The exhibition “Illuminating the Past: Art and Artists of the Ban Chiang Project” ran from April through August 1995 at the University of Pennsylvania Museum. It was put together by Dr. Joyce White, Director of the Ban Chiang Project, Raymond Rorke, exhibit designer, Project volunteers and work-study students, and the artists whose works and words appeared in the exhibition.

Joyce, as she was referred to in the exhibition, devotes countless hours to training and supervising Ban Chiang Project artists to produce the high-quality illustrations necessary for publication of archaeological research. Since 1976 over 40 artists have worked for the Project. The exhibition showcased their fine work and explained its importance to archaeology, with a behind-the-scenes look at how these artists worked and felt. A small excerpt of the exhibition is presented here. The material illustrated dates to between 3600 B.C. and A.D. 300.

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**FIG. 1A, B**

Q: “Why not just photograph the objects?”

A: “A camera doesn’t have a brain, it can’t make choices about what is important, or differentiate parts with the same hue but different meaning, or reconstruct a fragmentary object, or simultaneously show the shape of the object and its internal structure.”

Pottery vessel from Burial 7; see also Figure 12a. (a) Photograph by William Kobler, (b) drawing by Jean Gardner
PARTNERSHIP

The main archaeological drawings done on site are horizontal views called plans and vertical views called sections. Both are usually drawn in pencil on graph paper with the help of tools like meter sticks, tape measures, and plumb bobs. Thousands of drawings will be made to illustrate the Ban Chiang excavations. Artists will learn an exactness of illustration often not taught in art schools, and archaeologists will form a visual vocabulary with which to describe and compare the site. Ultimately, archaeologists and artists must work as partners to present the new information meaningfully.

The most important aspect of archaeological documentation is context: where things were found in the earth in horizontal and vertical relationship with each other. Site plans aim to show remains in situ (exactly as found in the earth) during roughly one period of time.

Site plans of Ban Chiang can be incredibly complex. The site was used alternately as a cemetery and a living village, but a single excavation layer may have evidence of both functions. For better clarity, we want to illustrate each layer’s cemetery and habitation evidence separately. Ultimately we expect to do about 50 site plans from all the levels at the site.

Sections are vertical views of an excavation. They show the depth and sequence of materials and deposits layered in the ground. Because older material is generally deeper than more recent material, sections can illustrate the sequence of time periods, with each layer of material corresponding approximately to a period in time. The layers usually differ in color, texture, and thickness, and so sections often resemble “layer cakes.”

At Ban Chiang, the layers were often not clear and distinct, but graded into each other. Because they were very thick, each layer might include long periods of time. Even so, you can still see burials, postholes, pots from different periods, and changes in the soil from top to bottom in the sections.

Measured plans and sections like this pencilled one were drawn on graph paper at the site. But some sections had to be drawn from photographs or rough sketches at the end of the Ban Chiang dig, a wall collapsed and it was too dangerous to stand in the square to do a carefully measured drawing.

The final inked illustrations of the artifacts and contexts of an archaeological site are published in reports and articles on the excavation. A scholarly report must present the archaeological evidence in a manner that convinces other scholars of the interpretation of the data. A report also provides a visual basis for archaeologists to compare sites. Illustrations are essential to the ongoing process of documentation and communication.

Artist: “I was at the site for 6 weeks. We were always busy, which was good.”

Art and Artists of the Ban Chiang Project
Artifacts from daily living were most likely used on the raised house floors. Refuse was swept off the porches onto the ground below while chickens and pigs wandered about under the houses. Pottery might also have reached the ground by accidently falling off the raised floor (hence our "Splatt" Theory). Once on the ground, the artifacts may have been further kicked about by humans and animals, coming to rest in a chaotic pattern.

**ARTIFACTS**

Detailed artifact illustrations are particularly important for a new research area such as Southeast Asia. They document the range, variation, and condition of materials recovered from an ancient society. Because Ban Chiang artifacts were handmade and therefore diverse and unusual, we chose a stippling technique to render them. This allows us to depict the subtle textures and features unique to each artifact. Schematic (highly simplified) drawings lack the detail necessary to document telling surface features.

Artifact drawings begin with a scaled pencil study done on centimeter graph paper. The scale is often 1:1 ("life size"). A different scale is used to enlarge an object in order to show small details or to reduce a large object to a more manageable size.

Joyce: "One of my hardest jobs supervising is getting the artists to conform to a standard technique and style, and to measure accurately—it's the opposite of their art school."

Joyce: "There are some general conventions, or rules, in archaeological illustration, such as using a light source from the top left. However, each excavation tends to develop its own conventions. For a new research area such as Southeast Asia, we find we develop some conventions as we go along, having little to guide us."

