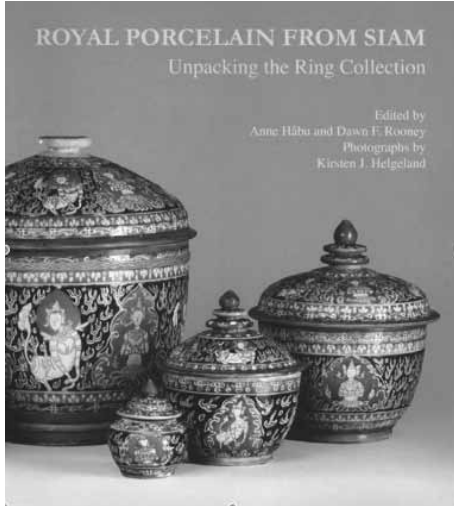


Royal Porcelain from Siam: Unpacking the Ring Collection edited by Anne Håbu and Dawn F. Rooney (Oslo: Hermes Academic Publishing and Bookshop A/S, 2013). ISBN: 978-82-8034-200-3



This major publication accompanies the exhibition of the Ring Collection of Bencharong at the Museum of Cultural History, University of Oslo, which runs until August 2014. The collection was brought back from Thailand by the Norwegian naval officer, Captain Theodore Ring (1866–1932), who served in the Royal Siamese Navy from 1897–1906, during the reign of HM King Chulalongkorn (Rama V). In 1904, Ring donated the majority of his collection, totalling some 250 pieces, to the Ethnographic Museum, now subsumed under the Museum of Cultural History, and the Museum of

Applied Art, now part of the National Museum of Art, Design and Architecture.

From around the mid-20th century, the collection remained in store for half a century. Martin Hager-Saltnes attributes its rediscovery to Rose Kerr's report of 2006 that hailed the collection as outstanding in size and quality. He unravels the biography of Bencharong and the reasons for its historical neglect, including cultural puritanism on the part of scholars, who considered them as de-contextualised, of a hybrid nature, and historically associated with "disreputable collecting activities".

The publication is laudably ambitious in its contribution to both the history of Bencharong porcelain, the museological aspects of collecting during the 19th century and exhibition making within the context of Norwegian museums today. A more extensive discussion of all thirteen scholarly contributions is unfortunately beyond the scope of this review. However, the following chapter summaries demonstrate the importance of integrating different perspectives in the study of a largely undocumented tradition. The congruities across cultures and different types of materials contribute greatly to the vexing questions of origin and historical developments.

As expected for a publication with so many contributors, there were editorial challenges regarding the balance of content and sufficient cross-referencing. Also, one misses a catalogue section that would have highlighted each piece and provided a record of the whole collection. However, the essays are generously illustrated and the appendix of line drawings provides a useful quick reference of the various vessel forms that are frequently referred to throughout the book.

Part One: Bencharong - Its History and Characteristics

Dawn Rooney's concise overview of Bencharong, or 'five colours', porcelain and its related counterpart Lai Nam Thong, literally 'gold-wash pattern', is a useful way to understand their uniqueness within the wide repertoire of Chinese export porcelain. Made initially for the Thai court, they are ornately decorated with painted enamels in black, red, green, yellow and white. The addition of gold enamel distinguishes Lai Nam Thong wares. Rooney traces the significance of the pallet of five colours back through Thai and Chinese chronicles, Chinese five colour, or *wucaï*, porcelain of the mid-15th century and the symbolism of five colours in Chinese as well as Thai Buddhist traditions. The significance of this becomes abundantly clear as Rooney outlines a strong Hindu Buddhist theme in the repertoire of Bencharong design motifs. Most significantly, Rooney reports that sherds found in 2011 at the Yanhe kiln site at Jingdezhen in China, confirm production took place there around the second quarter of the 19th century.

Pariwat Thammapreechakorn looks further into the origins, development, dating and use of Bencharong. The earliest evidence is sherds from the site of a royal household in Lopburi. Wares were ordered for the first time by King Thai Sa during the early 18th century, although a lack of records remains a challenge for constructing a history of Bencharong. The author's proposed seven-phase chronology offers new scope for dating other categories of export art discussed elsewhere in this publication. The phases correlate with the reigns of Thai monarchs from King Thai Sa of Ayutthaya in 1709 to King Chulalongkorn in 1910. The designs develop progressively from the earliest coarsely painted wares with limited pallet and a yellow ground to the incorporation of signature pink tones of *famille rose* on an increasingly wide range of vessel shapes. Designs feature the deity (*thep panom*) motif amongst the predominant vegetal and floral motifs until the introduction of a covered bowl form, with Hindu Buddhist imagery such as the mythical *norasingh* and garuda during the reign of King Rama I. An example with the mark of the Chinese emperor Jiaqing and another with an unknown factory mark associated with Chinese export wares of this period, provides intriguing additional evidence. Illustrations of these marks would have been beneficial.

