

## CERAMICS FROM MUANG PHAN, CHIANG RAI PROVINCE

by

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The ceramic tradition of northern Thailand has been a subject of interest to art historians and archeologists, among others, for some time. The development of ceramic technology and products, including high-fired stonewares, is closely linked to the political development of the northern Thai states. The warfare and unstable economic conditions of the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries A.D., consequent on the struggles among several Thai kingdoms, are clearly correlated with the end of ceramic manufacture at the Sawankhalok and Sukhothai kilns. A number of kilns in the provinces of Chiang Mai, Chiang Rai and Lampang seem to have been built at that time, perhaps by potters who were seeking refuge from Ayutthayan invaders (Kraisri 1960: 18)<sup>2</sup>.

Eventually it may be possible to write a comprehensive analysis of the development of Thai ceramics before and after the decline of Sukhothai influence in the late fourteenth century. It may be assumed that the political events of the time played nearly as important a role in shaping ceramic development as did the hands of the potters themselves. A clear picture of the course of ceramic development in the region,

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2. The dating of the northern kilns—Sankamphaeng, Kalong and Wang Nua, Phan, Ban Don and perhaps others—is still uncertain. Phraya Nakhon Phrah Ram (1936) has proposed an alternative sequence of pottery development, which differs from that which is generally accepted.

therefore, should provide a mirror which reflects contemporary change in northern Thai society as a whole<sup>3</sup>.

A number of kiln sites usually assigned to the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries A.D. have been discovered and described<sup>4</sup>. One particular group of two sites, six kilometers apart, was discovered some six to twelve kilometers north of Muang Phan, Chiang Rai Province, in 1962 by Mr. Kraisri Nimmanahaeminda<sup>5</sup>. In July 1973 the sites were surveyed and partially excavated by the Chiang Mai section of the Fine Arts Department; 38 kilns were located and 20 excavated, according to Bhayap Boonmark of the Chiang Mai Museum<sup>6</sup>. In order to contribute to future comparative studies of the products of the various northern Thai kilns, this article describes some artifacts obtained from Muang Phan.

The pieces are from the collection of Mrs. Ruth B. Sharp of Ithaca, New York. Most were presented to her by Mr. Kraisri in 1964 from a large collection housed at the Phan branch of the Bangkok Bank of Commerce; others were collected then or later from the vicinity by Mrs. Sharp and her husband, Dr. Lauriston Sharp, and may be seen in Ithaca as part of the study collection of Cornell University's Johnson Museum of Art<sup>7</sup>. Items donated by Mr. Kraisri, and the materials from the 1973 excavations, are in the Chiang Mai Museum. Non-ceramic artifacts have not been reported from the neighborhood of the Phan kilns, to this author's knowledge. The present collection of ceramic items recalls Spinks' statement that "the Phan celadons...are the

3. Possible associations between various kiln centers and political centers can be postulated: Sankamphaeng (? Lan Na); Kalong and Wang Nua (? Wiang Pa Pao); Phan (? Phayao); Ban Don (? old Chiang Saen or Chiang Rai); and perhaps others.
4. See, for example, Kraisri 1960; Spinks 1965.
5. Previous descriptions of the site have been published by Spinks 1965: 122-125; and Gluckman 1974.
6. Gluckman 1974: 2. A kiln has also been reconstructed on the grounds of the museum.
7. The Johnson Museum study collection also contains a selection of artifacts from Sankamphaeng and Kalong.



finest ceramics yet discovered at any of the northern kilns."<sup>8</sup> This judgment certainly holds as far as celadons are concerned, but otherwise might be disputed by specialists familiar with the remarkable and varied porcelains from the Kalong, Wang Nua and nearby related kilns of the so-called "Kalong tradition".

The main collection, excepting smaller sherds and fragments, consists of 67 pieces:

24 bowls	2 jarlets
8 vases	2 eared jars
5 animal figurines	2 <i>kendis</i>
5 small high-footed stands	2 covers
5 dishes	3 sherds of 3 vessels, two-color
4 pontils	ware
4 lamps	1 architectural fragment

All but one are glazed with a celadon-type glaze, which varies from a glossy, highly crackled deep green which occasionally forms thick puddles where it has accumulated in depressions, to a thin, pale, creamy yellowish-white. On a few pieces the glaze has been partially eroded (for example, see figure 1). One bowl is unglazed<sup>9</sup>.

