

# The Siam Society's Role in Heritage Protection

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Preservation has been a concern of the Siam Society from its beginnings. In its early years, the emphasis was on the preservation of knowledge about Siam from oral and written sources. In his speech at the first general meeting on 7 April 1904, Dr. Oskar Frankfurter outlined the areas which deserved attention: history, peoples, languages, literature, archaeology, coinage, influences from India and China, economy and industry, arms, music, and drama.<sup>1</sup> These concerns occupied the Society for its first half-century.

Around the start of its second half-century, the Society gradually began to focus on the preservation of both the natural heritage and man-made heritage in Thailand. Under the presidency of Prince Dhani Nivat, the Society launched a project to study Khmer art and monuments in Siam. Eleven site visits were undertaken, and a nine-day seminar was held at Sukhothai, Kamphaeng Phet, and Si Satchanalai. The *Journal of the Siam Society (JSS)* carried several articles from the project, including the first studies of “Khao Práh Vihār” by John Black.

At its fiftieth anniversary in 1954, the Society resolved to found a Research Centre which came into being in 1960. Among the donors were His Majesty King Bhumibol Adulyadej, the Princess Mother, Prince Dhani, Danish firms, and the Ford Foundation. J. J. Boeles was appointed the director. Over the following years the Research Centre pursued several projects of both investigation and preservation:

- a joint project with Denmark on the prehistory era around the Khwae Noi River in Kanchanaburi, including various caves around Sai Yok waterfall, Wang Pho and Ban Kao, also the creation of a research library;
- research on maps of Siam made in western countries, including collection of photo reproductions of many from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries;
- research and study trips on the hill peoples of northern Thailand, led by

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<sup>1</sup> O. Frankfurter, “The aims of the Society,” *JSS*, 1, 1 (1904).

Kraisri Nimmanahaeminda;

- research on a critical Pali dictionary in cooperation with Copenhagen Institute of Science and Arts, with support from UNESCO, the, Religious Affairs Department, and various Buddhist universities in Thailand;
- research to catalog *bailan* manuscripts and old books in monasteries of Lamphun Province.

Many of the articles in the *JSS* during the 1960s stem from these projects. The excavations in Kanchanaburi are a landmark in identifying the Neolithic era in Southeast Asia.

### Kamthieng House

In 1963, Nang Kim Ho Nimmanahaeminda donated to the Society the Kamthieng House, a 150-year-old traditional Lanna-style dwelling, originally built on the bank of the Ping River. With support from the Asia Foundation and the Rockefeller Foundation, the house was moved to Bangkok and re-erected in the Society's grounds. A traditional Lanna rice barn was also purchased to complement the house. This complex was opened by His Majesty the King in 1966 as Thailand's first ethnological museum.



Figure 1. The Kamthieng House: (above) *in situ*, Chiang Mai, 1963; (opposite, from top left) the rice barn *in situ*, Chiang Mai, 1963; the donor, Nang Kim Ho Nimmanahaeminda; the house and barn in the grounds of the Society; invitation to the opening in 1966; display inside the house.



## Woodcarving, parks, bridges, locality

In 1965, the Society had the opportunity to purchase a collection of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century wood carvings from Chiang Mai and Lampang. These now form the core of the Society's collection of historic wood carvings.



Figure 2. Wood carvings from the Society's collection

In the 1970s, as the Thai economy began to accelerate, the clash between “development” and “preservation” became more obvious. The Society pioneered many preservation issues which subsequently developed an independent institutional form. For example, in 1971, in response to a proposal to build a dam in the Khao Yai region, the Society undertook research on the impact of the dam and the need

for conservation in the Khao Yai national park. When a Friends of Khao Yai was formed, the Society provided support. Subsequently the dam project was cancelled.

In the same year, the Society hosted a series of lectures on urbanism, city planning, and urban conservation. This eventually led to the publication in 1977 of *Old Bridges of Bangkok* by Sirichai Naruemit, concentrating on bridges built in the Fifth and Sixth Reigns.

In 1974, the Society launched a project with assistance from the Ford Foundation to support conservation of local culture in peripheral areas of Thailand by encouraging local interest and participation. Under this project, the Society helped to organise performances and exhibitions in various provinces of the north, provided support for student study trips to cultural sites, made recording of local music, provided funding for copying of murals and collecting local literature, and provided help and expert assistance for local efforts to repair and restore monuments.

### Murals and ordination halls

At this time, the Society became actively involved in projects to preserve historic monuments threatened with destruction or deterioration. In 1974, the Society heard of proposals to demolish the ordination hall in Wat Nong Bua in Nan Province which contains some historic and exceptionally beautiful murals. The Society sent a letter to the Religious Affairs Department protesting against the demolition. With help from the Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs Department, the monastery authorities were persuaded to abandon their plan to build a new ordination hall in place of the old one, and instead devote funds to conserving the old ordination hall and its murals. In 1978, the Society organised a *kathin* trip to the monastery to raise funds towards the preservation of the murals which are now widely recognised as a major example of Lanna art and have become a significant tourist attraction.

Over the next few years, the Society's involvement in the preservation of murals expanded in cooperation with several other institutions.

