

TOWARDS A HISTORY OF SIAMESE GILT-LACQUER PAINTING

by

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The Siamese art of gilt-lacquerwork, and the items of furniture on which this medium has been applied, have received far too little scholarly attention. Gilt lacquer may be easily dismissed as 'minor art' in view of the laborious nature of the craft involved, but a day (or better a week) spent at Suan Pakkad's Lacquer Pavilion, or among the forests of lacquered scripture cabinets in the National Library collection, will convince anyone that great artists were at work in designing their panels and great craftsmen executed those designs. Another factor recommends gilt lacquerwork for greater attention: its durability, which surpasses that of paper, cotton and plaster upon which most Siamese painting has been done, and which is surpassed only by that of bronze and stone. A study of Siamese painting is most incomplete if gilt lacquer is not also considered, as the evidence of the former is highly fragmentary.

Enough Siamese gilt-lacquerwork exists, on wooden cabinets and panels of doors, windows, screens and walls, to permit us to write a fairly detailed history of the development of the art, with a rough system of dating, from the reign of King Narai (1656-1688 A.D.), or perhaps earlier, to that of King Mongkut (1851-1868). Such an history might enable us to date more accurately works in other media which so far we have been limited to designating 'late Ayutthaya'—that, of course, includes production in Thon Buri and early Bangkok times. Much light, I believe, may be thrown on this period otherwise darkened by the sack of Ayutthaya and the ravages of nature, time and man.

I must point out at the start, however, that what follows is not the definitive history I claim may be written. Rather it is the accumulated observations from several years of looking at gilt lacquer, comparing one piece with another and with work in other media, mulling over the external evidence in chronicles and so on. This experience has been augmented by ten days' concentrated research on cabinets in the National Library.

My subject matter is rather complex, so I had better identify it clearly at the beginning : (a) gilt lacquer, most of which is found on cabinets built to house palm-leaf scripture, but some of which decorates the wooden panels of walls, doors, screens and windows; and (b) scripture cabinets, most of which are decorated with gilt lacquer, but some of which are carved in bas-relief, some inlaid with mother-of-pearl, and some painted with polychrome lacquer.

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A general perspective on the art

Before treating with individual works of art I should like to make some observations on the media—the lacquer itself, gilt-lacquer painting, and the structure of the cabinets. These remarks may not be particularly original, but they have a place here as they may have bearing on our consideration and appraisal of individual pieces.

Lacquer. The oldest pieces of Siamese work in lacquer, i.e. the lacquered wooden panels of cabinets, seem at the oldest to be between 300 and 400 years in age. Lacquer is exceptionally durable, it is true, but inevitably it deteriorates in time, and its nature is such that repair or renovation is more laborious than the original process. Thus, when it reaches a certain stage of delapidation it is abandoned, and the elements destroy it completely. So we have no ancient pieces in Thailand such as remain in China, Korea and Japan, where milder climates and elaborate burials preserve so much that we can follow the craft back some two millenia and more.

We have no means of studying the origins of the technique in Siam, nor of knowing whether it was indigenous or imported. Its prevalence in mainland southeast Asia, particularly in Burma and Siam, suggests that the technique might be native, as does the fact that the forests of northern Thailand are a major source of raw material. Southeast Asian lacquer, like the Chinese product, is made from the sap of the tree *Rhus vernificera*. However, the Thai word for lacquer—*ร้* : *rak*, from the name of the plant from which lacquer is made—has no connection with the Chinese *ch'ing ch'i* (清漆); it might well be a corruption of the Persian/Indian *lakh* from which the English word is said to be derived. Thus the name implies a non-Chinese background, either native or Persian. The vegetable lacquer should not be confused with “shellac”, which is made from the secretions of the lac insect, *Coccus lacca*, also a southeast Asian product¹. On the other hand, technological advances in southeast Asia have tended to follow on catastrophe in China. The celadons and pyrotechnics, for which Sukhothai was famous in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries A.D., seem to have arrived in Siam in the wake of fleeing Chinese craftsmen, or as gifts from the victorious Mongols who were friendly to Siam. The well-known jealousy of the Chinese regarding their various technologies casts these speculations in an interesting light.

The oldest Siamese gilt-lacquer panels, if indeed they do date from the reign of King Narai, coincide more or less with the period right after the fall of the Ming dynasty in China. This may mean nothing, or it may mean that the technique, and perhaps also to some extent the art, require that we keep in mind a Chinese contribution as we consider the Siamese products available to us for study.

Gilt-lacquer painting. The Siamese technique of gilding lacquer has been described by Professor Silpa Bhirasri in the pamphlet *Thai Lacquer Works*² (hereafter

1. *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, Macropaedia, vol. 10, 15th ed., p. 575.

2. Thai Culture, New Series No. 5 (Bangkok, The Fine Arts Department, B.E. 2512), 3rd ed. (1969), 16 pp. + illus.

abbreviated *TLW*). It is called *laai rot naam*, meaning "splashed-water pattern". A negative image of the design is painted on the finely prepared black (or, very rarely, red) lacquer surface using a water-soluble pigment. When the watercolour is dry, gold leaf is applied to the whole surface. The gold leaf becomes bonded to the bare areas of slightly tacky lacquer, but the watercolour acts as a resist, preventing adherence from occurring in the areas that it covers. Later, when all is judged perfectly dry, quantities of water are splashed against the panel, dissolving the water colour which carries away with it all unwanted gold leaf. In this way a 'positive' image in gold, with a black background, is developed from the black-and-watercolour negative.

This method of decorating lacquerware appears to be unique to southeast Asia. I can find no reference to it in accounts of Chinese, Korean and Japanese lacquer, which was decorated with powdered metals and inlaid with metallic foils, and among other things shell, ivory and mother-of-pearl.

The technique as practised here is laborious, and represents a large investment in wood, labour, time, lacquer and gold leaf. Furthermore, once the gold leaf has been applied the design is very difficult to correct; a blunder in gilt lacquer would be nearly as bad as one in fresco. Only established masters of design, therefore, and presumably of mural painting and/or the illumination of manuscripts as well, would be allowed, or dare to attempt, to work in gilt lacquer. Hence, if a muralist's or illuminator's work is identified as also appearing in gilt lacquer, the chances are that he produced the gilt lacquer late in his life, perhaps after his murals. (Thai murals are not frescos and may easily be corrected as they are being created.) Certainly, some amateurs may have tried their hand at gilt lacquer. Their effort may in some cases be immediately detected by a hopeless amateurishness; other cases may never be detected because of their inspired brilliance.

Were gilt-lacquer panels designed by a master artist subsequently sent to a workshop for execution by craftsmen? I tend to believe, with no more evidence than my observations on Thai character and the Thai way of doing things today, that the artist would jealously execute his own work and scorn to let another have a hand in carrying out his concept. An apprentice, or rather disciple, might prepare the medium for him, and even perhaps lend a hand in areas of repetitive decoration, but a master artist would have taken a proud and jealous delight in realizing his creation. In saying this I am not trying to lay down an absolute rule, only suggesting what probably usually happened. In a few cases there may have been cooperation, and in some a competition, with prizes for the finest work, arranged as in the case of the painting of the murals at Wat Suwannaram, Thon Buri³. Likely candidates for this competitive approach are the Lacquer Pavilion at Suan Pakkad Palace⁴, where it is difficult to detect the same hand in any two panels, and the Louis/Aurangzeb cabinet (*TLW*,

3. See Nor na Paknam, *Silapakorn nai Bangkok*, p. 70.

4. See *The Lacquer Pavilion at Suan Pakkat Palace*, published by Princess Chumbhot of Nagara Svarga.

fig. 16) at the Bangkok National Museum. The door panels of the latter remind me of verses written by two poets who had agreed upon a theme and then worked in secret to outdo one another.

For this reason I also believe that the decoration of each cabinet was essentially the work of one man, despite the fact that, looking at the cabinets today, we observe striking differences in 'hand' between, say, the front and the sides, and the front and back, of almost every cabinet. I interpret these particular differences as owing not to the hands of different artists, but to different intentions upon the part of the same artist. An artist might plan that the door panels of a cabinet should bear a boldly depicted narrative, while the side panels (which almost always match one another, as far as I can observe) might bear a tight, crowded, semi-abstract design. Backs of cabinets were an entirely different matter: either they were left blank, or they were conceded a bold, easily executed design, for if the cabinet was to be set up against a wall, as was the usual practice, no one would look at the back. This is in fact the most common scheme of things: a highly dramatic front, highly decorated sides, and a blank or rather simple back. But such a scheme does not demand many hands; rather it suggests the genius of one artist treating prominent surfaces with drama and obscurer surfaces with increasing degrees of obscurity.

Two criteria have so far been used in attempting to date work in gilt lacquer: the esthetic and the iconographic. The esthetic approach, stated very roughly, considers that bold, inventive, powerful work, often employing relatively large areas of black in a positive manner, denotes an early date of manufacture, while more compact, less lively, more repetitive work tending to fill every square centimetre of space suggests degeneration of the art, and therefore a late production date. This concept is by no means irrelevant, particularly if used by one with great esthetic sensitivity who has had the opportunity to study intensively many of the extant works. The dangers of the approach are apparent from my earlier remarks, namely that an early artist might have intended to produce a panel tightly covered with conventional design, or from boredom he might resort to a repetitive pattern that his apprentice might be allowed to handle. Similarly a 'late' artist might have resorted to a bold approach. The pitfalls are only too obvious: some of the most gracious, vivacious and inventive modes of 'early' *kranok* are being created today by the artist Angkhan Kalyanaphong; and the dead hand of the hack may be detected in some pieces that are otherwise clearly of relatively great antiquity.

The iconographic approach is similarly good and bad. As with other traditional art forms, the Siamese arts went through occasional, very short periods of revolution in which new forms were invented or adapted, followed by decades or even centuries of emulation. The reign of King Narai was presumably a period of artistic revolution, certainly in architecture and probably in most of the other arts. The two zeniths abroad, that of Louis XIV's France and the Mogul Emperor Aurangzeb's India, impinged heavily on Narai's Siam, according to indigenous chronicles and foreign sources. Hence Narai's reign would have seen the inception of Europeans depicted as

bewigged chevaliers, and Indians in elaborate but undecorated turbans, jhodpurs, and tight-sleeved, diaphanous gowns (*TLW*, fig. 16). This, I believe, is so. These same figures, which soon became characteristic motifs, recurred well into the nineteenth century⁵, to be replaced by contemporaneous figures again only in the following 'revolutionary' period, the reign of King Mongkut (1851–1868).

My own approach here is not immediately to date cabinets, but initially to attempt to place them in 'families', dating the families if a cabinet of that family bears an inscribed date, taking esthetics and iconography into account where possible and noting all other similarities, including the architecture of the cabinets, metal fittings and the identifiable 'signatures' of artists which may be detected in decorative patterns. My hypothesis, that the decoration of each cabinet is essentially the work of one master, meets a crucial test here, in grouping cabinets according to family. If many cabinets are each the work of more than one hand, classification becomes a more complicated task.

