

# THAI OFFICIAL RANK ROBES (SUA KHRUI)

## History, Fabrication and the Conservation of Admiral de Richelieu's 19th Century Robe

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### Introduction

Nowadays, it is rare for the Thai people to see the king and the royal family dressed in full traditional royal regalia. That was not always the case. In one of the most famous and popular images of His Majesty King Bhumibol Adulyadej, he is dressed in his elaborate intricate golden robe, the symbol of his kingship. Instantly recognised by all Thais, the photo shows him formally dressed in the robe called *Cha Long Phra Ong Khrui* (1).

Also known as *sua khrui*, meaning the “official or insignia robe”, this style of robe is a singularly significant traditional male garment worn by the king and other high-ranking, esteemed officers and government officials dating back to ancient times. The style is a loose-fitting outer garment, open-fronted and similar to a *chogha*, a Turkish word meaning “long sleeved garment”<sup>1</sup> or a medieval surplice. It is tailored and is usually knee to mid-calf length. It is constructed of a netted fabric worked with varying degrees of embroidery and surface embellishment on top of the netting. This paper will discuss the history and use, the manufacture and conservation of these ceremonial garments. The study will reveal some of the techniques, materials and the traditional methods in making the robe, which can lead the conservator to understand better the methodologies for their treatment and preservation.

There are two variations of *sua khrui* discussed in this article. The first type is the exclusively royal robe with “solidly overall” gold-thread net, with other decoration and embellishment that can include gold thread or beetle wings, or sequins. Second, is the combination robe for high-ranking officials that was made primarily of sheer delicate white silk or cotton tulle, with accents of gold thread net and surface embroidery.



1 His Majesty King Bhumibol Adulyadej wearing the embroidered ceremonial robe with the emblem of the Royal House of Chakri, the Chakra Discus of Vishnu and the Trident of Shiva. Organising Committee for the National Communications Day, The Celebration on the Auspicious Occasion of His Majesty King Bhumibol's 72nd Birthday Anniversary, Bangkok: Amarin Printing and Publishing, 1999

<sup>1</sup>Ritu Kumar, *Costume and Textiles of Royal India*, Italy, 2006, p. 178 and *The Arts of Kashmir*, The Asia Society, New York. The latter exhibition catalogue shows an example of a 19th century full sleeved long robe from the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, gift, 1949, 49.32.74. The *chogha* has antecedents in Persia and Central Asia, and is worn over inner garments.





2 Persian scholar's costume. Pepin Van Roojen, *The Pepin Press Visual Encyclopedia: Costume*, Singapore: The Pepin Press, 2001



3 This print captures the French enchantment with the Siamese envoys with their gold cloaks and conical hats. The trio included Ok Phra Wisutra Sunthon, better known as Kosa Pan, Ok Luang Kanlaya Ratchamaitri and Ok Khun Sriwisan Wacha. Morgan Sportes, *Ombres Siamois*, Paris: Mobius, 1994, reprinted from a 17th century print



4 Textile information is revealed in other mediums; here a lacquer manuscript cabinet, Ayutthaya period, 17th–18th century, Bangkok National Museum Collection. We can surmise a Frenchman on the left and a North Indian or Arab trader wearing a Persian style attire on the right. Natthapatra Chandavij, *Ancient Textiles and Dressing in the Mural Painting at Bhuddhaisawan Chapel*, Bangkok National Museum, Bangkok: Office of Archaeology and National Museums, The Fine Art Department, 2002



5 Chevalier Claude de Forbin, in the uniform of a rank robe and conical hat bestowed by King Narai. Siamese royal costume was a fascinating subject for lithographs and a means of understanding the dress of the Siamese elite. Morgan Sportes, *Ombres Siamois*, Paris: Mobius, 1994





6 His Majesty King Vajiravudh (Rama VI) in his Coronation Ceremony, 1911. National Archives of Thailand, *Historical Photographs of the Royal Coronation Ceremony in Rattanakosin Period*, Bangkok: Fine Art Department, 2007



7 H.R.H. Prince Chakrabongse Bhuvanadh (left), son of King Rama V with Queen Saovabha Phongsri. Fine Art Department, National Archives of Thailand, *The Archives Photograph Collections: The Children of King Chulalongkorn (Rama V)*, Bangkok: Amarin Printing and Publishing, 2009. H.S.H. Prince Rajadhabhisek Sonakul (middle), grandson of King Rama IV, and H.S.H. Prince Kitikreuk-krai Kashemsanta (right), grandson of King Rama IV. Jeffrey Finestone, *A Royal Album: The Children and Grandchildren of King Mongkut (Rama IV) of Siam*, Bangkok: Goodwill Press, 2000

