

Textiles with Attitude

Kathleen F. Johnson



This mannequin with silver regalia vessels re-enacts the photograph of Prince Suriyadej of Nan taken in 1888. The prince's easy demeanor is a perfect expression of Power Dressing: Lanna Shan Siam 19th Century Court Dress.

Text by Kathleen Forance Johnson

Photographs by Kathleen Forance Johnson and Jane Iverson

An heirloom cloth, although at times old, tattered or faded, is never a rag. A textile passed down through generations embodies memory and meaning. In many societies a simple piece of cloth imparts status, even power, to the wearer or possessor. It may contribute to a sense of belonging and give physical and spiritual protection. Textiles delight the weaver, the wearer, the user, the seller, the owner and the viewer. Cloth often plays a part in important life transitions such as birth, coming of age, marriage, death and afterlife. Since ancient times, textiles have been an important item of trade and a potent status marker. A practiced eye can often tell where a piece of cloth came from, its placement in history and how it was made. Richly evocative, heirloom textiles carry a wealth of information.

A Thai acquaintance, a scholar of antiquities and an avid textile collector, recounted this true story to me. A number of years ago one of his students was on his way to call upon the abbot of an ancient *wat* (temple) to conduct historic research. The student was caught in a sudden downpour and arrived at his appointment thoroughly drenched. When he asked if there were anything available with which he could dry himself, the abbot reached into an old clay pot standing nearby and pulled out a much-wrinkled and stained piece of cloth.

While drying himself, the student noticed that the cloth was marked with unusual patterns not found on textiles today. His curiosity piqued, he asked the abbot if he could keep the cloth.

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Lace blouse of the late 19th century shows European influence in clothing worn by court ladies during the reign of King Rama V.



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Gold brocade jacket arrived in a wrinkled condition and had to be opened out very slowly by inserting crumpled tissue paper over a period of a week. Then the lining had to be replaced to help support the fragile brocade.

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“Yes, there are more of them here in this pot; take what you want!”

That night in his room, the student smoothed out the wrinkled cloth fragments and discovered from their characteristic patterns that they could only have come from the coffers of the royal courts during the Ayudhya period. The next morning he returned to the abbot to ask for more “rags.”

“Oh, those old things. You’re too late. I burned them with the trash this morning!”

Hopefully, the climate for appreciating and preserving historic textiles has improved in Thailand. Still, there is a long way to go toward establishing international-standard conditions for conserving valuable collections. Few museums in Thailand are currently equipped to provide the requisite climate control, safe storage facilities and care by professionally trained staff. No existing program in Thailand focuses only on textile conservation, although such advanced programs do exist in other countries. Academic curricula designed to provide training to that level of professional competence in conservation and museum management focus instead on painting, sculpture and historic monuments. This is unfortunate because the art and science of preserving historic textiles is as complex and difficult as conserving other valuable art objects. Thailand’s rich textile heritage is at risk unless more Thais are trained in this specialized field.

Textiles are among the world’s most fragile artifacts and are difficult to preserve even under the best of conditions. That any ancient textiles survive the ravages of insects, pests, mold, climate and general human wear and tear is something of a miracle. The precious traces of prehistoric textile fragments encrusted in the mineral salts deposited on bronze-age funerary artifacts in the Ban Chiang archaeological digs in Northeast Thailand are like a letter from the ancient past, speaking directly to us across the ages. The fact that they have been made and worn or used by real people, that they have been

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Phasin (skirt) from Tai Khoen court, Chiang Tung, includes gold embroidery, sequins and gold woven patterning. Textiles surviving the ravages of time require careful attention to preserve them for the future.

Tai Lue court dress featured opulent imported velvets suitable for jackets in the cool season. The conservator must be aware of the qualities of each fabric—from velvet to voile—and what treatment is required by each.

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The Jim Thompson Center for Textiles and the Arts is designed to blend in perfectly with the other Thai-style period buildings of the Jim Thompson House compound while offering optimum atmospheric and display conditions for fragile textile exhibitions.

a part of someone's life and identity, and that they provide us with threads of a living past gives them an immediacy and intimacy lacking in some other items of monumental antiquity.

