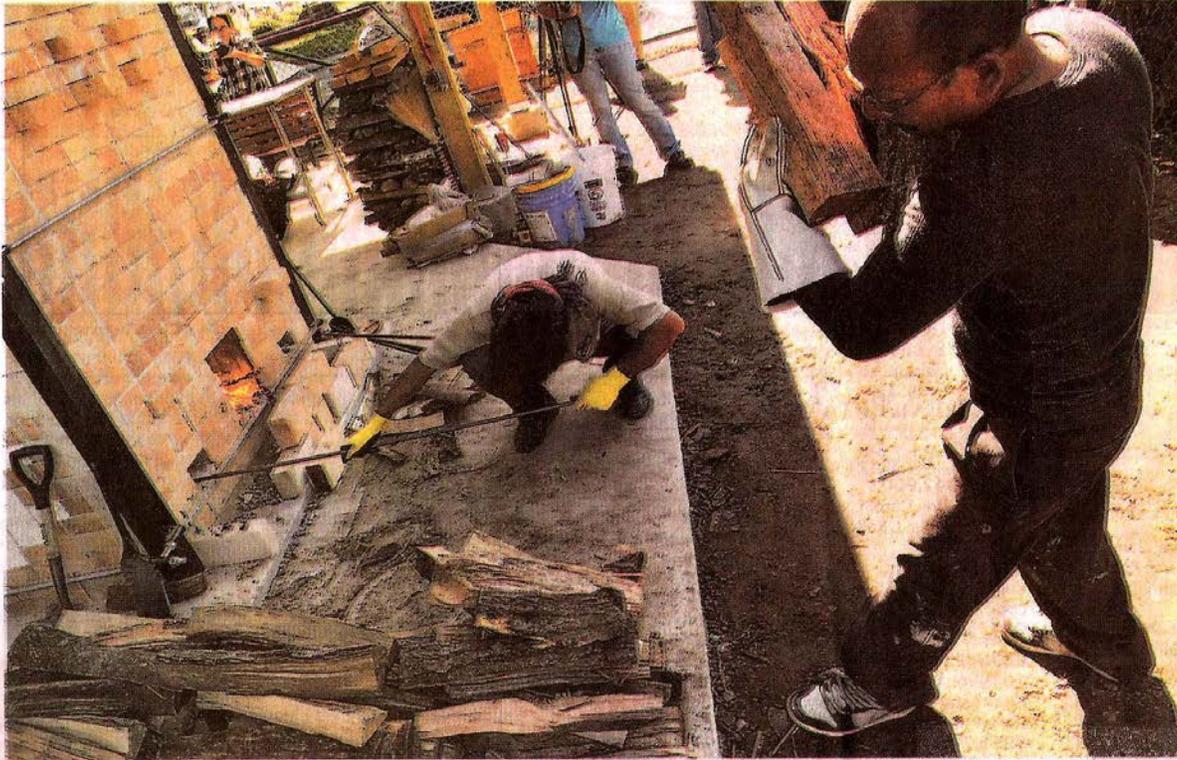


Globe North

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PHOTOS BY LISA POOLE FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Yary Livan (right) brings wood for the new kiln. Kneeling, Kang Proeung, a fine arts teacher in Cambodia, helps start the kiln's first fire.

Cambodian kiln lights up tradition in Lowell

By Joel Brown, *Globe Correspondent* / October 17, 2012

LOWELL — The kiln somewhat resembles a temple, with its two colors of brick, the arch above its door, and the chimney tower.

Inside the ware chamber sits a treasure trove of traditional Cambodian ceramics, all made in Lowell: teacups, pitchers, and water jugs in subtle earth tones, plus vase-like pots for cooking oil or honey or wine. Most are unadorned, a few shaped like elephants or bearing the face of an owl.

On this Tuesday afternoon in late September, most are still warm to the touch.

Yary Livan climbs halfway inside the kiln and pulls each piece out carefully, with a look of pride behind his glasses. He has been waiting for this moment, and not just since Saturday, when the wood-fired kiln was lit for the first time. He has been waiting for many years.

