Netherlands Beggar Beakers

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A seventeenth century friar and nun, rescued from a rotting ship, have found permanent shelter at the Metropolitan Museum. Their countrymen of the present day regard these yellow-robed, unsmiling figures as survivors of an ancient religious feud.

The doll-like pottery sculptures (Figure 1) came to light in the 1920s, when the remains of a small wooden vessel were found in an Amsterdam polder, in the course of improving a drainage canal. The recoverable portion of the cargo included stacks of Netherlands majolica dishes, mostly broken, and eight ecclesiastical figures, these two among them. The find was unique in yielding the first group of intact figures of their type ever unearthed in the Netherlands.

These statuettes are not sculptures in the usual sense. Rather, they are effigy vessels, coarsely modeled and hollow-cast with roughly cylindrical interiors. Behind the head of each is a spoutlike opening in the form of a yawning sack or billowing hood. This is uncomfortably small and inconveniently placed for a beaker; and like most pouring lips, it narrows down at the far end. The design is better adapted for pouring than for drinking.

The very simplicity with which these figures are modeled endows them with an air of dignity. The forms are so uncomplicated that it was possible to produce them in two-piece molds. Not much effort was expended in touching up the casts; the vertical mold seams may be seen at the sides, and only the hands and wallets give evidence of retouching. Thus it is apparent that they were made in fair number and meant to be sold cheaply.
Both figures agree in color. They are bathed in a crackled lead glaze which, though transparent, invests heads, hands, and robes with a clay yellow tone. Stoles are deep olive green. The friar’s wallet is brown, and both plinths have been painted unevenly with a reddish-brown slip. Close examination shows that the ware itself is putty gray, except in small areas where the absence of glaze has permitted the heat of the kiln to scorch it, and in these places it is pink.

The geographical origin of the little company of friars and nuns to which our pair belonged was not immediately recognized. The few fragmentary ones known earlier in Dutch collections had always been considered German. The assumption was based on the knowledge of analogous spouted vessels of the sixteenth century in museums at Hanover and Cologne. These German beakers also represent clerics. One at Hanover is relatively close in the technical sense, being fashioned of light pink pottery and glazed in yellow and green. Another in Cologne is of salt-glazed stoneware.

The Dutch collector F. Bodenheim, who initially acquired the beakers from the Amsterdam drainage canal, proposed a Netherlands origin for them in 1932. In 1955 another collector, H. M. J. Rijkers, reinforced the suggestion by claiming them for the province of Limburg, an area presently bounded by Belgium and Germany. In both instances the peculiarities of the paste and glaze were carefully considered. The conviction has grown during the years that these beakers are indeed from this southeastern province. The claim for Dutch origin receives additional support from the name Broer [Brother] Claes, surely more Dutch than German, that is inscribed on the base of another male figure found with ours, presently in a private collection.

Although duplicates occur among the beakers found at Amsterdam, the variations of subject and decoration invite comparison. For example, there are both bearded and beardless monks, nuns in two sizes (one 8 3/8 inches tall), and several types of relief ornament on the round plinths. Our two figures are distinctive in that both carry the inscription ANNO 1605; the date is interrupted by a cross in the instance of the friar, and by a device resembling a “house mark” in that of the nun. (Drawings of these devices are reproduced actual size in this paragraph.)

The variability of the bases is all the more intriguing when it is observed on otherwise matching figures. It can be demonstrated that four of the eight Amsterdam figures unquestionably came from the same mold. Starting with our
own, the same size, stance, features, and costume details can be observed in three other friars, including the one illustrated in Figure 2, now at the Boymans-van Beuningen Museum. Yet this uniformity within a single model is in contrast to the variations found in the plinths, of which one is undecorated, two are inscribed with dates, and the fourth is ornamented with rosettes.

Since the figures and their bases are not discontinuous (having no horizontal joint or mold seam), and since the ornaments on the bases have been molded rather than “sprigged on” or transferred, it is evident that several molds were made for each given model. A single master figure having a plain base would serve as the subject of the first mold, for instance. The same figure with rosettes applied to the base would then become the “block” for a second mold, and so on, with other variations, ad infinitum. Thus the model cast from these several molds could be supplied with or without an ornamented or inscribed base.

The Dutch name for these effigy beakers is Geuzenbekers or “beggar beakers,” a term that sounds completely obvious. Yet the word Geuzen has several distinct historical applications which invest these objects with a propagandistic meaning. Foremost among them is its application to the bitterly anti-Catholic groups, called Geuzen, which acted as a divisive force in the Netherlands of the sixteenth century, retarding Dutch efforts to achieve independence from the burden of Spanish oppression. The animus fanned by the Geuzen continued into the following century and beyond. It is in this light that the beakers are interpreted today in the Netherlands. They are regarded as carry-overs from the Geuzen practice of deriding their adversaries at anti-Catholic gatherings. It is believed that they were created as objects of ridicule, to be the butt of jibes against the exaggerated materialism of the mendicant orders. The proponents of the idea thus explain the emphasis upon the sacks, traditional attributes of beggars, carried by the figures of the Geuzenbekers.

Perhaps there is room for a different view. Coming from a strongly Catholic region, is it not possible that these could have been made to serve as household objects fashioned after familiar local types? Their German counterparts stand in violent contrast. One at the Kunstgewerbe-museum in Cologne depicts a cleric about to become violently ill from too much tippling; another at the Kestner-Museum, Hanover, represents a monk slipping a nude woman into his robes. The satire is intense and stinging.

It should be noted that any conclusion must be considered in the light of the rarity of such beakers, either Dutch or German. But in the writer’s opinion, the Limburg figures possess a poise and decorum which could only have been imparted by sympathetic hands. We are dealing here with folk art, and if it was the purpose of the Dutch potters to ridicule the Catholics in our beakers, they have dealt gently with their theme.

3. Another view of the Metropolitan Museum’s monk beaker shown in Figure 1