

THE CERAMICS SECTION OF THE DEPARTMENT OF PLASTIC ARTS
ROYAL UNIVERSITY OF FINE ARTS

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Chhun Pok (figure 1) died in August 1998 at the age of forty-four. He was the head of the Ceramics Section of the Department of Plastic Arts (Royal University of Fine Arts) and had just established his own studio and kiln in the village of his birth. Today his sons, Vannak and Vannoeun and his nephew, Rot Sophorn, continue to work at the Pok kiln across the Mekong River from Phnom Penh in the village of Svay Chrum (Kandal Province).

Ceramics is one of the areas of specialization which students at the Department of Plastic Arts can choose to study.¹ The present-day Department is located behind the National Museum of Cambodia in the buildings of the School of Cambodian Arts which was established when George Groslier took over the administration of the Palace workshops in 1918.² The School of Cambodian Arts was founded in response to claims by certain colonial officials that local arts were disappearing or "degenerating".³ Such descriptions of decline convinced the administration of the Protectorate to create an institutional structure within which particular definitions of Cambodian art were to be preserved and passed down. Fields of traditional arts such as silversmithing were gathered and organized into sections of study.⁴ In this article, we wish to give an account of how the Ceramics Section emerged from the initial configuration of the School and to consider some questions raised by practices in the Section today.

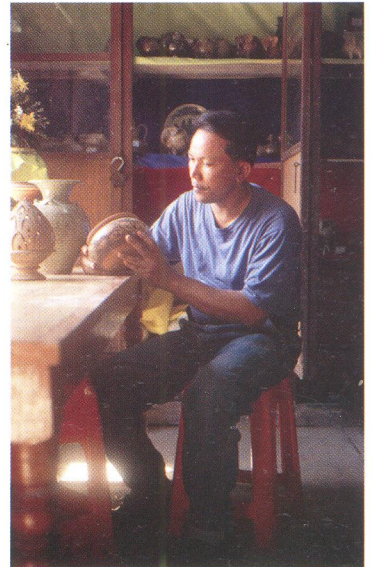


Figure 1. Chhun Pok at the Ceramics Section of the Department of Plastic Arts, June 1998

¹ The Department of Plastic Arts is one of five Departments which make up the Royal University of Fine Arts in Phnom Penh. The other Departments of the University are Archeology, Architecture, Music, and Dance.

² We would like to point out that the School of Cambodian Arts was not "created" out of nothing in 1918 but rather reshaped existing structures into a centralized institution and thus represented a continuity (Groslier 1922).

³ See Commaile 1906; Marchal 1913; as well as speeches by Groslier and Baudoin at the Inauguration of the Museum and School complex (*Inauguration* 1920). The most comprehensive presentation of this view is found in a series of articles by George Groslier published in the *Revue Indochinoise* (Groslier 1918b-e and 1919).

⁴ The original ateliers of Groslier's school were: 1) Traditional painting and architectural plans, 2) Sculpture, 3) Furniture making and woodworking, 4) Bronze casting, 5) Silversmithing, 6) Weaving (Groslier 1925).

