



**GOLDEN SPLENDOR** HM King Bhumibol in his ceremonial robe. Image courtesy of the Organising Committee for the National Communications Day, the Celebration on the Auspicious Occasion of His Majesty King Bhumibol's 72nd Birthday Anniversary

# THE ROYAL ROBES

*SUA KHRUI, THE ORNATE ROBES WORN BY THAI KINGS FOR CORONATIONS AND OTHER PRESTIGIOUS OCCASIONS, OFFER A SENSE OF CONTINUITY DOWN THE CHAKRI DYNASTY. INES EHRlich FINDS OUT MORE*

**V**ISITORS TO THAILAND invariably notice numerous depictions of His Majesty King Bhumibol Adulyadej, resplendent in his golden embroidered robes, adorning the façades of public and government buildings. For the Thai people, these garments are immediately recognised as a symbol of His Majesty's kingship; they are known as *cha long phra ong khruai* or *sua khruai*, meaning official or insignia robe—the usual English rendition is the Gown of the Great House of Chakri. The use of *sua khruai* dates back to ancient times when the garment was worn by the king during the royal coronation ceremony and other auspicious occasions. There are two styles of *sua khruai*, an elaborate gold variation reserved for royalty as a visible sign of power, wealth and divinity, and a less elaborate style worn by high-ranking officers and government officials to denote their rank within the court.

The coronation ceremony itself dates back to the Sukhothai period (1238-1583) and in common with many Thai rituals and art forms, takes its roots from Hinduism. During the ceremony, the god Vishnu is invited to enter the king's body, incarnated as the earthly Rama. For this highly auspicious occasion, the king dons his golden *sua khruai* robe, receives a divine name and is presented with the royal regalia, royal utensils and the eight royal weapons of sovereignty, a total of 28 items emblematic of royalty and kingship. By receiving the regalia, a king is rightfully assuming the position bestowed upon him

while also accepting the privileges and duties of this role. Several of the items are ancient, reflecting Indian influence and similar to those used during the Khmer empire, while others are of purely Siamese origin.

## HISTORY OF THE ROBE

According to Julia M Brennan, a senior conservation consultant to the Queen Sirikit Museum of Textiles in Bangkok, and a professional associate of the American Institute for Conservation, the *sua khruai* cannot be accurately dated, but it appears to have a distinct Persian or Mughal influence as seen in the earliest depictions of its use in two 17th-century prints. One such image depicts the first French ambassador, the Chevalier de Chaumont, presenting a letter from King Louis XIV to King Narai in 1685, and the other is a print of the Siamese embassy to Louis XIV led by Kosa Pan in 1686, a year later. Further information on its origins is gleaned from a lacquer manuscript cabinet from the Ayutthaya period (1351-1767) at the National Museum Bangkok, whereby stylistic similarities can be seen between the dress of the Indian or Persian figure and that of the Siamese ambassadors. The closeness in style, Brennan explains, was influenced through the region's trading ties during which symbols of prestige and kingship were copied or adapted.

Since the Ayutthaya period diplomatic ties were sealed with a *sua khruai*, whereby foreign emissaries had a set of garments bestowed upon them by the king, which they would be required to wear at court. This custom was part of a widespread Asian tradition denoting royal favour and allegiance. Use of the *sua khruai* in this fashion continued into the Rattanakosin period, as demonstrated in the 1804 Law of Three Seals prohibiting its use by junior government officials.

## DESCRIPTION OF THE ROYAL SUA KHRUI

The royal *sua khruai* is similar in shape and cut to that worn by high-ranking officials, but made entirely of gold thread as opposed to white silk or cotton tulle enhanced with gold.

It is an outer garment, usually knee- or calf-length, worn as a gown or robe, with long sleeves and open at the front. The garment is exquisitely embroidered with beetle wings or sequins and features a gold band along the torso. Additionally, royal robes are embellished with royal symbols such as a *naga* (mythical serpent), *garuda* (mythical bird and Lord Vishnu's mount), insignia and monograms. This imagery is often repeated in the borders and further conveys the symbols of power and office, as seen on the robes of Kings Rama V and Rama VI.

The weaving of the gold net is called *krongthong* and it employs a technique, *thak ta chun*, only used and taught in the Thai royal court. Applying embellishments such as jewels, glass beads, sequins and beetle wings is a skill perfected over the generations by royal artisans. The last consort of King Rama V, Chao Chom Mom Rajawongse Sadap Ladavalaya was highly skilled in this technique, and at the request of HRH Princess Sirindhorn returned to the palace to teach this unique handicraft until her death in 1983. Tools and samples of gold netting used by her are on display at Princess Sirindhorn's private museum. The craft continues in a small part of the inner court at the Grand Palace. The 19th-century golden threads are likely to have come from France and India, as they do today.

