

Chiang Mai University Ceramics Research Project

by John Shaw

With the single exception of China, no country in the world has a richer ceramics tradition than Thailand. Pottery has been found at stone age sites 10,000 years old in the area of Spirit Cave in the Province of Mae Hong Sorn in the north of Thailand. The great Baan Chiang ceramic and bronze culture started 5,500 years ago and flourished for 3,000 years. The Davaravati and Haripunchai Kingdoms produced, over 1,000 years ago, beautiful unglazed pottery. The 1,000 year old glazed ceramics of the Khmer Empire were almost all made at Baan Kruat in Buriram Province of Thailand. Next came the superb wares produced in Sukhothai and Lanna (Chiang Mai) between the C14th - C16th A.D. The main known ancient kiln sites of Thailand are: Sukhothai-Sukhothai-town; Sawankhalok (Pa Yang and Goh Noi); Khmer - Baan Kruat; and Northern Thai - Kalong, Sankamphaeng, Paan, Nan, Payao, Sansai, Lampang. However, the art of making glazed stoneware was lost to the Thai people until the beginning of the present century. Now, once again, Thailand is a leading producer and exporter of glazed ceramics and the industry

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Kalong Wares in the Ceramics Museum, Chiang Mai University

is mainly centered around Chiang Mai and Lampang.

With this rich heritage of ceramics past and ceramics present, it is fitting that Thailand should have established the first Ceramics Research Project in Southeast Asia. No better place could have been chosen than Chiang Mai where old kiln sites from the days of Lanna lie buried close to modern kilns, many of which work as once they did five hundred years ago.

Chiang Mai University became interested in ceramics for two very different reasons. The Chemistry Department wishes to help up-

grade the modern pottery industry. With the support of the Japanese Government, a Silicate Technology Centre was set up with first class laboratory and small scale manufacturing facilities where glazes and clays can be analysed and improved, new techniques and firing methods tested and students from within and without the university taught. Courses can be short, teaching only basics of the potters' craft, or long and deep giving instruction on glaze and clay chemistry, throwing, turning and moulding, kiln engineering as well as the artistic aspects of ceramics. The Center has very

sophisticated equipment including electron-microscope, X-rays, DTA (differential thermal analysis), softening point measuring equipment, etc. and is now actively involved in the study and analysis of ancient ceramics.

The Physics Department is also keenly interested in the study of old ceramics and plans soon to set up thermoluminescence and carbon 14 dating facilities.

The other approach to ceramics came from the Faculty of History which has set up its own Research Project including a working museum with an excellent representative selection of Northern Thai ceramics and pieces from Sukhothai-town, Sawankhalok, Khmer, Vietnam and China. These are mostly broken pieces but all are precisely identified, first into the kiln complex and then, if possible, into the individual kiln where it was made. The wares of each kiln site are then subdivided into types i.e. Kg 1 shows that the piece is decorated with an underglaze black pattern and comes from the Payoom group of kilns in the Kalong complex. Collectors or archaeologists can therefore bring pieces they have found to the Project Museum and compare them with

sherds from the various kiln sites. It is planned to extend the sherd library to cover, not only Thai and Khmer wares, but also wares from other kiln sites in China, Vietnam, etc.

The History Department is now teaching ceramics as part of the Archaeology syllabus. Students work at the Silicate Technology Centre and they visit kilns both modern and ancient and are encouraged to take part in excavation projects and do their own research at home, as well as learn the history of ceramics.

As Chiang Mai University becomes better known as a centre of ceramics so, it is hoped, will more people come to study the sherds, pots or information, all of which will be classified and recorded so that an increasingly detailed picture of the ceramic past of Thailand can be built up.

The aim of the Project is to gain greater knowledge and understanding of the ceramics of Thailand; to provide a regional centre of information available to all; to preserve as many ceramic pieces as possible; to spread awareness of the importance and beauty of Thai ceramics; to attract the support and interest of people within and without the

University; and to teach the history of ceramics.

For further information please contact The Ceramics Research Project, Department of History, Humanities Faculty, Chiang Mai University.

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tures and misadventures. Owing to the intricacy of working under a totally unfamiliar environment, progress in the development of proper techniques of archaeological research had often been painstakingly slow. Recently, however, as the problems of exploring the depths of the sea have been cut down to manageable proportions, the interesting facets of this modern science continue to draw concern for the systematization of methods of preserving the patrimony.

Meanwhile, for this writer, participation in the archaeological excavations proved to be a rewarding experience in terms of learning a great deal about the proper means of treating shipwreck sites. During the four months of working closely with archaeologists, the writer gained added expertise in the handling of, as well as the principles of how the equipment and devices worked that contributes towards the improvement of the accuracy of interpreting the information presented by the finds. Through this training, the writer likewise learned of the various problems that exist in underwater research and how these problems could be preempted or diminished by careful attention and determination. But more importantly perhaps, he develops the correct attitude towards learning and actually performing the work of the enlightened archaeologist.

For these invaluable experiences and training, the writer expresses his gratitude to the organization which was primarily responsible for this training, SPAFA.



The other Kalong Ware collection in the Ceramics Museum