

Museum of our Own: In search of a local museology for Asia

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TEACHING THAI TEXTILE HERITAGE: THE ROLE OF THE QSMT

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Queen Sirikit Museum of Textiles, Bangkok, thailand

The Queen Sirikit Museum of Textiles was established on May 9, 2012. The museum is located in the Grand Palace, Bangkok, Thailand. Our mission is to be an institution for preservation, exhibition, research, and public education about the textiles and costumes of ASEAN countries, with a special emphasis on Thailand. The museum, like all such institutions, is divided into front-of-house and back-of-house.

The back-of-house of our museum contains the conservation laboratory, registrar's office and object storage. These three areas have been designed to control temperature and humidity. An acid-free environment is used to prevent damage to the objects. All objects are frozen before entering the collection and every modern practice for the care and handling of textiles and other objects are observed.

The front-of-house consists of three exhibition galleries, a library (open by appointment only), lecture hall and an Activities Studio. The three current exhibitions are as follows: *Artistry in Silk: Her Majesty Queen Sirikit Creates a New Royal Style* which displays Her Majesty's wardrobe made of many kinds of Thai textiles woven or embroidered by village women. *Fashioning Tradition: A Modern National Dress for Thailand* shows how Her Majesty and

Her designers created 8 styles of what is now considered Thai traditional dress based on re-interpretations of historic court attire. And the last exhibition, *For the Love of Her People: Her Majesty Queen Sirikit Creates the SUPPORT Foundation*, tells the story of how Her Majesty established SUPPORT, a craft-based non-profit dedicated to helping poor people in rural areas throughout the country.

Recognizing the diversity of the museum's audience – Thais, foreign tourists, resident foreigners and students of all ages, (and many of these categories overlap), the QSMT established an Activities Studio intended to provide visitors, especially students, with a place in the museum to learn through carefully structured play. The content, however, is always linked to the museum's exhibitions. As an example, for the theme of the first studio installation we selected how textiles were cared for in the Siamese court of the 19th century. The visitor learned about the washing, pressing and pleating processes and how women's textiles were perfumed with natural fragrances (visitors could smell various plant materials used for perfuming, for example). Most of the equipment displayed in this room was interactive--some digital, some directly "hands on" with assistance from studio staff. Visitors also had the opportunity to try on traditional Thai dress. The goal of this installation was to promote knowledge and understanding of textile preservation in the Thai Court during the time of King Rama V (who reigned from 1868-1910).

In 2013, we changed the installation in the Activity Room to *Dress and Colors at the Thai Court* and included new interactive components: a magnetic doll game and stamps of Thai textile patterns. We also added a section on how to dress like ladies of

the court following the color of the day. Currently our activity studio theme is centered on a village in the northeast of Thailand where the climate is hot and arid. But most silk and ikat in Thailand come from this region. This studio installation has a doll magnet with regional dress choices that are then to be matched to a map by visitors, a film of the life-cycle of the silk worm and the processing of silk thread, along with stamps with textile patterns from northeastern textiles to put on take home cards. A highlight is a loom with a weaver who demonstrates how to weave ikat. Museum staff, in traditional dress, is available to assist the public and to facilitate communication between foreign visitors and the Thai weaver.

In addition to promoting self-learning by our visitors, we also provide educational programs for students. The education department has prepared an Activity Book for use with students in four grade levels: early/late primary, secondary (middle school) and tertiary (high school).

For the activity book we use A5 size paper as it is convenient for every student to carry while visiting our museum. Our activity book was created from the basic education syllabus of the Ministry of Education of Thailand. Then we adapted the content to the different educational levels of the students as follows:

For early primary students, the Activity book focuses on counting and basic calculation by using garments in gallery 1. In gallery 2, we try to enhance their general knowledge about art and cultural in Thailand through Thai traditional dress. In Gallery 3, the goal is to convey a few simple concepts about the silk process. For example, we introduce them to mulberry leaves, the silk worm,

and the loom. Finally, we introduce information on the history of the museum's building and location.

For late primary classes, we wished to enhance their mathematical and English language skills by introducing more advanced English and more complex arithmetic in order to find the answers in English. For Gallery 2 we focused on art, culture and the Thai language (especially reverence for the royal family). In Galleries 3 & 4 we focused on handicrafts through the process of making silk. Then, as they leave those galleries, text panels and a 3-D model tell the building's story including its history and founder. Finally, we ask for student opinion about our museum.

For students of secondary school we focus on analysis and writing skills. Students learn about textiles in the first exhibition and how to distinguish different types of silk. For the second exhibition secondary students learned to recognize styles of Thai traditional dress. In the third exhibition we still focused on handicrafts as well as the process of making silk but added more about plants used in natural dyeing. As with the other age groups, we also focused on general knowledge about the museum building itself.

Tertiary (high school) students, We focused on a synthesis of information by using open-ended questions. But still kept content about culture and the clothing and textile arts.

Students can seek the answers during a tour of the exhibition. However, for children in kindergarten the Museum has made Thai traditional costume pictures to take home and paint. At least they will remember one of the Thai traditional dresses that they take home.

For Thai and international students, we also have a small booklet in both Thai and English.

In August of this coming year, the museum will have a new project to celebrate Mother's Day. This event is an opportunity for any educational institution to bring students to visit our museum without charge and receive a guided tour plus an activity book.

We will also provide training on each of the topics of the exhibitions for teachers. The goal of this is to promote the use of the educational programs of the museum as a resource for learning outside the classroom. We will start by inviting teachers from schools close to the museum to make access as convenient as possible. Eventually we hope our educational training will spread to other areas of the city. We will also promote these events through other channels in addition to the museum's website and publications such as Facebook and other websites and publications.

Next year the museum is planning its first traveling exhibition to various places in Thailand, starting in the northeast. We are also planning to create school Resource Kits with various themes related to our exhibitions. Each Resource Kit will contain a manual to aid both teachers and students in understanding how the Resource Kit works. The Kits will also have a pocket book, exercises, and games. The primary goal is to give students a chance to learn about their country's textile traditions without having to visit the QSMT in person. Teachers can integrate our story in the Resource Kit into their lessons or teach from the Resource Kit as a stand-alone lesson. But if any school needs more detailed information, for example, about 'Thai traditional dress', they can invite our educator to give a presentation about our exhibition to their students. This flexibility means you can use

our Resource Kit before or after a visit to the galleries or even if you have never visited the museum.

It is anticipated that the effect of these new projects will be to increase the percentage of museum visitors who are students or children compared with the student visitors during the same period last year. Already, this year our first trial free class visits on Thai Mother's Day, August 12th increased student attendance in between August – October by 34%.

In addition to all of these activities, the QSMT also has monthly lectures, seminars and workshops with well-know textile specialists, teachers, collectors, and artists designed for university level students and the general adult public. There are also events specifically related to festivals and holidays as well as other special projects geared to a public, adult audience.

These unique events are always listed on the Museum's website in both Thai and English. Until now most of this type of programming has been presented in Thai, but we are working on future events that will either be in English or bi-lingual to attract the large foreign tourist and ex-pat audience interested in learning more about Thai and ASEAN textiles and 19th century court dress.