Zandvliet offers a huge survey of all manner of Dutch, indigenous and hybrid visual production. The works presented span four centuries of Dutch interactions with Asia, and huge geographical sweep. However, since the Dutch presence in Asia was based in Batavia, a significant number of artifacts come from the Indonesian archipelago. The book relies on a thematic and highly object-based approach, pairing brief thematic introductions with short historic summaries of a multitude of objects that fit each specific theme. The thematic chapters are themselves grouped in major chronological periods, which helps give the themes relevance, and avoids the issue of a-historicism that so often plagues thematic histories.

Drawing on the very rich collection of the Rijksmuseum, there is a notable reliance on objects produced by Dutch artist working for or inspired by the VOC trading missions in Asia; however there are also many objects produced by local artists. This reliance on Dutch objects is particularly true in the second and third chapters, “Bureaucracy from Batavia,” and “Governor-General Portraits, 1609-1945.” There is a wider focus in the remaining chapters of the first section, which collectively emphasize the indirect rule and interculturation that typified the Dutch experience in Asia before the 19th century. Objects like a ceremonial suit of European armor given to the Japanese Shogun, and the Portrait of King Sayfudin of Tidore do a good job emphasizing how the Dutch entered a complex diplomatic world, and their efforts to appease and work with local rulers. Examples like these go to the larger thrust of the book, that the Dutch presence in Asia produced a population that was in many ways part of Asia, even while maintaining many European customs and expectations.

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