

THAI COVER BOWLS OF THE FOURTEENTH AND FIFTEENTH CENTURIES

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From the close of the thirteenth century to the middle of the fifteenth century the Thai produced several types of unusual glazed wares. Large quantities of these wares were exported to the Philippine and Indonesian archipelagoes, where they competed principally with the cheaper export wares of South China and Annam. In this way, the Thai kilns came to play a significant role in the great ceramic trade of that era.

The Thai wares of this period were manufactured at two large ceramic centers in the kingdom of Sukhothai. One center was near the old walled capital, a little northeast of Wat Si Chum. The wares produced at these kilns are known as Sukhothai wares. They are strikingly similar to the famous Tz'u Chou wares of North China, and there is considerable evidence that the kilns were actually established by Chinese potters from Tz'u Chou, who came to the Thai kingdom as a result of one of the embassies dispatched to the Court of Kublai Khan by King Rama Kamhaeng in the closing years of the thirteenth century.

The other ceramic center was at a place called Ban Ko Noi (บ้านกำน้อย) on the main Menam Yom (แม่น้ำยม) north of the ancient walled city of Sawankalok, at a point some 24 kilometers upstream from the present town of that name. This center had been producing wares with a lustrous brown glaze long before Chinese ceramic influences had resulted in the establishment of the Sukhothai kilns.

The early Ban Ko Noi wares were essentially Thai in concept and spirit, showing little if any Chinese or other foreign influence. These brown monochromes are usually known as Chaliang ware, after the old Thai name of district in which the kilns were located. Around the beginning of the fourteenth century, however, Chinese ceramic influences also reached the Ban Ko Noi kiln site, resulting in the production of a type of celadon ware. There is little doubt

¹ Among other publications of the author on the subject of Siamese pottery are two monographs published by The Siam Society, the first of which appeared in the August 1956 issue of the Society's *Journal*. Titled 'Siam and the Pottery Trade', it was reproduced in 1961 in a special collection of *Journal* articles. The second monograph, titled 'Siamese Pottery in Indonesia', was published by The Siam Society as a separate publication in 1958 [original end note in *Sawaddi*].

that this development was inspired by the wares of the famous Chinese celadon center of Lung-ch'uan and, as at Sukhothai, there is again little doubt that Chinese potters were brought to Ban Ko Noi from Luang-ch'uan in response to another Thai embassy to Peking.

Eventually the Ban Ko Noi kilns, or the Sawankakok kilns as they are usually called, began producing decorated wares in addition to the Chaliang brown monochromes and the Sawankalok celadons. While the Sawankalok decorated wares also reveal Tz'u Chou influences in their style of painting, they are distinctly different from the Sukhothai wares, not in the physical character of their paste and glaze but in the treatment of their painted decoration. In the early periods of production, Chinese decorative styles are most apparent, but with the passage of time these wares became more and more Thai in spirit.

The wares of Sukhothai remained wedded to the Chinese traditions of Tz'u Chou and the Sawankalok celadons continued throughout the period of their production to adhere closely to the Chinese traditions of Lung-ch'uan. On the other hand, the Chaliang brown monochromes and the Sawankalok painted wares became distinct from all other Asian ceramics and are consequently most expressive of the Thai spirit.

Of the two, Sawankalok painted wares are perhaps of greater interest, not only because of their extraordinary variety, but also for the examples they offer of contemporary Thai decorative styles. In form and decoration they combined elegance with refinement, boldness with restraint, and artistry with a functional purpose. Like all the Thai wares, they possess that utilitarian quality of having been made to be used but yet not at the sacrifice of aesthetic appeal.

The Sawankalok painted wares are a fairly hard-fired stoneware approaching the porcelaneous character of the Sawankalok celadons. The paste, however, is more granular and the exposed parts of the body are generally a light grey. The paste was first covered with a grey slip upon which the designs were painted with a ferrous pigment which fired to dark brown or black, over which a thin, transparent glaze was applied.

One of the most representative forms among the Sawankalok painted wares is the bowl or box with a lid. The cover bowl was a ceramic form popular in China and one which the Annamese potters exploited to the fullest in their underglaze blue wares, but the Thai cover bowls express forms more characteristic of India than China, even though much of their decorative elements are plainly Chinese. These interesting vessels belong to the area of Southeast Asian culture where influences from China and India met and were synthesized to create a local expression with a distinct character of its own.

For the most part, the Thai cover bowls are of a globular or ovoid shape, their dome-formed lids being roughly one-third the height of the vessels. Occasionally pieces of more squat proportions are found, the lids of which are

generally less dome-shaped or are even flat, resembling the cover bowl shapes most commonly seen among the Annamese wares.

