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**TO GIVE WITHOUT  
DISCRIMINATION:  
HER MAJESTY  
QUEEN SIRIKIT'S  
40-YEAR EFFORT TO  
PRESERVE THAI TEXTILE  
TRADITIONS**

**Keywords:** Thailand, textile heritage, cultural identity, textile arts revival, court dress reinterpretation, indigenous arts, rural development, SUPPORT Foundation

## ABSTRACT

In 2011, Thailand's first textile museum and textile conservation laboratory opens in Bangkok: the culmination of Her Majesty Queen Sirikit's lifetime effort to revive indigenous and endangered textile traditions, build a nationwide organization to preserve Thailand's textile heritage, and assist Her people. Under royal patronage, the museum brings together the rich and varied tribal, indigenous, and royal textile traditions – honoring and preserving Thailand's diverse cultural identities. Establishing Thailand's first national textile conservation lab and training center marks a serious commitment to long-term cultural preservation. Its mandate is to become a conservation destination for Asia; with a trained conservation team, state of the art storage and lab facilities, long term treatment and exhibition programs, and outreach and education with other Asian museums. The successes and strategies employed by Her Majesty to launch and sustain this new textile center are reviewed in this paper.

## RÉSUMÉ

En 2011, le premier musée des textiles et laboratoire de conservation des textiles a ouvert à Bangkok, point culminant des efforts déployés par Sa Majesté la reine Sirikit tout au long de sa vie pour faire renaître les traditions textiles indigènes et celles en péril, fonder un organisme national pour préserver le patrimoine textile de la Thaïlande et aider son peuple. Sous son mécénat royal, le musée rassemble les traditions textiles tribales, indigènes et royales, riches et variées, honorant et préservant ainsi les identités culturelles diverses de la Thaïlande. L'institution du premier laboratoire national

## INTRODUCTION

For forty years, Her Majesty Queen Sirikit has worked to identify Thai indigenous and endangered textile traditions and build a rurally-based nationwide organization to preserve Thailand's textile heritage. In September 2011, Thailand's first textile museum and textile conservation laboratory opens in Bangkok. This new museum brings together the great diversity of traditional Thai textiles for study, preservation and display. Housed on the grounds of the Grand Palace, the museum is the culmination of Queen Sirikit's vision for the long term preservation of Thailand's rich and varied textile traditions – a vision that venerates and preserves Thailand's diverse cultural identities. Supported by a state of the art storage facility, conservation lab, and galleries, professional staff will promote the museum as a regional center for the conservation of Thai textiles and a hub for the sustained training of the first generation of Thai textile conservators. This paper will review the history of the textile heritage project, establishment of the museum, the inaugural exhibitions, selected conservation treatments, on-going training, development of a Thai-based conservation materials network, and long term storage and rehousing programs. Finally, the paper will explain the vision for the future of this multi-disciplinary, multi-cultural endeavor (Figure 1).



**Figure 1**

Queen Sirikit Museum of Textiles. Renovated 19th-century building on the grounds of the Grand Palace

et centre de formation de conservation textile en Thaïlande marque un engagement sérieux envers la préservation culturelle à long terme. Doté d'une équipe de conservation qualifiée, d'installations d'entreposage et d'un laboratoire à la fine pointe, proposant des traitements de longue durée, des programmes d'exposition, des actions d'éducation et de proximité avec d'autres musées asiatiques, cet établissement a vocation de devenir une destination de conservation pour toute l'Asie. Les succès et les stratégies adoptées par Sa Majesté pour lancer et soutenir ce nouveau centre sur le textile sont décrits dans cet article.

