

Not only dragons and lotus blossoms

This catalogue presents the impressive collection of Vietnamese ceramics in the Museum of Art in Birmingham, Alabama, published in conjunction with their exhibition, which opened in January 2012. The museum had started collecting Vietnamese ceramics less than forty years ago. Along with a steady stream of gifts and purchases – among them, also some from the Hoi An shipwreck – the museum was fortunate to receive as a major addition an important private collection in 2005 and 2007.

Brigitte Borell

Reviewed publication:

John A. Stevenson and Donald A. Wood, with Philippe Truong. 2012.

Dragons and Lotus Blossoms. Vietnamese Ceramics from the Birmingham Museum of Art. Seattle: University of Washington Press; Birmingham, Alabama: Birmingham Museum of Art, 264 pp., ISBN: 9780295991627 (paperback).

THREE ESSAYS, accompanied by a chronological table and a map, precede the catalogue. John Stevenson, the co-curator of the exhibition, gives an overview of the development of Vietnamese ceramics as an art form, including the earliest glazed wares of the Han-Viet period (111 BCE to the late second century CE), the flourishing production during the Ly and Tran dynasties in the eleventh to fourteenth centuries, the fifteenth and sixteenth century blue-and-white wares intended for Islamic markets from Indonesia to Persia, and the sixteenth and seventeenth century ornate wares for use in Buddhist monasteries.

Philippe Truong offers brief information on the state of research of Vietnamese ceramics, including archaeological work and finds from shipwrecks, in particular, the five important shipwrecks identified along the Vietnamese coast between 1990 and 2002, with dates ranging from the fifteenth to the seventeenth centuries: the Hon Cau Island wreck (aka Vung Tau wreck), the Hon Dam Island wreck (aka Phu Quoc II wreck), the Cu Lao Cham wreck (aka Hoi An wreck), which is particularly important for Vietnamese blue-and-white export wares of the late fifteenth to early sixteenth centuries, and the Ca Mau and Binh Thuan wrecks. In addition, he explores the intricate matter of forgeries of Bleu de Hue, though the catalogue contains none of these special Chinese blue-and-white porcelains ordered for the Vietnamese court in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. He distinguishes three phases of reproduction, each spurred by different collectors' interests: a first phase in the nineteenth century, which comprises a variety of pieces copying the characteristic eighteenth century Trinh marks; a second phase in the 1990s to feed a new collectors' market with a fresh esteem for these wares, generated by academic publication on the subject; and a quickly-following third phase of excellent twenty-first century copies not easily recognised as forgeries.

The essay by Donald A. Wood, the museum curator, is devoted to the decorative motifs on Vietnamese ceramics. He includes an abundance of information for the reader to promote understanding and appreciation of the motifs and their intrinsic meaning, with emphasis on Vietnamese traditional legends and folklore. In particular, he highlights the meaning of Buddhist motifs and the Buddhist context of many types of wares.

The catalogue comprises 219 objects, covering the full range of Vietnamese ceramics, all accompanied by excellent colour illustrations (167 objects with full catalogue entries, the remaining 52 added at the end, with shorter texts and smaller illustrations). A great number of the pieces (over 40%) were already included – often with different or additional



illustrations – in the publication on Vietnamese Ceramics edited by John Stevenson and John Guy (*Vietnamese Ceramics. A Separate Tradition*, Chicago: Art Media Press, 1997); at that time, some were already in the possession of the Birmingham Museum of Art, others were still in private ownership. However, bibliographic references for the individual pieces are generally omitted, although these would have been useful for the lay – and the academic – reader of the catalogue, as they are part of each piece's research history.

The ceramics from the period of the Ly (1009-1225) and Tran (1225-1400) dynasties, often esteemed as the most creative and distinctive period of Vietnamese ceramics, form the heart of the collection with about half of the total catalogue numbers. These include a number of pieces of great beauty, in particular among the pieces with ivory-coloured glazes. Worth mentioning are the unique ewers (cat.23-26), which are also remarkable for the lightness and thinness of their potting, the pair of brown-inlaid jars (cat.17 and 18), assumed to have been a pair for at least seven hundred years. Also well represented are ceramics of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, among them, some excellent blue-and-white pieces, painted with the freshness and spontaneity that characterises Vietnamese ceramic art. Notable is the *kendi* (cat.125) showing unusual scenes with human figures, and

the charming water dropper in the shape of a pair of nestling ducks (cat.137). Most spectacular are two pieces decorated with underglaze-blue painting enhanced with overglaze enamels: the plate (cat.120), another example for the rare depiction of human figures in a landscape, and the large jar (cat.121), famous for its representation of various mythical creatures.

In addition to these Vietnamese wares, which were all made in the north, in the Red River valley and Thanh Hoa Province, the collection also includes a few ceramics that were produced in the Champa kilns in central Vietnam.

The catalogue entries are subdivided following different topics – chronological, typological, thematic, temple use, everyday use – each preceded by a brief introduction, thus pointing out different interesting accents in the ceramics' development, for instance, the decoration in underglaze iron-brown preceding that in underglaze cobalt-blue (cat.110-114). It is a splendid collection of Vietnamese ceramics and a delightful catalogue for ceramic enthusiasts, indispensable for collectors and researchers of Southeast Asian ceramics alike.

Brigitte Borell, independent scholar
(b_borell_seidel@hotmail.com).