



Southeast Asian Ceramics Museum Newsletter

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Museology training course looks at the status and strategy of Thai museums

FOR TWO WEEKS 14-25 June the Southeast Asian Ceramics Museum conducted a training course on museology for a group of six curators from museums in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. The group met at the museum each morning for lectures and discussion from 8 a.m. to noon. After lunch there were daily field trips to a variety of Thai museums.

On Day One each of the visiting curators decided on a subject for a useful survey and then designed a survey to be conducted during the museum visits. On the last day of the course they each summarized their findings in a 10-15 minute presentation.

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Photos:

The training group in the ceramics room at the Thai Fine Arts Department's 'Visible Storage' museum (top), and learning basic ceramics identification in the storeroom, Southeast Asian Ceramics Museum (center).

The students, pictured right with Pisit Charoenwongsa, head of SPAFA (3rd from left), Roxanna Brown (4th from right) and Walter Kassela, a museum

volunteer (right rear) included (left to right) Ardi Asmera Saeman, Curator at the National History Museum, Kuala Lumpur; Mohd Nasrulamiazam Mohd Nasir, Curator of Ethnology, Malay World Museum; Rafidah binti Abdullah, Curator at the National History Museum; Farizawati Sabri, Curator at the Natural History Museum; Zarinah Sarifan, Museum Services Division, Dept of Museums and Antiquities; and Wan Noazimah binti W. Kamal, Curator at the National Museum, Kuala Lumpur.



Letter from the editor

READERS ON OUR EMAIL list will have noted that instead of sending the newsletter as an attachment in June, we sent a link to the museum website where all issues are now posted. So far the website is mostly in Thai, except for the 'NEWSLETTER' link, but we will have more English-language pages as time allows them to be written. See <http://museum.bu.ac.th>. (NOTE absence of 'www' !)

It is a great pleasure to report that our curator and collections manager, Pariwat Thammapreechakorn, accepted a Master's degree in historical archaeology this past 18 July. The degree followed four years study at Silpakorn University, Bangkok. His dissertation examined influences from Chinese and Vietnamese ceramic decoration on stucco designs on monuments in Thailand during the 15th-16th centuries. He is seen on graduation day at right.

R. M. Brown



Letters to the editor

More on Sunchi ceramics

Regarding the Chinese blue and whites from Sunchi, India, they certainly look like late 16th/early 17th centuries — Portuguese period in other words.

— John Miksic, Singapore

Editor: I am sorry to have missed printing this opinion in the June 2005 newsletter which also has a photo of the shards in question. I have to confess that I don't know this later material well enough to say who might be right. It seems like more research is required. I don't think there is anyone qualified to make an unequivocal statement about whether the shards in the photo are all the same date or not.

Ceramics cleaning

I was wondering if you know how to take care of old pottery - cleaning, preserving, etc. I can imagine what to do, but I have a few pieces that are quite dirty - apparently just from sitting on shelves for years, but I have been afraid to touch them in case I damaged or destroyed some of the 'patina'. Is there anything written that can give guidance, especially for shipwreck pieces where the glaze is deteriorated somewhat,?

— Timothy Rebbeck

Editor: I have solicited the advice of Bonnie Baskin (bbaskin@juno.com), a professional conservator, who has been teaching ceramics conservation in Cambodia. She replied as follows:

First off, based on what I've seen over the years, I cannot urge you strongly enough to seek the help of a trained conservator. Now let me answer your questions. There are at least two books, *Conservation and Restoration of Ceramics* (Oakley and Buys) and *Repairing Pottery and Porcelain* (Lesley and Auley), on these topics. The point you make about possible damage to fragile glazes is a critical one, for cleaning can easily dislodge flakes of unstable glaze. Normally, therefore, conservators start by gently dusting ceramics with a soft brush to remove surface particles of dirt and get a beginning sense of the stability of the object. If it proves sound and, testing shows, can withstand wet methods of cleaning, then the next step is to test different solvents--including de-ionized water--to find out which works best, or in what mixture or sequence they should be used.

Visible dirt is only half the story,

however. Your ceramics may have absorbed soluble salts, which should be removed, or they may have a variety of hidden weaknesses in the clay or glaze or both that may not become apparent until real problems suddenly arise. (This happens all the time with student conservators.)

If you cannot consult with a conservator and if the cleaning absolutely must be done, you could start yourself with a soft watercolor brush. Then, with caution, move on to wet cleaning, should this be necessary, using a Q-Tip moistened with a little de-ionized water, cleaning no more than a square inch at a time, and disposing of swabs as soon as they're dirty; if the water pools, soak it up promptly with the edge of a piece of toilet paper. Start on the back or bottom, to be on the safe side, and stay vigilant. The advantage of giving the job of cleaning to a conservator, however, is that conservators can readily evaluate the condition of ceramics, anticipate problems so as to avoid them, and deal appropriately with the unforeseen; or they can advise you on whether, and how, you could do the cleaning yourself.