## RESUMEN

En 2011 abrió en Bangkok el primer museo textil y laboratorio de conservación de objetos textiles de Tailandia. Fue la culminación de los esfuerzos de toda una vida de Su Majestad la Reina Sirikit por revivir las tradiciones textiles indígenas en peligro, crear una organización a nivel nacional para conservar el patrimonio textil de Tailandia y ayudar a su gente. Gracias al mecenazgo real, el museo recoge tradiciones textiles tribales e indígenas ricas y variadas, honrando y preservando así las diferentes identidades culturales de Tailandia. La creación del primer laboratorio nacional de conservación de textiles y centro de formación, deja claro el serio compromiso con la preservación cultural a largo plazo. Su mandato consiste en convertirse en el primer destino asiático en materia de conservación, para lo que cuenta con un equipo de conservación capacitado, laboratorios y bodegas con las instalaciones más avanzadas, programas de tratamientos y exposiciones a largo plazo, y programas de divulgación y educación en colaboración con otros museos Asiáticos. Este artículo revisa los éxitos y estrategias empleados por Su Majestad para lanzar y mantener este nuevo centro textil.

## HISTORY OF THE RURAL DEVELOPMENT PROJECTS AND SUPPORT FOUNDATION

Beginning in the 1960s, Thailand's King and Queen travelled throughout the country to establish projects designed to alleviate poverty and mitigate natural disasters through innovative agricultural projects, reforestation, health clinics, and skills training (Office of Permanent Secretary 2008, 55). They were then, and still are, deeply committed to the improvement of daily life for all rural Thais. They found that traditional activities such as weaving and basketry had steadily declined and that the rejuvenation of traditional crafts of rural communities might also invigorate their economies (Figure 2). Keenly interested in local handicrafts and ethnic clothing, The Queen collected historic samples and catalogued rare textile techniques during these trips. An unexpected source for samples of old regionally woven *matmee* or ikats (tying and dying pattern technique) and other traditional textiles was the cleaning rags used by village women in their homes. Her Majesty started collecting these rags, recognizing that these were the remaining examples of a rich and beautiful tradition (Veeranuwat 1990, 14–22). She also recognized that the increasing adoption of western style clothing could render obsolete many of the ethnographic textiles and the traditional techniques.

In an effort to preserve precious cultural identity and promote supplemental opportunities, The Queen commissioned village women to weave traditional textiles for Her own personal use. She used these newly woven fabrics in the making of Her own clothes, which were proudly worn on public occasions. Her public display inspired new interest in producing these beautiful textiles that had nearly become extinct. In 1976, the establishment of the Foundation for the Promotion of Supplementary Occupations and Related Techniques (SUPPORT Foundation) created an organized structure to implement the Queen's goal to help the rural poor, particularly women, which in turn led to the successful revival of many traditional arts, particularly textile arts (Rampiapha Kasemsri 2002, 14).

The goal was simple: to revive indigenous arts and create livelihood. Other crafts include the revival of court arts such as gold and silver niello, beetle wing embellishment, lacquer ware, vine basketry and wood carving. Today, the SUPPORT Foundation has nine main centers and 145 branch training facilities in 50 provinces. More than 300,000 people are engaged in traditional crafts and thus improve their livelihood (Rampiapha Kasemsri 2002, 201). Through the systemized promotion of indigenous crafts, what started as an effort to assist the rural poor has turned those regional expressions of culture into a national identity and source of pride. In turn, the effort has been successful in not only preserving many of Thailand's artistic and cultural traditions, but also in establishing a vibrant legacy for future generations. Today, SUPPORT textiles are exhibited and sold throughout the world, and more importantly, are integrated into the urban Thai identity in both home decor and fashion (Figure 3).



**Figure 2**

An early visit by Their Majesties to Khao Tao weaving workshop, 1966. Photo by the Royal photographer, Bureau of the Royal Household

## PROMOTING NATIONAL IDENTITY THROUGH THAI TEXTILES

The Queen's determination to promote SUPPORT weavers inspired Her to create a stunning wardrobe made from village-woven Thai textiles. She invented a new fashion paradigm: inspiring multiple weaving workshops; the work of young Thai designers such as Pichita, Yuthapong, Rapee Nai Noi and Nu House; and a 30-year relationship with the House of Balmain. In addition, The Queen worked with international designers such as Dior, Givenchy, and Valentino to create stunning western-style dresses using Thai textiles.

