



Thai Textile Society Visit to The Queen Sirikit Museum of Textiles June 19, 2012

by Siew-Eng Koh



TTS members in front of the museum, Photo Wipawee Tiyawes

*“The museum’s mission is to collect, display, and preserve textiles from Southeast Asia, South and East Asia, with a special emphasis on the textiles of and related to the Royal Court and to serve as a centre for all who wish to learn about textiles past and present.”
The Queen Sirikit Museum of Textiles*



TTS members gather around as K. Tang explains how K. Oum restores Her Majesty’s costume by sewing a light, transparent net on the embellishment to ensure that all beads and sequins stay in place, photo Wipawee Tiyawes

The Queen Sirikit Museum of Textiles, Thailand’s newest and state-of-the-art museum is housed in the beautifully renovated Ratsadakorn-Bhibhathana Building at the Grand Palace. This former Ministry of Finance building was constructed in 1870 during the reign of King Rama V. The Museum was officially opened by HRH Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn on April 26, and was opened to the public on May 9.

On June 19 members of the TTS, led by Steering Committee Wipawee Tiyawes, curator of the Tilleke & Gibbins Textile Collection, had the rare opportunity to visit the Museum and tour its premises, including areas not opened to the public. The group was warmly met by Acharn Anucha Thirakanont and Kullawit Laosuksri, advisors to the Museum, who guided our group through the current exhibits on display, “Artistry in Silk: The Royal Style of Her Majesty Queen Sirikit” and “Fashioning Tradition: Queen Sirikit Creates a National Dress for Thailand”. The exhibition is a stunning display of Her Majesty’s traditional Thai ensembles spanning the years of her reign. These include hand woven textiles from Her Majesty’s SUPPORT Foundation.

The group was then taken to the textile conservation laboratory and storage facilities, where Museum staff explained techniques of conserving, handling and storing antique textiles. Members who had attended a recent TTS talk by Julia Brennan, consulting conservator at the Museum, witnessed the staff at work applying methods of conservation and explaining the correct way of storing antique textiles. The equipment included freezers to rid the textiles of pests and the large but shallow tanks to wash the textiles. This visit was an invaluable learning experience in conservation as well as an aesthetically pleasing display of Her Majesty’s magnificent collection.

The Museum is open daily 9.00 - 16.30. Members who missed the wonderful tour are encouraged to visit the Museum anyway.

HEADER: Lao Kruang Ikat and Kalasin Phrae Wa, photos Donna Dingle

ABOUT US

The Thai Textile Society is a non-profit organization dedicated to the study and appreciation of textiles, with particular emphasis on the textiles of Thailand and Southeast Asia. Based in Bangkok, the Thai Textile Society was founded in 2004 when Kathleen Forance Johnson, wife of U.S. Ambassador to Thailand Darryl Johnson, invited scholars, collectors, and other textile enthusiasts to establish a society dedicated to the study, appreciation, and preservation of the textile arts in the kingdom and the region. An avid weaver and textile collector, Mrs. Johnson envisioned the Society as a forum for textile lovers to exchange ideas and share information and resources. Since its inaugural meeting in May, 2004, the Society has organized regular lectures, trips, and other programs such as its popular Collector’s Corner series. The TTS enjoys and appreciates support from the Siam Society and the James H.W. Thompson Foundation. It has also worked closely with the latter on programs such as the August 2005 Jim Thompson textile symposium. Membership in the Thai Textile Society has grown steadily, and our e-mailing list now reaches more than 400 people worldwide. Under the leadership of Acting President Dr. Sathirakorn Pongpanich, the Society continues to host regular educational programs designed to promote appreciation of Asia’s rich textile heritage. **DISCLAIMER:** This newsletter is distributed free to TTS members and subscribers, and it is accessible free to all website visitors in the hopes of encouraging interest and scholarship in textiles and is the sole property of TTS. Personal opinions expressed in this newsletter are strictly those of the authors and are not necessarily endorsed by the Thai Textile Society. **Our Website can be accessed at <http://thaitextilesociety.org>**



Patient needlework of restoration, photo by Wipawee Tiyawes

COLLECTOR'S CORNER INDIAN SARIS PRESENTED BY MONDIRA MUKERJEE

Story by Ruth Gerson
Photos by John Toomey



Mondira Mukerjee's Collector's Corner

The Collector's Corner program has provided the opportunity to view textiles belonging to private people as well as those of shop owners and museums. This has enabled participants to view some unique pieces and learn about the traditions of the people who wear them.