Ceramics did not play a significant role in Groslier's original conception of the School nor was it present as a separate atelier in the preceding Palace workshops.⁵ Instead, the first attempt by the Protectorate to organize ceramics training occurred in the provinces. As part of a broader initiative to develop more vocational training opportunities, a program in "the art of painting plates" was established within the residential school of Kompong Chhnang in 1920.⁶ The director of the school, Madame Michel, had hired a Cambodian painter to teach courses in drawing, and several students in these courses applied their lessons to pots, producing decorated ceramics which Michel then marketed.⁷ This initiative came to the attention of George Groslier who was by then the director of the larger cultural management system called the *Direction des Arts Cambodgiens* (DAC).⁸ Complaining that he had "never been consulted for the organization of this section of Cambodian art and the training of students," Groslier described Michel's teacher as "a bad Cambodian artist," "a painter after post cards and photographs" who had begun to make oil paintings on plates in Kompong Chhnang. Colonial authorities were quick to support Groslier's criticisms and by 1924 the Kompong Chhnang training program had been placed under the technical control of the DAC. Through the new link to Phnom Penh, models were provided by the DAC and suitable directives were given to ensure "the maintenance of Khmer tradition" (Groslier 1924). Tuon Keo (figure 2), a twenty-nine year old graduate of the first class of the restructured School of Cambodian Arts, was appointed the technical director and only teacher of the Kompong Chhnang atelier of ceramic decoration.⁹ He introduced a course in the drawing of *kbach* (Khmer ornamentation) as a six month precursor to the decoration of ceramics and some reports indicate that the designs from old ceramics found at Phnom Kulen were proposed as models (Groslier 1918a). Unfortunately we know of no examples of the products of this annex school although the atelier sent "very pretty dish models" to the Colonial Exhibition of 1931. Tuon Keo taught at the annex school until it was closed in the economic downturn of the early 1930s; he then became a professor of drawing at the School of Cambodian Arts until his death in 1942.

It was not until the 1960s that another government-sponsored ceramics training program was re-opened, this time in Phnom Penh at what had by then become the Department of Plastic Arts of the Royal University of Fine Arts.¹⁰ Those who remember the start of this Section attribute its opening to the return of Man Mkot from France.¹¹ As Ouk Dit describes it, Man Mkot felt that Cambodia had good clay deposits and



Figure 2. Tuon Keo

⁵ See the Royal Ordonnances of January 1, 1907; April 17, 1912; and December 14, 1917, as well as Groslier 1925. In the original structure of the School of Cambodian Arts, ceramics was taught by a visiting "Annamite" professor within a broader atelier of modelling wax and clay positives for molds and bronze-casting.

⁶ Conseil du Résidence: Session de 10 Juin, 1920 [National Archives of Cambodia, file 4746 (Collection of the Résident Supérieur)].

⁷ The correspondence makes repeated reference to "Madame Michel" without ever giving her full name. See National Archives of Cambodia, file 1985 (Collection of the Résident Supérieur).

⁸ Letter from Groslier to the Résident Supérieur, January 20, 1922 [National Archives of Cambodia, file 1985 (Collection of the Résident Supérieur)].

⁹ Personnel file, Tuon Keo [National Archives of Cambodia, file 11128 (Collection of the Résident Supérieur)].

¹⁰ The School of Cambodian Arts became the Royal University of Fine Arts in 1965.

¹¹ Man Mkot studied at the Ecole Normale Supérieure des Arts Décoratifs in Paris and returned to head the Faculty of Plastic Arts in the late 1960s. For the following section we wish to thank Ouk Dit (former professor of fabric design and the widow of Man Mkot), Som Samnang (graduate of the first class of ceramics students), Kang Proeung (professor of ceramics at the Faculty today), Srieng Y (professor of sculpture at the Faculty today) and the late Chhun Pok (former head of the Ceramics Section of the Faculty) for sharing their memories of the time during conversations with Ingrid Muan over the period 1997-2000.

an existing industry of tile production. The modern technologies of firing and glazing which would be taught at the School could "improve" this existing production. Others remember the opening of the Ceramics Section as part of a broader initiative to modernize offerings in the arts in which courses in interior decoration and fabric design began to be offered at about the same time. Such topics introduced "modern technologies" and "things we didn't have yet" although these modernizing impulses were balanced by a growing desire to train Cambodian ceramics experts capable of "restoring the ancient examples in the Museum."¹²

Although Man Mkot oversaw the opening of the Ceramics Section, teaching at first was in the hands of visiting French and Australian lecturers as well as Ngor Ang Lay, a Cambodian trained in ceramic technologies in Japan. In the early 1970s, they were joined by Chum Kem, who was trained in Italy and remained more famous for introducing the Twist to Cambodia than for his work in ceramics. Chhun Pok and Kang Proeung began studying in the Section in the early 1970s and completed their studies immediately after the Khmer Rouge period while also serving as teachers. Man Mkot and Chum Kem died during the Khmer Rouge period and Ngor Ang Lay immigrated to Japan.