Through personal fashion, The Queen has moved mainstream Thai attitude beyond mere acceptance to a national celebration of traditional crafts and textiles. It is not uncommon in today's fashion conscious capital of Bangkok, to attend a black tie event where a majority of the women are wearing Thai textiles fashioned into evening wear. Her Majesty's specially designed outfits, 55 from the years 1960 through 2000, have been chosen for display in the new museum. These couture costumes reinforce the message that traditional indigenous textiles are high fashion and the most desirable fashion in Thailand (Figure 4).

Queen Sirikit's early interest in traditional Thai arts and culture led her to encourage and, sometimes, revive traditional textile arts and styles. Her efforts also included reviving and popularizing traditional Royal Thai Court Dress. Seen in wall paintings and old black and white photographs, court clothing was rapidly becoming a relic of the past, pushed out by the wildly popular western skirt and pants (Office of Thai Identity 2000, 342–561).

In the late 1950s and 1960s, Thailand was part of a region characterized by both Communist and Colonial neighbors. Politically astute, The Queen recognized that Thailand's national and international identity could be improved and 'civilized' through a strong physical and cultural display of identity. Therefore, She revived and popularized several different court costumes, reinterpreting the designs to make them a little more modern and easy to wear. These court costumes served to promote traditional Thai costume as a visible symbol of a rich national heritage for Her Majesty's state visits in the 1960s and 1970s.

The Queen conducted research into the historical records of royal costume, and with the design expertise of Pierre Balmain, eight official Thai court outfits were developed and promoted by Her Majesty and her aides.<sup>1</sup> Varying in elaboration, each is suitable for a range of social functions, from morning to midnight. Today, each of the eight styles is sewn from different elaborate textiles, using weaving techniques that include those that have been revived by The Queen's efforts (Figure 5). The eight costumes integrate these special fabrics and updated design. For example, the traditional *sabai*, or breast wrapper cloth, was modified into an elegant one-shoulder bodice with a zipper. The *pha noong*, traditionally five meters of elaborate silk brocade folded, tucked,



**Figure 3**

Her Majesty, wearing a couture *matmee* suit, tours SUPPORT sericulture projects, Ban Nhong Kae, Sakon Nakhon, 1985. Photo by the Royal photographer, Bureau of the Royal Household



**Figure 4**

Queen Sirikit arriving at Sheraton Grand Hotel in *matmee* dress designed by Balmain, Los Angeles, 1985

pleated and shaped into a skirt or *pha sin* or “harem-style” pants, was transformed into an easy to wear elegant evening dress or pant suit. These once-innovative designs are now part of mainstream Thai dress. They have served as inspiration for Friday school uniforms, Miss Thailand competitions, wedding dresses and hospitality uniforms for hoteliers and airlines. One permanent gallery at the museum is devoted to this remarkable preservation story, and how the revival and reinterpretation of court dress has become part of Thai national identity (Figure 5). This gallery juxtaposes the contemporary costume versions with their 18th- to 20th-century precedents.

## RESCUING INDIGENOUS TEXTILE TRADITIONS – TWO CASE STUDIES

Two case studies highlight the broad reach of the SUPPORT foundation’s efforts to revive traditional Thai textiles: the revival of silk *matmee* or *ikat*; and the resurgence of supplementary weft patterned silk.

### **Na Pho (Buriram Province) and the revival of silk matmee production**

In 1970, the first national heritage project revitalized the nearly extinct *matmee* or silk ikat weaving tradition of the Northeastern region of Thailand, a largely agricultural area with a historically unstable economy due to the challenges of weather and other variables. The revival of the weaving was a by-product of rural agricultural development efforts led by The King. In addition to inspiring village-based weaving, The Queen allocated one child per family to work in the fields and another to receive academic scholarships (Office of Permanent Secretary 2008, 126–127).

Observing silk *matmee* scraps in use as rags in poor village homes, The Queen asked a team of her Secretaries to collect as many old tattered samples as possible. Hiding among the faded, soiled and mildewed scraps, lay the original patterns that were nearly lost. It took the team multiple trips to the villages, collaborating with health and agricultural advisors, to establish trust among the villagers to promote the revival of traditional weaving (Published interviews with Secretaries 2002).