As for preservation, common sense is the best guide. Store ceramics, wherever possible, on a cushioned surface. Keep them away from new wood (it off-gases acetic acid). Provide storage conditions that shield them from dust and ensure they won't knock together or fall. Make sure the people handling them have clean hands, use two hands to lift and support them, and transport them by stabilizing them on a cushioned cart. Finally, if ceramics are very fragile, place them in a container and lift or move the container rather than the ceramic.

— Bonnie Baskin

Hoi An wreck reproductions

Yesterday I saw a box of very fine Vietnamese parrot bowl reproductions at the Seattle Asian Art Museum. The box was made in China. It was unclear whether a Chinese or a Vietnamese pottery had made these too-good-to-be-true small parrot bowls, but in any case the result was good.

On display, the Seattle museum has an excellent selection of Hoi An Hoard blue and white trade wares, as well as a first rate presentation of Thai wares from Si Satchanalai (Sawankhalok), Sukhothai and the northern Thai Kalong kilns.

—David Rehffuss

Reading list

Do you mind if I suggest something of value that you might include on your website? A suggested reading list. I am always looking for information to assist my collecting interests. Say a reading list for beginners, intermediate, and new releases? I am a collector of Chinese ceramics primarily, but lived in Thailand, and would be most interested in Southeast Asian ceramics if I could find good sources of information.

— Archie McKee

Editor: I've had this idea on my mind as well, and I hope to have the beginnings of a list over the next couple months when we'll have a museum volunteer from the UCLA art history department here. More than a simple list, we hope to have an analysis of each book and comments about whether they are up-to-date or not..



Snakehead fish burial offering

While reorganizing the hundreds of boxes of ceramics stored in our lab, we opened one to see if the "complete pots" noted on the box label were adequately cushioned. And there, in a ziplock bag, were three sections of a bowl inside which were small dirt-encrusted bones embedded in a shallow layer of compacted earth. (Photograph shown above.) Identified by a specialist in fish bones, the bones turned out to be those of a giant snakehead, a member of this region's popular snakehead fish family. So we have at last an unquestionable example of a burial offering in a pot, the first we've heard about in Cambodia.

—Bonnie Baskin

Ceramics conservation graduation

TWENTY-THREE 2ND-year archaeology undergraduates at Royal University of Fine Arts, Phnom Penh, received their Certificate in Archaeological Ceramics on 17 June 2005. The students earned the degree for completing an intensive semester-long class on the science, technology, and conservation of ceramics. Taught by the staff of the university's Ceramics Conservation Lab, the certificate course is the only one of its kind, not only in Cambodia, but also in Southeast Asia. Shown here with the students are the Deputy Dean of the Faculty of Archaeology, Peng Sytta, who handed out the certificates, along with the teaching team of conservators: Mr. Tep Sokha, Ms. Chap Sopheara, Ms. Pich Thyda, and Ms. Bonnie Baskin.



Red River delta ceramics

COINCIDING WITH the 10th anniversary of the establishment of US-Vietnam diplomatic relations, the Freer Gallery of Art on July 10 opened an installation of 22 13th-16th century ceramics made in the Red River delta, northern Vietnam. They include a unique underglaze iron brown pillow in the shape of tortoise (left) that was sold to an American collector in Bangkok in 1957 with the story that it was found in 1943 at the site of an ancient Buddhist temple on the eastern bank of the Chao Phraya river about 700 yards from The Oriental hotel. According to Curator Louise Cort, this is the first major presentation of Freer's Vietnamese collection. Red River ceramic wares have a distinctive cream-colored stoneware clay fabric and they often show a mysterious brown-slipped 'chocolate base.' Compared to Chinese wares, the cobalt blue on Vietnamese blue & white is slightly softer; the painting is more linear, with fewer color gradations; and the sense of proportion in the decoration differs. The show is open indefinitely.

China-Mediterranean Sea symposium

THE LATEST SYMPOSIUM organized by the Société Française d'Étude de la Céramique Orientale (Oriental Ceramics Society of France) was held at the Musée Guimet on 26-27 November 2004. The title was 'China-Mediterranean Sea: Routes and Exchanges of Ceramics before the 16th Century.' Nineteen curators, scientists and archaeologists gave talks on the stylistic and commercial relationships between the Middle East and Asia ceramics. The gathering was chaired by Marthe Bernus-Taylor, former director of the Islamic department at the Louvre and president of the ceramics society. [Bernus-Taylor is shown at right together with Gilles Beguin, director of the Cernuschi Oriental Art Museum.] The speakers included John Guy, Monique Crick, Marie-France Dupoi-zat, Yolande Crowe, Bing Zhao, Tadanori Yuba, Axelle Rougeulle, Pierre-Yves Manguin, and Philippe Colomban, among others. Papers from the symposium will be published in issue No. 4 of the society's annual journal, *Taoci*, which will appear in late 2005 or early 2006.



