# An Unusual Sawankhalok Ceramic at the Asian Art Museum, and Its International Connections

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**Abstract**—An unusual 15th–16th-century Siamese ceramic in the collection of the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco poses intriguing questions. What is it, exactly—that is, what was it used for? Who were its envisioned clientele? What are the sources of its form and decoration? Tentative answers to all these questions hint at far-flung trade connections with Indonesia, Iran, other parts of the Islamic world, as well as China. These connections hardly show up in written records, so we must depend on objects to reconstruct the story.

**Keywords:** Asian Art Museum; Islamic World; Mosque Lamp; Sawankhalok; Siamese Ceramic; Trade Connections

## Introduction

As the archeologist Mark Horton noted in 2004, writing of medieval exchanges between northwest India and East Africa, "[i]f we were to rely solely upon documentary evidence, then much of the trade of the Indian Ocean maritime world would be invisible".[2]

Something similar could be said of another place and time, namely 15th–16th-century Ayutthaya, where surviving documentary evidence is meager and largely restricted to matters of immediate interest to the royal court. Overseas trade relations and certainly the designing and manufacturing of trade goods to appeal to far-flung markets must be inferred from thin foreign records and, most of all, from objects viewed as documents in themselves. Cultural historians have, in recent decades, paid increasing attention to objects and their histories—"Tales Things Tell"—to gain insights into aspects of history recoverable in no other way.[3]

An unusual Siamese export ceramic in the collection of the Asian Art Museum (AAM) of San Francisco **[Figures 1a–b]** is worth considering in this light.[4] Its function, form, and

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[2] Horton 2004 quoted in Flood & Fricke 2024: 1. Transregional, if not global, connections in the design, creation, and trading of Sawankhalok ceramics were discussed in two unpublished papers by Woodward 1998a and 1998b. Woodward's papers have been helpful and stimulating.

[3] Flood & Fricke 2024. The introduction is useful as an overview of issues and methods. I am grateful to Andrea Norris for calling this book to my attention. For another recent approach to object-based global history, see Cooke 2022.

[4] This object, 2023.46, and others in the Asian Art Museum (AAM) collection referred to below, may be seen in the museum's online collection database (https://searchcollection.asianart.org/collections). 18 photos of 2023.46 are presented, from all sides, top, and bottom. The museum bought the object in 2023 from Zetterquist Galleries, New York City. Zetterquist was selling it on behalf of the Mary & Cheney Cowles collection, Seattle, which had held it since about 1980. Previously it was in the collection of Floyd


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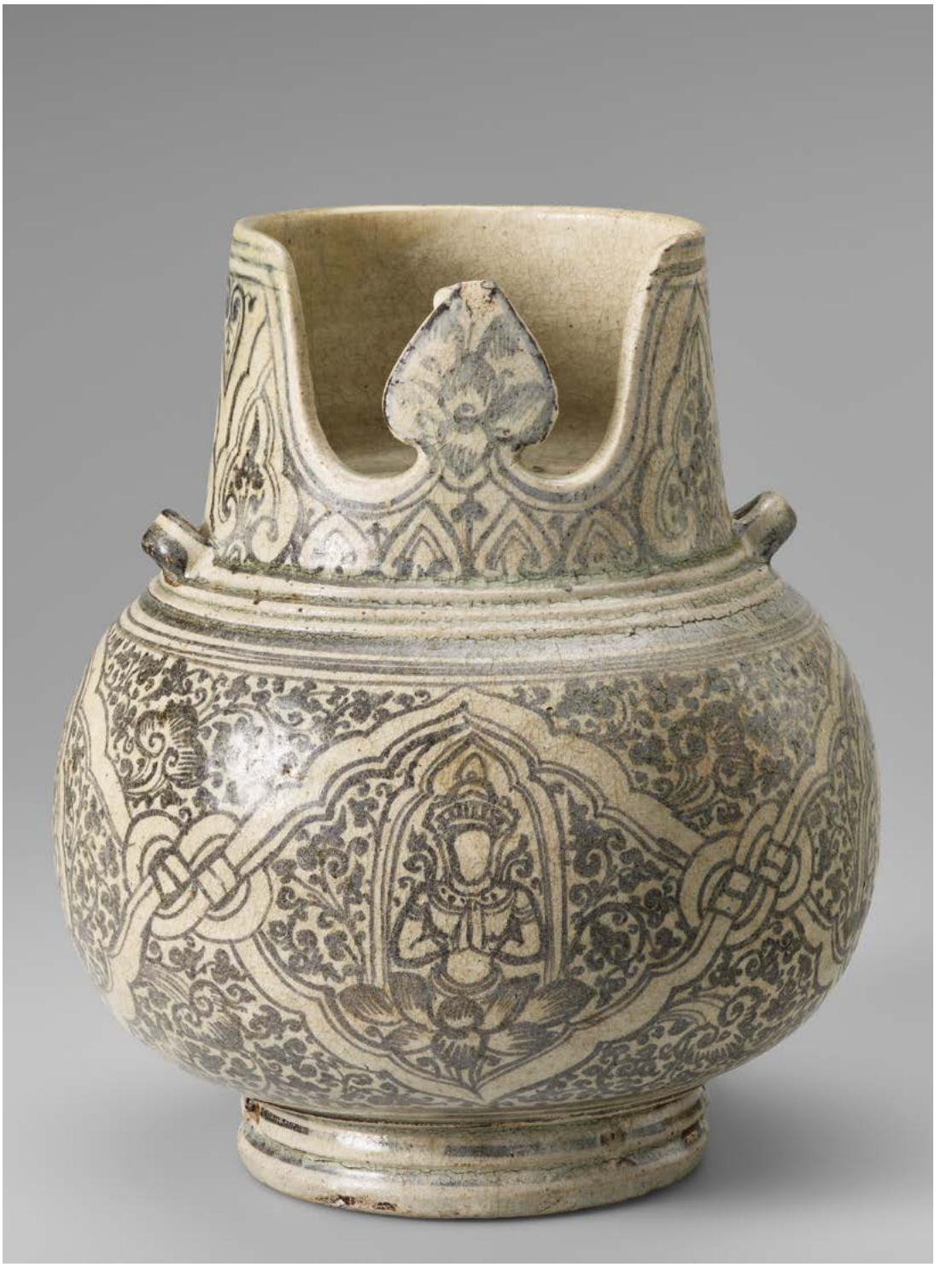