The cabinets and their structure. The Thai call scripture cabinets *tuu phratham*, "cabinets for the Dhamma". The word *tuu* is of Chinese origin (櫥) like the Thai names for most items of furniture (*kao-ii*: 交椅, a chair; and *to?*: 桌, a table), which is natural enough as the Thais have always been a floor-living people like the Japanese, for whom most items of furniture used to be superfluous. The cabinets have no antecedent in the Indo-Lankan tradition and so, because of the Chinese name and because similar trapezoidal cabinets (also trapezoidal desks, altar-tables and sideboards) are known in China⁶, I hypothesize, very tentatively, a Chinese origin for these cabinets⁷. The hypothesis is strengthened by the supposition that immigrant Chinese carpenters were the cabinetmakers, imported Chinese skills having supplied many of the technical requirements of early urban Siam. In Lanka, manuscripts are kept in vast, elaborate *almirah* of Western inspiration. If Lao and Cambodian cabinets of trapezoidal form occur, their origin may be looked for in Thailand. I do not know how the Burmese store their manuscripts, but perhaps *almirah* serve the purpose there.

The first reference to such cabinets for the Law that I can find in Siamese literature occurs in the Somdet Phra Phonnarat Chronicle, written at the turn of the eighteenth century. While Narai was Uparaja during the short reign of his uncle Si Suthammaracha, that king took a fancy to Narai's younger sister. But she resisted his attempts upon her modesty, and had herself smuggled out of the Grand Palace in a *tuu-phra-samut* or "cabinet for state documents". The unsuspecting palace guard let the royal shipment pass, and the younger sister arrived at Narai's palace to condemn Si Suthammaracha for his unseemly lust. This chain of events led to Narai's successful

5. See illustration in Michael Wright, "Gilt-lacquer cabinets of Siam", in *Arts of Asia*, vol. 8 no. 3 (May-June 1978), p. 45.

6. The best of them have been dated to the Ming dynasty; see the example published in *Arts of Asia*, May-June 1971, pp. 52, 53.

7. Trapezoidal cabinets were made in China between the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries A.D.; see Robert Elseworth, various publications.

bid for the throne. It is a suitably dramatic entry for these dramatic artifacts into documented history. The episode must have taken place in 1656, which was shortly after the fall of the Ming dynasty in China.

The cabinets had two chief purposes, one being to preserve their precious contents from the inclement elements, for when printing was unknown the written word possessed an extraordinary value and its disappearance was an ever-present fear. The other purpose was to act as a shrine, for the Buddhist scriptures—the Dhamma in concrete form—were as much an object of veneration as of study. The stout timbers of the cabinets provided protection; their brilliant decoration rendered them shrines, very often with Dvarapalas or guardian figures on the doors as on most other shrines. In height the cabinets range from hip-high pygmies to giants of some nine or ten feet, though the vast majority are human-sized, i.e. between four and six feet. The timbers are very stout, averaging about three inches square, while the panels are cut very thin, a little over one quarter of an inch. The latter are fixed into the timbers with a resinous glue that is usually used for caulking boats. Similar to lacquer, it is a sort of natural plastic that is solid but pliable, and absolutely waterproof. The whole is one of great solidity and strength in which warping is impossible, though some of the older and thinner panels have cracked.

The weakest point of the cabinets is the doors which, of course, could not be glued into place. These door panels are either slightly thicker than the backs and sides or are braced by slats running behind them. All the later cabinets, and most of those judged early, have doors turning on hinges, some of them fine and decorative elements in themselves, particularly the older ones. But most hinges are what can only be called cheap and tinny. The original hinges can be detected because they are placed horizontally across the surface, i.e. they are flat, one element nailed onto the door panel and the other nailed to the front surface of the timber. Most hinges were covered with lacquer and gilt (unless they themselves were decorative), some of which may have chipped away revealing their rough nature. In many sad cases the original hinges have rusted away and been replaced by newer ones, crudely and carelessly attached to the surface blotting out much beauty.

Only three or four of all the extant cabinets, so far as I can discover, have 'hingeless' doors revolving on extensions of their outer upper and lower corners that turn in holes in threshold timbers of the cabinet doorways. This construction is immediately understandable if you have seen a great teak temple door. The interesting point is that those great temple doors had to be hung in such a manner, for no hinges could bear their weight, whereas the doors of cabinets are relatively light. I can only conclude that the few that do turn on their own extensions are of considerable antiquity, dating from before the time when the affixed hinge was widely known here. I do not know when the hinge came into popular use here.

Another metal fitting present on many cabinets is a halved medallion in the centre of the door panels (*TLW*, fig. 1). There are two kinds, one resembling the

medallion in the middle of a Persian carpet (one half being on each of the two doors), and the other resembling the Thai chest ornament *thap suang*, similarly divided. These act as bearers for rings through which an old-fashioned Chinese lock could be passed. Some of them are of outstanding workmanship. Some of the most spectacular appear on old cabinets, some apparently old cabinets have none, while some later cabinets have quite remarkable examples.

Regarding height, the cabinets were originally made to be used in a kneeling or seated position, thus they appear 'stubby' when we walk up to them today. To compensate for the diminutive appearance the Bangkok National Museum has placed some of its exhibits upon low, lion-legged daises. This adds to their beauty as we stand viewing them today, but the fact should be born in mind that the lion-legged base and the additional height are additions.

There are four customary types of bases, or legs, excluding the daises described above. (a) The plain type: The vertical timbers extend downward to form four square-based legs. Inappropriately called "pig legs" in Thai, some 90 per cent of cabinets have legs of this type (*TLW*, fig. 14). (b) 'Lion' legs, or 'Garuda's claws': Of Chinese origin, this type has been used by the Thai for many centuries. It occurs more frequently on recent cabinets. (c) 'Pig's trotters': These very Chinese supports, with front and back legs curved inwards just at the bottom, seem to occur only on the more recent cabinets. (d) The coffered base: Easy to understand visually, it is very difficult to describe (*TLW*, figs. 10, 16). To the eye several variations exist, but there are only two basic forms: one comprises those built upon vertical timbers of type (a), which are very strong—even if the coffering is broken away, the cabinet still stands. Some cabinets that now seem to be of type (a) may once have had coffering about the legs. The second coffered type of base was built on coffered panels, and hence is essentially weak—in some cases the coffering has broken away so that the cabinets now rest on their 'uppers', i.e. they are without any base or support, and lie piteously like rowboats grounded at low tide.

Gilt lacquer may be seen at the Bangkok National Museum (abbreviated in lists hereafter as BNM; rooms 10, 17 and the upper story of room 8), at Suan Pakkad Palace (SPP; the inner walls of the Lacquer Pavilion, plus several cabinets in the private museum there), at several temples (in particular Wat Rakhang in Thon Buri), at the former National Library building between the Phramane Ground and Wat Maha That (NL₀), and at the new National Library (NL), adjoining Tha Vasukri, where a fine three-story building has been constructed to display almost 400 examples. The single most famous example, the cabinet from Wat Choeng Wai, is housed at the National Gallery (NG). In addition, M.R. Kukrit Pramoj and the Rangits have important cabinets in their private collections. My research has concentrated on the new National Library installation. The cabinets arrived there only recently, and their arrangement is as yet only tentative. The ground floor has a representative selection which I found useful for statistical purposes. The first story contains a more haphazard group of very interesting and very dull cabinets, while the second story is a sort of historical glory-

hole, chockablock with the most undistinguished, most damaged, most important and, alas, most beautiful specimens.

Cabinets in the National Library collection

I recently spent most of a ten-day holiday in research at the present National Library, with an occasional dash across town to check out a theory or take a measurement when I recalled a cabinet elsewhere. On the first day I set to work armed with a flask of hot jasmine tea and a notebook. I confined myself to the ground floor, where there are almost 100 cabinets, as I knew that the wealth of material upstairs would prove indigestible (I admit I did peep, but quickly came down again, chastened, and with renewed resolve). Most of the day was spent patrolling the ranks of cabinets, looking but trying not to begin to think. I went home exhausted and bemused.

Quality of gold. However, that approach proved to be the right one. The weather the first day had been overcast. The next morning was a brilliant one, and as I stepped into the building, alight this time with the sun's rays, I was struck by the fact that one cabinet (Th.B. 3)⁸ at the very end of one aisle was glowing more richly than the others, although no direct light reached it; the gold leaf on that one appeared to be of a different quality from that used on most others. Fortunately it bore a dated inscription, 1777 A.D. in the reign of King Tak Sin of Thon Buri, and had been taken from Wat Rakhang. Following this lead I found that all cabinets from Wat Rakhang that bore a similar 'hand' had been gilded with a similar quality of gold. A goldsmith could define it more accurately; I can only say that it appeared 'buttery'.

My eyes alert to subtleties this second day, I resumed my patrol of the ranks of cabinets, noticing more differences in the qualities of the gold. Some was of a particularly lovely pallor, a gold that I can only describe as 'moonlit'. On checking, the labels most of these paler cabinets turned out to be marked "A.Y." A few marked "K.Th." that display the same pale gold I am convinced, by other evidence as well, should be ascribed to the Ayutthaya period.

The obviously Bangkok-period cabinets were a mixed bag as far as the quality of gold was concerned, none with the lovely pure pallor of the Ayutthayan cabinets nor with the richness of the Thon Buri examples. A strong difference is noticeable, however, between them and the very latest cabinets (one or two of them bearing dates in the 1860s and 1870s) which show a coppery hue and seem to bear signs of corrosion.

I do not suppose that these changes of quality in gold represent a consistent deterioration; rather they suggest different sources of gold leaf being utilized during different periods of history. An economic historian might be able to enlighten us on

8. In the early years of this century the cabinets in this collection were studied and marked either *ด.ย.* ("A.Y.": Ayutthaya; up to 1767), *ท.บ.* ("Th.B.": Thon Buri; 1767-1781), or *ก.ท.* ("K.Th.": Krung Thep, or Bangkok, 1782--), according to provenience/period.

the various sources. The evidence, in any case, suggests a tentative scale of hue/quality of gold according to provenance :

Ayutthaya : a very fine, silvery pallor.

Thon Buri and early Bangkok (school of Wat Rakhang) : rich and 'buttery'.

Early 19th-century Bangkok : undistinguished, of middling intensity.

Later 19th-century Bangkok : coppery.

Wear, and tear. Another factor sprang to eye, in comparative reflex as a result of the first day's experience : the difference between 'wear' and 'tear' manifested on these cabinets. 'Tear' might be characterized as acute trauma, inflicted upon a limited area by an accident or by the attentions of well-meaning cleaners whose ministrations of the dust cloth on the flange of the base have removed much of the gold from the bottoms of panels, or by the ignorant and superstitious who have repeatedly rubbed a particular spot in the hope that a lucky number would appear. Tear occurs on even the latest cabinets, and is immediately identifiable because of its limited area and/or obvious cause (see our figure 1, where 'tear' has occurred owing to people opening the doors). 'Wear' is much more difficult to describe, and appears more frequently among the older cabinets. It is a case of chronic old-age, involving wide, poorly defined areas of lost gilding and slaty, crusty lacquer (see figs. 2, 3).

