

Behind the Scenes

ILLUMINATING THE PAST:
ART AND ARTISTS
OF THE BAN CHIANG PROJECT

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.

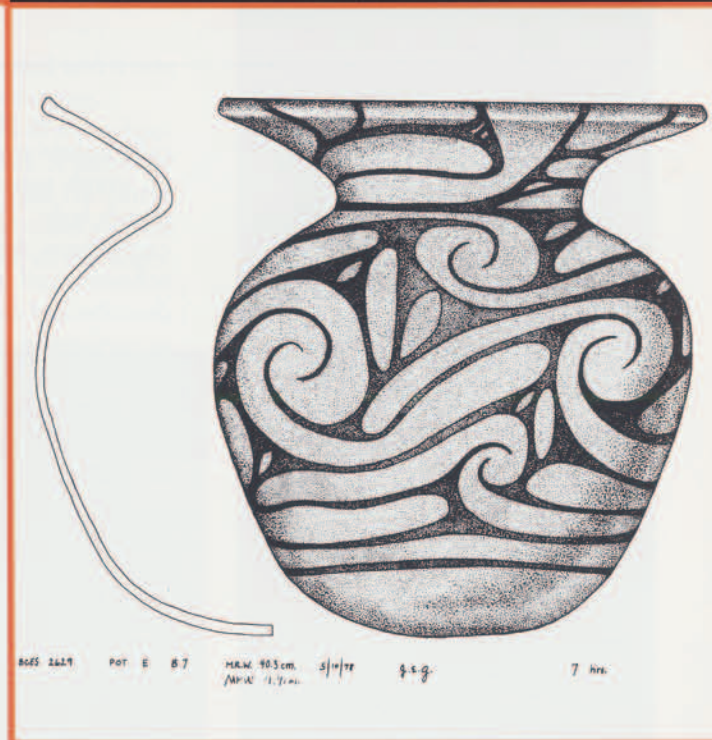
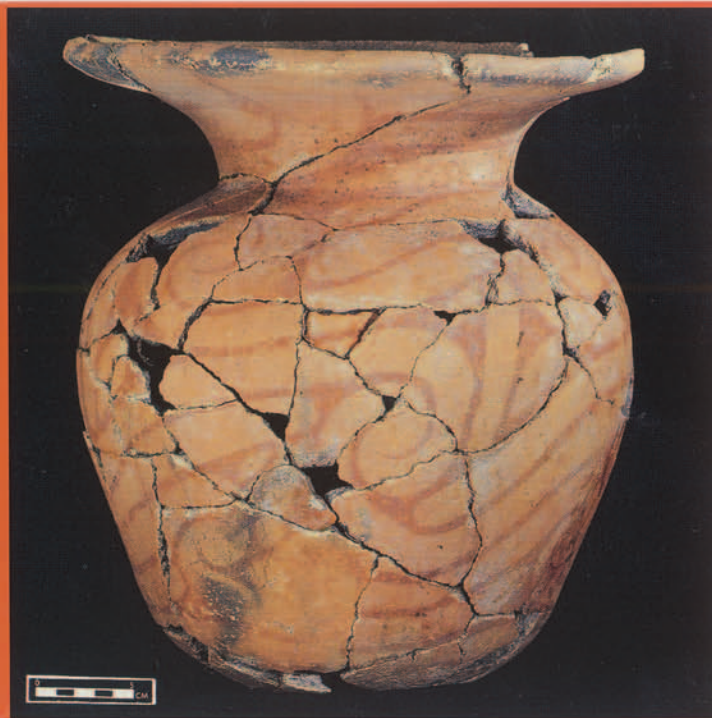


FIG. 1A, B

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

FIG. 2 Excavation is a process of destruction: as a site is dug away, it is lost forever. It is only with meticulous records—written notes, photographs, and illustrations—that the archaeologist can reconstruct the site for publication.

A square under excavation at Ban Chiang; photograph courtesy of the Ban Chiang Project



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 penciled one were drawn on graph paper at the site. But some sections had to be drawn from photographs

Artist: "Because site plans were so complex, Joyce had to be the eyes while I was the hands. We were lucky that we got along so well and trusted each other."

