

Bat Trang's 'blue' ceramics

LE HUY VAN REPORTS ON THE TRADITIONAL FORM AND GLAZE SYNONYMOUS WITH CERAMIC PRODUCTION IN BAT TRANG, NEAR HANOI

Completed domestic-ware, Bat Trang village, 1997. Photo: Object magazine.



ABOUT 20 KILOMETRES FROM HANOI, Vietnam, across the Red River, lies the world-famous ceramics village of Bat Trang. Approximately 800 families in this village operate 800 kilns. These independent craftspeople autonomously organise the complete process of ceramic production, from building the kilns, acquiring and making the materials, to selling and distributing the final product.

Bat Trang's ceramic production dates back to the 14th century; the end of the Tran Dynasty. As famous as this ceramics trade is, equally famous is the characteristic 'blue' glaze used, a colour which has become known world-wide as the trademark of Bat Trang. This blue—Hoa Lam in Vietnamese—is the colour of the 3rd epoch of the development of ceramics in Vietnam. It replaces the brown ceramics from the earlier Ly-Dynasty period, and it remains the most popular ceramic production in Vietnam today.

For many years, tens of thousands of these blue ceramic products have been exported to Japan, Indonesia, the Philippines, and Europe. The Japanese art historian, Fujico Coiama once said: "It is regarded to be 'good manners' in Japan to serve tea in blue cups from Annam (the old name for Vietnam)."

The craftspeople of Bat Trang employ a unique technique which makes their ceramic production distinctive from that of several other ceramic producing villages in Vietnam. The technique involves the use of carefully sifted, hard, white clay to form the ceramic body. The surface of the piece is polished until it is smooth and silky using a blend of rice ash and ground rocks. The plates, cups, bowls or vases are placed in protective saggars (ceramic containers) and stacked in the kiln, taking up minimal space. Very high temperatures are then applied to fire the work. The kilns are fired using wood and coal based 'patties'. These techniques are crucial for the resulting form and quality of the ceramics.

Before sections of the ceramic forms are painted by hand, lines are engraved into the surface. The painter varies the brush strokes by leading the brush lightly or heavily across the form, and uses different brushes to create thin or thick lines in a variety of shades of colour. The great skill of the craftsmen is evident in each 'free-hand' painting, and consequently is admired and revered by the community.

The development of different styles of painting in the 'blue' ceramics from Bat Trang can be traced back six centuries. In the 15th and 16th centuries—the flourishing period—the motifs were predominantly free and vivid; 'open' compositions as it were. By the end of the 18th century the motifs had become austere and relief-like in character. In the 19th century naturalistic motifs became dominant (fig.1) and the standardised, conventional pattern of these remains popular today.

The ceramics produced in Bat Trang can be divided into two styles: domestic and decorative. The domestic-ware includes plates, bowls, pots, and jars, and while these objects have different uses, they are united by their simple shapes and plain decoration. This domestic-ware is commonly painted with motifs based on flowers, fish, birds, and stylised clouds and flames. The decorative ceramics are more ritualistic and include candle holders, incense holders, vases and other ornaments. These objects are highly decorated with complex forms. The motifs favoured are more exotic than those used for the domestic-ware, often featuring tortoises, dragons and other mythical creatures.

Even now—a few hundred years after the 'blue' ceramics flourished—these objects can still be found in many households in Vietnam, and their traditional form and characteristic 'blue glaze' remain synonymous with the ceramic production of Bat Trang.

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Ceramicist Tran Do (left), viewing his unfired ware with artist Nguyen Minh Thanh (middle), at Bat Trang village, 1997. Photo: Object magazine.



Completed domestic-ware with dragon-like handles, Bat Trang village, 1997. Photo: Object magazine.



Transporting domestic-ware, Bat Trang village, 1997. Photo: Object magazine.



Fig.1. Incised figures of sacred animals with swastika borders, 19th C., Bat Trang ceramics.

