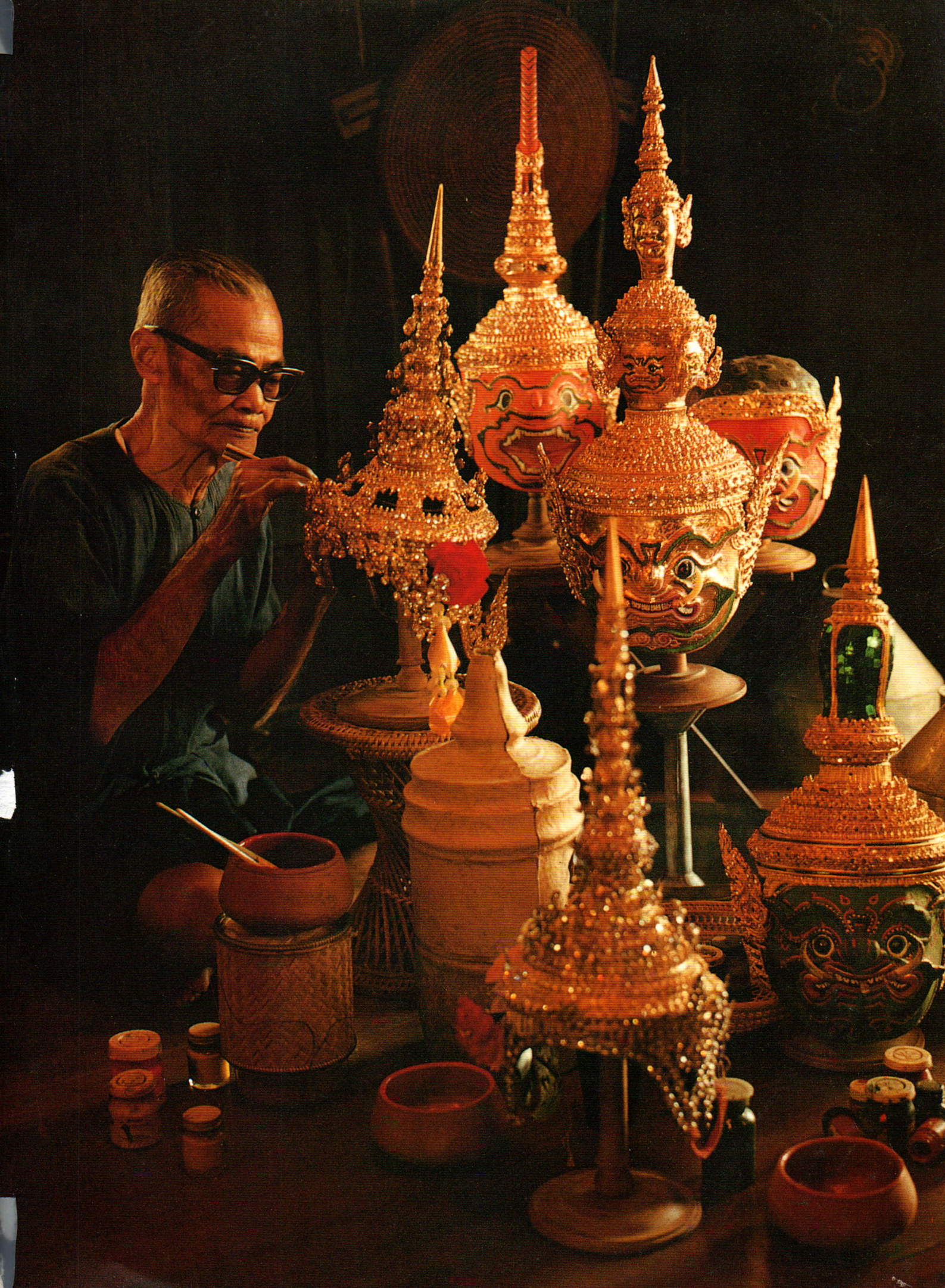


ThaiLife

THAI FOLK ARTS AND CRAFTS











**THAI FOLK ARTS
AND
CRAFTS**

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ThaiLife

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INTRODUCTION

In a sense the folk crafts of a nation can be seen as the truest expression of its native culture, reflecting as they do the customs and tastes of the great majority rather than those of a small, cultivated elite. Their primary purpose, of course, is utilitarian--a basket in which to carry rice, a trap to catch fish, a jar to hold water, an umbrella to ward off the rays of the sun--and as such they offer a deep insight into the way ordinary people live. Yet remarkably often also, in elegance of line and delicacy of workmanship, these mostly handmade crafts achieve something higher which can only be called true art, pleasing the eye and stirring the emotions.

Thailand enjoys a particularly rich heritage of folk arts, handed down over the generations since the early days of the kingdom. Some, like the shimmering silks of the Northeast and the superb woodcarving of the North, have become major export items and are internationally renowned; others are rarely seen outside the rural villages where they continue to be made in traditional ways and used in daily life. All, however, constitute a vital and enduring thread in the complex fabric we call Thai culture.

In Thailand, as in many other countries, the introduction of cheap, mass-produced goods from abroad inevitably had an adverse effect on the production of such crafts. Sir Malcolm Smith, an English physician who lived in Bangkok in the early years of this century, was one of those who observed, and lamented, what seemed to him the apparent decline even then of several notable folk arts.

In the days of King Mongkut, he wrote, it was the custom of many wealthy families to maintain craftsmen in their own houses. Some were employed as gold and silversmiths, some as jewelers; others were painters or wood-carvers, or workers in lacquer or mother-of-pearl...The artists belonged to the household, they took pride in their work, they vied with each other in performance, and their children when they grew up entered the occupation and learnt it from their parents. The master of the house was, in his own way, a patron of the arts.

Every town in the country in those days had its own industries, its potters, its metal workers, its carpenters, and boat builders. Everything that was required by the people for their daily needs was made 'at home.' The country was self-supporting.

To Sir Malcolm's eyes, this golden age of handicrafts was rapidly disappearing. Part of the reason was the flood of new products from abroad, not necessarily more durable or efficient than the locally-made ones, but usually much cheaper. Another part, which he regarded as being just as important, was changing fashion and styles of living. He believed that if the process continued, the native crafts would one day completely disappear, a sad loss to Thailand and its culture.

This pessimistic view was not unjustified, particularly from the vantage point of booming, rapidly Westernizing Bangkok. Within a few decades after Sir Malcolm's time, fine handicrafts were rarely seen in the capital and few, if any, households were in a position to maintain resident artisans, even if they wanted to.

Yet the evidence offered by Bangkok was misleading. In most villages of the country side, and in certain provincial cities like Chiang Mai in the North and Nakhon Si Thammarat in the South, the old traditional arts not only survived but continued to show a remarkable vigour.

Country people in Thailand are deeply conservative by nature, and their ingrained suspicion of the new extended to the implements used in their daily life. Fashionable ladies in the capital might give up their richly embroidered silk costumes for Parisian dresses, city households might boast the latest in electrical gadgetry: in the average farming community, on the other hand, home-spun cloth continues to be woven by time-honoured processes, rice and other produce was still carried in baskets that has changed little over the centuries, even children's toys remain much the same. The potter and the weaver, the wood-carver and the basket-maker, all remain respected members of their community.

Writing in 1968, another observer, (Valentine) Chu, found rural handicrafts thriving in Thailand. *"Many villages...specialize in a single craft",* he noted, *"often with each household of the village devoting attention to only one detail of that craft. In the parasol village near Chiang Mai, for example, people in some homes split and shape bamboo; others assemble the bamboo strips into parasol skeletons; still others fasten on the paper covering, waterproof the parasols with resin oil, and paint on floral designs. There are villages spinning, weaving and dyeing silk or cotton, villages producing hand-wrought silver bowls and plates, villages carving teak elephants and salad bowls, villages weaving baskets, making pottery, and fashioning pewterware, bronze Buddhas and temple bells. Handicrafts are practiced by city-dwellers, too; along the **klongs** of Bangkok, skilled workers turn out kites, spirit houses, dolls, bronze cutlery, and*

handsome nielloware--the last named being silver and bronze spoons, ashtrays, bracelets and brooches that are inlaid with coloured alloys."

Moreover, recent years have seen a major revival of interest in Thai folk arts. One reason has been a growing awareness of the cultural importance of these traditional crafts and also of their intrinsic beauty in a world of plastic and other artificial materials. Not only anthropologists and other scholars but also collectors, dress designers, interior decorators, and ordinary Thais have come to appreciate them, with the result that countless shops in Bangkok now specialize in such arts and they can be found in even the most modern homes.