Royalty, ministers and provincial governors ordered Bencharong although royal orders probably ceased by the mid-19th century, with the Taiping Rebellion (1855) and the destruction of Jingdezhen. Chinese merchants brokered orders by the late 19th century. Pariwat raises the interesting possibility that kilns at Dehua in Fujian province and at Guangzhou in Guangdong province also produced wares at this time. He ends with a useful list of vessel types and their known uses, which reflect the varying preferences of consumers.

Rose Kerr looks at porcelain production at Jingdezhen through the records of Jesuit priest Père François Xavier d'Entrecolles, written in 1712 and 1722 respectively;

the detailed works on porcelain production by Tang Ying, the superintendent of the imperial kilns between 1728-1756; and the observations of Lan Pu during the Qianlong reign, eventually published in 1815. This centre for mass production of export porcelain to worldwide markets also produced blank vessels that could be sent south for decorating. Between 1730 and 1750, the customization of designs was undertaken in this way. Although evidence is lacking, some Bencharong and Lai Nam Thong wares may also have been decorated in this way. Correlations can be made in terms of form as well as finely painted enamel designs with imperial wares of the Jiaqing and Daoguang reigns. Interesting comparisons are also made with mid to late 19th century Nonyaware, a colourful export porcelain with similar forms and dense designs made for the Straits Chinese communities living around the British Straits Settlements of Singapore and Malaya. Finally, the enamel wares that were typically decorated in Guangzhou have similarities to Lai Nam Thong wares. These were favoured in the Middle East and North America where they were known as Rose Medallion wares. The additional use of gilding made them expensive and hence, just as in Thailand, they were keenly sought by the aristocracy and the wealthy.

Part Two: Collections and Collectors

Anne Håbu's survey of the Ring collection draws on correspondence by the donor for insights into his collecting interests, which were significantly influenced by his relationships with Thai royalty and members of the newly formed Siam Society. Members who viewed the collection before it was sent to Oslo in 1904 included Prince Damrong Rajanuphab and Gerolamo Gerini, whose scholarly works would have had significant influence on Ring. Of note are Ring's written records of local opinions, such as a monk who said that a particular jar would have been an heirloom piece, more likely lost due to a gambling debt than stolen. There is also important museological data about an incomplete set of wares that was split between the two museums but never united despite Ring's requests to the museum director.

Luisa Mengoni's examination of the twenty-three enamelled copperwares in the collection provides interesting comparisons with Bencharong. The copperware tradition first developed in Beijing for imperial use during the late 17th century, and subsequently flourished in Guangzhou where wares were made for Europe, the Middle East and Southeast Asia. The chapter also looks at how particular vessel types might have been used. The distinctive yellow-ground wares were a special type of royal gift to confirm the attainment of rank by senior monks – the colour is associated both with their robes as well as with the monarch, as it was in the Chinese imperial tradition. Interestingly, King Chulalongkorn also sent a group of copperwares in 1876 to the Siam Exhibit at the Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia. Inscribed with dates equivalent to 1868, these wares must have raised considerable interest overseas, as European collectors began to take an interest during the late 19th century.

Anne Håbu also looks at Ring's collecting interests against the political background of the Royal Siamese Navy and its role in Thailand during the turn of the century under the patronage of King Chulalongkorn. We learn that his love of collecting had started in childhood, but that he probably only started to collect seriously when he married and settled down in Bangkok over a period of nine years. His interest in Bencharong and motivation for donating are due to many reasons - fellow Norwegian Carl Bock had sold Siamese Bencharong to the Ethnographic Museum in 1883, and Prince Damrong, whom he knew well from time spent together at sea, would have been a great influence. In 1904, the new museum building programme to celebrate independence from Sweden probably appealed to Ring's sense of national duty, resulting in the gift of the best Thai art in the country.

Arild Engelsen Ruud reveals the ethos of 19th century collecting and offers a counterpoint to Ring's approach through the work of Norwegian explorer-ethnographer Carl Bock. Collections made during his travels through northern Thailand (1880-81) included Bencharong which he sold not only in Oslo, but also to the British Museum and the Victoria and Albert Museum. Bock is very much a product of the colonial enterprise, with an Orientalist outlook that essentializes Thai culture. In his travelogue *Temples and Elephants: The Narrative of a Journey of Exploration through Upper Siam and Lao*, it is clear that Bock did not take well to local culture and his scathing criticisms reflect an attitude of 'dismissive superiority', an attitude of the times applied as much to the lower classes within the home country as to foreigners. Conflicts with local people and a lack of scholarly integrity further characterise his Euro-imperialist role. Unusually, however, he had high praise for Thai royalty and the king's policies of modernisation. Moreover, he supported the independence of the kingdom despite the rapid encroachment of colonial rule in the surrounding regions. Ruud concludes that despite his shortcomings, Bock's support of the king and Thai independence, whilst surprising, appears all the more sincere.