## History of the Robe

The exact origins of the *sua khruai* are not known, although the robe's aesthetics appear to have Persian or Mughal influence (2). The earliest known imagery of the *sua khruai* is a painting depicting a group of Siamese ambassadors in the second embassy mission to Versailles, in the audience of King Louis XIV at the palace of Versailles in 1686, during the reign of King Narai (3). In the painting, the Siamese ambassadors wear shirts underneath their ceremonial robes, *lom phok*, the conical hat of Siam (which also denotes their high rank as mandarins), and weapons at their waists. Exotic foreign traditional styles of dress were quite influential during the Ayutthaya period<sup>2</sup> (1350–1767) in which King Narai ruled. Stylistic similarities can be seen between the full uniform of the Siamese ambassadors and the robe worn by the Indian or Persian figure (4), on the right. This lacquered wood cabinet also depicts a French figure, on the left.<sup>3</sup> One can see how the splendid and ornate *sua khruai* is reminiscent of the French style as well.

From the Ayutthaya period on, diplomatic relationships were sealed, in part, with the *sua khruai*. In fact, each high-ranking foreign officer was given a set of clothing, a sort of “uniform” necessary to be part of every court pageant. This is evident in the clothing and presentation of the Chevalier Claude de Forbin,<sup>4</sup> known in Thai as *Ok Phra Sak Songkhram* (5), the French naval commander, who served at King Narai's court.

A similar style of robe, more often of silk satin embroidered with metallic thread patterns, originating from India, was widely worn by those of high rank in the Asian courts such as Burma, during the Konbaung period<sup>5</sup> (1752–1885), Khmer, Cham and Shan. These courts often traded and copied or adapted each other's symbols of prestige and kingship. Therefore, there appear to be similar royal prestige robes across the region, which are an amalgamation of various influences.

The first king of the Chakri dynasty, King Rama I, *Phra Bhudha Yod Fa*, established Bangkok, *Khrungthep*, in 1782. This marks the start of the Rattanakosin period. He en-

acted rules and regulations for the court, including prescribed directions for the use and ownership of the *sua khruai*, such as “... the lower ranking officer was not allowed to wear a gold robe or decorate higher than their rank. . .”<sup>6</sup> The use of *sua khruai* was designated as *tem yot*, full-dress Siamese court uniform for royal ceremonies or for a special or auspicious occasion. For example, in a coronation ceremony, the king wore the full-dress golden robe with the great crown of victory and the regalia jewels (6). Attending officers and princes would present themselves in robes that represented a variation of the royal *sua khruai*, one made of cotton netting with only accents of gold thread netting.

No one could possess rank robes except through the king's largesse. Textiles and the *sua khruai* were an essential part of these tributes, and textiles were historically highly valued and restricted in their use. In fact, the production of the golden robe was controlled by the king. They were crafted in a specific workshop within the inner court—the artists supervised by a prince—and then the robes bestowed in a controlled and highly ritualised way.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>2</sup>By that time Ayutthaya was an important trading city in Asia. Many foreign traders, including the Chinese, Vietnamese (Annamese), Indians, Japanese and Persians, and later the Portuguese, Spanish, Dutch and French, were permitted to set up villages outside the walls of the city. King Narai was born in 1633 and died in 1688.

<sup>3</sup>It is assumed that this figure depicts King Louis XIV.

<sup>4</sup>He accompanied the Chevalier Claude de Chaumont on the diplomatic mission of King Louis XIV to Siam in 1685–1688, with the rank of a major aboard the ship *Oiseau*.

<sup>5</sup>Sylvia Fraser-Lu, “Thai Influence on Burmese Konbaung Period Royal Costumes 1752–1885”, lecture at QSMT symposium, 2013, Bangkok, Thailand.

<sup>6</sup>Phra Pativedyavisisth, “khruai”, *The Encyclopedia of Thailand*, Vol. 5, Bangkok: The Royal Institute, 1962, p. 2664.

<sup>7</sup>McQuail, p. 101. The bestowing of these special robes was part of a long and widespread Asian tradition of rulers giving “robes of honour” as a sign of royal favour and a symbol of allegiance.





8 The Ploughing Ceremony at Sanam Luang, May 11th, 1961.  
*Thailand Illustrated Magazine*, Vol. 78, May 1961

Children of the Thai royal court wore *sua khruai* in a ceremony of their own, called the Tonsure Ceremony. This Brahminical custom is a rite of passage, when the child's topknot, allowed to grow long from birth, is ceremoniously cut off. The Tonsure Ceremony of the child or a grandchild of a king or royal family member was a public and widely celebrated event, symbolising their coming of age and transition into a new spiritual phase; (7) shows three different tonsure costumes, each demonstrating a prince's rank. H.R.H. Prince Chakrabongse Bhuvanadh (left) wears the *sua khruai* most similar in style to the king because he is the son of King Rama V. The other two children, H.S.H. Prince Rajadhabhisek Sonakul (middle) and H.S.H. Prince Kitikreuk-krai Kashemsanta (right), who are grandsons of King Rama IV, wear slightly different styles of prestige robe due to their rank. In this ceremony the robe is usually wrapped across the child's shoulder, a stylistic mode of the day. Historically, the Tonsure Ceremony was royally sponsored, with great pomp and prescribed customs and clothing. Today, the custom and celebration has ceased.<sup>8</sup>