One of the possible reasons that the Ceramics Section was able to rebuild after the Khmer Rouge period was because clay was readily available and often free. Another reason was the personal commitment of Chhun Pok who tried to reconstruct the atelier as he had known it in the early 1970s, despite the difficult financial and social conditions of the 1980s. With more recent interest and help from Australian and Japanese donors, the Ceramics Section has become one of the most active and flourishing Sections of the Department.¹³

Working from photographs found in books and articles on Khmer ceramics, Chhun Pok built a repertoire of forms based on what he called "Khmer tradition." He developed a curriculum of study and established a network of sales outlets which allowed him to market the work of the Section, thus providing purchasing funds for supplies and equipment which meager University budgets did not allow. At the time of his death, Chhun Pok was experimenting with local clays and various kinds of natural ash glazes which he hoped would produce colors similar to the Angkorian ceramics found in the collection of the National Museum of Cambodia. After Chhun Pok's death, Kang Proeung became head of the Ceramics Section and today he teaches several groups of students in the classroom which Chhun Pok rebuilt.

Students entering the Ceramics Section learn the process of preparing clays first.¹⁴ All clays brought from the countryside are dried and then undergo a repetitive process of soaking and sieving before they are ready for use. In addition to the "ordinary" brownish grey clay found along rivers and banks throughout Cambodia, the atelier uses a white clay from Stung Chhay (Kampot) and a red clay from Kompong Sela (Kompong Speu) which are considered quality clays able to withstand higher temperature firings (figure 3).¹⁵



Figure 3. Stung Chhay clay (left), Kompong Sela clay (right)

¹² Conversation with Y Srieng, May 2000.

¹³ This is in stark contrast to other Sections such as bronze-casting, jewelery, weaving, and wood sculpture, all of which have virtually stopped teaching. We wish to especially note here the ongoing support of the Ceramics Section by Yuko Ishikawa and Arai Shiro.

¹⁴ The following description is drawn from conversations with Rot Sophon (director of the Pok kiln and former student at the Department), Kang Proeung (professor of ceramics at the Department today), and the late Chhun Pok.

¹⁵ Over the last few years, the land containing these better kinds of clays has been bought and the new owners limit access to the clay deposits, often charging excessive prices for the clay or requiring purchases of large amounts. Today, the Ceramics Section sometimes mixes ordinary clay with white clay in a percentage mixture in order to keep some of the same heat resistancy without using too much of what is increasingly an expensive and rare material.

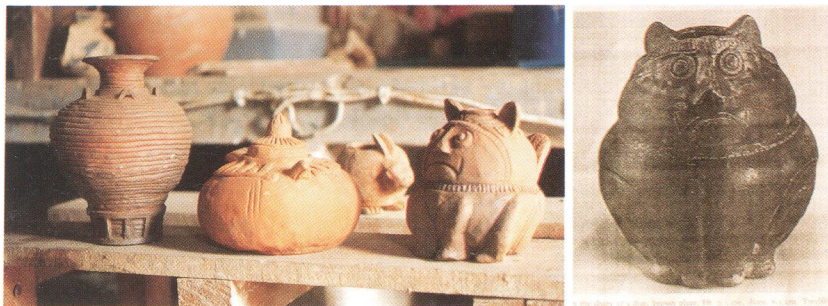


Figure 4. Hand-formed objects made by first year students of the Ceramics Section (left); The pot in the shape of a dog (right) as illustrated in the Section's xerox copy of Fujiwara's *Khmer Ceramics from the Kamratān Collection*. The student work on the far right is a copy of this piece.

almost exclusively on Angkorian ceramics found in well-worn and often photocopied examples of recent scholarship. The atelier has, for example, a xeroxed version of Fujiwara's *Khmer Ceramics from the Kamratān Collection* from which students copy forms such as the pot in the shape of a dog (figure 4).