Queen Sirikit made a visit to one of the *matmee* producing villages wearing a Balmain jacket cut from the first *matmee* revival weaving. Trust and love led to the first women’s sericulture and weaving projects, reproducing the old *matmee* patterns and reviving the natural dye colors. In 1978, She gave Her *matmee* Balmain jacket to Mrs. Tie, one of the first weavers, and asked her to reproduce the fabric. The weaver treasured the royal jacket and when she died in 2008, she was cradling it in her arms. The new museum proudly pays homage to the weaver and this touching story of heritage revival by displaying the jacket and photos of The Queen’s first visits to Northeastern villages and Mrs. Tie’s house (Figure 6).



**Figure 5**

Her Majesty wearing ready-to-wear (*Pierre Balmain* Ref. No. 168443) Thai traditional court costume, Bangkok, 1982

**Figure 6**

Her Majesty giving her bolero (*Pierre Balmain* Ref. No. 164006) to Mrs. Tie Sangwong (next to HM), Northeast Thailand. Photo by the Royal photographer, Bureau of the Royal Household

### Ban Phon and resurgence of Praewa complex supplementary weft patterned silk

During a 1977 visit to the impoverished ethnic *Phu Thai* villages in the northeast province of Kalasin, the Queen was welcomed with a ‘carpet’ of deep red supplementary weft patterned sashes, unique to this group, and, at the time, a rapidly vanishing tradition.<sup>2</sup> Today, these *praewa* masterpieces are the most coveted and expensive of Thai textiles (Figure 7).

Similar to *praewa* cloth is *khid*, which was traditionally used for making pillows and woven by mothers for their sons when they joined the monkhood. When The Queen visited the northeastern region of Sakonnakorn in 1977, the villagers presented her with a *khid* pillow. Enamored with the elaborate patterns, She commissioned yardage, reduced the pattern size, and popularized this fabric by wearing jackets daily from this fabric (National Research Council 2006, 29).

### ESTABLISHING THE CONSERVATION CENTER AND TREATMENT PROTOCOL

The Queen Sirikit Museum of Textiles is the first in Thailand to be dedicated to serving the Thai people and training Thais in the field of textile conservation. Within the museum, equal priority is given to rural and ethnographic textiles, royal textiles, conservation treatment, public display and interpretation. The storage facility will house over 15,000 textiles drawn from the vast storerooms of the Grand Palace, SUPPORT Foundation’s holdings, and Her Majesty’s personal collections. This multi-year project involves re-housing and cataloguing the foundation collections, ethnographic and royal collections dating to the 18th and 19th centuries, and the treatment of both The Queen’s and non-royal textiles for the inaugural exhibitions.

Several long term projects include the survey and rehousing of 16th- to 20th-century royal textiles housed in Treasuries on the Grand Palace grounds. The museum team serves as advisors and partners on the protocol of preservation: procuring archival materials and training palace staff to vacuum, roll, box, photograph and rehouse these old collections (Figure 8). Within the museum, a state of the art storage facility with customized Delta housing units has been built.

One of the major endeavors of the conservation team is establishing a Thai-based conservation materials resource. Because there are no archival materials produced in Thailand, the museum is working with local paper, plastics and other manufacturers to locally produce high-grade conservation materials. The goal is to develop a local market in South East Asia and an online resource that other museums can use to order materials. This is a critical component to building a sustainable textile conservation center for Thailand. It is driven by the need to rehouse the vast repository of royal textiles and the high cost of importing archival products from Europe and the United States.



**Figure 7**  
Her Majesty with *Phu Thai* ethnic group, weavers of *praewa*, Ban Phon, Kalasin, 1982. Photo by the Royal photographer, Bureau of the Royal Household



**Figure 8**  
Conservation team training and rehousing textiles with the Royal Household Staff, Grand Palace, 2010. Photograph by Parichat Saengsirikulchai

The conservation team works to collaborate and educate other members of the museum team, such as curators, collections managers and registrars. The goal is to establish smooth operation of a huge central textile center, maintain a strong conservation ethic and preservation expertise, so that Her Majesty's work to revitalize Thai cultural heritage is a living legacy. To further that goal, several important projects are already under way.