Their economic importance has increased accordingly. Various Thai handicrafts are being exported to countries all over the world, bringing in millions of dollars in foreign exchange. In 1981 Bangkok was selected as the venue for CONEX 81, an international handicraft showcase.

One of the biggest boosts of all has come from the Foundation for the Promotion of Supplementary Occupations and Related Techniques (SUPPORT), established in 1976 by Her Majesty Queen Sirikit. This organization, aimed at helping rural families earn additional income and thus improve their lives, is now providing financial assistance and expert guidance to craftsmen all over Thailand in 18 different skills, ranging from delicate Yan Lipao basketry in the far South to hilltribe silverwork in the northern mountains. SUPPORT also sells the products through a network of shops and stimulates interest in them through a variety of promotional activities both in Thailand and abroad.

Despite the quickening pace of modern changes, Thai folk arts and crafts continue to play a significant role in society from the economic, as well as the utilitarian and aesthetic perspectives.

National Identity Board
December 1987



LACQUERWARE

The art of making lacquer originally came to Thailand from China, probably by way of Burma, but over the centuries distinctively Thai designs and techniques were evolved. It became a notable handicraft in the northern province of Chiang Mai and is still made in a number of households there, particularly in the little hamlet of Ban Kern, or *Lacquer Villages*.

Lacquerware begins with finely-woven bamboo basketry of well-seasoned wood which has been carved or shaped on a lathe into the desired shape. To this is first applied a basic coating material called *samook*, consisting of the ashes of burnt rice-paddy husks or ground clay mixed with *rak*, or black lacquer, obtained from a tree which grows in the northern hills. When dry, this is polished with soapstone and then another coating is applied. This process is repeated again and again, up to fifteen times, building up a rigid base of durable lacquer. At the end, a final polishing is given with a sandpaper-like leaf called *bai-nod*.

The object is then ready for the first coat of pure black lacquer. When this has dried, which may take as long as two weeks, another is applied and then another. There may be from three to six coatings, and since each must dry thoroughly, the production of a single lacquer bowl can take several months. The final layer is polished with water and powdered fired clay, giving it a glistening shine.

A design is then applied by one of two methods, depending on whether it is to be in colour or in gold. The process for the first is called *lai kud*, meaning "a design which is dug out"; as this suggests, the decoration is engraved with a sharp-pointed tool, after which it is washed with a solution made from chopped fruit and then in water. The object is next soaked for three days in coloured paint, washed with water, and polished with the sandpaper leaf. At the end the colour remains in the engraved design, while elsewhere the surface remains a glossy black.

The gilding process is called *lai rot nam*, or "a design made by washing." In this, a drawing is first traced on the lacquered object and all parts that are to remain black are covered with a sticky yellow substance that will dissolve in water. A thin layer of lacquer is then applied over the whole area and before this is dry, gold leaf is applied to the pattern area. After about 20 hours the object is given a thorough washing, during which the yellow gum and the gold sticking to it detaches; the gold design is left sharp and clear in the un-gummed areas.

Lacquer decoration has been used extensively in Thailand, on everything from simple bowls and trays to elaborate doors and windows. Today as in the past it remains one of the outstanding Thai handicrafts.



*Finely-woven bamboo forms the base of lacquerware
Samples of Thai lacquerware products*













WOOD CARVING

Northern Thailand abounds in hardwood forests, so it is only natural that wood carving should rank high among the country's traditional handicrafts. Evidence of the wood-carvers' skill can be seen on countless Buddhist temples all over the country, in splendid gables, cornices, doors, and windows; it is present, too, on palaces and ordinary houses, as well as countless items used in daily life, from spinning wheels to elephant howdahs.

The wood traditionally employed is teak, but numerous other varieties have been used as well. For furniture and temple decorations, the wood is usually received by the carvers in the form of planks. The designs are drawn on the wood in pencil and then carefully carved with a mallet and chisels of various sizes. The cost of the finished product depends on the difficulty and complexity of the design; some simple, repetitive ones take only a few days to execute, while others may require months.

The greatest concentration of wood-carvers is perhaps still in the north, mainly in and around Chiang Mai but gifted craftsmen can be found all over the country. The shops of Bangkok, for example, are full of magnificently carved furniture, and teakwood trays, salad bowls, lamp-stands and other items are exported in large quantities to admiring buyers throughout the world.



Wood-carving in Thai architecture

Wood-carving in details





Wood-carving products become impressive household objects







SILVERWARE

Though silverware is made in several parts of Thailand, the most famous center is Chiang Mai, where it has been a prominent local handicraft for at least a thousand years. In ancient times it was concentrated in a village called Wau Lai, just outside the city walls; the village has long been absorbed by the modern city, but the area where it stood is still noted for its silver and the most characteristic sound is still the rhythmic tapping of hammers against metal.

Northern silversmiths have applied their skills to a great variety of objects, from goblets to swords, but their most common products have been ceremonial bowls and epergnes and betel nut boxes of assorted sizes. These are usually adorned with elaborate *repousse* decorations, either with figures or traditional Thai motifs.

The silver content varies, but most of the better craftsmen have traditionally used a mixture of 100-per-cent pure silver and 90-per-cent *ngern taep*, which is silver melted down from old coins, mainly Indian rupees and Burmese kyats.

Mixed with saltpeter and popped rice to render it soft and smooth, the silver is melted in ceramic bowls placed in a furnace. It is then poured into shallow moulds to form thin, flat sheets.

The sheets are dipped into sulphuric acid to remove air bubbles and then into tamarind juice, which washes away the acid and all dirt. A wire brush is employed to give the metal a preliminary shine.

While the silver is still hot, shaping is relatively easy. A wooden anvil, shaped like a large toadstool, is placed inside the roughly formed bowl after the desired design has been hammered on to the interior surface. The craftsman then works from the outside to create the final decoration, hammering with a skill born of long practice.

The completed bowl or box is boiled in sulphurated water to give it an attractive white luster, polished with a brush, and, the final step, given another rinse in tamarind juice.

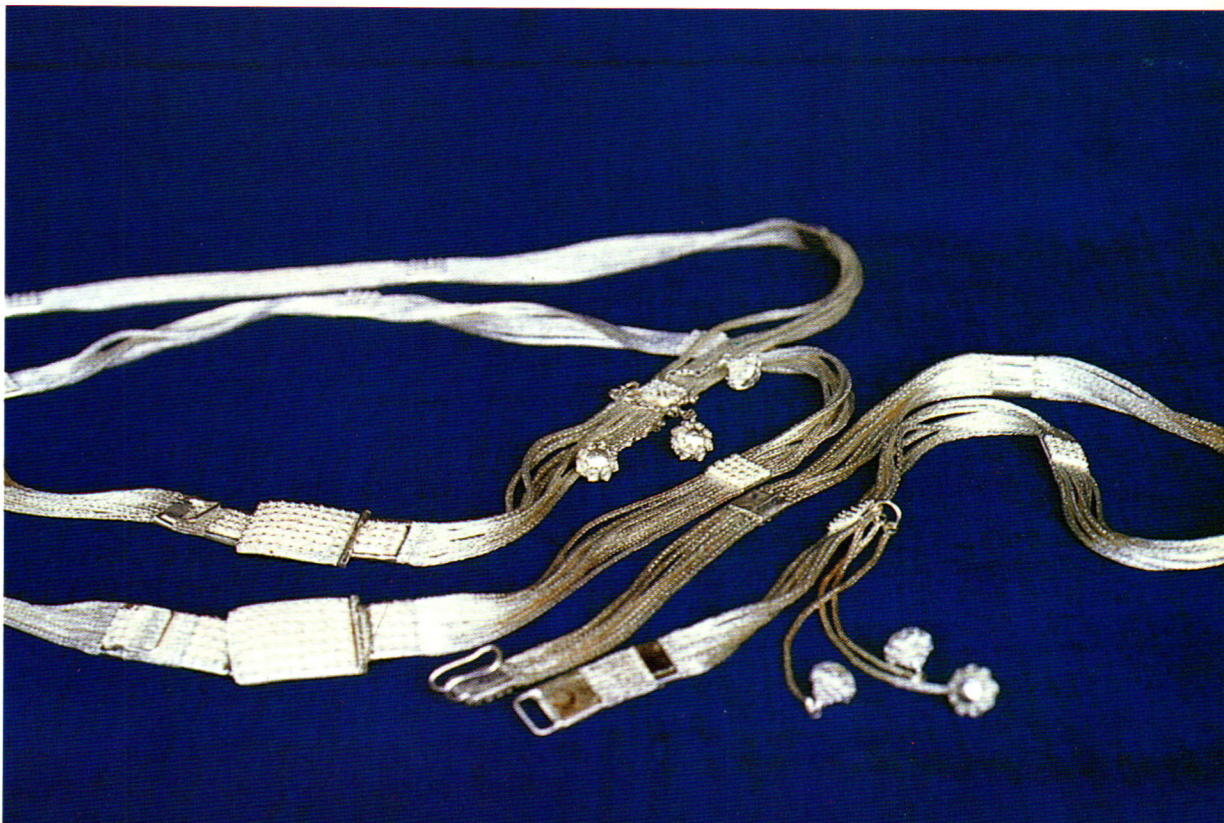
*Silverware objects are usually
the exquisite treasures among the
Thai family*







