

Notes on the History of the Art of Mother-of-Pearl in Thailand with Particular Reference to the Doors on the *Ubōsot* of Wat Phra Chetuphon¹

For prudence's sake, the title of this chapter must take the above form, since little is available to us about it that is ascertained or even verifiable. Hence it is that, in fact, the history of the art of mother-of-pearl in Thailand includes only a details and footnotes. We do not know in what century, let alone in what decade, nor in what locality, the first object in mother-of-pearl (presumably no longer in existence) was created in Thailand. In the literature, there are only general statements such as "of the Ayutthaya period" or something of the sort which can be categorically substantiated. Anything more venturesome or more specific given the present state of our knowledge would merely be guesswork. The few objects datable with certainty are those on which the date of origin is given by inscriptions or for which, exceptionally, dates unrelated to art history can be cited.

The employment of mother-of-pearl in Thailand as a decorative medium providing colour highlights is recorded for the Dvaravati period (the 3rd–6th centuries)², but mother-of-pearl was treated at that period, however, only in a very rough-and-ready fashion which had nothing to do with the art of mother-of-pearl in

later centuries. More or less shapeless platelets were pressed into the ornamentation on stucco in the same way that coloured scraps of pottery were used for decoration.

There was no direct development from the Dvāravati period to the Buddhapāda in the Chiang Mai branch of the National Museum, or the doors in the *ubōsot* of the Wat Phra Chetuphon in Bangkok, but Thai culture, "a culture in the melting-pot of races," cannot be viewed in isolation from the evolution of the art of mother-of-pearl in the other countries of South and East Asia. A glance beyond the confines of Thailand is therefore necessary.

More familiar in world art than the objects in mother-of-pearl from Thailand are those from China whose cultural development began three thousand years earlier than that of the Thais. It can be assumed with some certainty that the Thais became acquainted with the Chinese art of mother-of-pearl at the beginning of their history. The recorded Thai embassies to the imperial Chinese court from the Sukhothai period on (1250–1350 A.D.)³ who brought gifts, and no doubt returned with some (an exchange of goods that can be inferred), could have played the part of intermediaries.

Mother-of-pearl as an ornamental material was already known in China in the An-yang period (*circa* 1300 B.C.)⁴. Outstanding examples from the T'ang and Ming periods survive, but, judging from the items we know, the Chinese art of mother-of-pearl appears not to have exercised any direct influence on the artistic workmanship of Thailand. Apart from the fact that the presumably oldest surviving objects of mother-of-pearl in Thailand display, in astonishing exclusiveness, a type of *motifs* and ornaments, Thai or very probably Thai-derived, the technical refinement of the Thai objects is fundamentally distinct from the Chinese, on which further observations will be in order below. Chinese ornaments and portrayals do not appear on Thai mother-of-pearl work except at a late stage in this artistic development, especially from the reign of Rama III (1824–51) when everything Chinese became generally fashionable.⁵

Some forms of everyday things ornamented with mother-of-pearl can be referred to Vietnamese models.⁶ In this context, we may recall that, in the days of Rama I (1782–1809), Gia Long, subsequently named Emperor of the reunited Vietnam by the Thais, as Ong Chiang Su, had lived in exile for a lengthy period at the royal court in Bangkok,⁷ and may possibly have introduced into Thailand, for the first time, one or other new designs.⁸ Even this possibility cannot be verified. We are ignorant both of the dates and the channels of any possible influence.

What is known, so far, about Vietnamese objects in mother-of-pearl, especially pieces of furniture, trays, boxes, and other objects of everyday use, bears witness to an outstanding practical skill and an aesthetic sensibility that exploit fully the ultimate resources of iridescent mother-of-pearl. However, in *motifs* and execution, the Vietnamese art of mother-of-pearl can definitely be attributed to Chinese cultural influence alone.

We know as good as nothing about objects in mother-of-pearl from Burma or Laos. Scarcely any object of any artistic merit is known from these countries. In this connection, the still unexplained portrayal of the "Footprint of Buddha" in the Chiang Mai Museum is excluded from consideration at this stage. Artistic Burmese handicraft was and still is devoted

primarily to work in lacquer whilst Laos was too remote and too poor, from the outset, to be capable of making such splendid decorative objects as works in mother-of-pearl.

Hence, in our present state of knowledge, nothing substantial about the history of the art of mother-of-pearl in Thailand is to be learned from the cultural history of the neighbouring peoples who, in other respects, influenced the cultural creativeness of the Thais. The history of the art of mother-of-pearl in Thailand is basically confined, therefore, to an enumeration of the objects known to us nowadays of which only a limited number are datable with certainty.

Despite all the gaps in our knowledge in the historical field, we are in a position, thanks to the surviving material, to distinguish with some certainty the "late" from the "earlier" objects in mother-of-pearl. In this context, the exact point of time after which we are entitled to talk of "late" works must be left flexible. There is an undoubted break perceptible at the beginning of the (historical) Bangkok period, i.e. in the year 1782 A.D., but the decisive alteration in style is more probably to be placed in the reign of Rama III (1824–1851), the third ruler of the Chakri dynasty. Not until about 1850 onwards did a more powerful influx of Western culture make itself evident in Thailand. While this did not directly influence the art of mother-of-pearl, all the same, it led to a gradual dissociation of the Thais from the forms in their traditional art, and, through this, even influenced indirectly their activity in the art of mother-of-pearl. An important fact, as well, is the increased influence of Chinese art, beginning notably under Rama III in all fields, including the artistic work of craftsmen.

The following may be specifically valid:

1. If, it is accepted, as is generally asserted in the literature (though without proof), that the mother-of-pearl decorations found on the east and west doors of the ubōsot of Wat Phra Chetuphon in Bangkok were executed during the reign of Rama I (1782–1809)⁹ we could date the beginning of narrative, scenic representations to, say, the year 1800. All previous known objects in mother-of-pearl are purely ornamental or are decorated with images of gods and/or mythological creatures.