The Royal Ploughing Ceremony was, and still is, another occasion when this prestigious robe plays an important role. *Phraya Reakna*, the Lord of the Plough, is still celebrated to mark the traditional beginning of the rice-growing season. As seen in (8), a photograph taken during the Ploughing Ceremony on May 11th, 1961, the Lord of the Plough is shown wearing the *sua khruai*. Other festivals and celebration days associated with ancient Brahmanical traditions, such as the Swing Ceremony, also employ the golden royal robe. Festivals featuring Chao Phraya Wichitwongse Wuthikrai (Mom Rajawongse Khlee Sudasna) (9), as well as the Lord of the Swing Ceremony,<sup>9</sup> *Phraya Yuenchingcha*, encourage the health and bounty of the land and crops, and continue to take place annually. In Thailand, these rites date back to ancient times, and the use of the *sua khruai* is a ritualistic and emblematic part of the ceremonies.

Thai princes and officials too wore the *sua khruai*, as mentioned in this 1856 account by Harris upon the occasion of his audience with King Mongkut (Rama IV), "Arrived at



9 Chao Phraya Wichitwongse Wuthikrai (Mom Rajawongse Khlee Sudasna) as the Lord of the Swing Ceremony, *Phraya Yuenchingcha*, wearing the full royal *sua khruai*. He wears a silk brocade shirt and hip wrapper, hidden beneath the rank robe, and the conical hat to conduct the ceremony. Natthapatra Chandavij, *Ancient Textiles and Dressing in the Mural Painting at Bhuddhaisawan Chapel, National Museum, Bangkok*, Bangkok: Office of Archaeology and National Museums, The Fine Art Department, 2002





10 The importance of the king's *sua khruai* can be seen in a 19th century mural painting of King Rama V at Phra Thinang Songphanuat, Wat Benchamabophit, Bangkok. Anake Nawigamune, *King Chulalongkorn in Mural Paintings*, Bangkok: Saengdao Publishing House, 2011



11 Detail of King Rama V, holding a meerschaum pipe and welcoming the Austrian ambassadors in the Grand Palace, 1896



12 The young princes, 1887, attired in full Deva-style dress for a royal cremation ceremony. H.R.H. Prince Yukala Dighambara (left), son of King Rama V with Princess Saisavali Bhiromya, and H.R.H. Prince Abhakara Kiartivongse (right), son of King Rama V with Chao Chom Manda Mode. Fine Art Department, National Archives of Thailand, *The Archives Photograph Collections: The Children of King Chulalongkorn (Rama V)*, Bangkok: Amarin Printing and Publishing, 2009

the Hall of Justice, the nobles. . . were dressed in rich gowns interwoven with gold.”<sup>10</sup> A scene in the painted mural in the Songphanuat chapel at Wat Benchamabophit (The Marble Temple) (10) chronicles the story of King Rama V welcoming the Austrian ambassadors to the Grand Palace in 1896. The king is resplendent in his golden robe and

full-dress uniform holding a meerschaum pipe (11). It is clear that the sparkling *sua khruai* were a prevalent feature of status in the court and inspired respect, if not awe, in foreign visitors.

In 1947, the grandson of King Mongkut, Prince Wan Waithayakorn, ambassador to the United States, gave the *chalong phra ong khruai* belonging to his grandfather, to the Smithsonian Institution in Washington DC. The Smithsonian is considered the “national museum” of the USA, and therefore the most suitable venue for a diplomatic gift to the nation. The relatively simple and lyrical overall pattern of a spiralling flame motif executed in silver and gold, on solidly gold net cloth, stylistically dates the robe to the mid-1800s.<sup>11</sup>

In 2013 and 2014, the Chicago History Museum commemorated the 120th anniversary of the World’s Columbian Exposition<sup>12</sup> with an exhibit titled “Siam: The Queen and the White City”, honouring Queen Savang Vadana (wife of King Rama V) for her contribution to the exposition. In the 1893 exhibit, the queen organised an exhibit showcasing the handwork and skills of Siamese women, including silks, weavings and basketry. The current exhibit honours Queen Savang Vadana, great grandmother of the present king, and includes one of King Bhumibol’s robes. Created solidly out of gold thread and weighing over five kilos, the robe is quite

<sup>8</sup>The last account of a royal Thai tonsure was in 1932, the year that the absolute monarchy was dissolved. However, the belief that growing a topknot for the purposes of curing a sick child, or ensuring health in children, can still be seen in Thai children, often at Brahmanic temples.

