

Thai Elephant Statues in Singapore, Jakarta and Ho Chi Minh City: Art, Diplomacy and the Projection of Power

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ABSTRACT—In Singapore, Jakarta (Indonesia) and Ho Chi Minh City (Vietnam) stand bronze elephant statues gifted by Thai kings in 1872 and 1934 respectively. The monuments were designed to commemorate the kings' visits to these cities and visualise royal power. The article contextualises these statues in diplomatic practice and contemporary politics, in their cultural setting and symbolism, as well as in the history of secular bronze sculpture in Thailand. The statue in Ho Chi Minh City is identified as the first major bronze statue to be cast at the foundry of the Fine Arts Department in Bangkok in 1932.

Introduction

In central locations of three major Asian cities—Singapore, Jakarta (Indonesia) and Ho Chi Minh City (Vietnam)—stand bronze elephant statues. If they could talk, these statues could tell of imperialism, civil war, invasions, anti-colonial struggle, independent nationhood, and more recently of rapid urban and economic development. Perched high up on their plinths, the elephants have witnessed some of the key events in the modernisation and emancipation of Southeast Asia. All three statues were gifts presented by Thai kings.¹

The elephant statues in Singapore and Batavia (present-day Jakarta) were erected 150 years ago, in 1872, while the statue in Saigon (present-day Ho Chi Minh City) was inaugurated in 1936. The two older statues were gifted by King Chulalongkorn (Rama V, reigned 1868-1910) to commemorate his visits in 1871, while the statue in Saigon was gifted by his youngest son, King Prajadhipok (Rama VII, reigned 1925-1935), after he had visited French Indochina in 1930.

This article explores these three bronze elephant statues as works of art and contextualises them in diplomatic practice and contemporary politics, in their cultural setting and symbolism, as well as in the history of secular bronze sculpture in Thailand. The significance of these bronze elephants lays in their representation of Thai cultural

¹ I am very grateful to Nguyen Thi Luong, Tej Bunnag, Kannikar Sartraproong, Wasana Wongsurawat, Dom Roongruang, Baas Terwiel, Marc Frey, and Maurizio Peleggi for their guidance and support in writing this article. A short version appeared in the *Bangkok Post* newspaper on 28 November 2022. All illustrations in this article are the author's, except where indicated otherwise.

iconography through an European art form for the purpose of expressing a message of power and independence during periods of colonialism. Among the three statues, the focus of this article is on the “Indochina Elephant” (ช้างอินโดจีน), as it was called at the time, which was the first major bronze statue cast by Corrado Feroci at the foundry of the Fine Arts Department in Bangkok. This article argues that the Indochina Elephant in Saigon marks an important step in the history of modern art in Thailand.

King Chulalongkorn’s elephant statues in Singapore and Batavia, 1872

Famously, King Chulalongkorn was the first Thai ruler to travel outside the kingdom when he visited Singapore and the Dutch East Indies in 1871.² The visits of the young king—he was 17 at the time, had been king for only three years and was still subject to a powerful regent—were designed to study modern (colonial) administrations in the region and modern technology, and to underscore Siam’s independence towards the European colonial powers. They were early stepping stones in a broader project of the centralisation of royal power and an elite-led modernisation of the kingdom. These reforms also addressed the institution of the monarchy itself, by adopting Western fashion, cuisine, architecture, art, and a variety of other symbols and practices, as Maurizio Peleggi has shown, in an effort to appear more equal to European peers and allow for recognition among civilised nations.³

Planning these first overseas visits was a delicate and complex affair, as colonial borders in Southeast Asia were pliable in this period and armed conflicts, especially with France to the kingdom’s east and with Britain at the border with Burma (now Myanmar) were a very real possibility. Siamese-Dutch relations were also not on a stable footing, for although The Hague had recognised Siam diplomatically on the same level as China and Japan, this recognition was not awarded on the ground to the Siamese consul in Batavia. The initiative for the visits originated from the royal bureaucracy in Bangkok, and the administrations in Singapore and Java took some time to warm to the idea. Yet, when the British and Dutch colonial governments eventually agreed to receive the king as head of a sovereign state, success was on the cards. Chulalongkorn and his retinue arrived in Singapore on 13 March 1871 and spent eight days there, followed by another eight days

² These royal visits have been studied by Kannikar Sartraproong, *A True Hero: King Chulalongkorn of Siam’s visit to Singapore and Java in 1871*, Ph.D. Thesis, Leiden University, 2004; Patricia Lim Pui Huen, *Through the Eyes of the King: The Travels of King Chulalongkorn to Malaya*, Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2009; Imtip Pattajoti Suharto, *Journeys to Java by a Siamese King*, Jakarta: ITB Press, 2012. Kannikar Sartraproong has also written specifically about the Singapore elephant statue in a short, but insightful, article for the Singapore Art Museum; see Kannikar Sartraproong, ‘The Bronze Elephant: A Present, A Gift, A Monument’, in: June Yap, Selene Yap and Joella Kiu (eds), *The Gift: Collecting Entanglements and Embodied Histories*, Singapore: Singapore Art Museum, 2021, pp. 80-89.

³ Maurizio Peleggi, *Lords of Things: The Fashioning of the Siamese Monarchy’s Modern Image*, Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2002. On the importance of the visits for King Chulalongkorn’s ensuing administrative reforms, see Kovit Wonsurawat, ‘การปฏิรูปการปกครองในรัชสมัยพระบาทสมเด็จพระจุลจอมเกล้าเจ้าอยู่หัว ประสบการณ์จากสิงคโปร์ ชาว และอินเดีย พ.ศ. 2413-2415’ [‘Government Reform during the Reign of King Rama V: Experiences from Singapore, Java and India, 1870-1872’], in: *วารสารการบริหารปกครอง [Governance Journal]*, Vol. 6, No. 1 (January-June 2560/2017), pp. 2-30.

in Batavia and Semarang, Java. The hosts put on week-long programmes consisting of official receptions, balls, tours, and theatre performances, while the highlight in Java was Chulalongkorn's inspection of the high-tech of the day, the railway.⁴



Figure 1. Singapore Elephant Statue. (Collection of the National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board)

So pleased were the king and his senior officials with the outcome of the tour, that they wished to provide lasting and visible expressions of the respect and recognition that the king had received during his visits. Hence, the idea of gifting elephant statues to Singapore and Batavia was born and the two governments were requested to place them at suitable locations after they had been shipped from Bangkok. In Singapore, the bronze elephant was erected prominently in front of the town hall (present-day Victoria Memorial Hall) on 25 June 1872 (Figure 1), where it stood for over four decades until 1919, when it was moved to its present location next to Parliament House (since renamed Arts House). The statue's plinth was constructed locally and features inscriptions on its four sides memorialising the king's visit in Thai, Chinese, Jawi (an Arabic script for writing Malay) and English.⁵

The twin elephant in Batavia differs from the statue in Singapore only in that its bronze original has been maintained, while the one in Singapore has been painted over in dark grey and black with white tusks since at least a century ago. As the result of a prank

⁴ On the visit to Batavia and Semarang, see *Bataviaasch Handelsblad*, 1, 5, 11-15, 17 April 1871. A lengthy and very detailed article on the king's visit to Java in English, which translates several reports from Dutch-language newspapers, can also be found in *Straits Times Overland Journal*, 12 April 1871.

