

SEACS Excursion to Bangkok 17-20 January 2019

More than a dozen SEACS members gathered at noon on Thursday, 17 January at Bangkok's Suvarnabhumi Airport, overnight bags in hand, ready to launch into a busy three-day schedule that covered Thailand's ceramic history from its earliest Neolithic finds to the 20th century bencharong ceramics exported from China for the Thai court.

First stop was the strikingly modern and excellent Southeast Asian Ceramics Museum housed on the Bangkok University campus, established in 2000 to commemorate the university's 40th anniversary. Its contents include the 16,000+ ceramics donated by the founder of the university, Khun Surat Osathanugrah. One of its former curators was SEACS member Roxanna Brown, known for her ground-breaking work on the Ming Gap.

We met the museum's current assistant curator, Khun Atthasit Sukkham on the museum's front steps by its replica kiln before proceeding inside for a two-hour tour of the museum and its highlights. While the focal point for most of the group was Thailand's famous export wares from the 14-16th centuries representing the Si Satchanalai kilns, a special exhibition of Neolithic pottery that included the well-known Ban Chiang finds also drew the group's attention. The permanent displays are excellent and it would be safe to guess that at least 1000 photos were snapped by our group.

A tip shared by K. Atthasit to the group was how to identify Thailand's celadon—all of which, we learned, are from Si Satchanalai kilns. Sukhothai ware has a thick slip and five spur marks clearly visible on the inside; Si Satchanalai ware has a thin slip and no spur marks. Another tip: if you can't identify 14th from 16th century Thai brown-glazed wares, look at the glaze. In the 14th century the artists painted the glaze on; in the 16th century, they were dipping their wares into the glaze pots. The name Si Satchanalai refers to the preferred contemporary name for the kiln site, which has since taken on the new name of Sawankhalok, in case you wish to visit it.

At the end of our museum tour we gathered around Noel Hidalgo to hear the latest news about the marine archeological site he has studied close to the coast south of Bangkok. It is a 9th century Arab dhow similar to the Belitung wreck whose cargo is exhibited at ACM. The ship had been scuttled after most of the cargo had been removed but a great many broken pieces plus some bronze bowls were left behind. And the ship's timbers and even some of the rigging has survived along with stitching of coconut fibre used in its construction. The reason that so much of the vessel has survived is because it lay buried in the mud of an area used for shrimp farming. The wreck has been named after the farmer who donated the area for archaeological research and preservation. The 1200-year-old timbers need to be kept constantly moist to preserve them but plans are afoot to put the wreck on display in a museum.

The group had split into two 8-seater vans for ease of travel, but arrived at our next destination, the beautiful iUDIA hotel on the Ayutthaya River only minutes apart and quickly settled in. Within half an hour almost everyone had gathered along the river with a refreshing drink in hand to view the sunset over Thailand's former capital. After a specially arranged meal by the hotel's owner-proprietors and lifetime SEACS members, Khun Pimpraphai Bisalputra and Jeffrey Sng, we learned in a series of talks by local collectors that because of the large sand bar blocking the Chao Praya River, barges had carried the Chinese ceramics from the river mouth up to Ayutthaya. Obviously several had had unfortunate incidents enroute as we saw amazing collections of Chinese shards of all types and

colours. Early the next morning, a small group of early risers walked along the river's banks on a dawn tour led by Dr. Pek (Thanyakan) who owns an extensive collection of Thai ceramics, and a few were lucky enough to pick up a few shards. (In the 'old days', we were told, baskets of such shards were sold riverside.)

After breakfast we trooped off to visit one of the several nearby temples of Ayutthaya, the ancient kingdom, which became the dominant power in the region from 1351 – 1767 with a population of over a million at its zenith. When the Burmese invaded in 1767 they destroyed the city of Ayodhya (which means 'unconquerable city' and may have tempted fate). The temples were ransacked and badly damaged during the attack but the ruins of Wat Maha That (temple of the great relic) are still a wondrous sight. And we were able to tap the knowledge of our guides, Noel and Ruth, who explained the layout and functions of the 14th century temple structures. One of the highlights was to see a Buddha's head inextricably embraced by the roots of a Boh or Banyan tree. Opinion was divided over the identity of the tree though the genus *Ficus* was generally agreed upon.

A short stroll away is the Chao Sam Phraya National Museum, which houses a host of treasures, including a hoard of gold that escaped the predations of the Burmese. The gold lay hidden deep beneath the 14th century temple Wat Ratchaburana until it was discovered in 1956. Amongst the star attractions was a 14th century solid gold Buddha plus a giant one carved from stone from 6th – 7th century. After a sumptuous lunch by the river we boarded our minibuses for the journey to central Bangkok and check in at the Royal Orchid Sheraton hotel. Across the river from here, by private ferry, was the venue chosen for our finale dinner with a feast specially selected by Pim, our hostess of the night before.

The next day, Saturday, we assembled in the adjacent shopping centre, Riverside City, where we were treated to a lecture and guided tour followed by a panel discussion about Bencharong porcelain. This is a unique class of enameled export ware made in China exclusively for Siam, initially for the Siamese court but, into the 19th century, it was also collected by wealthy Chinese merchants. Bencharong means 'five colours' in Sanskrit, though in fact more than five colours were invariably used. And the related class of related ceramics known as Lai Nam Thong meaning 'gold washed pattern' in Thai refers to later products embellished with gold, which required an additional low-temperature firing.

The curator of the exhibition and author of a new book on the subject, Dawn Rooney, shared with us her vast knowledge of the subject and made many of us hungry to own a specimen of this strikingly colourful porcelain, which was made in Jingdezhen and decorated in Guangzhou before being shipped by junk to Siam. It reminded some of us of the similarly unique and vibrant Peranakan Nonya ware. But the imagery and style are quite different.

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