

Fourteen days in Thailand on a study tour led by Vipoo Srivilasa and in the company of esteemed Australian ceramic artists was a privilege that I did not take for granted. The Australian artists, Prue Venables, Simon Lloyd, Sony Manning, Sue Kneebone, Vipoo himself and myself, comprised a group that covered a number of ceramic styles. We are all experienced clay workers: Prue's fine and refined domestic wares in porcelain, Simon's explorations in ceramic design, Sony's coloured clay inlays on formal shapes, Sue's conceptual installations that involved ceramics, Vipoo's

their lifestyle, particularly in regard to the use of ceramics, not only through its containers for food and drink, but in ideology from the market places to the sculptural centres. A number of fine museums were visited, often accompanied by an expert on the particular ceramics presented there, and also private specialised collections were open to us. Most of the ancient Thai ceramics were familiar to me: the Sawankalok wares, Sukhothai dishes, Khmer pots with their dark iron glazes and the Neolithic jars with red brushwork, but the opportunity to handle these pieces, to turn them over and examine the clay,

display in a private garden. Customers were able to choose what they wanted from a range of replicated gods and goddesses, nymphs and demons, elephants and birds. If desired these works could be artificially aged, the moss on their surfaces enhancing their forms.

As on any such a tour, we gained information, seemingly by osmosis. In our daily interaction with people: in restaurants, shops, markets, factories, massage parlours, taxis and buses, hotels and museums, we learnt of the day-to-day life of the Thai people. There was such goodwill and friendliness, in Thailand it seemed everyone was cheerful. The Sanskrit language was beyond us but we all learnt a few words which drew smiles in response from the Thai people we met. Vipoo Srivilasa is an enthusiast: for Thailand, for ceramics and for people. Travelling with such an energetic person who has a positive attitude to every aspect of life, our reward was to be guided by him in a friendly and obedient fashion. In this way we were free to absorb the flavour of Thailand in all its senses.

Although I was not able to join the visit of the



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whimsical figures and blue and white decorated wares, and my wood-fired stoneware jars and objects, brought a wide range of techniques and aesthetic approaches to the talks both between ourselves and to the students who attended our demonstrations. Vipoo had prepared PowerPoint demonstrations of our work, our studios and lifestyle to augment our demonstrations and these served as introductions to our Thai counterparts and the students at the different universities that we visited.

Six Thai ceramic artists became our special friends and colleagues on our journeys in Bangkok, Swankalok and Sukhothai. These artists, namely: Amornthep Mahamart (Top), Dusadee Rumanee (Dee), Prinda Setabundhu, Surojana Sattaburtre, Worawut Suteeweeraajorn (Won) and Phiphat Chit-ariak (Phat), also were varied in their approaches to ceramic art and their contemporary expressions were more sculptural and less inhibited than ours. Top makes large pieces for placing in parks and foyers of buildings, Dee works in a figurative manner, influenced and expanding on the Thai Buddhist style of icons found in temples, Prinda is an installation artist whose works fill gallery floors, Surojana works on commissions for large outdoor monuments, Won's work is delicate decorative figures, especially the expression of hands, while Phat's ceramics refer back to ancient monoliths and tools. All are teachers and we visited their universities to talk to their students, and all are respected artists in Thailand and beyond.

The program was a serious one aimed at giving the travellers the chance to understand Thai culture, to explore its history through visits to temples and shrines, to examine

the making marks, debate the processes and decorative meanings, gave us further insight into the richness of the past. Roxanne Brown at the Asian Ceramic Museum at the University of Bangkok talked to us about her theories of dating Thai ceramics; John Shaw in Chang Mai invite us to examine closely wares that were dated over past millennia, showing us genuine and authentic pots from his collection; and Patricia Cheesman, an expert in South East Asian textiles lectured us on patterns and dyes showing examples of styles from the different regions of Thailand, how the dyes were made, what the patterns meant, and who was entitled to wear them.

Visits to a number of factories gave us an understanding of modern Thai ceramic practice and the busy export market and competition for sales that goes on. Innovative new ideas are being sought and tried with bright colours and smart contemporary forms. Other factories concentrate on traditional wares for restaurants and figurative pieces for public and private worship are made. One particular factory made terracotta reproductions and housed a large

Thai artists to Melbourne, I know that it was successful and that ties to the future of our group interaction have been set. Plans are already in action.

This Thai-Australian project is unique, I have not heard of anything similar. Its success is due to the forward planning and attention to detail in the leadership of Vipoo Srivilasa. His efforts to bring artists of different backgrounds and aesthetic goals together in a friendly way for the purpose of education and understanding should become a model for future interaction and assist in the promotion of international goodwill.

For more detail of the project visit www.clayalchemy.net

1. The first day in Bangkok
2. Demonstration
3. The first meeting