⁵ The inscription reads in its English original: "HIS MAJESTY / SOMDECH PHRA / PARAMINDR MAHA / CHULALONGKORN / THE / SUPREME KING OF SIAM / LANDED AT SINGAPORE / THE FIRST FOREIGN LAND / VISITED BY A SIAMESE MONARCH / ON THE / 16TH MARCH, 1871."



Figure 2. Batavia Elephant Statue. (Leiden University Libraries)

by visiting sailors, the Singapore statue briefly even donned a green colour in 1941.⁶ As in Singapore, the plinth for the statue in Batavia was also constructed locally, but while the Singapore version was kept in a simple European fashion, this one was designed in an exuberant Javanese style with stone carvings on all sides and corners (Figure 2). King Chulalongkorn particularly enjoyed this design and preferred it over the one in Singapore.⁷ The Siamese elephant was given a prominent home also in Batavia at its inauguration in 1872. Standing in front of the Museum of the Royal Batavian Society of Arts and Sciences (present-day National Museum), the elephant looked across the city's expansive Royal Square, today Independence Square (*Medan*

Merdeka), with its landmark national monument (Figure 3). The statue's plinth is inscribed with commemorative texts in Thai, Dutch, Jawi and Indonesian, but the word



Figure 3. Batavia Elephant Statue in front of the Museum of the Royal Batavian Society of Arts and Sciences.

⁶ *Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, 21 May 1941; *Straits Budget*, 29 May 1941.

⁷ Sartprapong (2004), p. 236, note 427. In fact, King Chulalongkorn was not alone in his dislike of the plinth in Singapore. Upon its inauguration, the *Straits Times* wrote that the statue did “not look by any means imposing”, particularly decrying the pedestal, which it attested to having a “graveyard-monument look about it” and lamenting that “the little elephant itself – entirely in consequence of its surroundings – looks for all the world like a comfortable little porker”; see *Straits Times*, 29 June 1872.

‘Batavia’ has since been scratched from the inscription’s Dutch version, presumably out of anti-colonial fervour.⁸

A question this article is unable to answer is why King Chulalongkorn did not also offer elephant statues to the hosts of his later visits to Malaya, India and several European countries. Although the king travelled widely after his initial trip in 1871, the bronze elephants in Singapore and Jakarta remain the only statues gifted during the Fifth Reign.



Figures 4 (left) and 5 (right). The Singapore and Jakarta Elephants today.

King Prajadhipok’s elephant statue in Saigon, 1936

The world of King Prajadhipok was very different in most aspects of life from the world inhabited by his father in 1871. Prajadhipok was already a well-travelled and cosmopolitan man when he became king in 1925, and continued to travel widely on state business, for pleasure, as well as for medical care. Prajadhipok followed in his father’s footsteps when, in 1929, he chose Singapore and the Dutch East Indies as destinations for his first international trip as king; and he would have certainly seen the two elephant statues, which at that time had already been standing prominently in Batavia and Singapore for nearly sixty years.

King Prajadhipok’s visit to Indochina in April-May 1930 was a reciprocal visit after Alexandre Varenne, the Governor General of Indochina, had visited Bangkok in August

⁸ The inscription reads in translation from the Dutch original: “GIFT / FROM / HIS MAJESTY / SOMDECH PHRA PARAMINDR / MAHA CHULALONGKORN / THE SUPREME KING OF SIAM / PRESENTED / TO THE CITY OF BATAVIA / TO / COMMEMORATE / HIS VISIT IN THE MONTH OF MARCH / 1871.”

1926, and an effort in improving the historically troubled relations between Siam and France. Both sides were keen on exploring closer commercial relations between the kingdom and the colony, as well as the development of infrastructure and communications by land, sea and air. For the French hosts, co-operation in suppressing communist agents

was a further item high on the agenda. A French newspaper expressed the hope that the visit would “mark a trend towards a Franco-Siamese reconciliation that is entirely desirable and timely”, after Siam had “historically always been an adversary and competitor for Indochina.”⁹

Prajadhipok and his large entourage arrived in Saigon on the royal yacht to grand fanfare on 14 April. The *Bangkok Times* called it a “triumphal entry into Saigon.” They were received by French and Vietnamese notables, led by Varenne’s successor as Governor General of Indochina, Pierre Pasquier, who had travelled to Saigon from Hanoi for the occasion (Figure 6). Ceremonial activities, gala dinners and receptions filled the ensuing three days, interspersed with a theatre performance, visits to a school, a hospital, a museum and the botanical gardens, attending a football match

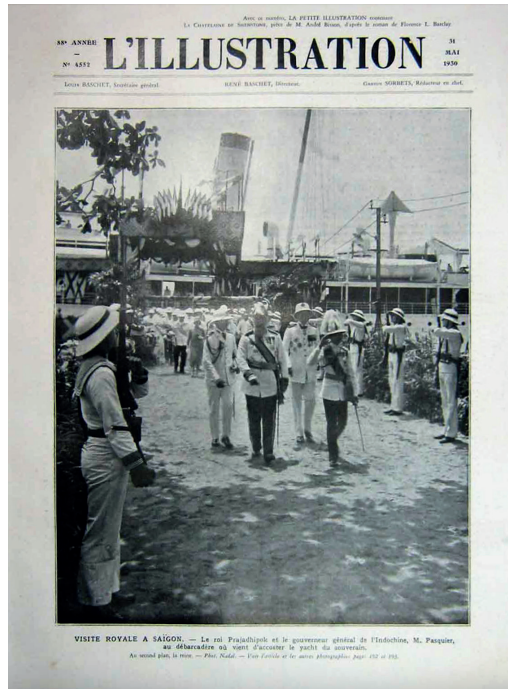


Figure 6. Magazine cover depicting King Prajadhipok’s arrival in Saigon on 14 April 1930.

between a team from Siam and a local team, and shopping. The royal entourage travelled onwards for a sightseeing tour to Tourane (present-day Da Nang) and Hue in central Vietnam, before returning to Saigon via Da Lat and travelling back to Siam overland via Cambodia and the temples of Angkor in early May.¹⁰

While there was a sense of insecurity among palace officials in Bangkok in 1871 as to how Chulalongkorn would be received by Western colonial powers, no such sense of insecurity can be detected in the files about the visit of Prajadhipok to Indochina

⁹ *France-Indochine*, 11 December 1929.

