

Despite its long ceramic legacy, before 1967, the world was largely ignorant of Viet Nam's participation in the maritime ceramic trade, and awareness of its extent only began to emerge during the period that vendors in Indonesia began to sell ceramics from looted sites; shortly thereafter, they were also being dug up in the Philippines. While archaeologists despaired at the rapid destruction of so many sites, which made it impossible to place the finds in any accurate cultural context, it was soon evident that the finds came from China, Thailand, and Viet Nam. Understandably, many were incorrectly classified simply because they had never been seen before, and no one really knew how old they were.

Almost twenty years later, in 1983, overwhelming evidence uncovered the remains of a ceramic industry that had once flourished in Hai Duong Province. Investigations revealed that a whole string of kilns had operated along the banks of the Ke Sat River. Excavations begun in 1986 have increasingly recovered materials that match ceramics found at export sites. The Chu Dau–My Xa complex is now acknowledged to have been a major contributor to this ancient trade, and the adjacent Binh Giang district in the same province also contributed.

A greater window of opportunity for export came in the middle decades of the fifteenth century, following the short, bitter occupation of Viet Nam by Ming China (1407–27) and on the heels of the seven great maritime expeditions (1405–33) of Yongle (r. 1403–1424). These grand expeditions stimulated regional trade, yet following these diplomatic coups, Chinese policy changed abruptly to one of virtually proscribing private trade. This restriction remained in place until 1567. Viet Nam's trade expanded into this vacuum; in this period, its blue-and-white ware blossomed. It seems that for some decades, Viet Nam was a leading exporter of blue-and-white and polychrome ceramics, and the only country in Southeast Asia to do so.

Since Viet Nam and China were supplying the same overseas markets, obvious parallels in production exist. The most striking are dishes of large diameter, which both countries produced in response to West Asian market preferences (cat. no. 86h–i). Then, too, the concept of painting blue decorations on ceramics was an imported idea. The concept perhaps originates in West Asia's affinity for the blue of lapis lazuli, but it was first brought to technical perfection by potters in China using pigment derived from cobalt ore. Yet despite being next door to a large and powerful China that turned out enormous quantities of immaculately painted, brilliant ceramics, and a captive by nature of its geographic proximity to the ambit of this influence, in the middle decades of the fifteenth century, Viet Nam turned out a stream of painted ceramics with design concepts different from those previously encountered on East Asian ceramics and more in common with those on West Asian ceramics (fig. 5). These designs, painted with energetic brushwork and a masterful use of shading, dominate the center panel. This is a new development.

In this period, the first monochrome blue wares appear; a new genre in Viet Nam's repertoire. Laboratory tests indicate that pigments used on Viet Nam's fifteenth-century blue-and-white ware are either from ores from a different source than those presently known or from a source or sources that yielded different qualities of ores. These are cobalt-containing manganese ores fired in a reduction environment. Iron oxide was intentionally added to create changes in coloration ranging from very bright blue to dark greenish-blue; a very low iron content yielded bright blue, and a higher content, dark greenish-blue.⁶⁷

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