The Rooney Cultural Archive – Southeast Asia and Electronic Cultural Atlas Initiative (ECAI)

Dawn F. Rooney has been researching on various aspects of Southeast Asian cultures for several years, and has now compiled her work into a website for public access.

Logo for Dawn F. Rooney Cultural Archive — Southeast Asia; Center Medallion: A fish plate from Sukhothai, Thailand, 5th Century

I initiated the Rooney Cultural Archive – Southeast Asia to preserve three decades of independent research and to make it available to a wider public for educational purposes, particularly students, teachers, and scholars in the ten countries of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), where English language sources are neither readily nor widely available. The aims of this long-term project are to provide a new resource, to encourage the exchange of information, and to contribute towards a greater understanding and appreciation of the art of Southeast Asia. The first stage of this project has been carried out through a grant from the James H.W. Thompson Foundation in Bangkok, Thailand and through technical support from the Electronic Cultural Atlas Initiative (ECAI) Southeast Asia, University of California (UC) Berkeley and web designer, Tom Riddle.

The material covers aspects of the art of Thailand, Cambodia, Indonesia, Lao PDR, Myanmar, and Vietnam and comprises some 20,000 objects, images, maps, ceramics, shards, kiln furniture, conservation records, lectures, interviews, manuscripts, books correspondence, and field notes. Much of the material is either unpublished or out-of print.

While pondering how to accomplish my goal, members of the Society for Asian Art introduced me to Dr. Lewis Lancaster, Professor Emeritus of

East Asian Languages and Cultures, UC Berkeley, and head of ECAI. It is a global collaborative project, established in 1997, that works towards advancing the study of humanities by using new technology for a better understanding of place and time. ECAI holds two meetings annually in different regions of the world in cooperation with other organizations who are involved in digital technology. These meetings include lectures centered on humanities, workshops, and demonstrations on using the software and other technical issues. They bring together people who are working with historical data and want to use modern technology for studies, analyses, and comparisons. Representative international meetings include one held in London (June 2000) where model projects for integrating ECAI's technical infrastructure were introduced. A symposium and workshop in Siem Reap, Cambodia (January 2002), organized by ECAI Southeast Asia, focused on shared access to Southeast Asian inscriptions, taking rubbings, digitizing rubbings, and organizing digital images for on-line retrieval by time and place using ECAI technology. ECAI participated in the Pacific Neighborhood Consortium Annual Conference "Cultural Heritage and Collaboration in the Digital Age" in Bangkok, Thailand (November 2003).

Earthenware spouted vessel with
red-painted bands around neck and
shoulder; Sisophon, Cambodia, 6th Century

Professor Lancaster introduced me to Caverlee Cary, head of ECAI Southeast Asia. She currently holds the position of ECAI Southeast Asia Editor, based at the Geographic Information Science Center of UC Berkeley. Caverlee and I are working together on my Angkor material, which she thinks is well-suited to the goals of ECAI Southeast Asia. Ever since our first meeting, Caverlee has supported and guided me tirelessly. Leedom Lefferts, a well-known and respected figure in the field, is the new Co-Editor of ECAI Southeast Asia. He is an anthropologist specializing in the region and recently retired as professor at Drew University.

Early in its development, ECAI chose Geographic Information Systems (GIS) as its technology. GIS links information to place, but the software generally does not accommodate temporal information well, and time is a critical element in the research of many ECAI affiliates. Thus ECAI helped support the development of a customized, time-enabled GIS, which is called TimeMap, developed by archaeologist Ian Johnson at the Archaeological

Betel Chewing Traditions in South-East Asia; book and photographs available to download without charge on http://rooneyarchive.net

Art and architectural data can be documented and organized, using ECAI software.

Computing Laboratory of the University of Sydney. ECAI affiliates use TimeMap to index digital resources - text, images, maps, video - by time and location. Metadata, or data about the data resources, is registered with the ECAI Metadata Clearinghouse at UC Berkeley. By searching ECAI metadata, or selecting a region of interest by drawing a "bounding box" on the map interface on the Clearinghouse search page, users can see a list of available datasets, select those they wish to display, then click on "Make a Map" to display data on a map created directly from stored data. The underlying principle is that researchers maintain their own data on their own computers, and users locate and retrieve these resources through the Metadata Clearinghouse that allows them to visualize data on a map-based interface.

I find the digital mapping feature useful for research on Southeast Asia, a region in which the culture is easier to understand in terms of past kingdoms than modern geopolitical boundaries. Using TimeMap, for example, today's borders can easily be replaced with those of former kingdoms, thus allowing the user to visualize the region through the rise and fall of kingdoms and their relationships to each other in both time and place.

For a clearer understanding of how cultural data can be integrated using ECAI technology, I recommend looking at the following models: The Sasanian Seals project at UC Berkeley. This material is the work of Professor Guitty Azapay, an Advisor to the Society for Asian Art, and Jeanette Zerneke. The site serves as a model for handling un-provenanced material. Over 300,000 photographs held at Ohio State University comprise the John C. and Susan L. Huntington Photographic Archive of Buddhist and Related Art. This project is an example of how art and architectural data can be documented and organized, using ECAI software. David Runsey of Cartography Associates is a resident of San Francisco and an avid collector of historical maps of Asia. He used TimeMap to put 10,000 maps on the Internet. For a complete list and description of ECAI projects, visit the web site.

