Those Celadon Blues and Greens, Yellows, Browns, Greys

Ray Hearn contemplates the term ‘Celadon’

The title of this paper paraphrases Those Celadon Blues (Robert Tichane, 1978), which implies that a formal definition of celadon as green is not so easy. Not all celadons are green or blue, and to complicate matters, not all green glazes are celadon. The terms soft, waxy, fat and unctuous apply to classic celadons but would be most unlikely to refer to a copper or chrome green glaze. When we use the term ‘celadon’, we as studio potters know exactly what we mean. It is a pale green glaze that was originally prized in China and South East Asia for its jade-like quality, and the glaze of the Longquans of the Song Dynasty, the classic celadons. However, the Chinese themselves did not ever use the term celadon, rather 瓺色, for a range of green or bluish green glazes, and so the use of the term may not be appropriate in this context.

Tichane’s title has a double meaning, because a degree of angst can attend the effort to create a good celadon, and especially to recreate an ancient celadon, certainly to those like myself of the pinch of this, splash of that, school of glaze chemistry. Celadon occurs in such a wide range of colours because even trace amounts of other minerals, for example titanium, or slight variations to the firing, will likely cause variation.

My feelings for celadon were to change dramatically at the start of my PhD studies in material culture, which focused on the ceramics production of Thailand at Si Satchanali. Here the ceramic archaeologist, Don Hein, first introduced me to the kiln site late one afternoon: The sight of thousands of shining wet 500 year-old celadon shards gleaming in the sunset was a significant emotional event. The hairs on my arms stood up, I was hooked; my life changed.

The colour range, from grey through to bright green was particularly impressive, though I was to realise that as most of these shards were wasters, under and over-firing accidents had contributed to that variety. In northern Thailand or Lanna, kilns and sites are scattered. In the world class Lanna collection, the author John Shaw notes colour from the green of young rice through yellow and brown. His favourite celadon is rain-cloud celadon, which isn’t green at all but grey.

During my research, these shards were to reveal much. Until production began here, mostly of celadon, no glazed wares at all had ever been made in Thailand. Because of the proximity to China it is held that: “It cannot be mere
coincidence that the only other countries in the world besides China to make high-fired ceramics in early times are all on or near the borders of China” (Brown 1988: 75).

Although the Si Satchanali potters were motivated by the Chinese celadons traded into Thailand from the 10th century, there can have been no actual direct technology transfer. Longquan celadons have a felspathic base (Tichane 1978), but Si Satchanali celadons have an ash base (Hein 2001) and are typically bluish and glassy green tending to craze. By triaxial blending I was able to confirm that a simple ash/lime/clay blend using the original Si Satchanali clay source, agricultural lime and bamboo ash gave a good celadon at the 70/80 per cent ash range. Even with an exact recipe, without similar glaze ingredients and kilns, it would have been extremely difficult, and an unlikely coincidence that Sawankhalok could experiment with, and then begin to produce a green glaze that could duplicate Longquan celadon.

During fieldwork, I talked with the one of the owners of a contemporary celadon factory, Baan Celadon (House of Celadon) in Chiang Mai, who thought that the word ‘celadon’ may have derived from the two Sanskrit words *sila* and *dhara* meaning stone and green respectively. Since the ware was unlikely to have been known historically as celadon in South East Asia, this would appear to be contemporary folk culture appealing to a largely Western tourist market.

In the 17th century the Dutch referred to it as *gor", and VOC (Dutch East India Company) records note that there was a market for it in India (but not apparently in Europe, where salt glaze and tinware were popular). Celadon was imported into Europe in small amounts no earlier than the 15th century, but had reached as far as the Middle East many centuries earlier. The Sultan of Egypt, Saladin, sent 40 pieces to the Sultan of Damascus in 1171, but it is a long stretch of the imagination to suggest that the 12th century word Saladin became, in 19th century Europe, celadon.

The name celadon is a particularly Western concept, made especially popular by 20th century studio potters and first appears in Europe in the 17th century. Celadon was a shepherd in a pastoral romance *L’Astree* by Honore d’Urife (Shaw 1989). The shepherd wore a green-grey costume, and so initially celadon was the name of a character in a play, and from this later came the secondary meaning of a colour as in Longfellow’s couplet. The emergence of the studio potter in the 20th century has caused the rise in popularity, and mystique, of celadon. Do I mean in this article to demystify the glaze? Not at all. Having looked into the bowls of Gwyn Hanssen-Pigott, currently on display at the National Gallery of Victoria, my love affair with celadon remains as strong as ever.

REFERENCES:

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