Johanne Huitfeldt discusses other Norwegian collecting interests from the 18th century onwards. *Chinoiserie* was popular by the time the Danish-Norwegian Far East Asian Trade Company was established in 1732. But interest in collecting only really took off in the mid-19th century, particularly among Norwegians who were employed with the Imperial Chinese Maritime Customs Service. Two notable donations are the group of 207 Chinese porcelain wares from the Daae collection given to the Museum of Applied Art, and 2,500 pieces of Chinese art given in 1910 by General Munthe to the West Norway Museum of Decorative Art in Bergen. However, numerous other Norwegians, including women who were posted overseas with their husbands, made donations. Huitfeldt mentions the establishment of the Oriental Ceramic Society in 1993, and considers the challenges of museum collecting today in the face of a strong art market and problems of authenticity.

Paul Bromberg draws on his experience as a collector of Bencharong in explaining their appeal as 'funky' and 'exotic' porcelain. Their use as sherds for

the decoration of temple architecture would have been appreciated by Ring. Most notable of the temples adorned in this way are Wat Phra Kaew (Temple of the Emerald Buddha) and Wat Rajabopit, also known locally as the ‘Bencharong Temple’. He surmises that Ring would have bought what he could afford, but that the prices of Bencharong had risen considerably even some sixteen years after Ring left Bangkok. Bromberg also retraces the historical progression of Bencharong, highlighting certain aspects that other contributors appear to have excluded. For example, the earliest Bencharong has the reign mark of the Ming Dynasty Emperor Wanli, which others claim is apocryphal. The hypothesis originally raised by Natalie Robinson in 1985 is that export ware of little interest to the Chinese would not have been made to deceive at that early time. He also describes contemporary Bencharong production in Thailand. Proclaimed a national treasure in 1980, the wares are now symbols of Thainess. Although local production is generally targeted at the tourist market, quality reproductions of old wares and contemporary designs signal a healthy future for Bencharong.

Peter Skilling’s contribution on clay tablets dating to the 8th to 10th centuries might seem somewhat misplaced in a publication on Bencharong. However, Ring’s travels took him to the limestone caves of Trang, along the west coast of southern Thailand, where he collected a group of these tablets. Known in Thai as *phra phim* or “stamped or impressed holy image”, they were made in large numbers as part of the Buddhist tradition of merit-making. The impressed images in this case include Buddha and the Bodhisattvas, notably Avalokiteshvara, the Bodhisattva of Compassion. Many are also stamped on the reverse with the core Buddhist teaching, the stanza of causation, in Sanskrit. These types were collected in the 19th century and deposited in museum collections in the region as well as in Europe.

Part Three: Motifs and Influences

Prapassorn Posrithong’s comparative analysis of Indian trade cloths made for the Thai market provides another early reference to the notion of ‘five colours’. French records of 1678 of printed cottons from the west coast of India describe them as *pancheranguis*. However, in the early 16th century, the Portuguese Tome Pires had already written about fine textiles being imported from India into Ayutthaya as part of the extensive maritime trade that took place across the Bay of Bengal. By the late 17th century, the trade was expanded when the Thais actively participated as an entrepôt for the re-exportation of textiles bound for China and Japan. Like Bencharong, the imported textiles were reserved only for royal use, and similar motifs such as the floral trellis were used on block-printed textiles, porcelain and enamelled copperwares. Textile designs are found in pattern books supplied by Muslim Indian traders, who placed orders with the woodblock makers of Gujarat. A comparable repertoire of deity motifs include *devaraja*, or the god-king, mythical beasts and floral motifs. The addition of gold leaf parallels Lai Nam Thong wares,

and similarly reflects their royal status. Likewise, by the early 19th century, the quality of imported textiles declined as they became more widely available and their use included offerings to temples.