*Traditionally elegant, yet fashionable,
use of silverware products*





BAMBOO BASKETRY

Bamboo grows wild throughout Thailand, and for centuries its tough, pliable stalks have been deftly woven into a wide variety of objects that combine utility with often remarkable artistic expression. Every country household contains examples of these, used in almost every aspect of daily life. As one writer on the subject has noted, "Historically, the patterns and shapes of the weaving reveal the ancestral customs and habits of an ordinary, forgotten people. Each intricately woven basket has its own particular shape and function. The techniques, ranging from the delicate and graceful to the rustic and bold, were born rural necessity and handed down from generation to generation."

No brief account could encompass all the different baskets produced in Thailand, but certain types are repeated over and over, in nearly every part of the country. One of the most common is the *sum pla*, or fish trap, an elegant, ingenious device for catching fish in the shallow waters along the edge of a rice field. Once caught, the fish are put for safekeeping in another, tightly woven basket called a *khong*, which rests on four supports and has a narrow opening at the top; some *khongs* are also fitted with a cone-shaped insert made of bamboo to keep the fish from jumping out.

Yet another familiar basket is the multi-purpose *grajad*, used for carrying rice or other produce. This is shallow and has a wide mouth which is often adorned with decorative edging--sometimes in a style quaintly called "take the girl by the hand," meaning that the closely interlocked weaving leads the eye around the rim. A flatter version of this basket, called *grajad mon*, is commonly carried on a pole or on the hip.

Glutinous rice is a staple food in both the north and the northeast, and farmers carry a supply of it with them for lunch when they go to work in the fields. A wide range of baskets have been devised for the purpose, always covered and footed, with a cord attached so that it can be easily carried over the shoulder. Many of these have handsome geometric designs in darker bamboo woven into them.

There are also special baskets for measuring and carrying coconuts, for winnowing rice, for transporting pigs to market, for rearing silkworms, for storing clothes and other possessions, for packaging charcoal--in brief, for just about every need that might arise. All, therefore, are basically utilitarian; but in beauty of workmanship and design many also deserve to be elevated to the category of true folk art.







Various forms of basketry





Basketry is renowned for its everyday use and beauty







YAN LIPAO BASKETRY

Throughout the damp rain forests of southern Thailand, a tough-stemmed climbing fern grows in abundance, and for several centuries this easily-available raw material has been used to make a delicate basketwork known as Yan Lipao.

The vine must be sufficiently ripe before it can be used, at which time the dark, bark-like outer covering of the stem is removed in strips of various sizes. The shape of the object is formed as the weaver winds the strips tightly around a wicker frame, now after row, a task requiring infinite skill as well as considerable time and patience. When completed, the object is much stronger and more durable than bamboo basketry.

Two hundred years ago Nakhon Si Thammarat Province was an important center for the production of this beautiful handicraft. Numerous artisans there were engaged in making trays, bags, betel-nut boxes, even children's toys, which were popular in far-off Bangkok, particularly in the royal court. The art then entered a long period of decline, kept alive by only a few craftsmen scattered around the south. In recent years, however, it has undergone a major revival thanks to the interest of Her Majesty Queen Sirikit, who has included it among the crafts being promoted by the SUPPORT Foundation; and now handsome Yan Lipao bags are to be seen frequently once more in the capital as well as abroad.



Samples of Yan-Lipao basketry







THAI SILK

A few years after the end of World War II, an American named Jim Thompson introduced the shimmering, multi-hued silks of Thailand to eager buyers in such distant centers of fashion as New York and Paris. So successful was Thompson's venture that not only did silk eventually become the country's most famous luxury export but also millions of people abroad came to believe that he had originated the art of Thai silk weaving.

This, of course, was an erroneous impression. The Thais had been weaving silk for centuries, particularly in the northeast where mulberry trees grew profusely. The wardrobe of every aristocratic Thai included many silk garments, rich with intricate gold embroidery, and ordinary people as well used it on ceremonial and other special occasions.

On the other hand, the industry had certainly gone into a long decline, starting in the latter part of the 19th century when cheaper, factory-produced silks from China and Japan began to flood the market. An attempt to improve production was made during the reign of King Chulalongkorn, when Japanese experts were brought in and a Department of Sericulture was established; but the efforts enjoyed limited success, and by the time Thompson came the material was being woven in only a few places. His contribution was to improve production techniques and make the silk known to international markets.

There are a number of silk factories today, most of them in or around Bangkok, but the weaving remains basically a cottage industry, with thousands of households deriving all or part of their income from it. The northeast is still the main center of production, but the material is made in other parts of the country as well.

Besides plain and printed silks of various weights, a number of special weaves have become celebrated. One of these is called *mudmee*, a specialty of the northeast which is now in wide use thanks to the encouragement of Her Majesty Queen Sirikit. *Mudmee* is produced by a tie-dye process: the silk thread is wound around two

poles (called **luck mee** in Thai) whose length equals the width of the cloth, after which it is tied (**mud**) at various places according to the design. The thread is then dyed, and spun on a shuttle, producing a handsome textile with subtle designs that often depict stylized flowers and animals.

Another much sought-after silk is richly brocaded with gold or silver thread in traditional Thai patterns. This requires the most time and skill to make and is therefore the most expensive, used mainly on such ceremonial occasions as weddings.

Thai silk is today the best known of all the country's handicrafts, found not only in countless local shops but also throughout the world.

*Colourful silk from Thailand
always remains a memorable gift*





Process in making silk

THAI FOLK ARTS AND CRAFTS

Editorial Board Temsiri Punyasingsh
Wilars Singhawisai
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English Text William Warren

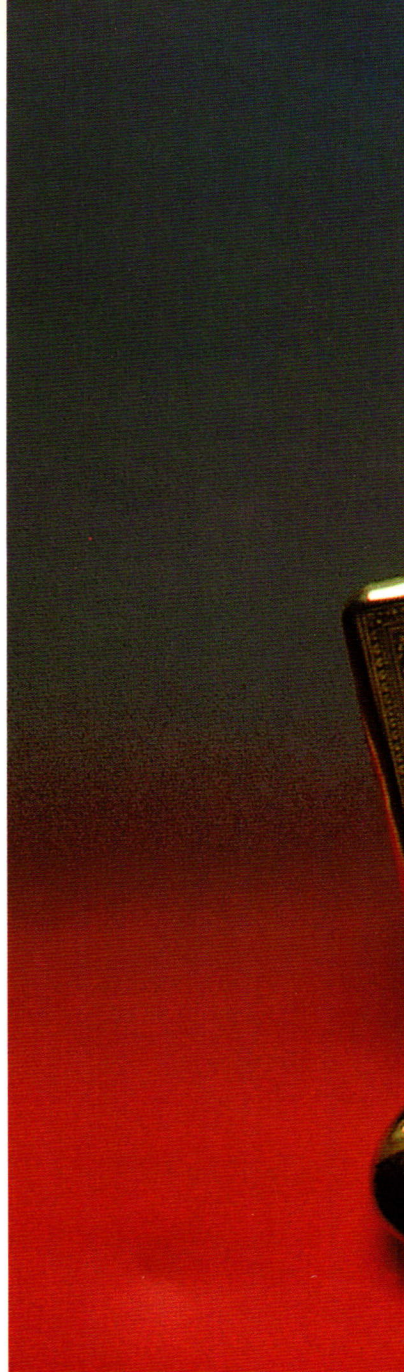
Editor Tira Seeboonruang

Photography The Tourism Authority of Thailand

Design Chattan Kunjara Na Ayudhya
Sunthorn Amphanthong
Nanda Charoenphan
Pornkawee Nitikaset sunthorn