The difference between 'wear' and 'tear' is no help in pinpointing dates, but as very few of the cabinets have been exposed to the full violence of the elements because of their intrinsic value, great wear strongly indicates antiquity, and a lack of it the likelihood of recent origin. Furthermore, I feel that wear and tear deserve much more study if only to help in preventing further damage and loss.

It is commonly thought that moisture is the chief enemy of gilt lacquer, as it is of murals. But if this were so then the inner panels of the Lacquer Pavilion should have been damaged in vertical strips by water dripping from the roof. This seems not to have been the case, for whole panels have lost their gilding with no vertical prejudice. The culprit I choose is light, as the gilded backs of cabinets, that are usually against a wall and therefore shaded from the strongest light, are usually free from wear, in contrast to fronts and sides. Examples are too numerous to mention.

The loss of gilding on the fronts of cabinets might be put down to frequent wiping; but other evidence points to light as a source of wear: the gold on lacquered window panels, like those of the *bot* at Wat Suthat, too vast and too numerous to have been much cleaned, not exposed to rain, though an occasional storm may have drenched their lower reaches.

I have never caught a cabinet in the act of peeling. This is because gold leaf is too thin to become detached from the wood in this fashion. For those who are unacquainted with the qualities of gold leaf, it is so thin that when held up to sunlight it is transparent, and the sun appears through it as a ghostly green disk; it is so insubstantial that if one rubs a leaf between forefinger and thumb it crumbles and vanishes.

Thus, as the lacquer slowly loses its adhesiveness through the influence of light, the gold vanishes imperceptibly, a few atoms at a time, with the breeze. I am reminded of the description of an eon in Sanskrit literature: "If a fairy were to come once in a century and stroke a diamond mountain with a whisp of silk, that mountain would be worn away before . . ." But, alas, gilt lacquer is not of diamond stuff.

Worn surfaces present an interesting phenomenon: those parts where the original gilt pattern has by now worn off reveal a black-lacquered surface which has been exposed to the atmosphere for a shorter length of time than the black-lacquered parts that were bare of gilt from the very beginning. Although the whole surface is now stripped of its gilt and apparently blank, some parts are thus more corroded and slaty than others. The outlines of the original pattern, therefore, may be detected by squinting at a portion of the panel surface at an angle **against** the light, which throws the areas of original gilding into relative relief. A good example of such wear is K.Th. 143 (fig. 2) tucked away on the second floor of the National Library, black and lopsided, its base almost rotted away, its doors held together by a piece of wire, and a hole in its roof. Judging by its carpentry, and from what is revealed by dint of a lot of squinting, it is a close relative of the Choeng Wai cabinet (definitely A.Y.) and a very fine specimen, its gilt jungles infested with mythical birds and beasts.

There ought to be some technique to redevelop these latent images, bringing out the original design at least in outline.

'Weight'. In gilt-lacquerwork, 'weight' is not *avoirdupois*, but may be described as the weight of the hand as in handwriting or a signature. It is difficult to discover in narrative panels, but comes out clearly and fairly constantly in decorative design. My own awareness of this quality began with squinting at cabinets from a distance, avoiding all detail and just trying to get a general impression of gold *vs.* black, light *vs.* dark, lightness *vs.* heaviness. When similar 'weights' of design among the cabinets had imprinted themselves on my mind, closer inspection sometimes proved I was absolutely wrong, but more often than not there were other similarities that convinced me that here was the same hand, or a very similar one, at work.

Dated inscriptions. I found a number of cabinets, and one table, bearing dated inscriptions which have not yet been collected and published before, as far as I know. Rough translations are given below, arranged from oldest to latest.

(a) Th.B. 3 (NL, ground floor, dated 1777 A.D.). The top flange, front, carries the following inscription in upright Thai script typical of the period.

Over 2,320 years of the Buddhist Era having elapsed, [lacuna]
 the date being $\frac{4}{5} \frac{12}{5}$ *kham*, in a Cock Year ninth of the decade, Maha Taeng, a child
 of the Buddha [i.e. a monk], filled with pure faith and realizing that the relig.
 [lacuna] so that the religion may prosper forever. He hopes that, steadfast
 in the Dhamma, he may attain a Buddhist realization of the Noble Truths and arrive
 at supernatural bliss as easily as identifying the Three Characteristics under the dispen-
 sation of the Buddha Maitreya. Completed at a cost of $\frac{14}{1} \frac{2}{2}$.

On the top of the panel, left side, is written in a beautiful Ayutthayan italic "this side was drawn a second time". On the cushion of a kneeling divinity, at the centre of the decorated righthand door panel in upright letters, appears the words "glorious born-of-the-gods [Sri-devaputra]—Grandfather [taa]".

The date of the first inscription, which presumably records the building of the cabinet, puts it in the tenth year of the 15-year reign of King Tak Sin of Thon Buri, and one year after the king ordered the copying of the *Trai Phum* manuscript now in Berlin⁹. The copying of the *Trai Phum* is understood to have been ordered done at Wat Rakhang, where this cabinet was found. Much of the inscription consists of pious Pali technical terms, which I have translated very roughly indeed.

What interest me most are the lacunae, which are due neither to wear nor to tear; the gilding has been neatly and completely stripped away at these points, and the blank spaces, which have been regilded, bear some signs of wear, indicating that the erasure was effected long ago. I can only guess that the first lacuna (quite short) that occurs in the middle of a long and exact phrase expressing date, gave the regnal year of King Tak Sin, and that this date was later removed for political reasons. The second lacuna is even more of a mystery. It should have contained the words "built this cabinet", but it is a long lacuna and may have continued with a dedication of part of the merit accruing (this is very common practice) to someone who later became *persona non grata*.

The short inscription on the side is also mysterious. One can see what it refers to, as a considerable area of the *kranok* pattern in the upper middle of the panel has been removed and replaced by a rampant Hanuman chasing the sun. One wonders if there is any heraldic meaning behind this Hanuman (there is no other Ramayana motif on the cabinet), or whether it was just the patron's whim. But one wonders even more why the change should have been recorded so elegantly.

The third inscription, on the angelic being's cushion, is less mysterious than it sounds. The being is apparently worshipping the Čulamani Stupa in the Tavatimsa Heaven, the last wish of all good Buddhists in the old days. The scene and inscription therefore record the demise and apotheosis of a respected ancestor. I shall refrain from trying to guess who "Grandfather" might have been. One cannot help thinking, though, that the Maha Taeng who built the cabinet and who presumably was the grandson, must have been an extremely important person to have afforded the expense.

(b) K. Th. 58 (NL, first floor; dated 1781; see our figure 4). Inside the door panels, in Khmer script, Thai language, in gamboge ink and attempted gilding on red lacquer, there are the following inscriptions.

[Left door panel:] This cabinet was built by Maha Bunnag, a child of the Buddha who, full of pure faith, saw this world as full of change and ruin, with sorrow, disease,

9. Klaus Wenk, *Thailandische Miniaturmalereien* (Weisbaden, Franz Steiner Verlag GMBH, 1965).

birth, old age, sickness and death being its principal characteristics. He therefore had [this cabinet] made as a memorial to the Dhamma, to contain the Tripitaka, that it may give rise to correct practice and realization, and the continuance of the religion, as an object of worship for those of middling development. With mercy and kindness may they learn the Tripitaka and the Commentaries.

"[This cabinet] was built when 2,324 years of the Buddhist Era had elapsed, on the thirteenth day of the seventh month [May-June], it now being $\frac{6+1}{14}$ of an Ox Year, third of the decade. May it [the cabinet] be a cause for the arousal of wisdom in whoever sees it.

[*Right door panel:*] I therefore offer a portion of my merit to them [those who see the cabinet?] as they may desire. By virtue of the merit I have made, in whatever birth I come to, let me know no sickness of heart; may my enemies fail, and may I be endowed with the intelligence and the wisdom to recognize impermanence, suffering and nonself [i.e. the 'Three Characteristics' of the first inscription], so that lust, anger, foolishness and acquisitiveness may be lessened. May my mind be bent on works of charity and the avoidance of sin in all my rebirths. Let me not fall into delusion, but let me strenuously endeavour to attain the Ten Perfections. May I meet all the Buddhas, from the first to Maitreya until I attain Nirvana in the distant future. Built at a cost of $\frac{12}{2}$.

This long, chatty dedication lacks the mysteries of the first one, but it seems to reflect the instability of the time, for in 1781 King Tak Sin and a great many other people were executed and the Thon Buri period came to an end. This cabinet too was found at Wat Rakhang.

(c) Chinese table with drawers, K.Th. T-1 (NL, second floor; 1784; see fig. 5). On the back, in Khmer script and Thai language, is the partial inscription "2,327 years of the Buddhist Era having elapsed [lacuna] may I attain full Enlightenment". This table is important, as it appears to be very late. Its fussy Chinese-style decoration reminds me at once of the reign of Rama III or IV, but the date places it early in the reign of Rama I.

(d) K.Th. 245 (NL, second floor; 1784). On the upper portion of the left door panel, in Khmer script and Thai language, appears the phrase "2,327 years of the Buddhist Era have elapsed, a Dragon Year sixth of the decade".¹⁰ This cabinet's decoration appears to be wholly amateur or provincial. I include it only because a date is provided.

(e) K.Th. 24 (NL, ground floor; 1788). On the bottom of both door panels, in upright Thai script, appears the inscription

2,331 years of the Buddhist Era having elapsed, in an Ape Year tenth of the decade, in the twelfth month, Maha Rot, an upholder of religion and a guide to Nirvana for his benefactors built this cabinet costing $\frac{14}{2}$.

10. According to my calculations, 2327 (1784 A.D.) was a Dog Year, sixth of the decade.

(f) K.Th. 35 (NL₀; 1818). On the top front flange, in upright Thai script, appears

2,361 years of the Buddhist Era having elapsed, it being.....day,month, a Year of the Tiger, tenth of the decade, Somdet Amarinthāmāt [Somtec Amarindāmāta] had this made for the religion. May I become a mother of the Buddha, any one of them, in the future.

Amarinthamat was chief consort to King Rama I.

(g) K.Th. 282 (NL, first floor; 1835). At the bottom of both left and right side-panels, in upright Thai script, there are inscriptions. The left panel reads "this is Grandmother Bun's cabinet, built that she might attain Nirvana in the end. If she does not reach Nirvana, let no suffering come to her". The right panel reads "this cabinet was made for the religion [numerals worn away, but the date must be 2378] of the Buddhist Era having elapsed, a Goat Year seventh of the decade. Let me have Right Views. May this be a cause for Nirvana" (the last sentence in Pali).

(h) K.Th. 234 (NL, first floor; no date). The following inscription is on the bottom of the right side-panel, in upright Thai script. "This cabinet was built by Grandmother Pan so that she may go to Nirvana. If she does not get there may she meet Maitreya. Nai Nok drew this." Though this inscription gives no date, I include it because the design is almost identical with cabinet K.Th. 282, and because the artist's name is provided. This may be useful when other evidence comes to light.

