



Jar encrusted with corals from Belitung wreck; photo by Michael Flecker



Kendis on display

Firing the Imagination Buried & Sunken Treasures

By Margaret White



Blue and white rooster water dropper

Southeast Asian Ceramics: New Light on Old Pottery, currently on view at the National University of Singapore (NUS) Museum, is being held in conjunction with the Southeast Asian Ceramic Society of Singapore (SEACS) in honour of the 40th year of the society's founding and its continuing leadership in the field of ceramics. The main focus of the exhibition is the changing perceptions in the study of Southeast Asian ceramics over the past four decades. The themes are broadly organised around the key archaeological sites, technological developments and the changing patterns of trade.

Before 1969, serious study of Southeast Asian ceramics had been confined to Thailand. Thus, when SEACS was founded by a passionate former University of Singapore museum curator, William Willetts, it had two objectives: to create a network of communication among people in Singapore and to foster scholarship on the subject.

Happily, in the intervening years, as archaeological research in Southeast Asia increased, it spurred the study of ceramics. Scholars such as Roxanna Brown, Michael Flecker, John Miksic and Willetts have contributed much knowledge about the wide range of ceramics produced, the technology employed and the distribution from the 11th to 17th centuries of various sites in Thailand, Laos, Malaysia, Vietnam, Burma, Cambodia and Indonesia. Of particular interest are the many fine paste earthenware *kendis* or water pots made at a southern Thai kiln, suggesting an important commercial link between the Kra Isthmus and Java for at least three centuries.

So what else can you expect to see at the exhibition? To my mind, some of the most exciting finds have been those retrieved from shipwrecks. Until 1969, not a single Southeast Asian shipwreck had been properly excavated. Undisturbed for centuries, the durable nature of ceramics has preserved thousand of pots, bowls and dishes. More recently, the discovery of the late 9th century sunken treasures of the Tang dynasty cargo from the 'Belitung' wreck in Indonesia, with its 60,000 pieces of ceramics, gold and silver, has made world headlines. Highlighted in the exhibition, this find has significantly pushed back the timeline on connections

between China and Southeast Asia. To date, it signalled China's earliest major export of ceramics to Southeast Asia. Singapore has purchased the entire cargo, which in the future will be housed in a maritime museum.

Other maritime discoveries highlighted in the exhibition from the 15th century shipwreck, the 'Royal Nanhai,' and the 10th century 'Intan' wreck, point to an established trade network within the Southeast Asian region. The range and quantity of Vietnamese ceramics displayed reveal a vigorous trade between Vietnam and the rest of Southeast Asia between the 14th and 16th centuries. I was especially charmed by the petite Vietnamese blue and white jarlets, ewers and boxes which may have been used in rituals or for cosmetics or medicine and were highly valued by their owners, who loved their lively painted beauty.

You may be surprised to learn that ceramic finds from archaeological excavations at various sites in highly urbanised Singapore have helped reconstruct our island's pre-colonial history. A diverse range of blue and white ceramics, as well as the only known ceramic compass and fragments of a Chinese pillow, suggest that small, high-quality wares were produced for a society that lived on today's Fort Canning Hill in the 14th century.

This ceramics exhibition offers an overview of the technology, aesthetics and organisation, both economic and political, of seemingly diverse territories in pre-colonial Southeast Asia. As Alvin Chia, President of SEACS, observes, "We are only just beginning to appreciate the significance of Southeast Asian ceramics in our understanding of the collective cultures of the region."

Southeast Asian Ceramics: New Light on Old Pottery is on view until 25 July.

Margaret White has lived in Singapore for seventeen years. She collects antique textiles, carpets, ceramics and paintings, all of which provide inspiration for her own work as a painter. She is a former president of FOM.

Photos courtesy of the NUS Museum, unless otherwise indicated