It appears doubtful, however, that the

mother-of-pearl representations on the doors were actually created under Rama I. Admittedly, Wat Phra Chetuphon was built by him—we have detailed statements in historical sources to that effect.¹⁰ However, the bringing into being of this extensive temple-complex must be viewed in the light of the generally hasty construction of the new capital and consequently of an inadequate standard of quality in the building material. Even under Rama III, or only about twenty years later, extensive repair-work on a wide scale had to be undertaken on this temple. The chronicles report this in detail.¹¹

The warlike period of Rama I was no time for such a difficult, costly, and time-consuming work as the mother-of-pearl pictures from the *Rāmakīen*. The ornamental floral margins to the pictures, which more or less frame the separate wings of the doors, and the purely Chinese ornamentation on the main beams which close the wings also point unambiguously to the reign of Rama III.

This assertion would be in harmony with all other things that can be said about the form and content of the “later” objects in mother-of-pearl. The date mentioned in the previous paragraph “about 1800” would need then to be shifted forward a couple of decades.

2. Directly related to the beginning of the portrayal of scenes is the changeover from the formal to the naturalistic—or, rather, more nearly naturalistic—rendering of the plant-forms. Compare the plant-arabesques in Plates XVIII–XX with the trees and shrubs in Plates XXIV–XXIX of Wenk (1980)¹², *The Art of Mother-of-Pearl in Thailand*. The representation of persons—including the monkey kings—changes simultaneously in similar fashion.

3. The graphic delineation gives way to a more two-dimensional, more expansive form in which are inscribed so as to better render personal characteristics and physiognomic details or details of dress and decoration lines, curves, or circles in the mother-of-pearl. This procedure was employed in Chinese and Vietnamese art from the earliest times, but not in the “early” mother-of-pearl art of Thailand.

4. The innovation indicated above under 2, representing plant-form in a fashion closer to the naturalistic, finds its continuation in a progressively more florid, one might almost say

baroque, representation of the floral ornaments (see Plates IV, VI, IX, and XV in Wenk 1980). The same feature appears in contemporary painting. Lush floral margins develop—after 1800, perhaps somewhat sooner—from the abstract, geometrical friezes as ornamental edgings to the representation or as floral sprays in a picture¹³.

5. It is possible to conclude, with some of the objects in mother-of-pearl illustrated, e.g. in plates V, VI, X, and XI, that their function as ornamental pieces outweighed their function as objects of everyday use¹⁴. It is impossible to give a precise date for this development, but it is conceivable that the growing departure from native tradition, after about 1850, led to tools and objects of everyday use, once considered as incidentally ornamental objects, coming to be regarded solely as such.

6. All the mother-of-pearl objects showing Chinese influence more or less distinctly, such as those in Plates XII, XVII, and XXV–XXX, or predominantly indebted to the Chinese feeling for form, as, for instance, the decorations on the wooden manuscript-case (Plates XII–XIV), belong to the group of “late” works. As previously indicated, everything Chinese was very much *à la mode* in Thailand, especially under Rama III.¹⁵

Conversely, arising from what has been said above, essential conclusions can be drawn about the art of mother-of-pearl before 1800.¹⁶ Only a little elaboration is called for.

Beside the purely ornamental decoration based on floral and geometrical patterns, the subjects on the bigger objects in mother-of-pearl, especially the wings of the doors are exclusively as reproduced in Plates XVIII–XXII. These are circular medallions with mythological creatures, figures from literature, especially the *Rāmakīen*, and representations of gods from the Hindu pantheon. (Plate XX). The details are discussed in the elucidation of the individual plates.

In the relevant literature, criticism has been expressed¹⁷ regarding the development of the Thai art of mother-of-pearl from its beginnings to the later objects. This notes that the objects touched on above—from about 1800–1820—no longer attain to “the classical beauty, the delicacy, and the dignity” of earlier pieces.

Some who look at the objects will feel drawn more to those of the earliest period than to those of the 19th and 20th centuries. Repeated mention is made in Wenk, *The Art of Mother-of-Pearl in Thailand*, of the disproportion and lack of harmony displayed by later pieces. However, on the whole this type of innovation, ignores the law implicit in every art: the striving after innovation, after expansion, and after development. Every artist seeks to exploit his resources to the full, within the exigencies of his period, to the limits of what is formally conceivable to him and what is portrayable in its content. In the nineteenth century, Thai artists started from the base established by their predecessors in the seventeenth century. To those with a classical frame of reference, this seemed to appear to others as innovation in harmony with the spirit of the age, with the contemporary climate—whatever that may mean—provided, of course, the art, the heart of the matter, is not forgotten.

The Manufacturing Process and the Raw Material

If we take the trouble to count the platelets inlaid in a single square centimetre of mother-of-pearl decoration, take into account the highly diverse forms, and observe the variety of their colouring, it will become clear, at the first glance, what a labour-intensive procedure is involved in mother-of-pearl preparation.¹⁸

The technique and the material employed in it are described below.

1. First, the plain object, the thing that is to be decorated with mother-of-pearl (shall we call it the basic shape?) has to be made. This is relatively easy with flat objects, such as for doors, shutters, and panels for bookcases. Completely dry wood has to be cut accurately to the desired size which required considerable manual skills given the tools of past centuries and considering that teak doors were often several metres high and several centimetres thick.

With smaller-sized panels, for example, the upright panels illustrated in Plates XVI and XVII, rattan or *thong-lang* wood¹⁹ were generally used. The latter is useless for other purposes but has the advantage for work in mother-of-pearl that it is especially light.

The making of the various utensils such as *talum*, *tiap*, *lung*, or *khan nām* proves more difficult manually, further details of which will be provided later. Rattan²⁰ is most adaptable for the creation of the frequently complicated shapes which are made with polygonal, round, curved, or tiered with concave or convex surfaces. Shapes woven from this material better preserve the configuration intended than from any other wood.