(i) K.Th. 292 (NL, first floor; 1839); wholly Chinese decoration, with polychrome lacquer. On the top flange, front, appear the Chinese characters 道光拾捌年立: "done in the eighteenth year of Tao Kuang"; which corresponds to 1839 A.D.

(j) K.Th. 317 (NL, ground floor; 1845; see fig 6). On the fronts of false drawers in the base of the cabinet, the following passage is inscribed in upright Thai script and Thai language with the exception of the last sentence which is written in Pali.

2,388 years of the Buddhist Era having elapsed, we, Layman Roek and Laywoman Chaem, built this cabinet for the furtherance of the religion; may we reach Nirvana. May we be bold in almsgiving, constantly to beggars and the poor. And may our minds be set upon the Triple Gem. Whatever sons, daughters and other dependants we may have throughout our rebirths, may they be obedient. Whatever Buddhas may preach in future ages, let us come in contact with their doctrine and listen to the sermons of each Buddha, sitting before him with pure and undoubting hearts. Let us have the intelligence and wisdom to learn the Tripitaka. Let us have faith and energy in the religious life, faultlessly. Let there be Nirvana.

(k) K.Th. 272 (NL, first floor; 1869; see fig 7). At the bottom of left and right door panels, in upright Thai script and Thai language with the exception of the last sentence which is written in Pali, appears the inscription

2,412 years of the Buddhist Era having elapsed, it being a Serpent Year first of the decade, Layman Sing built this cabinet for the furtherance of the religion, offering a portion of his merit to Laywoman Muang as an aid towards Nirvana. May this be a cause of Nirvana.

(1) K.Th. 193 (NL, first floor; 1872; see fig 8). The bottom of the left side-panel, in upright Thai script, reads

2,415 years of the Buddhist Era having elapsed, it being an Ape Year fourth of the decade, I, Mother Pha, built this cabinet to contain the Tripitaka, for the furtherance of the religion. May I attain Nirvana in the distant future.

I have few general observations to make upon these dated inscriptions, except to bewail the fact that no Ayutthayan cabinet is dated. Apparently the Ayutthayans thought their world so permanent that they seldom bothered to inscribe or date objects, unlike the rulers of Sukhothai who recorded their acts of merit in fullsome detail.

However, since most ancient Thai inscriptions record works of merit, the reason for the silence of Ayutthayan cabinets might be that they were not made for merit, i.e. as offerings to monasteries. Furthermore, I believe that very few extant Ayutthayan cabinets are decorated in a specifically Buddhist theme; a notable exception is the back panel of A.Y. 29 (see fig. 9), which may be a later monastic addition. In other words, in the Ayutthaya period, cabinets may have been built primarily for palace use and donated to monasteries only as an afterthought, like so many other household effects and even whole houses after their noble owner had passed on and might be in need of the merit afforded by such a donation.

Therefore it may be helpful if we think of the Ayutthayan cabinets as "cabinets for state documents" (*tuu-phra-samut*) rather than "cabinets for the Dhamma" (*tuu-phra-tham*).

Dated inscriptions recording the meritorious act of building cabinets occur first in the reign of King Tak Sin of Thon Buri (notably Th.B. 3 and K.Th. 58). The mystery here is the excellence of the Buddhist sentiment expressed, when, given the disorder of the kingdom, one would expect magical incantations at best. Admittedly the two examples I have found may be interpreted as magical incantations, as may all such inscriptions, but they are of a most elevated spirit. The orthography is also highly literate, though even the Berlin manuscript of the *Trai Phum* (dated 1776) abounds in aberrant spellings and phoneticisms (e.g. "*krakul*" for *trakul*, and "*krpilabad*" for *kapilavattu*, which cannot be blamed on Sukhothai orthography). This leads me to believe that the authors were members of the remainder of a highly educated elite, the scions of the Ayutthayan nobility. Their scholarship must have been of indigenous origin, as scholarship in Laos and Cambodia was probably negligible at the time, Lanka was only just beginning to revive culturally, thanks to the loan of Siamese monks in the 1750s, and Burma was the enemy *par excellence*. Another cabinet, dated 1784 (K.Th. 24), though very grand bears illiteracies in its inscription ("*Nrphan*" for Nirvana).

Other distinctive markings. Many cabinets with straight legs bear small figures in gilt on the legs, just below the flange of the bottom of the cabinet. I have observed the following motifs thereon: numerous *yaksa*, even more numerous *garuda*, one or two *rajasinha*, a *garuda* mounted on a *rajasinha*, one or two *devata*, two instances of old ladies worshipping, one instance of a child. I suspect that the old ladies represent donors, and the child a dead infant, recipient of the merit accruing from the donation of the cabinet; mute substitutes for inscriptions, more moving than informative.

The mythical animals are more difficult to interpret. Were they added as magical guardians, or as atlantes? Were they the heraldic emblems of certain noble donor families, or were they the marks of ateliers? Or were they added at random? The random theory seems unlikely. All, except one case of a *Garuda* and one old lady, occur on cabinets that can be dated fairly certainly to between the Thon Buri period and the second decade of the nineteenth century. The two exceptions seem to be rather later. The Thon Buri cabinet with the dated inscription (1777 A.D.) bears some *yaksa*, not on the legs which are stunted and insignificant, but on the timbers just above the bottom flange, while most *garuda* occur on cabinets that I class as belonging to the 'Dancer' family (see following section).

With regard to applied metallic decoration, there are a few instances of bold and decorative hinges, all obviously Ayutthayan (pre-1765), cast in brass, quite handsome enough to have been taken from Momoyama Japanese cabinets (for example A.Y. 28). But other Ayutthayan cabinets have dull, practical hinges, often hidden below the lacquer and gilding. All hinges of later cabinets are unremarkable. Metallic medallions, where they occur, are similarly uninformative, being magnificent on some of the oldest cabinets (A.Y. 28, again) or absent (A.Y. 7), the more nondescript on the more recent ones. A fine example appears on K.Th. 317, dated 1845.

Families of cabinets

I prefer the word 'family' to 'school' in this case, as the latter term has been too loosely applied in Thailand, sometimes in reference to an historical period (the Dvaravati 'school'), sometimes to an atelier (the Thon Buri 'school' at Wat Rakhang), and sometimes to a geographical area (the Nonthaburi and Phetchaburi 'schools'). Furthermore, I have come across proof of the existence of only one atelier, that at Wat Rakhang. Clearly others existed, but until we know more about them I shall confine myself to 'families' of cabinets.

My 'family' indicates something more specific and at the same time more tenuous than 'school'—a distinct similarity in esthetic 'hand', a similar treatment of rocks or plants, a similar rhythm in the *kranok*, an identical perceived quality of gold leaf, the same provenience, like degrees of wear, a cast of face recurring on more than one cabinet. The last item probably indicates my choice of the word 'family'. The relationship can be fraternal, i.e. cabinets by the same artist, or ancestral, meaning that one form was earlier than the other and probably inspired it. Dated inscriptions are, of

course, the most binding evidence, so the dated cabinets are bound to be the anchors of several of my families. The descriptions and opinions which follow are based on investigation of cabinet exteriors only, except in cases where evidence from interiors is specified.

The family system I have tentatively devised comprises the following groups:

1. Coffe-based family.
2. Wat Rakhang family.
3. Dancer family.
4. Spider family.
5. "Grandmother Bun" family.
6. K.Th. 317 family.
7. K.Th. 272 family.
8. "Mother Pha" family.

1. Coffe-based family

This is my most tentative family, with no dated member. It had better be thought of as consisting more of great-aunts and godsons rather than of brothers, or fathers and sons. Some cabinets without coffered bases may also be members, but I exclude them for the moment to avoid confusion. The only factors that persuade me to treat these cabinets in one group, as a putative family, are: great wear and pallor of gilt, indicating relatively great antiquity; lack of primary Buddhist symbolism, perhaps indicating a palace provenence; and magnificent bases. My treatment of this family will necessarily be chiefly descriptive.

The cabinets that I place in this grouping are listed below, followed by descriptive notes. All measurements in this section are of the body only; roofs and bases are variable due to losses and restorations.

- (a) The Louis/Aurangzeb cabinet (BNM, Ayutthaya room)
- (b) The Choeng Wai cabinet (NG)
- (c) K.Th. 143 (NL, second floor)
- (d) A.Y. 7 (NL, first floor)
- (e) A.Y. 29 (NL, first floor)
- (f) K.Th. 156 (NL, ground floor)
- (g) K.Th. 251 (NL, ground floor)
- (h) K.Th. 295 (NL, second floor)

(a) **The Louis/Aurangzeb cabinet** is 106 centimetres (cm) high; the dimensions at the top are 90 cm wide by 68 cm deep, while the base is 96 cm wide by 72 cm deep. Its provenence is unknown.

Decoration. The door panels have been published by the Fine Arts Department (TLW, fig. 16) and in several other places. The left-hand panel bears a bewigged chevalier holding a sword. The extreme difficulty of the figure's posture suggests that the artist was working from a Western portrait, interpreting its haughty pose in his native two-dimensional idiom. There is a dog-like creature at his feet. He stands in what seems to be a grotto, of rock or perhaps clouds or foam, at the apex of which is a grinning satyr's mask. There are two small figures in the grotto, on the left a Caucasian (identifiable by wig and cravat) with winged upper arms. He holds a gourd pipe (the native Siamese tobacco pipe) in his right hand, and gestures threateningly with it at the figure at the top-right of the panel, a figure in Chinese dress and queue who holds what looks like a Chinese waterpipe. This involvement of tobacco smoking makes me think that the satyr's mask in the middle may be derived from the bowl of a French clay pipe, which in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was often given the form of a satyr's head¹¹. The figure on the right panel is in what I take to be Mogul costume: tight jhodpurs, and a tight-sleeved, loose-skirted gown. At his waist is a Malay *kris*. In the grotto above his head are another grimacing Caucasian with winged upper arms on the left, and on the right a figure in a bag-like turban who is about to hurl a rock at the Caucasian. Whether these figures simply indicate the perceived oddness and belligerence of foreigners, or whether they record political trends or historical occurrences, I am unable to say.

The sides of this cabinet (see fig. 10) have not been published, as far as I know. Each side is divided vertically into two narrow panels.

The pattern is a 'field-of-flowers' and leaves, closely recalling a Persian carpet. Imposed upon the field are mythical beings: *khiren*, *rajasinha*, *sing-to*, *garuda* and *devata*, and realistic deer, etc.

The back, also divided vertically, displays two standing figures, one a Brahma with three faces visible and four arms, borne aloft by a bear, and the other an unidentified deity borne by a monkey. These figures and their costumes seem uniquely elegant. The only figures resembling them that I can recall are those on the great door-panels (thought to date from the early eighteenth century) of the *bot* at Wat Yai Suvanaram, Phetchaburi, which appear much stiffer. The architecture surrounding the heads of the figures on the back of the cabinet also recalls the architecture of the *dhammasana* in the *sala* of that temple. This pair of figures is so archaic and so different from anything else on the cabinet (or any other decoration anywhere) that I wonder if these back panels were not rescued from an earlier cabinet that had already fallen into disuse or decay.

