

useful reader for students and others with a serious interest in the complex junctures between modern politics and the Theravada Buddhist worlds in mainland Southeast Asia.

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Nicol Guérin and Dick van Oenen, *Thai Ceramic Art – The Three Religions*. Singapore, Sun Tree Publishing, 2005, 310 pp., 439 colour plates, 396 figures and line drawings.

This beautifully illustrated book on Thai ceramics is extremely interesting and engaging. It takes a very different approach to the subject than previous studies. Roxanna Brown, in her earlier review in the September–October 2005 *Southeast Asian Ceramics Newsletter* has written, ‘It is a work of interpretation in contrast to past inventory-like books on Thai ceramics.’ The authors have examined ceramic production of the present-day Sukhothai region during the fourteenth to the sixteenth centuries in the light of Thai history, culture and religion, with the focus of the work on the ‘ecclesiastical usage of Thai ceramics.’ Many new and stimulating ideas are introduced in the book; some are controversial and deserve serious discussion.

The complex history of the early Thai states and the influences that shaped their philosophies, politics and religions are presented in an interesting, sometimes lyrical, way. The evolution of Thai art, craft and architecture is discussed, with considerable detail devoted to the analyses of the motifs featured on the ceramics. The meaning of Thai figurative art has been the subject of much scholarly debate. The authors have examined a variety of ceramic vessels and figurines that may have been used in animist, Buddhist and Hindu ritual

processes. They have also tried to identify some of the personages depicted in ceramic sculpture by reference to their social milieu. Their findings are speculative and will no doubt generate debate.

This is a multifaceted study, covering a lot of ground in its ten chapters. The difficulty of dating Thai ceramics is addressed in an open manner, with an invitation to the reader to make adjustments should fresh evidence emerge. The approximate terminus date for Sawankhalok production is given as 1583, a date that is generally accepted.

The book has an encyclopaedic number of photographs and drawings of ceramic forms and decorative motifs; it is certainly the most comprehensive collection published to date and each topic is covered in depth. For example, there are many images of the traditional hunchback water droppers and related figures, including the fascinating but largely ignored representations of Chinese and other foreigners, perhaps merchants or emissaries who attended the Sukhothai and Sawankhalok courts. The Chinese and Thai figures are relatively easy to identify by their hair styles, costumes and facial features, but other people wear a variety of head-dresses and some have elongated bearded faces and slanted, almond-shaped eyes, suggesting that they could represent people from central or western Asia.

The authors have grouped Sukhothai province ceramics in a cultural context: 'Reliquary use, Religious use, Offering wares, Lustration wares, Semi Religious

Cult use and Animistic use'. A relatively limited number of figures and vessels have been associated with Buddhist or animist practice in the past. They include: temple guardians, *Naga* and *Makara* finials, ceramic sculptures of deities, elephants and architectural fittings, balustrades and lamps, stemmed *paan* or offering bowls and zoomorphic pouring vessels, or *kendi*. Many previous writers defined the myriad of small ceramic figurines of domestic and wild animals, including buffalo, elephants, ducks, chickens, anteaters, dogs, tigers and bears, as merely toys, but an exception is the doll-like male and female kneeling figures (often decapitated) holding infants. These are discussed extensively in the book and the 'decapitation theory' of the so-called *tukata* female and male figures is re-examined in some detail. The authors have again carefully associated the entire group of models with various religious practices. They also draw some interesting comparisons with related ceramics from China, Cambodia and India. A separate section examines animal figures associated with Thai Buddhism, especially elephants, but also monkeys, horses, deer and hares. A small but fascinating section follows on 'Anthropomorphic Figurines.'

The discussion of the large and expressive fragment of the ceramic image of the head of Buddha in the Sawankhalok Museum is particularly interesting. From the proportions of the face the authors calculated that the original seated figure would have been 1.705 metres high.