Of the first three Chakri kings there are no available photographs and the few visual



**EARLY DAYS** (From left) The robes may derive from Persian styles, as shown in this scholar's outfit; King Mongkut (Rama IV) in his coronation robes in 1851

depictions that exist were rendered in engravings based on word of mouth. Sadly, little of the opulence of the bejewelled garments is conveyed through this type of medium.

"Much of the current style of the robe was stylised by the first Chakri king," says Yaowalak Bunnag, a conservator at the Queen Sirikit Museum. "Upon ascending the throne in 1782, King Rama I also set the rules for use and ownership of the *sua khruai* robe. The textiles were highly valued and their use restricted; their meticulous production was overseen by the king himself, crafted in a workshop within the Inner Court under the supervision of a prince." After amassing all available information concerning such ceremonies from the Ayutthaya period, the king created a model upon which all future coronation ceremonies were based, sitting on the Octagonal Throne beneath a seven-tiered umbrella wearing the elaborate *sua khruai* robe. After the Great Crown of Victory had been placed upon his head, the umbrella would be replaced by one with nine tiers, symbolising full sovereignty. Next, the head Brahmin would present him with regalia crafted especially

IMAGES: THE PERIN PRESS VISUAL ENCYCLOPEDIA; A ROYAL ANTHEM: THE CHILDREN AND GRANDCHILDREN OF KING MONGKUT (RAMA IV) OF SIAM



**COURT ATTIRE** Prince Krisda Bhiniham, son of Rama IV, wears the Star of Nine Gems on his robe

for the occasion. The same crown and accompanying regalia have been used by all subsequent Chakri kings.

When photography arrived in the kingdom, the famous image of King Mongkut (Rama IV) in full royal regalia was taken by John Thomson, a Scotsman at the Siamese court. The photo shows off the fine detail and richness of the king's elaborate traditional *sua khruai* as well as recording for the first time a true likeness of the monarch, which until then had been taboo. A detail of the king's robe shows a *naga* embroidered with silk and gold metallic thread.

In addition to the photographs portraying the king in his traditional *sua khruai* gown,

## KING RAMA V CODIFIED THE USE OF THE SUA KHRUI BY ESTABLISHING EMBLEMS TO DENOTE LEVELS OF RANK WITHIN THE COURT

Yaowalak shows us photographs of Kings Rama IV and V wearing very different ceremonial attire. She explains that the lavishly embroidered costumes, reminiscent of those worn by celestial beings in Buddhist cosmology, represent the concept of Devaraja, the god king. "Both robes were worn during the coronation ceremony but the Devaraja costume is considered more auspicious since it dates back to ancient times when it was worn by royalty in Asian courts such as those of Burma and Cambodia," she says.

Rama IV's reign saw the arrival of the French and the British in Southeast Asia, and precipitated the disappearance of elaborate court rituals in most of the region. The Siamese king, however, did not abandon the court's ancient rituals—instead, he introduced elements of European attire to the court, including his European-style jacket, in a bid to appear more civilised (by Western standards) and stave off the threat of colonisation. A recent exhibition at the National Museum Bangkok, Elaborate Vintage Textiles and Clothing, displayed King Rama IV's European-style ceremonial jacket worn when receiving foreign dignitaries.

King Chulalongkorn (Rama V) had his first coronation ceremony in 1868 when he was just 16, for which he wore full ceremonial *sua khruai* robes. When the king came of age in 1873 he had a second coronation and in a photograph by Francis Chit, Bangkok's first commercial photographer, he is also depicted wearing Devaraja-style robes, as his father had done. According to Brennan, during his reign the king codified the use of the *sua khruai* by establishing crests and emblems to denote levels of rank within the royal court. From the late 1890s he took to wearing dress uniform instead of the royal ceremonial garb when posing for official portraits and attending state rituals. In a photograph housed at the National Archives of Thailand, the king is seen wearing the *sua khruai* in the style reminiscent of a Western military uniform with the insignia of First Class of the Most Illustrious Order of Chula Chom Klao Star. Despite its popularity, by 1941 wearing the *sua khruai* with insignia was discontinued and today it is only worn for official photographs. A detail of the king's robe shows his embroidered initials in Thai—for *baw ror* meaning Maha Chulalongkorn Parama Ratchatirat, King Chulalongkorn the Great.