Mondira Mukerjee is a long-time resident of Thailand, hailing from Calcutta in the state of Bengal, a region rich in culture. This last August 25th, in the William Warren Library of the Jim Thompson Center, Mondira presented a wide range of saris, from her red wedding sari interwoven with heavy silver thread, to the thin saris woven of jute with applied block-print designs.

The sari is the most popular women's garment in India. It is a long rectangular piece of material averaging 6 yards in length, with some variations, and fits all sizes and shapes of women. It is a versatile garment that is worn differently in the various regions of India, and like people's names in that country, the name of the sari and the manner in which it is worn reveal its origin. In addition to the quality of the material, the way a sari is worn indicates a person's status in Indian society. In other words, there is much more to a sari than meets the eye.

The use of sari can be traced to the ancient Indus Valley civilization and the culture of Gandhara, evident in sculpture from this northern region. The styles of saris continue to evolve, especially in recent years following fashions and trends that can be dated. Most of the saris presented in the program were of silk, of varying weights, of jute which feels to the touch like rough silk, and mixed man-made materials to illustrate the evolution of the sari. The cotton saris shown were so fine that the speaker referred to the material as silk-cotton.



Embroidered sari from Calcutta



Varanasi silk

Mondira compared two saris of varying weight silk, both interwoven with silver thread. The glistening silver thread in the heavy weight sari was of pure silver metal, while the thinner silver thread woven into the lighter weight silk was mixed with copper. Ornate and costly saris are worn in weddings, formal occasions and temple ceremonies. These are produced in centers that are well-known all over India. While Varanasi in the North and Kanchipuram in the South are two of the best known silk weaving centers, there are others of fame. Northern looms are different from southern looms, producing dissimilar silks, and are worn in fashions distinctive to their origins.

The designs and motifs in saris are numerous. These include various floral designs, leaves, the mango-shaped motif, stripes, finely checkered patterns, and more. The colors are vibrant and used in such weaves as brocade, embroidered materials, and the complex ikat method matching pre-dyed threads to create a design. The weaver does not wash the finished product, but the threads are usually rinsed prior to weaving. To care for the sari, it must be hand washed in water with a mild soap, and each wash renders the material softer. To protect the lower hem of the sari a fine lining is added to the part that brushes the ground.

Mondira highlighted a few sari styles and their distinguishing weave, color or design. For example, **wedding saris** in the North are generally red in color, and some are orange. The ones in the South are green while wedding saris in the southwestern state of Kerala are white.

Silk and sari styles:

Mysore silk (South) - is the finest in India.

Varanasi silk (North) - is often brocaded indicating the influence of the past Muslim Mughal rulers.

Maharashtran saris (West) - are woven in plain designs often with stripes, some in gold.

Kanchipuram silk (South) - has rich texture.

Tanchoi - is silk brocade sari with dots woven into the material, the more dots the better the sari.

Bandhani - are the tie-dyed saris made in Rajasthan and Gujarat. Mirror work is added in the latter.

Kantha saris - are the product of east India in the states of Bengal and Orissa where delicate embroidery is applied in floral, mythological and folktale designs.

Baluchari saris - figurative designs tell the story of the god Krishna. These come from the village of Vishnapure in Bengal. Today, although brides' saris are richly woven in the old tradition, the women of the younger generation are looking for light weight and easy to wear materials. Nonetheless, the tradition of wearing saris remains in India, and it continues to be identified as its national dress.