Arthid Sheravanichkul focuses on an unusual white-ground covered bowl with narrative design based on the literary work *Phra Aphai Mani* by the historically famous court poet Sunthorn Phu (1786-1855). This fascinating account of the epic is illustrated on the bowl. The author raises the issue of the painter's identity – some say it was the nephew of King Rama IV, others say it might be the work of the Bangkok-based merchant Phraya Choduek Ratcha Setthi. During the mid-19th century, imports were increasingly handled by such agents. Whilst Thai, Chinese and Persian sources of inspiration underpinning this literary masterpiece reflect a cosmopolitan Bangkok, the author concludes the work ultimately reflects growing Western influence during the reign of King Rama III. This is seen in the character Laweng Wanla, the Queen of Lanka, who was apparently inspired by Queen Victoria and is wooed by the hero, Phra Aphai Mani.

Jens Braarvig discusses how Thai identity uniquely incorporated and adapted Indian influences, in particular from the Hindu Buddhist traditions. His interpretation of the individual motifs found in Bencharong designs is a useful reference, particularly where stylistic variations from Indian prototypes and local adaptations are highlighted. For example, the variation of the *thep phanom* holding the ritual *vajra*, when rendered in soft enamels, appears to hold sprigs of foliage rather than conventional thunderbolts. The thumbnail illustrations provide a useful visual glossary.

Part Four: Exhibiting Bencharong

Martin Hager-Saltnes discusses the exhibition's objective to look at Bencharong from different perspectives in order to better understand this hybrid art. One perspective is the cultural biography of the collection, starting with the production of Bencharong and their eventual role as symbols of royal power and national identity. In the late 19th century, they became collectors' items, which resulted in the donation of the Ring collection. The new museum's display was, according to Ring, cramped and did not emphasise the beauty of the wares. The author suggests that their original function was probably downplayed in favour of presenting them as objects from the exotic East. Sometime around the mid-20th century, shifts in anthropological interests led to the neglect of the collection. In 1932, thirteen of the Bencharong pieces donated to the Museum of Applied Arts were sold, as they did not fit the aims of the museum.

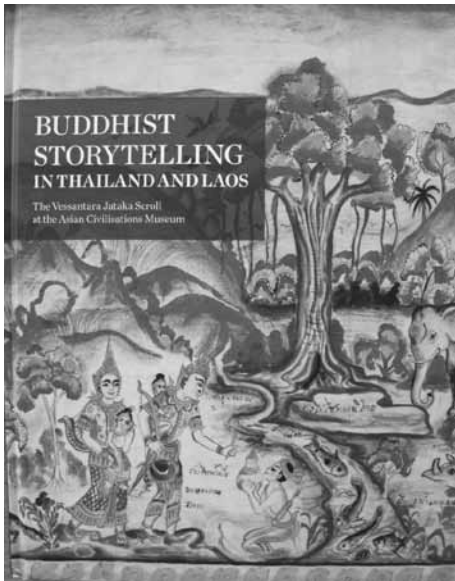
The other perspective is to engage visitors in the tactile qualities of the wares, with pieces made available for handling. But beyond the aesthetic quality of the wares, the author asks how an appreciation of their production, use and hybrid nature should be conveyed. He also identifies potential audiences and their interests,

and concludes with a detailed exhibition design concept that accommodates these different perspectives.

This colourful publication is a fitting tribute to the Ring collection and a long-needed contribution to the study of this exuberant ceramic tradition. The Museum is to be congratulated for dedicating resources to this project and for drawing together an international group of scholars, without whom this unique multi-perspective approach would not have been possible. The result is a publication that appeals to both scholars and general readers.

Heidi Tan

Buddhist Storytelling in Thailand and Laos: The Vessantara Jataka Scroll at the Asian Civilisations Museum by Leedom Lefferts and Sandra Cate with Wajuppa Tossa (Singapore: Asian Civilisations Museum, 2012). ISBN: 978-981-07-2478-8 (hard).



The study of the art of Thailand and other Southeast Asian countries has long been confined primarily to the stone and bronze works of kingdoms, dynasties, and monarchs. Generally neglected have been the ephemeral works in cloth and wood, created and used by religious devotees far from centers of political power. In recent decades, however, the aesthetic and socio-religious value of textiles and their role in religious practice have been recognized by art historians and ethnographers. Among these scholars are Leedom Lefferts and Sandra Cate, who have co-authored several articles on ritual and artistic aspects of Vessantara Jataka scrolls (*pha yao phra wet*) in northeast Thailand and

Laos. *Buddhist Storytelling in Thailand and Laos* grows from, extends, and integrates that work with a close examination of one such scroll and comparisons of others.

Vessantara Jataka scrolls play a central role in annual merit-making festivals, known as *Bun Phra Wet*, which reenact the story of Prince Vessantara as he perfects the virtue of generosity. The scroll featured in the book is extraordinary in many ways, from the meticulous rendering of human figures, animals, and landscape elements, to the masterful flow of the composition which moves seamlessly from one chapter to the next.