

Archaeological Finds of Ceramics in Lao PDR

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The Vientiane Archaeological Survey was formed in 1989 to study the historical ceramics of the Lao People's Democratic Republic. It is a collaborative venture between the Department of the Museum of the Lao PDR, the Ministry of Information and Culture, and researchers from the University of Sydney. The work is funded by the Australian Research Council and assisted by the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs through the Australian Embassy in Vientiane.

Recent archaeological work has proven that Laos has a rich and long ceramic history, contrary to previous views. Recently, more and more kiln sites throughout the country have been reported. For example, the number of known kiln sites has doubled in the past ten years and the number is expected to double again in the next decade. Although some of them are unconfirmed, the large number of sites compels a reassessment of the contribution of Laotian ceramics to the development of stoneware in the region.

An excavation at Sisattanak in south Vientiane is the first of a series of research projects planned for the country. Finds have already shown that the kilns at Sisattanak are different from others in South-East Asia.

Finds

Apart from the kilns, the most common material found in excavations is remains of kiln furniture and related debris such as wasters, or cracked, slumped, fused, underfired, or otherwise damaged pots that are

products of every firing. This type of debris is generally cast aside on the nearest slope or hole. Sometimes abandoned kilns, including the firing pit, were used for this purpose. Few whole pieces are found at the kiln sites so archaeologists must try to reconstruct vessels from shards.

Besides form, decoration and designs are also useful in building a typology of wares and tracing the lines of development. Designs tend to be traditional and usually change occurs gradually. Sometimes designs on prehistoric objects are found on wares produced centuries later and may occur on the same or different shapes.

Discovering Laotian History and the Achievements of the Past

Recent discoveries show that in the past ceramics were produced in Laos hundreds of years ago, that kilns were capable of producing ceramics fired at a high temperature, and that ceramics reached a high level of artistic and technological skill. The discoveries indicate that the ancient potters of Laos were capable of producing ceramics equal in quality to those made elsewhere in South-East Asia. The potters adopted cross-draft kilns for firing and modified the design to suit their local needs and traditions.

Until last year, the only known kiln site in the Laos was Sisattanak in south Vientiane. Research conducted between 1989 and 1990 revealed that a sophisticated industry existed several hundred years ago and made both unglazed and some glazed wares

for the household, as well as architectural and trade ceramics.

In 1991 excavations were conducted at Ban Xang Hai, near Luang Prabang. They revealed a larger and even older industry than Sisattanak. It is estimated that the kilns were operating some six hundred years ago. Evidence of prehistoric occupation was also found and materials included stone axes, amulets, copper tools, and burials.

Recently two more ancient kiln sites were found near Luang Prabang. Indications of other production sites in north-west Laos making glazed jars are also present. The Laotians are making an effort to locate, record, and protect these sites.

Technicians from the Museum Management section, the Information Culture section of Xiengkuang Province, and a relic technician from Fuku Okaya of Japan discovered in November 1994 ancient images of people etched onto the exterior of a stone jar. The jar (no. 217) was found in the Plain of Jars at the village of Ban Vang. The dimensions are: diameter = 60 cm; height = 160 cm; and width = 66 cm. ■

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Traditional Theatre in Southeast Asia

Traditional Theatre in Southeast Asia is a recent publication which introduces many traditional forms of theatre that are not widely known outside their countries of origin. Edited by Dr Chua Soo Pong, currently the Director of the Chinese Opera Institute in Singapore, the book discusses how traditional forms of theatre should be revitalised in the rapidly changing socio-economic environments of Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore and Thailand.

Traditional Theatre in Southeast Asia (US\$10 excluding postage cost) can be obtained from:

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