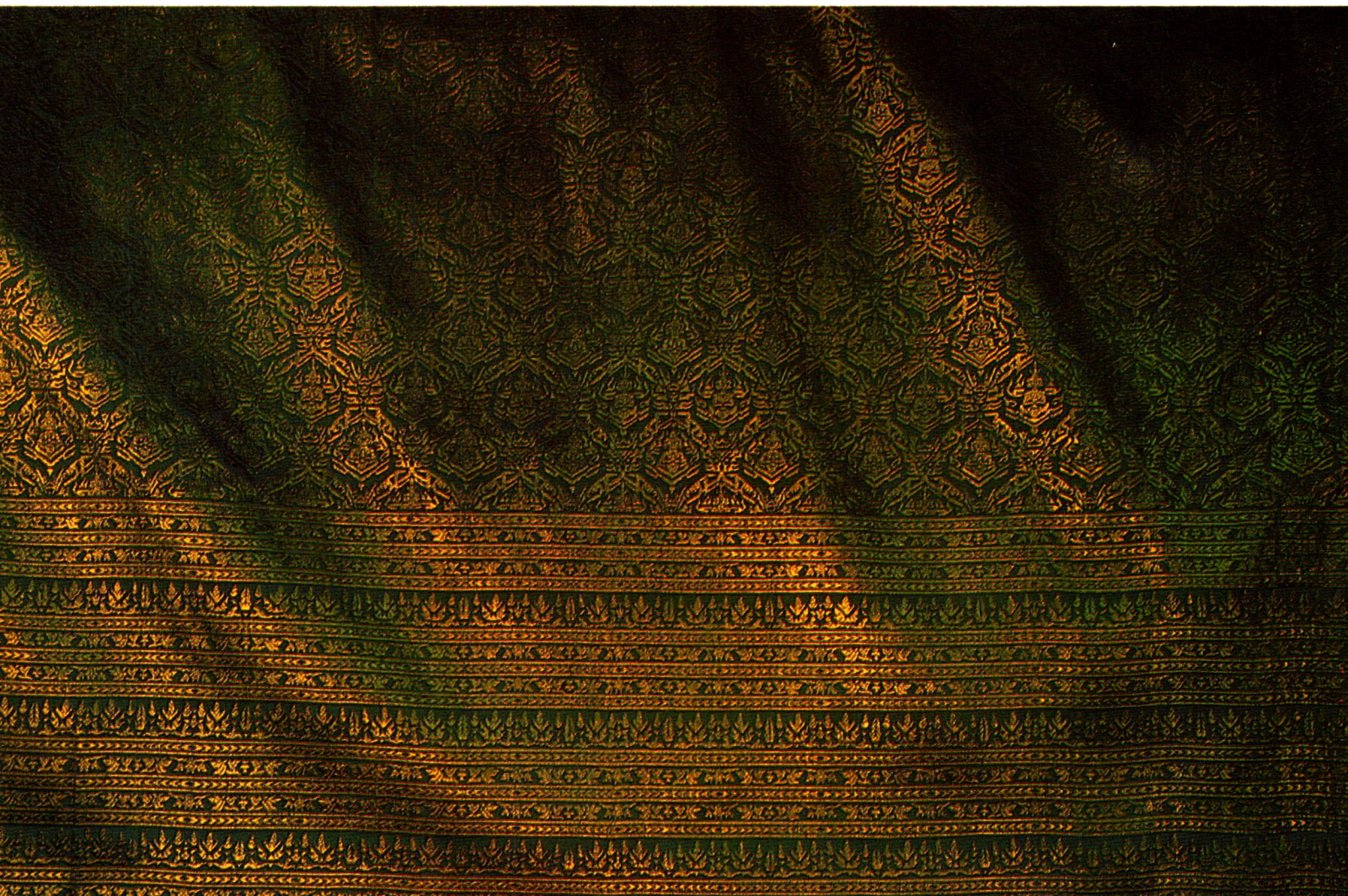






SUPPORT training centre and its crafts







Samples of crafts produced by SUPPORT

strikes their farms.

Besides individual provincial projects, SUPPORT maintains two training centres to which people come from various places for training courses. One is at Bang Sai, on the bank of the Chao Phya River just down from the old capital of Ayutthaya; the other is in the compound of Chitrlada Palace, official residence of the King and Queen. Experts are employed to teach the courses at these centres, and SUPPORT buys all the finished products that meet its standards. It also buys those made in the provinces. that attain similar requirements.

Marketing the handicrafts is an important part of SUPPORT's work. Within Thailand, the main outlet is a network of seven Chitrlada Shops, four in Bangkok and three at popular tourist centres outside the capital. In addition, Her Majesty the Queen has personally made two trips abroad to promote SUPPORT products, setting up exhibitions in Japan and the United States and meeting prominent retailers like Neiman-Marcus in Dallas, Texas.

Though primarily aimed at helping Thai farmers, SUPPORT benefits others as well. A number of projects have been set up in camps for Indochinese refugees, thus enabling people from Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam to learn skills and support themselves.

In honour of her leadership in this wide-ranging program, as well as her other activities on behalf of rural people, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations awarded Queen Sirikit the coveted Ceres Medal for the year 1979. The accompanying citation read in part:

For your far-sighted efforts to advance the status of women as expressed in royal patronage of organizations and programs providing educational and training opportunities to enable women to improve their economic and social welfare, while enhancing appreciation for their national cultural heritage.

For your keen sense of social justice and compassion, as manifested in your support of His Majesty's policy of sharing land with the tillers;

For your innovative role in designing and promoting village level projects to help rural women look well to their households...and profit from the fruit of their hands....

SUPPORT

Early in their reign, their Majesties King Bhumibol Adulyadej and Queen Sirikit began travelling extensively throughout Thailand, getting a first-hand view of the problems that beset rural families. Out of such experience has come a deep concern for the welfare of Thai farmers, who constitute over 80% of the population; more practically, it has given rise to hundreds of royal projects designed to directly benefit those who depend on agriculture for their basic livelihood.

Queen Sirikit's interest has focussed on reviving many of the beautiful handicrafts she came across during her journeys around the country. Producing such crafts in their spare time, she felt, could help rural families earn much-needed extra income in difficult times; moreover, it would stimulate new interest in many of Thailand's oldest and most beautiful folk arts, some of which were in danger of disappearing.

Beginning with a small weaving project near the Royal Palace at Hua Hin, the concept gradually expanded to other provinces until numerous crafts were involved by the mid-70's. It was then felt that a central administrative body was needed to coordinate the various projects as well as to find larger markets for the products. Accordingly, the Foundation for the Promotion of Supplementary Occupations and Related Techniques, popularly called SUPPORT, was formally established on July 21, 1976, with an initial working capital of 3,475,862 baht, partly funded by Queen Sirikit and partly by private donors.

Today SUPPORT has projects in all the major regions of Thailand and promotes 18 different crafts, all based on traditional skills and easily available local materials. These include *mudmee* and other kinds of silk, plain and brocaded cotton, embroidery, miniature dolls, bamboo basketry, Yan Lipao, silverware, artificial flowers, and nielloware. Nearly 10,000 artisans are presently involved, and thousands of others have received sufficient training to enable them to turn out high-quality handicrafts between crops or when disaster



