



ROXANNA MAUDE BROWN
1946 to 2008
IN MEMORIAM

A Personal Reminiscence

A macabre, brutal and wretchedly cruel tragedy has hit both the surviving son, Jaime, and wider family of the late Roxanna Brown, Director of The Southeast Asian Ceramics Museum at Bangkok University, Thailand. She travelled to Seattle on 8th May 2008 from Bangkok as an invited distinguished expert speaker to deliver a paper “The Sea Trade from China to Southeast Asia” on her specialist ceramic field at the University of Washington Symposium on 10th May 2008 “Maritime Asia in the Early Modern World”. She was detained at Seattle airport on arrival and remanded in custody at the Federal Detention Centre in Seattle, where after five days she died most likely in considerable pain and alone in imprisoned isolation from the free and happy world she knew.

Federal Agents arrested her on arrival at Seattle on a fiat from the State of

California where Federal and State investigators are preparing charges against a gallery in Los Angeles which has allegedly been importing antique artefacts from Thailand and selling them to residents in Southern California at inflated prices to enable the purchasers to donate the objects to California museums and claim substantial tax deduction benefits. Apparently, the (extremely peripheral) involvement of Roxanna related to the alleged use of her digital electronic signature for the completion or authentication of object appraisal forms for fraudulent valuation at the inflated tax deduction levels in issue. As will be made clear below, the likelihood of her culpable guilt in such an offence is remote in the overall context of the kind of person that she was. She was formally charged with the offence alleged to have been committed by her and she was remanded in custody pending extradition to California from Washington State. Caught up in an unimaginable complexity of formal and rigid bu-

reaucracy with a likely forward time frame of months if not years to resolve, Thailand, her friends, her museum and above all her son were receding and sinking further and further away.

On Monday, the 12th May 2008 she developed symptoms of extreme ill health and we do not currently have accurate information as to what exactly happened between that time and what has been reported as her death at approximately 2:30 am on the morning of Wednesday, the 14th May 2008.

Many people, including her brother from the family seat in Chicago and friends in Seattle, are taking all appropriate steps to identify the true facts of this appalling story and all who knew Roxanna – and many who did not know her but knew her work – will be alert to continue to press for the fullest and fairest possible judicial examination of all the surrounding circumstances.

Roxanna Brown came to South East Asia as a journalist graduate from Columbia University in 1968. She worked from Saigon and travelled around what was then South Vietnam in the early 1970s taking an ever deeper interest into the traditional ceramics of Vietnam and visiting the identified kiln sites.

I first met her in 1975 when she was living and working in Hong Kong but maintaining a very sound interest and expertise in the ceramics of South East Asia. At that time, I had developed an interest in the mediaeval ceramics of Thailand and we had many interesting conversations about pieces that I had acquired through travels throughout South East Asia and particularly in the Philippines and Indonesia where large scale opening of burial sites of the Sukothai and Sawankolok periods were revealing a wide range of Thai ceramic pieces.

She was intimately involved in the arrangement and cataloguing of the second ever exhibition put on by the then newly formed Oriental Ceramic Society of Hong Kong on the ceramics of South East Asia

– an excellent coverage of the subject whose catalogue remains a standard work. In the late 1970s she developed the concept of an antique fair in Hong Kong and worked together with financing assistance to put the idea into reality. The consequence was the first, and then the second, ever antique fairs held in Hong Kong at the Excelsior Hotel and the Furama Hotel in two consecutive years which were both remarked as a great success. However, through no fault of Roxanna, they were ahead of their time and further financing was not available and the concept died. Roxanna left Hong Kong and moved to Thailand in order to be nearer the study base of her developed expertise. She married Joe Ngerntongdee and they had a son, Jaime.

Her marriage was not successful and the greatest personal tragedy was inflicted upon her in the early 1980s when Jaime was a young child. In a busy road in Bangkok, Roxanna was crushed by an enormous truck which pulverized her lower body. She spent many months in hospital and emerged with very little

use in her left leg, a pronounced limp and the need for the use of a stick to support walking. Despite these enormous difficulties, she took great pride in bringing up Jaime as a single mother and continuing the research and the studies which by this time had already brought her fame to scholars and collectors worldwide in her chosen subject of South East Asian ceramics. In 2002 she began serious discussions with Khun Surat Osathanugrah, the founder of the Bangkok University at a huge site north of the Don Muang Airport who was also an avid collector of South East Asian ceramics, principally from Thailand. Through very wide purchasing over many years, Khun Surat developed the leading collection of Thai ceramics in the world and was keen to make his collection available through appropriate supporting scholarship and research to the world in a purpose built museum at Bangkok University. What a fortunate chance it was that discussions between Khun Surat and Roxanna led to her appointment as the first director of the South East Asian Ceramics Museum

of Bangkok University which triumphantly opened its doors to the public in early 2005.