The Society cooperated in the Fine Arts Department's project for preservation of the historic First Reign library at Wat Rakhang Kositaram in

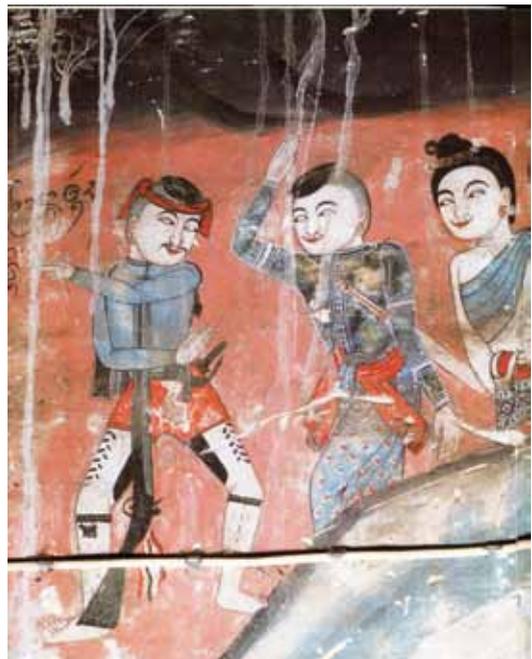


Figure 3. Restored mural in Wat Nong Bua, Nan

Thonburi under the leadership of the distinguished artist and expert in restoration, Dr Fua Haripitak; cooperated with the Society for Cultural Conservation of Lampang to preserve several sites; and cooperated in the preservation of the exceptional Ayutthaya-era murals in Wat Khongkharam, Ratchaburi.



Figure 4. Restored murals at Wat Rakhang Kositaram, Thonburi

Figure 5. Restored murals at Wat Khonkharam, Ratchaburi



In 1980, a Committee for the Preservation of Thai Murals was formed within the Society. In 1982, the Society supported a restoration of the Third Reign murals in Wat Bangyikhan in Thonburi, again in cooperation with the Fine Arts Department. This led to a similar project to restore the murals in Wat Bang Khanun in Nonthaburi.

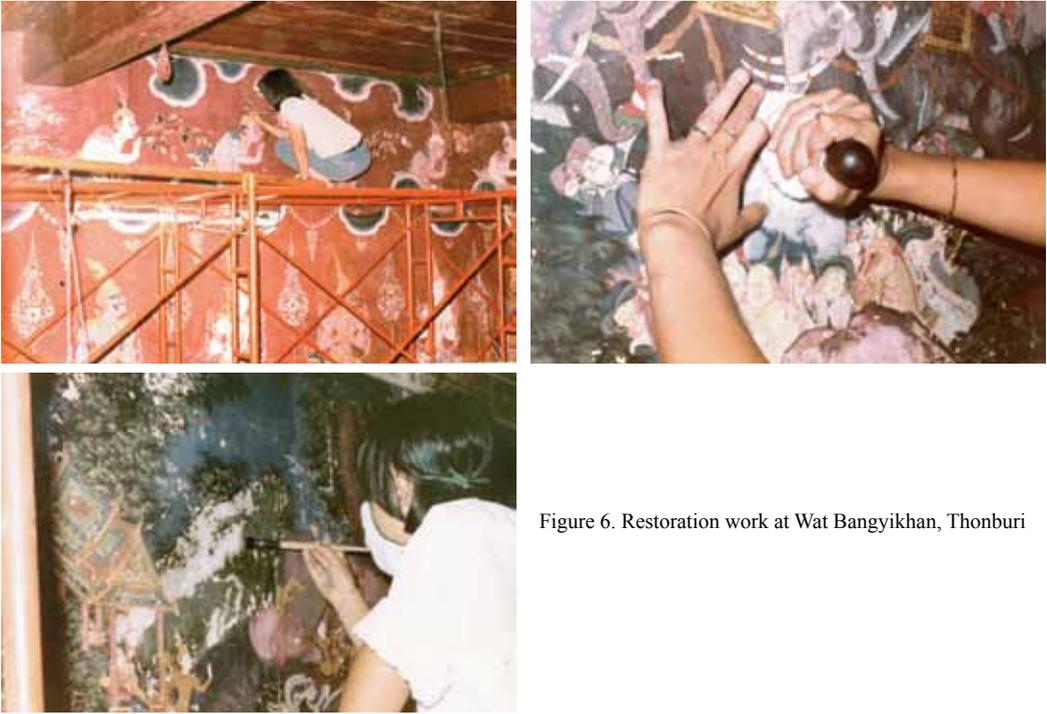


Figure 6. Restoration work at Wat Bangyikhan, Thonburi



To ensure preservation of some exceptionally fine murals from the Fifth Reign in Wat Buak Khrok Luang, Chiang Mai, the Society arranged for Dr Fua's son Thamnu to execute life-size copies.



Figure 7. Copy of mural from Wat Buak Khrok Luang, Chiang Mai, by Thamnu Haripitak. The blank area at centre bottom is the position of a window frame.

