

Vietnamese ceramics

Việt Nam
viet nam
Vietnam

gốm
goum
ceramic

bát
batá
bowl

Ceramic has been an important medium of artistic expression in mainland Southeast Asia for millennia, and today ceramics are still produced in large numbers and in a wide variety of forms. Vietnam has always been one of the main centres of ceramic production on mainland Southeast Asia and Vietnamese ceramics were traded throughout Asia. Many Vietnamese ceramics have been recovered from historic shipwrecks raised from the South China Sea, their hulls packed with ceramic wares destined for use across Asia. Open-fired ceramics have been produced in northern Vietnam for domestic use from as early as 10,000–5000 BC. The earliest kiln-fired, glazed Vietnamese ceramics date from between 100 BC and 300 AD. Kiln sites have been discovered in the area around the border between China and Vietnam, as well as further south.

Although influenced by Chinese ceramics, Vietnamese ceramics have their own distinctive styles and forms. They were produced in a wide variety of shapes, glazes and decorative techniques, and created for domestic and court use as storage containers, wine ewers and teapots, and bowls for food and tea. Ceramic vessels were also used in temples to store offerings, water and food.

This group illustrates the variety of shapes and decoration in Vietnamese ceramics. The *Covered jar* (2010.326.a-b) was made between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries, during the early period of Vietnamese independence from China, when the capital was situated at the site of current day Hanoi. Many of the storage jars and ewers from this time are characterised by their distinctive organic, gourd like forms, as seen in this rounded jar. It is decorated with an applied collar on the lid in the shape of lotus petals. The lotus plant is an archetypal Buddhist motif signifying spiritual purity because the lotus plant emerges from muddy waters and the flower stalk rises upward toward the light. Buddhism became the state religion in Vietnam during the eleventh century, and the lotus designs characteristic of Vietnamese ceramics from the eleventh to the fifteenth century suggest that many of these vessels were produced for use by Buddhist temples and monasteries.

Chinese ceramics provided inspiration for many of the ceramic styles of Vietnam. For example, the *Covered ewer with bowl* (2010.332.a-c) closely replicate Song dynasty (960–1279) Ching-pai wares, and were used for warming wine.¹ The ewer, filled with wine, sat in the bowl filled with hot water. These types of ceramics were used as tableware by upper and middle class Chinese and Vietnamese society. The lid is decorated with the figure of a lion, an auspicious Chinese symbol denoting harmony, blessings and high rank.

The popularity of Chinese motifs is similarly evident in the blue and white glazed *Dish* (1998.241), which has a lively design of peony flowers and leaves painted in cobalt blue.² The design also includes Chinese-style clouds around the rim, and lotus petal shapes around the outside of the dish. The use of cobalt blue underglaze³ decoration on porcelain began in Vietnam during the fourteenth century, about the same time as its beginnings in China.⁴ Blue-and-white porcelain probably originated in China as a trading commodity, intended for markets in Southeast Asia and the Middle East. Indeed, the cobalt blue pigment was originally imported into China from Egypt and Persia where it had been used to colour glass for centuries.

The lobed *Bowl* (2010.339) is of the type that was exported to Japan from China and Vietnam, and used in tea ceremony. These humble wares appealed to the Japanese aesthetic of *wabi-sabi*, which valued rusticity and imperfection, and evoked the Buddhist concept of the impermanence of life. Trade throughout Asia, as exemplified by these Vietnamese ceramics, ensured a cross pollination of artistic styles and symbolism within the region.

left to right:

VIETNAMESE

Covered jar
11th – 13th century, Vietnam
earthenware
21.0 x 20.0 cm diameter (overall)
Gift of Zorica McCarthy, 2010
(2010.326.a-b)

VIETNAMESE

Bowl
13th – 14th century, Vietnam
earthenware
6.0 x 14.5 cm diameter
Gift of Zorica McCarthy, 2010 (2010.339)

VIETNAMESE

Dish
15th – 16th century, Vietnam
stoneware
6.0 x 25.7 cm diameter
Purchased through The Art Foundation of Victoria with the assistance of The Thomas William Lasham Fund, Governor, 1998 (1998.241)

VIETNAMESE

Covered ewer with bowl
11th – 12th century, Vietnam
earthenware
27.0 x 22.0 cm diameter (overall)
Gift of Zorica McCarthy, 2010
(2010.332.a-c)

- 1 Ch'ing-pai (bluish-white) refers to a type of popular early porcelain created in the late tenth century from a fine white paste covered with a thin, lustrous glaze that ranged in colour between light blue and white.
- 2 One of the symbolic meanings of the peony is 'riches' and in the context of a food utensil would have been a propitious symbol of abundant food.
- 3 The blue design was painted directly onto the ceramic body and then a clear glaze was applied over the top and fired, hence the term underglaze blue.
- 4 <www.metmuseum.org/toah/works-of-art/1989.157>

