

Thai Ceramics

Pottery for everyday use has been made in Thailand for thousands of years. Between about 1375 and 1575, however, a variety of glazed and decorated wares intended for export were made in several centers in north central Thailand. These wares have been found in large quantities, usually together with Chinese and Vietnamese wares, as far away as the Philippines, eastern Indonesia, and even Japan, testifying to widespread seaborne trade. In recent decades marine archeologists have found cargoes of thousands of ceramic vessels on shipwrecks from this period, and have greatly increased our understanding of the ships, their routes, and the trade goods they carried.



Lidded bowl, approx. 1500–1550. Thailand. Stoneware with slip and painted decoration under glaze. *The James and Elaine Connell Collection of Thai Ceramics*, 1990.127.

The Ceramic Production of North Central Thailand (Nos. 1–23)

The kingdom of Sukhothai (mid-1200s–1438) produced ceramics at a number of kilns in two areas, the vicinity of the city of Si Satchanalai (also known as Sawankhalok) and the vicinity of the city of Sukhothai itself. A variety of vessel types was made in both areas, as were architectural components such as roof tiles and decorative roof fixtures. (Examples of decorative roof fixtures may be seen high on the walls of this gallery.)

Production continued at these kilns for more than a century after the kingdom of Sukhothai was incorporated into the central Thai kingdom of Ayutthaya, or Siam, in 1438. One of the primary routes by which Sawankhalok and Sukhothai ceramics reached the sea to be shipped abroad was through the city of Ayutthaya, a major trading center strategically located on a navigable river. The economic value of the huge ceramics trade must have been great.

Sawankhalok wares were usually made of fine, buff-colored clay. They were covered in glazes of dark brown, off-white, or celadon green. Alternatively, they were decorated with dark brown painted designs under a clear glaze. Other decorative techniques included carving the surface before glazing, scratching designs through a brown glaze to reveal the white body beneath, and modeling three-dimensional decorative elements in clay and adhering them to the surface before firing. All of these glazing and decorating techniques may be seen in examples in this case.

Sukhothai wares were made of a coarser clay that usually appeared dark gray and speckled after firing. To provide a smooth, light-colored surface on which to paint decorations, Sukhothai potters usually covered their vessels with slip—a thin coating of diluted fine clay—before painting and glazing.

Other Thai ceramic wares (Nos. 24–31)

A number of centers in northern Thailand, such as Kalong and Sankamphaeng, also produced fine high-fired ceramics. Their wares seem to have been used in their own region, but not exported like Sawankhalok and Sukhothai wares.

Substantial new evidence, from archeological excavations, chance finds, and greatly increased technical analysis and scholarly study, comes to light every year. As a result, our understanding of Thailand's ceramics industries is changing rapidly.

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