"I am very, very happy, very, very excited," he says mildly. "It is a dream come true." He holds out a pot for inspection: "And: success!"

Livan, 58, has been a ceramic artist since he was a young man. He survived the Khmer Rouge's killing fields and came in 2001 to the United States, where he was granted political asylum. Landing among Lowell's large Cambodian community, he resumed practicing the art, which just a handful of other survivors know. He shared his knowledge at area schools and studios, including a new job this fall teaching as an adjunct professor at Middlesex Community College. But he had always found only modern, gas-fired kilns to work with. He wanted a traditional wood-fired kiln.

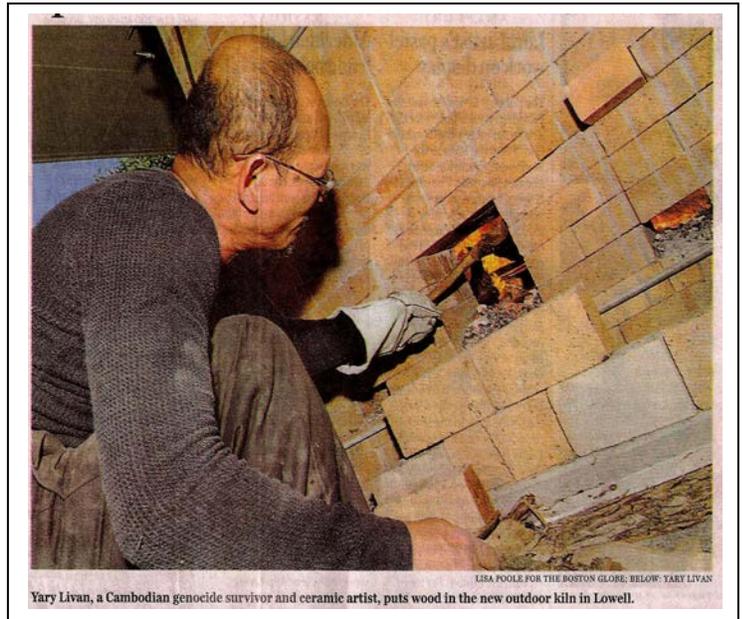
Now he has one, thanks to a project sponsored by Middlesex Community College and the Lowell National Historical Park. The kiln is outdoors under a roof on a piece of land on Aiken Street that was provided by the park.

The kiln project “celebrates and shares a centuries-old Cambodian tradition that very few people know about, but that people can take pride in, and that without stabilizing support may disappear from practice,” said Margaret Rack, a professor of art at Middlesex.

Livan revels in the difference the wood-fired kiln makes.

“See this?” he said running a fingertip over a small pot’s artfully mottled colors. “This you get with smoke.”

It is a random, natural process, the glazing affected by the heat and smoke and ash passing through the kiln’s ware chamber from the firebox to the flue. And every piece is unique. “You have only one of these in the world, not two,” he said of the pot, “because it is from a wood kiln.”



The pot designs date back to the ancient Angkor kingdom, and Livan says there are few original examples left, thanks in part to the upper-class tradition of occasionally secreting a piece of gold or a precious stone inside the clay. Over the centuries, he says, Cambodians smashed many of the pots looking for the valuables.

“It is a poor country,” he says.

Livan was studying at the Royal University of Fine Arts in the capital city of Phnom Penh when the Khmer Rouge came to power in the 1970s. As part of the regime’s brutal upheaval of the country, he and his family were sent to a work unit in the countryside. His mother saw the Khmer Rouge trying and failing to build a kiln to make roofing tiles.

She took a risk and told them that her son knew how to build a kiln. When they came to get him, he thought he was being taken to be killed, as many others had been. But instead he was given food to strengthen him for the kiln job. He now believes it saved his life. Later, after the Khmer Rouge were driven from power, he resumed his studies.