The Thai Textile Society welcomes articles from you, our members and readership. You can request Guidelines for Submission of articles at: ThaiTexNews@gmail.com



The Hemis Festival

Story by Jenny L. Spancake
Photos by Jenny and Steve Spancake



Close-up of Padmasambava

In July, 2011, I went to Ladakh, a district in India which is part of the state of Jammu and Kashmir, to attend the festival that is held every year at the monastery of Hemis. I was accompanied by a friend and both our husbands. We quickly discovered that Ladakh is one of the most physically beautiful areas we had ever visited; it lies between the Kunlun mountain range in the north and the main Great Himalayas to the south. The capital is Leh, essentially a hill-top fortress. Also running through Ladakh is the legendary Indus River; each time we traveled to Hemis we crossed this river.

David L. Snellgrove and Tadeusz Skorupski have written a seminal book (*The Cultural History of Ladakh. Vol. I: Central Ladakh*. New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House Pvt., Ltd, 1977) which describes the history, religion, art and architecture of Ladakh. Much of the information in this article is from this publication.

Although there are Muslims in Ladakh, which is located on the borders of both China and Pakistan, the most important aspects of the Ladakhi culture are Buddhist. The first reliable historical records begin in the 10th century; in these Ladakh is already regarded as part of the Tibetan cultural scene. Ladakh was probably part of the western Tibetan kingdom that was founded after the collapse of the 8th-9th century Tibetan empire. The great translator and temple builder, Rinchenzang-po (958-1055) was active in Ladakh and is credited with founding Alchi, the most famous of the Ladakhi temples. However, it is likely that Buddhism had also reached Ladakh from India very early in Buddhist history. Ladakh is poised on the trade routes, so ideas were always flowing through this area. Little that we can state as a fact is known about early history here.

Hemis, a Vajrayana Buddhist monastery known as a *gompa* in Ladakh, is about forty kilometers from Leh in a remote side valley on the left bank of the Indus. We arrived at Hemis after passing some of the longest mani walls we saw in Ladakh. Mani walls can be hundreds of thousands of stones, each inscribed with the mantra, *Om Mani Padme Hum*, which can be translated as "Hail to the Jewel in the Lotus". We could not see the monastery from a distance as one does so many of the

others perched on their mountaintops. But then a corner is turned and Hemis looms in the distance. Hemis, named after the monastery, is the only major festival in Ladakh that is not held during the winter months, which means that the festival is a popular tourist destination. The monastery is part of the Drukpa school of Vajrayana Buddhism and was one of three monasteries founded by Senge Namgyal (1570-1642), one of the best known kings of Ladakh. The Drukpa is one of the six Kagyu schools and is named after the monastery of Druk in Central Tibet. The Kagyu is one of the schools of Vajrayana Buddhism that was founded by Naropa, a well-known figure in Vajrayana Buddhism, who is also said to be connected with Hemisgumpa. The current spiritual head of the Drukpas is Gyalwang Drukpa, the twelfth incarnation of the founder of the lineage, Tsangpa Gyare Yeshe Dorje (1161-1211).

As all monasteries, Hemis is composed of a number of buildings which are arranged in such a way that a large central courtyard is created. Here is where the dances of the festival take place. On the edge of this open space, a raised dais with a richly cushioned seat and a finely painted table are set up. Ceremonial items needed for the festival are placed on the table including holy water, uncooked rice, *tormas*, which are small sculptures made of dough and butter, and incense sticks. We arrived and were fortunate enough to have reserved seats on a terrace overlooking the courtyard so that we had a panoramic view of the dance area. The unfortunate part of our wonderful seats was that it was necessary to climb up to the rooftop to access them; and we were only able to get up to the rooftop via a very long bamboo ladder that was not easy for those of us who are not keen on heights. But the spectacle of the dances made the climb well worth the effort.

The festival is held every July and celebrates the birthday of Padmasambhava, also known as Guru Rimpoche, who is credited with founding Vajrayana Buddhism. He fought with demons at the site of Hemis and so was responsible for the safety of the local people. The dances performed at the Hemis festival are held on the traditional birthdate of Padmasambhava, the tenth day of the fifth month, and are meant to illustrate the life and mission of Guru Rimpoche. During the year of the monkey, the year in which Padmasambhava was born, and which occurs every twelve years, a more elaborate festival is held.