¹⁰ The visit was major news in the French Indochinese newspapers at the time; see *La Dépêche d’Indochine*, 14 and 15 April 1930; *L’Echo Annamite*, 25 March 1930; for a detailed rundown of the king’s programme in Indochina, *France-Indochine*, 25 March 1930; *ibid.*, 12, 20 and 26 April 1930; *Les Annales Coloniales*, 17 April 1930; *L’Illustration*, 31 May 1930. For extensive coverage of the visit in Siam, see *Bangkok Times*, 29 and 31 March 1930; 7 April 1930 (incl. photographs of the King’s departure from Bangkok); 11, 14–17, 19–25, 28–30 April 1930; 1, 6, 7, 9, 10 and 13 May 1930. The Siamese team won the football match 3–2 in Saigon on 14 April. The tour was overshadowed by two automobile accidents that occurred among the king’s party, one in Vietnam and a second, more serious one in Cambodia that killed Nit Sanasen, a lady-in-waiting to the queen and the wife of Phraya Manopakorn Nitithada (Kon Hutasingha), who went on to become Siam’s first prime minister in 1932. A stone monument in honour of Lady Manopakorn, sponsored by the king, was designed by Prince Ititthep Kridakara and erected at Wat Pathum Wanaram; see NAT, ST 0701.7.3.1/25.

in 1930. The French colonial government made efforts to host their royal visitor as splendidly as possible, in order to further their commercial and political interests, but also because the king was the first foreign head of state to visit the colony. Emulating his father, Prajadhipok wished to memorialise his successful visit by gifting a bronze elephant statue, and officially did so in 1934 (Figure 7).¹¹

The bronze elephant was 1.5 metres tall, thereby larger than its two elder cousins, and the plinth was constructed to be 1.6 metres tall. The statue was erected in a prominent location of central Saigon at the north-eastern end of Boulevard Norodom, adjacent to the shrine of remembrance for the fallen Vietnamese soldiers of the First World War (known today as Hung King Temple). The location was chosen by the city council because they believed the elephant statue would fit well with the entrance to the zoological garden, while simultaneously being prominently visible on the city's grandest boulevard.¹²

The original plan of constructing a plinth made of granite in Saigon, as proposed by the palace in Bangkok, proved challenging due to an inability of the administration in Cochinchina to purchase the necessary granite stone and identify skilled craftsmen to execute the task. After long delays, the original plan was abandoned in favour of a plinth made of reinforced concrete with granite plates covering all sides, in order to finally complete it and avoid "the appearance to the government of Siam of a lack of eagerness to accept its gift of friendship".¹³ Bronze plates, that had also been made in Bangkok, were affixed to all four sides of the plinth with inscriptions



Figure 7. French-Indochinese newspaper of 15 May 1934, announcing King Prajadhipok's gift of an elephant statue on its title page. (Global Press Archive)

¹¹ Governor General to Governor of Cochinchina, 16 April 1934, VNA II, GOUCOCH, 24388/01. The visit was considered a great success in Bangkok, see *Bangkok Times*, 19 April 1930.

¹² Minutes of the Meeting of the Administrative Council of the Metropole Region of Saigon-Cholon, 12 June 1934, VNA II, GOUCOCH, 24388/04. This choice of location was not favoured by all council members, with one complaining: "I'm afraid it looks like a little dog in front of this big square. I do not think it would look harmonious at all". King Prajadhipok had visited the shrine of remembrance on the first full day of his visit to Saigon, see *La Dépêche d'Indochine*, 14 April 1930.

¹³ In the end, the difficulties in constructing the plinth for the statue resulted in delays of nearly two years and became a diplomatic embarrassment for the Governor General of Indochina, who oversaw foreign relations and who spent two years urging his colleagues in Cochinchina to complete the base while repeatedly apologising to the Siamese government through the French Minister in Bangkok; see various correspondence in VNA II, GOUCOCH, 24388.



Figure 8. The Indochina Elephant, colourised photograph.

commemorating the king's visit in Thai, French, Vietnamese and English.¹⁴ Eventually, the statue, which had arrived in Saigon in November 1935, could be placed onto the plinth and was inaugurated on 13 March 1936.¹⁵ This sequence of events means that, while King Prajadhipok had travelled to Indochina as an absolute monarch in 1930, he gifted the elephant statue as a constitutional monarch in 1934, and when the statue was finally inaugurated in 1936, Prajadhipok was a former king living in exile in Britain.

The elephant statue survived intact when monuments from the French colonial period were toppled by Vietnamese nationalists throughout the country in 1945. It also survived the many years of war that raged in Vietnam until 1975, and the ensuing communist rule. In 1995, the statue was moved from its original location on the right of the Hung King Temple to the left side, some 300 metres further into the Botanical Gardens. Ostensibly this was done to give the statue a more honourable location on the occasion of the twentieth anniversary of Vietnamese-Thai diplomatic relations, but practical considerations may have well played a role, given that the statue originally stood in the middle of what is today one of the zoo's major motorcycle parking areas.¹⁶ The statue has remained a fitting landmark and the object of countless family photographs at the entrance to the city's famed botanical and zoological gardens for the past eight decades (Figure 8).

¹⁴ The inscription reads in its English original: "GIVEN BY / HIS MAJESTY / SOMDECH PHRA PARAMINDR / MAHA PRAJADHIPOK / SUPREME KING OF SIAM / AS SOUVENIR OF / HIS MAJESTY'S FIRST VISIT / TO INDO-CHINA / LANDED AT SAIGON / ON THE 14 APRIL 1930".

¹⁵ *France-Indochine*, 16 March 1936; *La Dépêche Coloniale*, 18 March 1936.

¹⁶ Bùi Hoàng Anh, 'Viếng đền thờ Hùng Vương' [Visiting the Hùng King Temple], in: *Kiến Trúc và Đời Sống [Architecture and Life]*, No. 14, 1998, pp. 23-25. The article wrongly gives 1975 rather than 1976 as the year of re-establishment of Thai-Vietnamese diplomatic relations.

Elephants in Thai culture and as diplomatic gifts

Elephants and elephant images are ubiquitous in Thai history and culture, as they are in India, Iran (Persia) and other countries. Elephants, especially white elephants (ช้างเผือก), represent the Thai monarchy, royal power and the kingdom as a whole. They appear in legends and religious texts, symbolise good fortune, were central to warfare and royal ceremonies, and have been widely used as beasts of burden. Elephants are worshipped as *Ganesha/Phra Phikanet* and *Erawan* and are omnipresent in the Western-style coat of arms introduced by King Chulalongkorn; on temple and palace reliefs, official emblems and royal decorations, they adorn flags and have become commonplace in popular culture. As a corollary, Thailand has long been associated internationally with the image of the elephant (Figure 9).¹⁷

Elephants have also been an important means of international diplomacy, demonstrating the high degree of respect the Thai king awarded to the recipient. King Mongkut (Rama IV, reigned 1851-1868) famously offered elephants as gifts to American President Buchanan and the government of France in 1861, and while the French government accepted two elephants, Buchanan's successor, Abraham Lincoln, declined the offer on the grounds of an unsuitable climate in the United States.¹⁸ As Lisa McQuail explained: "Thai kings often