Sawankalok cover bowls range in size from miniature pieces only two or three centimeters in diameter to vessels sixteen or more centimeters across the mouth. The lids are close fitting, resting snugly against a narrow flange on the inner side of the bowl's mouth, leaving the outer surface of the lid flush with the outer surface of the bowl itself. Bowl and lid thus form a single, integrated unit, and the painted decoration frequently extends over the two parts in a continuous pattern.

Most of the lids have handles, usually in the shape of the lotus bud or a narrow, more extended form suggesting a spire or finial. Some pieces have no handles, or have only what might be called a token handle representing the stem of a fruit. The bowls of this later category came to be known among the seventeenth century tea masters of Japan, who were avid collectors of Thai wares, as the *kaki-no-te* or persimmon type of bowl, since the general shape of the vessel with its stem-shaped token handle set closely against a few molded leaves on the top of the lid fittingly suggested the persimmon. The persimmon is not indigenous to Thailand, however, but since the tree is common in China, it would logically appear that this ceramic fruit shape was introduced at the Sawankalok kilns by potters from China, especially since the persimmon is frequently depicted in Chinese art. Sotogari Soshin, a Japanese specialist on Southeast Asian ceramics, has offered what is undoubtedly an acceptable explanation of this peculiar fruit-shaped Thai vessel. While these bowls certainly resemble the persimmon, they resemble equally well the mangosteen, a fruit more likely to have been within the purview of the Thai potters. Moreover, the term *kaki-no-te* was first applied to this Thai bowl form by Japanese tea masters familiar enough with the persimmon but who most likely had never seen or even heard of the mangosteen. But in ceramic parlance the fruit-shaped Thai pieces are invariably called the *kaki-no-te*, a term which will undoubtedly persist.

The more common ovoid Thai cover bowl with a lotus bud or spire handle owes its origin to the ancient Indian reliquary urn. In the Taxila Museum in Pakistan there are a number of Gandhara period reliquary vessels of stone which are almost identical in shape with many of the Sawankalok cover bowls. Similarly-shaped reliquary vessels made of crystal ware recently excavated from an old *chedi* above the site of the Bhumipol Dam in the province of Tak in north-central Thailand; and in the National Museum in Bangkok there are several large bronze cover vessels of this characteristic Indian shape, which were excavated at Sukhothai. These bronze vessels are known as *kalasa* (spelt ກລັສ in Thai and pronounced *klos*). They were apparently used to hold flower petals as a scent, or as a receptacle in which to steep flower petals in water to make a cosmetic or lustration.

The decorative elements on the Sawankalok cover bowls as well as on the Sawankalok painted wares generally are dominated by floral motifs. The element most commonly seen on the cover bowls is the so-called T'ang or Chinese grass motif, what Japanese ceramic specialists call the *kara kusa*. This design consists of a continuous repetitive floral scroll that encircles the body of the cover bowl, often extending over both the bowl and its lid. The repetitive floral scroll has innumerable variations, and is a decorative element continually met in Chinese wares. The Sawankalok potters delighted in the use of the repetitive floral scroll, but for some reason this attractive device was employed far less frequently by the Thanh Hoa potters of Annam.

Other floral elements consist of vertical arrangements of sprays of leaves, or a single leaf resembling the bamboo (or possibly intended to represent the lotus petal) extending upward from the base. The two elements are usually combined in alternating panels around the surface of the bowl, and the same arrangement was used on the lids, the alternating designs radiating from the center of handle of the lid. Other arrangements with alternating panels combined a floral motif with a geometric pattern, usually some form of the lattice.

Not all the Sawankalok cover bowls have patterns executed in underglaze painted designs against a grey ground. In some pieces the decoration is formed by the use of the brown Chaliang glaze combined with a creamy white glaze for the ground or, alternately, the white glaze forming the decoration and the brown glaze the ground. In this method of decoration the design was first carved in the paste and the brown or creamy white glaze applied within the carving, which gives the decoration the appearance of having been executed in a slight relief.

Less common than the foregoing types of cover bowls are the Sawankalok monochrome pieces. For some reason, however, a celadon glaze was never used; at least no examples have ever come to my attention. In addition to celadons the Sawankalok kilns also produced wares with a white glaze which has a subdued tinge of blue. This glaze has a rather coarse, pitted quality, the result of small air bubbles which formed on the surface during the firing. The white glaze was produced through excessive oxidation by adding a considerable quantity of wood ash to the usual celadon glaze mixture and then permitting more oxygen from the air to enter the kiln in contrast to the reducing process of firing which was required to produce the characteristic greens of the celadons.