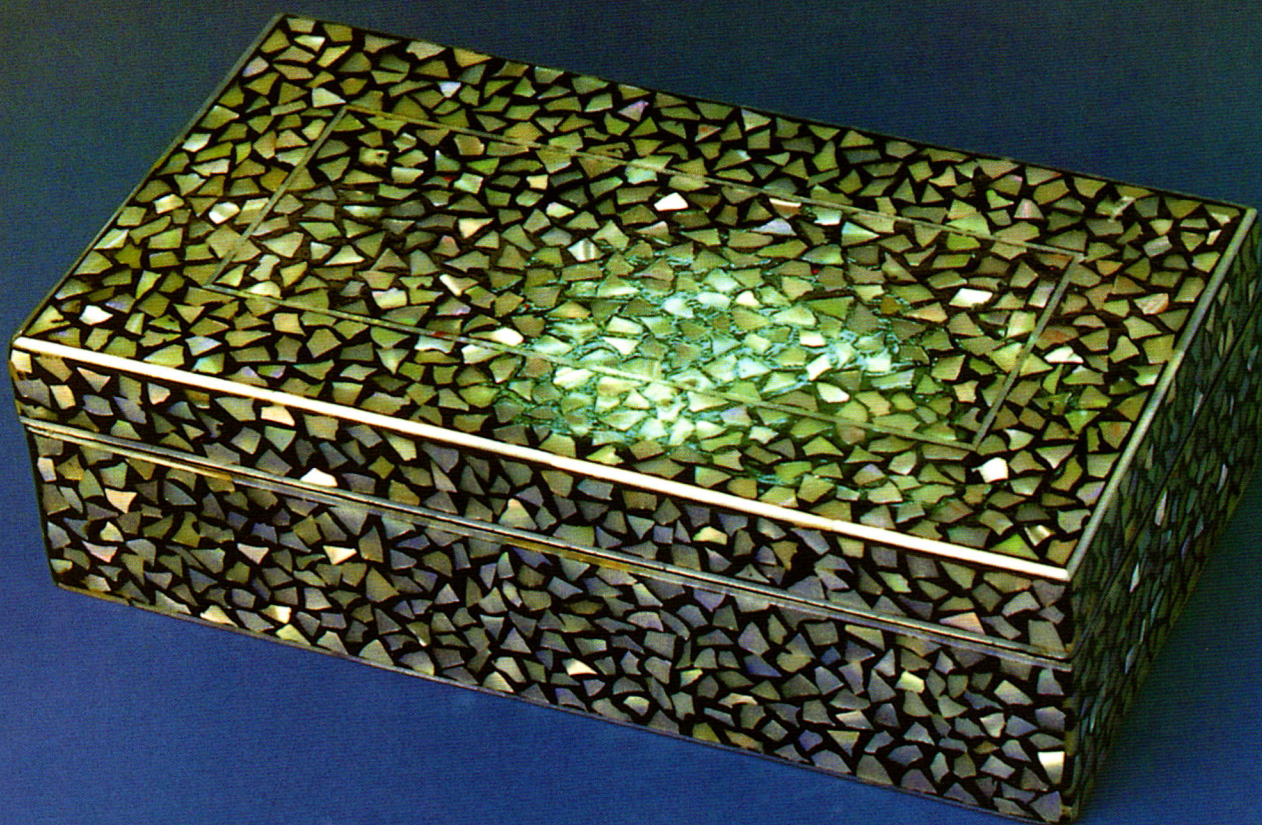


*Mother-of-pearl inlaid objects
Details of mother-of-pearl inlaid objects.*











The highest quality mother-of-pearl work requires both time and an amazing amount of patience. Evidence of this can be seen in the doors and windows of the chapel at Bangkok's Wat Ratchabophit, on which one square metre contains approximately 20,000 tiny pieces of shell.

To quote one authority on the art, "Though technique and materials may differ slightly from those used in the past, the magnificent patience and attention to detail required remain the same and result in lovely pieces which inspire awe in the admiring beholder."

MOTHER-OF-PEARL INLAY

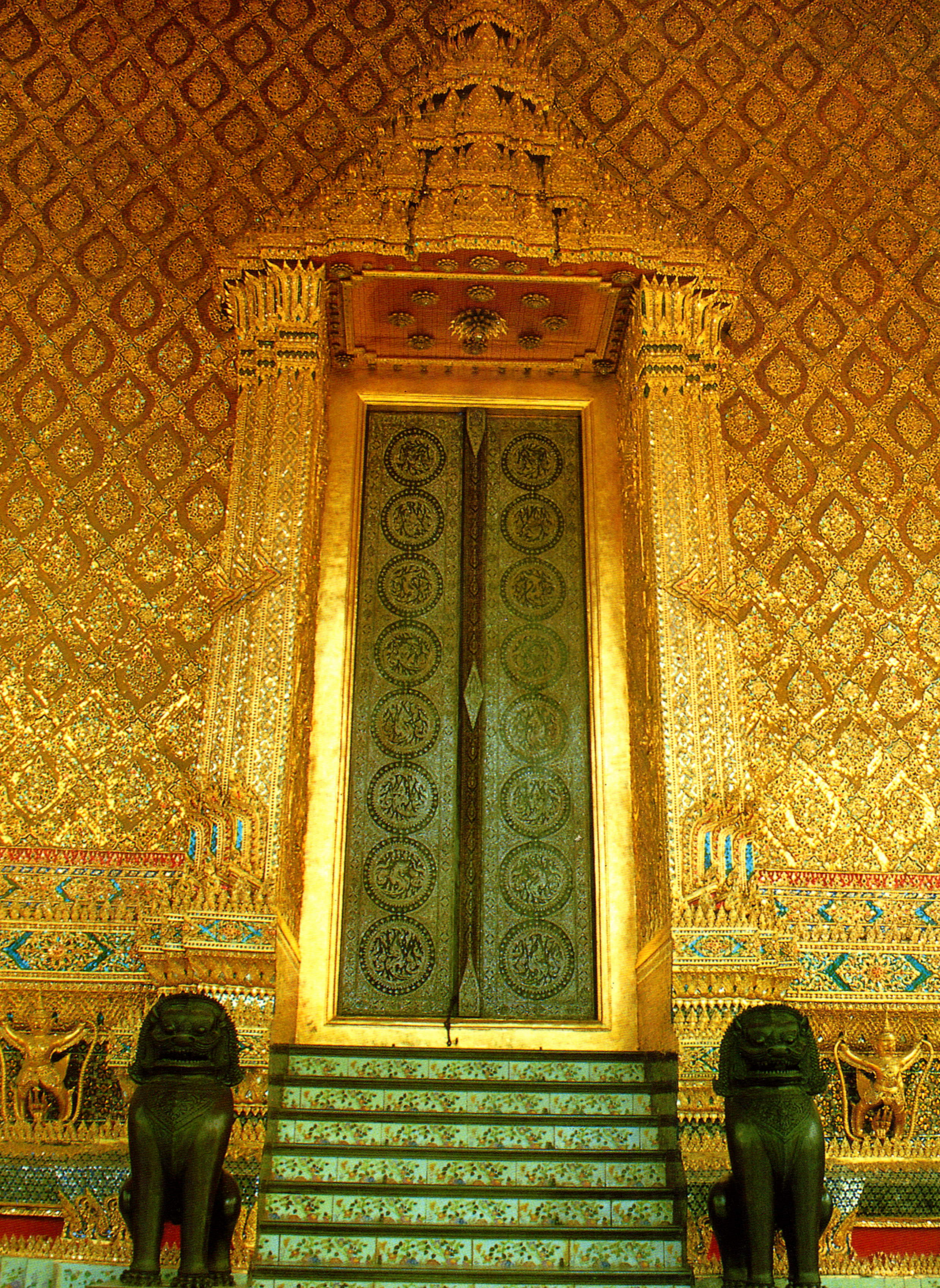
The use of mother-of-pearl to adorn various objects has a long history in Thailand. Stucco pieces studded with bits of shell have been found at monuments dating back to the Dvaravati period (6th to 11th centuries), and some form of the art may have existed even before along the coastal regions.

But these early efforts were crude compared with the magnificent works achieved by techniques perfected in the late Ayutthaya and early Bangkok periods, when temple doors and windows, manuscript boxes, alms bowls, and numerous other items were splendidly decorated by the painstaking process the Thais call *krueng mook*. The craft continues to thrive today in the production of exquisitely detailed furniture, mirror frames, boxes, and trays that are the pride of many owners both in Thailand and abroad.

Many seashells fall into the general category of *mother-of-pearl*, but the most popular in Thailand is the *hoi fai*, or flame snail, from the Gulf of Thailand, which has a particularly beautiful iridescence. The outer surface of this shell is removed with a special knife and the white inner shell is cut into thin, fairly flat pieces, each about two and a half centimeters long.

The pieces are honed until smooth and shiny and then usually glued onto smooth, flat pieces of thin wood. The design, if simple, is traced directly onto the shell surface; for more complex ones, tracing paper with the pattern drawn on it is glued to the shell. A special curved bow saw is used to cut the mother-of-pearl, after which it is carefully removed from the wood and the cut edges smoothed with a hand file to ensure that they will fit tightly together.

If the design was sketched directly onto the shell, the pieces are pasted in their proper places on the tracing paper, which is then pressed, paper side up, on the sticky, newly lacquered surface of the item being decorated. After the paper has been moistened and peeled off, the surface is rubbed with a hard stone to restore its shine and defective patches repaired with more lacquer; there is then another polishing and a final coat of clear varnish.











Nielloware pieces

NIELLOWARE

The art of *kruang tom*, as the Thais call nielloware, is believed to have come to the country during the Ayutthaya period. The precise origin is uncertain; some scholars say it came from China, others from Persia; in any case, it became a major craft in southern Thailand, particularly in Nakhon Si Thammarat, and is still practiced there today.

Fine nielloware is usually made of pure silver, sometimes later plated with gold. The metal is bought by the craftsman in thin sheets, from which the desired shape is cut and welded into a crude, three-dimensional form.