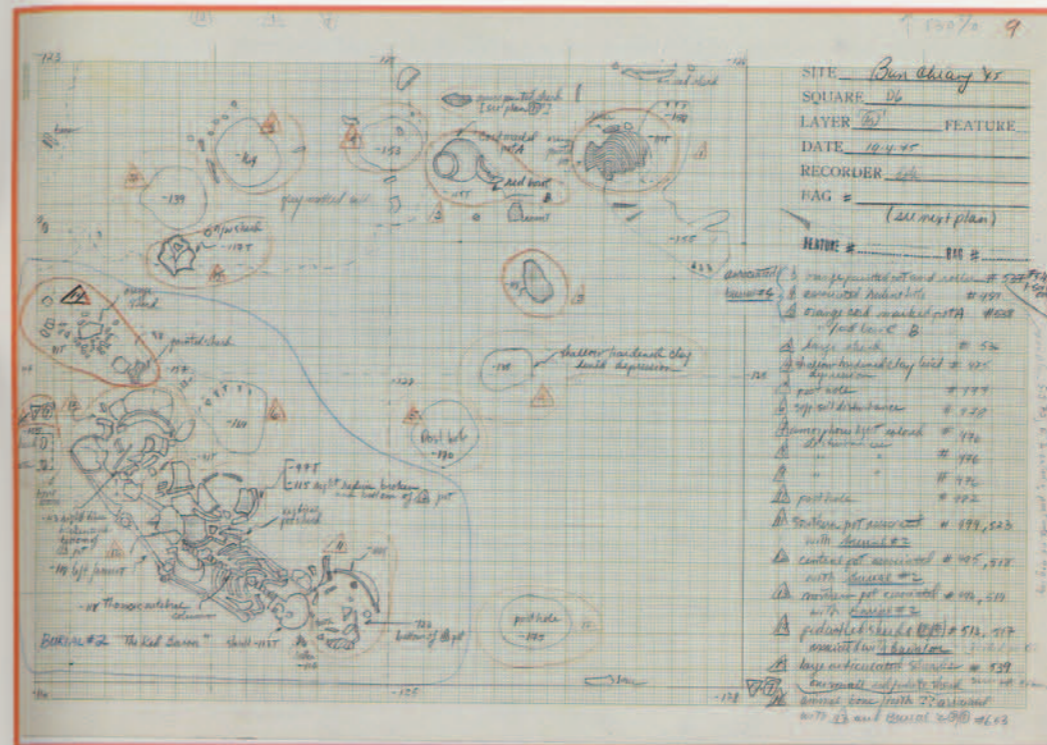


FIG. 3 Detailed scale drawing is one of the basic means to record a site. Photographs, while also important, cannot substitute for the measured precision and annotation of the field drawing.

Field drawing of Square D6, Ban Chiang; courtesy of the Ban Chiang Project

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: "Joyce and I spent HOURS sitting on the floor of the dark corridor outside the lab, looking at burial slides projected on the wall. We were trying to see which bones were present, exactly where grave goods were placed, proper proportions, where disturbances cut the burial. Photos give us a confusing jumble of information—our job is to articulate the information to make it useful and understandable in a series of drawings."



FIG. 4 A house in the present-day village of Ban Chiang.

Photograph by Joyce White

FIG. 5 Artist's conception of the formation of the archaeological site at Ban Chiang.

Drawing by Ardeth Anderson

Artist: "Archaeologists think that the people of ancient Ban Chiang lived in houses built on stilts—just like the modern day villagers. The presence of numerous vertical cylindrical holes at the site is one piece of evidence for houses on stilts. Another is the absence of distinct living floors. When these stilted houses disintegrated, nothing of them was left for the archaeologists but darkened cylinders of soil."

Artist: "As Joyce described how the site of Ban Chiang came to be, how materials were deposited in the earth and built up over time, I wanted to try another kind of illustration—one that was more imaginative than technical, that would help others visualize the ancient site 'holistically.'"



