QUEEN SIRIKIT MUSEUM OF TEXTILES

A Royal Textile Museum For Thailand

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Photographs courtesy of the Queen Sirikit Museum of Textiles, unless otherwise stated

1 The Queen Sirikit Museum of Textiles, in the grounds of Bangkok’s Grand Palace
ON MAY 9th, 2012, the Queen Sirikit Museum of Textiles opened its doors to the public (1). Named for Thailand's reigning queen and housed in an historic building in the grounds of Bangkok's Grand Palace, the museum is dedicated to the preservation, exhibition and study of the textiles of Southeast, South and East Asia, with an emphasis on textiles and clothing associated with Thailand and its royal court.

Her Majesty Queen Sirikit, who has devoted decades to promoting and preserving indigenous Thai textiles, decided to create the museum, a logical extension of her work. She directed her Deputy Private Secretary, Thanpuying Charungjit Teckara, and her senior advisor on artistic affairs, Smitthi Siribhadra, to oversee the establishment of the museum. The first step towards making concept a reality was to find the incipient museum a suitable home. A 19th century office building in the outer courtyard of the Grand Palace complex was identified and in 2003, King Bhumibol graciously granted its use to Her Majesty for a museum.

The Ratsadakorn-bhibhathana Building is Western in style and was named for its first occupant, the Royal Department of Tax Revenue (later the Ministry of Finance). It was built on the site of a former army barracks at the behest of King Chulalongkorn (Rama V, reigned 1868–1910) in the 1870s; it is thought to have been designed by Joachim (Gioachino) Grassi, one of the first of a wave of foreign architects employed in Siam, who arrived in Bangkok around 1870 from his native Capodistria (then part of Italy). Grassi, whose buildings combine Classical and Romantic architectural elements, prospered in Thailand; he was later joined by his brothers Giacomo and Antonio, with whom he founded Grassi Brothers & Co., which of-

ferred architecture, civil engineering and building services to royal, public and private clients. No records of precisely when the building was started or finished have yet been discovered, but King Chulalongkorn wrote in 1873 of his intention to use the building as offices for Treasury staff and officials; and a pediment ornament bearing the emblem the king used before 1879 was found during renovation (2), suggesting that construction was completed before that date.

The building, originally square, underwent several renovations and enlargements during its 125 years; in 2003 it was a long rectangle (3). Its interior needed to be completely remodelled to render it suitable to be a modern museum. Grittip (Jay) Sirirattumrong, a principal of Bangkok-based architecture firm DSDI Co., Ltd as well as a partner in a Chicago architectural firm that specialises in historic renovation and reuse, was appointed to spearhead the transformation. Several years were devoted to basics: the building was gutted and strengthened; old wood support beams were replaced with steel; and extensive work to modernise and upgrade the building’s electrical, climate, fire and security systems in accordance with contemporary museum standards was undertaken. Simultaneously, many of the building’s original architectural details—its façade, interior mouldings and doors, and beautiful original teak flooring—were preserved. Additionally, an impressive new rotunda was designed, in consultation with Professor Siribhadra, to serve as the museum’s main entrance, and construction began.

Melissa Leventon and Dale Carolyn Gluckman of Curatrix Group, a US-based museum consultancy specialising in textiles and costumes, were contacted for expert advice on how to outfit the textile-specific and other specialised

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spaces—storage, registration, conservation, library and galleries. Leventon, former Curator-in-Charge of Textiles at the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, and Gluckman, retired Curator and Head, Department of Costumes and Textiles at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, joined the team in 2006, bringing more than forty-five years’ combined museum experience to the project. Following a brief initial visit to Bangkok, Leventon and Gluckman organised a series of visits in the spring and summer of 2006 to twenty-five museums in Europe, the United States and Asia for Professor Siribhadr—a slated to become the museum’s founding director—and Mr Sirirattumrong, to allow them to view a wide range of current practises for the care, housing and display of textile collections and to meet and talk to relevant staff. Particular emphasis was placed both on museums lodged in historic buildings and the challenges they faced, and museums whose facilities had recently been, or were in the process of being, upgraded (4, 5). Leventon and Gluckman followed the site visits with three detailed programming reports that described a wide range of specifics, from proposed room sizes and layouts, to adjacencies, to organisational structure and staff, to specialised equipment for storage and conservation, and books for the library.

