

## New book on Thai ceramics

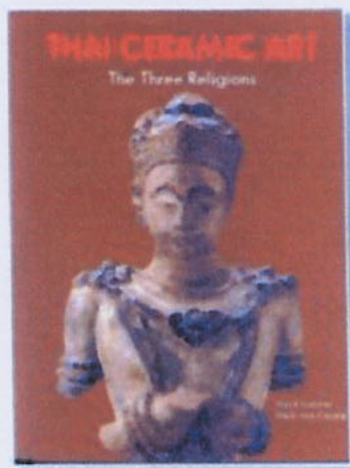
THIS BOOK IS NOT ONLY newly-published, it looks at Thai ceramics in unexpectedly refreshing new ways. It is a hefty work of 10 chapters, including more than 800 illustrations, packed with information and creative, often surprising ideas. It is a work of interpretation in contrast to past inventory-like books on Thai ceramics. And, filled as it is with free-flowing thoughts on the interpretation of the material, it is not surprising that every one of the book's chapters offers grounds for argument. But the idea of making a list of seeming mistakes or weak arguments pales beside the very real feeling of excitement on reading the book. This is a genuine 'page-turner.' Here is the first time a book attempts to fit the ceramics of the Sukhothai kingdom (Sukhothai & Sawankhalok kilns) into the culture and beliefs of that kingdom. The three religions of the title are Buddhism, animism and Hinduism.

Analysis of the ceramics begins with figures that represent (or may represent) religious personages or historical kings. It goes on to propose symbolic meanings for

various popular decorative motifs. Among many other ideas, the authors suggest that Mahayana Buddhism was perhaps more popular than Hinayana because a lotus motif is not as common as the fish motif on Sukhothai ware. They creatively link the 'sunburst' motif on Sukhothai ware to the possible knowledge of opium by showing how it could be made with a dried poppy blossom. Next the authors look at the origin of shapes. They assign covered box and covered bowl shapes to Indian Buddhist tradition. They argue that covered jars are based on Indian reliquary models. Many of the shapes that became popular for export, they say, were probably initially developed as containers for ritual offerings. Groups of ecclesiastical shapes are detailed. Lustration wares (e.g. kendi, ewers) receive an entire chapter, and Sawankhalok figurines are analyzed for evidence of cult use.

There is not space for a full review here or thoughtful or thorough analysis of the many new ideas presented, some of which could be faulted, but let it be clear, this book is above all inspiring. Its given me, for one, many new display ideas that would create excitement.

RMB



Nicol Guérin and Dick van Oenen, *Thai Ceramic Art - The Three Religions*. Singapore: Sun Tree Publishing Ltd. ISBN 981-05-0736-4. Hardcover & dust jacket, 310 pages, with 830 color photos & line drawings. US\$120. Send orders to: Oriental Art Magazine, 300 Park Avenue, 17<sup>th</sup> Floor FMB #1725, New York, NY 10022 USA. Singapore fax: (65) 6737-3190.