The artist copies the shapes on thin rice paper and cuts them out like the parts of a dress pattern. He then covers each piece with a background design, usually traditional, such as a Thai flame or an intricate floral motif. The paper is shellacked in place onto the metal shell, which then goes to the engraver.

The engraver fills the inside of the piece with heavy molten black wax. When this has hardened, he proceeds to tap out the design, using a set of nail-like steel instruments with various shaped tips. Great care must be taken to avoid puncturing the metal and achieving a uniform depth of engraving.

After the design has been engraved, an oxidizing solution is applied to the parts in high relief, turning them a permanent blue black. The piece is then filed to remove all the rough edges and given a final polishing.

Nielloware objects have been made in almost every conceivable shape, from elaborate coffee and tea sets to fittings for handbags and buttons. It is still one of Thailand's most distinctive and beautiful crafts.





*Kites of various colours and sizes
decorate the summer sky*





*"Pla Tappien" mobile
Papier maché banks*





TOYS

In every culture, toys are an important part of childhood, and Thailand is no exception. Many Thai toys are also beautiful handicrafts that are still made today just as they were centuries ago.

One example is the graceful mobile known in Thai as *pla tappien*, a popular souvenir with many tourists who visit the country. The fish that comprise the mobile are made of plaited dry palm leaves, often painted in bright colors; traditionally, the *pla tappien* is hung above a cradle so that a baby can watch it slowly turning in the breeze.

Then there are kites, which come in a vast variety of shapes and sizes and can be seen everywhere in the sky during the kite season from February to April. Actually, some Thai kites are considerably more than mere toys in both their size and the skill required to fly them. This is particularly true of those used in kite fighting, a sport thought to have been in existence since the Sukhothai period. It involves lofty battles between the five-pointed "male" kites, called *chula*--which may be up to six feet in diameter--and the smaller, diamond-shaped *females*, called *pakpao*. The kites have a framework of bamboo, carefully rounded and smoothed, covered with tough, handmade *sa* paper.

A delightful small toy in rural areas is the *jakkajan*, or cicada, made out of clay and bamboo. Tied with cotton to a bamboo handle, these make a shrill, chattering sound when whirled, exactly like that of a real cicada. Other highly realistic-looking insects are made of deftly plaited strips of bamboo or palm leaf.

Another toy found in many homes are papier-mâché banks in the shape of animals. Traditionally these were animals of the twelve-year cycle and a child was given one in the likeness of his birth-year animal, but today the brightly-coloured figures are made in a variety of other forms as well.

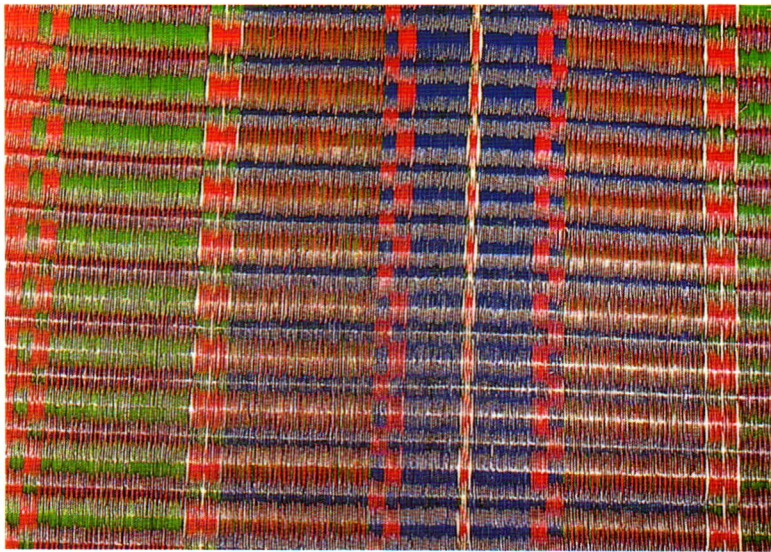






Modern use of reed mats





Colourful patterns



REED MATS

A handsome handicraft found throughout most of Thailand is produced by skillfully plaiting reeds, strips of palm leaf, or some other easily available local plant. The supple mats made by this process--*weaving without a loom*, as one authority calls it--are widely used in Thai homes, from the simplest to the most luxurious. The most traditional use is for sleeping, though they are also now being made into shopping bags, place mats, and decorative wall hangings.

One popular kind of Thai mat is made from a kind of reed known as *Kachud*, which grows plentifully in the southern swamps. After the reeds are harvested, they are steeped in mud, which toughens them and prevents them from becoming brittle. They are then dried in the sun for a time and pounded flat, after which they are ready to be dyed and woven into mats of various sizes and patterns.

Other mats are produced in different parts of Thailand, most notably in the eastern province of Chanthaburi. Durable as well as attractive, they are plaited entirely by hand with an intricacy that makes the best resemble finely woven fabrics.





Modern forms of Thai pottery



A priceless traditional blue and white piece



Traditional patterns give inspirations to modern Thai pottery





*Pottery for everyday usage
as well as decorative purposes*



*Decorated pots and jars,
symbols of classic Thai workmanship*





firing the kilns comes from a small jungle tree that grows north of Chiang Mai, the ash of which is supposed to help impart the typical celadon colour. Several companies are now making the stoneware, which is reaching an even wider circle of admirers than its Sukhothai prototype.

Ban Chiang relics, dating back to pre-historical times, present a vista into the dim past.



POTTERY

Clay is probably the most abundant, cheap, and easily obtainable material in the world," says one writer on Southeast Asian crafts. "It is easy to prepare and does not require a great deal of technological knowledge to use. It has been one of mankind's earliest materials that was fashioned for fundamental human needs.

Handsome pots dating back more than 6,000 years have been found at Ban Chiang, in northeastern Thailand, and the art of shaping and firing clay has continued to the present day. Simple earthenware vessels are still used for cooking and storage; more sophisticated glazed pottery is also being produced by methods introduced from China 700 years ago.

Almost every region of the country has its own traditional pottery. The north, for example, makes fine low-fired pots and water jugs, lightly glazed with terra cotta and oil to make them capable of holding liquids; by northern custom, one of these pots is placed outside most temples and private homes so that thirsty strangers can stop and refresh themselves. Dark-brown pottery in a wide variety of shapes, from flower pots to fanciful animals, is produced at kilns near the northeastern city of Nakhon Ratchasima. Ratchaburi, east of Bangkok, is noted for its beautifully decorated water storage jars, yellowish-green in color and adorned with dragons and swirling floral motifs.

The art of making delicate, blue-green celadon began at the end of the 13th century, when King Ramkamhaeng the Great of Sukhothai brought 300 Chinese potters to his kingdom. Within a short time the high-fired stoneware was being traded throughout Southeast Asia, all the way to the Philippines and Indonesia.

The celadon industry declined with Sukhothai, but has been revived in recent years in the northern city of Chiang Mai. The process is still the same as in ancient times, using a clear glaze made from feldspar, limestone, ash, and a small amount of red clay. The wood used for





*A Lady from the Inner Palace
Figure from "Ramayana"
hill tribe dolls*



Thai classical dancers
Figures from "Ramayana"
One of the main characters
from the classical "Ramayana"