<sup>9</sup>One of the twelve royal ceremonies held in each of the months of the Thai lunar calendar. In the Hindu epic called *Tiruppavai*, it is believed that Siva descended to earth. The Lord of the Swing Ceremony wore the robe and conducted this ceremony.

<sup>10</sup>Cosenza, 1930, p. 132.

<sup>11</sup>McQuail, p. 99.

<sup>12</sup>“The World’s Fair: Columbian Exposition” is the full name for the 1893 Chicago World’s Fair, held in celebration of the 400th anniversary of Christopher Columbus arriving in the “New World”.



realistically displayed on a three-dimensional form, and vividly symbolises the presence of His Majesty.<sup>13</sup> The robes were worn by kings in ceremonies spanning from their coronation to cremation, as seen in these images of young royalty attired to attend a cremation (12).

In 1851, when photography was brought to Thailand during the reign of King Rama IV, perhaps the most famous and iconic photograph of the king was popularised. Taken during his coronation ceremony, King Mongkut is seen in (13) wearing his elaborate *sua khruai*. Compared to the standard lithotype and etching images of the day, the introduction of photography, depicting the sumptuous details and richness of the robe and a true likeness of the king, must have stunned readers of newspapers both in Siam and beyond.

Traditionally, Thai levels of rank vary widely, and therefore so must the *sua khruai*. During the reign of King Rama V in the late 1800s, a more precise method of visually defining rank was introduced. It was important at this time in the monarchy to designate and distinguish prestige and service, so King Rama V further codified the *sua khruai*'s use by establishing what were called the "Decorations", crests or emblems of rank. Decorations were particular insignias or badges that specified rank and place within the royal court, whether for members of royalty or government official. In the style of a more Western military uniform, the



14 His Majesty King Chulalongkorn (left) wears the *sua khruai* with the insignia of First Class of the Most Illustrious Order of Chula Chom Klao's Star. His Royal Highness Prince Krisda Bhiniharn (right), son of King Rama IV, wears the gold robe with the Star of Nine Gems, the insignia of the Ancient and Auspicious Order of the Nine Gems. Courtesy of the National Archives of Thailand



13 Note the curtain and setting of His Majesty King Mongkut (Rama IV), Coronation Ceremony photographic portrait, 1851. Jeffrey Finestone, *A Royal Album: The Children and Grandchildren of King Mongkut (Rama IV) of Siam*, Bangkok: Goodwill Press, 2000



15 Detail of the admiral's robe showing the high skill of embroidery of motifs, an unique example of customised embroidery designating level of service. Courtesy of Julia M. Brennan



decorations were commonly a star medallion worn on the left side of the robe, much like a pin. Less commonly, epaulette-like ribbons were worn over the shoulders of the *sua khruai*.<sup>14</sup> Incidentally, these orders and decorations were also used for the high-ranking ladies of the inner court.<sup>15</sup>

Individuals who received decorations were often required to prepare their own costumes, fabricating their robe, and then attaching their decorations.<sup>16</sup> This is in contrast to being bestowed a robe by the king which would have been crafted by strict guidelines under royal supervision. In (14), His Majesty King Chulalongkorn on the left is shown wearing the First Class of the Most Illustrious Order of Chula Chom Klao's Star. To the right, stands His Royal Highness Prince Krisda Bhiniharn, son of King Rama IV, wearing the insignia and decoration of the Ancient and Auspicious Order of the Nine Gems. Despite its popularity, by 1941, wearing the *sua khruai* with decorations was discontinued. Today, wearing robes is limited to special ceremonies such as a grand audience of the king<sup>17</sup> and the annual Ploughing Ceremony. Wearing insignia or decorations continues today with the full dress Western-style military uniform, but on *sua khruai* only in official photographs.

## Robe Production

As previously mentioned, there are two variations of *sua khruai*:

1. The "solidly overall" gold-thread net robe, with gold thread or beetle wing, sequin, other decoration and embellishment, and "only for royal wear".
2. The combination robe made primarily of sheer delicate white silk or cotton bridal net or tulle, with cuffs, collar, hem and plackets made of gold thread net. The robe overall is embellished with gold thread and other embroidery, and worn by high-ranking officials.

Often the nobility or high officials had to produce their own *sua khruai*, which was always the second type, made primarily of cotton tulle with accents and adornments of gold. Sometimes, the *sua khruai* was customised and specific to the individual wearing it, with embroidered imagery that denoted rank and honorary position within the Thai court or service to the monarchy. This is the case with the robe given by King Rama V to Thai Naval Admiral de Plessis du Richelieu. Nautical motifs, such as the anchor, ship's wheel, crossed oars, form the overall decorative pattern on the robe (15).<sup>18</sup>

However, a majority of the *sua khruai* for nobles and high-ranking officials are generally not customised nor do they denote specific role or relationship. Instead, it is more likely that they are simply decorated in floral and vine motifs. For the king, it is a different story.