**THE "SPLATT" THEORY**

Making sense of the remains of daily life is a particular challenge for a site like Ban Chiang. No intact houses were excavated, almost no activity areas were found. Instead, the remains of daily life consisted mostly of holes—probably for houses built on stilts. Spreads of small pottery sherds, animal bone, and other discarded artifacts were probably refuse "kicked around" on the ground.
POTTERY

The study of pottery is fundamental to archaeology. Because it endures in the earth through the ages, pottery allows us to follow a trail back through time, giving us a "ceramic chronology." Different types of pots can be linked to different time periods by their features, and published illustrations of pot types are essential tools for archaeologists to compare sites in a region.

The Ban Chiang Project is lucky to have many "whole" pots excavated from human graves. In reality, Ban Chiang vessels that had never been broken are rare; many pots had been deliberately broken over the bodies at the time of burial. We had over 500 pots to illustrate, but most of them had to be painstakingly reconstructed first.

Pottery illustrations must convey the pot's shape, surface texture, decorative techniques, and cross section. One of our major goals was to accurately depict "cordmarking," a common pottery feature throughout prehistoric Southeast Asia. Almost all Ban Chiang pots have cordmarking—impressions of cord pressed into the soft surface of a pot while it was being made. The size of the cord and the angle of the marks gives each vessel its own distinctive pattern. The artist can capture in ink cordmarking that might be too delicate to show up clearly in a photograph.
BURIALS

A grave is like a time capsule, a sealed context where everything was placed together at one time. Skeletons and objects in the grave provide important information on individuals and their societies in ancient times. Clear illustrations are essential for archaeologists to understand and compare ancient funerary rituals.

Ban Chiang graves that contain groups of bodies or large numbers of artifacts are a challenge to illustrate clearly. We began by illustrating "layers" of the grave—individual burials and objects. The final illustration is a composite of all the individuals in the group along with grave goods. When published, each skeleton and artifact in these drawings will be fully labeled.

A single skeleton tells us about an individual's age, sex, health, and lifestyle. Surrounding the skeleton, objects give more clues to an individual's wealth, status, and social role. Overall, the arrangement of skeletons and objects in the grave gives us a picture of the scene of the burial ritual.

Ultimately, a set of graves from the same time period can give us an even larger picture of the society as a whole.

To draw burials, information had to be compiled from many sources: original field drawings, black and white photographs, slides, field notes documenting which bones had been found, as well as anatomical aids like Gray's Anatomy and real skeletons.

THE DISCOVERY AND EXCAVATION OF BAN CHIANG

The discovery of ancient Ban Chiang happened quite by accident. In 1966, Stephen Young, a junior at Harvard and the son of a former United States ambassador to Thailand, was visiting Ban Chiang in the course of sociological research. One day while walking down a village road, he tripped over a tree root and came face to face with rows of pots emerging from the earth. When he realized that he had fallen on an archaeological site, he alerted the appropriate authorities.

Northeast Thailand and Ban Chiang were suddenly thrust into the archaeological spotlight. In 1973 the Fine Arts Department of Thailand and the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology agreed to a joint program to excavate at Ban Chiang. Dr. Chester F. Gorman of the University of Pennsylvania Museum and Poit Chaoemwongsa of the Fine Arts Department of Thailand co-directed the excavations. After the untimely death of Dr. Gorman in 1981, Joyce White, a student of his, was named principal investigator. Dr. White continues to be responsible for the analysis and publication of the Ban Chiang excavations.

Two major excavations were undertaken in 1974 and 1975. Excavations at Ban Chiang were especially challenging because the mound was entirely covered by a living village and because looters in search of Ban Chiang pottery had thoroughly disturbed the site. At the end of the second field season, several tons of packaged and labeled cultural materials were shipped to the University of Pennsylvania Museum for analysis.
"Ban Chiang is without question the most important prehistoric settlement so far discovered in Southeast Asia."

UNESCO World Heritage Committee, December 1992

FRIENDS OF BAN CHIANG

In December of 1992 Ban Chiang was designated a World Heritage Site by UNESCO and thereby joined 377 other sites around the world judged to be worthy of special attention and protection. The Friends of Ban Chiang was founded in celebration of this honor.

Friends are a support group for the Ban Chiang Project at the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology. Thus far, funds raised by the Friends are enabling the Project to apply a state-of-the-art dating technique to the site. The new dates should provide a more accurate understanding of the chronology of the Ban Chiang cultural tradition and will ensure that the Ban Chiang Project continues its legacy of excellence in Thai archaeology.

Friends receive a newsletter, the Ban Chiang UpDate, and invitations to special presentations on the Museum’s research in Southeast Asia. For more information, or to become a Friend, please write (or call):

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