Vung Tau Cargo ceramics donation

THE SOUTHEAST ASIAN CERAMICS Museum recently received a gift of 30 Vung Tau cargo ceramics from the museum's founder and patron, Surat Osathanugrah. The Vung Tau cargo, which was recovered off the coast of southern Vietnam in 1990-1992 and assigned to the 1690s, comprised both fine quality Chinese Kangxi porcelain and lesser quality Chinese stoneware that included primarily dish shapes. The porcelain represented approximately 25 - 35% of the ceramic cargo. Based on the location of the wreck and the cargo contents, it is assumed that the ship, which was a Chinese-built vessel, was bound for old Dutch port of Batavia (Jakarta) in Indonesia where the stoneware would have been sold on the local market and the porcelain probably transferred to ships sailing on to Europe. Most of the cargo, nearly 30,000 pieces, was sold in a Christie's auction at Amsterdam on 7-8 April 1992.

The museum houses an initial collection of 2,050 ceramics donated by Mr. Surat Osathanugrah. With few exceptions, these ceramics were all found in Thailand. There is pottery from as early as about 3,000 BC and as late as the 19th century.

There are ceramics from production centers in Thailand as well as ceramics that were imported in olden times from neighboring countries.

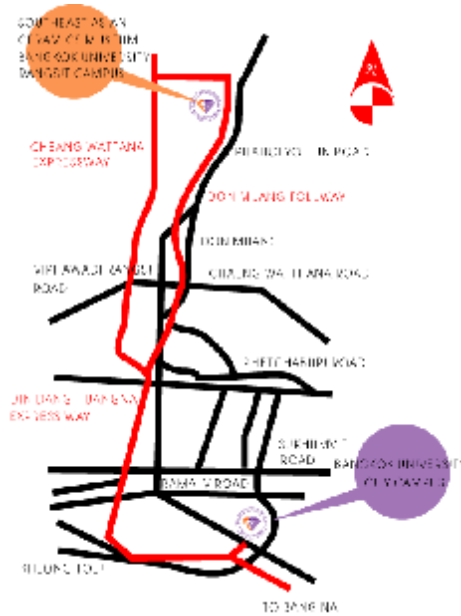
Khmer ceramics from old kilns presently located within Thailand are represented. There are also Vietnamese ceramics, a great variety of Chinese ceramics, Burmese, Lao and Japanese ceramics.

Display galleries show all the types of ceramics found in Thailand and the technology involved in local Thai production. The museum collections include kiln site wasters and fragments that are essential for teaching ceramics dating and identification.

It is also home to one of the largest collections of ceramics from the 14th-16th centuries Tak-Omkoi sites of western Thailand.

The museum formally opened to the general public on 11 May 2005.

Interior museum views



The displays seen here show (upper left) a variety of storage jars (upper right) an outline chronology for Thai trade ceramics (forefront, lower right) the mixture of Thai, Chinese and Vietnamese ceramics made about AD 1380-1430.

The Southeast Asian Ceramics Museum is located at the Rangsit campus of Bangkok University.

Southeast Asian Ceramics Museum
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Training course in museology

Museology, continued from page 1.

Some lecture days were devoted to museum development strategy. Important speakers on this subject included Pisit Charoenwongsa who presently leads a working group designing a new museum for Siem Reap, Cambodia; and Puthorn Bhumadhon, director of the newly established National Discovery Museum of Thailand.

Other days there were guest lecturers on the collecting and care of various types of materials. Dawn Rooney covered antique maps & their care; and Vasilij Mihailovs discussed antique coins and the general care of metals, as well as museum 'infomatics.' Sarah Hammecker described her personal experiences in conservation work on European stone sculpture and on Thai temple murals. Steven Martin, a collector of smoking paraphernalia, demonstrated how to search on Ebay for antiques and appraisal purposes. The group also covered such topics as the usefulness of new technologies such as timemaps, live cams, and virtual reality. An audience of about 20 listened raptly to the final presentations of the curators before they left for the airport at 2:15 p.m. on Saturday, June 25th.



Photographs: The group during morning lecture time with Dawn Rooney who explained the essential terminology for describing antique maps (above left); at the site for the new National Discovery Museum with Puthorn Bhumadhon (upper right); and in a group with Sarah Hammecker, Dr. Brown, and personnel from the Visible Storage museum (lower right). There was time to play as well: see Farizawati and Wan on an elephant in Ayutthaya.