Three of the bowls are deformed, warped out of shape. A vase, a small dish and a small vase were in contact with other pieces during firing, and some clay from the other vessels has become attached to the three objects (fig. 2). Many of the objects are whole, or 90 per cent complete: one of the *kendi*, 10 bowls, 5 vases, 2 dishes, 5 small high-footed stands, and 2 lamps. Based on comparative states of preservation, Phan wares seem less fragile than many Sankamphaeng and Kalong products.

*Bowls and dishes.* The bowls and dishes share the same set of designs, which are incised under the glaze. Vertical striations resembling fluting are found on the outside of two bowls (fig. 3), as well as the

8. Spinks 1965: 2. Gluckman (1974) observes that the Muang Phan potters had access to better clay than did those at Sawankhalok.

9. Spinks 1965: figure 44 illustrates some unglazed Muang Phan bowls.

eared jars of the seventh category below. The design of the interiors of bowls and dishes ranges from undecorated pieces (fig. 4), through pieces with simple sets of concentric circles just below the rim and at the bottom of the cavetto (figs. 5, 6); to objects with interior bases decorated with lotus and other floral motifs (figs. 7, 8), or spirals with three, four or multiple wing-like arms, in the center of which is contained a small, coiled, spiral ring (figs. 9, 10, 11a, 12). These last are usually surrounded by short, ray-like motifs, and no two pieces have ever been found with identical designs. Dimensions of the bowls range from a piece with a height of 4.5 centimeters (cm) and diameter of 17.5cm, to a deep bowl 7.6cm high and 16.6cm in diameter. The biggest dish measures 23.4cm in diameter and 2cm deep (fig. 8).

*Miniature pieces.* At least nine objects are much smaller than the other pieces: three small vases (for example, figure 13), a bird-effigy *kendi* (fig. 14), and five high-footed stands. All but the *kendi* are glazed a creamy to grayish yellow; the *kendi* is a glossy green. All are undecorated. The five stands all have thumb-print patterns on the bases (as in figs. 15, 16), showing where they were cut from the wheel with a cord. Two of the vases have irregular, hand-molded bases (fig. 17), while a third has a carefully carved, concave foot. The *kendi* has lost its tail and part of its crest, but otherwise is in good condition, with a very glossy, coarsely crackled glaze<sup>10</sup>.

*Large kendi.* The other, larger *kendi* (fig. 18) has a finely carved foot and a band of underglazed design at the level of its mammiform spout. The funnel on top is not part of the original piece. Apparently the original funnel (if one existed) was broken off, and another roughly glued to the body. The glazes of the two are quite different, the substitute spout being dark and very glossy, with the rest of the piece being lighter and not glossy.

*Bottles.* They are undecorated and resemble forms of other Thai kilns<sup>11</sup>.

10. For other bird-shaped *kendis*, see Spinks 1965: figure 29; Spinks 1976: 16.

11. Spinks 1965: figure 22, piece on right; also figure 45, piece on right. They are from Sawankhalok and Kalong.



*Vases.* In different sizes and shapes, all of them are plain (see figures 19-22). The vase in figure 19 has a crack at the base mended with wax, suggesting possible use in recent times.

*Animals.* Three elephants, a duck and a water buffalo are included in the collection. Of the duck (fig. 23), only the body remains. The head, tail and base are gone. Wings are molded in high relief on the hollow body.

The largest figurine is an elephant, also heavily damaged (fig. 24). Detailed trappings are depicted by underglazed incised lines and dots. The animal stands on a base with a cross-shaped opening in its center.

The other two elephants are smaller and less detailed (e.g. fig. 25). Both possibly carried receptacles on their backs, which have since disappeared, indicated by scars of rough, unglazed patches.

The water buffalo is complete (fig. 26), including a dish-like receptacle on its back.