They compare the exaggerated arched eyebrows to a late Sukhothai style bronze sculpture described by Diskul in *Sukhothai Art* (fig. 60). The image of a torso of a crowned deity with Thai facial features, delicate moustache and beard on the dust jacket of the book is described as a 'royal figure.' It has an *urna* in the form of a spiral surmounted by a flame similar to the one on the brow of the face fragment of the Buddha. A similar design is found on early Sawankhalok 'fish and flower' decorated underglaze stoneware, where it is combined with a stylised 'Thai orchid tree flower' (*Bauhinia variegata*). The orchid trees with their striking purple flowers still grow close to the ancient kilns at Sawankhalok.

The book does not cover the considerable range of export wares from Sawankhalok and Sukhothai, produced, as Piriya Krairiksh wrote in his foreword, 'between the mid-fourteenth to mid-sixteenth century, at a time when Thailand was then a major centre of ceramic production in the world, second only to China.' But there is an overlap between the two streams of ceramic production. For example, underglaze decorated and monochrome stoneware covered boxes were exported to maritime Southeast Asia in huge quantities. Their form and the lotus bud handles on the lids appear to be derived from much earlier Indian turned-stone reliquary containers. The larger Thai boxes are often described as reliquary containers, but the only examples of ceramics used for burial purposes found by the Thai-Australian ceramic

research project at Sawankhalok during the 1980s were medium-sized jars. A shallow cemetery was discovered between kilns at Ban Ko Noi. The mainly unglazed stoneware baluster-shaped jars with flared mouths, sealed with inverted plain conical bowls, had been used for re-inhumation. They have been identified by Don Hein as Mon. Larger burial jars of a similar shape but with moulded decoration were made at the Supanburi kilns. Baluster jars are also the subject of a detailed study in the section on 'ecclesiastical vases' and their form is discussed in relation to Indian and Khmer types, especially *purnakalas*. Kendi, described in the book as 'lustration wares,' are another example of a ceramic type that could serve multiple roles. They were also exported in large numbers.

Both writers are passionate collectors of Thai ceramics and have spent several decades travelling the world to study public and private collections of Thai wares. Much of this is evident in the background research of the book. The preface refers to their own extraordinary collection — they have 'permanent access to about 800 pieces, few of which had been published before.'

Unfortunately the publisher has reproduced the map of Southeast Asia in small scale, making it impossible to read without a magnifying glass. A photograph of a reconstructed kiln, pl. 33, is at Sukhothai, not Ban Ko Noi. There are a number of attributions in the book that might be challenged, but that only makes the book more interesting.

The present work is definitely a ‘must’ for scholars and collectors of Thai and Southeast Asian ceramics.

Dick Richards

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Bhawan Ruangsilp, *Dutch East India Company Merchants at the Court of Ayutthaya: Dutch Perceptions of the Thai Kingdom, c. 1604-1765*. Leiden/Boston, Brill. 2007, 279 pp., EUR 73.-

Thai scholars who have managed to command the seventeenth and eighteenth century Dutch language sufficiently to get access to the sources of the Dutch East India Company (VOC) are rare indeed. Bhawan Ruangsilp might be the second scholar after Dhiravat na Pombejra who has done so. Her study covers the whole area of the VOC presence in Siam, which, however, does not mean that there is much overlap with the work done by others. The classical study in the field is without doubt George Vinal Smith’s work from 1977, *The Dutch in Seventeenth-Century Thailand*. Although its author seems to have disappeared from Thai Studies, everybody who works with the VOC sources about Siam still depends on his efforts. His well-documented presentation of the facts from the archives covers only the seventeenth century; Bhawan adds much original material from the later period between 1694 and 1765. But the main difference with Smith is in approach. Where Smith presents a reliable bone structure, the merit of Bhawan is that she has added some flesh.

Bhawan’s perspective is reflected in the word “perceptions” in the subtitle of her book. Perceptions she sees “as a ‘cognitive’, ‘active’, and ‘selective’ search of an ordered world” and perceiving is “an act of construction which is