



POTS FROM TONKIN

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Tonkin is an area around the Red River lowlands in present day North Vietnam. At certain time in history the area of was also known as Dang Ngoai. For many centuries Tonkin was famous for its high quality ceramics. The art of ceramics flourished here from 10th century onwards. During the following centuries the techniques used became more sophisticated, the forms diversified and became more delicate, enamel finishes showed added brilliance and glazes became more transparent.

Under the Late Ly dynasty (1010–1225) Buddhism became a state religion. Lotus as the main symbol of this philosophy appears as a decorative motif on ceramics. Dishes from this period are typically decorated with a raised ring of lotus petals. Examples include large containers decorated with stylized light-brown lotus leaves.¹

During the Late Ly – Tran period (11th–15th century) green ceramics was widely produced. These were very different from the green Chinese ceramics. They differed in materials used, the chemical composition of the glaze and the firing temperature. The manufacture of these objects is extremely delicate. The main problem is that the firing temperature of the glaze is about 100 °C lower than that of the clay from which the pot is made. If the kiln is heated to the temperature required by the glaze, the body may not be properly fired. On the other hand the correct temperature required for the biscuit firing may result in damage to the glaze. The challenge is to find a type of clay mixture, whose firing temperature is close to that of the glaze. It appears that the artisans of the Late Ly – Tran period succeeded in solving this complicated problem. Their masterpieces present a perfect body under a remarkably even layer of glaze.²

During Le period (15th–18th century) new types of ceramics appeared: objects covered in white transparent glaze, decorated with a blue design. In the 1970s at Cat Lang, where

¹ See Handicrafts, pp. 85, Bui Van Vuong, p. 197.

² See Bui Van Vuong, pp. 200–205.

Van Don sea port once stood, jars containing many specimens of these ceramics were found. Apart from these valuable items ordinary articles for every day use continued to be made throughout the Le period.³

Since the 10th century onwards famous ceramic works have been known to exist in the following provinces: Hai Duong, Bac Ninh, Binh Dinh, Phuc Yen, Vinh Yen, Ha Dong, Quang Binh and Thanh Hoa. Most of the centers in these areas produces terra cottas, faience and stone wares. Other works in Phu Vinh in Quang Nam province and at the well-known centre at Bat Trang in Bac Ninh province produced high-fired glazed and unglazed stone ware and semi porcelain.⁴

Since as early as the Late Ly dynasty commercial exchanges took place with foreign countries, and during the following centuries Vietnamese ceramics became known abroad, especially thanks to Dutch East India Company (VOC) in Japan, Indonesia, the Philippines, Siam (Thailand), Turkey, Spain, Portugal, France, etc.⁵ National museums of these countries maintain displays of Vietnamese ceramics.

During the late 20th century archeological research at Chu Dau locality, Hai Hung province took place. It revealed huge number of ceramic objects from 15th–16th centuries. Amongst the items were pots of different shapes: pear shape bottles decorated with blue birds, pots that have a shaped foot, jars with tiger head designs, and lime pots in many sizes.⁶

Bat Trang village is mentioned for the first time under the name Bat commune in 1352 and in the following centuries is continuously recorded as well developed ceramic works. In the 1990s Bat Trang works in Gia Lam district of the capital Ha Noi dusted off their old traditional manufacturing methods and at the same time brought in modern technology and marketing practices, e.g. electric kilns, e-mail orders.⁷

The items of art presented here reflect the traditions of North Vietnamese ceramics.

Green celadon pot, Fig. No. 1

(bought in Bat Trang village market in 1999 as part of an eight piece tea set, part of a private collection)

This crackled glazed green celadon pot is shaped like a bird. The beak serves as spout, the tail as decorative handle. The pot is complemented by a purposive metal handles. The pot's lid has shape of a raised chrysanthemum flower. The height (without metal handles) of the pot with the lid is 12,5 cm. On the upper part of the pot are raised chrysanthemum leaves.

³ Handicrafts, pp. 87.

⁴ Hejzlar, pp. 30–31.

⁵ Bui Van Vuong, pp. 236–239.

⁶ Chu Dau Ceramics, pp. 27, 39–40, 134.

⁷ Personal research visits of Bat Trang Village in 1999 and 2000. For the detailed description of traditional producing ceramics method see Phan Huy Le, pp. 19–25.

The shape and decoration of the object reflects the art trend of Late Ly – Tran dynasties (1010–1225). The iron handles have been used on pots since 15th century onwards when different crafts could cooperate in chosen localities. A disadvantage of these metal handles is that they absorb the heat of the pot filled with hot tea. Celadon glaze was mostly popular among foreigners living in Vietnam as well as abroad. An extremely large number of modern shaped tea sets, especially of the green celadon, are being exported all over the world.

Buffalo pot, Fig. No. 2

(bought in Bat Trang village market in 1998, part of a private collection)

This is a crackled glazed blue and white pot. The lid of the pot is in the shape of a buffalo boy playing a bamboo flute. The pot has a very interesting form of a kneeling buffalo. The animal's open mouth is used as a spout, the twisted tail as the pot's handle. Buffalo horns, hoofs, tail, eyes, mouth are highlighted with blue color. The lid is picked out with the same color. The height of the pot (including the lid) is 10 cm, the length of the pot is 15 cm and the height of the lid is 6 cm. If you visit Vietnamese countryside even today, you can see a lot of young buffalo boys riding buffaloes and playing with them, sometimes also playing the flute. Since it is a very common phenomenon in the history of Vietnamese countryside, it is also a very frequent motif on local popular art and craft⁸. In any case, this pot is a very popular gift, especially among foreigners from Europe.