The museum’s development was unexpectedly halted by the untimely death of Professor Siribhadr in November 2008. As the institution’s director-elect, he had been an important guiding hand in its development, articulating much of the vision of what the museum could be, spearheading collecting efforts and assembling an enthusiastic young staff; his death was a sad blow. After several months of uncertainty, however, the museum’s board decided to proceed. Her Royal Highness Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn continued in her supervisory role and Thanpuying Charunmit’s daughter, Piyavara Teekara, recently returned from the United States with a graduate degree in costume studies from New York University, was appointed as the museum’s new head officer.

Leventon and Gluckman were re-engaged to work curatorially with the museum’s young staff, to develop the institution’s opening exhibitions and related publications and its administrative infrastructure. For this phase of the project, the board brought in a number of additional foreign and Thai consultants. Julia M. Brennan of Caring for Textiles, a Washington DC-based textile conservator with extensive experience in Asia, was hired to set up the conservation laboratory, train the staff and supervise the treatment and mounting of all the objects selected for the museum’s inaugural exhibitions. Tim Culbert of Imrey Culbert, a New York-based architecture studio specialising in gallery and exhibition design, was tasked with designing the overall look of the museum’s galleries, the permanent display cases and the inaugural exhibitions. At the curators’ request, Imrey Culbert designed the cases with flexibility in mind to accommodate the widest possible range of museum objects. The cases that line the walls of three of the galleries are equipped with ingenious movable back panels, which may be pulled forward to bring flat textiles closer to the viewer, or pushed back for the display of a costume or three-dimensional object. Similarly, the wedge-shaped, free-standing floor cases are large enough to hold five or six mannequins, but also have removable internal dividers that can be used to create a series of spaces suitable for small

4 Study storage at the de Young Museum, San Francisco, 2006. Courtesy of Melissa Leventon

5 A wall of books in the textile study centre, de Young Museum, San Francisco, 2006. Courtesy of Melissa Leventon
Wedge-shaped cases can hold five or six mannequins each. A band of Lumisty® film across the end offers selective viewing angles. Courtesy of Dale Carolyn Gluckman

Full-width doors offer easy access to display case interiors for installation and de-installation. Courtesy of Dale Carolyn Gluckman

Conservator Parichat Saengsirikulchais checks a datalogger

Each gallery has an individual, custom-designed ceiling and lighting system. Courtesy of Dale Carolyn Gluckman

Three-dimensional or flat textiles (6). All the cases, which were fabricated and installed by Goppion, S.p.A. of Milan, are individually climate-controlled and equipped with thick, non-glare glass and large doors that provide easy access for staff during installation and de-installation (7, 8). They are both functional and beautiful.

Imrey Culbert also created custom designs for all the gallery ceilings, which were complimented by innovative lighting designed expressly for each gallery by consultant Suzan Tillotson of Tillotson Design Associates (New York, NY) (9). Imrey Culbert also brought in graphic designers Alicia Cheng and Sarah Gephart of Mgmt. (Brooklyn, NY) to create museum identity and graphics, and media specialist Alain Dupuy of Innovision (Paris) to advise on touch,
television and movie screens, sound systems, etc. (10). Later, additional exhibition services were provided by the architect Nita Yuvaboon, and the Bangkok design and media firms Plan Motif and Ovation.

Simultaneously, the curatorial team, charged with filling four galleries, began to develop three interrelated exhibitions. A number of Thai consultants were tapped for specific subject knowledge. These included Weerathamma Tragoonngoentha, an expert on historic Thai silk and gold brocade, and Professor Anucha Thirakanont, a specialist in Thai court history and dress. Additional consulting was provided by Kullavit Laoaksri, currently Editor-in-Chief of *Vogue* Thailand, and Sappasit Foonfongchaveng, former curator at TCDC Gallery in Bangkok. Both gentlemen are specialists in contemporary fashion and the wardrobe of Her Majesty Queen Sirikit. In all, more than ninety people—including the building construction crew—worked on getting the museum up and running. The finished museum was officially opened by its patron, Her Royal Highness Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn, in an invitation-only ceremony on April 26th, 2012 (11). The public opening was scheduled two weeks later to allow time for final adjustments and troubleshooting.

**Inaugural Exhibitions**

Prior to the curatorial team’s beginning work on the inaugural exhibitions, Princess Sirindhorn had expressed her desire to have at least one of them address the subject of how hard her mother, the Queen, had worked on behalf of the people of Thailand. In the end, all three of the opening shows addressed one aspect or another of this subject.

