

A NOTE REGARDING TWO EUROPEAN STATUES IN THE BANGKOK MUSEUM

Visitors to the National Museum at Bangkok are naturally more interested in the magnificent heritage of art from Siam and neighboring countries than in the few examples of European sculpture exhibited there. So it is not surprising that the two statues illustrated in figures 1 and 2 have received scant notice. Yet they deserve attention not only for their intrinsic excellence, but also as documents in the history of Siam.

Somewhat less than human size, they are carved from white marble, parts of which are now discolored. Otherwise they are in good condition, and the extremely high polish on the stone has suffered very little damage.

Figure 1: A bearded man with flowing hair. He muffles himself in his heavy cloak against the cold, getting what comfort he can from the flame of a small brazier at his feet. The iconography identifies him beyond doubt as Winter.

Figure 2: A young woman of classical mien. She wears a light garment that reaches from the flowery garland at her waist down to her ankles. Her feet are bare. One end of the garment, which she touches with her left hand, hangs over her left shoulder, leaving her right breast exposed. In her right hand she holds some small flowers, which, together with the garland at her waist, her light attire, and her bare breast, identify her as Spring.

Obviously the statues are part of a set of the Four Seasons, the other two of which are lost. On the basis of their style, with its reminiscence of the baroque modified by a classicizing tendency, they can be assigned to French sculpture of the 1670s or 1680s.

Dr Richard H. Randall, Director of the Walters Art Gallery in Baltimore, observes that the female figure is 'a staunch heroine of the seventeenth-century type'. There are close parallels in the Fountain of Latona in the garden of Versailles, executed about 1670 by Gaspard and Balthasar Marsy, in a style typical of the seventeenth century. The male figure also has a strong heroic character. Dr Randall adds that the high polish on both statues suggests that they were kept indoors, while those at Versailles have become soft in tone through weathering.

In the reign of King Rāma IV (1851-1868), the two statues stood at the entrance of the Chapel Royal of the Emerald Buddha at Bangkok. We know this from one of the drawings (fig. 3) used by Mrs Anna Leonowens to illustrate her book, *The English Governess at the Siamese Court* (London, 1870, facing p. 52). The drawing, which is anonymous, is no masterpiece; but allowing for a few changes made in the course of later restorations to the Chapel Royal, for example in the parapets of the stairways, it gives a fair likeness of a portion of the east wall of the building. There is no difficulty in recognizing the two statues, though the drawing, prior to publication, seems to have been touched up by someone in London who mistook the statues for living people, darkened Winter's blanket and omitted his brazier, and modestly covered Spring's exposed breast. Mrs Leonowens, the 'Anna' of *The King and I*, was

governess to the children of King Rāma IV from 1862 to 1867. She is a notoriously untrustworthy witness, often muddled, and not above resorting to prevarication when it served her purpose. In her account of the two statues, she is certainly muddled when she says they stood at either side of a 'gate', as figure 3—which cannot be an invention—clearly shows them standing at either side of the door of the Chapel Royal; and her grasp of iconography was feeble. But the anecdote she tells, which may be true in part, is not without interest. At page 52 of *The English Governess* she writes:

On either side of the eastern entrance—called *Patoo Ngam*, "The Beautiful Gate"—stands a modern statue; one of Saint Peter, with flowing mantle and sandalled feet, in an attitude of sorrow, as when "he turned away his face and wept"; the other of Ceres, scattering flowers. [. . .] Visiting this temple in company with the king and his family, I called his Majesty's attention to the statue at the Beautiful Gate, as that of a Christian saint with whose story he was not unfamiliar. Turning quickly to his children, and addressing them gently, he bade them salute it reverently. "It is Mam's p'hra," he said*; whereupon the tribe of little ones folded their hands devoutly, and made obeisance before the effigy of Saint Peter.

There is no record to show how the statues reached Bangkok. The most plausible explanation is that they were among the presents sent by Louis XIV to King Nārāyaṇa of Siam (r. 1657-1688), who had his capital at Ayudhyā, but spent much time at *Lopburī*. King Nārāyaṇa, encouraged by Phaulkon, favored the French as a potential help against too much Dutch influence, and with his consent a number of French missionaries and merchants settled in Siam. To promote friendly relations, Louis XIV sent two embassies to Siam, the first of which arrived in 1685 and the second in 1687. Both brought a lot of presents for the King. Though I have not been able to locate any list of the gifts, it seems probable that one of the embassies, most likely the second, brought statues of the Four Seasons, and that King Nārāyaṇa installed them in his palace, either at Ayudhyā or at *Lopburī*. After Nārāyaṇa's death in 1688, Siam closed itself almost completely to Europeans, and remained closed until well into the nineteenth century, so it is impossible to believe that the statues were sent during that period.

Ayudhyā was destroyed, and *Lopburī* badly damaged, as a result of the Burmese invasion of 1767. After the Siamese established a new capital, first at *Dhanapurī* and then at Bangkok, they sent missions to rescue statues that were lying neglected among the ruins in Ayudhyā, *Lopburī* and other cities. Hundreds of large images of the Buddha, and several of Hindu divinities, were brought down the river and distributed among the monasteries of *Dhanapurī* and Bangkok. One such mission may have brought along the statues of Winter and Spring, without knowing what they represented. It would hardly have occurred to them to search for Summer and Autumn, which by this time had probably disappeared or been broken up. A good many antiquities from the old cities, including Winter and Spring, were placed in the Chapel Royal.