He and his wife, Nary Tith, met at the university in Phnom Penh in 1982 and married two years later. Livan was accused of working with an opposition party and they fled to a refugee camp at the Thai border, then were moved to another and another, before eventually being repatriated back to Cambodia in 1992 after a peace agreement. Livan made it to the United States in 2001 and Tith and their four children followed in 2004.

Maggie Holtzberg, folk arts and heritage program manager for the Massachusetts Cultural Council, thinks the kiln project is in keeping with the mission of Lowell’s national park.

“Part of the Lowell National Historical Park’s mission is to tell the human story of immigration,” she said. “For the park to host [the kiln] and present public programs is a remarkable opportunity – not only to connect with Lowell’s Cambodian community, but to help preserve and revitalize an ancient Khmer cultural tradition that is hanging on by a thread.”

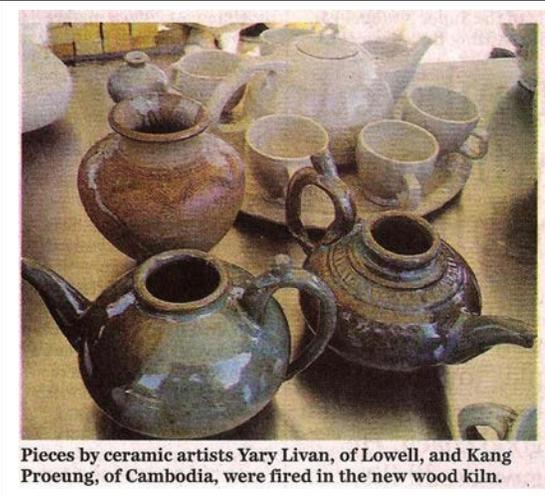
The kiln project originated out of a 2010 US Department of Education trip to Cambodia, where six educators from Middlesex Community College and the Lowell public schools studied and learned about Cambodian culture and history, hoping to make continuing relationships with educators in Cambodia, and then infuse the knowledge into their teaching. Returning home, Rack and other local cultural authorities determined to build Livan his kiln.

Grants were sought and received. The small corner plot of land, not far from downtown, was provided by the historical park.

“We have lent the use of this space for creation of the kiln . . . to utilize this in a way to enlighten residents and visitors with a particular facet of one community that now calls Lowell home,” says David Blackburn, chief of cultural resources and programs for the park. “What’s so cool for us as well is, here are academic fine arts programs, and suddenly by working together we’re providing students of these programs an opportunity to experience a very ancient tradition.”

Livan and company built the kiln with two types of firebrick, one for structure, one for insulation, with some steel frame elements. Local architect Samnang Khoeun and his associates at 42 Architecture designed the roof that was built by local contractors. There were various celebrations along the way, with guests including two Buddhist monks from a local temple, dressed in bright orange robes, and three more plainly dressed representatives of the Lowell Fire Department. All were apparently satisfied with the construction.

Grant money also brought Livan's childhood friend and fellow ceramicist Kang Proeung over from Cambodia for a number of weeks up until the kiln opening. They say they are two of only three or four living masters of their craft, and at least one of the others is no longer practicing.



Last month, they fired up the loaded kiln early in the morning on that Saturday and kept feeding the firebox with cordwood until late that night before closing it up. On Tuesday, Livan pulled small, ceramic "pyrometric" cones from various corners inside the kiln. Some were slightly lopsided at the top, others melted into lumps. Each indicates how hot that part of the kiln was, the hottest topping out around 2,300 degrees Fahrenheit.

"Every kiln has some spots with very high heat and spots that are a little bit low," Livan says.

In September, Livan and his colleagues fired about 100 pieces of pottery in the kiln. Some have already been sold.

The kiln will be fired up again later in the fall.

Livan fired several pieces in the wood kiln from community college students in September. That will continue under his direction.

Rack sees a clear benefit to the school.

"It enriches curriculum at Middlesex, so that our students could engage in creative work that is culturally rich and places them in complex and culturally diverse interactions . . . making connections across the city," Rack said.

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