

# Bencharong for the Siamese Court

By Dawn F Rooney

Bencharong is a unique type of enamelled Chinese export ware made exclusively for the Siamese court in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Exotic motifs painted on bowls, jars, stem plates, and other shapes in an array of brilliant colours adorned the dining tables of Siamese kings and small, bejewelled pots contained cosmetics for the royal females. 'Bencharong' is a Thai word derived from Sanskrit meaning 'five colours' which gives an indication of the number of colours used on a single piece. In reality, though, the number was sometimes more, sometimes less, than five colours. *Lai Nam Thong*, a Thai phrase meaning 'gold washed pattern', differs slightly from Bencharong, but it is so close in form and motif that the two are considered one class of enamelled porcelain made in China for export to Siam. The main



Fig 1. Bencharong covered jars with Thep phanom motif. Collection of Paul Bromberg.

difference between the two is the addition of gold on *Lai Nam Thong*. Although the Siamese court was the initial patron of Bencharong, a prospering kingdom and a growing economy extended the patronage in the 19<sup>th</sup> century to aristocrats and immigrants from southern China who had become wealthy merchants.

All enamelled Chinese export ware was produced in the same way. The first stage was throwing a desired form on a potter's wheel; then applying a white glaze and firing the piece in a kiln to a high temperature, resulting in porcelain; next, painting motifs on the piece using lead-based pigments in brilliant colours and firing it a second time in a smaller kiln at a lower temperature. If gold was applied, the piece



Fig 2. Lai Nam Thong spittoon with geometric design. Collection of Wesley Kirkholm.

was fired yet a third time, again at a low temperature. Finally, it was ready for export to foreign markets. Theoretically, most of the so-called white-glazed blanks were made at Jingdezhen, Jiangxi Province, because that is the source of the type of clay used. Then, the majority of



Fig 3. Bencharong bowls with Thep phanom motif. Collection of Paul Bromberg.

glazed pieces were probably transported to other centres for enamelling either to satellite kilns in Jingdezhen or perhaps to Guangzhou on the coast of southern China. This theory, though, awaits archaeological evidence.

How does Bencharong differ from other types of Chinese export ware? First, the decoration covers the entire surface. Second, the motifs are repetitive and set against a solid background. Third, the main motif is placed in an oval or diamond-shaped medallion and several are evenly spaced around the body. Fourth, a freely-painted pattern fills the remaining empty space. And finally, the decoration is contained within borders that surround the foot, shoulder, and mouth rim (Fig 3).

Bencharong forms are similar to those used for daily life in Thailand today. Typical pieces for a dinner service include bowls (with or without a cover), covered jars, tea pots and cups, and spoons. A spittoon is another popular form. It was used as a receptacle for the remains of a betel quid in the widespread custom of betel chewing that spans all classes (Fig 2). A golden betel set was a part of the royal regalia for Thai royalty as recently as 1972 when it was used for a ceremony installing the Crown Prince of Thailand.

Mythical figures are the most unique and distinctive feature of Bencharong. They reflect the spiritual beliefs of the Thai people and derive from Buddhist or Hindu mythology. The *Thep phanom*, a male deity, is the figure that appears most frequently. He sits on a ring of radiating lotus petals. Only his white torso is visible; his arms are on his chest with palms held together, fingers pointing upwards in an adoration gesture. He wears a petal-like collar and elaborate jewellery, a helmet with floral extensions on each side, and a tiered crown tapering to a slender point (Fig 1). The *Thep phanom* is also used frequently as a decorative motif on the walls of temples as seen at



Fig 4. Wall decoration of a Thep phanom at Wat Benjamobpit, Bangkok.

Wat Benjamobpit in Bangkok (Fig 4). The lion symbolizes royal power and figures in many kinds of Thai art such as lacquer, metals, wood, and mother-of-pearl. The depiction of a *Norasingha* ('man-lion') on Bencharong is particularly endearing. It has the head, torso and arms of a human and the hind quarters of a lion with a flame-like tail; the hoofs of the *Norasingha* are those of a deer and the front ones are crossed (Fig 5). Garuda, the vehicle of the Hindu god Vishnu, has a human torso and trunk and the wings and talons of a bird. Use of this majestic, powerful creature on Bencharong was reserved for exclusive use by the king (Fig 6).