The king's robes are very specifically embellished with royal symbols, such as nagas (mythical serpents), Garuda (mythical bird and Vishnu's mount) and even insignia or monograms. This imagery, often repeated in the borders and plackets, further communicates the symbols of power and office, as the king alone can wear these motifs. Examples of symbols specific to the king are seen on two robes

belonging to King Rama V and King Rama VI. Moreover, the king's robes, both historically and today, are made with the utmost attention to all motifs, reflecting an overall Thai aesthetic in both floral and emblematic symbols (16, 17).

The practise of manufacturing these beautiful and distinctive garments is extensive and precise. Weaving the gold net, *krongthong*, of the robe is a specific technique called

<sup>13</sup> Julia Brennan personal communications with Chicago History Museum curator and Ms Bunaree, advisor on the exhibition.

<sup>14</sup> Secretariat of the Cabinet, Office of the Prime Minister, *Royal Thai Orders and Decoration*, 3rd edition, Bangkok: Amarin Printing and Publishing, 2003, p. 129.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 130.

<sup>16</sup> H.S.H. Chonchitrathanom Diskul, *Memoirs of H.S.H. Princess Chonchitrathanom Diskul*, Bangkok: Siam Publishing House, 2007, p. 130.

<sup>17</sup> In the Grand Audience Ceremony, His Majesty The King wears the ceremonial robe with Decorations, as do the representatives to grant the King's wishes. These include His Royal Highness The Crown Prince, Prime Minister, Speaker of the House of Representatives and President of the Supreme Court.

<sup>18</sup> More about the unique role of the admiral's robe and his own role in Thai history will be discussed below.

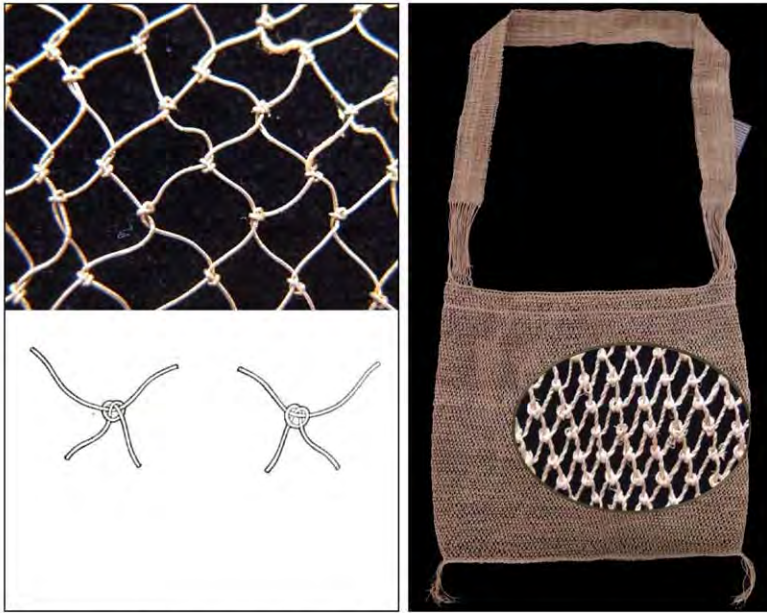


16 Detail of naga on the robe of King Rama IV or King Rama V, executed in silk and gold metallic threads. Courtesy of the QSMT, The Royal Collection



17 Detail of the ceremonial robe belonging to King Rama V embroidered with his initials in Thai "จปร" or "Jor Por Ror" (left) meaning *Maha Chulalongkorn Parama Rachathirat*, King Chulalongkorn the Great. Detail of the ceremonial robe belonging to King Rama VI with the embroidered naga (right), the symbol of his birth (Year of the Dragon) in the Chinese zodiac. Courtesy of the QSMT, The Royal Collection





18 Detail of the knot “*ta chun*” (left), QSMT, The Royal Collection, 2012, and a Kamu knotted bag of vine (right), from Laos, contemporary. Bag courtesy of Ock Pop Tok, and knot hand drawn by the QSMT Conservation Department



19 King Rama V's consort, the last 19th century expert in *thak ta shun*, the gold net knotting. *Chao Chom Mom Rajawongse Sadab Ladavalaya: A Consort of HM King Rama V*, edited by M.L. Phunsaeng (Ladavalaya) Sutabutr, Bangkok: Amarin Printing and Publishing, 1983. The other two images show her personal *krongthong* or gold netting and tools. Courtesy of Her Royal Highness Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn Collection



20 Contemporary *krongthong* is revived in Her Majesty Queen Sirikit's stunning evening dress (left) from 1965. A sash (right) embroidered with the Star of the Most Illustrious Order of the Chula Chom Klao, circa late 19th–early 20th century. Courtesy of the QSMT, The Royal Collection

*thak ta chun*. This method of knotting is used and taught only in the Thai royal court. The knot looks similar to the common “fisherman’s knot” as well as the knots used in the vine bags made by the Akha or Khamu indigenous hill tribe groups (18). It is a loose knot, like looping or a knitting knot, creating a very open mesh fabric. This kind of knotting is made using common netting tools, shuttles and long needles. But the variation in the size of the loops, density of the honeycomb-like fabric, selection of gold or other metallic threads, was and still is skilfully manipulated by

the artist to create gossamer or dense cloths. Then the application of jewels, glass beads, sequins or iridescent beetle wing bits into swirling dragons, floral vines or intertwined regal symbols, further showcases the expertise of the crafts-woman.