Having worked with a number of significant writers and scholars associated with leading museums around the world from the Powerhouse Museum in Sydney to the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, Roxanna was well versed in what makes a modern museum run in ways that are of interest and relevance to the public as well as the support and continuation of research. It was a wonderful moment when, having established an active Friends Group to take from her much of the load of administrative organization in public outreach for the museum, she was able to develop and issue one of her principal dreams, the first South East Asian Ceramics Museum Newsletter as Volume 1 No. 1 in September 2004. This newsletter distributed effortlessly by email has since that date been an immensely valuable and interesting collation of published news and views about research and interesting discoveries and developments in the study of

South East Asian ceramics. She took the deepest personal interest in both the design and content of the Newsletter and its frequent publication, sometimes monthly, sometimes bi-monthly, was an event gratefully received throughout the ceramic interest world. I am happy to record that 27th May 2008, nearly three weeks after her death, my computer screen flashed and received the last of the Museum regular newsletters that Roxanna edited and finalized before here fateful trip to Seattle. The attributed list of over fifty reporters published on the masthead, speaks loudly in praise of a quality publication of the advancement of Asian ceramic knowledge.

From modest beginnings and always with an extremely quiet and softly spoken mien, Roxanna had climbed to the top of her chosen professional tree. Reserved and low key in dress, appearance and expression, she was the careful and gentle epitome of the committed scholar whose original thinking and determina-

tion to communicate led her and her museum into the forefront of advancement of knowledge in the field. She jealously and fiercely guarded the integrity of the ceramic cultures and sites of South East Asia. Apart from certain mandatory inclusions at the insistence of Khun Surat, the selection and arrangement of pieces on view at the museum were those of Roxanna alone and the display of the Khun Surat collection in the museum is stunning. Here, at the pinnacle of her ambition, she was able to develop the Museum, the Friends Group, the Newsletter and the world into a coherent and eager platform of increased knowledge. The qualities of constant and quiet determination also marked her attitude to her many friends and admirers of which I have been proud to be numbered as one for over 30 years. Only last year, Roxanna came to Hong Kong to deliver at a symposium "Chinese Ceramics and the Maritime Trade Pre-1700" at the University of Hong Kong Museum and Art Gallery on the 16th June 2007 a paper on her

brilliant and definitive dating analysis of the ceramic contents of the scattered jigsaw pieces of discovered Song, Yuan, Ming and Qing Dynasty ship wrecks recovered from all over the South China Sea. This landmark work drew a much more accurate picture of the historical reality both of the developmental dating of the mix of domestic Chinese, Vietnamese and Thai ceramic production and of the directly related international seaborne trade in those goods than had ever been possible before. By the cruellest irony, it was her pre-eminent leadership in this research that took her to the Seattle Symposium and her death.

Also in 2007, Roxanna kindly agreed with Michael Martin, President of our Society, to receive at her museum on 18th May 2007 and to guide a group from the Society. That visit was not able to take place and was postponed to a date later in this year or early in the next. As we now sadly know this opportunity to hear many interesting facts and fables from Roxanna will never happen.

At the age of 62 she was at the prime of her academic achievement and fame with many years lying ahead of her of valuable contribution to the advancement of knowledge in her field in which she was a hugely proven giant talent. Through an inconceivably brutal and surely irrelevant “accident” of bureaucratic reality wearing its most shocking, insensitive and unresponsive armour plated clothes, this life was imprisoned and died. We, her friends, students of her intelligent, fully committed, clever and consistent work in the field, her 92 year old mother, her son, Jaime, and the world at large, have lost a friend, teacher, active scholarly contributor and mother of the greatest and most constant value on the sacrificial altar of an expediency which bears no relation whatsoever to the measure of deepest loss. We salute not only her memory but also her work and writings which represent the inviolate contribution of her life’s endeavour and endure as an exemplary pedestal for future generations to follow in the field.

ANGUS FORSYTH