Pot with a bamboo handle, Fig. No. 3

(bought in Bat Trang village market in 1998, part of a private collection)

Cracked glazed blue and white pot on three small legs is completed with a bamboo handle. The height of the pot including the handle is 10,5 cm. It is an example of a traditional decoration combining geometrical ornament with flowers, most likely chrysanthemum. The only protrusion on the pot is top on its cover.

Pot with a metal handle, Fig. No. 4

(bought in Bat Trang village market in 1999, part of a private collection)

A cracked glazed blue and white pot on three small unglazed legs is completed with metal handle. The height of the pot excluding the handle is 8 cm. It is an example of a traditional auspicious decoration. On one side of the pot there is a fish, on the other one crayfish. Both animal motifs are complemented by sea grass and water waves. Fish and crayfish are traditional symbols of abundance.⁹ The spout is symmetrically decorated with grass and possibly waves motifs. The lid of the pot is decorated with symmetrical blue petals. Four edges metal handle is engraved with plant stems, leaves and buds on two upper edges only.

⁸ Very similar motif see Müllerová, Pictures, pp. 44.

⁹ Müllerová, Auspicious Motifs, p. 48, 50.

Pot with a dragon motif, Fig. No. 5

(bought in Hanoi market in 1983 as a part of seven pieces tea set, part of a private collection)

The pot is very probably a product of Hanoi or Bat Trang works. The height of the pot is 10,5 cm including the lid, the diameter of the bottom of the pot is 6 cm. The white-grey glaze of the pot is decorated with brown-green paintings. The lid of the pot is decorated with simple clouds, the handle and the spout with motifs of leaves and uneven curves. The key ornament placed on one side of the pot is a dragon flying on and between clouds. The dragon depicted with a hairy head, two horns, and a bushy beard has quite a strong body covered in fish scales and four legs with three claws. The dragon's back is from head to tail covered with sharp fins.

A popular decorative motif of the dragon has been sought after in Vietnamese society since the Late Ly dynasty. During the art history of Vietnam the dragon body has varied from a strong animal with a relatively small head to an animal resembling more a snake rather than a dragon. By the end the Late Ly dynasty a typical Vietnamese dragon has been created looking like a huge viper with a chameleon's head without horns, its long body covered with numerous scales. The characteristic feature under the subsequent Tran dynasty was a disproportionate magnification of the dragon's head compared with the body. During the Late Le dynasty, and especially at the end of its supremacy, the head of the dragon was made even more disproportionately larger than the body, and was graced with horns similar to a deer's horns, whiskers, a beard, and the crest in the shape of flames. During the last Vietnamese dynasty, the Nguyen (1802–1945) the dragon in fine art becomes weaker physically, and the emphasis is placed on the detailed, elaborate rendering of head.¹⁰ In popular art the dragon is a symbol of the ruler, a moral perfection and an overall force and power.¹¹ From the above, it is clear that the decorative motif on this vessel draws its inspiration from the Late Ly dynasty period.

Marrow Pot, Fig. No. 6

(bought in Bat Trang village market in 1999, part of a private collection)

The marrow belongs to the oldest and most frequent auspicious themes in traditional Vietnamese art. The marrow expresses longevity.¹² The height of the pot excluding the handle is 12 cm. This is a crackled glazed white pot with blue handle in the shape of a plant stem. The blue decorative leaves grow from one side of the handle and decorate the right side of the pot. A similar, but a little bit larger motif of leaves grows from the handle just in the point turning into the pot's spout and decorates a part of the other side of the pot. This vessel has no lid. It is filled with liquid through a hole of shape of deep funnel on the irregular round underside of the pot. When the pot is full of liquid, you place the bottom of it on a mat and the air left inside the pot locks the funnel like the lid. The air inside vessel works as a pressure lid and ensures that the liquid does not leak from the pot. This vessel can be placed in a deep bowl full of hot water to warm the content inside. This is the only pot not used for tea, but for spirits, usually drunk warm.

¹⁰ Müllerová, *Religious Motifs*, p. 459

¹¹ Müllerová, *Religious Motifs*, p. 472

¹² Müllerová, *Auspicious Motifs*, p. 48, 51

The pieces mentioned in this article represent daily used ceramic dishes that are very popular not only in modern Vietnamese society, but also in contemporary Asian, American and European galleries of applied art.

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1. Green celadon pot

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2. Buffalo pot

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3. Pot with bamboo handle

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4. Pot with metal handle

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5. Pot with dragon motif

Very probably a product of Hanoi or Bat Trang works, 1980's. The height of the pot is 10,5 cm including the lid, the diameter of the bottom of the pot is 6 cm. The white-grey glaze of the pot is decorated with brown-green paintings. The lid of the pot is decorated with simple clouds, the handle and the spout with motifs of leaves and uneven curves. The key ornament placed on one side of the pot is a dragon flying on and between clouds.



6. Marrow pot

Bat Trang kilns, 1999. Cracked glazed white pot with blue handle in the shape of a plant stem. The height of the pot excluding the handle is 12 cm. The blue decorative leaves grow from one side of the handle and decorate the right side of the pot. This vessel has no lid. This vessel can be placed in a deep bowl full of hot water to warm the content inside.