**Figure 1a: Lamp or water vessel, Thailand, approx. 1500, Asian Art Museum, San Francisco, H. 21 cm × Diam. 18.7 cm, high-fired ceramic with underglaze painting, acc. no. 2023.46, Museum purchase with exchange funds from the gifts of James and Elaine Connell and Avery Brundage © AAM**

**Figure 1b: Different view of the object © AAM**

**Figure 1c: The object from above, showing tube and presumed fill hole © AAM**

decoration whisper of connections, link by tenuous link, from Spain to Indonesia. Along the way may be Persian metalworkers, Chinese merchants, and Javanese mosque-builders. However, caution is necessary from the beginning: some of what follows is speculation, and is often reliant on subjective judgments of what resembles what and how much.

The object was made in the Sawankhalok (Si Satchanalai) kilns of upper central Thailand probably, as shipwreck and other evidence would suggest, within a few decades of 1500 (Brown 2009). It is of glazed stoneware with a bulbous body raised on a foot ring, having a tall neck with a cutout in the shape of a rounded W with a leaf-like element at the middle. Two small loops would have allowed for hanging; directly below each loop is a hole in the foot ring, so perhaps a suspension cord passed through one loop, through one hole, across the bottom, through the other hole, and then up through the other loop.

Inside the neck, a floor divides the neck area from the body proper **[Figure 1c]**. A hole in this floor presumably allowed filling and emptying. Behind the leaf-like element is a small

Whittington of Seattle, who was in the Foreign Service in Thailand 1958–1962, in Indonesia 1962–1964, and in Southeast Asia in business until about 1972. Much of the Whittington ceramics collection was given to Western Washington University and can be seen in the university's online database (https://mabel.wwu.edu/whittington-collection-asian-ceramics). Where the object was found is not known, though Indonesia (or the Philippines) is likely. Painstaking examination by the AAM's objects conservator, who has extensive experience with Thai ceramics and has X-rayed a number of them or submitted samples for TL testing (and has identified several fakes and pastiches in the museum's collection) found no reason to doubt the authenticity of this object. Laboratory investigation found tiny mineral deposits (identified with X-ray fluorescence analyzer as iron and manganese) suggesting that the object was once buried.

**Figure 2: Jug, Timurid-period Persia, 1450–1500, Victoria & Albert Museum, H. 12.8 cm × Diam. 12.5 cm, brass with gold and silver inlay, inv. no. 750-1889 © V&A**

**Figure 3a: Sawankhalok object, approx. 1450–1550, University of Michigan Museum of Art, H. 17.9 cm × Diam. 14.5 cm, high-fired ceramic with underglaze painting, acc.no. FIC2006.356 © UMMA**

integral tube, also of glazed stoneware. This tube gives access to the interior of the body.