Musicians



Large Thangka

One of the first events of the two day festival is the raising of a large appliqué and embroidered thangka. It is particularly interesting for me as I am very interested in textiles, both to see the thangka and to watch all of the participants arrive, some in traditional Ladakhi dress, some in Bhutanese dress, some in Tibetan dress and of course, the tourists in western dress of amazing variety and appropriateness. One of the more interesting aspects of traditional Ladakhi dress is what is known there as an apron. This is made from a piece of store bought fabric, generally of Chinese manufacture, which is then sewn into an apron shape but worn as a cape. Also very much typical of Ladakhi dress is the felt hat with upturned brim worn by the women. Ladakhi dress can be quite plain when the apron is not present.



L Woman with "Apron". Above, Detail of Hashong's attendant's costume

The musicians play traditional music using four pairs of cymbals, large pan drums, small trumpets, large sized wind instruments, and occasionally two large trumpets. The first two dances set the limits to keep the evil spirits away and to give "a benediction to the place, give initiation to the guests, remove the obstacles of evil spirits, and fulfill the purpose of Ordinary and Supreme liberation." After this, the dance of the eight different manifestations of Padmasambhava begins. The dance is a wonderful mix of monks playing musical instruments, carrying flags, flowers, a fan and a parasol, and copper drums. Then the five Goddesses carrying the symbols of the five senses appear, followed by the eight different forms of Padmasambhava, the sixteen *dakinis*, and the sixteen fairies. The four heroes appear wearing turbans and tiger skins and carrying drums and bells. This dance is colorful and vibrant and the crowd is completely absorbed in the music and drama. The costumes are made of Chinese fabrics of varying designs,

many machine-made and of synthetic materials, but some silk as well.

The next dance is the dance of the twelve Zhingskyong Dharmapalas who are the protectors of the Buddha's teachings (dharma). Two of the dharmapalas are a couple with lion faces, eight others are supernatural spirits, and the last two are monkeys.

Another colorful dance is performed by the five dakinis in wrathful form. They are red (two of them), white, yellow and green. They each carry *phurbas*, a type of dagger, as an instrument to destroy those who work against the Buddha's dharma. The evil destroyed is transmuted into pure nectar which is offered by the dakinis to the dharmapalas.

Then the ten great male and female heroes appear. The common people in Ladakh call them the heroes of the sky and the earth. They are in wrathful form wearing tiger skins on the lower part of the body. The dance drives out the evils and the devils who work against the dharma and sentient beings whether they are on earth or in space. The colors of their faces are yellow, brown, red, green and blue.

After this dance the large thangka painting of Guru Rinpoche is rolled back to the accompaniment of music. This ends the first day of the festivities and the crowd begins slowly to disperse. On the road up to and then again back down to where vehicles are parked, are a variety of stands selling any number of things both practical and spiritual, including amulets.

The second day of the festival begins quite slowly. A large thangka is again displayed. Then finally the dances begin. First to appear are the eleven Acharyas (teachers). Then a dance begins which is led by a deity with the mask of a buffalo. With the help of four skeletons, the deity puts an end to an effigy of those who have committed ten serious crimes.

Hashong now appears; he is a Chinese monk generally known as the smiling Buddha who in reality is Maitreya. He exhibits inner peace of mind. His disciples accompany him and Hashang distributes apricots to them.

The last dance is the liveliest of the festival and allows the young monks the liberty to chase and tease the older monks. The audience enjoys this playful rowdiness; it brings things to an end with a lot of humor. All the participants go back into the main monastery building. We follow and watch the younger monks still full of energy from their revelry. Soon however the long process of putting all of the masks and costumes away for next year begins. We leave with the memory of a pageant of costume and belief.

