

# A crack at ceramics

A bowl is more than what you feed from, discovers **Aneeta Sundararaj**

**H**AVE you ever wondered when the ceramic plates you use daily were made? Which kiln was used to make the storage jar in your pantry which stores uncooked rice? Was the clay used of good quality?

These are the sort of questions that members of the Southeast Asian Ceramic Society (West Malaysia Chapter) ask on a regular basis. Recently, the Society played host to Dr Rose Kerr, who presented a lecture on the subject matter of *Chinese Export Ceramics*, a book she co-authored

with Luisa Mengoni.

She reveals that since her childhood days, she has enjoyed learning languages, particularly Chinese. "When learning it from a book didn't work, I took up Chinese Studies in university," she says.

After graduating from the School of Oriental and Asian Studies, Kerr was offered a one-year scholarship by the British Council to stay in China.

Likening her time in China to a scene from Pearl S. Buck's *The Good Earth*, she says: "It was the last year of the Cultural Revolution, but we didn't know what was happening outside. I was living and working with the people of the land as though we were in a commune."

Upon her return to the UK, she took up a position in the Victoria and Albert Museum, London. She later became its Keeper of the Far Eastern Department. She is currently honorary associate of Needham Research Institute in Cambridge.

**FROM HERE TO AFRICA**

"Ceramics is very much a part of everybody's life. In China, even a peasant owns a porcelain bowl," says Kerr, who is fluent in Mandarin.

The Chinese were said to have started making ceramics in 600AD, exporting them in 800AD, and eventually having a monopoly of this industry for over 1,000 years. Their success was attributed to having the right clay, firewood and coal as well as sophisticated kilns capable of between 12,000°C and 13,000°C.

There is a collection of ceramics from the Philippines in the Victoria and Albert Museum presented by Sir John Addis. In 1970, he was the ambassador in Beijing and, by all accounts, an eccentric man. He collected textiles, furniture and ceramics and, while in Manila, he would go on archaeological digs.

Among the items from Sarawak is a crackle-glazed storage jar whose story has a connection with the Kuching National Museum.



Kerr reveals:

"When the museum was opened in 1891, a series of young men came from England to manage it. One of them was John Hewitt, who was the director of the museum from 1905 to 1908. He was an expert in natural history and had written books about snakes and amphibians."

After Sarawak, Hewitt's next posting was to Africa. Kerr thinks he sold his collection of ceramics to fund that trip. In a series of letters, he explained that many of the items were collected from his journeys to the foot of Mount Santubong and little villages around Kuching.

**GUESSING GAME**

From Brunei, an incense burner of white porcelain was in the collection obtained in 1914. "All we know about the man who sold it to us was his name: G.M. Baker. Other than the fact that he was a broker in Brunei, we know nothing more," says Kerr.

The most beautiful pieces in this series, by far, are those from Thailand. There is a high-quality Bencharong bowl made for the Imperial Court in Thailand, dating between 18th and early 19th Century. It is closely related to Nyonya ware.

What seems clear is the dearth of detailed information about the ceramics. For instance, the jars from

Hewitt are thought to be remnants from the *Vung Tau* shipwreck (early 1690s). Kerr laments: "We have been guessing and trying out new ideas on many of the items. The information we have is from what our clients have told us."

**TURNING POINT**

In the 1980s, many items found in a shipwreck off the coast of China were auctioned off in Europe. The items fetched quite a sum. Outbitten, the Chinese government started a programme to fund research into shipwrecks and land archaeology. Since then, there

has been more information about the many shipwrecks off the coast of China.

For now, Kerr believes many of the items from Southeast Asia were exported from a kiln in Zangzhouzhi in the Fujian province of China. "Those made for

the Imperial Court in China and for local use were probably made in kilns around Jingdezhen in the Jiangxi province of China. Zangzhouzhi was nearer the coast, which made it easier to export the ceramics."

While that explanation seems possible, Kerr will be the first to admit that her lecture was not about the ceramics found in Southeast Asia. "They were partly about the dating and attribution of objects, and partly about their social history."

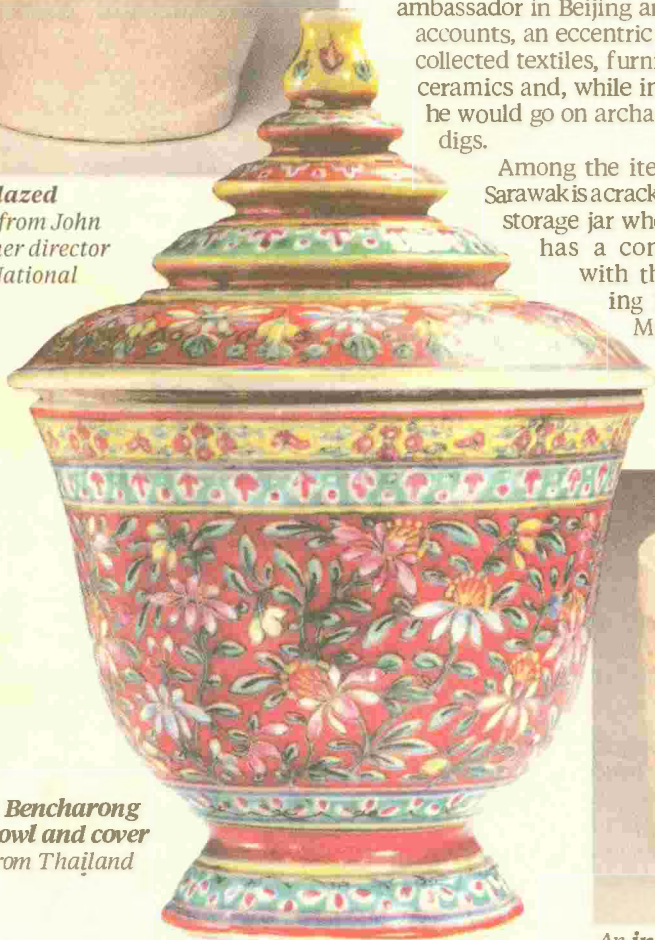
In other words, her lecture was about how these pieces ended up in the Victoria and Albert Museum.

In her closing, she said: "While it's easier to document the history of the items that came from the Philippines, the ones from Sarawak and Brunei are still a mystery. More research needs to be done."

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Rose Kerr



A crackle-glazed storage jar from John Hewitt, former director of Kuching National Museum



A Bencharong bowl and cover from Thailand



An incense stick holder from one G.M. Baker

## VALUABLE FIND

IMAGINE you're doing some gardening and suddenly you dig up a pot. What would you do? Would you keep it or sell it? If you choose the latter, to whom?

Rose Kerr, honorary associate of Needham Research Institute in Cambridge, offers these pointers:

1. Take the item to a museum or a dealer. This will help you get an opinion on it.
2. If it's valuable, you may want to keep it.
3. If you choose to sell it, there are three options: put it into an auction, sell it to a dealer, or sell it online. If you choose the third option, be warned that there are many fake dealers.