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The letters "A" and "I" on this plate possibly refer to Abraham and Isaac Pereira. These two figures started the first major Jewish sugar refinery in Amsterdam in the mid-seventeenth century. In 1656 they constructed two buildings at the Waterlooplein: a sugar factory at number 11 and a house at number 13. In 1658, the company started producing (under the name Thomas Rodrigues Pereira), and finished products were sold in 1664.



Sugar was initially limited to a wealthy elite who used it as a symbol of power and wealth. In the sixteenth century, "sugar banquets" arrived to the Netherlands. The well-to-do outdid each other by displaying magnificent sugar sculptures on their table. Confectioners often mixed these sugar sculptures with other elements such as wax, plaster, textile and later even porcelain.^[3]

In the sixteenth century, the city of Antwerp was one of the most important sugar refinery centers in Europe. After the Spanish occupation of Antwerp, Amsterdam became the new economic center of the Dutch provinces. Fifty to sixty refineries were active in Amsterdam in 1660, and by 1662, the Republic provided more than half of the refined sugar consumed in Europe.^[1] The reason the refining process took place in Europe and not in the countries of production was that the transport of the commodities between the two continents posed great risk as refined sugar was easily damaged after sea travel.

The refineries converted crude crystal sugar into a superior grade product. First, the crude sugar was boiled, and then filtered to eliminate impurities. Once it was ready for granulation, the syrup was poured into conical earthenware molds, like the one pictured on the plate. Within a few days, the sugar would crystallize into the traditional sugarloaf shape. Dark syrup and noncrystalline matter called molasses would drain through a hole in the top of the cone. Once dry, the loaf was removed from the mold, stored in a room, and eventually trimmed into a final shape for transport throughout Europe.^[2]

During the first half of the seventeenth century, most of the sugar that was imported to the Low Countries came from Brazil. When the Dutch West India Company (WIC) lost control of northeast Brazil in 1654, the Dutch colony of Suriname became the leading supplier of sugar.