

JULIA BRENNAN

Conservation crusader



PHOTOS: YINGYONG UNA NONGBAK

EXPAT SCENE

USNISA SUKHSVASTI

Flying in and out of Bangkok regularly over the past two years is textile conservator Julia Brennan. US-based Brennan is no newcomer to Thailand, having grown up in Chiang Rai and Chiang Mai at the time Her Majesty the Queen was establishing the Support Foundation and reviving the nearly lost textile traditions.

Julia Brennan has taught textile conservation in Asia for the past decade. She helped establish the National Textile Museum, under the royal patronage of HM Ashi Sangay Wangchuk in Bhutan. Over a period of eight years she helped train the first generation of Bhutanese textile conservators.

However, working in Thailand as a professional conservator, to preserve Thai cultural treasures was a long held dream that has now come true. In Thailand, she has been working on a number of textile projects, mainly as a consultant training a group of textile conservators, helping to set up a new textile conservation laboratory, and helping to establish the Queen Sirikit Museum of Textiles, organised under the Support Foundation and Her Majesty's the Queen's Personal Affairs Division Office. The museum is expected to open in August.

Another project, which she has just completed, is the conservation of the ceremonial robe presented by King Chulalongkorn to Phraya Cholayuth Yothin, otherwise known as Vice Admiral Andreas du Plessis de Richelieu, a Danish navy officer who became the first and only foreigner to take command of the Royal Thai Navy at the beginning of the 20th century.

The robe had been in the possession of the admiral's grandson, who put it up for auction in 2007. This was when it caught the attention of Anders Normann,

the consul general of Denmark in Thailand, who hoped to return the robe to its country of origin.

Flash forward four years, and Normann is now the proud owner of the robe, having grown too attached to part with it. Besides, it is a truly historic artefact that attests to the long Thai-Danish relations which Normann himself feels personally, having spent over 40 years in the Kingdom.

On its rediscovery, the robe was so fragile, however, and a couple of years of upright display had begun to cause wear and tear. In stepped Brennan, and through her expertise and patient efforts, the robe is now ready for permanent display.

How did you become involved in this project?
Jane Puranananda was like our fairy godmother. She saw the robe and realised some professional advice might be useful and introduced me to Anders. I saw the robe in 2009 and wrote the proposal: "It's very fragile, it needs a lot of work. It can be displayed, but very cautiously, on a slant."

What was the condition of the robe when you first saw it?

For its age and delicate construction, it was in remarkable condition. The construction and materials had, in fact,

an "inherent vice" — heavy metallic embroidery applied to a very gossamer netting ground cloth. The weight of embroidery and age and brittleness of embroidery threads had caused loss of the embroidery and embellishments.

Some of the embroidery was missing, many glass beads and metallic sequins had fallen off, and the metallic gold threads were unravelling. Holes were appearing in the netting.

What did the conservation process involve?
First I had to stabilise and repair the gold metallic embroidery. This included reattaching all loose gold threads and bullion and soutache threads, and reconstruct the sequined and bullion embroidery. Replacement vintage sequins and gold metallic soutache, bullion and other gold threads had to be sourced and purchased in New York City.

Then the holes had to be repaired. It was painstaking work. I would work five hours, then take a break and walk up and down Silom Road to readjust my eyes before coming back for another five-hour session.

Finally, a padded support was inserted to give it some shape so the front and back are separated and give the heavy embroidery some support, as well as to hold the neck up.

How did you come up with the display idea?
Anders really wanted it standing, so last year we had a mannequin shipped out from the US. But when I saw it, I was nearly in tears because I knew it wasn't going to work. This was a delicate evolving stance between conservator and patron.

Anders, to his credit, began to think long-term. He realised he is just the short-term protector of this artefact. He couldn't possibly have it on a mannequin as it would destroy it.

I discussed it with a case designer in the US, whose specifications were executed by a local case maker in Thailand. The robe is now displayed on a glass deck; normally it's solid. We have to use glass bumpers to hold it in place so you can see each and every detail. Everything had to be ingeniously thought out.

How do you feel upon completing this project?
Overall, it's a very collaborative and involved process. This was a huge honour for me as a conservator to be able to work on such an important piece of Danish-Thai cultural heritage. It's like a royal relic, an important part of Thai-Danish history, and to be able to extend the life of it by restoration and conservation support, repair, and be able to design a method of display that will preserve it long-term while allowing people to enjoy it and learn from it.

I've been fortunate to work on a number of exciting high profile pieces — George Washington's silk waistcoat, president Abraham Lincoln's Great Overcoat that he was assassinated in, Babe Ruth's kimono from his tour to Japan. This goes into my archive of most extraordinary projects.

The ceremonial robe of Phraya Cholayuth Yothin (Vice Admiral Andreas du Plessis de Richelieu) can be viewed by appointment only at Nicolie, 1041/5 Sun Square, Silom Road (between Soi 21 and 23). Call 02-233-6957.

The preserved ceremonial robe of Vice Admiral Andreas du Plessis de Richelieu.