THE "SPLATT" THEORY

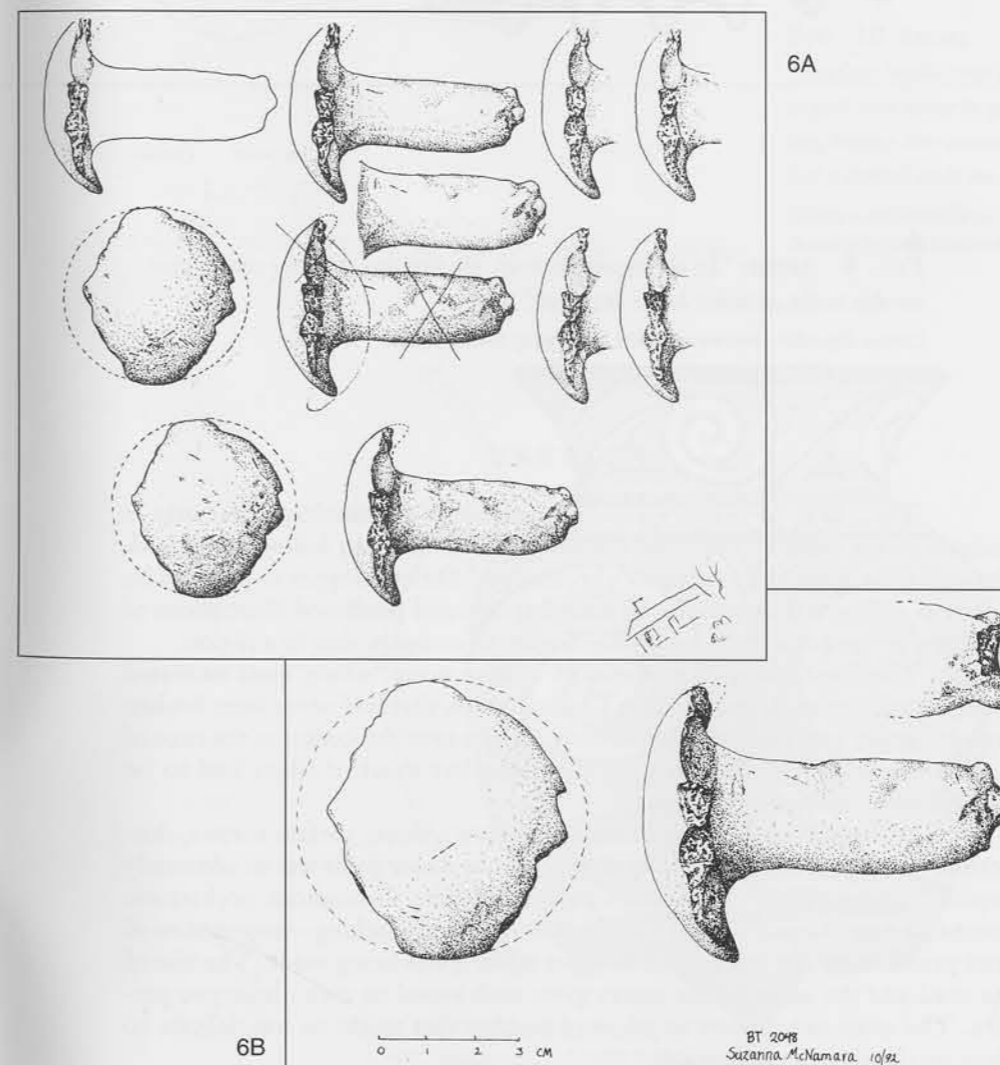
Making sense of the remains of daily life is a particular challenge for a site like Ban Chiang. No intact houses were excavated, almost no activity areas were found. Instead, the remains of daily life consisted mostly of holes—probably for houses built on stilts. Spreads of small pottery sherds, animal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

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 accidentally 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 allowed 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."

FIG. 6A On tracing paper, the artist practices stippled versions. These warmup sketches help the artist to see the object's details and to work out visual solutions for depicting textures and contours. Joyce has the artists make a reduced xerox of their drawing to help visualize how it will look when published. Comments are noted in pencil.

Clay pestle, used for shaping pots; drawing by Suzanna McNamara

FIG. 6B A final stippled artifact drawing is done on vellum.

Drawing by Suzanna McNamara

Artist: "By the time I do a final I really KNOW the object, every nook and cranny."

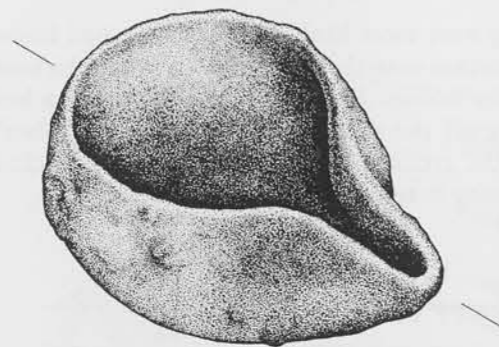
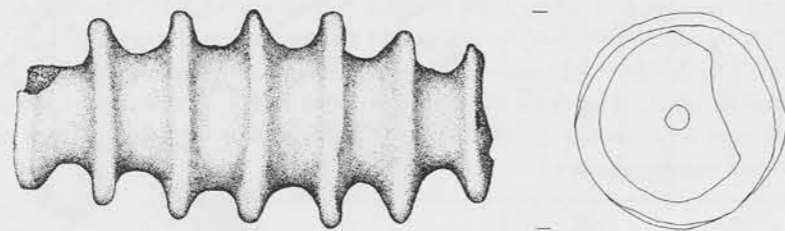