Structure. The 'roof' consists of a row of carved, down-turned lotus petals, one of up-turned petals, and one of hexagonal lozenges. As we see it today the roof is flat. The upright timbers are inlaid in green and white mirrorwork. They have gilt wooden diamonds at their mid-points, and half-diamonds at top and bottom. The base consists

11. See *National Geographic Magazine*, vol. 152 no. 6 (December 1977), pp. 764-765.

Structure. Roof, upright timbers and base are all identical to those of the Choeng Wai cabinet, though the roof is undomed. The structure is in excellent condition. There is no medallion. Six unremarkable hinges are buried under the lacquer. The interior is very strongly constructed, with two stout shelves fitted firmly into place and lacquered in red. Their front edges are beaded.

Gold. The rather pale gilt exhibits slight wear which is confined mostly to the door panels, while several small but conspicuous patches of tear occur on back and sides. I see a fraternal relationship between this cabinet and the Choeng Wai example, in identical structure though different dimensions; a similar degree of manifest energy in the design, differing only in that the Choeng Wai design is based on a seminatural forest motif, while the motif here is of stylized rice plants; a similar delight in and close observation of small-life; the recurrence of *sing-to* and *khiren*; similar degrees of wear and tear.

(e) A.Y. 29 has dimensions of $94 \times \frac{(\text{top: } 99 \times 63)}{(\text{base: } 106 \times 70)}$ cm. Its provenance is Wat Klang, Samut Prakan Province.

Decoration. The door panels and sides are similar, each bearing a symmetrical but lively *kranok* design. The doors have Narai on a *garuda* below and a *thepphanom* above (see fig. 3). The right side has, from top to bottom, a *thepphanom*, a *sinha*, a *thepphanom* and a *garuda*; the left has a *thepphanom*, a *garuda*, a *thepphanom* and a *sinha*. All are frontal. The back of the cabinet is divided vertically into two panels, each panel being subdivided into ten rectangles (see fig. 9). In these are illustrated—strip-cartoon fashion—ten meditations on decaying corpses, two parables on aversion to the world, two parables on the binding and loosening of attachments, and the Twelffold Chain of Becoming (the *Paticcasamupāda*) compressed into six rectangles. The subject matter is taken from a compendium of Dhamma (title unknown), an illuminated manuscript of which has been published as *Pritsana Tham Thai* in Thai, and *Teaching Dhamma by Pictures* in English, by the Social Science Association of Thailand (B.E. 2511), with an explanatory text by Buddhadasa Bhikkhu.

Structure. The roof is identical to the Choeng Wai cabinet, seeming to have once been domed. At back and sides there is a pendent row of *krachang*. The upright timbers, once inlaid with green mirror, little of which remains, are adorned at mid-point with flowers in high relief, and sheathes (*kāp phrəm sən*) at top and bottom. The base is the same as that of the Choeng Wai, though without the topmost layer of lotus petals. The medallion is heavily magnificent. There are no hinges for the door panels turn on their outer extensions. These were at one time broken away, apparently in ancient times because they have been laboriously replaced by new wooden extensions; in more recent times hinges would probably have been installed instead.

Gold. Fine and very pale on the front and sides, it is nonetheless very worn, with the left door-panel almost a total loss. The gold on the back is perhaps slightly

richer. Because of the relative richness (and considering the ascetic content), I take the back gilt to be a later monastic addition, though not much later for the drawing is still very antique, viz. of the monks' robes, the thrones and Rahu's face.

The symmetry on front and sides, the ancient repairs, and the lack of any detectable foreign influence, tempt me to suspect that this is one of the earliest cabinets remaining, dating from the early years of Narai's reign or even before. I can find nothing in the highly symmetrical designs on the panels that recalls the Choeng Wai cabinet.

(f) **The K.Th. 156 cabinet** measures $123 \times \frac{(\text{top}: 104 \times 76)}{(\text{base}: 115 \times 86)}$ cm, and comes from Wat Bang Phraek, Nonthaburi Province.

Decoration. Doors and sides bear a bold, symmetrical *kranok* design with *rajasinhas* below. *Thepphanoms* grace the doorways. The back, divided vertically into two panels, is blank.

Structure. The roof is identical to those of the other cabinets, and may have been domed. There is a row of pendant *krachang* all round as on example (e) above. The upright timbers bear gilt foliate designs. The base is gone, but for the uppermost layer of up-turned lotus petals and one of lozenges. There is a stout bronze medallion, and six stout hinges are superimposed upon the lacquer.

Gold. This is very pale, with extremely heavy wear, particularly on the right door-panel and both sides. The symmetrical design, pale gold, heavy brass fittings, and great wear all recall A.Y. 29.

(g) **K.Th. 251** measures $105.5 \times \frac{(\text{top}: 80.5 \times 67)}{(\text{base}: 86 \times 72)}$ cm, with no provenance given.

Decoration. Doors and sides bear a bold, highly symmetrical *kranok*, the door panels having amorous couples (*mithuna*) in grottos near the base. The right side is infested with small-life. The back is divided vertically; it is unadorned.

Structure. The roof is typical, as is what remains of the base, a row of hexagonal lozenges; there is no upper row of lotus petals. Upright timbers are gilt but otherwise unadorned. There is a thin but elaborate medallion. The six hinges are decorative and superimposed on the lacquer.

Gold. The gilt is very pale, and almost worn away at the sides and at the bottoms of the door panels. The small-life on what is left of the right side recalls the Choeng Wai cabinet.

(h) **K.Th. 295** comes from Wat Ratchakruh, Thon Buri.

Decoration. Door panels bear a bold, asymmetrical *kranok* with a Ramayana battle below, some *yaksa* on left, and Rama on right. The presence of certain items, including figures, and the treatment of the foliage, recall some panels in the Lacquer Pavilion at Suan Pakkad Palace. The side panels at first sight seem to have been totally gilded over and unadorned. However, very close scrutiny reveals, at least on the right

hand panel, that a forest design recalling the Choeng Wai cabinet exists below the gold. I suppose that at one time these panels had become so badly worn that those in charge of the cabinet decided to have them relacquered and gilded. The gold on the left side has worn away in a leprous manner, rendering invisible any design that may exist beneath it.

Structure. The roof is flanged, but lacks carved lotus petals and lozenges. The timbers are gilt but unadorned. The base consists of a beaded flange, a row of coffers containing flowered diamonds, lions' legs, a row of up-turned lotus petals and a stout final base. A small medallion is attached with large-headed, decorative nails. The six hinges are stout, decorative and superimposed upon the lacquer. The inside is very similar to that of A.Y. 7, the shelves having beaded front edges.

The authorities long ago assigned this cabinet a "K.Th." label, i.e. Bangkok period, and I too thought at first that it might represent a fairly recent attempt to emulate the coffer-based structure. But close examination of the vegetation and figures on the door panels (which bear no resemblance to the later and very common Ramayana battle panoramas) has convinced me that this cabinet was special. Since discovering the Choeng Wai-type jungle beneath an added layer of lacquer and gold on the right-hand side panel, I believe that the cabinet deserves much better display and closer study.

Conclusions on the Coffered family. Tentatively, the relations of the various cabinets within the family (insofar as they are considered to constitute one group) are as follows:

Ancestral: A.Y. 28 and perhaps K.Th. 156.

Fraternal: Louis/Aurangzeb, Choeng Wai, A.Y. 7 and K.Th. 143.

Filial: K.Th. 251 and K.Th. 295.

In chronological terms, 'ancestral' refers to early or pre-Narai times, 'fraternal' refers to the reign of Narai or not much later, and 'filial' to post-Narai times and before the fall of Ayutthaya (1767). Regardless whether the decoration was carried out by one atelier of artists, I am almost convinced that a single workshop of cabinetmakers (carpenters) is represented here.

The next family is that of Wat Rakhang, which has a very clear identity and one member dated 1777 in the Thon Buri period. The gap between the cabinets that we know (or think) are Ayutthayan and the dated Thon Buri cabinet is a dark one, since it corresponds to the disorder preceding the fall of Ayutthaya, and the disorder following it, perhaps 10 or 15 years in which cabinets and other major works of art were unlikely to have been made. Artists obviously did survive the catacyclysism, but by the time they were put to work again by King Tak Sin of Thon Buri they must have been considerably older and their skills probably somewhat atrophied.

In search of an enlightening beam to begin to break that darkness, I feel the potentially strongest source to come from K.Th. 295, for the forest that shows dimly beneath the new coats of gilt and lacquer on its right-hand side-panel seem to link it back with Choeng Wai, while the stout, asymmetrical *kranok* on the upper parts of the door panels link it forward, I think, with the similar *kranok* of cabinets found at Wat Rakhang, one of them (Th.B. 4) dated 1777. K.Th. 295 and Th.B. 4 could be the work of one man, or one team: the former cabinet when the artist(s) were young in Ayutthaya, the latter by old survivor(s) in Thon Buri. The poetic abandon of Choeng Wai days had been lost, but the *kranok* was still bold and confident, and it had not been forgotten how a squirrel is supposed to climb and a bird to peck. This is the one thin link I can find between what for us is 'prehistoric' Ayutthaya, and the firmly dated and authenticated school at Wat Rakhang in Thon Buri, where the documented history of gilt-lacquer cabinets begins.

2. *Wat Rakhang family*

This family is so well documented that there is little reason not to call it a school. We know that an atelier existed at Wat Rakhang, we know more or less when it was active, we have the names of those who were presumably its leading artists, and we can recognize many of its works. One of its products is the magnificent manuscript of the *Trai Phum* now preserved in Berlin, some of the illuminations of which have been handsomely published by Klaus Wenk¹⁴. The colophon of this manuscript states:

2,319 years of the Budddhist Era having elapsed [i.e. 1776 A.D.], on the twenty-sixth day of the fourth month, the date being 3 $\frac{12}{1}$ 11 of the waning moon, year 1538 of the Little Era, an Ape Year eighth of the decade, His Majesty was holding court in his floating pavillion in the city of Thon Buri, Glory of the Ocean, with a large number of courtiers in attendance. He was examining an ancient copy of the *Trai Phum* when it came into his mind that the common folk and the four types of beings ought to be given an understanding of the Three Spheres, the five means by which gods, men, the denizens of hell, titans, hungry ghosts and beasts come to birth. He therefore ordered Chao Phraya Sri Dharmadhiraja, his Prime Minister, to prepare blank books of fine quality and send them to artists to copy and illuminate the *Trai Phum*. The work was to be done at the college of the Sangharaja [taken to mean Wat Rakhang], and the Sangharaja was to supervise the work so that the text would be followed faithfully for the use of future generations.