The Jim Thompson Center for Textiles and the Arts opened in Bangkok on December 16, 2003, setting a new standard for textile museums in the region. Located in a beautiful new building on the grounds of the familiar Jim Thompson House Museum, it is designed to provide all the conditions needed for displaying precious textiles in an attractive, safe and well-controlled setting. The Textile Gallery is located on the second floor of a traditional-looking Thai wooden building, which also contains a spacious Jim Thompson store on the ground floor. The new complex fits in well with existing buildings.

By establishing the gallery, the James H. W. Thompson Foundation hopes to

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Embroidered silk coat, decorative headpiece and gold-spangled shoes would have been worn during a royal ordination ceremony.

further the preservation and broader understanding of Thailand's rich cultural heritage. Although the center currently does not own a permanent collection, leading art historians and academics will be invited as guest curators for the various exhibits which will include loans from public and private collections. The exhibitions will not only feature traditional textiles from Thailand and the Southeast Asian region but also will focus on traditional and contemporary fiber art from Thailand and other countries. Future plans include establishing a textile library and research center, which would provide a valuable resource to stimulate textile scholarship, conservation and connoisseurship.

The inaugural exhibition at the Textile Gallery was called *Power Dressing: Lanna Shan Siam 19th Century Court Dress*. Its focus was on the court costumes, textiles and royal regalia from the inland principalities of Lanna (covering northern



On display after careful conservation are a pink silk Shan court coat (left) and the white trousers and shirt to be worn under the coat (right). Finding just the right way to wrap the turban added an unforeseen complexity to the preparation of the display.

Thailand, parts of Laos and the Shan States of northeast Myanmar) and the coastal region of the Kingdom of Siam. Costumes and accessories were on loan from a number of private and public collections. Dr. Susan Conway was the guest curator who also wrote the excellent catalog. Dr. Conway has studied the history of regional textiles and court dress for a number of years and brought to the exhibition all of her expertise and knowledge in a well-laid-out selection of costumes, accessories and old photographs. This skillful interpretive arrangement gave the viewer an enticing glimpse into this opulent world of a bygone era.

The photo in the exhibition catalog of Prince Suriyadej of Nan, taken in 1888, is particularly evocative. The same photograph appears on the cover of Conway's book, *Silken Threads Lacquer Thrones: Lan Na Court Textiles*. Clothed in a fine silk hip wrapper, a simple shoulder cloth and a silk turban with a frangipani tucked behind his ear, the prince reclines at royal ease on a gold-embroidered triangular pillow with his silver regalia (emblems of his

authority) laid in front of him. He is the picture of self-assurance, calculated power and complete independence. In modern colloquial terms we might say he exudes *attitude*. The feeling of a powerful but elegant presence was recreated three-dimensionally with a mannequin used as the centerpiece of the display.

In the old kingdoms of Siam, Lanna, and Shan/Burma there was an intricate network of power and prestige among the courts of the various rulers. Smaller principalities bowed to larger and more powerful courts and paid tribute in specified kind and amount to the dominant ruler. The type and quantity of luxury textiles and costumes along with symbolic accessories for rulers and their courtiers were strictly prescribed by rules called sumptuary laws and were clear indicators of exact rank, power and wealth.

Another elaboration of this power system was the practice of strategic marriage alliances between courts. This practice cemented relationships between political and economic entities which otherwise could be extremely antagonistic if not outright hostile. The women



Brocade coat (sua klum) and plaid hip wrapper (pha chong kraben) were popular dress in the Lanna courts into the 1870s.

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Susan Conway oversees the garment conservation process.

Jane Iverson



Coat issued by King Rama V to provincial governors, diplomats and senior Lanna princes is constructed in several layers. Gold-wrapped cotton thread is sewn onto a netted backing in a technique called couching. Then the figured netting is backed with a silk lining. This case presented a number of delicate problems for the conservators.

who were brought into the court tended to keep their native dress (representative of multitudinous ethnic affinities) in the new court, symbolizing the reach of the ruler's power. Furthermore, these same women brought with them a large variety of materials and styles that could be combined in new ways and sometimes copied. Thus, textiles and costumes were the very underpinning of this system of power and identity in the old kingdoms and remain cultural treasures today.

I was privileged to visit Dr. Conway while she was in the last stages of preparing the exhibition. On the top floor of the Jim Thompson store on Surawongse Road in Bangkok, pieces of garments in various stages of conservation and display readiness were laid on long tables covered with gray felt. Weeks of systematic care and attention went into preparing the items for exhibition before they could be mounted on mannequins.