*Thai fruits made of fired clay
Palace dolls*





*Masks from the classical theatre
used now for decoration*



DOLLS

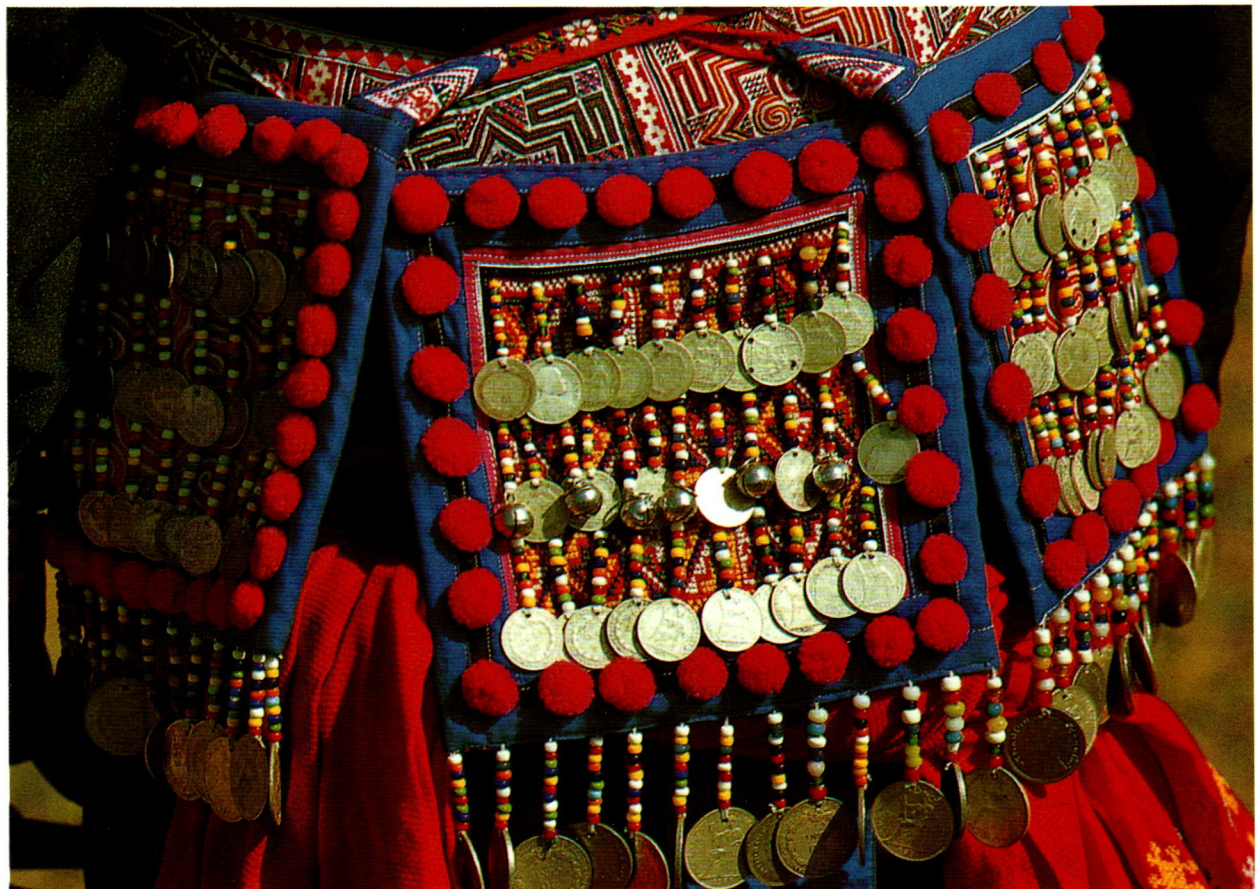
The making of dolls of one kind or another is a handicraft in just about every country, and this is true of Thailand as well. Not all of them are intended for the amusement of children, however; on the contrary, many can be looked upon as exquisite works of art and are valued as such.

This artistic quality is evident in the charming "palace dolls," so called because in ancient times the ladies of the royal palace were noted for their skill at painting these tiny figures made of fired clay. Just about every aspect of Thai culture is reflected in the little dolls, from cooking to boxing, and each detail is meticulously rendered in miniature.

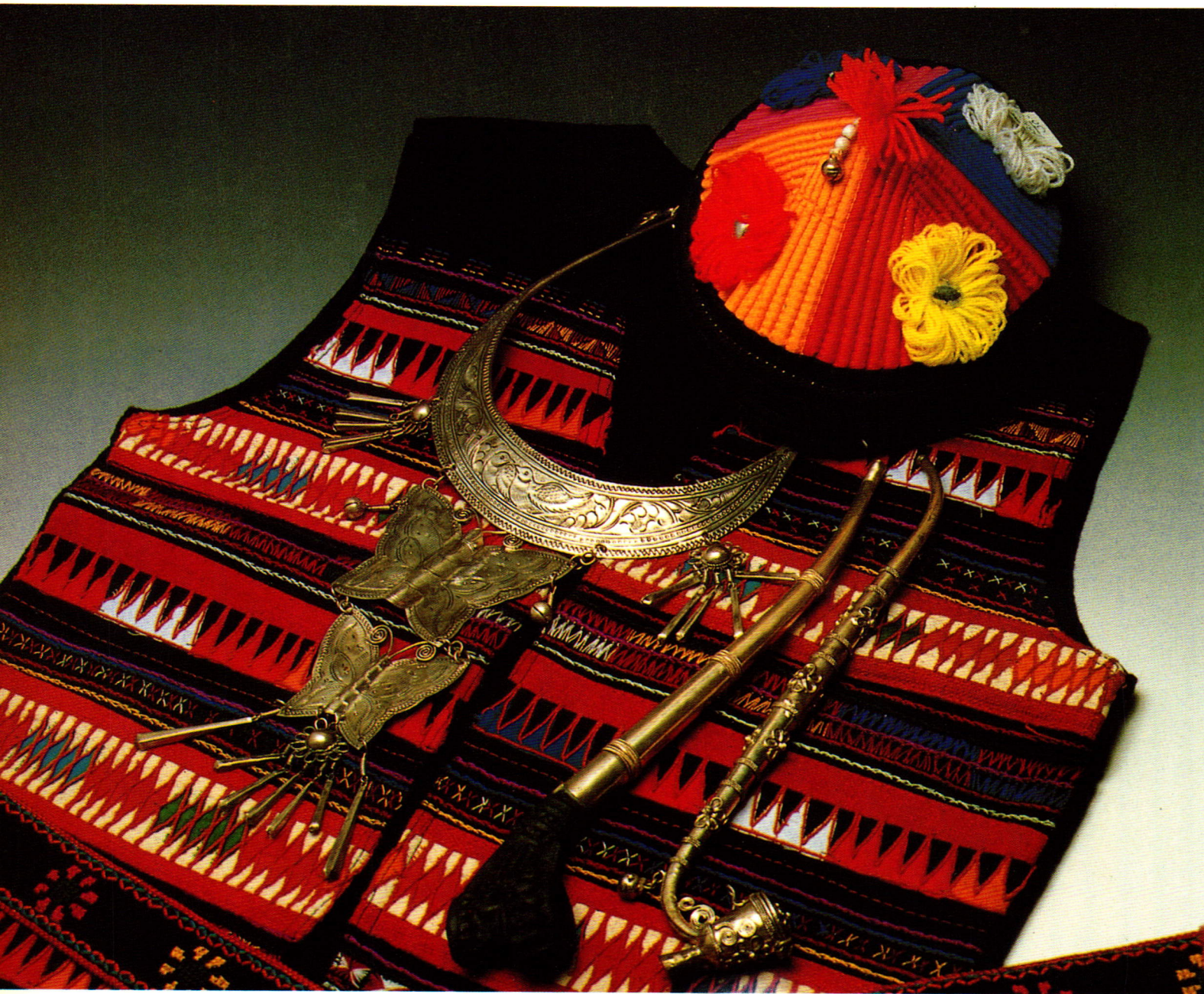
As in the case of a number of other crafts, the making of palace dolls suffered a decline in the present century. In recent years, however, it has undergone a successful revival under the auspices of Her Majesty Queen Sirikit's SUPPORT programme. Numerous households now make them in the central province of Ang Thong, where high-quality clay is abundant, and collecting them has once more become popular.

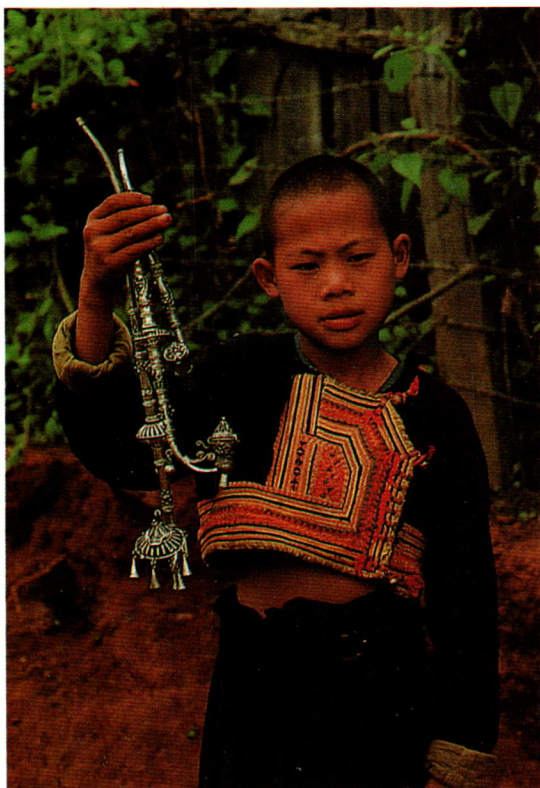
Less traditional but also popular with collectors are handmade dolls in native costumes ranging from those of the Thai classical dance to those of the northern hill tribe people. This is a comparatively new handicraft, having been started only around 30 years ago in Bangkok, but it has become so familiar to Thais as well as tourists that to many it seems a part of the national culture. Many hours of painstaking work are required to produce one of these beautifully garbed figures, to stuff and sew the cloth body and to apply the often intricate details to the costumes, which are exact replicas of the real thing. These dolls originated with Khunying Tongkorn Chandavimol, who became familiar with the process during a stay in Japan, and for years they were made only in her Bangkok home; now other companies produce them as well, to meet the growing demand.