With Your Majesty's permission we	<table border="0"> <tr> <td>Luang Phechrawakom</td> <td rowspan="4">} illuminated this <i>Trai</i> <i>Phum</i>.</td> </tr> <tr> <td><i>Nai</i> Nam</td> </tr> <tr> <td><i>Nai</i> Bunsā</td> </tr> <tr> <td><i>Nai</i> Ruang</td> </tr> </table>	Luang Phechrawakom	} illuminated this <i>Trai</i> <i>Phum</i> .	<i>Nai</i> Nam	<i>Nai</i> Bunsā	<i>Nai</i> Ruang
Luang Phechrawakom	} illuminated this <i>Trai</i> <i>Phum</i> .					
<i>Nai</i> Nam						
<i>Nai</i> Bunsā						
<i>Nai</i> Ruang						

With Your Majesty's permission we	<table border="0"> <tr> <td><i>Nai</i> Bunchan</td> <td rowspan="4">} clerks, copied the text in Your Majesty's honour.</td> </tr> <tr> <td><i>Nai</i> Chet</td> </tr> <tr> <td><i>Nai</i> Son</td> </tr> <tr> <td><i>Nai</i> Thongkham</td> </tr> </table>	<i>Nai</i> Bunchan	} clerks, copied the text in Your Majesty's honour.	<i>Nai</i> Chet	<i>Nai</i> Son	<i>Nai</i> Thongkham
<i>Nai</i> Bunchan	} clerks, copied the text in Your Majesty's honour.					
<i>Nai</i> Chet						
<i>Nai</i> Son						
<i>Nai</i> Thongkham						

14. See footnote 9.

The illuminations of the manuscript reveal the work of several hands; it might be interesting to try and identify who did what, but the four artists' names that we see above are now no more than algebraic cyphers. Among the particular characteristics that appear in the manuscript, however, are some of particular interest to us, as they recur on the panels of cabinets. Those that I have been able to identify are the following.

(a) In the *Thailandische Miniaturmalereien* plate to chapter XXIV (Vidhura Jataka), the Bodhisatva, who sits playing a board game with a *yaksa*, is depicted as ethereally tall and slim. This slimness, although extreme to the extent of appearing decidedly unnatural, does not make the figure seem amateurishly handled; on the contrary, it lends a great air of dignity. A similarly attenuated figure, though seated differently, occurs on the right door panel of Th.B. 3.

(b) At least one of the painters has trouble with crowned heads in three-quarter face views. He makes one temple broader than the other, thus making the crown seem to sit lop-sided (plates to chapters VIII and IX, for instance). This tendency is perhaps even more marked on the Wat Rakhang cabinets.

(c) Crowns form one curve with faces in profile, head and crown fitting into one graceful droplet-shape (plate to chapter XXI, and Indra in plate to chapter VIII). This convention is common in Siamese painting, but in this manuscript and the Wat Rakhang cabinets it is particularly marked.

(d) Many figures, particularly the less noble ones, bear the expression of intelligent, amiable children (plates to chapter XIX). This facial expression occurs frequently in the Wat Rakhang cabinets.

(e) Rather 'rough' drawing; the lines that make up the facial features are roughly sketched in, often without their ends meeting where they should.

Most of the cabinets that I place in the Wat Rakhang family have been removed from Wat Rakhang, and those which have been discovered elsewhere bear one or more of the above characteristics, plus a bold, asymmetrical *kranok*, in each case of a density similar to that of Th.B. 3. They are all in rich, 'buttery' gold-leaf. My candidates for the Wat Rakhang family are the following.

Th.B. 3 (NL, from Wat Rakhang; *yaksa* leg guards; dated 1777 A.D.).

K.Th. 50 (NL, from Wat Rakhang; *yaksa* leg guards).

A.Y. 17 (NL, from Wat Rakhang; see fig. 12).

K.Th. 46 (NL, from Wat Hong).

K.Th. 59 (NL, from Wat Rakhang).

No. 25 (BNM, room 17; provenance unavailable).

No. 11 (BNM, room 17; provenance unavailable).

Two cabinets (in the Ho Trai at Wat Rakhang).

One cabinet in the Rangsit collection.

This family certainly contains many more extant members, but I have included here only those that strike me as indubitable.

Another link may exist between production of Wat Rakhang and of Ayutthaya: one of the cabinets still in the Ho Trai at Wat Rakhang, in the wing that is called the "Bedroom", does not have a coffered base, but its roof and 'floor' each consist of a row of carved lotus petals and one of hexagonal lozenges. Here the hand of Ayutthaya's royal cabinetmakers is perceptibly at work again. They were no longer up to producing a full coffered base, but a royal donation (these two cabinets are supposed to have been offered by King Rama I, but they may have been at Wat Rakhang already, gifts of King Tak Sin) required the visible grandeur of carving. Similar rows of lotus petals and lozenges occur at the Ho Trai, Suan Pakkad Palace.

The Ho Trai at Wat Rakhang, in which stands the cabinet mentioned above, was offered to the monastery by King Rama I, and its murals were painted during his reign. According to Prince Naris¹⁵, the artist was *Phra Achan Naak*, a monk. However, I am unable to detect any striking similarities between his murals and the *Trai Phum* illuminations or the gilt-lacquer cabinets from this monastery.

3. *The Dancer family*

The 'dancers' in this family's name refer to the constantly recurring motif of dancing torsos that grow from a twisting vine design. The cabinets were found at several temples in the Thon Buri - Bangkok area; I cannot find a base location at which to place their point of manufacture. Their placement in time presents no problem, as one of the most typical of their number is K.Th. 24, dated 1788 A.D. in the reign of Rama I. Characteristics shared by most Dancers examples are listed below.

(a) Almost all cases exhibit a twisting vine pattern (*laai kaan khot*) from which dancing or *anjali* figures emerge: gods, goddesses, children or mythical beasts.

(b) Facial features are very finely drawn, haughty, with lines joining exactly where they should.

(c) Nondescript gilt, neither of buttery richness like that of the Wat Rakhang family, nor of lunar pallor like the Ayutthayan cabinets, adorns the cabinets, although the quality is far from poor.

(d) A preponderance of *garudas* appear as guards on the legs.

(e) In general, there is a similar density or 'weight' of the *kranok*; it is much lighter than that which occurs on Wat Rakhang cabinets.

The cabinets that I place in this family are:

K.Th. 24 (from Wat Maha That; *garuda* leg guards; dated 1788).

K.Th. 304 (from Wat Ratchaburana; uniquely carved legs, no guards).

15. See Fua Haribhitak, *Mural Paintings at Wat Rakang* (Bangkok, Khana Kamakan Arurak Silapakam, no date), p. 5.

- A.Y. 4 (from Wat Sai Suwan; *garuda* leg guards).
- K.Th. 2 (from Wat Chantharam, *garuda* leg guards).
- Th.B. 4 (from Wat Chantharam; *garuda* leg guards).
- K.Th. 330 (from Wat Suvannaram; *garuda* leg guards).

Among this family the following examples might tentatively be placed as well:

- A.Y. 28 (from Wat Khrut; *sinha* leg guards; see fig. 17).
- Th. B. 1 (from Wat Ratchaburana; no leg guards).
- One cabinet (SPP; see fig. 14).

A.Y. 4 is an interesting case, as the door panels bear twisting vines, very probably by the Dancer hand apparent on those cabinets named above, while the side panels bear narratives. The left-hand panel is famous, and has been reproduced frequently (*TLW*, fig. 18). Th.B. 4 also has narratives on the sides; these are difficult to compare with A.Y. 4, as the former consist largely of rural scenes while the latter are taking place in palaces and in the air. But both bear at least one striking similarity: unimportant background areas are often filled in with hatchwork; compare the area below Yasodhara's arm (A.Y. 4) with the area behind the amorous couple in Th. B. 4 (see fig. 15) in this article. Notice, too, the treatment of the female heads in both examples. The treatment of rocks, trees and architecture as well as the general composition in these narrative panels of A.Y. 4 and Th.B. 4 recall to me much that we see on the Lacquer Pavilion at Suan Pakkad Palace. I believe that they and the Lacquer Pavilion should be given much comparative scrutiny.

A.Y. 28 (see fig. 13) and the cabinet at Suan Pakkad (fig. 14), if they belong in this family at all, are probably 'ancestral' to the family as they reveal a greater vivacity. A.Y. 28 has door panels bearing the twisting vine pattern (*TLW*, fig. 12), closely recalling that on other members of the family, but it is somehow more daring, more spiky. The side panels bear an amazing, blazing *kranok*, with one swirling dancer in the middle. At the bottom of these panels are fabulous beasts that closely recall those on the Choeng Wai cabinets; could there be a connection? These panels are almost identical to the corresponding ones on the cabinet at Suan Pakkad which, alas, has lost its doors. The back of A.Y. 28 is entirely gilt with no decoration.

The cabinet at Suan Pakkad, partly described in the last paragraph, has a most interesting back panel, a narrative depiction of a journey through the jungle handled most masterfully.

4. "Spider family"

The dated member of this family is K.Th. 35, an exceptionally large cabinet donated according to its inscription by the dowager Queen Amarinthamat in A.D. 1818.

K.Th. 35 has been moved to the national provincial museum at Ayutthaya. Its back panel depicts a tale involving a *rishi* who saves a flock of *kinnara* by destroying a giant spider that has been preying on them; in the process he loses his celibacy. This story seems to have vanished from Siam, but a poem based on it has been discovered in a manuscript in Sri Lanka¹⁶. This story also occurs on K.Th. 246. I have simply named this family after the characteristic spider. The doors of K.Th. 35 bear at their lower extremities pairs of mythical beasts (*rajasinha* and *gajasinha*) in flowery grottos. Above them the panels are filled with a tight, fussy *krānok*. The 'apron' of the cabinet bears two rather Chinese dragons that are infested with odd little parasites: lizard-like creatures with European heads bearing beards and curly wigs. I am not sure that this artist was entirely fond of *farang*.

M.R. Kukrit, at his house on Soi Suan Phlu, has an extremely fine cabinet, three of the panels of which bear at their lower extremities grottos in which mythical beasts frolic: a pair of *sing-to*, a pair of *rajasinha* (see fig. 16), and a trio of birdmen with pheasant-like wings (fig. 17). All these beasts have *farang* heads. The crags that form the grottos are treated in a manner very similar to that of K.Th. 35, with clumps of grass and an odd plant with a large almost round leaf. This similarity yields the only (tentative) evidence for dating¹⁷.

Other members of this family—similar treatment of rocks and vegetation; tight, fussy *krānok*; *farang*-headed creatures—are to be seen at the National Library: K.Th. 103 and K.Th. 14 (on the first floor) and K.Th. 315 (second floor). K.Th. 14 has *yaksa* as leg guards. K.Th. 83 (see fig. 18) may also be a member, as it bears birdmen like those on the Kukrit cabinet.