FIG. 7 Artist: "I rely on Joyce to check my measurements and guide my rendering to produce a balance of detail and clarity."
Clay crucible, used for melting bronze; drawing by Jean Gardner

11/77 Jean Gardner



0 5 10 cm

BCE 24/1775 S. BROADDUS

FIG. 8 Artist: "To the casual observer, the finished drawing should give no clue to the countless hours invested."
Carved clay roller, function unknown; drawing by Scott Broaddus

POTTERY

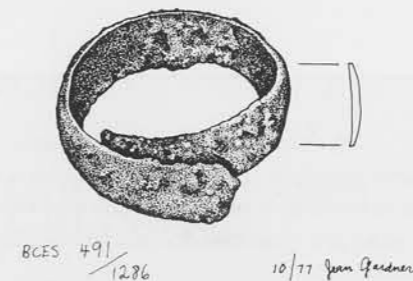
The study of pottery is fundamental to archaeology. Because it endures in the earth through the ages, pottery allows us to follow a trail back through time, giving us a "ceramic chronology." Different types of pots can be linked to different time periods by their features, and published illustrations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

Artist: "I found the process of stippling meditative."

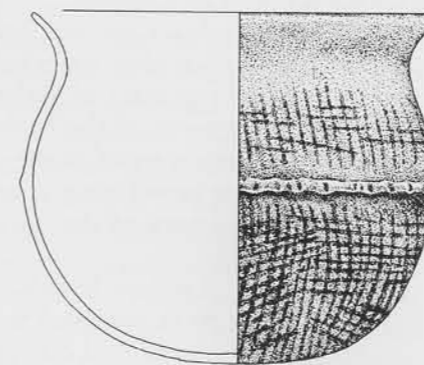
Joyce: "Getting a consistent style among many artists is easier with stippling than with crosshatching, another technique of archaeological illustration."



BCE 491/1286

10/77 Jean Gardner

1/2



0 5 10 cm

BCE 2210 POT C B 52 M.R.W. 16 c.m.

J.G.

2 1/2 hrs.

FIG. 10 Artist: "Heavier-handed marks on pots were easier to portray because they actually had a depth I could see."
Pottery vessel from Burial 52; drawing by Jean Gardner



BCE 796 BY POT F M.W. 21.8

10/77 BCE 796 BY POT F M.W. 21.8

M.W. 26.8

J.G.

BCE 796

FIG. 9 Joyce: "Artifact illustration combines the exactness of drafting with the subjective interpretation of art."
Bronze bangle, jewelry for adults and children; drawing by Jean Gardner

Artist: "I tend to imagine a lot. But learning to draw the artifacts as they are, not as I imagine them, actually helps me see life in general as it is."

FIG. 11 Artist: "I think I've made as many dots as stars in the Milky Way."
Pottery vessel from Burial 9; drawing by Jean Gardner

Artist: "Just measuring these fragile, fragmentary, and sometimes distorted vessels was a challenge and took two of us. Often we had to reconstruct the pot on paper."

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 ritual.

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.