2. After the basic shape has been completed, the ornamentation, the picture, or the scene that is to decorate the object is sketched out. With simple patterns or duplicates, the craftsman can probably do this himself. He might also be able to rely on his experience without a special sketch. Nonetheless, the hand of an artist is needed in order to sketch out pictorial representations or complicated ornaments covering the whole surface. In fact, names of a few artists, architects, painters, and sculptors have come down to us in whose biographies it is stated that they had made sketches for mother-of-pearl ornament.²¹

The subject of the representation, whether ornament or image, must be adapted to the object it is to decorate. This demands an accurate knowledge of iconography. The god Indra on Erawan or Phra Nārāi on Khрут will not be portrayed on a *talum* or a *tiap*, in which fruit is offered, or on a cigarette-box, *hip buri*. Such representations must be confined to temple doors or the sides and doors of bookcases in which Buddhist manuscripts are kept. For the rest, a consideration of all forms of decoration appears to show that no rules exist whereby specific patterns or ornaments must be employed exclusively for given objects. For example, *kranok* ornamentation appears on the royal throne as well as on the objects for everyday use already instanced. All that can be observed is that purely geometrical decorations are commoner on smaller rather than larger objects. This presumably arises from technical and operational considerations.

The whole representation for an object or a door is drawn in mirror-fashion, so that it can afterwards be applied directly to the lacquer surface of the item concerned.

3. The drawing, after completion, is inscribed on transparent paper, *kradat kao*.

4. Next the natural raw material, sea-shells, has to be prepared. These are to be found in the Gulf of Thailand as well as the Bay of Bengal.

Numerous species of sea-shells and snails²² are employed, especially the greenish-blue, iridescent *hoi muk* or *hoi ut*. This comprises a genus of snails called Turbo or “roundmouth”²³ of the family of *Rhipido-glossa*²⁴ of which five species occur, namely *Turbo elegans*, *Turbo intercostalis*, *Turbo nicobarius*, *Turbo patholatus*, and *Turbo ticaonicus*.²⁵

These snails are mainly found around various smaller islands in the province of Ranong, around the Samui Islands (Surat Thani province), on the Sing Peninsula (Chanthaburi province), around the island of Khram (Chonburi province), and the island of Phuket. The snails attain a length of up to 20 centimetres.

Another genus of sea-shells, the *hoi nom sao* or *hoi lam*, that is, *Trochus*, is used for work in mother-of-pearl. These include *Trochus maculatus*, *Trochus niloticus*, *Trochus niloticus var. maximus*, *Trochus radiatus*, and *Trochus verrucosus*. These species of sea-shells are found mainly round the Chang and Samui Islands, on and around the coasts and the archipelago of the provinces of Ranong and Phuket.

Other sea-shells that may be mentioned are called *hoi wong chang*, *Nautilus pompilius*, *hoi chop*, *Pinna chemnitzii*. Also there is the pearl oyster which is generally called *hoi muk*, *muk can*, *lamut*, *Pinctada fimbriata*, *Pinctada lurida*.

The marine animal best suited for the procurement of mother-of-pearl, because it is the most beautiful, is the *hoi ut*, called, on account of its lustre, *hoi fai*, “flame snail.” According to the references in the literature, this kind of snail found in Thai waters surpasses in beauty those occurring in the Philippines or on the Chinese coast.

Because of the natural curves in sea-shells and snails, it requires dexterity on the part of the craftsman to cut away straight and flat pieces. Furthermore, only part of the shell is usable since the outer edges have weaker colouration.

The tools for the reparation of platelets of mother-of-pearl are, basically, small saws, files, and burins. The shells are first sawn into pieces of about 2.5 centimetres, which are more or less strongly curved. Then the platelets are rubbed down with a whetstone, (*hin mun*). After the

surfaces have been smoothed sufficiently, they are attached to flat, absolutely smooth disks of wood of about double the thickness of the pieces of mother-of-pearl. This is done for the purpose of preventing the mother-of-pearl from cracking while being cut to the desired shape.

5. The separate figures or lines from the original of the whole decoration are inscribed or traced on very thin paper. The most precise handling is called for at this stage so as not to distort the form and scale of the original design. The paper bearing the outline of the piece of mother-of-pearl is reinforced with wood.

6. After these preliminaries, the most time consuming task of the whole process begins, namely, the preparation of the large and small pieces of mother-of-pearl that will make up the whole picture. What an expenditure in time and labour was (and is) required for larger objects can be seen, among other places, in an inscription in Phitsanulok. No less than 130 persons were engaged for five months and twenty days in making two door-wings for *Wihān* of the Wat Phra Si Ratana Mahā Thāt. If we allow a working period of seven hours per day, this means that each participant spent nearly 2,000 working-hours in 170 days. Hence, all told, 154,700 working-hours must have been expended. More than 1,000 platelets and minute bits were required in spiral shapes or coming to a sharp point, sawn out, filed smooth, and polished, all this merely to build up only one of the eighteen mythological creatures portrayed in a circular setting.

Luang Wisānsinlapakam gives some details about the daily labours of a worker in mother-of-pearl.²⁶ A certain Nai Yu, a well-known worker in mother-of-pearl and teacher of his art, who worked “quickly,” could saw out 30 to 35 platelets a day. If he worked on a *kranok* ornament, he could not do as many. Luang Wisānsinlapakam, himself, stated that 1,500 to 2,000 platelets were necessary for a *talum* of 25.5 centimetres in diameter (of the uppermost portion, i.e. of the actual bowl). For this quite small object alone a sawing-time of almost two months of daily labour was required—and there still remained other time-consuming tasks.

7. After the completion of the separate pieces, these have to be stuck, in the shortest possible time, on the *kradat kao* with an adhesive solution and with the planned overlay. This is

not solely a mechanical operation, but presumes experience and a feeling for gradations of colour, since it is desirable to assemble the individual tiny pieces, often of identical shape, with their often very different play of colours, in harmonious fashion.

8. The object to be ornamented with mother-of-pearl is given a coating of lacquer. This must be done all at once in order to ensure an even drying over the whole surface.