The object's general shape, with bulbous body (18.7 cm in diameter) and cylindrical neck, probably derives from Timurid Persian metalwork jugs **[Figure 2]**. The shape, sometimes with an added handle, has a complicated history, turning up also in Chinese ceramics.[5]

The examples of Persian metalwork and Chinese ceramics do not have the cutout in the neck, the leaf-shaped

**Figure 3b: The object from above, showing presumed fill holes © UMMA**

central element nor, of course, the floor inside the neck with its fill hole and tube.

## Purpose

The handful of somewhat similar published Sawankhalok ceramics have been called either water vessels or lamps.[6] Usually photos looking down into the neck areas of these other examples are not available, so it is not clear if they have a fill hole or tube. Perhaps the most closely similar object in shape, but not in decoration, is in the collection of the University of Michigan Museum of Art (formerly at the University of Michigan Museum of Anthropology). It has two holes in the floor inside its neck, but no tube **[Figures 3a–b]**.[7]

[5] See Komaroff 1992: 53–55. A 15th-century Chinese example is Metropolitan Museum of Art 2004.163. The Met's record notes "The shape of this tankard is derived from Islamic metalwork: it seems likely that the piece was produced for export".

[6] For example, water vessel or canteen: Kritsada et al. 2535: 44, 72, 143 (which is also illustrated and discussed in English in Burin 2016: 9); lamp: Guérin & van Oenen 2005: pl. 169a–b, and figs 158–160; Übersee-Museum Bremen 1977: 35.

[7] It is illustrated in Wagner 1979–80: fig. 9. Thanks to

If the AAM object functioned as a pouring vessel, perhaps as a *kendi* does, and the tube was its spout[8]—or, for that matter, the liquid was poured out from the side opposite the spout—why the suspension loops? One scholar speculates "suppose it was for ceremonial cleansing or for lustration of sacred objects. It could have been suspended over a table".[9] Alternatively, could it have been intended as a sort of canteen? But it seems too heavy and unwieldy, especially if filled with water, to imagine slung over the shoulder. Also, though canteens, or related pilgrim flasks, are common enough in other Asian ceramic traditions, they seem not to have been made in the Sawankhalok kilns.

Alternatively, might the object have been a lamp? If so, presumably the tube supported a wick long enough to trail down into oil inside the body. Laboratory examination by AAM conservator Mark Fenn using a borescope found no visible trace of oil residue in the glazed interior and no remnants of soot around the tube. In addition to objects of this type, Sawankhalok produced other possible oil lamps, but their shapes are entirely different and they have no loops for hanging.[10]

My best guess is that the object may be a mosque lamp. Some ceramic mosque lamps contemporaneous with it from the Islamic world are not vastly different in shape and had loops for hanging **[Figure 4]**.[11]

## Decoration

The body is decorated with four cusped lozenges set against a background of foliate scrolls. Within each lozenge is a half-length celestial figure making a gesture of respect termed *thepphanom* (เทพนม) in Thai. The figures are backed by a pointed frame and the rest of the inside of each lozenge is filled with foliate scrolls similar to those in the general background.

On the neck are motifs for which English does not seem to have a good term. I will call them upside-down cusped heart shapes. Between these are smaller right-side-up heart shapes that are not cusped.

### *The Lozenges*

The four cusped lozenges are bordered by double bands. The double bands continue beyond the lateral points of the lozenges, connecting them in a chain. Unusually, between the lozenges the double bands twine through two of what might be Chinese coins with

curator Natsu Oyobe for examining the object and sending photos.

[8] Objects conservator Mark Fenn at the AAM tried filling the vessel with water and pouring it out through the spout. This worked, but Fenn noted that if the tip of the leaf-like element were not chipped off, the tip would have interfered with the water stream.

[9] Hiram Woodward, email of 17 June 2024.

[10] For a discussion of Thai ceramic lamps in general, see Guérin & van Oenen 2005: 132–141. Also, for example, AAM 1989.34.87, 1990.110, and 1990.157. An interesting Sawankhalok oil lamp, the body of which has a decorative scheme related to that of the object of focus here, is in the Art Gallery of New South Wales (AGNSW) in Australia, 224.2006. One wonders, however, if the AGNSW object may be made up of components that did not originally go together.

[11] The lack of soot could mean that the tube has been cleaned at some point or that the object was intended as a lamp but never actually used as such. On the form and symbolism of mosque lamps, see Graves 2018. Thanks to Qamar Adamjee for drawing this article to my attention.

