

16. Vietnamese Stoneware Jar

Height: 21.3 cm. (8 3/8 in)
Diameter: 21.5 cm. (8 1/2 in.)
Ly dynasty
11th-early 13th century A.D.

Acquired in Japan

The heavily potted stoneware jar is barrel-shaped, roughly cylindrical with slightly bowed sides, a wide mouth and an elaborate openwork pedestal-style base. The body is divided into twelve upright lotus-petal lappets defined by deep, double grooves, the petals casually outlined and the grooves infilled with iron pigment. A collar comprised of multiple lotus petals carved in bold relief projects below the everted mouthrim while *nyi* motifs are incised on a carved saw-tooth band below, all casually dabbed with iron-brown. The interiors of the bold lotus lappets are undecorated. Their starkness produces a powerful contrast and foil to the complexity of the décor above and below where a notched band surrounds the vessel providing a visual boarder setting off the pedestal beneath. A circle of carved upright lotus petals, with smaller ones below pointing downward, cushion the vessel above the high foot where ten rectangular apertures, in imitation of a carved wooden stand, are carved above the stepped base where a row of impressed circlets decorate one tread. On the exterior of the jar the ivory-colored glaze is rather glassy, crazed or crackled throughout, pooling to a greenish tint in depressions and forming thick olive-green droplets in other areas. The glaze extends down the sides of the interior and is patchy and thinner at the bottom. The deeply recessed base, enclosed within a wide foot, is unglazed with drips of the glaze seeping onto the off-white colored stoneware that has burned a buff color where exposed.



During the early 11th century A.D. a native Vietnamese dynasty, the Ly (A.D. 1009-1225), came into power, throwing off the mantle of Chinese domination and initiating a period of cultural independence, one well-expressed in the art of the potter. Lessons learned during centuries past--the production of high-fired ceramics from China, for example, or decorative modes from India and neighbors closer to home in South East Asia--continued to serve artists in their newest endeavors, represented here by a vessel of powerful form and design.

This vessel shape is sometimes referred to as an urn, reflecting discoveries in funerary contexts, and also as Thanh Hoa ware, based on excavations. Thanh Hoa was the southernmost limit of Chinese incursion and a domination that lasted overall from the first until later in the tenth century. It was in this area where these vessels were first discovered and although later finds indicate a more widespread production and distribution, the name stuck.¹

While the representative example here has a straightforward robustness and appeal, it can be characterized in the same breath as elegant and even courtly. The marriage of sculptural strength with ceramic grace was a quite successful one: smooth surfaces in conjunction with crisp modeling, light and flowing body lines juxtaposed with sharply projecting details. The decorative parameters within the group of barrel-shaped vessels to which the present belongs, however, are somewhat broad. Examples range from the extremely restrained (limited secondary bands and flat bases) (figs. 1-2) to various degrees of complexity

(secondary bands and pedestals) (fig. 3) to those with inlaid designs, produced by way of a highly innovative technique developed by Vietnamese potters (fig. 4).²

The dominance of the lotus-petal motif in the Buddhist world of the Ly dynasty is not surprising and associates the ceramic décor with the world of art in Southeast Asia, India and China where Buddhism had such a powerful impact and where lotus flower and petal designs are so prominent. The sharp cutting of the motifs on the Vietnamese ceramics has been attributed to the influence of Southeast Asian metalware, but it might also have resulted from imitating stone sculpture in a manner similar to the influence of sculpture on 5th-century Chinese ceramic design. The possible influence of these Vietnamese wares on some unusual Song dynasty ceramics from Guangdong has yet to be explored.

1. See John Stevenson and John Guy, *Vietnamese Ceramics: A Separate Tradition*, Chicago, 1997, fig. 2, p. 111 illustrating three urns *in situ* at Thanh Hoa during an excavation in 1930. Two of the urns have covers.

2. See Nancy Tingley, *Arts of Ancient Viet Nam: From River Plain to Open Sea*, no. 76 and *Kaikodo Journal* XI, "In the Company of Spirits," Spring 1999, nos. 70 and 71, pp. 212-214 and 314-316.



Fig. 1: Vietnamese stoneware jar with carved lotus-petal collar, 11th-12th century A.D., Nezu Museum, Tokyo, after *Sekai Tōji Zenshū*, vol. 16 (Annam), Tokyo, 1984, pl. 315.



Fig. 2: Vietnamese stoneware jar with carved lotus-petal collar and cover, 11th-13th century A.D., after *Sekai Tōji Zenshū*, vol. 16 (Annam), Tokyo, 1984, pl. 4.



Fig. 3: Vietnamese stoneware jar with openwork base and carved lotus-petal above base and cover, 11th-13th century A.D., excavated from Thanh-hoa, Vietnam, Musees Royaux d'Art et d'Historie, Brussels, after *Sekai Tōji Zenshū*, vol. 16 (Annam), Tokyo, 1984, pl. 6.



Fig. 4: Vietnamese stoneware jar with carved lotus, openwork base, and grown inlay design, 12th-14th century A.D., private collection, after John Stevenson and John Guy, *Vietnamese Ceramics: A Separate Tradition*, Chicago, 1997, pl. 70.