9. When the mother-of-pearl is completely glued to the paper, and is firmly anchored, the object to be decorated is given a further coating of lacquer. An especially high quality lacquer is employed for this which also has the property of drying quickly. This compound is called *rak samuk*, and consists of a mixture of wood-charcoal and the sap of the lacquer-tree.²⁷ The wood-charcoal is obtained from the veins of banana-leaves, certain grass-haulms,²⁸ or black soot. Before being used, i.e. before it is mixed, it must be properly cleaned. The wood-charcoal or the soot is blended with the lacquer fluid by means of a wooden rod or mortar until a paste is formed which is applied to the surface to be decorated, and then smoothed. The application is repeated several times.²⁹

10. When the surface has dried but is still sufficiently flexible, the tiny pieces of mother-of-pearl glued to the paper are forced into the substance. This involves delicate balancing to keep the lacquered surface as even as when it was first prepared. When the lacquered surface is sufficiently dry, and the mother-of-pearl firmly anchored, the worker removes the paper to which the platelets were glued. He moistens this with a liquid called *nām chup*,³⁰ and removes it.

11. When it is completely dry, the lacquer surface is rubbed down with a *hin kāk phet*, i.e. carborundum³¹, or with another equally hard stone to restore the sheen. Defective patches in the lacquer are made good, and the whole decoration is rubbed down again, this time with charcoal or dried banana-leaves from which the vein has been removed and impregnated with cocoa butter.

Should it prove necessary to inscribe lines on figures or ornaments, for instance, features, hair, folds in the clothing, or details of adornments, this is carried out during this last stage of the work.

A lengthy procedure here reaches its conclusion, one which necessitates perfect skill on the part of the artist for the masterpieces of work in mother-of-pearl. Nowadays, few have mastered the art.³²

An opinion is expressed in the literature on the subject that the art to mother-of-pearl can be regarded "in a certain respect as a variant of work in black-and-gold lacquer."³³ However, we do not know whether the graphic sketches for mother-of-pearl work were variants of black-and-gold lacquer work or the reverse. Still both mother-of-pearl and black-and-gold lacquer work is only a manifestation of one impulse that is realized in all variants of the visual arts in Thailand, and moulded by an identical feeling for form. Sculpture and painting both served originally only to spread knowledge of the teaching and life of the Buddha. Art developed out of it as, so to speak, a by-product.³⁴ Furthermore, some of the finest pieces of black-and-gold lacquer work, e.g. the pictures in the Suan Pakkad Pavilion³⁵ or those made on bookcases very recently by Thawan Datchani,³⁶ show that these differ widely in form and expression from the portrayals in mother-of-pearl.

In a brief excursus we may give here an account of the differing technique of Chinese (and Vietnamese) mother-of-pearl work.

With lacquered objects either made of large blocks of wood or smaller pieces, the surface to be decorated is incised for every separate platelet which has previously been sawn and filed to the size and shape desired. The pieces inlaid are held in position by a lacquer cement. According to another method considered superior, the platelets are hammered into the incisions previously prepared, and fixed with a cement made of lacquer and rotten wood.

In works of inlay into a lacquered surface, the platelets of mother-of-pearl were attached to the rough lacquer basis. A thin, shining coating of lacquer was then spread over the whole. Only after this was the ornament cut into the platelets of mother-of-pearl, where necessary, and the whole surface polished once more.

The Rāmakiēn in Thailand: A Literary-Historical Introduction

1. Only a few poetic works of old Thailand

have penetrated the consciousness of the people as much as the *Rāmakīen*. The names of its heroes and kingdoms are known to those interested and educated in literature as well as to the man in the street. Thailand's fine arts, insofar as they are not inspired by Buddhism, are dominated largely by subjects taken from this epic. And the theater in its many different forms has demons and monkeys.

So far, neither philological nor literary-historical research has been able to indicate the way in which the epic reached Thailand. We must depend essentially on a number of assumptions.

As far as the subject matter is concerned, the obvious starting-point is the *Rāmayana*, which in India is considered to be one of the works of Vālmīki. However, this was certainly not the model for the Thai *Rāmakīen*. It is more likely that the *Rāma* legend was spread in the form in which it was known in South India by Indian merchants, who traveled in great numbers from the South Indian Pallava kingdoms to the Malay peninsula and the Indonesian archipelago, and later on by soldiers. From Java and Sumatra, the legend reached Cambodia and the Mae Nam Chao Phrayā valley. As in its country of origin, India, different versions of one and the same legend became known. Autochthonic elements may at that time have fused with alien ideas.

In the course of the widespread devastation which resulted from the destruction of Thailand's old capital, Ayutthaya, in 1767, by far the greater part, i.e. more than nine tenths of the literature in manuscript form, was lost. Manuscripts which can reliably be dated earlier than 1767 are extremely rare. Research in Thai literary history, thus, is confined to a narrow field. While it is conceivable that a few manuscripts supplying new information to researchers may yet turn up, the exact origin of the Thai *Rāmakīen* will remain unknown.

The epic as we know it today runs to about three thousand pages, each the size of an encyclopaedia page. The epic came to exist in its present form during the reign of Rama I (1782–1805). The final verse, in *khlong* metre, gives 1797 as the year of its completion. We must accept this date without discussion, for the historical sources and astrological calendars of

that time, otherwise so rich in detail, say nothing about the origin of the *Rāmakīen*.

Comprising more than one hundred thousand lines, the *Rāmakīen* is the most voluminous poetic work, not only of Thailand, but of the whole of South East Asia. The lines of the *Rāmayana* of Vālmīki run to less than half this number.

The authors of the *Rāmakīen* are not known. The enormous length of the epic leads to the assumption that more than one poet was involved in composing the verses. The reign of Rama I was one of Thailand's most lively literary periods. Rama I himself is supposed to have helped with the creation of the work.

The 1797 edition is written in *khlong* metre, which is generally used for texts spoken on the stage. Western connoisseurs of literature will be surprised to learn that the lengthy text, completely epic in nature, is rated according to Thai literary categories as *bot lakhon* poetry, i.e. theatrical poetry. This has to do with what can be called the standard edition. But quite a number of other texts based on the *Rāmakīen* legend are known.