Second year students in the Ceramics Section are introduced to the pottery wheel and learn to make basic cylinders and bowls (figure 5). Up until a few years ago, the Section only had kick wheels made in Cambodia and run by leg-power (figure 6); through a recent donation from Japan, the Ceramics Section now uses almost exclusively electric wheels.¹⁶ The goal of second year teaching is for students to be able to control production on the wheel in order to make symmetrical centered pieces. Upper level students make more complicated forms and larger vases.

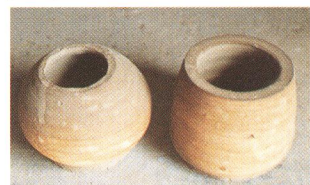


Figure 5. Basic forms made on the wheel by second year students

Advanced students also begin to learn firing and glazing techniques. The original wood burning kiln from the late 60s is still in use (figure 7) while an electric kiln, given by Japanese donors a few years ago, is used as well. The old kiln produces irregular and unpredictable glazed surfaces due to ash and smoke falling onto the objects inside the kiln as they are fired (figure 8). Although it takes up a great deal of space and requires considerable expenditure to buy the wood necessary to fire it, the old kiln is still used because the irregular and "artisanal" glazes it produces have taken on an aesthetic value for foreign buyers.

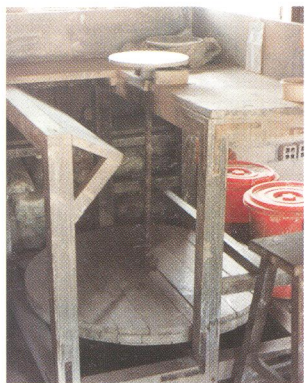


Figure 6. Leg-powered kick wheel

Under both Chhun Pok and Kang Proeung, the atelier has studied the hues and finishes of glazes found on pieces illustrated in recent publications on Khmer ceramics. The atelier then

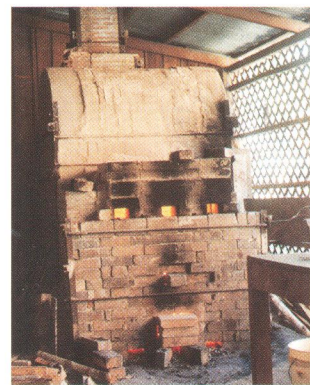


Figure 7. The wood-burning kiln, built in the late 1960s

¹⁶ The electric wheels were donated by the Nihon Tougei Ceramics Club in Japan. The donation was organized and facilitated by Yuko Ishikawa and Arai Shiro.

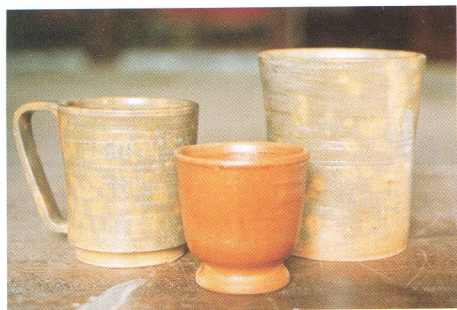


Figure 8. Cups fired in the old wood-burning kiln (right and left); the cup in the center was fired in the electric kiln.



Figure 9

Top left: samples of different colors of clay used for glazes; Bottom left: samples of fired glaze using rubber tree ash on ordinary clay; Right: samples of glaze made from quartz, granite, and wood ash fired on red clay (above) and Stung Chhay clay (below).

tries to recreate the pictured colors using local materials such as tree ash and the ash from husks of rice. Clays of various colors and rock powders are added to this ash and water mixture in order to produce a range of earthen colored glazes (Figure 9).