The last consort of King Rama V, Chao Chom Mom Rajawongse Sadab Ladavalaya (19), was a skilled expert in the traditional court crafts. When her king passed, she left the Grand Palace to live a simpler non-royal life. She returned to the court only at the request of Her Royal High-





21 Golden embroidery bag, Rattanakosin art, Bangkok National Museum Collection. Courtesy of the Public Relations Division, Central Administrative Office, Fine Arts Department



22 Complex and heavy embroidery executed through paper cut outs. Busaya Krairiksh, 1985. Courtesy of the QSMT, The Royal Collection



23 Two examples of 19th century royal robes, powerful and yet gossamer. Smitthi Siribhadra and Sunida Bunnag, *Treasures of The Chakri Dynasty*, Bangkok printing, 1984



ness Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn to teach and preserve this remarkable and historical hand craft until her death in 1983. Consequently, the craft continues today in a small division of the inner court at the Grand Palace in Bangkok. Several ladies, taught personally by this last royal consort, manage a group of girls, as they work solely to produce commissioned robes for the royal family. Princess Sirindhorn has examples of the gold netting and tools used by the last consort of King Rama V proudly on display in her private museum.

Traditionally, only men wore the robe or *sua khruai*. However, the actual gold thread netted cloth, referred to as *krongthong*, is used for other prestigious clothing, specifically for garments, dresses and accessories for high-ranking women of the royal court. Old photographs from the second half of the 1800s show consorts and princesses wearing outer breast wrappers (*sa phak*) made of *krongthong*. Two versions of *krongthong* used by ladies are shown in (20). An evening dress created for Her Majesty Queen Sirikit is made entirely of gold net and then embroidered with additional golden beads. The dress is the centrepiece of the collection of the Queen Sirikit Museum of Textiles in Bangkok. Also pictured is a gold sash with the order of the *Chulachomklao* Decoration, instead of the star associated with the men's robes. The gold net bag, housed in the National Museum, shows another use of gold net (21). While *krongthong* is a rare material today, it is still popular, as demonstrated by the cheap polyester machine made versions of *krongthong* sold in Thai cloth markets for use in dance and theatre costumes.

As discussed, the *sua khruai* can be made in two styles—one specifically for the king and royal family, and the other for ranking officers. However, the overall shape or cut of the robe is identical. It is comprised of five pieces; two panels at the front, two sleeve pieces and one whole back panel (similar to a kimono). After embroidering each piece, the five pieces of *krongthong* are attached together at the seams. The robe's completion depends on the final embroidery, which can include many kinds of embroidery stitches and additions of sequins, beads and many metallic thread types. The gold netting or cotton tulle of the body is strengthened and visually resolved by the addition of the borders, plackets, cuffs and collar. Often, the border *krongthong* panels are made with thicker threads or more densely woven, in order to provide sturdy edges. The border pieces are matched at the seams and corners, and then more embroidery is superimposed to make the motif continuous.

Because gold is so valuable, and thus a sign of wealth and prestige, the *krongthong* net made for the royal family robes are made entirely of gold thread. Once assembled, gold bands along the torso of the *sua khruai* also distinguish the royal robes. All other rank robes are created by adding the golden sections, as accents only, to a predominantly white cotton tulle garment. Some of the gold thread is literally just that, metallic gold thread. A majority of the gold thread is gold wrapped around a silk core. The source of the 19th century threads is difficult to determine and no court records or receipts have been located. However, it is likely that the gold, silver and even platinum threads came from both France and India. These two countries remain the sources today.

While the materials and the themes of decoration may be different among the two robe styles, both styles are often



24 Detail of the king's robe—a classic 18th century Siamese stylised motif, prevalent in brocades and block prints, here executed in coloured silk floss, hammered and crimped silver. Courtesy of the QSMT, The Royal Collection

extensively embroidered and beaded. The embroidery, usually much heavier than the *krongthong* netting itself, is sewn onto a layer of sketching paper, with the netting sandwiched between the two. The paper is a structure for anchoring the threads, a support for the weighty beads, and a visual guide for adding the surface motifs. Sequins, metallic coil, crimped metal strips, bouillon and even green iridescent beetle wings have historically been embellishments incorporated into the embroidery of the *sua khruai*. The mythical man-lion *nara singha* motif, symbol of kingship, is shown in (22). Spectacular examples of the robes of King Rama IV and King Rama V contained in the Grand Palace holdings show a wide range of delicate embellishments and materials. One can only imagine how many hours were devoted to making each of these *sua khruai* (23, 24).