From the Ayutthaya period (1350–1767), a voluminous poetic work in *kāp* metre has been handed down to us as have some fragments in *khlong* metre.

A fragment, mainly containing scenes from the last part of the epic, namely from the time after Thotsakan's death as well as a longer section about Thao Maliwarat's court, probably originated between 1767 and 1787 during the Thonburi period. However, it does not match the 1797 version stylistically, prosaically or as far as the contents go. Taksin, the Thonburi period king who freed Thailand from the Burmese occupation, is given as its author in Thai literary history. In fact, in the preface to the work, the words "royal poetry" occur.

Under Rama II (1809–1824), a version of the *Rāmakīen* was written which, like the 1797 version, is described as *bot lakhon* poetry. It begins with the scene in which Hanumān and Ongkhot set out to inform Sīdā that the monkey army is advancing on Langka, and it ends with Rāma's return to Ayutthaya. Some other fragments of that period, some of them in *kāp* metre, are also known to us.

Rama IV, Mongkut (1851–1868), Rama V, Chulalongkon (1868–1910), and Rama VI,

Wachirawut (1910–1925), later rulers of the Chakri dynasty, all reshaped various scenes of the epic, primarily as stage versions.

Even less is known about literature from Laos than about Thai literature. Nevertheless, we do have a poetic work in print called Rama Jataka which differs from the 1797 *Rāmakīen* version in many details. Its hero is a Bodhisattva sent down to earth by Indrā. In contrast to the *Rāmakīen* and the *Rāmayana*, the Jātaka Rāma has only one brother, Phra Lak, an interesting difference which could point to a connection with the Dasaratha Jataka, which is possibly the oldest of the Rāma legends. A Lao text of the Rāma legend, *Phra Lak Phra Lam* has recently appeared. Its publisher, Sahai, a man of Indian origins, has also given us an important study called *The Rāmayana in Laos*

2. The contents of the 1797 “standard edition” of the *Rāmakīen*, which will be taken as a basis in the following, can be divided into three parts.

a. The realms of men, monkeys and demons are created. The demons’ power increases to such an extent that even the gods feel threatened. They therefore decide that Phra Nārāi should incarnate himself on earth as Rāma in order to take up the fight against the demons. Rāma marries Sīdā.

b. The actual conflict which dominates the epic begins when Rāma is banned from Ayutthaya. Other authors, e.g. Prince Dhani, start this second part as early as the time of Rāma’s birth. This interpretation does not, however, pay sufficient attention to the parallel development of Thotsakan, ruler of the demons, and his counterpart Rāma. If one takes the inner structure of the work into account, Rāma’s birth and early youth in Ayutthaya belong to the first part, the introduction. Sīdā’s abduction and the ensuing gigantic struggle between gods, monkeys, and demons, up as far as Thotsakan’s death and the fall of Langka, constitute the central part. Thus, and characteristically, the reliefs at Wat Phra Chetuphon begin with the abduction of Sīdā. At the end of the second part, the main theme of the third and last part is touched upon.

c. The profound dissension between Rāma and Sīdā. The description of further

battles is, one feels, nothing more than padding, especially since the presentation of the battle-scenes, even down to details, is repetitive. The dramatic climax of the third part is reached in its last sections. In place of the rambling and often fabulous narrative, inner conflict is portrayed. And Sīdā, now develops truly royal greatness. At the end of the epic, the action proper consists not of the raging fights of the men but of the conflict in the queen’s mortally offended heart. And, unlike a merely edifying or entertaining story, the *Rāmakīen* does not offer a conventional solution to the conflict. Sīdā flees to the underworld, a symbolic act. Not until after the trial and the purification of her heart is she reunited with Rāma.

The main action of the plot summarised above includes a great number of episodes of varying length which frequently interrupt the course of the action and have greatly increased the epic’s proportions. However, some of these self-contained episodes have a charm of their own. They are works of art per se.

Notes on the History of Wat Phra Chetuphon

This temple, more commonly known by its popular name of Wat Pho, is the largest temple complex in Bangkok and may justly be referred to in its entirety as a large museum. It is regrettable that many, in fact most, of the art treasures once contained within its walls have been destroyed. For instance, only faint traces, scarcely perceptible, are left of the mural paintings of great artistic value which once decorated the *ubōsot* and *wihān*. However, the temple still contains numerous objects of art which are surely unique in world art.

The construction of the temple began in the year 1789 on a site that at that time was a swamp. As recorded in the Thai chronicles, King Rama I (1782–1809) ordered the area to be drained and consolidated by a work force of some 20,000 men, a rather difficult operation considering the technical equipment then available. The cost of raising the level of the building site alone amounted to 250 *chang* and 15 *tamlung*, i.e. about 152 kilogrammes of sterling silver, which was a huge amount at that

time. The laying of the foundations and the building of the whole complex took over twelve years to complete. Eventually the temple was consecrated in a solemn ceremony in April 1804. However, the *ubōsot*, which is the main building of every temple, had already been consecrated in the year 1791 and given the name Phra Si Sanphet. It is with the *ubōsot* that we are exclusively concerned in this article.

The above events are described in great detail in Thai historical sources. No mention, however, is made of the art treasures of the *ubōsot*, which nowadays are of the greatest interest to non-Buddhists. It is significant, however, that to the native Thai these works of art are not of such prime importance. They are looked upon merely as accidental by-products decorating a building dedicated to the preaching of the doctrine of the Buddha, and thus serving to enhance the glory of the "Great Teacher."

Wat Pho was presumably erected in great haste under King Rama I. Extensive repair work had to be carried out as early as the reign of King Rama III.