The research into glazing seems to be motivated by the desire to replicate as closely as possible models offered by Angkorian ceramics. This desire not only concerns the surface aspects of the objects (glazing, texture and decoration) but also and especially the forms. Indeed, the Ceramics Section reproduces the repertoire of shapes found in recent publications on Angkorian ceramics, copying these forms often so literally that, for example, Kang Proeung replicates the broken handle of a vase taken from a photograph in the Fujiwara book (figure 10). At first glance such procedures might seem like forgery, or at best mechanical and unconsidered repetitions. But looking more closely and considering the process of copying as a means to establish a base for the practice and teaching of ceramics through the reactualisation of valued lost objects, one can find meaning in mimicking the original. The reference to Angkorian ceramics not only situates these products within the most glorified era of national heritage but also sets the products of the Section into the sphere of high art. We can therefore understand why forms of the countryside such as the *ka-am* (water pot), *chhnang* (cooking pot), and *changkran* (cooking stove) are never referred to by the



Figure 10. Vase made by Kang Proeung (left); the same form pictured in Fujiwara (center); right: Fish pot copied (with a lid added) from the xeroxed copy of the Fujiwara kept in the atelier.

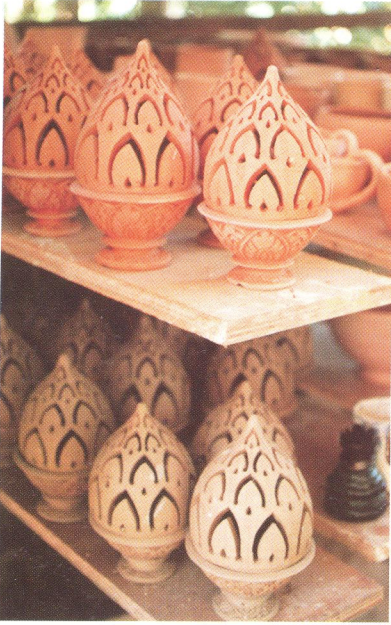


Figure 11. Lamps following Chhun Pok's design stored at Lor Pok

Section as possible models since, although they are clearly also a part of local traditions, they are considered ordinary objects of use rather than art objects to be viewed. Despite the necessity of establishing a foundation and a justification for practice, we still have to question whether a production such as that of the Ceramics Section is sustainable given that the majority of the objects it produces are copied from a past era and have little practical use in everyday contemporary Cambodian life. What is their destination and for whose culture are they made? Is their main function to serve as tourist souvenirs? Should they be exhibited as art? Worshipped as relics? Or find new purposes?

Shortly before he died, Chhun Pok established a private studio and kiln at Svay Chrum, the village of his birth. He intended this kiln to be a place where members of his family would work together, designing and producing ceramics which he would market under the name of "Lor Pok" or Pok kiln. He also hoped to be able eventually to give job opportunities to his neighbors and fellow villagers. His way of proceeding indicated an awareness of the necessity to expand definitions of ceramic practice while reevaluating its relation to institutions of formal training as well as considering socio-economic realities. His recent ceramic work pointed towards a process of

innovation as well. One of the few new objects which Chhun Pok designed was an oil lamp in the shape of a lotus bud (Figure 11). This functional object integrated the ornamental tradition of *kbach* with familiar forms of everyday life (the lotus bud). Even in the forms he copied, Chhun Pok began to change their surfaces, looking to other areas of traditional visual culture for resources, studying and then translating *kbach* ornamentation used in wood and stone sculpture to the surface of ceramics (Figure 12). These ornamental additions expanded the repertoire of geometric patterns copied from the past while keeping within a culturally specific language of forms. Today the sons of Chhun Pok and his nephew Rot Sophon continue these experiments at Lor Pok.

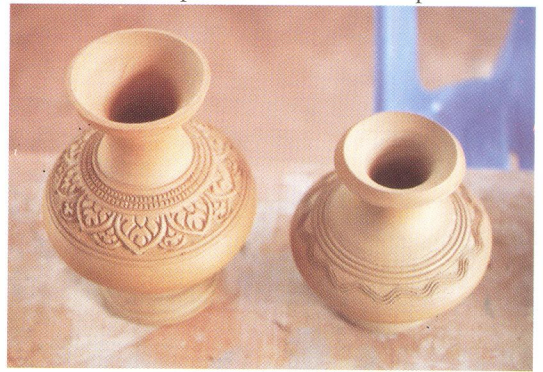


Figure 12. Vases at Lor Pok made by Pok Vannak: *kbach* decoration following Chhun Pok (left); decoration following ancient examples (right).

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