The Sawankalok potters favored the pitted, white glaze for their larger cover bowls and for some of their large water jars. Among the small cover bowls, however, this type glaze is most often found in combination with the Chaliang brown glaze, the bowl, and frequently the handle of the lid, being in the oxidized white glaze, the flat-type lid being covered either wholly or in part with the brown glaze. The elegant simplicity of bowls of this type has a great appeal to collectors, but they are rather rare.

While the decorative elements on the smaller cover bowls show certain Thai characteristics, the elements themselves remained basically Chinese. Among the other Sawankalok painted wares, however, notably the large plates and bowls, it is possible to trace a distinct emergence of Thai styles of expression as well as the incorporation of Thai or Indian decorative elements. Reginald le May first called attention to this obvious reassertion of the local genius some years ago in an article in *The Journal of Siam Society* ("A Visit to Sawankalok," Vol. XIX, part 3, September, 1925, pages 63-82). Especially noteworthy was the appearance of such Indo-Thai elements (usually in the center of plates and bowls) as the *hoi sang*, or conch shell, the *mongkut*, or tiered crown, the *cakra*, or discus, and the Buddhist swastika. The small cover bowl shape, however, did not lend itself to the application of these more pictorial designs, and their decorative elements consequently retained the standard Chinese forms.

Animal or human figures are never found on the Sawankalok cover bowls, but were occasionally painted on the larger Sukhothai bowls. Unlike the Chinese, the Thai potters never labelled their wares with reign marks and dates, or the name of a particular kiln or potter. A few Thai pieces have been found, however, bearing dedicatory inscriptions in Thai letters. Occasionally a Thai piece is found with some form of marking incised in the paste on the base or painted in that area. The pieces I have seen with such marks are so few and the marks have been of such an unintelligible character as to suggest that they were merely doodling on the part of some mischievous artisan.

The cover bowl has become a prized item among collectors of Thai ceramics. These unusual vessels were made in large quantities. Some of them may have served as reliquary urns, but the great majority were most likely used as containers for food, spices, medicines, cosmetics, or the assorted ingredients used in betel chewing. An interesting feature of the work of the Sawankalok potters which is not found among the Sukhothai wares was the miniaturization of their pieces. We can only guess at the purposes for which such small articles were made, and while we cannot rule out their possible use as containers for medicines or spices, it would appear that their principal purpose was to serve as votive offerings at household and other spirit shrines, along with the small human and animal figurines for which the Sawankalok kilns were also famous.

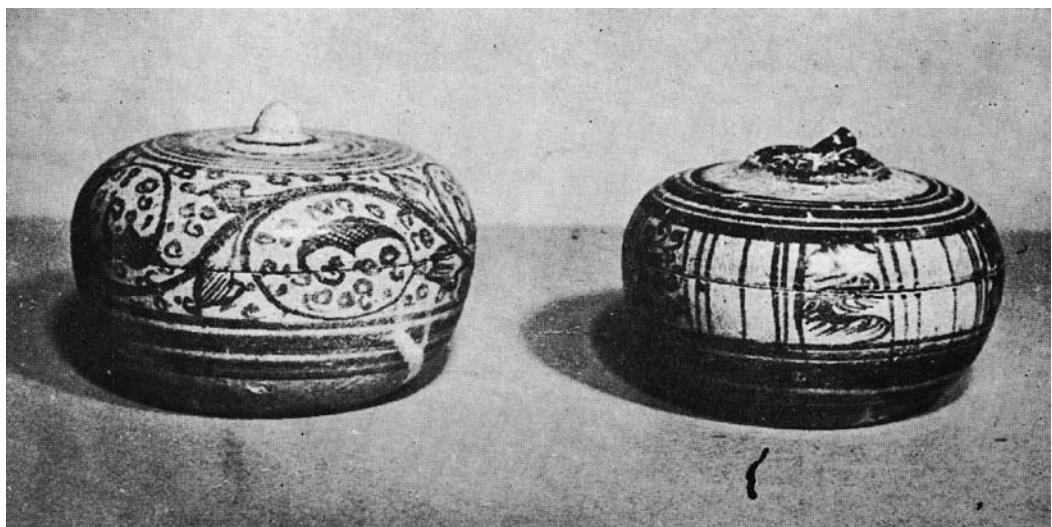
The production of these unusual decorated wares came to an abrupt and violent end in the middle of the fifteenth century, when the Sawankalok-Sukhothai area became a battleground between the rival kingdoms of Ayudhya and Chiengmai, resulting in the destruction of the kilns and the dispersal of their potters and other craftsmen. There was a subsequent revival of the Thai ceramic industry in the far north of Siam, but for some reason for which an explanation is still to be found these later kilns at Kalong, Samkampaeng and Phan appear to

have forsaken the once popular small cover bowl form. Larger, red earthenware cover bowls and jars have been made by the Thai to the present day, and the small cover bowl became an exceedingly popular form among the *bencharong* porcelains with enamel glazes, which were custom-made in China from around the seventeenth century in Thai shapes and with decorations in the Thai style. The small Sawankalok cover bowls consequently represent an unique but ephemeral expression of the Thai genius in the ceramic medium.