In March 1979, the Society organised an exhibition of photos of *wat* murals from all regions to raise awareness of the art form and the need for preservation. As part of the same project, the Society hosted several talks on conservation techniques in Thai, English, and Japanese. This project inspired publications on Thai *wat* murals by several printing houses.



Figure 8. Photo exhibition on murals at the Society, March 79; (left) HRH Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn talks with Prince Subhradradis Diskul; (right) Professor Chitti Tingsabadh

## Textiles

In 1980, the Society received the donation of a large *phra bot*, a form of textile banner or hanging with a religious motif usually displayed in a *wat*. The Society arranged for the item to be restored successfully, as a result of which several other *phra bot* were donated in subsequent years.

A Textile Preservation Group was formed within the Society that gradually amassed a collection of over 900 pieces that are periodically exhibited.



Figure 9. Restored *phra bot*

Figure 10. Exhibition from the Society's textile collection





Figure 11. Wat Sra Bua Kaew, Khon Kaen:  
 (this page) the original roof;  
 the problematic replacement;  
 (opposite) the old roof removed and the hall wrapped during construction;  
 the replacement roof with eaves wider even than the old roof





### **The restoration of Wat Sra Bua Kaew**

In 1999, the Society launched a project to conserve the ordination hall at Wat Sra Bua Kaew in Nong Song Hong District, Khon Kaen that contains rare and beautiful examples of the local tradition of painting. With the best possible intentions, the local people had raised funds to replace the badly deteriorated roof. Unfortunately, the replacement followed the Rattanakosin style with a higher peak and much shorter eaves, resulting in the paintings on the exterior of the hall being exposed to the rain during storms. The Society raised funds from various individuals and institutions to construct a new roof, designed in old style but constructed with modern materials, and made other repairs to ensure the survival of the paintings. HRH Princes Galyani Vadhana presided over the dedication of the renovated building in February 2001.



In 2007, the Society cooperated with the Department of Archaeology to print a booklet on the conservation of monuments for monks and wat authorities.

### The Society auditorium

At its 75th anniversary in 1979, the Society renovated its auditorium, including installing air conditioning and other innovations, but took special care to preserve the original architecture. The renovation received an award for conservation of Thai architecture from the Fine Arts Department, and another from the Association of Siamese Architects.



Figure 12. The Siam Society auditorium:  
as opened in 1935;  
after renovation in 1975;  
Conservation Award from the Association of Siamese Architects, 2001

### Intangible heritage

While much of the Society's conservation work in this era focused on physical fabric, the area of intangible was not neglected.

Since 1971, the Society paid attention to the preservation of old forms of Thai music, dance, drama, and puppetry by staging regular performances. In 1978–79, the Society launched a project to conserve music from the Sixth Reign by recording performances on film and distributing the results to various musical and educational institutes.

In 1972, the Society gave support to the conservation of old Thai films, and arranged screening of some rare classics including some made by King Rama VII. In 1980, the Society screened *The King of the White Elephant*, the first Thai film with an English-language script. In 1980–81, the Society was donated a collection of 200 reels of private films by Queen Rambhai Bharni. When the Thai National Film Archive was created within the National Museum in 1984, this collection was donated to the Archive which had the requisite expertise in conservation.

Beginning in the 1970s, a committee within the Society had begun collecting and restoring old manuscripts. The Society's collection now amounts to 900 bundles. The texts are photographed for preservation, and many have been transcribed in preparation for publication.

### From practice to advocacy

By the 1980s, as the Thai economy accelerated and government began to promote tourism very aggressively, the threats to cultural heritage quickly multiplied in number and complexity. At the same time, however, more individuals and organisations became sensitive to the issues surrounding the protection of heritage. The role of the Society began to shift from practitioner to advocate and coordinator.

In 1987, the Society hosted an international symposium in Chiang Mai on "Culture and Environment in Thailand" with 20 speakers and over 300 attendees. The proceedings were published in 1989 as a book recognised as a landmark in debate on the protection of Thailand's natural heritage.



Figure 13. Attendees of the conference on "Culture and Environment in Thailand: Dynamics of a Complex Relationship", Chiang Mai, August 1987

This led to a second international symposium in 1992, also in Chiang Mai, on “Environment and Culture with Emphasis on Urban Issues”, which foreshadowed the growing concerns over the urban environment later in that decade. In 1995, the Society helped to bring together architects, historians, property developers, government officials, and representatives of UNESCO and the World Monuments Fund to discuss the problems and challenges of preserving monuments across Asia. The participants discussed sites such as Luang Prabang, Nara, Angkor, Pagan, and Ayutthaya. A summary of the conference concluded, “On the whole the identified sites did not suffer from willful neglect, but over-exposure.... The age of mass tourism was arriving in Asia.... All delegates spoke of the importance of education: for teaching future generations about their cultural past, to instill a sense of pride in the ancestral and national physical heritage, to preserve for future generations the monuments which represent singular achievements and are important not just for the nation but for the world.”

The launch of the Siamese Heritage Protection Program in 2011 represents a natural extension of the Society’s long-standing commitment to preservation, but also a new focus and urgency in response to the many threats to Siam’s extraordinarily rich heritage.