*Eared jars.* Both eared jars have external fluting. The example in figure 27, however, has appliquéd loops for ears, and a constricted neck which is unglazed and apparently meant to be fitted with a lid. Also, a band about 1 cm wide just above the broad, well-formed foot is unglazed. The other jar (fig. 28) has two hollow cylinders for ears. The glaze runs uniformly to the base of the small, concave foot. Apparently this piece also had a lid, but was fired with the lid in place, so the two parts fused together. A small part of the lid remains in place, the rest perhaps having been chipped off intentionally<sup>12</sup>.

*Lids.* One lid, with a thick, dark-yellow glaze, is perfectly flat except for a small appliquéd handle. The other is an unusually thick piece, glazed a glossy green on both sides. The handle stands about 4cm above the lid, and is cone-shaped, resembling those in Spinks (1965: fig. 10), except that about half-way up it flares into a flat disc about 4.3cm in diameter. It thus resembles an umbrella. Most of the lid is unfortunately chipped away, so no estimate of its diameter can be given.

12. For similar eared jars from Sawankhalok, see Spinks 1965 : figure 49 ; Spinks 1976 : plate 7.

*Pontils.* Four tubular pontils, of the type illustrated by Gluckman (1974: fig. 2) and Spinks (1965: fig. 45) are present. Several of the bowls and dishes in the collection display the firing ring produced by this technique: a gray circle in the center of the base, surrounded by an area of dark red blotches, indicating the use of the pontil during their firing.

*Lamps.* In the collection are four lamps, of a form as yet known only from Muang Phan<sup>13</sup>. All are of slightly different size and shape, with heights ranging between 7.2cm and 10cm, and diameters from 9.5cm to 11cm. The bases also vary greatly. Two are cord-cut, one is concave, and one is hollow. Glazes sometimes run to the foot, and sometimes do not reach below the dish, which probably held the fuel.

*Architectural piece.* A large fragment exists of what was probably a decorative building tile. It is broken across its length; the undamaged end is trilobate. The piece is 1.9cm thick, 19.5cm wide, with roughly parallel sides. Only the top surface is glazed, green with coarse crackling.

*Sherds of two-color ware.* Perhaps the most interesting part of the collection is a group of three rim sherds of thick, coarse ware, probably from large jars. All are slightly different, but all have rims and upper bodies glazed green. Below the green area is a low flange or ridge, and below this the body is glazed a dark, uneven brown<sup>14</sup>. The paste of the sherds is light gray, but with coarse, black inclusions not found in other pieces.

One sherd has a down-turned angular rim, and is glazed both inside and out with green above and a blotchy brown below, which runs into thick black streaks. The wall of the body is almost vertical, and the curvature of the rim very small, suggesting a large vessel.

13. For illustrations, see Spinks 1965: plate 44; Gluckman 1974: figure 3.

14. This glaze resembles very closely the brown of the Chaliang kilns.



The second sherd has a rolled rim, with a curvature indicating a diameter of about 15cm at the mouth. Below the flange marking the green-brown boundary, however, the body abruptly flares out, suggesting a globular lower body with a much greater diameter. The interior is glazed green for the upper 5.5cm; below it is unglazed.

The third sherd is the most massive. The piece has a constricted neck; the rim is plain and very slightly everted. The rim diameter may only have been about 15-18cm, but below the neck the body flares greatly. Again, the interior is glazed green above, unglazed below the level of the outer flange.

Two-glazed jars are published from one other site in Thailand, whose wares are of the Khmer tradition<sup>15</sup>. The Ban Sawai site (Brown *et al.* 1974), dated A.D. 1050-1300, contained two-glazed jars, and small pieces with the "thumb-print" pattern on the bases resulting from their removal from the wheel by cord-cutting.

#### *Summary*

The Muang Phan site contains a wide variety of wares, many of which have no counterparts in form and decoration at other kiln sites in northern Thailand. In technique and use of shape, Muang Phan's strongest parallels seem to be with Sawankhalok. However, the combination of two-color wares and cord-cut miniature pieces may indicate similarities with assemblages from other ceramic centers farther east, such as Ban Sawai, or perhaps experimentation with a style of glazing which is little-known outside the northern Thailand area. The ceramics of Muang Phan indicate development through adaptation of ideas from external sources, and through evolution of local expression.