Introductory Notes on the Mother-of-Pearl Inlay Work in Wat Phra Chetuphon

There are numerous works of art illustrating the *Rāmakīen*, especially in sculpture and painting. However, only once and only in Thailand has this epic been illustrated by means of mother-of-pearl inlays. The uniqueness of this gives considerable importance to the scenes represented on the doors of the *ubōsot* of Wat Pho. Yet it is not their singularity but the artistic conception of these pictures in mother-of-pearl that accounts for their outstanding value. One may well compare the art of mother-of-pearl to the art of painting, since these inlays are animated not only by their qualities of outline and drawing but also by the iridescent play of light on the mother-of-pearl.

It should be pointed out with regard to the place of the *Rāmakīen* in Thai intellectual life, that the mother-of-pearl illustrations in Wat Pho refer exclusively to the second part of the *Rāmakīen*, i.e. to the central part of the epic. They

begin with a scene in which the struggle waged by Rāma and his monkey allies against Thotsakan, the lord of the demons, has already broken out. The mother-of-pearl artists evidently assumed that the viewers would be able to recognize the subject of their representation immediately. The cycle of representations on the door ends as abruptly as it begins. The narrative is cut off in the middle of an episode, the liberation of Phra Mongkut.

The artists were evidently granted great freedom in their portrayal of the different scenes. The *bot lakhon Rāmakīen* provided their model and perhaps imposed certain restrictions. For the rest, though, they could follow their artistic mood and temper. This explains why in some cases a whole chapter of the epic, consisting of many individual scenes, is condensed into a single section of a plate, whereas in other cases a whole plate may be devoted to a single line. Some plates diverge considerably from the text of the *Rāmakīen* while certain scenes are not mentioned in the text at all. In one case this occurred because it would have been impossible to have represented Inthorachit hiding inside the hollow trunk of a tree. Other deviations may be explained by the conjecture that they are based on a version of the *Rāmakīen* which differs from the standard text.

The sequence in which the scenes are represented on the doors also varies from the sequence of the narrative in the *Rāmakīen*. One sequence begins at the lower right half of the door wing; another at the upper margin. Similarly, the sequences of scenes within the individual wings is not always identical with those of the narrative. However, this should not greatly concern the viewer, since every single scene is a miniature work of art in itself and individually conveys the beauty of the art of mother-of-pearl inlay work.

The inlays are found on doors on the east and west sides of the *ubōsot*. There are two doors on each side. Each door has two wings. There are in all eight sets of the inlays. Examples of some of the panels are illustrated here³⁷. Explanatory information on each scene is provided.

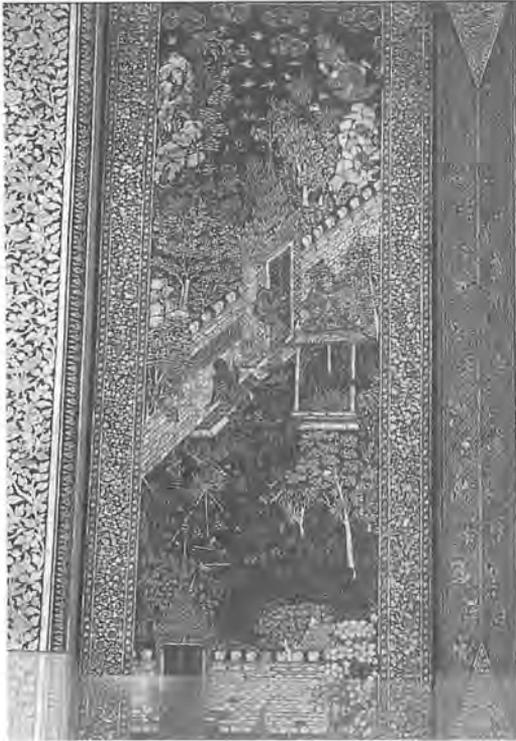


Fig. 1. Middle section left hand panel

By order of Rāma, Phra Mongkut is kept prisoner in Ayutthaya. This plate is likewise based only on a few lines in the text of the *Rāmakīen*. Rāma's order is to tie the prisoner "fivefold" by both hands and feet and to put his neck into a wooden collar.

Amongst all the representations in mother-of-pearl on the doors of the *ubōsot* of Wat Phra Chetuphon this plate is the only one with a genre subject.

Phra Mongkut sits on a wall with his feet in fetters and his neck in a collar. A watchman and a tradesman with a pair of scales stand next to him, and armed soldiers are in front. The tradesman is engaged in conversation with two elderly men, one of whom holds a palm-leaf manuscript in his hand. An old man leaning against a wall gesticulates and converses with a man kneeling in front of him and also with women sitting in a pavilion. Various utensils such as a bottle and *bai sī* stand on the floor in front of the tradesman. The task of the man at the side of the soldier guarding Phra Mongkut is clearly to mark the time with a gong.

Help is on its way to Phra Mongkut. Indra sends the goddess Ramphā to Phra Lop, who is waiting outside the city gate, but not daring to enter in order to liberate his brother. Phra Lop puts a message and a ring into a bowl filled with water. The ring is

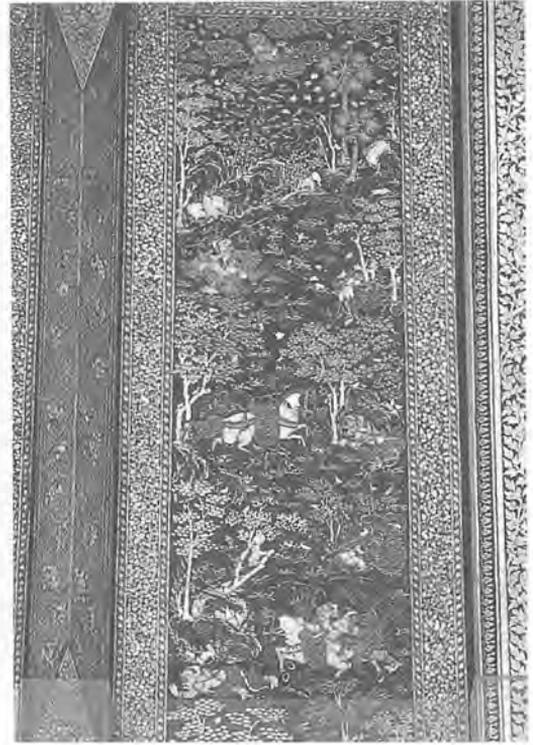


Fig. 2. Middle section right hand panel

Phra Mongkut and Phra Lop are confronted by a wonderful horse in the woods. Its head is black, its body white and its hooves red. From its neck dangles a diamond vessel. Phra Mongkut opens this and finds a golden plate bearing an inscription that says the mighty Rāma is the owner of the horse and that whoever catches and rides it shall be doomed to die as his enemy.

