 2002.
- 21 Drewal & Mason 1998, 34.
- 22 Babalola 2019, 224.
- 23 Drewal & Mason 1998, 34-52.

- 24 Ogundiran 2020, 103-108.
- 25 Babalola 2019, 226-227; Ogundiran 2020, 99-103.
- 26 See also the history of powder glass beads in Simak & Dreibelbis 2010, 131.
- 27 On strips of cloth, see De Marees 1987, 61.
- 28 Drewal & Mason 1998, 17.
- 29 Drewal & Mason 1998, 18.
- 30 Drewal & Mason 1998, 18.
- 31 Drewal & Mason 1998, 18.
- 32 Trivellato 2014, 22.
- 33 Trivellato 2014, 13.
- 34 Sutton 2012, 60.
- 35 On De Marees, see Sutton 2012, especially chapter 3. On the 'pragmatics of trade', see page 60.
- 36 De Marees 1987, 11.
- 37 De Marees 1987, 34.
- 38 De Marees 1987, 225.
- 39 Simak & Dreibelbis 2010, 127-128.
- 40 Other travel writers mention *akori* beads, including the 18th-century Danish merchant L.F. Römer, although he may have been referring to imitation *akori*. Römer 2013, 115. Cited in Simak & Dreibelbis 2010, 128.
- 41 De Marees 1987, 53. For more on 'polishing', see De Marees 1987, 80, 84, 177.
- 42 De Marees 1987, 53.
- 43 De Marees 1987, 36.
- 44 Anderson & Kehoe 2024.
- 45 De Marees 1987, 25.
- 46 Davidson 2020, 710.
- 47 Coral beads – like glass beads – were also shipped to West and West Central Africa by European trading companies in the early modern period (called *fijn bloedkoraal* on Dutch cargo lists). The implications of the Dutch-African coral trade for early modern visual culture is the subject of an ongoing project and will not be addressed in this essay.
- 48 Rebecca Parker Brienien has noted the similarities between this style of pearl earrings (with red bows) and the earrings worn by middle-class women in Dutch paintings. Brienien 2006, 149.
- 49 De Jongh 1975-1976.
- 50 Quoted in De Jongh 1975-1976, 88.
- 51 This necklace was promised to her by Pepys in August 1665 and supposedly still survives as a family heirloom. Pepys 1971, 113.
- 52 Ng forthcoming, 2. These prices were recorded by the Dutch jeweler Thomas Cletscher.
- 53 De Jong 1975-1976, 80.
- 54 Rijks 2019, 321. On imitation pearls, see also Oppen & Oppen 1996-1997, 23-34.
- 55 Perhaps it is the elusiveness of the woman in Vermeer's *Girl with a pearl earring* that has fueled the debate surrounding her painted pearl. For a comprehensive analysis of this debate, see Ng's forthcoming essay, 'Vermeer's pearls'. Many thanks to Dr. Ng for sharing a pre-published version of this essay. On Vermeer's representation of pearls, see also An 2002, 139-143.
- 56 Ng forthcoming, 4.
- 57 De Lairese 1817, 21.
- 58 Domínguez Torres 2020, especially 63-68; Domínguez Torres 2024.
- 59 Kolfin 2020, 21-26; Ponte 2020, 53.
- 60 Kolfin 2020, 22.
- 61 It is possible that the painted pearls in Jan Mijtens's portrait were considered tactful surrogates for the 'slave collar', which would have directly referenced enslavement in a country where it was ostensibly illegal.
- 62 The connection of pearl adornments to enslavement – and to Johan Maurits's role as an enslaver – is made more explicit in a drawing after Eckhout's painting made by WIC employee Zacharias Wagener (1614-1668). In Wagener's drawing the woman is branded with an M.
- 63 Brienien 2006, 132.
- 64 Zacharias Wagener wrote the terms 'mameluca' and 'mulato' on his drawings after Eckhout's paintings, suggesting they held broader currency. See note 62.
- 65 A painting described as 'Johan Maurits surrounded by Brasilians' was originally included with the series but was separated when it entered the collection of the Danish king Frederik III. The painting was later destroyed in a fire.
- 66 Brienien 2006, 162-168.
- 67 Cat. The Hague 2004, 83.
- 68 Quoted in cat. The Hague 2004, 83.
- 69 It is important to treat Wagener's comments with a modicum of caution. As Brienien wisely points out, 'Wagener's descriptions were created to accompany his copies, not the original paintings. As such it is important to keep in mind the fact that this man had his own ideas and prejudices regarding the various ethnic groups present in Brazil'. Brienien 2006, 135. Nevertheless, Wagener's comments may be indicative of a more widely held view.
- 70 Rijks notes that imitation gems are hard to trace in inventories, although she has found 18 items that explicitly mention their counterfeit status. She has noted, however, that many inventories include descriptions of colored glass or crystals, as well as green stones, all of which may be shorthand for imitation gems. Rijks 2019, 322.
- 71 Rijks 2019, 335, n. 87.

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