### A Conservation Case Study

It is no wonder why these exquisite garments were and are so special, and yet, they are very hard to maintain over time. Textile conservators at the Queen Sirikit Museum of Textiles are exploring and cataloguing both the condition and deterioration of many of these historic beauties. One thing seems certain: the actual materials and construction methods themselves cause damage and deterioration. Referred to as “an inherent vice” from a conservator's point of view, the actual ground cloth of either netted gold or cotton tulle is just too delicate to support the heavy metallic embellishments, even with structural support from paper or other materials. In addition, oxidation and high humidity discolours the gold.

Many attempts have been made to prevent deterioration of these robes. One traditional court method is a large cotton robe in the shape of the *sua khruai*, to cover the robe and protect it from dust and oxidation (25). Many conservation efforts are being put towards physically repairing the embroidery and devising a support system for the *krongthong*. One recent project helped advance the understanding of how structure and embellishment might properly be conserved in these iconic textiles.





25 Solitary example of a cotton overcoat or dust-cover; a clue to the traditional method of protecting *sua khruai* for long periods in storage. Paothong Thongchua, *Royal Textiles in the Siam Court*, Bangkok: Bank Thai Public Company Limited, 2005

Andreas du Plessis de Richelieu (1852–1932), of the Danish foreign service, received the royal title and rank of Phraya Chonlayuth Yothin from King Rama V. In addition, King Rama V bestowed the *sua khruai* robe and the Decorations (26) upon Admiral de Richelieu.<sup>19</sup> A formidable businessman and naval expert, he regularised the Royal Thai Navy, and even served as the Commander-in-Chief. In fact, he is often referred to as “the father of the Thai Navy”.<sup>20</sup> It is his robe that underwent an extensive conservation process in 2011 and is on public view in Bangkok (27).

The robe represents a remarkable and well-documented story of the friendship between two men, the diplomacy between Siam and Denmark, and the final journey of the honorific robe back to its place of origin. De Richelieu became an indispensable adviser to King Chulalongkorn on matters of business and trade: in addition to captaining the king’s yacht, the *Maha Chakri*, on at least two journeys to

Singapore and Java in 1896 and 1901, he was also responsible for bringing electricity to the Grand Palace and then Bangkok, setting up a public transport trolley system, and co-founding the largest regional trading company, the East Asiatic Company.

When the royal temple Wat Benjamabopit was being built in Bangkok in 1901, Admiral de Richelieu facilitated the shipment of the main Buddha image of the chapel. His name appears with King Rama V’s on the base of the statue.

<sup>19</sup> In addition to the Dane, King Rama V bestowed titles on a Belgian, Chao Phraya Abhairaja (Gustave Rolin Jacquemyns), who served as a General Advisor in international law, and a Japanese, Phraya Mahidhorn (Tokiji Masao), who served as an Assistant Adviser to the Ministry of Justice and later as the Ambassador to Siam. Both men were legal experts who assisted in setting up courts and law practises in Siam, as well as counselling in trade, foreign agreements and negotiations.

<sup>20</sup> Sukhsvasti, *The Journey of the Robe*.





26 A striking portrait of the admiral donning his *sua khruai*, with many of his Siamese, Danish and French medals and insignia, circa 1901–1902. Courtesy of the admiral's family in Denmark and Anders Normann

ue.<sup>21</sup> De Richelieu was such a trusted friend of the king that he accompanied two princes to Denmark in 1883 for education, served as an adviser to Queen Saovabha when she was installed as Regent in 1897, and also accompanied Crown Prince Maha Vajiravudh on his visits to the royal courts of both Denmark and Russia, as well as to the Royal Military College at Sandhurst, England.

Admiral de Richelieu arrived in Siam in 1875, letter in hand from the Danish King Christian IX, ready to offer his services to the king. During this often turbulent era of French and British expansion in Southeast Asia, he served King Rama V in many naval capacities. He commanded the Siamese gunboats in the Paknam Incident of 1893, and effectively ended The Franco-Siamese War, then became the Vice-Admiral of the Thai Navy. The robe was given to the Danish Admiral in 1902 by King Rama V to honour his service to the crown, along with the title and rank of The Most Illustrious Order of Chula Chom Klao, or Phraya Chonlayuth Yothin. The treasured robe travelled back to Denmark in 1903 and remained there until 2010. The retired admiral and the king remained in contact, and enjoyed a last reunion in 1907 in Norway.