Hill tribes crafts





*Embroidered costumes and crafts
in silver from various hill tribes*



HILL TRIBE CRAFTS

About a dozen semi-nomadic hill tribes live in the highlands of northern Thailand, some of them roaming freely back and forth across the borders of Burma and Laos, others now beginning to settle down in permanent villages with the help of the Thai government. They belong to a number of ethnic groups and each has its own distinctive culture, reflected in a variety of unusual tribal crafts which in recent years have been attracting increasing attention in the outside world.

Nearly all the major tribes contain gifted silversmiths, and for a very practical reason: with their traditions of moving frequently from place to place it was essential to devise a way to transport their worldly wealth easily, and silver jewelry fulfilled both this need and a desire for adornment.

As a result, men, women, and even small children wear a profusion of ornaments: heavy silver belts and bracelets, headdresses composed of silver coins, huge earrings, and necklaces hung with such useful implements as toothpicks, scissors, and tweezers, also made of silver. The workmanship on these is so superb that many collectors now seek them out in the shops of Chiang Mai and Bangkok.

Fine embroidery is another traditional hill tribe handicraft, with the Meo and Yao people being particularly skilled at creating magnificent, boldly coloured geometric designs. In long strips these are used to edge a skirt or jacket, in squares to enhance a vest or shoulder bag, in larger pieces to make up a handsome quilt. Her Majesty Queen Sirikit has long been an admirer of tribal embroidery, and thanks to her leadership it is frequently seen on handbags and dresses worn by fashion-conscious ladies in Bangkok.

Other hill tribe crafts include fine basketry, often sealed with resin to make it more durable on long treks through the mountains, and a variety of handsome homespun cloths, both cotton and a local hemp that produces a fabric resembling linen.

Little known to the outside world until a few decades ago, the tribal arts are now a prominent part of the Thai handicraft scene.

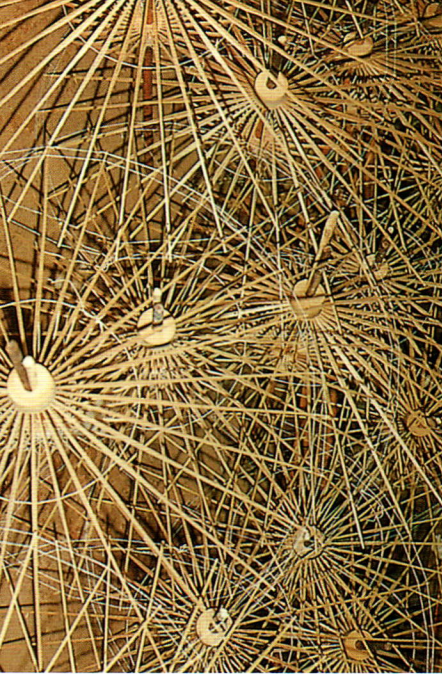






*Beautiful umbrellas in paper and silk
keep the sun and rain away*





Colourful umbrellas, one of northern Thailand's most popular souvenirs

Process in making umbrellas



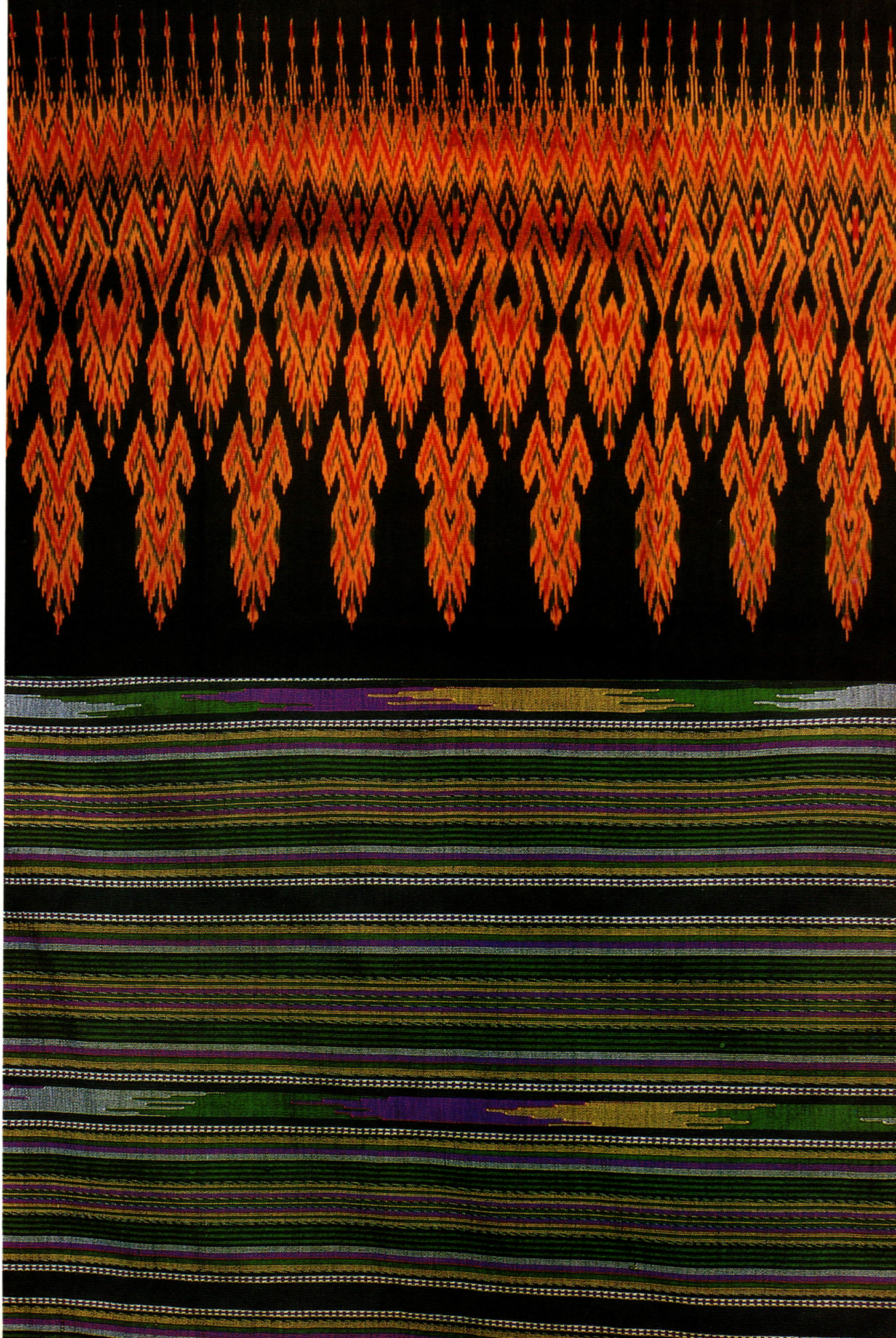
UMBRELLAS

Handmade umbrellas have long played a role in Thai traditional life, used either in ceremonies or, more prosaically, to protect the owner from sun and rain. Probably the most famous manufacturing center today is the little village of Bor Sang, about ten miles east of Chiang Mai, where most of the population devotes its energies to the craft, just as they have for at least 200 years. The umbrellas come in all sizes, from tiny ones suitable for a child to huge ones measuring two or three meters across, and in a great variety of designs.

Bamboo is used for the framework, which is then covered with a locally produced paper called *sa*. The latter, another characteristic northern handicraft, is made by a complex process from the bark of the paper mulberry and other trees and is wafer-thin but also extremely tough. Layer after layer of the paper is glued to the frame, carefully smoothed by hand during each application until it is taut and even. When the paper is dry, the decorations are painted on by hand in oil colors, with each artist specializing in a particular design: dragons, flowers, human figures, scenic views, etc. A final coat of clear lacquer is then sometimes applied to make the umbrella waterproof.

Once produced mainly for use by people in Chiang Mai and other northern centers, the umbrellas are now being made in large quantities for export and many young people are taking up the craft as a full-time occupation.







*Various shades and intricate
patterns of Thai silk*



*Attractive finished products
are worth the efforts*