King Vajiravudh (Rama VI) also had two coronation ceremonies, a modest one immediately after ascending the throne in 1910, and a more lavish one in 1911, in the full royal dress. He further codified the use of *sua khruai* by royal ordinance in 1912. He specified the different types and ranks to be worn by members of the royal family and government officials and granted permission for it to be used as the academic dress of the Royal Pages School (Vajiravudh College) in 1913. Since 1967, other universities have also adopted the *sua khruai* as their academic regalia, and the term has acquired the more general meaning of any style of academic

IMAGE: NATIONAL ARCHIVES OF THAILAND

or court dress. Details of the ceremonial royal robe belonging to King Rama VI show an embroidered *naga*, the symbol of his birth year (the dragon) in the Chinese zodiac.

Images depict King Prajadhipok (Rama VII) wearing the full regalia during his coronation at the Phaisan Thaksin Hall on February 25, 1926, and again on December 10, 1932 upon signing the constitution of the Kingdom of Siam at the Ananta Samakhom Throne Hall.

Depictions of HM King Bhumibol Adulyadej wearing his ceremonial robes are still a common sight in Thailand. Whether seated during his coronation ceremony or standing in his golden embroidered *sua khruai*, the images inspire awe and respect among his people. The robe, worn over a white military uniform, is distinguishable by the emblem of the Royal House of Chakri comprising the intertwined chakra (discus) of Vishnu and the trident of Shiva, the golden chain and the white epaulette-like ribbons attached to the shoulders. Throughout His Majesty's reign, he has donned the ceremonial robes on many special occasions, beginning with his coronation on May 5, 1950. Other occasions included royal processions, birthday celebrations and receiving special audiences. To mark his Golden Jubilee in 2006, he wore the resplendent *sua khruai* as he delivered a speech to the people from the palace balcony to the cheers and tears of the adoring crowds.

Where can these robes be seen today? Although more rarely nowadays, such garments were often seen by the public during the present King's birthday celebrations. Yaowalak explains that numerous robes belonging to kings of the Chakri dynasty are stored in the treasuries of the Grand Palace in the Chakrapat Bhiman Throne Hall, but due to their value and fragility are not accessible to the public. The public can view a number of honorific robes, donated to the National Museum Bangkok, during special exhibitions and others are found in private collections.

One such example is the robe bestowed upon the Danish Admiral Andreas du Plessis



**INTRICATE DETAIL** King Chulalongkorn's robes bear the the insignia of First Class of the Most Illustrious Order of Chula Chom Klao's Star; close-ups show the complex embroidery on the robes

IMAGES: NATIONAL ARCHIVES OF THAILAND; QUEEN SIRIKIT MUSEUM OF TEXTILES

de Richelieu by King Rama V more than 100 years ago in recognition of his services to the kingdom. It was later purchased by antiques collector Anders Normann and painstakingly preserved by Julia Brennan. While serving on the board of the Copenhagen auction house Bruun Rasmussen, Normann found the robe on the floor of the owner's office, ready to be auctioned off. "I saved it from the hammer," he says with pride. "Having lived nearly 50 years in Thailand and being familiar with Thai art and history, I realised that this was something very special." An auction principle was overridden and Normann was allowed to contact the owner (the admiral's grandson), pleading with him to return the robe to Thailand where it belongs. "It is the only one in the world," he says. "King Chulalongkorn had it specially made for the admiral, as can be seen from the unique maritime motifs. It is one of the few ceremonial robes still in a private collection." Today the robe is displayed at his Asian Art Museum on Silom Road; he admits that this is not ideal but he hopes to find a more suitable home that will ensure public access.

Brennan explains that *sua khruai* are very delicate, fragile, precious and rare. "They are only made on commission, and take many months and years to produce," she says. "Because of their royal connections, rarity and fragility, they are selectively worn, and not displayed for long."

**TO THE MANNER BORN** (From top) A 19th-century painting at Wat Benchamabophit in Bangkok shows King Chulalongkorn (Rama V) in his *sua khruai*; Anders Normann with the robe of Admiral de Richelieu; a detail of the admiral's robe



## THROUGHOUT HIS MAJESTY'S REIGN HE HAS DONNED THE ROBES ON MANY SPECIAL OCCASIONS, BEGINNING WITH HIS CORONATION

The significance of these robes derives from their ancient history, their unique craftsmanship and the reverence attached to the kings who wore them. Advanced conservation techniques and storage conditions are employed to preserve these age-old garments, ensuring the survival of Thailand's unique textile heritage. ●

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IMAGES: QUEEN SIRIKIT MUSEUM OF TEXTILES; KING CHULALONGKORN IN MURAL PAINTINGS; YINGYONG UN-ANONGRAK