Out of sheer defiance and sportiveness the two youths nevertheless mount the horse.

Anuchit (Hanumān) has pursued them and tries to approach.

In the landscape background in this plate the legendary *kinārī*, half-human, half-bird (upper half of the picture) appears. Her outlines are portrayed rather awkwardly and coarsely.

It should be noted that the lacquer coating of this and the following panels is slightly cracked.

Anuchit tries to catch Phra Lop and Phra Mongkut. The youngsters defend themselves valorously and defeat the one who once was victorious over both Inthorachit and Thotsakan.

Although this episode is relatively short, it is given a disproportionately large space in this and the following plates.

Anuchit is disarmed by Phra Lop and Phra

Mongkut and his hands are bound behind his back with liana cords. He is unable to free himself and is obliged to withdraw in wrath and shame.

The landscape is enriched with new forms of vegetation. Stags, depicted with a skilled hand, gallop through the woods, an elephant collects leaves from bamboo stems. Its calf in front is portrayed in full mother-of-pearl work, whereas the mother elephant above it is only sketched in outline. This apparently unimportant detail testifies to the artistic sensibility and creativity force of the artist. Flights of the birds round a coconut palm, above which Anuchit takes flight through clouds.



Fig. 3. Bottom section right hand panel

After her flight to the hermit Wachamaruek, Sīdā gives birth to a son fathered by Rāma, who receives from Wachamaruek the name of Phra Mongkut. Later the hermit conjures up in a magic fire a second boy whom he names Phra Lop. He teaches them both his wisdom, especially the magic arts.

Meanwhile

The great wise teacher
Beheld two scions of royal rank
(He) taught (them) the art of shooting arrows
skillfully.

Then he said to the beloved disciples,
Gifted with wisdom and bold, that
They should give proof of the sun-race of the kings,
Which is the noblest of earthly world.
He prepared the vessels for the holy ceremony,
So as to harden through the divine radiance of
Viṣṇu
The arrows to auspicious power
And then to give them to the two brothers,
So thought he, and at once the wise one
Determined the auspicious time at which to
Light the bright flame in the numerous vessels,
And to recite the wonder working
Vedas in the gathering of the spirit.

The hut of Sīdā is clearly separated from that of Wachamaruek, the hermit. He can be recognized as a hermit by his clothing imitating the skin of an animal, and by his characteristic headgear. Wachamaruek gives to one of the boys a bow, whilst the other holds a dart in his hands raised in reverent attitude. The countenance of the hermit expresses age, wisdom, and dignity; and we may again marvel at the degree of the refinement that can be extracted from the brittle material of mother-of-pearl.

The doors of the two huts are decorated with Chinese ornaments or subjects. Rock formation cluster about the huts, as do tress and sprays with clearly distinct shaped leaves.

The various requisites spread about on the ground in front of the hermit's hut bear witness to the idyllic *dolce far niente* atmosphere of rural Thailand. On an earthenware charchol stove is a kettle. A fan to blow on the fire, such as is still used nowadays, stands next to it. A (tea) pot and a beaker of the kind employed even today for the brewing of tea stand on a tray. The hermit's sandals are neatly laid out before the steps that lead up to his verandah. Cock, hen, and chicks, the domestic creatures of even the poorest, scratch about on the ground. An *ong*, a water-pot, here richly decorated, stands at the boundary between the two huts.

Besides the "small deer" such as hares, squirrels and birds, there are to be seen, as playful complements to the same, tiny creatures in the furthest left-hand lower corner and similarly in the upper right-hand corner. Their loin cloths, indicated by leaves show that they are probably to be taken as Nārīphon, mythical tree-dwelling people. In the lower branches of the tree, standing

at the left-hand margin of the scene, can also be seen two creatures, half-man, half-bird, represented as male and female, who represent *kinarī*, fabulous creatures from the Himalaya.

The ornamental borders are executed with greatest charm. A monkey is mounted on a rat, birds brings insects and grain to their young, and in the lower margin of the panel can be seen a clumsily rendered rodent with wings spread out.

Sīdā's two sons have meanwhile grown to manhood. They are no longer cared for and protected by their mother and the hermit Wachamaruek. Both are skilled archers and hanker after adventure. On one of their excursions in the woods they come to a soaring rang tree. Phra Mongkut stretches his bow, and his arrow splits the tree. Huge branches break off and fall down to earth with a mighty crash. The gods in heaven and men in all corners of the earth are roused and startled.



Notes

¹ Editorial note: This article was submitted to the *JSS* in about 1993. Due to various factors, such as the need to take photographs of the doors to illustrate the article, completion of the manuscript fell far behind schedule. The article is published here in essentially its original form, with only some editorial revisions. The quality of scholarship in the article is borne out by the fact that subsequent work on mother-of-pearl inlay has not contradicted his findings. For example, in a just published book by Julthusana Byachrananda, *Thai Mother-of-Pearl Inlay*, the creation of the panels at Wat Pho are dated authoritatively to 1831, that is in the reign of King Rama III. Professor Wenk, basing his assessment almost exclusively on stylistic evidence dates the creation of the panels very close to this. We apologize for not being able to use more of the pictures taken of the door for this article. These images are available for study at the Siam Society by those interested in them.

² See Boisselier for reports of the excavations at U Thong, p. 230.

³ See Skinner, *Chinese Society in Thailand: An Analytical History* 1957, pp. 1–12.

⁴ Feddersen, *Chinesisches Kunstgewerbe*, p. 147.