**Figure 4: Mosque lamp, Turkey, Iznik, approx. 1510, British Museum, H. 27.8 cm × Diam. 18.5 cm, ceramic with underglaze painting, with later replacement suspension chains, inv-no. G.5 (Godman 5) © British Museum**

their square openings. But almost certainly, rather than seeing bands passing through Chinese coins, we are to see complicated knots of figure-eight shape.[12]

The exact prototypes of the cusped lozenges on the AAM object are not obvious. Cusped lozenges appear in Islamic metalwork and Chinese porcelain as much as two centuries earlier,[13] and on a mid-14th-century engraved slab at Wat Si Chum, Sukhothai.[14] The Wat Si Chum design may itself have Persian, or, perhaps more likely, Chinese connections. During and after the period of Mongol domination in Persia and China motifs and artistic ideas flowed back and forth, so it is not easy to say where a pattern or ornament originated, or at least first came into fashion (Medley 1973). Of course, the creativity of Siamese ceramic designers must also be considered.

These examples are mostly single cusped lozenges; the idea of joining them in chains seems to come more specifically from Timurid, Safavid, and other 15th–16th-century Islamic metalwork. Examples abound, but usually, in the Islamic examples, the linked motifs are not all the same; lozenges tend to alternate with cartouches **[Figure 5]**.

There is a puzzle related to where else a similar design motif on Sawankhalok ceramics is found. The design is cusped lozenges linked in a chain with the double bands bordering each lozenge twisting as they continue to the next lozenge. This chain motif appears fairly often in *kendi* decoration, but much more rarely elsewhere.[15]

### *The Celestial Beings*

As such celestials often do, these rise from a lotus flower. The motif appears only rarely in the underglaze-painted decoration of Sawankhalok (and Sukhothai) wares, but is common enough in 15th–16th-century ceramic architectural components such as roof ornaments, and in stucco.[16]

Oddly, while on the AAM object the crowns and jewelry of the celestials are delineated with care, the celestials

[12] For drawings and descriptions of various chains of cusped lozenges, including one with knots (ปมเงื่อน, *pom-ngueang*) between, see Kritsada et al. 2535: 71, figs 36.1–36.3. A vessel of a different type with almost identical knots between the lozenges is shown on p. 40.

[13] Islamic metalwork: for example, the "Courtauld bag", an inlaid brass object thought to have been made in Iraq about 1300–1330; Chinese porcelain: innumerable examples of the Yuan dynasty (1279–1368), for instance British Museum PDF,B661 and Krahl et al. 1986: pl. 577. A large Yuan blue-and-white jar with cusped lozenges found in the crypt of Wat Mahathat, Ayutthaya; see www.ayutthaya-history.com/Temples_Ruins_MahaThat.html. Examples in 15th–16th century Persian design are: (1) book cover: British Museum 1992,0431,0.1; (2) carpet: the "Ardabil Carpet", V&A Museum 272-1893.

[14] Boisselier 1976: 68, fig. 37, where he mentions the possibility of "Iranian influence". Woodward (2009: 155), on the other hand, would tend to think the connections Chinese.

[15] Such *kendi* are not uncommon. Examples include AAM 1989.34.38 (where the bands make a knot rather than a twist), Met 238.23, ACM, Singapore, C-1440, and Guérin & van Oenen 2005: figs 198, 210. An unusual example on a dish is AAM 2018.12.

[16] Ceramic roof ornament, one example among many: a 15th-century Sukhothai ceramic roof ridge finial in the AAM 1990.16; stucco: at for example, Wat Chulamani, Phitsanulok, of approx. 1464. A good image of a *thepphanom* in stucco at Wat Chulamani can be seen at: https://www.timsthailand.com/prang-wat-chulamani-khmer-ruin/ (accessed 25 January 2025). For Wat Chulamani and its stucco decoration, as well as helpful comparative material, see Santi 2539.

**Figure 5: Detail of jug in Fig. 2 © V&A**

have no facial features. The low-relief celestial on a 15th–16th-century ceramic antefix at the AAM (1989.34.66) also has no facial features and several Sawankhalok *kendi* with faceless figures are known.[17] Why no faces? A thought that springs to mind is that Siamese ceramic designers were trying to avoid offending the sensibilities of Muslim customers. But human figures with faces turn up often on Persian ceramics both before and after the period of the AAM object (for example on *Mina'i* and Kubachi wares) and very commonly in Persian and Indian Islamic paintings of the period. The question why the celestials on some Sawankhalok ceramics have no facial features remains open.

