



The Strange Secret of Zaanse Schans – August 29, 1647

As a naturally curious and restless person, the corona virus restrictions have made 2020 an especially difficult and frustrating time for me. To satisfy my wanderlust, I've changed my international travel plans to include spontaneous adventures in Holland – generally little days trips from Utrecht. Recently I found myself in the intriguing township of Zaanse Schans, about a half hour north of Amsterdam. The secret this village keeps is both dramatic and bizarre, and for over 300 years quite possibly one of the strangest stories in The Netherlands.

Much of the evidence I learned about this drama came from a dark corner in the Zaan Museum, a modest tourist attraction dedicated mostly to celebrating Zaanse Schans and *Verkade* chocolates, a local industry. In their gallery hangs an antique oil painting by an anonymous artist that tells a far-fetched tale of miracles and mayhem. Yet according to the exhibit curators it's not just a legend, it's actually true. You be the judge.



The painting in question depicts a surreal scene indeed. On August 29, 1647 a local farmer, Jacob Egh, was attempting to control a massive bull who had been upset by children flying kites nearby. The furious animal could not be calmed, he charged at the man and gored the poor farmer to death, much to the horror of his very pregnant wife. Heartbroken, the woman lost control of her rage and attacked the beast like a maniac. In the subsequent struggle she was also gored, then flipped into the air by the beast only to die later on from her injuries – but her baby survived! According to witnesses by some miracle the infant was sliced out of the woman's womb, ejected in mid-air and actually lived through this bizarre caesarean section.

The town folk were shocked by the terrible violence, but awed by the miracle child. Nearly 800 villagers attended the funeral of the parents a few days later. After the service, the crowd turned their attention to the bull, which was seen as vicious and evil. The crowd turned to riot and they chased the doomed animal into a ditch where he was slaughtered and dismembered for a feast that evening. Cups were made from his enormous horns and one was given to the victim's family as a memento, the other is still on display at the Zaan Museum.

The incident was seen as a bonafide miracle by the local Catholic church, but more as a business opportunity for Zaanse shopkeepers.

Baby Jacob, as he was named, became a ward of the church and as news of the *miracle baby* increased, so did the number of religious pilgrims to the area. Visits with the blessed child could be arranged for those with enough faith and money. Inns and guest houses created 'special prices' for these travelers and restaurants catered to naïve foreigners. Citizens wasted no time exploiting the tragedy, creating souvenirs and keepsakes of the event for visitors – especially dinnerware (because who doesn't think about evisceration during the entre?) Soon after, enterprising Dutch merchants began to trade with the cookware all over Europe, and the legend of the miracle baby eventually even reached the Vatican in Rome.

Similar to the Delft pottery tradition, Zaanse craftsmen created a collection of elegant plates, cups and saucers depicting the dreadful scene with a full color glaze. These items helped make the story of the airborne abortion attempt famous all over the world, where it ultimately earned an international audience, especially in the Far East.



All this attention was well and good for the Zaanse town elite until the so-called *miracle baby* died of consumption less a year later. Another baby was substituted for a while, but the infant also succumbed to illness and the grim reaper.

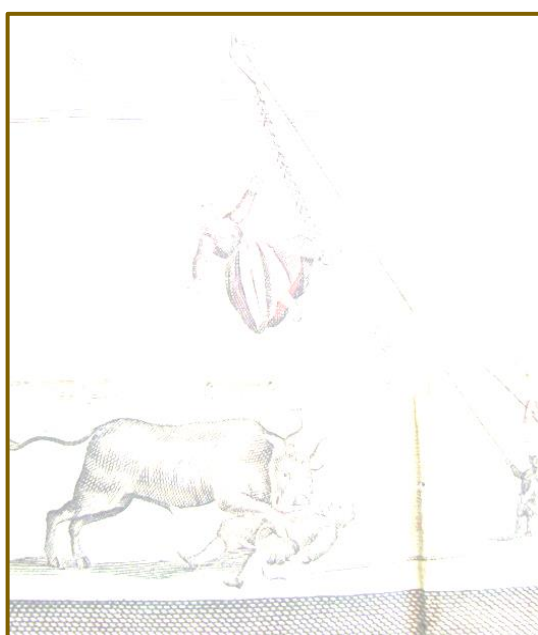
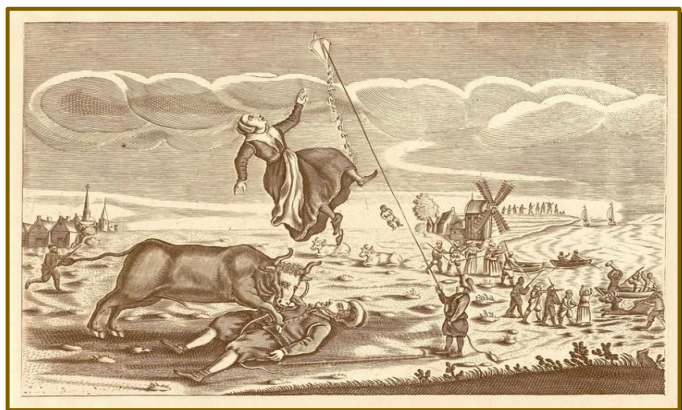
Suddenly it seemed the town's time in the spotlight was over – or was it?

Zaanse's artisans continued to make the unsettling crockery, and their weird designs became popular in China - along with the crazy story. The Chinese merchant class became fascinated with these dish sets and they became a very trendy and expensive curiosity. Even today, a single original setting can sell for up to eight thousand euro!

Driven by the economics, the local church continued the legend by commissioning an oil painting depicting the 'cruelty of the bull' to preserve the episode – *almost* the same painting now hanging in the Zaanse Museum. Let me explain.



When the original artwork was completed in 1726, the tragic story was explained with a couple paragraphs of text at the bottom of the painting. For over a century, thousands of the morbid and curious lined up to see the famous picture and discuss the bizarre story. But eventually church leaders lost patience with the constant din of loud foreigners, religious zealots and sketchy drifters interrupting their church services - so a hard decision was made.



In 1798, the church removed the illustration from the main chapel gallery and hid it in the sanctuary behind a curtain. Strict visiting hours were established and a fee was required just to view the artwork. But as time went on, the painting and the incident became a source of embarrassment rather than pride for the town, especially the crass commercialization of the tragedy. By the turn of the 19th century, most Zaanse artisans had stopped making 'cruel bull' souvenirs and the incident was rarely discussed in public.

During a renovation of the chapel interior in 1834, the artwork was reconsidered yet again. The original text explaining the incident on the image disappeared under a coat of paint, and the canvas could only be seen by paid appointment. Within a decade, the church banned the picture completely as *"the image was found to be contrary to good taste and mores"* according to the parish bulletin. Later, the drape was removed and the picture was defaced by smearing it with a thick layer of white lime to cover it. It would remain that way for a generation.

Finally, around 1860, public pressure required the church administration to restore the painting as best they could to make it presentable again. After weeks of work, the showpiece was returned to the gallery only a little worse for wear. But by that time it was obvious the strength of the story had faded and soon the whole incident fell into obscurity.

.More than a century later the city of Zaanse Schans rediscovered the fantastic tale of the bull's cruelty and displayed the painting and some related items in a special museum exhibit. In 1977 the artwork was professionally restored and added to the permanent collection at the Zaanse Museum when it opened in 1998.