After nearly one hundred years in a bank vault in Denmark, Mr Anders Normann, the Honorary Consul-General of Denmark, with the help of the admiral's grandson, brought the textile back to Thailand. This exquisite robe of gold embroidery needlework on cotton tulle and gold netting was custom made especially for the admiral. Embroidered in metallic gold bullion threads, sequins and soutache, are motifs of ships' anchors and ships' wheels, oars and other nautical insignia. Other than the *sua khruai* made and worn by the kings of Siam, this is the only known example of a *sua khruai* that is highly customised and detailed with imagery of the recipient's rank and trade (28). The return of this significant artefact is a milestone in cultural history and its conservation reinforces a close diplomatic relationship that has evolved over one hundred and fifty years. It is a story of international preservation efforts.

Fortunately, the admiral wore it only draped over his shoulders, and then it rested in dark cold storage in Denmark. The delicate condition of the robe required extensive conservation treatment in order that it can now be displayed safely. The construction and materials of the robe, heavy metallic embroidery on its gossamer netting, has caused tears, holes and loss of the embellishments. Any



27 The crest bestowed by King Rama V is prominent on the admiral's robe, now restored, 2012. Courtesy of Julia M. Brennan

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.





28 Were these nautical motifs copied by the embroiderer from a photograph? One wonders about the relationship between the king and artisan. Courtesy of Julia M. Brennan

wear and hanging causes deterioration, tearing of the netting and breaking of the threads, and exposure oxidises the metallic decorative elements. This robe had minimal damage to the netting, so holes and tears could be patch-supported individually. It should be noted that other robes observed in Thailand had received less gentle wear and treatment. They are so fragmentary and torn, that a full lining of a lightweight organza would need to be applied to the entire inside of the robe in order to provide support to re-attach the embellishments. While not as far gone, the admiral's robe had its own challenges for proper conservation.

The goal of the conservation efforts for Admiral de Richelieu's *sua khruai* was to stabilise and restore the robe, so that it could be permanently displayed in a private gallery in Thailand. The robe needed a lot of help if its glory was to be restored, due to its age and the materials from which it was made. Much of the metallic embroidery, executed through paper and the tulle netting and gold mesh beneath, had fallen off. In addition, there were many tears in the netting.

Replacement sequins, bullion, soutache and gold metallic threads were sourced from old trim shops in New York City. The use of vintage embellishments better matched the patina of the metal on the robe. Where the paper support was torn or missing, new acid free rag paper was used and then replacement elements stitched on top. Several large floral medallions were completely reconstructed (29). Holes in the netting were patched with replacement fine cotton



29 Conservation details: before and after working over the original paper support. Courtesy of Julia M. Brennan





30 Anders Normann, Honorary Danish Consul-General to Thailand, owner and patron of the admiral's robe. Courtesy of Julia M. Brennan

net from England, and hand stitched to the inside of the robe. Work progressed slowly and carefully, nearly two hundred hours all told, as any movement of the robe threatened further damage.

The display of the robe posed additional challenges. Initially, the owner's hope was that the robe could be shown three-dimensionally on a form. As soon as conservation treatment began, it became clear that any hanging weight would further deteriorate the robe. A lovely compromise was devised—display on a slant in a fully protected glass case, with the back of the robe viewable in a set of ingenious mirrors below the case. For the purposes of display, a two-inch thick white silk padded cushion was custom-made to fit inside the robe, to provide support and shape, and separate the front and back of the robe. A padded “clerical collar” provides more rigid support for the mandarin style collar. The front of the robe is loosely basted together. Glass bumpers help hold the robe in place at a thirty-degree slant. The vitrine was designed by a specialist at the Smithsonian Institution, and then produced locally in Bangkok.

It is a tribute to Mr Normann that this remarkable piece of Thai-Danish history is fully conserved. He takes great pride in having repatriated this unique artefact and sharing its legacy (30). In the words of the admiral's grandson Allan Hastrup, “The Admiral's legacy is immortal, and I have peace of mind knowing that his (*sic*) most treasured

parting gift from the King—the golden robe specially made for him—is now back in Thailand and accessible for future generations”.<sup>22</sup>

With this conservation treatment and display as a guide, it is hoped that other *sua khruai* will be identified and brought to the Queen Sirikit Museum of Textiles Conservation Lab for analysis and preservation. The National Museum in Bangkok owns several honorific robes, and there are presumably others in private collections. In addition, numerous robes belonging to the present king and previous kings of the Chakri dynasty are retained in the treasuries of the Grand Palace. Along with the long-term conservation of a core collection of these unique royal robes, a future exhibition and continued research on the sources and styles would be a significant contribution to the field of royal textiles.

The *sua khruai*, in its variations and long traditions of use for auspicious occasions, is an emblematic form of ceremonial dress that both represents unique elements of Thai history and pan-Asian themes. Thus, it is symbolic of both national pride and of international discourse and trade. However complex the process, conserving the most intact samples for study, display and wonder, can convey a sense of history and a sense of the future for the people of Thailand and other viewers.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.



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