With this first issue
The Thai Textile Society
launches its TTS Newsletter. Our hopes run the gamut from your contributions of who, what, when, where, and how news articles about textile events, to your own research as well, including photos and data, that you might wish to share with the scholarly community and textile enthusiasts. For Guidelines and Submissions please send to ThaiTexNews@gmail.com



Dancer with close-up of Chinese brocade costume



Dancer with Buffalo mask



**Conservator
Extraordinaire Ms. Julia
Brennan**

Text and photos by John Toomey



Ms. Brennan speaks at Siam Society

Ms. Julia Brennan, who assisted with the Queen Sirikit Textile Museum tour mentioned in the previous article, also presented to the TTS a special lecture "PRESERVATION OF YOUR TEXTILE COLLECTIONS" on May 9 in the lecture hall of the Siam Society. She emphasized how to take care of our collections in a humid and tropical climate. Ms. Brennan gave practical advice on how to take both direct action (treatment, intervention, repair, restoration) and indirect preventative action (monitoring, good lighting, safe storage and display, good handling, protection from environment and theft) to protect textiles, using Lou Gerhig's baseball jersey and Bhutanese royal raven crowns as examples. A few years ago Ms. Brennan also gave us a presentation at the Natalie Gallery on her restoration of a Thai golden robe. King Chulalongkorn had bestowed this rare textile in recognition of 25 years of service on the Royal Navy Vice Admiral, Danish Andreas du Plessis de Richelieu. Ms. Brennan is consulting conservator for the Queen Sirikit Textile Museum and owner of Textile Conservation Lab in the U.S. For more see www.caringfortextiles.com



Left: Detail of the Golden Robe. More images in our Photo Gallery

**Patterns of Trade
TTS MEMBERS ATTEND SINGAPORE CONFERENCE**

Text and Photos by John Toomey

Some TTS members journeyed to Singapore's Asian Civilizations Museum to join the International Conference "Patterns of Trade, Indian Textiles for Export, 1400-1900", held April 21st. Siew-Eng Koh, Martine Mauffrey, Chomporn Dhanesnittaya, Barbara MacNeill, Russ Barschi, Singapore member Shook Tan and John Toomey packed every moment with fun.



Bangkok visitors with curator D. Henkel



Kalamkari for Thai Market

The day before the conference, Shook, Singapore FOM Textile Enthusiasts Group member, took most of us by underground to the ACM and guided us through the spectacular finds of Tang dynasty ceramics, gold, and the crew's personal effects from the Belitung wreck and the newly acquired collection of stunning Indian trade textiles that make up this special show and center of the conference. We were awe-struck by such beauty in silk and cotton, especially the Gujarati *patola* double ikats, the Coromandel Coast painted *kalamkaris*, and dyed and painted *palampore* bed covers with their sinuous trees of life and exotic fruits and flowers for the European market. Shook also guided us through other galleries where we learned so much from the Treasures of the Chinese Scholar, the special Indian Temple of Arts section, the uniquely designed displays of The Vietnamese Literati, and the Cham, Malaysian and Indonesian cultural relics. Each of the various national exhibits included ethnic textiles.

At the all-day conference we met the ACM Director Alan Chong, TTS lifetime member Dr. Linda S. McIntosh, consulting conservator at Tilleke and Gibbins, and other friends in the audience, including Dr. John Guy, curator of SEA Art at the New York Metropolitan Museum (formerly curator at London's V&A) and author of numerous books and articles. Guy presented the opening keynote address, *To Step on the Spread Cloth*, a recap of his research for *Woven Cargoes*, which laid out the history of the globalization of the Indian Ocean trade, using cloth as currency. The exhibition curator Dr. David Henkel explained his concept for the exhibit and the rationale for its setup. He laid examples in long glass cases, hung larger textiles on the walls as would have been done in temples and suspended a canopy overhead. All the exhibits were bathed in soft light of 50 LUX to preserve the centuries-old textiles.

The audience was especially captivated by Dr. Roxanna Waterson's intriguing field study of Indian heirloom textiles used for rituals in Toraja, and the way they have been preserved in baskets, hung from the high rafts of long houses. Coming from Thailand, we were glad to hear the very well-researched and expertly delivered talk by Prapasorn Posrithong, demonstrating how *kalamkari*, *patola*, and chintz cloths were used by Thai royalty, the middle class, and commoners from the 17th through the 20th centuries. Altogether there were six talks and two quite lively panel discussions.

At the end of the conference, Dr. Henkel guided us through his special curator's tour of the exhibition, which reinforced our learning over these two days.

More images for some articles in the TTS Newsletter and TTS events can be found in the Photo Gallery of our Website:

<http://thaitextilesociety.org/gallery.php>

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