



Ceramics as Artifacts and Its Usefulness to the Archaeologist

By Cynthia O. Valdes

Introduction

In the Philippines, ceramics are misunderstood objects. Associated with private wealth, power and prestige in civilized circles as well as in tribal societies still existing in the hinterland, at best they are considered art forms and prized heirlooms. At worst, curious antique collectibles. If not retrieved from shipwrecks, most ceramics found in the country have been dug up from ancient graves for commercial purposes or looted from caves.

Our National Museum with its limited resources has not managed to stop nor keep up with “pothunting” activities. Most Philippine collections have been built up through acquisitions from dealers who get their stock more often than not from “pothunters”. Perhaps, these are the reasons why serious scholars shy away from ceramics..

One wonders how the study of an object as mundane as clay and as elemental as a pot has become so bewilderingly complex, intimidating and controversial. Pottery is one of the longest-lived handicrafts in the history of civilized man. Through the ages, it has been elevated from the most humble utilitarian forms to the level of art and connoisseurship. The aesthetics of pottery have been praised in poetry and literature, admired and sought after for their beauty and rarity.

World-renown collections of ceramics in Europe, the United States, the Middle East, China, Japan and Korea, to more recent acquisitions in Hong Kong and Taiwan, Malaysia, Singapore and Jakarta, have been propelled by great wealth and generous bequests, if not by state recognition of its significance to a country’s history or pre-history. Along with paintings and sculptures, ceramics have been subject to the minute scrutiny of scholars and art historians.

Archaeological Finds in China and the Rest of Southeast Asia

I think the modern-day archaeologist, like his confrere in the distant past have come to recognize that often ceramics or pottery are encountered at archaeological excavations. It can be useful for dating the site. It can tell you about the activities of the people that placed these artifacts in the grave in the first place.

In the last half-century, data from archaeological projects as well as accidental finds during road building and other infrastructure build-up have re-kindled interest in ceramics in China and the rest of Southeast Asia. These new data have made it possible to ascribe a direct provenance of manufacture for certain types of wares. Combined with findings from the recipient countries of wares that were in the first place made for the overseas trade, the study has become more systematic and precise.

Moreover, modern scuba-diving techniques have made possible the recovery of ancient shipwrecks with ceramic cargo in their holds still stacked in the thousands, buried in the sand for hundreds of years. This recent phenomenon has served to add a new and exciting dimension to the study.

Ceramics for the Archaeologist

While it is useful for the archaeologist to have a “working knowledge” of ceramics, I believe he or she should leave it to the ceramic specialist to do the more advanced scrutiny (“hair-splitting”?) that invariably occurs among the experts when they meet. The study of ceramics is a process that takes much longer than a university degree would normally take. It is an intellectual pursuit that only the staunchest will survive, necessitating not only extensive book research but also active communication with your colleagues who will want to share the latest information as you also provide them with the results of your own study.

Handling experience is also imperative and it takes years before one becomes familiar with genuinely old pieces. In recent years, the study has acquired more “pitfalls” as ceramic centers from China and elsewhere become more adept at reproducing “antique ceramics”. There is a tradition in Jingdezhen (the ceramic producing center in China) itself of replicating designs and motifs from older ceramics.

In Southeast Asia, the manufacture of ceramics as a means of livelihood for the people continues to thrive as these find acceptance in the market. The potter often reproduces copies of old jars and trade wares to fill increasing demand. Buyers often purchase reproductions as decorative items. But sometimes, they are deceived by unscrupulous dealers who pass off reproductions as antique items.

The study of ceramics as a discipline that ranks with other accepted university courses has not yet dawned in the Philippines nor anywhere else in Southeast Asia. Peter Lam, Curator of the Art Gallery at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, advises that students of ceramics would benefit greatly by constant visits to Museums, attendance at conferences, and the handling of actual pieces as well as exposure to the latest ceramic information coming from international ceramicists and archaeologists in China and elsewhere.

Perhaps students of archaeology can approach the study of ceramics as supplemental knowledge peripheral to his main course. However, he/she will have to conduct the study with the same discipline and clinical interest that he/she normally applies to the study of other artifacts found in the archaeological record such as fossils, ancient tools and the like. It would be a serious mistake and a great tragedy should students of archaeology succumb to the lure of ceramics as collectibles.