

DATING OF EARLY PZH OBJECTS: A RE-APPRAISAL OF THE YEAR LETTER THEORY

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The Plateelbakkerij Zuid-Holland (PZH) was started in Gouda by Egbert Estië in late 1897 in partnership with local ceramics factory owner Adriaan Jonker Kzn. There is very little source material available on the earliest history, which leaves us to study the surviving objects of the period. The first person to attempt a systematic study of the history of PZH was collector and researcher Rob Hageman (1933-1986). He published an article on the dating of early PZH objects in the October 1981 issue of the Dutch magazine 'Antiek'. With detailed and systematic arguments he concluded that the letters that appear on early PZH objects were used as a year code. The system of year codes would have started in the first full year of production, 1898, with the letter A until the year 1905 (H), when Egbert Estië left the company as manager and shareholder. Based on the objects Mr Hageman used as examples for the article and the identity and working periods of artists as they were then known the theory fitted very well, and in the last 40 years it has been the basis of dating of these early pieces.

Rob Hageman's article started with testing and discarding several other reasons for this single letter coding: for clay used, type of glaze, model, décor, colour, location of manufacturing, designer, use, quality, complexity, approval mark, and customer code. He then tested the fifteen objects to see if the working period of the artists matched the year letter on their objects. With some minor assumptions, this was the case.

With the growth of the collection and the database of PZH objects with an emphasis on the first ten years of PZH production, more objects that had this letter code came available as study material. As not all objects fitted comfortably in the theory that the letters were meant as a year code, it warranted having a fresh look. During an accidental meeting with Dutch ceramics collector and researcher Bert-Jan Baas, he mentioned his doubts as well. During a PZH research project with fellow collector and researcher Barbara Walraven (1959-2018), they also found reasons to question if the letter code indeed was a year code. We agreed on a goal to try to find 150 pieces (ten times the original group) and see if this would lead to a different outcome.

NOT A YEAR CODE?

The first thing that stood out was that all objects with a letter code bear the factory mark 'Zuid-Holland Gouda'. Later decor series such as P-decors (introduced c. 1901) are, with only a few exceptions, marked 'Made in Zuid-Holland'. Delft decors (from 1900) were marked with 'Delftsch' or 'Zuid-Holland Delftsch'. Around 1908, the factory mark on the PZH objects changed again to predominantly 'Zuid-Holland Gouda', a little later 'Holland Gouda' or 'Gouda Holland' was also used.

All objects used in Rob Hageman's article had the double E in the pediment of the Lazaruspoot logo, the logo of the PZH. The article and later literature always supposed that these letters possibly stood for the initials of Egbert Estië, and only disappeared in 1905 after Mr Estië had permanently left the PZH as a shareholder. However, this turned out to be incorrect: just over half of letter code objects (both with the letter A and in the group of later letters) do not have this double E in the pediment of the logo. There is therefore no clear correlation between the presence of the double E and the dating of the objects to the first eight production years of PZH.

Since the publication of Rob Hageman's article, it has been assumed that the year letter coding was used until 1905 (year letter H). In the new more extensive dataset we find objects up to and including the letter R, which would represent 1913 to 1915 (depending on whether both the I and J and the O and Q were used). The distribution of the letters over the objects is very uneven: 37% have letter A for 1898, 20% have the letter B and after that, it quickly decreases from just under ten per cent for the letter C to a few per cent in the last years (see table). This would mean that already in the second year (1899) a large part of the undoubtedly increased production would have been produced without the letter code and in later years only a very small part of the production would have been marked with this code. It is known that the PZH did well in the first years; if the letter codes were indeed year letters, then a reversed distribution would have been expected. For all early objects sorted by letter code and artist see [here](#) and for all early objects sorted by artist and letter code see [here](#).

<u>LETTER CODE</u>	<u># OF OBJECTS</u> <u>PZH</u>	<u>%</u>
A	56	37%
B	30	20%
C	14	9%
D	10	7%
E	9	6%
F	7	5%
G	3	2%
H	5	3%
I		
J	1	1%
K	1	1%
L	2	1%
M	2	1%
N	1	1%
O	1	1%
P	6	4%
Q		
R	2	1%
TOTAL	150	

Further analysis led to the hypothesis that all objects marked with 'Zuid-Holland Gouda' AND a letter code could have been produced exclusively in the first few years of the existence of the PZH. This was supported by the following observations:

- All letter code objects with the letter A are made on models with a model number from 1 to 151, but objects with later letters also all fall into this group. Reconstruction of the PZH model range from model number 1 to 526 (this is based on a PZH catalogue dated to the year 1909) shows that these model numbers were issued chronologically, with possibly only minor deviations in the later (higher) model numbers. Model numbers assigned to models purchased from Plateelbakkerij Haga (in 1907/08) and the Porcelainfabriek De Kroon (in 1911) and the new model numbers for the production year 1910 also support this.
- Decors on the group of objects with letter codes only belong to two groups: decors in the spirit of Rozenburg/Brantjes/Holland Utrecht from the last years of the 19th century and decors that would later develop into the 'Gouda' decor. These came into production in 1898 (based on contemporary accounts) and were probably introduced by W.G.F. Jansen (PZH: 1898-1899). Decor types such as Delfts (started in 1900) and P-decor (started late 1900/early 1901) do not occur with a letter code.
- All objects with a letter code bear the monogram of a painter who worked for PZH in the years 1897-1899, based on extensive research into population registers of various places and movements of painters to and from other factories. Not a single object is signed by a painter who started from mid-1899 onwards. For painters with longer employment of whom we can recognize a development in monogram and/or handwriting, we only find the “early” versions.
- If letter code objects were made in later years, one would also expect later models painted by painters who started later.
- We find objects of six painters with letter codes that would stand for years in which the painters likely would no longer have worked for PZH. While civil record information is often incomplete and regarding professions unreliable the known oeuvres of artists (number of objects and décor styles) give a reasonable indication of the length and dating of their employment at PZH.

Johannes Florack	Latest year code F=1903	Moved back to Amsterdam in May 1900, no PZH work can be attributed to him afterwards
David van der Kellen	Latest year code D=1901	Moved back to Utrecht in Oct 1898, no work can be attributed to him afterwards
Bernardus Nieman	Latest year code P=1912	Moved back to Amsterdam in May 1899, no PZH work can be attributed to him afterwards
Dirk Jan Raap	Latest year code N=1910	Moved back to Purmerend in 1903, no PZH work can be attributed to him afterwards
Johannes Stam	Latest year code O=1911	Moved back to The Hague in 1899, commuted to Gouda but no work known after 1907
Dirk Verhaar	Latest year code P=1912	Moved to Nijmegen in April 1902, worked there and later in The Hague as stained glass glazer.

- And more subjectively: the decors on year letter pieces deviate as a group from the decors that we find on objects that can be dated in the years after 1899. The dark, symmetrical decors in the style of Rozenburg/Brantjes/Holland Utrecht are very rare

anymore, which is in line with the developments in the art world that took place around the turn of the century. In the Gouda decor group, we see a gradual development of the earliest decors to a few standard designs around the time Willy Hoyng takes over the management of the factory in 1908.

All the above leads to serious doubt that objects with the letter code and with what appears “early” decors were produced after 1899. But without an unambiguous way to date objects how can we prove that the development of consumer fashion would make the production of turn-of-the-century decors a good decade later highly unlikely? The development of decors on wall plates gives fairly strong support. The three types of wall plates that were used at PZH in the first 10 years can be dated per type and the photo archive has enough examples to demonstrate a reasonably unambiguous decor development, see [here](#).

BUT WHAT THEN?

But if the letter code does not represent the production year, then what does it stand for? Rob Hageman found no connection with clay/shard type, type of glaze, model, decor, colour scheme, place of manufacture in the factory, type of object, quality designation, degree of difficulty of painting, approval mark and customer code. Based on a group of objects ten times larger, we initially found no relationship between the letters and decor/decor group/degree of difficulty or model/model family/size. The uneven distribution of the letters makes a customer code and approval mark very unlikely.

The founder of PZH, Egbert Estié, had been previously involved in the start of the ceramics factory Brantjes in Purmerend. The objects of Brantjes (active from 1895-1904) mostly have a year code (A to I) and a decor code (Dec: A to N). At first glance there is no relationship between letter code and decor designs, there are many different decors with the same decor code letter. In the 'Purmerend Jugendstil Pottery 1895-1907' catalogue from 1995, the writers give a logical explanation: for each model, a letter was associated with a certain decor. It is most likely that the first decor that was carried out on a new model received decor code A. If the model was subsequently also produced with a different decor, it was given decor code B, etc.

But this means that there is indeed no relationship between the decor code and a particular decor: if for example, new decor 'sunflower' is the first decor used on model 65, this decor gets code A. But on model 19 which was already in production with other decors the decor 'sunflower' will have received a later letter from the alphabet as decor code. In fact, the decor letter is not a decor code, but a decor-on-model code. Within a group of objects of one model, the pieces with the same decor all have the same decor letter. The combination of model number and decor letter defined a unique product for stock and order administration. But it could also be used to record the level of difficulty and standard work hours and/or pay for the artists. We can now sort the group of objects by model number and decor letter, see [here](#).

Of the group of 150 PZH objects that have a decor-on-model letter, there are 40 of which we know only one object of a specific model. In the group of the remaining 110 objects there are 5 cases where we find two different decors within one model number/decor letter combination. And once on one model we find the same decor under two different letters. There is no conclusive evidence, and mistakes were possible at the time. But one idea is that if a model/decor combination was no longer in production and there was no stock, the decor letter for another decor was used on this model.