In their manufacture of these small cover bowls, the Thai potters were plagued by a special problem. The bowls were fired with their lids fitted in place. As a result the two parts were frequently fused together by the melting of the glaze. The number of wasters found in this condition indicates that such fusing of lid to bowl was a common occurrence.

I have an exceptionally fine Sawankalok cover bowl unmarred by a single flaw or blemish. The lid, however, is firmly fused to the bowl. When the piece is shaken a faint tinkling sound comes from within, caused by some small bit of vitrified clay or sand. The intriguing sound always heightens the temptation to try to cut the lid loose in some way and thereby expose the dark interior of the vessel to the light of day for the first time since some unnamed potter at Ban Ko Noi last set the lid in place centuries ago just prior to placing the bowl in the kiln. The temptation has been scrupulously resisted, however, not only out of respect for that nameless craftsman whose skill fashioned this supernal piece, but for the more mundane consideration that by attempting to do so I might irreparably damage an otherwise perfect example of this unique expression of the Thai genius.

[Here are] some of the old Thai bowls described in the article by Dr Spinks. The largest is the Sawankalok cover bowl in the ovoid, reliquary urn shape with a finial type handle; the smaller bowls have incised decoration in brown and creamy white glaze. These bowls are from the collection of Bangkok resident Dean Frasché, as are all those reproduced in Dr Spinks' article except the final one shown, which is from his own collection. [*Sawaddi* vol.3, no.2, Nov.–Dec. 1964, p.4]





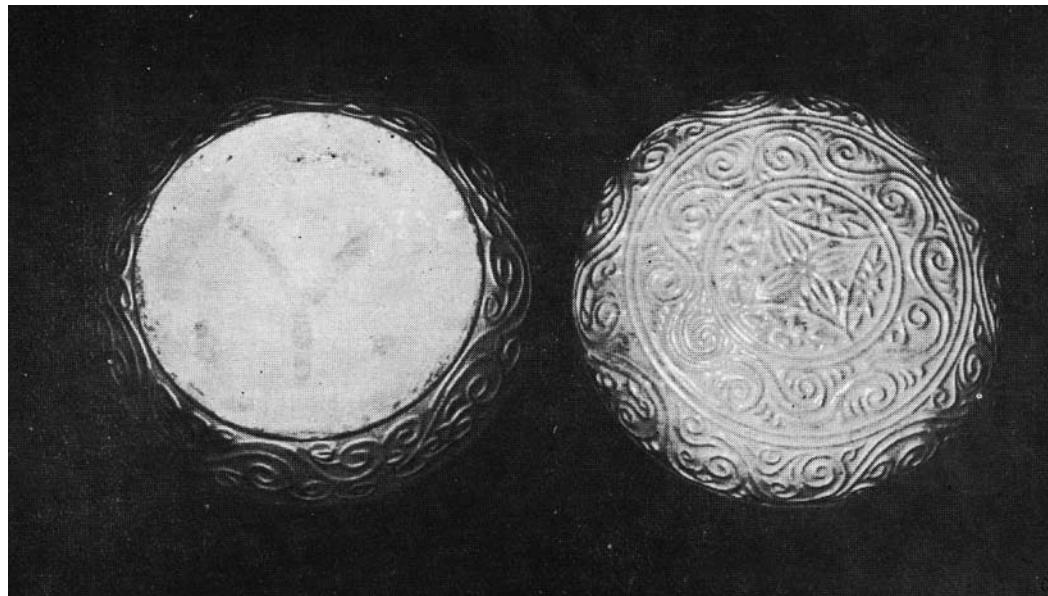
Examples of small Sawankalok cover bowls with incised decoration in brown and creamy white glaze.





Small Sawankalok cover bowls of the more squat shape. The bowl at the upper left is in creamy white glaze with part of lid in Chaliang brown glaze.





Large type of Annamese cover bowl or dish in white glaze with design molded in relief under the glaze.





Miniature Sawankalok cover bowls.



The cover bowl of the author with the lid fused to the bowl by the melted glaze.