Floral motifs abound on Bencharong and represent lush tropical flora and the Thai people's love of bright colours. Flowers in bloom, buds, leaves and knotty stems appear commonly as background and borders (Fig 7). The lotus is the most sacred flower in Buddhism and all parts of it are symbolical. A tightly closed bud, a delicate seed, an elegant bloom, or stylized petals are all typical motifs seen on Bencharong. The chrysanthemum is an example of a Chinese-inspired pattern. It represents autumn in Chinese symbolism as it blooms at that time of year in the Chinese calendar.



Fig 5. Bencharong covered jar with *Norasingha* motif. Collection of Paul Bromberg.

Geometric motifs, such as a trellis pattern, executed in gold, were especially suitable on *Lai Nam Thong* pieces. These designs are rhythmic and allow one to simply enjoy the cadence of the piece and to admire its perfection (pictured on the cover).

Determining an exact beginning date for Bencharong and the precise places of production and enamelling

in China are the most controversial aspects of the subject. The main reason is the lack of primary sources. In Siam, all written records were destroyed when the Burmese sacked the Kingdom of Ayutthaya in 1767. Therefore, even though some experts have proposed an earlier beginning date for Bencharong, the absence of any written or archaeological evidence presents a major problem for reaching a consensus amongst scholars. Evidence in China is equally frustrating as no written records are known and Bencharong has only recently been found in an archaeological site. Shards excavated from a kiln at Jingdezhen are dated to the reign of Emperor Daoguan (1821-1850) based on associated finds of Chinese ceramics (Fig 8). This find, in 2011, is important because it is the first concrete discovery of Bencharong at Jingdezhen in a controlled excavation and firmly establishes it as a production centre not only for glazing but also for enamelling the ware.

Despite the unanswered questions about Bencharong, significant progress has been made in the past few years. The publication of two books on the subject have developed an awareness of



Fig 6. Covered bowl with Garuda design. Collection of Wesley Kirkholm.

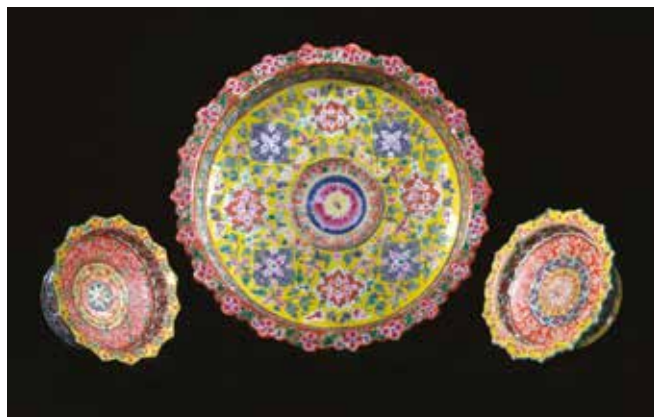


Fig 7. Bencharong stem plates with floral designs. Collection of Paul Bromberg.

Bencharong, brought research up-to-date, and pinpointed the importance of Bencharong's cultural and social contribution to Siamese history. *Bencharong & Chinaware in the Court of Siam* by Jeffery Sng and Pim Praphai Bisalputra (2011) features an outstanding private collection of Bencharong and provides an insight into the 19<sup>th</sup> century porcelain trade between China and Siam. The most recent publication on the subject, *Royal Porcelain from Siam, Unpacking the Ring Collection*, (2013) includes 14 chapters by international experts of five nationalities on all aspects of the subject and features some 240 pieces donated to the Museum of Cultural History, University of Oslo in 1904 by Theodor Ring who served as an officer in the Royal Siamese Navy for nine years (1897-1906).

The Jim Thompson house in Bangkok has a fine collection of Bencharong. Arm-chair travellers can see nearly 100 pieces in detail and take a virtual tour of Bencharong in the house at <[rooneyarchive.net/ceramics](http://rooneyarchive.net/ceramics)> (see also *PASSAGE*, May/June 2013

*The House that Jim Built*). Bencharong production was revived in Thailand in the 1960s.

Today, several cottage industries in the environs of Bangkok are skilfully replicating antique Bencharong. These hand-painted pieces are sought after as gifts for visiting dignitaries and for special rites such as weddings and anniversaries. Thus, the legacy of Bencharong continues as representative of a royal Siamese cultural tradition of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries.

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Fig 8. Bencharong shard excavated at Jingdezhen, China (1821-1850).

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