### *The Cusped Heart Shapes*

The cusped heart shapes on the neck are easy to match in the 15th–16th-century Siamese decorative vocabulary. The shape appears, for example, on ceramic antefixes and also in stucco on Wat Chulamani (วัดจุฬามณี) in Phitsanulok (approx. 1464), which descends from earlier wall decoration at Phimai, and the 15th-century Wat Nang Phaya (วัดนางพญา) in Si Satchanalai.[18]

### Key Points and Scenario

• Persians were aware of and had a presence in the Ayutthaya kingdom by the period of the object.[19]

[17] LACMA M.84.213.65, Guérin & van Oenen 2005: pl. 199. Unusually, on both vessels the figure is full-length, not half-length as with the typical *thepphanom.*

[18] Antefix: AAM 1990.163; stucco at Wat Chulamani: Woodward 1978: fig. 1; also, Santi 2539; Wat Nang Phaya, Si Satchanalai: images can be found easily by Google search.

[19] For a summary, see M.I. Marcinkowski 2002 and C. Marcinkowski 2014.

• The adaptation in Ayutthaya of Persian or other Islamic decorative motifs in the 15th and 16th centuries (and later) has been mooted by art historians.[20]
• 15th-century Vietnamese ceramics made their way into old Iranian and Turkish collections, showing that goods from mainland Southeast Asia were reaching Iran and Turkey; presumably, goods could move in the other direction as well.[21]
• In the 15th and 16th centuries certain motifs or configurations of motifs appear in the decorative arts of Europe, much of the Islamic world (including Indonesia), China, and Ayutthaya. Presumably, makers of trade goods were responding to the tastes of customers.[22]
• Large quantities of 15th–16th-century Sawankhalok ceramics were exported to Indonesia and the Philippines.[23]
• It is possible that the AAM object was found in Indonesia.
• 15th-century Vietnamese ceramics of unusual shapes were used in the decoration of Javanese mosques and it is thought they must have been specially ordered.[24] If special orders were placed for Vietnamese ceramics, it seems likely that such orders could be placed for Sawankhalok ceramics too.
• Chinese merchants (as well as Indians, Arabs, and Persians) arranged long-range trade from entrepôt to entrepôt; Ayutthaya was one node of this trade. Some of these Chinese traders were Muslim.[25]
• Ethnically Chinese Muslims lived in Java at least from the time of Admiral Zheng He's voyages in the early 15th century.[26]

[20] For example, Boisselier 1976: 68, 75 and Wagner 1979–80: 491, n. 18. For a later period, see Listopad 2022.

[21] "Vietnamese Wares" in Krahl et al. 1986: 487–488.

[22] Various sorts of strapwork, with interlacing, sometimes twisting, bands are seen in elaborate knot designs attributed to Leonardo da Vinci, 1490–1500, and related designs by Albrecht Dürer which are themselves thought to derive from Islamic sources (Dackerman 2023, 2024); 14th-century stuccowork in the Alhambra, Spain; Mamluk, Timurid, and Safavid metalwork; early Indonesian Islamic tombstones, e.g., Musée Guimet MG18251; Javanese stone reliefs such as a circular pattern of knot motifs dated 1559 (Guy 1988–89: fig. 20); and early Ming porcelain such as Met 1991.253.37.

[23] Sawankhalok ceramics were an export ware, and more pieces (especially intact pieces) have been found in Indonesia and the Philippines than in Thailand. See, for example, Spinks 1959 and Brown 2009, passim. The very extensive "General Bibliography on Southeast Asian Ceramics" prepared by the staff of the National Museum of Asian Art may be found at https://publications.asia.si.edu/publications/seaceramics/resources/general-bibliography.php.

[24] See Guy 1988–89: 27–28, 32, 38, 42; also Dupoizat 2013: 112.

[25] One discussion is Woodward, 1998a. See also Medley 1973 and Bailey 1996.

[26] Lambourne 2008, though it focuses on Sumatra, is useful also for Java and has an extensive bibliography.

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In conclusion, as to how the AAM object came to be, we may conjure a scenario, though of course many are possible. Let us imagine that the authorities of a mosque in Java were satisfied with the Vietnamese ceramics they ordered and decide they would like some lamps. A trader, likely Chinese and possibly Muslim, suggests ordering the lamps from Ayutthaya. Receiving the order, the potters of Sawankhalok, who have never made a mosque lamp, are puzzled, but come up with a form and decorate it with some motifs that in their minds are Islamic. Conceivably, there were imported mosque lamps for them to see, but mosque lamps are sometimes also represented on carpets and ceramic tiles from the Islamic world, so possibly one of these provided a notion of the design of a mosque lamp.[27]

Now this may or may not approach what really happened. But the AAM object tells some such tale of the wide-reaching interchange of ideas and forms.

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[27] Carpet: the Ardebil Carpet of 1539–1540 (see LACMA 53.50.6, of which there is a photo detail of one lamp); tile: Royal Ontario Museum 955.129.2.

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