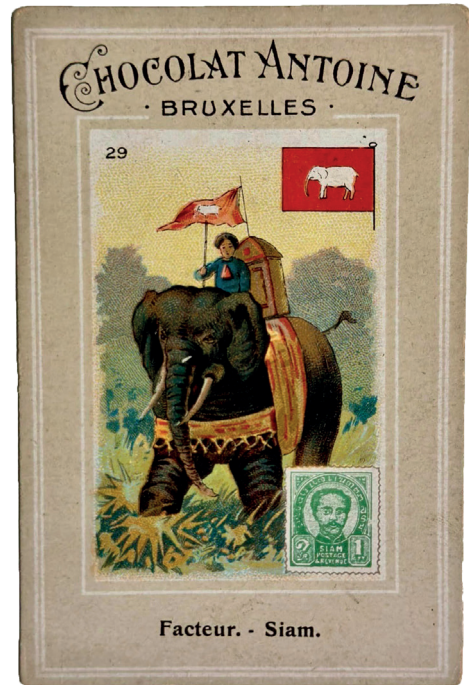


Figure 9. The Western image of exotic Siam was closely connected with elephants, as this Belgian chocolate trading card from ca. 1920 with no less than three elephant images shows. (M. Finsterer)

¹⁷ For details on the importance of elephants in Thailand, see Rita Ringis, *Elephants of Thailand in Myth, Art, and Reality*, Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1996; on the role of elephants in history and culture generally, see Robert Delort, *The Life and Lore of the Elephant*, London: Thames and Hudson, 1992.

¹⁸ The two Siamese elephants in Paris, named *Jussia* and *Bangkok*, lived until the 1880s by some accounts, until at least 1911 by another. They are not to be confused with *Castor* and *Pollux*, two elephants which were killed and eaten during the German siege of Paris in 1870. *Castor* and *Pollux* were kept at the Jardin Zoologique d'Acclimatation, an amusement park in the Bois de Boulogne, while the two Siamese elephants seem to have survived the famine at the zoo of the Jardin des Plantes, the city's main botanical gardens. On the Siamese elephants in Paris, as well as on *Castor* and *Pollux*, see Andrew Miles, *The Elephants of Napoleon III*, URL: <https://www.napoleon.org/histoire-des-2-empires/articles/les-elephants-de-napoleon-iii/> (accessed 26 March 2023); on the exchange between King Mongkut and American presidents, see Lisa McQuail, *Treasures of Two Nations: Thai Royal Gifts to the United States of America*, Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 1997, p. 33; For a discussion of King Mongkut's present in a wider American cultural context, see Ross Rullen, "'This Alarming Generosity': White Elephants and the Logic of the Gift", in: *American Literature*, Vol. 83, No. 4 (2011), pp. 747-773. DOI: 10.1215/00029831-1437207 (accessed 16 March 2023). McQuail (1997), p. 33, mentions that King Mongkut also sent one or more elephants to Japan in 1861, but the author was unable to verify this.

wished to include elephants in sets of gifts to Western heads of state, however, more often than not, the elephants were left behind due to lack of room in ships holds. This was the case with King Narai's 1686 gift of elephants to Louis XIV [and] with King Mongkut's 1855 gift of elephants to Sir John Bowring.¹⁹ King Chulalongkorn continued the tradition of gifting elephants when he offered two animals to Japan in 1888, as did the post-1932 governments, when an elephant named *Hanako* was sent to Japan in an effort of cultural diplomacy in 1935. After *Hanako* had been put down with the other animals in the Tokyo Zoo during the Second World War, another elephant—originally named *Gajah*, but quickly renamed *Hanako* after her famous ancestor—was gifted to Japan in 1949. In the latter instance, India also gifted an elephant to Japan named *Indira*.²⁰

While elephants may well have been the largest animals to be gifted by a country, often entailing a particular set of problems for the recipient as well as for the animal itself, the practice of giving live animals as diplomatic gifts is not uncommon. In recent history, China's panda diplomacy proved so popular that it received much mainstream media attention internationally.²¹

As an awe-inspiring representation of the kingdom, the elephant image was an inspired choice for the three bronze sculptures. Not only was the elephant central to Thai cultural iconography and to royal power, but it could also be easily recognised as part of nature and indigenous culture in Malaya, Indochina and Indonesia. For example, the elephant as a symbol will have resonated as strongly in Indochina in 1936 as it does in contemporary Vietnam through its evocation of the Trung Sisters, two popular folk heroines, who led a rebellion atop their war elephants against the Han rulers in 1st century CE. The elephant statues allowed such historical and cultural recognition, but could also be viewed as decorative monuments in their respective public spaces. They also took on a political meaning only when the observer read the inscriptions on the plinths.

However, the three elephant statues were gifts to Western colonial governments in Asia, not to neighbouring Asian peoples, and should therefore also be seen in the context of diplomatic gift-giving between Siam and the West. In this sense, they were gifts signalling mutual respect, thereby placing the Siamese king and the Western government on equal footing in diplomatic practice. This was, as we have seen above,

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 18, note 16.

²⁰ See David Michael Malitz, *Japanese-Siamese Relations from the Meiji Restoration to the End of World War II: Relations and Representations*, Münchner Schriftenreihe Japanforschung, Vol. 2, Bochum and Freiburg: Projekt Verlag, 2016, pp. 273, 359; Ian Jared Miller, *The Nature of the Beasts: Empire and Exhibition at the Tokyo Imperial Zoo*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013, pp. 181f., 186f.; Frederik S. Litten, 'Starving the Elephants: The Slaughter of Animals in Wartime Tokyo's Ueno Zoo', in: *The Asia-Pacific Journal – Japan Focus*, Vol. 7, No. 38/3 (2009), pp. 1-17. URL: <https://apjif.org/-Frederick-S.-Litten/3225/article.html> (accessed 17 March 2023). The city of Tokyo had purchased two elephants from (British) India already in 1924 for its Ueno Zoo.

²¹ For further details on gift-giving of live animals, see Leira Halvard and Iver B. Neumann, 'Beastly Diplomacy', in: *The Hague Journal of Diplomacy*, Vol. 13, No. 1 (2017), pp. 1-23. In one well-known instance, Portuguese King Manuel I gifted an elephant named *Hanno* to Pope Leo X in 1514; for details, see Silvio A. Bedini, *The Pope's Elephant: An Elephant's Journey from Deep in India to the Heart of Rome*, New York: Penguin Books, 2000. On Chinese panda diplomacy, see Falk Hartig, 'Panda Diplomacy: The Cutest Part of China's Public Diplomacy', in: *The Hague Journal of Diplomacy*, Vol. 8, No. 1 (2013), pp. 49-78.

especially important in 1871-1872 from the perspective of a young monarch, whose kingdom was surrounded by increasingly powerful colonial regimes. These diplomatic gifts struck a balance between showcasing the cultural and material richness of Siam, while being simultaneously acceptable by the hosts for public display. In other words, the statues signified the king's gratitude for the reception of his hosts as well as serving as a visual reminder of the status of the king and his kingdom.²²

In a wider geographical context, elephants are not unique to Thailand and Southeast Asia and have great cultural significance in other countries in Asia and Africa—the Hindu God *Ganesha* being perhaps the best-known example. Elephants have also made notable appearances in European culture: Hannibal is said to have crossed the Alps on elephants in the 3rd century B.C.; Victor Hugo immortalised the Bastille elephant monument in Paris in his novel, *Les Misérables*, in 1862; and many former colonial capitals of Europe boast an array of elephant statues. The majesty of the elephant has, therefore, inspired humans well beyond countries where the animals live. Gifting elephant statues to foreign countries is, however, not common at all. In fact, this article describes the only three examples of which I am aware.