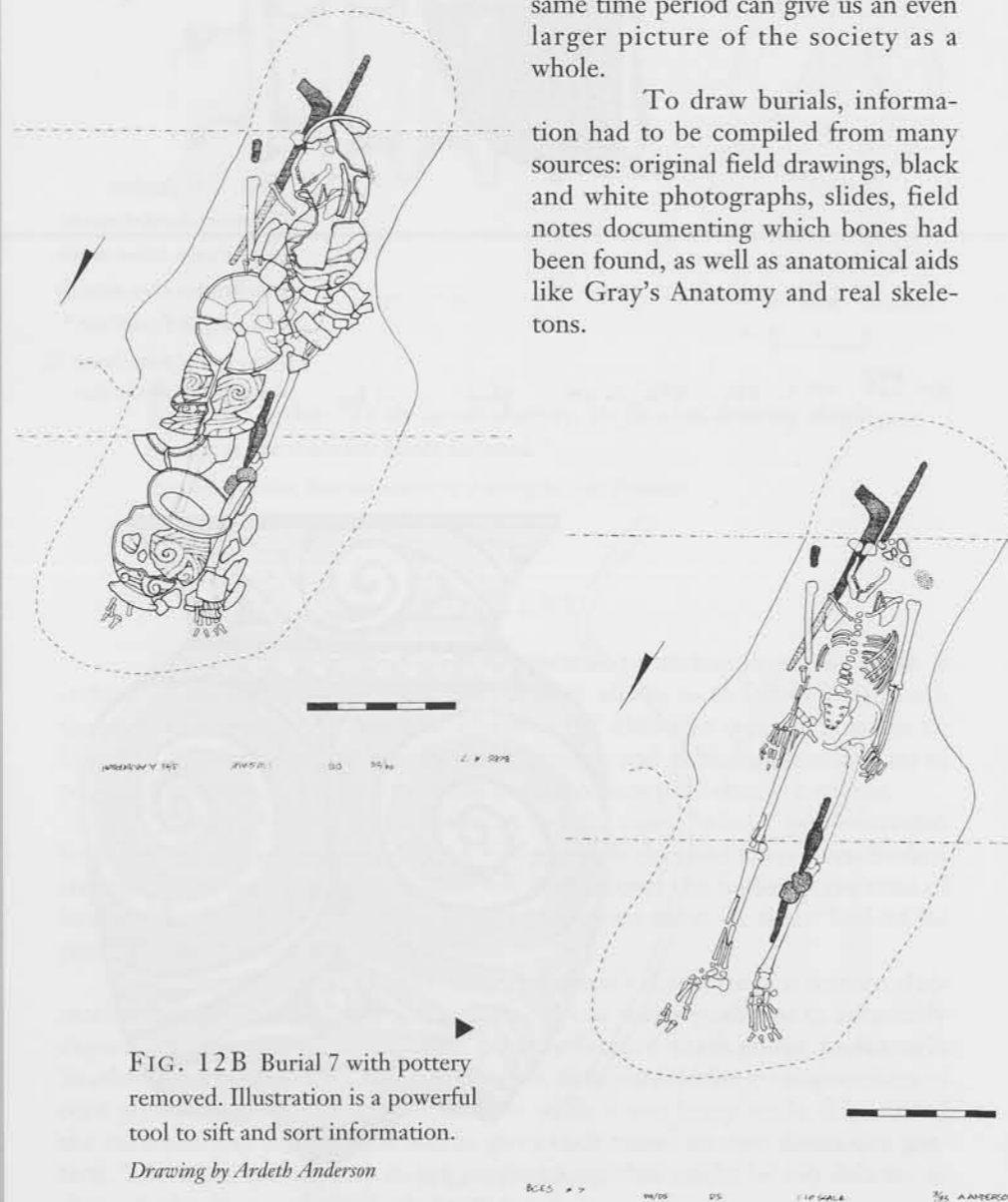


FIG. 12B Burial 7 with pottery removed. Illustration is a powerful tool to sift and sort information.

Drawing by Ardetb Anderson

Artist: "It was a challenge to make the skulls look serious, not laughing. The trick was to just draw what you see without letting your imagination enhance it."

FIG. 12A Burial 7. This 50 year old man, elderly for the time, was surrounded with grave goods. Eight painted pots and iron tools lay over the body. One tool with a wooden handle lay under the body. A pile of rice lay next to his head and remains from a bird lay on his neck. A different schematic texture was used to represent each material.

Drawing by Ardetb Anderson

Artist: "Which body was on top of which was critical, and figuring it all out from the field plans was extremely confusing. I had to rely on Joyce to designate and check where each grave was to be placed in the drawing so that the relationships and sequence were accurate and clear."

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 rims of pots emerging from the dirt path. 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 Pisit Charoenwongsa 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.



FIG. 13 Pisit Charoenwongsa and Chester Gorman, co-directors of the excavations at Ban Chiang.

Photograph courtesy of the Ban Chiang Project

FIG. 14 Joyce White, current Director of the Ban Chiang Project.

Photograph by Ardeth Anderson



“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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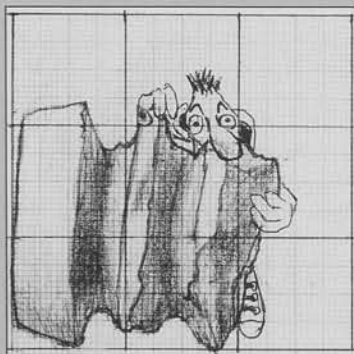


FIG. 15 “When Joyce Isn’t Looking.” One of the rich crop of doodles by artists of the Ban Chiang “Gang.”