Other projects on Southeast Asian culture that plan to integrate data with ECAI technology are in progress. Bonnie Baskin, who teaches conservation techniques to future art conservators at the Royal University of Fine Arts (RUFA) in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, is involved in archaeological excavations and research. Alan Potkin and Catherine Raymond (DeKalb, Illinois), of the "Digital Conservation Facility Laos," have developed a number of digital museum, database, and mapping projects. Surat Lertlum, Asian Institute of Technology in Bangkok, Thailand, is engaged in fieldwork to map trade routes in mainland Southeast Asia. Roxanna Brown, Director of Bangkok University Museum, is using TimeMap for her data on artifacts recovered from ninth to the nineteenth century shipwreck sites in Southeast Asia. Roland Fletcher,

University of Sydney, Australia, is using ECAI technology to disseminate his findings on the decline of the early historic settlement of Angkor in Cambodia and its water management system. Mamoru Shibayama, Center for Southeast Asian Studies at Kyoto University, is developing a database on trade between Southeast and East Asia. The projects described above are only a selection. Inquiries are welcome and should be directed to cari@berkeley.edu.

The initial phase of my project spans three years during which each item will be photographed, scanned, coded, identified, and described. The first stages of setting up a web site, creating a start page and categories, and selecting a search mechanism have been completed with the technical assistance of Bangkok-based web designer Tom Riddle. A highlight is the inclusion of books on Southeast Asia that are out of copyright and can be found today only in specialized library collections. Relevant pieces of Southeast Asian art from the Jim Thompson collection in Bangkok, Thailand will be included on my web site, starting with Bencharong ("five coloured") and Lai Nam Thong ("gold-washed") porcelain made exclusively for Thai royalty and aristocrats. Bencharong is a unique, over-glazed enameled ware made in China from the late seventeenth to the early twentieth century for export to Thailand. The Jim Thomson Collection of this material is one of the largest and finest in the world.

The formation of my archive began in 1971 in Bangkok, Thailand. As a newly arrived resident to one of the most exotic countries in the world, I wanted to explore and study the history and art. I started at the ruins of the first Thai kingdom at Sukhothai and the satellite city of Si Satchanalai, which are 750 years old and located in the fertile valley of the Yom River in north-central Thailand. I was astonished to discover that the river bank and the mounds above were covered with layers of green-glazed (celadon) shards, bricks, slag and other evidence of a kiln site. I returned to Bangkok and probed the Siam Society Library for information about the Si Satchanalai site. Surprisingly, I found only one document in English and quickly recognized that the information was outdated.

In the same year, quantities of previously unknown green-glazed and brown-glazed ceramics appeared in the Bangkok antique market. They looked remarkably similar to the so-called "Khmer" wares in a catalog of an exhibition curated by William Willetts that was held in Singapore earlier in the year. Little was known about them except that stylistically they looked unlike any other Asian ceramics, including Chinese. The pieces were purportedly dug up by villagers in Northeast Thailand. The wares for sale in Bangkok included wasters, pieces that had collapsed in firing. This is convincing evidence that they were made in Thailand because it is unlikely that mis-fired pieces would be found outside the country of origin.

These two experiences inspired me to begin research on the art of Southeast Asia, which continues with unabated enthusiasm after three decades. My work on ceramics resulted in four books and another one, in collaboration with Bonnie Baskin, conservator, is in progress. My research gradually expanded to related topics. While looking at Khmer ceramics, for example, I found many small, brown-glazed pots with calcified lime on the interior. Villagers told me they were used for betel chewing, and my resulting curiosity culminated in a book on the long tradition of betel chewing in Southeast Asia.

The art and architecture of Angkor captured me on my first visit in 1969. That, followed by the discovery of Khmer ceramics in Thailand in the early 1970s, compelled me to pursue my research on that culture. Field work, however, was limited to provinces in Northeast Thailand that were formerly part of the Khmer Empire because Cambodia was inaccessible for nearly two decades between 1972 and 1991 because of civil war and occupation by the Khmer Rouge. I went to Angkor as soon as it reopened and have returned seventy-eight times and written two books on the subject. Another one, in collaboration with Vittorio Roveda, an expert on the iconography of Angkor, is in progress. Then I began comparative studies of Angkor with the art and history of other kingdoms and sites in the region such as Sukhothai, Ayutthaya, Pagan, Borobudur, Champa, and Anuradhapura, Polonaruva, and Gampola in Sri Lanka. Most recently, I returned to my Asian roots, and wrote a book for the general public on Thai Buddhist images.

All of the material on my website (which is in its infancy) is available without charge for educational, non-profit purposes, including the content and images of three of my books (Khmer Ceramics, Folk Pottery in South-East Asia, Betel Chewing Traditions in South-East Asia).

I thank Caverlee Cary for providing information on ECAI and the projects relevant to Southeast Asia.

Dawn Rooney is an independent scholar.