The first step taken when the items came in was a thorough examination of the piece for its condition and review of any available information on its origins, history and composition. This information along with insurance information and photographs were entered on an accession form that stayed with the item throughout the conservation and mounting process. Items were aired and gently vacuumed through a nylon mesh laid over the textile. Crumpled items were stuffed with acid-free tissue paper, with more paper added gradually every day for a week. This slow and careful manipulation helps avoid damage through sudden change. Other items could be carefully steamed or gently pressed using an unbleached cotton top cloth. Some needed to be stitched to a backing in order to prevent further deterioration and provide support while hanging on display. Several garments needed new lining.

All of this work was done in an atmosphere of soft, indirect lighting. Strong direct light, especially sunlight

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The documentation for each garment accompanies it along each step of the conservation process. This Tai Yai, Shan male court dress was worn under a silk embroidered coat.

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Silk hta mein (wrap skirt) from the Shan States is embroidered with scrolled vines and the mythical hinta bird in gold metallic thread couching.

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Two assistants arrange the conserved garments on mannequins.

Shan female court dress layers couched silver thread flowers and vines on top of the wavy luntaya woven silk pattern for a very lustrous and feminine look.



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and high intensity fluorescent light, is destructive to fragile textiles. Everyone who handled the garments wore clean, white cotton gloves. The air-conditioning and humidity were controlled and stable.

Not everyone with a collection of antique textiles has access to a professional conservator or a climate-controlled museum-style storage facility. Still, there are certain steps that can be taken to lengthen the life of a textile treasure.

The golden rules for textile conservation in a tropical climate:

- Handle with care
- Do not wear
- Do not wash
- Store in a stable environment
- Do not expose to strong light

Full details on caring for historic textiles in a tropical climate can be found at the Website of Kent State University at <http://dept.kent.edu/museum/staff/mount.html>

Power Dressing has now been dismantled and the objects returned to their owners. The catalog, still for sale at the Jim Thompson Museum Shop, is an excellent reminder of the exhibition. The Jim Thompson Foundation has published another book, *Through the Threads of Time*, which includes additional articles by Susan Conway.

If you missed the exhibition or would like to see more of the same or similar pieces from the period, you can visit the permanent collection of the Sbn Nga Textile Museum in Chiang Mai. Some of the pieces in the Power Dressing exhibition were on loan from this large private museum, a collection assembled and displayed with the passion and obsession of a dedicated collector, Khun Akadet Nakkabunlung. The whole collection comprises around 6,000 items accumulated over twenty years. Sbn Nga normally changes exhibits every six months.

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Regional costumes, such as the silk hip wrapper on the conservation table (left) and on exhibit (below), were often brought along with women who married into the court of a different principality.



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Displays include not only textiles but also supporting interpretive material such as enlarged photographs, implements from the royal regalia as well as informative and clearly written labels. An excellent catalog pulls together all of the information for the viewer. It takes much thought, work and professional skill to make an exhibition come alive to the audience.

The Power Dressing exhibition textiles and those on display at the Sbn Nga Textile Museum give only a small glimpse of Thailand's rich textile heritage. Hopefully, such displays will stimulate public interest and awareness and encourage more work in the field of conservation, preservation and well-mounted exhibitions with ample supporting information and interpretive arrangement. Many more museum professionals need to be trained to care for Thailand's priceless textile treasures. ❖

Kathleen Johnson has lived in Thailand for the past two and one-half years. She is the wife of the former United States Ambassador to the Kingdom of Thailand, H.E. Darryl Norman Johnson. Thirty years as a teacher of art and art education in universities and international schools in various countries sharpened her perception and nurtured her curiosity about the arts in those places where she has lived. Mrs. Johnson is a hands-on textile designer and weaver who finds inspiration in the textile traditions she studies. She is the founder of the Thai Textile Society, hosted by the Jim Thompson Center for Textiles and the Arts in Bangkok.

Jane Iverson is an American who is well-known for her photographic documentation of Southeast Asia. As a Bangkok-based photojournalist, Jane enjoys capturing unique cultural events on film.

Trade brought in diverse materials for the court dressmakers to work with. The basic silks, beautiful in themselves, could be combined with a variety of exotic materials to create sumptuous new effects.

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Sbn Nga Textile Museum
Old Chiang Mai Cultural Center
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For more reviews of textile museums and collections in Thailand, visit the Tribal Textiles Website
www.tribaltextiles.info/Countries/Thailand.htm