By way of placing the three elephant statues into an international context, there are examples of statues that were gifted by foreign rulers or governments, although relatively few. The Statue of Liberty is the largest and most famous example, gifted by France to the United States in 1886. Like the three elephant statues made in Thailand, shipped to their destinations and placed upon locally produced plinths, the Statue of Liberty was made in France, shipped to New York and assembled there. In more recent times, the United Nations headquarters in New York and Geneva have received numerous monuments from its member states; during the Cold War, the Soviet Union gifted monuments to socialist states in Eastern Europe, and India has been gifting bronze statues of Mahatma Gandhi to foreign countries.

What distinguishes the three bronze elephants is their representation of a Thai cultural iconography through a European art form for the purpose of expressing a message of power and independence during periods of colonialism. The statues being introduced here are both monuments and memorials. As monuments, they have an aesthetic dimension—they were designed as works of art to be appreciated by viewers for their beauty or the quality of craftsmanship. As memorials, they evoke specific historical events and, from this, carry a specific political meaning or message—to commemorate visits of Thai monarchs as lasting symbols of the power and independence of the Thai kingdom.

²² On the different aspects and functions of official Thai gifts, see McQuail (1997), pp. 16-24. In describing the balance that the elephant statues struck, I am paraphrasing Solene Aubert, 'Symbolic and Problematic: Gifts in Diplomacy', in: *Harvard International Review*, 20 April 2022. URL: <https://hir.harvard.edu/symbolic-and-problematic-gifts-in-diplomacy/> (accessed 16 March 2023); see also Zoltán Biedermann, Anne Gerritsen and Giorgio Riello (eds.), *Global Gifts: The Material Culture of Diplomacy in Early Modern Eurasia*, Cambridge et al.: Cambridge University Press, 2018.

The elephant statues and secular bronze casting in Thailand

The elder twin elephants stem from a period in the later 19th century when, inspired by contemporary European trends, bronze casting of secular images began to gain popularity among the royal elite in Siam. While Thailand has a long tradition of casting religious bronze images, the production of secular bronze sculptures became fashionable under Kings Mongkut and Chulalongkorn, as Western aesthetics came to influence the Bangkok court. King Mongkut received a bronze bust of himself as a gift from Queen Victoria of England in 1859 and a standing sculpture of himself from the French government in 1863, both made from photographs the sculptors had been provided. Intrigued, the king had local artisans make more realistic bronzes of himself, and kickstarted secular bronze casting as a novel way of glorifying the ruler through this fashionable art form.²³

It is likely that the Singapore and Jakarta elephants were cast in Siam and that they mark some of the earliest secular bronzes. This assumption is supported by a travel book written by Norwegian Carl Bock, who visited Siam in 1881 and wrote about how poorly he judged the skills of painters in the kingdom. However, he continued, “if its ‘painters’ are not very advanced exponents of the art, Bangkok can boast of a sculptor or two of rare talent. Besides Chow Fah Maha Mala both his Majesty and Prince Kromalat have in their employ native artists who can model and cast an elephant, or a rhinoceros, that would ornament any *salon*, and reflect credit on any sculptor, so true is the anatomy and so bold the modelling.”²⁴ The two statues in Singapore and Jakarta are likely part of larger family of fourteen or more bronze elephants from this period, all very similar in make and size. Four pairs of bronze elephants guard the four entrances to Wat Ratchabophit, built in 1869, and two pairs of elephant bronzes stand at the foot of the dual staircase in front of the Phra Thinang Chakri Maha Prasat, the palace completed in 1882 (Figures 10, 11, 12).²⁵

The bronze equestrian statue of King Chulalongkorn, produced by a French sculptor in Paris and inaugurated in 1908 to mark the fortieth anniversary of the king’s accession to the throne, was significant as the first lifelike representation of the monarch in public. However except for the Sahachart Memorial of 1913 designed by Prince Naris in honour of Queen Saovabha Phongsri, it was only in the late 1920s that a vibrant period

²³ On the historical development of bronze casting in Thailand, see Mangala Pradhan, *Bronze Statues made from the Lost Wax Casting Technique and their Meaning in Contemporary Thailand: A Case Study of the Bronze Foundry of the Fine Arts Department in Salaya, Nakhon Pathom*, M.A. Thesis, Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok, 2553 (2010); Alexander B. Griswold, ‘Bronze-casting in Siam’, in: *Bulletin de l’Ecole française d’Extrême-Orient*, Vol. 46, 2 (1954), pp. 635-640. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3406/befeo.1954.5613> (accessed 15 March 2023).

²⁴ Carl Bock, *Temples and Elephants: The Narrative of a Journey of Exploration Through Upper Siam and Lao*, London: Sampson Low, Marston, Searle & Rivington, 1884, p. 29, Fn. 6 (italics in the original). I am very grateful to Kannikar Sartraproong for directing me to this source.

²⁵ The provenience of the metal elephant statues guarding the entrances at Wat Arun Ratchawaram could not be determined. Their comparatively crude manufacture suggests that they may predate the family of statues discussed here; however, they could also have been introduced during the extensive renovations of Wat Arun during the Fifth Reign.

of creating bronze statues of kings and other secular images began. This development is associated with the Italian sculptor Corrado Feroci, who arrived in Siam in 1923 and became the doyen for generations of Thai sculptors and painters and a driving force



Figures 10, 11, and 12 (clockwise from topleft). Phra Thinang Chakri Maha Prasat (River Books), Wat Ratchabophit, and Sahachart Memorial.

in the development of the Fine Arts Department and Silpakorn University. Known in Thailand by his Thai name Silpa Bhirasri, he and his students created at the royal behest monumental bronze sculptures of Thai kings, which were erected around Bangkok. They were also involved in creating Democracy Monument in 1939, as well as Victory Monument in 1942 for the Plaek Phibunsongkhram regime.²⁶

²⁶ The tradition of erecting monumental bronze statues of Thai kings continues into the present, with a statue

Feroci's congenial partner in creating secular bronzes was Prince Narisara Nuwattiwong, commonly known as Prince Naris. A son of King Mongkut, Prince Naris was arguably the most influential Thai artist of the 20th century. Apart from performing numerous roles in government and acting as regent for King Prajadhipok, the very prolific artist produced countless drawings, paintings, designs and iconic architecture, as well as writings on Thai culture and history. In the period around 1930, Prince Naris acted as vice-president of the Royal Society (ราชบัณฑิตยสภา), an academy of arts and sciences created by the king in 1926, which also incorporated the Fine Arts Department (กรมศิลปากร), while Prince Bidyalongkorn, the eminent poet, acted as the Royal Society's president.²⁷ The first monumental bronze statue commissioned by the king and executed in tandem by Prince Naris and Feroci was the Rama I Monument. Commissioned in 1928 and inaugurated in 1932 on the Bangkok side of the newly constructed Memorial Bridge, it took four years to make the monument, not least because Prince Naris' clay model was transported to Italy, where Feroci cast the bronze before having the statue shipped back to Bangkok.