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15. Examples of two-color ware are also known from other Khmer sites in Surin Province and from Kalong, as well as Sawankhalok and Sankamphaeng (Mrs. Ruth B. Sharp: personal communication).

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*Figure 1.* Diameter 6 cm,  
height 9 cm



*Figure 2.* D 13 cm, h 2.7 cm



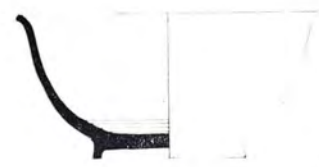
*Figure 3.* D 8.5 cm, h 3.9 cm



*Figure 4.* D 12.4 cm, h 5.8 cm



*Figure 5.* D 11.6 cm,  
h 5.7 cm



*Figure 6.* D 16.6 cm,  
h 7.6 cm



Figure 7. Fragmentary; 20 cm at greatest diameter



Figure 8. D 23.4 cm, h 2 cm



Figure 9. Base diameter 10 cm



Figure 10. D  $\approx$  20 cm (only 40% of rim remains); h = 5 cm





*Figure 11.* D 14.3 cm, h 6.4 cm



*Figure 12.* D 26.5 cm, h 5.5 cm



Figure 13. D 5.7 cm,  
h 4.9 cm



Figure 14. Length 10 cm, h 8.6 cm;  
tail missing

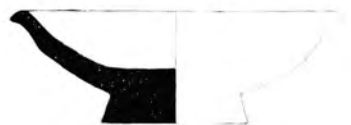


Figure 15. D 8.9 cm,  
h 2.4 cm



Figure 16. D 6.6 cm,  
h 2.6 cm

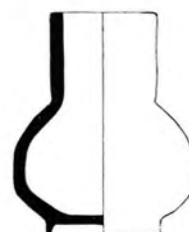


Figure 17. D 4.6 cm,  
h 5.8 cm



Figure 18. D 16 cm, h 15.5 cm





*Figure 19.* D 10.7 cm, h 8.4 cm



*Figure 20.* D 12 cm, h 8.5 cm



*Figure 21.* D 6.8 cm,  
h 6.3 cm



*Figure 22.* D 7.7 cm, h 8.9 cm;  
mouth d 5.0 cm

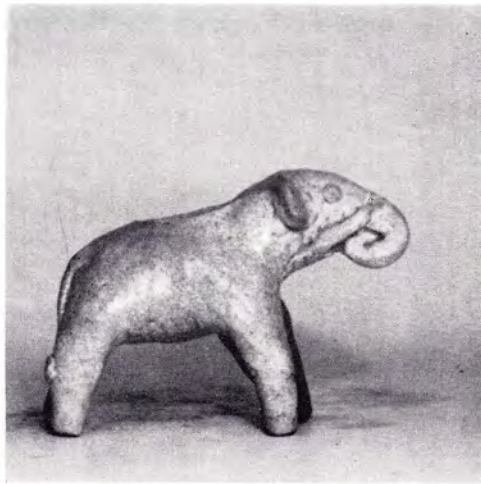


*Figure 23.* Present length (broken)  
15 cm, h 8 cm



*Figure 24.* L 15 cm, h 14.5 cm





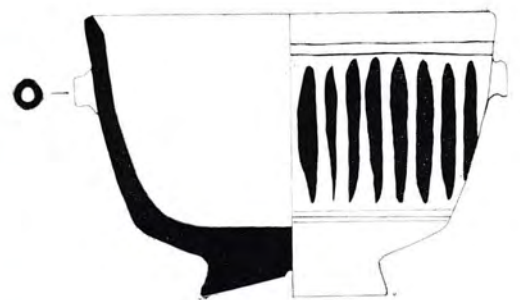
*Figure 25.* L 11 cm, h 7.8 cm



*Figure 26.* L 9 cm, h 9 cm



*Figure 27.* D 10 cm, h 12 cm



*Figure 28.* D 10.3 cm, h 7 cm