Model	# of objects	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M	N	O	P	Q	R
Wall plate #25	15		2		4	3		1	1				1	2			1		
Vase # 90	8	2	2	1					2				1						
Vase # 1	6	1	1												1	1			2
Bowl #52	6	1	2	1	1							1							
Vase # 11	3	1	1	1															
Vase # 10	4				1		1										2		
Vase # 14	4		1			3													
Jug # 31	4	1					2	1											
Vase # 15	3	1	1		1														
Vase # 27	3	2	1																
Clog # 70	3	1	2																
Vase # 89	4	1	1	2															
Wall plate # 35	3	2		1															
Wall plate # 40	3	2															1		
Wall tile left	3		3																
Wall tile right	2			2															
Coaster 0	2		1	1															
Amphora # 21	2	2																	
Amphora # 22	2	1															1		
Vase # 24	2						2												
Amphora # 26	2	1				1													
Vase # 41	2			1	1														
Jug # 42	2				1		1												
Clock 54	2	2																	
Vase # 75	2	1	1																
Vase # 92	2					1											1		
Vase # 97	2	2																	
Plant hanger # 100	2		2																
Vase # 109	2	2																	
Vase # 110	2	2																	
Vase # 113	2	1	1																
Jug # 116	2	2																	
Wall plate # 30	2								2										
Oil lamp reservoir	2	1	1																
One object per model	40	24	7	4	1	1	1	1			1								
SUM	150	56	30	14	10	9	7	3	5	0	1	1	2	2	1	1	6	0	2

D: two pairs of different decors
B: two different decors

A/B: same décor under different letter

A: two different decors

A: two different decors

A: two different decors

- Two model 25 plates with a decor of two birds of prey that can be dated before October 1898 have a decor letter D. Two other model 25 plates, also with the decor letter D, have a sunflower decor and could also have been painted after October 1898.

- Two vases of model 89 90 have a traditional decor, and one has an early Gouda decor. Both have the same decor letter B, one in a traditional decor, and one with an early De Gouda decor. The latter may also be marked with a P and the decor was most likely introduced later.

- Two clocks model 54 have the decor letter A, one with a traditional decor and one with a possibly later Gouda decor

But in the other two cases, this explanation is less likely:

- Two wall plates model 35 have the decor letter A but different traditional floral decors.
- Two jugs model 116 and decor letter A have different early Gouda decors

Despite these discrepancies, the Brantjes system is correctly applied in 84% of the cases (marked in green).

We now also have a good explanation why we find the letters from the beginning of the alphabet disproportionately high. Most models were only available with a small number of decors. In addition, the distribution of the percentage of objects per letter for Brantjes and PZH agrees well.

<u>LETTER CODE</u>	<u># OF OBJECTS</u> <u>Brantjes</u>	<u>%</u>	<u># OF OBJECTS</u> <u>PZH</u>	<u>%</u>
A	100	29%	56	37%
B	81	24%	30	20%
C	61	18%	14	9%
D	20	6%	10	7%
E	29	8%	9	6%
F	15	4%	7	5%
G	14	4%	3	2%
H	11	3%	5	3%
I	5	1%		
J	4	1%	1	1%
K	2	1%	1	1%
L			2	1%
M	1	0%	2	1%
N	1	0%	1	1%
O			1	1%
P			6	4%
Q				
R			2	1%
TOTAL	344		150	

Some models that were in production very early (such as wall plates and a few models with low numbers) and/or were very popular, we know objects with letter codes up to P or R. But we cannot demonstrate that for an object with decor letter R, this is indeed the eighteenth decor that was carried out on this model. In two cases (on models 31 and 52) we find the same decor in two colour schemes with the same decor letter, possibly because PZH could afford a certain degree of freedom in which colour scheme the customer received.

Based on the working periods of artists the use of a letter code to indicate décor per model on each object was stopped sometime in the third quarter of 1899. This is confirmed based on a rough estimate of production capacity per year over the first ten years of PZH's existence based on the number of painters.

Why the system was changed around this time we can only guess, it remained in use at Brantjes until 1904. Perhaps PZH wanted a more transparent system (internally and for the customer) where each model AND each decor had a unique code and each combination could be easily and consistently defined. From c. 1907 model and decor number were marked under each object when decorating. The model number system did not change for the first ten years (and had always been scratched or stamped after casting) The décor numbering system appears to be set up in or shortly before 1907. It is possibly a re-numbering of an older (internal) coding system, but it does not seem to follow a chronological system.

It might also be significant that the transition from the brand 'Zuid-Holland Gouda' to 'Made in Zuid-Holland' occurred at the same time in 1899. Again we can only guess at the reason, but possibly it was to make the brand sound more "international" in the light of the increasing export. The Chamber of Commerce report for 1899 mentions that PZH is actively building up an export business. From period sources like newspaper advertisements, we know Gouda art pottery was already for sale in the USA in 1900.

In conclusion: it seems very likely that the letter code on early PZH objects was not a year code, but a decor letter per model according to a system as was already in use at Brantjes. Based on all the above arguments, it is likely that the objects in this group were manufactured within the first two years of production of PZH, from December 1897 to most likely sometime in the third quarter of 1899.

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