5. "Grandmother Bun" family

K.Th. 282 was made for "Grandmother Bun" in 1835 (see notes on its inscription earlier in this article), already well into the reign of Rama III (1825-1851) who encouraged trade with China and who effected an amazingly successful amalgamation of Siamese and Chinese art. This cabinet is typical of the regnal style. Purely Siamese elements are no longer as vivacious and exciting as their antecedents, while Chinese influence is distinct; but the two blend very satisfactorily. K.Th. 234 is obviously by the same hand. These two cabinets, and several others, should be displayed together to facilitate the study of this very interesting period. They might also be accompanied by enlarged photographs of the architecture, stucco and woodcarving of the Third Reign.

16. See Christopher Reynolds, ed., *Sinhalese Literature* (London, Allen & Unwin, 1970).

17. M.R. Kukrit very kindly permitted me to photograph his cabinet, and I took the opportunity to ask him about dating it. "I wouldn't dare to say," he replied. "Look at those masterful Baroque grottos and the figures in them; they could almost be seventeenth century. But then look at the tight, fussy *krānok* up here; that looks more like late nineteenth century." I can now attempt to repay his kindness by suggesting that his cabinet may have been executed by the same hand as K.Th. 35.

6. *K.Th. 317 family*

The inscription of K.Th. 317 dates this large, handsome cabinet to 1845. Other cabinets that seem to be by the same hand are those labelled K.Th. 93, 136 and 343 (on the ground floor); K.Th. 174, 184 and 228 (first floor); K.Th. 316 (second floor). Unfortunately the period has produced 'late' examples of excessively fussy, dull, repetitive decoration. Grand though this cabinet is (see fig 6), it lacks inspiration; its back consists of doors with panels of glass, a symbol of what might have been considered modern at that time. Late in the reign of Rama III (1824-1851) there was a boom in the making and donation of cabinets, probably owing to the great economic prosperity of that reign. A great many, perhaps over 50 per cent, of the cabinets at the National Library seem to date from this Reign or later. I would think it advisable that most of them be sent out to provincial museums and libraries in order to supplement their collections, and to make space for an improved display of the more important pieces already at the National Library. The situation there at the moment resembles that of many Western museums, with 40 per cent of exhibits being genuine masterpieces and 60 per cent being mediocre items "in the manner of".

7. *K.Th. 272 family*

Cabinet K.Th. 272 on the first floor of the National Library is dated 1869. Though the *kranok* has a neurasthenic quality, much of the design is superb; something of a throwback to an earlier style. Similar cabinets are labelled K.Th. 139 and 338, among many others.

8. "*Mother Pha*" family

Cabinet K.Th. 193 (see fig. 8) on the first floor of the National Library was made for "Mother Pha" in 1872 (see foregoing reference to its inscription). Glazed Western bookcases were already becoming fashionable by that time; this cabinet is not very grand, but Mother Pha's name should be remembered as her old-fashioned taste is commendable. Similar cabinets are labelled K.Th. 124, 221 and 225.

In conclusion

In the foregoing pages I have built up tentative 'families' of decorated cabinets, by linking cabinets which bear dated inscriptions with like but undated specimens—primarily on stylistic grounds, but with some technical considerations as well, such as provenance, quality of gilt, and degrees of wear and tear. These families I hope provide a loose framework for further classification, or at least the impetus for more exhaustive and systematic study combining other considerations.

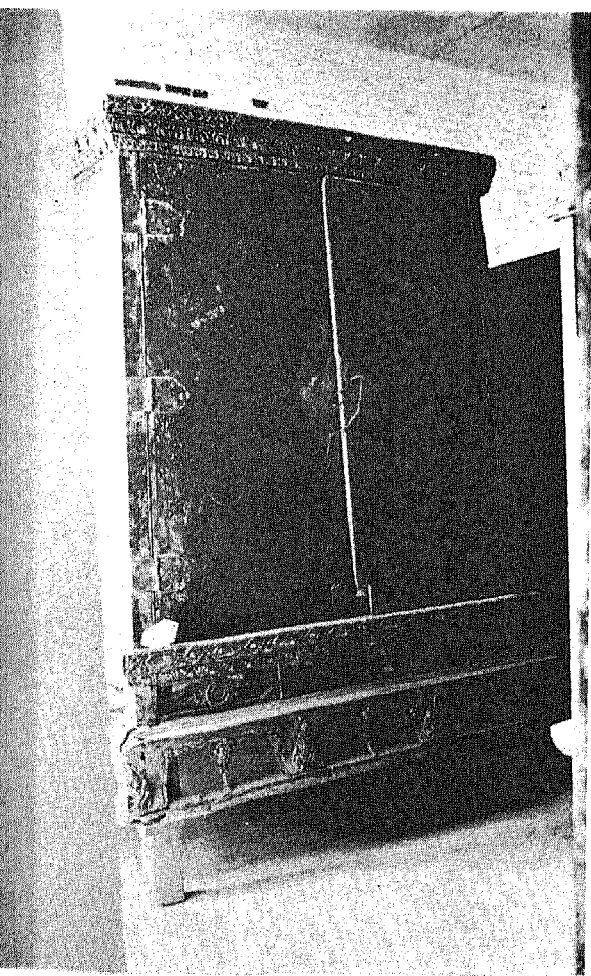


Figure 2. K.Th. 143; National Library.

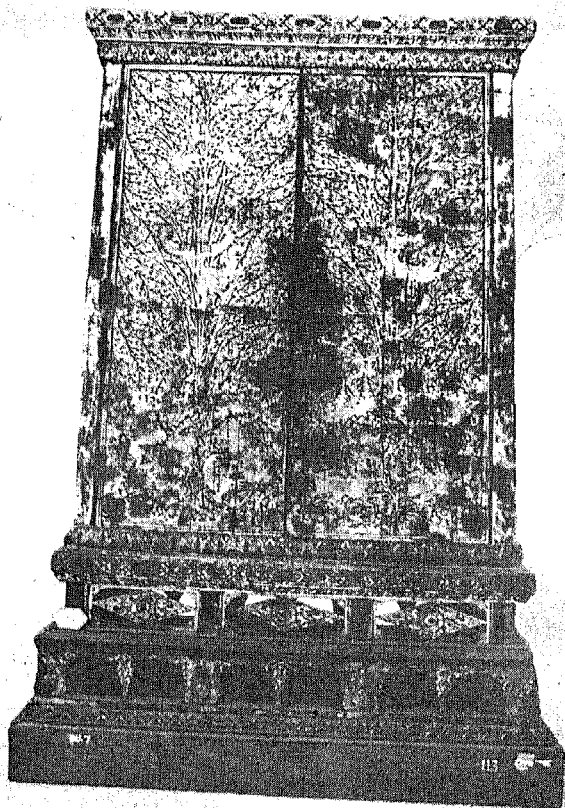


Figure 1. A.Y. 7; National Library.

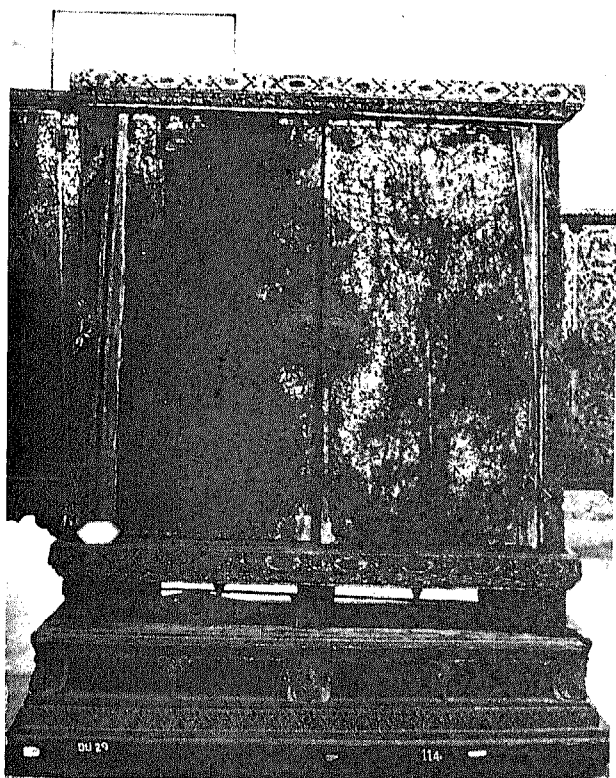


Figure 3. A.Y. 29; National Library.



Figure 4. K.Th. 58, dated 1781; National Library.

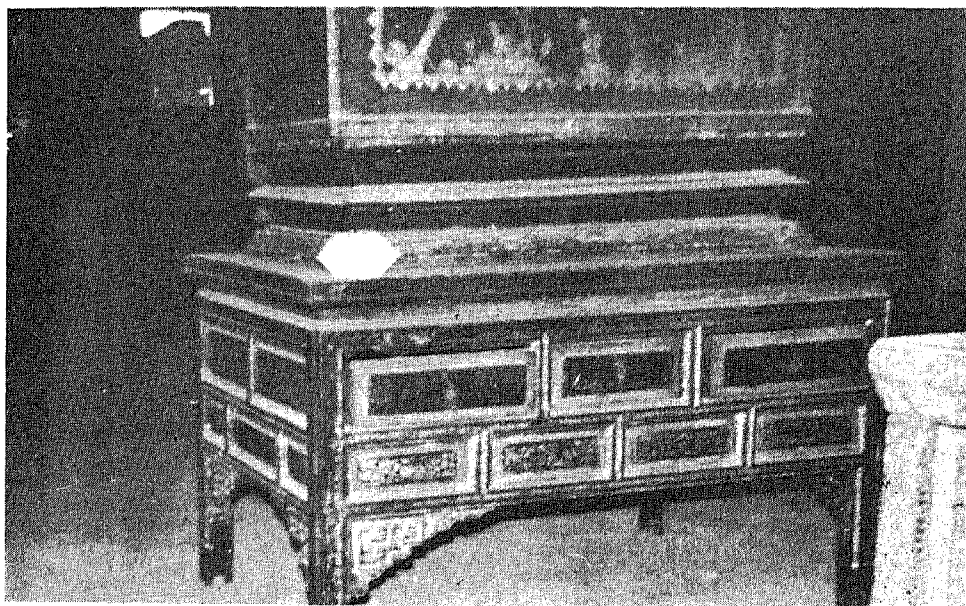


Figure 5. K.Th. T-1, dated 1784; National Library.