The decision to make the Indochina Elephant (ช้างอินโดจีน), as it was referred to in contemporary documents, was likely taken by the king after his return from Saigon. Prajadhipok was familiar with his father's elephant statues in Singapore and Batavia, having visited those two cities himself a year earlier. However, work on the Indochina Elephant statue began only in May 1932, immediately after the Rama I Monument had been inaugurated in April, and only weeks before the revolution that would change the political system and eventually lead to Prajadhipok's abdication. The long delay of two years between the king's return from Indochina and the start of the work was due to three factors. First, Bangkok's official art world was fully occupied with the preparations for the 150th anniversary of the founding of Bangkok and the Rama I Monument during these years; second, Feroci was away in Italy for an extended period to cast the Rama I statue and take leave; and third, the king himself was soon travelling again, spending a large part of 1931 in Japan and North America. Even after his return in October 1931, Prajadhipok was still dealing with health problems, as well as facing serious political issues and grave public finances.

The Indochina Elephant was designed by Prince Naris, who had drawn elephants before, like the imposing, yet finely detailed, image in 1923 of *Indra* riding *Erawan*. By his own account, the prince drew inspiration from the statues in front of the Phra Thinang Chakri Maha Prasat, themselves cousins of the Singapore and Jakarta Elephants.²⁸ The funding, 6,900 baht in total, was earmarked from the privy purse.²⁹ To cast the

of King Bhumibol (Rama IX, reigned 1946-2016) inaugurated at Bangkok's new Chalerm Phrakiat Park in October 2022.

²⁷ From 1934, the Royal Society was split into the Royal Institute for the sciences and the Fine Arts Department for art and archaeology. The Fine Arts Department was founded by King Vajiravudh in 1912 and predated the creation of the Royal Society.

²⁸ See Prince Naris to Ministry of Privy Seal, 14 May 2475 (1932), NAT, ST 0701.7.3.1/28. A rudimentary sketch made by Prince Ittithep can be found in Prince Ittithep to Prince Naris, 16 April 2475 (1932), *ibid*.

²⁹ NAT, KT 7.3.2/2. On the costs, see also NAT, ST 0701.7.3.1/27. Financial matters pertaining to the Indochina Elephant were complicated by the 1932 revolution and resulting changes in government and the management of public finances. In the end, as determined in 1936, the production and shipping of the Indochina Elephant

The statue was cast using the traditional lost-wax technique. In this process, first a clay model, or core, of the desired object is sculpted. The core may include an armature of metal rods to provide stability in the case of larger objects, like the elephant statues discussed here. The model is then fired to remove any humidity, before it is covered with a layer of beeswax, which allows the artist to smoothen surfaces and refine details,



Figures 14, 15, 16, and 17 (clockwise from top left). Indochina Elephant Detail; Statue in its original location to the right of the shrine of remembrance; Detail; Statue in its current location to the left of the shrine of remembrance.

before the core with its waxen skin is outfitted with a network of channels, or sprues, through which to pour the molten bronze, and is encased in a mould of plaster, which is called the investment. In the step that gives the technique its name, the wax is then melted and removed from the mould through an opening before the investment is buried in sand for protection. The molten bronze, an alloy of copper and tin, zinc, lead, or other precious metals, which has been heated to very high temperature in a foundry, is poured into the space created by the lost wax. This produces a hollow bronze figure after it has cooled and the mould is discarded. In the final process, called chasing, the statue is then cut free from its sprues and the remaining holes are filled, imperfections are repaired, details are sharpened, a patina is applied, and the statue is polished.

While the profound socio-political changes of 1932 were playing out around the foundry, it took from May to October to complete the plaster mould. Casting began in February 1933, starting with the elephant's head and followed by the two halves of the body, all of which were then welded together, and the limbs attached by May. In July, the elephant was placed onto the bronze base, but had to be taken apart once more, as the base could not carry the elephant's weight and had to be reinforced. By November 1933,

after nineteen months, the statue was completed and in February 1934, it was placed in a wooden box awaiting shipment to Saigon once its plinth was ready.³²

The Indochina Elephant was crafted with considerably more intricate detail than its older cousins, looking very lifelike and featuring a full set of royal elephant ornaments, or *kachaporn* (เครื่องคชาภรณ์), which befitted a white elephant and, according to Prince Naris, highlighted its Thai-ness: an elaborate harness, decorated caparison, two tassels decorating the ears, a head-net and decorative rings on the tusks. The finely detailed caparison features Prajadhipok's royal cypher on each side. 1.5 metres in height, it stands on a platform, or altar, also made of bronze, and in combination resembles the state elephant image of Siam, as it was used in the 1916 version of the national flag and the marble relief on the front of the podium of the Rama I Monument.³³

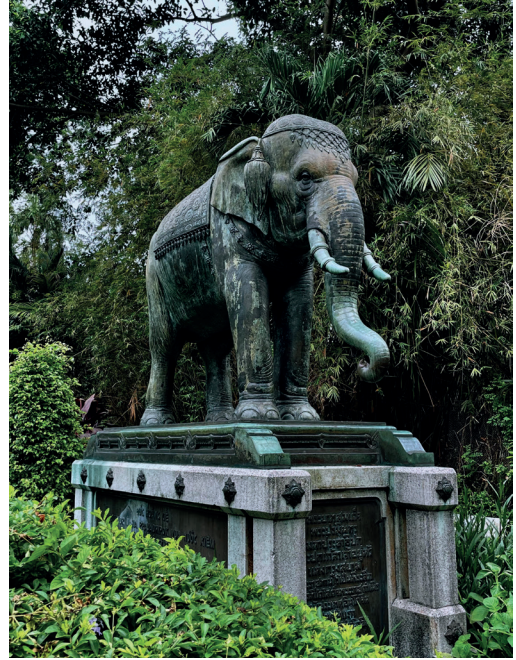


Figure 18. Indochina Elephant on its plinth with commemorative plates and decorations made of bronze.