When the Bangkok National Museum was opened in 1924, a number of antiquities were transferred to it from the Chapel Royal. Either at that time or later, Winter and Spring were installed in the Museum; but they were still not correctly identified; and when I first saw them in the 1950s they were labeled 'Saint Peter' and 'A Lady of the Court of Louis XIV'.

* 'Mam' is of course, แม่, an appellation used for European ladies. In a footnote, Mrs. Leonowens glosses *P'hra* as 'Saint, or Lord'.



Figure 1. Allegorical statue of Winter, from a set of the Four Seasons probably carved in France in the 1670s or 1680s. National Museum, Bangkok.



Figure 2. Allegorical statue of Spring, from the same set of the Four Seasons as figure 1. National Museum, Bangkok.

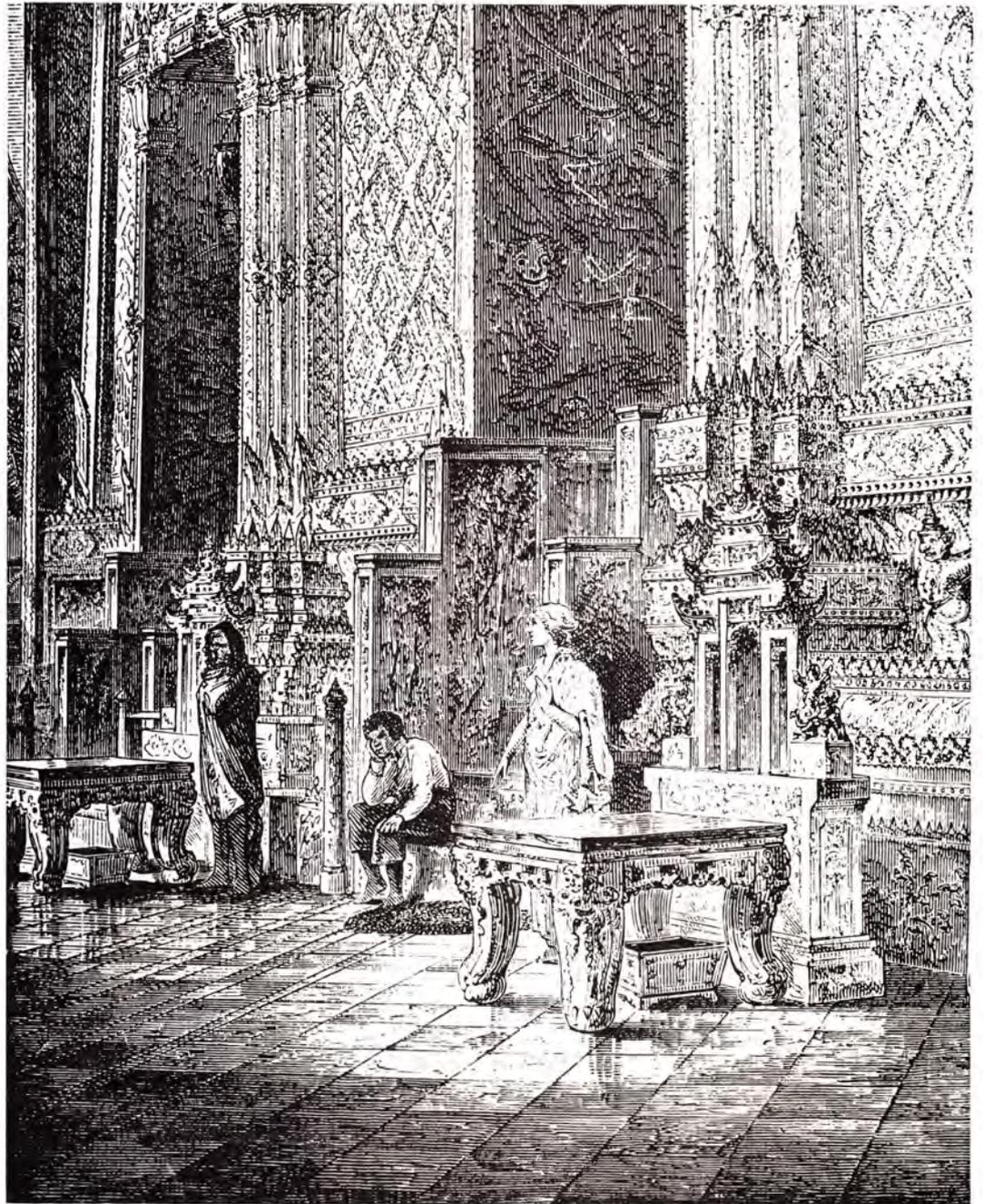


Figure 3 Drawing of a part of the eastern facade of Chapel Royal in the 1860s, showing the same two statues as in figures 1 and 2, slightly touched up. After Anna Leonowens, *The English Governess at the Court of Siam*, London, 1870, facing page 52.

Rāma IV was the first Siamese monarch since Nārāyaṇa to open diplomatic relations with any European country, and many of the gifts he received from European royalty were placed in the Chapel Royal. Some readers may think I am romanticizing when I suggest that the statues of Winter and Spring were brought to Siam by an embassy from Louis XIV. Anyone is at liberty to believe they were presents sent to Rāma IV by Napoleon III, or even Queen Victoria; but surely either one of those monarchs would have sent all Four Seasons, together with a letter identifying them. It is not likely that Rāma IV would have lost two of the statues, and forgotten the identity of the other two, in the short space of time before Mrs Leonowens saw the latter.

A.B. Griswold

*Monkton, Maryland
U.S.A.*