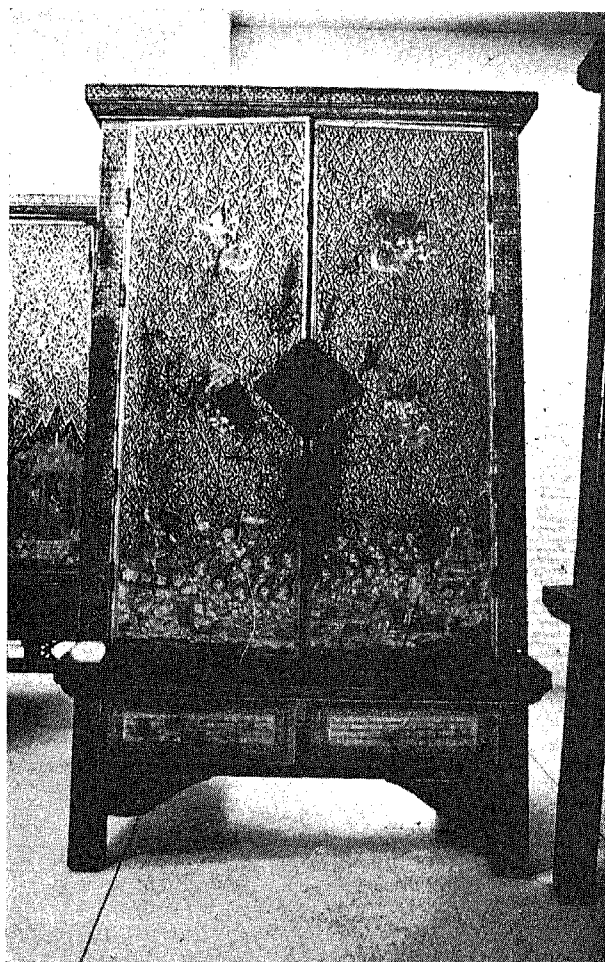


Figure 6. K.Th. 317, dated 1845; National Library.



Figure 7. K.Th. 272, dated 1869; National Library.

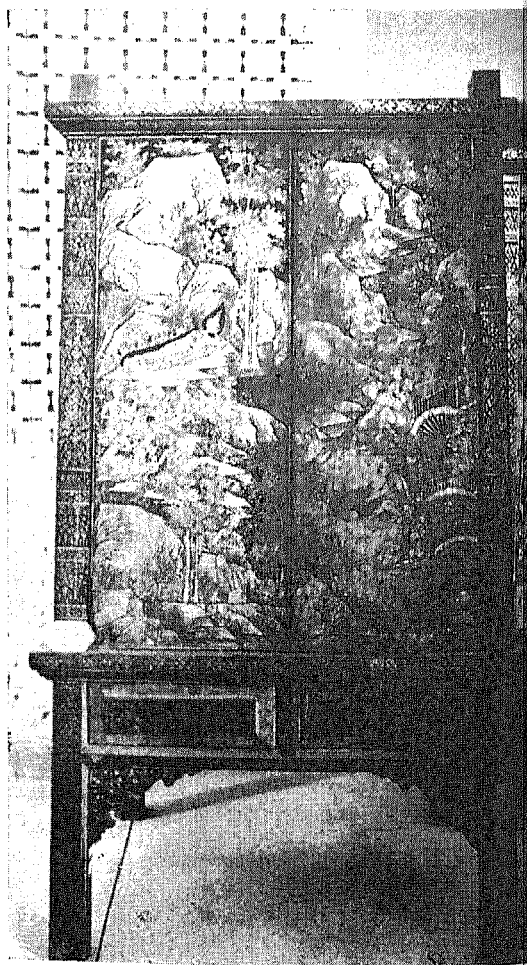


Figure 8. K.Th. 193, dated 1872; National Library.

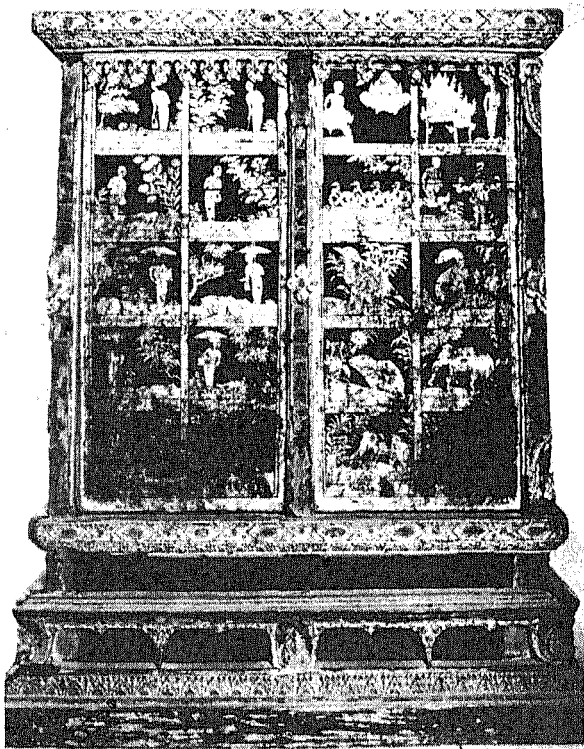


Figure 9. A.Y. 29; National Library.

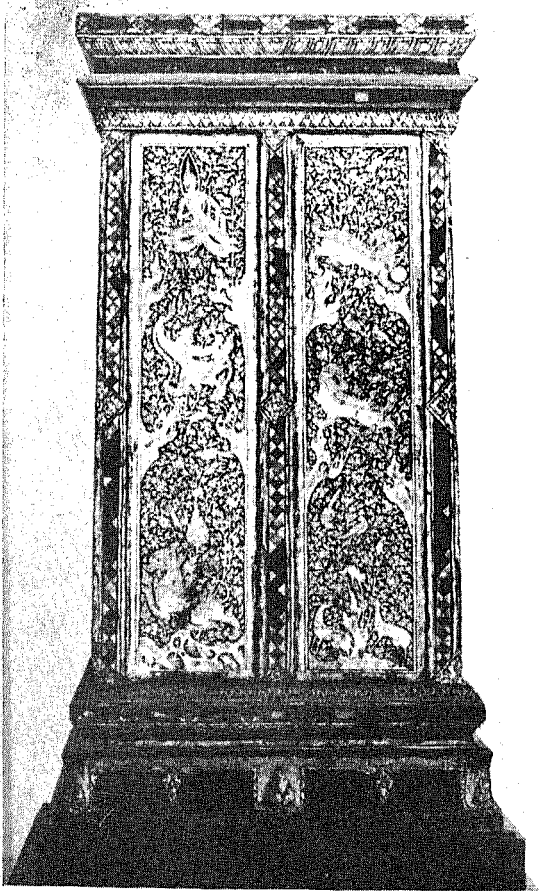


Figure 10. The "Louis/Aurangzeb" Cabinet (side view); Bangkok National Museum.



Figure 11. A.Y. 7; National Library.

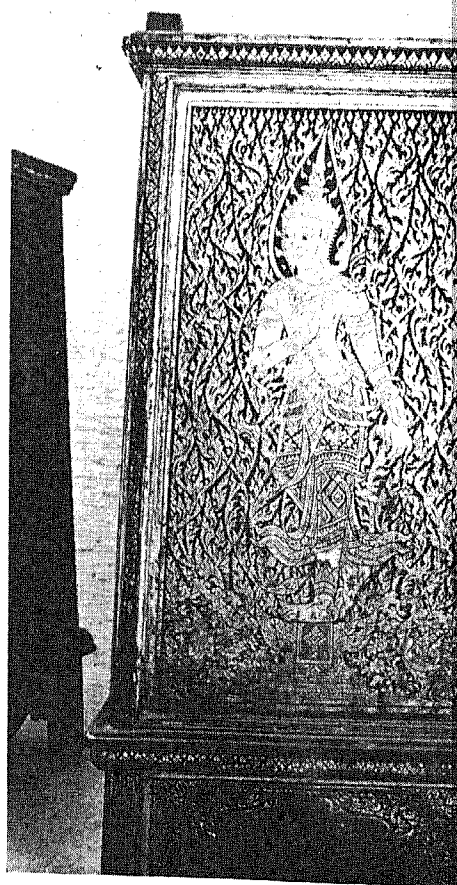


Figure 12. A.Y. 17; from Wat Rak.

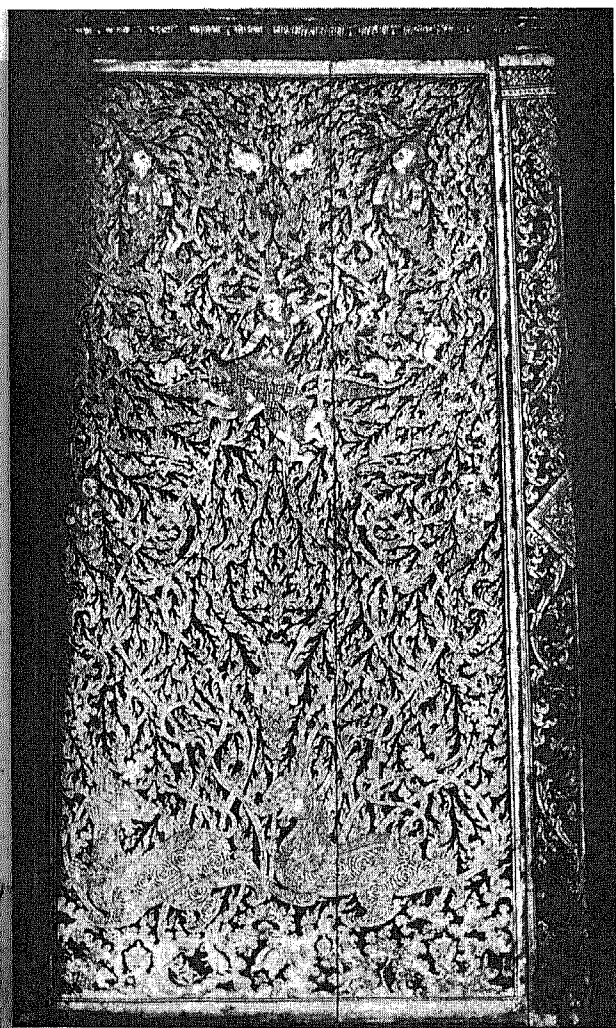


Figure 14. Book cabinet; Suan Pakkad Palace collection.



Figure 13. A.Y. 28; National Library.



Figure 15. Th. B. 4; from Wat Chantharam.



Figure 16. Cabinet in the collection of M.R. Kukrit Pramoj; *rajasinha* with foreigners' heads



Figure 17. Cabinet in the collection of M.R. Kukrit Pramoj; unusual birdmen.



Figure 18. K.Th. 83, National Library; birdmen similar to those in figure 17.

A particularly promising aspect of research is the relationship of gilt-lacquer-work with other forms of visual art, such as manuscript and other miniature painting, and murals. Documentary aspects might also prove rewarding, although my preliminary investigations have turned up very little, while the current literature as evinced in my footnotes barely outlines the existing wealth of art in this field.

Continuation of the task of publishing dated inscriptions would in itself make a significant contribution to art history, since the material provides chronological bearings which may in turn aid research in establishing dates for murals, other art forms, and associated objects.

Further work in the directions suggested here, and in new approaches in developing a proper history of Siamese gilt-lacquer cabinets, should in the long term throw light on artistic evolution during that amorphous period we at present call 'late Ayutthaya' and by which we mean everything produced from Narai to Rama III. As our knowledge grows richer, this exquisite heritage will become the more widely appreciated and valued, and should benefit from improved conservation. The remaining works, especially those poorly kept in obscure monastic collections, should be made available to as wide a public as possible.