One project is the compilation and publication of a bi-lingual (Thai and English) *Dictionary of Thai Textile Type Terminology*. When complete, this book will summarize and standardize all the historic court cloth types and ethnographic textiles into an indexed resource for curators, collectors, researchers, and conservators. A second major project is the development of a graphic *Catalogue of Textile Mounting Typologies*. Each Thai textile type is categorized by condition and physical qualities, and an appropriate display plan. The catalogue includes three-dimensional and architectural projections to provide clear guidelines for safe methods of display. This compilation is already a very successful communication tool in use with the design teams and curatorial staff. The long term goal is to expand and publish the typology, and utilize it in preservation outreach in Thailand.

The 2009–2011 training has included: hands-on instruction in production of three-dimensional mounts, invisible mounts, flat and roller mounts, and customized display and storage supports for flat, fragmentary and three dimensional textiles. Integrated pest management has been implemented and an active system for monitoring both RH, temperature and pests is in place. A massive project to freeze all collections is underway, before rehousing in acid free boxes in the new storage facility. One of the largest areas of work has been designing, constructing, customizing and installing mounts and forms of all typologies for the vast range of textiles included in the inaugural exhibit – in total, more than 140 textiles.

The conservation lab is a full scale facility, with wet cleaning capacity, and infrastructure for treatment, analysis and exhibition and storage preparation. One component of conservation work has been the treatment of textiles for the inaugural exhibition. Because the collections have been housed in a wide array of storage conditions, some of which were less than ideal, the condition of many textiles is compromised. Treatments have included: removing mold and mildew through stain removal; overall wet cleaning; and cleaning embellishments attached to couture clothing. Stabilization treatments of delicate silk brocades have involved full support linings, as well as overlays with stabiltex or silk crepeline. Support and repair fabrics are dyed on site, with the advice of a local dyer. The goal of the museum is to become a central conservation facility for other institutions in Thailand, and thus become a forum for shared training and research.

## CONCLUSION

The Queen Sirikit Museum of Textiles is the result of 40 years of preserving Thailand's individual and collective cultural identities through its textile heritage. The museum will showcase the diverse and creative processes that

were used to accomplish important cultural goals that can, and should be pursued, elsewhere. Within the overarching goal of preserving, promoting, and continuing a rich cultural tradition, several successful strategies were used by Her Majesty:

1. identifying the elements of the textile heritage that were at risk and finding samples for use by modern weavers
2. revitalizing and reinventing traditional weaving techniques
3. using traditional weaving and other crafts as a means of promoting greater economic stability in poor regions of the country
4. building national cultural pride by using the textiles in Her Majesty's own state wardrobe as a public symbol of Thai heritage
5. promotion of sumptuous Thai textiles and traditional costume as applicable to life (and dress) in the modern world, and finally
6. ensuring that a formal institution was created to serve as both a showcase for these efforts and a serious academic training facility to enhance the capacity of the region to preserve its cultural patrimony.

The creation of the first national textile conservation lab and training center marks a serious commitment to their long-term preservation. This museum will preserve, research, interpret and promote an understanding of Thai identity through the textiles of Her Majesty, the Royal court, and rural ethnographic populations. An international conference devoted to textile conservation and the study of Thai textiles is being planned for 2012.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> The eight official designs are named: *Ruean Ton, Chitralada, Amarin, Borom Phiman, Chakkri, Dusit, Chakkraphat and Siwalai*. From the simple casual day ensemble, to the formal evening ensembles, each design is named for historic places in the Grand palace complex. All eight designs are considered the creation of Her Majesty The Queen.
- <sup>2</sup> *Praewa*, also spelled *Phrae Wa*, derives the name from the length or “wa” of cloth (*1 wa is a Thai metric term = 2 meters*). *Praewa* is a very complex compound weave divided into principal and striped pattern sections.

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