Her Majesty’s interest in traditional Thai textiles is of long standing. In the 1950s, Thailand’s youthful queen was sometimes photographed incorporating them into her Western-style wardrobe (12). During her travels around Thailand with His Majesty the King, the queen became increasingly concerned about the challenges faced by Thai women in rural areas subject to periodic droughts and floods. She was also interested in helping them as a corollary to His Majesty’s important work to improve agriculture and water management in Thailand (13). Textiles,
13  Her Majesty Queen Sirikit speaking with flood victims in Na Wa, Nakhon Phanom province, northeastern Thailand, circa 1970.Courtesy of the Office of Her Majesty’s Principal Private Secretary

14  Her Majesty Queen Sirikit at a benefit dinner for the SUPPORT Foundation in Los Angeles, 1985. She is wearing a Balmain gown made of silk ikat from northeastern Thailand. Courtesy of the Office of Her Majesty’s Principal Private Secretary

15  Three views of “For the Love of Her Country: Her Majesty Queen Sirikit Creates the SUPPORT Foundation”
traditionally the purview of women, were an obvious way. The Westernisation of Thai dress, which had reached rural communities by the 1950s (see the article in this issue, “Women’s Fashions at the Thai Court: Tradition and Modernisation”), had started indigenous textiles on the path to extinction. It became Her Majesty’s goal to reverse the decline, as a way of preserving Thai culture and as a means for rural women to earn money in a manner that was not dependent on farming and the vagaries of the weather. Beginning in the mid-1960s, and accelerating rapidly in the 1970s, she began to persuade women to weave their traditional village textiles for sale, for which she provided the raw materials, the necessary teachers, guaranteed payment, and served as the liaison between weavers and the market place. Her efforts were codified with the establishment of the SUPPORT Foundation in 1976, which provided the necessary administrative infrastructure to support and expand Her Majesty’s efforts. In the late 1970s, Her Majesty began to wear these textiles herself, for promotional purposes and to underscore her faith in the creativity and skill of Thai craftswomen (14).

All these elements were explored in two of the three opening exhibitions. “For the Love of Her Country” is a multimedia experience, designed by Plan Motif, that uses a wealth of documentary film, historic textiles and clothing, and both high and low-tech interactive experiences to tell the story of Their Majesties’ travels throughout Thailand. Highlighted are Her Majesty’s burgeoning interest in textiles, the development of SUPPORT and the positive impact it has had on the lives of countless Thai families (15). “Artistry in Silk” presents a dozen of Her Majesty’s fashionable Western dresses worn for important occasions at home or abroad, made wholly or in part from SUPPORT
textiles and designed by French couturiers Pierre Balmain and Erik Mortensen, as well as several Thai designers (16). The didactic portions of the show—labels and period photographs of Her Majesty wearing each ensemble—are presented on dynamic screens, which allow for the inclusion of images and extended text in both Thai and English using a compact delivery system.

The third exhibition, “Fashioning Tradition”, presents the story of Her Majesty’s development of Thai national dress (see “Women’s Fashions at the Thai Court: Tradition and Modernisation” in this issue for a detailed explanation). This exhibition was made possible by the gift to the museum of more than forty examples from Her Majesty’s own wardrobe and loans from the royal collections of examples of the 19th century court textiles and accessories on which Thai national dress is based, some never before displayed to the public (17).

**The Museum Today**

The Queen Sirikit Museum of Textiles is the first museum in Thailand to be solely dedicated to the care, interpreta-
Conservator Piyamon Pochoom at work in the lab

The current installation in the activities studio features a variety of child and adult-friendly activities.

The “Weaving Royal Traditions Through Time” symposium held in Bangkok in November 2013 was organised by the museum as its international launch event.

As it completes its second year of operation, the Queen Sirikit Museum of Textiles has become an established attraction for Bangkok’s tourists and residents and a growing presence within the international community of museums. Future plans include exhibitions about King Rama V’s collection of batik (see the article in this issue, “Hidden Treasure: The Rediscovery of a Royal Batik Collection”), strengthening its professional ties through exchanges with other museums in Southeast Asia, and the inauguration of a travelling exhibitions programme that will allow it to share its riches and scholarship with an ever-expanding domestic and international audience.