The king had not accepted Prince Naris' original proposal to make the granite plinth in Bangkok due to the challenges posed for transport to Indochina, therefore only the bronze plates and decorations for the plinth were produced. The original plan was to make one plate with Thai and one with French writing, and Prince Naris designed the plinth accordingly. However, by early 1933, the king desired Vietnamese and English inscriptions to be added, which required four bronze plates and a redesign of the plinth. The court provided texts for the four inscriptions, using those from the Singapore Elephant as references, but it took until mid-1934 for all texts to be finalised and all four bronze plates to be completed, while in Saigon, as described above, the construction of the plinth encountered significant

³² For details on the production of the Indochina Elephant see NAT, ST 0701.7.3.1/26, 27, 28, and 29; see also Prince Naris to Prince Damrong, 27 December 2476 (1933), in: Prince Narisara Nuwattiwong and Prince Damrong Rajanubhab, *สาส์นสมเด็จ* [*San Somdet, Their Highnesses' Correspondence*], Vol. 4, pp. 107f. and Prince Naris to Prince Damrong, 16 February 2475 (1933), *ibid.*, Vol. 3, pp. 138ff.

³³ For details on *kachaporn*, see Lalita Assawasagulrecha, *The 'Gajabhorn' of Phra Sawet Adulyadejphahon: Ornament of King Rama IX's First White Elephant*, The Coin Museum – The Treasury Department, 9 August 2561 (2018). URL: http://coinmuseum.treasury.go.th/en/news_view.php?nid=123 (accessed 15 January 2023). On the Hindu tradition of elephant regalia, see Shakshi Gupta, 'Elephant Regalia: A Living Tradition', in: *Sahapedia*, 18 June 2018. URL: <https://www.sahapedia.org/elephant-regalia-living-tradition> (accessed 15 January 2023). Another remarkable example, where the state elephant image was used, is on the outer and inner covers of the commemorative book issued for the major exhibition planned just before King Vajiravudh's death in 1925: *ที่ระลึกสยามรัฐพิพิธภัณฑ์สวนลุมพินี พระพุทธศักราช ๒๔๖๘/The Souvenir of the Siamese Exhibition at Lumpini Park B.E. 2468*, Bangkok: The Siam Free Press, B.E. 2470 (1927).

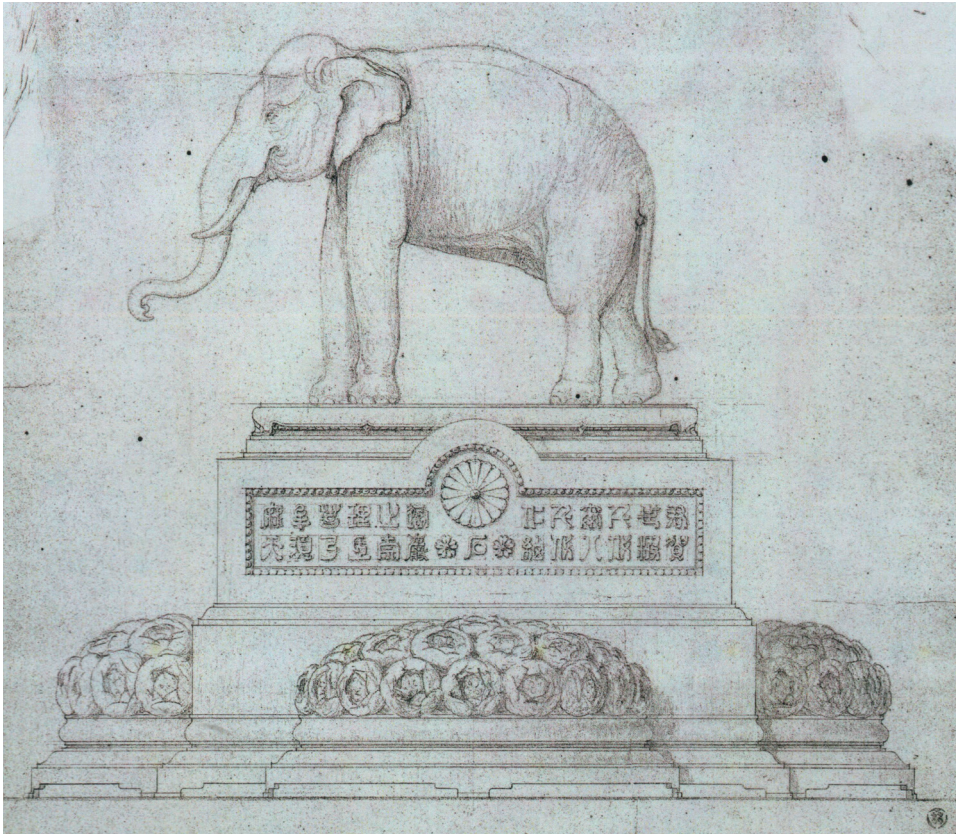


Figure 19. Drawing of Japanese Elephant, undated. (National Archives of Thailand)

delays. Eventually, the statue was shipped in November 1935 and inaugurated in March 1936 (Figure 18).³⁴

The Indochina Elephant does not appear in lists of works by Feroci, perhaps due to it being the only bronze statue created during the period he worked at the foundry of the Fine Arts Department, which stands outside Thailand.³⁵ Moreover, the Indochina

³⁴ Prince Naris to Prince Damrong, 27 December 2476 (1933), in: Nuwattiwong and Rajanubhab, Vol. 4, pp. 107f. See also Prince Naris to Luang Vichit Vadhakarn, 11 September 2478 (1935) and 27 April 2479 (1936), NAT, ST 0701.1/28; Prince Naris to Prince Ittithep, 17 April 2475 (1932), *ibid.* Late in the process, the Vietnamese text had to be changed once more, following advice from the government of Indochina; see Governor of Cochinchina to Mayor of Saigon, 9 May 1934, VNA II, GOUCOCH, 24388/02, and Prince Naris to Phra Saroj Rattanimman, 26 May 2476 (1934), NAT, ST 0701.7.3.1/28. Prince Naris had hoped to make the plinth in Bangkok, in order to have control over its design. He was concerned that otherwise a plinth not befitting the statue might be made, and referred specifically to that in Batavia as a negative example. In the end, Prince Naris designed the plinth and the bronze plates with the specific texts so that the authorities in Cochinchina had to follow them exactly for the plates to fit. See Prince Naris to Ministry of Privy Seal, 14 May 2475 (1932), *ibid.*

³⁵ The lists of bronze statues cast by Feroci, that the author was able to consult, typically list the Rama I monument of 1932 first, followed by the Thao Suranari monument in Korat of 1934. The Indochina Elephant is also not mentioned in relevant scholarship, e.g. Paweena Suteerangkul, ‘ศิลปกรรมในรัชสมัยพระบาทสมเด็จพระปกเกล้าเจ้าอยู่หัว’ [‘Works of Art in the Reign of King Prajadhipok’], in: *Journal of the Faculty of Arts, Silpakorn University*, Vol 42, No. 2 (July-December 2020), pp. 321–344. URL: <https://so04.tci-thaijo.org/index.php/jasu/article/view/248027> (accessed 24 March 2023); Maneepin Phromsuthirak ‘Special Note:

Elephant is possibly only one of more elephant statues planned during the reign, as a drawing at the National Archives of Thailand suggests. A Japanese Elephant was also designed by Prince Naris and looks very similar to the one produced for Indochina. On this undated drawing, the pedestal features the chrysanthemum emblem of the Japanese emperor in the centre, two cherry blossoms underneath, and the text of the Japanese national anthem. This drawing and the plan to gift an elephant statue to Japan were possibly made for the enthronement of Emperor Hirohito in 1928 (Figure 19).³⁶ Taken together, the Indochina Elephant of the early 1930s, the drawing of the Japanese Elephant, and the king's visit to Singapore and Batavia in 1929 where Chulalongkorn's elephants stood, make it reasonable to assume that King Prajadhipok may have been inspired to gift elephant statues to other countries besides Indochina during the Seventh Reign, and that more of them might have materialised under different political circumstances.



Figures 20 and 21: Postage stamps depicting the elephant statues. Left: Republic of Vietnam (1964); Right: Indonesia (1990).

Conclusion

The three Thai statues introduced here are unique in their aesthetic, diplomatic, cultural and artistic dimensions, and are simultaneously embedded in broader contexts. The elephant imagery is both specific to Thai culture and royal symbolism, as it is part of a centuries-old tradition of worshipping, utilising and gifting elephants and elephant images. The Indochina Elephant, in particular, stands at the beginning of a tradition of

Professor Silpa Bhirasri's Life and Works', in: *Silpakorn University International Journal*, Vol. 3, No. 1-2 (January-December 2003), pp. 39-46.

³⁶ The undated drawing of the Japanese elephant statue can be found in the photo collection of the National Archives of Thailand with the reference ผสบ. 8/6 แบบลายเส้นข้างยี่นแทน. King Prajadhipok's instructions to Prince Naris for the design of an elephant for the enthronement of Emperor Hirohito is made in Privy Purse to Royal Secretariat, 17 November 2471 (1928), NAT, R.7, RL 12/23. It is unclear why the project did not materialise. It also seems less likely that the undated drawing of the elephant statue was made in the context of King Prajadhipok's visit to Japan in April 1931, when he was en route to North America, as this was not a state visit and formalities were kept to a minimum during his stay, although it could conceivably have been made after the visit, in reaction to the enthusiastic reception the king received in Japan. The text of the Japanese national anthem, or *Kimigayo*, in the drawing is written in *Manyogana*, an ancient writing system based on Chinese seal script that uses Chinese characters to represent the Japanese language phonetically. I am grateful to Michael Mechthold-Jin, Ryo Nakamura and David Malitz for their support in determining these details.

secular bronze monuments cast at the foundry of the Fine Arts Department in Bangkok, while being the only such bronze that stands outside Thailand. The three statues are part of a relatively small number of statues gifted by one country to another and the only examples of bronze statues gifted abroad by Thai monarchs.³⁷



Figure 22. Silpa Bhirasri's elephant statue (2006), Rommaninat Park, Bangkok.

Since they were installed many decades ago, the three Thai elephant statues have become interwoven with the modern cityscapes they inhabit, where they have survived political change, war and urban development. While still acting as memorials of Thai history abroad for the informed observer, they have developed identities that are specific to their locations and are no longer necessarily connected to Thailand. In the case of modern-day Jakarta, the elephant monument has become the namesake in local slang for the National Museum in front of which it stands: the *Museum Gajah*, or Elephant Museum. The Saigon and the Jakarta statues both went on to feature on South Vietnamese (1964) and Indonesian (1990) postage stamps, as symbols for the respective zoo and the museum they

adorn (Figures 20, 21). Despite being among the oldest monuments in their respective cities, the three statues are in excellent condition at the time of writing. The elephant in Singapore was restored in 2022, its cousin in Jakarta just one year earlier, and its younger relative in Ho Chi Minh City was last restored in 2012.³⁸

³⁷ Another type of monument has been built in or gifted to several countries during the past century, namely Thai-style pavilions, both in the context of international exhibitions and as stand-alone monuments. The practice began with the Thai pavilion gifted by King Chulalongkorn to the German spa town of Bad Homburg after his stay there in 1907. For details, see Fine Arts Department (ed.), *ศาลาไทยตั้งประเทศ/Thai Pavilions Abroad*, Bangkok: White Lotus Press, 2014; Chomchon Fusinpaiboon, *Modernisation of Building: The Transplantation of the Concept of Architecture from Europe to Thailand, 1930-1950s*, Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Sheffield, 2014. A chapter on Thai pavilions is included on pp. 516-553 and has been reprinted at URL: <https://art4d.com/en/2021/12/thai-pavilion-from-the-1930s> (accessed 28 March 2023). A bronze bust of King Rama IX was gifted to the city of Lausanne and installed at the Thai pavilion there in September 2022. The bust was a gift from the alumni association of Thai students in Switzerland, supported by corporate sponsorship; see <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/swiss-unveil-bust-late-thai-king-bhumibol-2022-09-14/> (accessed 4 April 2023).

³⁸ <https://www.facebook.com/people/FranzWood/100063536740082/> (accessed 4 March 2023); <http://www.thaiembassyjakarta.com/เอกอัครราชทูต-ได้ร่วมเป/> (accessed 4 March 2023); <https://plo.vn/tuong-voi-trong-thao-cam-vien-ky-ngoai-giao-va-khong-gian-van-hoa-post40199.html> (accessed 4 March 2023).

While the contexts are different, one might say that the three elephant statues gained two siblings in modern times. The connection between Corrado Feroci and bronze elephants has been on display in Bangkok since 2006, when a statue, that was sculpted and cast according to drawings by the artist, was installed at Rommaninat Park in Phra Nakhon, not far from the foundry where Feroci cast the Indochina Elephant (Figure 22).³⁹ Also, as recently as 2017, a bronze statue was unveiled in Tokyo to commemorate *Hanako*, the elephant gifted by Thailand as a symbol of friendship to Japan in 1949, which became beloved during the 67 years it lived in a Tokyo zoo (Figure 23).⁴⁰ As it turns out, putting up commemorative Thai elephant statues in Asian capitals was not just an antiquated practice of past centuries.



Figure 23. Statue of Hanako (2017), Tokyo. (Wikipedia)

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KT 7 Foreign Affairs, Royal Visits (กต 7 เสด็จประพาส)

R.7 RL Seventh Reign, Royal Secretariat (ร.7 รล กรมราชเลขาณุกร)

³⁹ <http://www.thapra.lib.su.ac.th/e-book/sculpture/08-Silpa-elephant.pdf> (accessed 27 March 2023).

⁴⁰ <https://www.nationthailand.com/in-focus/30314431> (accessed 4 March 2023).

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