⁵ The brief sweeping statement in *Sinlapa Samai Ayutthayā*, p. 31, that “the Thais had been influenced during the Ayutthaya period by Chinese everyday objects in mother-of-pearl” is unsupported, and gets us nowhere in its vagueness.

⁶ As for instance, the tray-like container figured in Nindēt, *Muk thai*, p. 17; see also plate 18 in Luang Wisānsinlapakam, *Tamrā wichā chāng pradap muk krapa si liam*.

⁷ See Wenk, *The Restoration of Thailand under Rāma I 1782–1809*, p. 111.

⁸ Nindēt, p. 14.

⁹ Boisselier 1977, p. 231; Phirom's assertion, p. 7 in *Wāduai pratu nātāng pradap muk thai*, that “Wat Pho was built in the reign of Rāma I” can only

be taken, in conjunction with his further remarks, as meaning that he included the mother-of-pearl doors.

¹⁰ See Wenk 1968, p. 21.

¹¹ See *Yo Prawat Wat Phra Chethuphon*, p. 5.

¹² References to illustrations in plates below are all to Wenk 1980.

¹³ See in this context plates II, IV, XX, XXX, L, LXXI in Wenk, *Mural Paintings in Thailand* Vol. II, p. 1.

¹⁴ See illustrations 127–144 in Hetzlar-Forman, *Vietnamesische Kunst*, and also plate XXXV and figures 17–20 in Bernanos, *Les Arts Décoratifs au Tongkin*.

¹⁵ (I am unaware of any object known to be datable before, say, 1800 that exhibits undoubted Chinese ornamentation, apart from the Buddhapada in the Chiang Mai Museum which has not yet been studied.)

¹⁶ Boisselier 1977, p. 230, summarizes this as the “School of Ayutthaya”. I regard this terminology as mistaken, indeed positively misleading. The enumeration of isolated, probably more or less casually preserved objects does not entitle us to lump them together as being the product of a “school”. In my view, what has survived is far too scattered to justify so strict and precise an attribution as “school”.

¹⁷ See Boisselier 1977, pp. 299ff.

¹⁸ References to the technical manual process in the manufacture of mother-of-pearl objects will be found primarily in Luang Wisānsinlapakan, pp. 7ff, Phirom, pp. 4ff, Wathana Triphriksapkan, *Tamrā samrap tha khruang phāp chana tang*, pp. 16ff, and Ratsami, *Ruam thrisādihathakam*, p. 118.

¹⁹ Also known as *Kowithan*, *Erythrina fusca* (Leguminosae).

²⁰ *Calamus spp.* (Palmaeae).

²¹ Kalayanamitra, *Six Hundred Years of Work by Thai Artists and Architects*, pp. 100ff; *Prince Naritsanuwattiwong* in Sānsomdet Volume XVI, p. 90.

²² *Akharānukrom phumisāt thai* Volume I, p. 120; see also Pazaurek, *Perlmutter*, pp. 8ff.

²³ Also styled turban-shell, green snail-shell, and marbled tuban-shell. Boisselier's observation in *Malerei in Thailand*, p. 229, that the pearl oyster is chiefly used for works in mother-of-pearl in Thailand does not correspond to the facts. The shell, *Melagrina margaritifera*, is employed only in limited quantities, and not at all for works in which the iridescent play of colours is of prime importance. Boisselier's mistake may stem from confusion over the Thai names. *Hoi Muk* is used generally for all types of mussels and sea snails, the shell of which is used for mother-of-pearl work. *Hoi muk(k)* or else *hoi muk(a)*, however, is the term for "pearl oyster," but it is to be conceded on that score that the orthography of writings in Thai is not always consistent.

²⁴ *Rhipidoglossa*.

²⁵ See Phirom, pp. 4ff, *Akharānukrom phumisāt thai*, Volume 1, p. 120.

²⁶ Luang Wisānsinlapakam, p. 6.

²⁷ *Melanorrhoea usitata*.

²⁸ *Yā khā: Imperata cylindrica var. koenigii* (Gramineae). See McFarland's note in his *Thai-English Dictionary*, pp. 180ff.

²⁹ We may point out here that this particular lacquer is sensitive to cold. If objects in mother-of-pearl are exposed to cold, the lacquer begins to crack and finally to crumble. This is one reason why objects in mother-of-pearl are not generally popular in northern countries.

³⁰ The expression can be rendered in translation as "tempering water." There is a statement in McFarland, pp. 453ff that this liquid is used to temper glowing iron (I am ignorant of the consistency of this liquid).

³¹ So stated by Luang Wisānsinlapakam, p. 8 but we may well ask what workmen used in the days before carborundum was known. Presumably it was sapphires of the kind that are nowadays employed industrially and are found relatively frequently in Thailand. See *Sarānukrom thai* Volume II, pp. 1028ff on carborundum.

³² Sone *Mother-of-Pearl Inlaid*, pp. 42ff.

³³ According to Boisselier, *Malerei in Thailand*, pp. 227, 231.

³⁴ See Wenk, *Mural Paintings in Thailand* Volume 1, pp. XXXIIIff.

³⁵ Princess Chumbhot of Nagara Svarga, *The Lacquer Pavilion of Suan Pakkad Palace*, passim.

³⁶ See Wenk, *The Buddhist Art of Thawan Datchani* Plates XIX–XXVII.

³⁷ Photography by Bangkok Chowkwanyun and U Zaw Lwin.

³⁸ *Rāmakiēn* 4, p. 2684.

³⁹ *Rāmakiēn* 4, p. 2701.

⁴⁰ *Rāmakiēn* 4, p. 2665.

⁴¹ *Rāmakiēn* 4, p. 2666.

⁴² *Rāmakiēn* 4, p. 2667.

⁴³ *Rāmakiēn* 4, p. 2870.

⁴⁴ *Rāmakiēn* 4, p. 2667 ff.

⁴⁵ *Rāmakiēn* 4 p. 2644.

⁴⁶ *Chad ā* For more information see *Tamrā phāp lāi thai*, ā pt. 2, section 3, p. 11.

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