The National Museum of Thailand: A Case Study in the Representation of National Identity

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This is the third in a series of case studies exploring the relationship between national identity and its display in national museums.

Thailand’s National Museum is a multi-institution system, with 46 constituent museums in many parts of the country, but the principal component is without doubt the National Museum Bangkok, prominently located in the heart of the old city near the Royal Palace, and housed in a former palace itself. It is “possibly the largest [museum] in Southeast Asia” (Levine, 1980, p.74), it was the first public museum to be established in the Kingdom, and is readily identified as the National Museum by visitors and locals. For these reasons, as well as for its own intrinsic interest, the National Museum Bangkok will be the focus of this study, although reference will be made to other institutional components of the National Museum system.

The History of the Nation-State

In these days when nations and people are plunging recklessly forward, it is too often forgotten that it is impossible to shape the future without having a perfect understanding of the past. That is why the role of
history is still just as important as it ever was, that research into the past is as necessary as research of the present and the future, that museums are not repositories of archaic junk but valuable clues to the evolution of future human progress (Yupho, 1990, p.23).

Geographically, Thailand occupies the central territory of mainland Southeast Asia, its undisputed heartland the plain drained by the north-south running Chao Phraya River. The country has no natural boundaries, however, and its western and northern frontiers with Burma, high, forested mountains inhabited by minority peoples owing allegiance to neither state, have been fought over for centuries. In the south, Thailand extends down the Isthmus of Kra into the Malay peninsula, where its border with Malaysia is another zone of contention, and Thailand’s incorporation of the huge Khorat plateau in the northeast of the country has controversially separated millions of Lao speakers from their cultural home across the Mekong in Laos. Similar tensions have arisen over the demarcation of the border with Cambodia in the east, all these conflicts resulting in Thailand’s having a permanent ambiguity in its territorial definition, a situation brilliantly explored from a historical point of view by Thongchai Winichakul in his study of the development of Thai cartography (Thongchai, 1994).

Notwithstanding this geographical uncertainty, however, the concept of national identity is strong: “In Thailand today there is a widespread assumption that there is such a thing as a common Thai nature or identity” (Thongchai, 1994, p.3). Some scholars see this identity as principally a political assertion: “they are ‘Thai’ as citizens of Thailand, subjects of the Thai king” (Wyatt, 1984, p.1), but it is likely that a feeling of shared history and common cultural values underlies this sense of national identity, even though “none of the things to which the modern Thai now refers — political, cultural, linguistic — existed in its present form until relatively recently” (Wyatt, 1984, p.1). The historical reality is that only to a certain extent, mainly linguistic, did any features of Thai identity precede settlement in what is now Thailand. The forebears of present-day Thai speakers were “originally a tribal people without writing or an organised state” (Rawson, 1990, p.136), and first reached the land that is now Thailand as recently as the eleventh century. Over the next hundred years, the inexorable southward movement of the Thais “carved out new states in the territory formerly ruled by the Khmers” (SarDesai, 1989, p.29), forming an independent capital at Sukhothai in 1219 and even capturing Angkor itself in
1431. These late arrivals to the region, although numerically and militarily superior, nevertheless traded, interacted and intermarried with earlier immigrant groups such as Khmer and Mon, as well as with indigenous peoples and with later immigrants to the region such as the Chinese and Indians, evolving over centuries a more or less homogeneous, but certainly composite, cultural identity.

The original homeland of the Thai-speaking peoples (sometimes referred to as *Tai*), who include not only Siamese Thais but also Laotians and many minority groups in Burma, South China, Vietnam, Cambodia and Malaysia, are unclear, although the majority of contemporary scholarly opinion seems to favour a South Chinese origin, in present-day Yunnan.¹ One minority theory, based on ambiguous archaeological evidence, argues for an indigenous origin for Thais in the Chao Phraya valley, but for the most part Thais are comfortable with an immigrant national identity, free of any immemorial connection to an ancestral homeland. Bhikhu Parekh reports that the three central tenets of official Thai identity are religion, monarchy and nation (Parekh, 1999, p.71), the third term not having any necessary territorial connection but rather an ethnolinguistic meaning. According to David Wyatt, this immigrant national origin means that, in order to understand Thai history, "we must primarily be concerned with people, with culture, and with society, and only secondarily with their environment. The course of Thai history is complex because the historical experience of the Tai and Thai has taken place over and through a series of changing environments — environments that are as much social and cultural as they are geographical" (Wyatt, 1984, pp.1-2). He also makes the claim, somewhat more boldly but supporting it by reference to the historical records, that "for the northern Thai and Siamese, and for the Lao, real history must in some sense have begun in the thirteenth century" (Wyatt, 1984, p.39).

Before the founding of Sukhothai however, the Thais had undergone a religious transformation of immense cultural and historical significance in their adoption of Theravada Buddhism, originally proselytised by "Sri Lankan monks, evident from the early monuments at Sukhothai" (Fisher, 1993, p.152). Setting the Thai apart from their Mahayana Buddhist Khmer neighbours, Theravada Buddhism formed the basis of a community of the faithful to which all Thai could feel they belonged. "It supplanted local animistic spirits with more universal values and encouraged an ethic with social

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¹ I am relying here and subsequently on the information supplied to me in a personal communication of September 2001 by Dr Mongkol Samansuk, anthropologist and Chief Curator of the National Museum Bangkok.
dimensions that transcended the village” (Wyatt, 1984, p.31). Apart from the internal cohesion it provided, Theravada (or Hinayana) Buddhism was to pose a serious and ultimately destructive threat to the Empire of Angkor, “where the masses seem to have appreciated its egalitarian character. No more would they regard their kings as divine” (SarDesai, 1989, p.29). Inevitably acquiring accretions over the centuries from both pre-Buddhist animist traditions and Hinduism, as well as from Mahayana Buddhism, Theravada has remained central to the Thai idea of national identity, as Parekh asserts above.

Over the course of the thirteenth century the Thais, moving down from the upland valleys south into the fertile plain of the Chao Phraya, established a number of strong states such as Lan Na, based on Chiang Mai in the north, Sukhothai in the centre and Lopburi in the south, and hastened the demise of the two great Indianised empires of the region: Pagan in the west and Angkor in the east, although Mongol invasions were the principal cause of Pagan’s fall. Although independent states still, the Thai kingdoms of Lan Na and Sukhothai formed an alliance against the Mongols in 1287, and its success enabled the ruler of Sukhothai, Ramkhamhaeng, to build an extensive kingdom “by a judicious combination of force and diplomacy” (Wyatt, 1984, p.55), and although the empire’s significance as a regional power did not long outlast Ramkhamhaeng’s death in 1298, he is still popularly credited with being the first great Thai ruler and his capital city and temple complex of Sukhothai is regarded as the first Thai capital. He is also credited with devising the Thai script, although this is probably apocryphal. Of arguable importance in its contemporary success, but unarguably important in its legacy, Sukhothai as mentioned above was a Theravada Buddhist state, its values, monuments and statuary reflecting long contact with Singhalese Buddhism, thought to be “a more ‘democratic’ religion (Osborne, 1988, p.34) than the combination of Mahayana Buddhism and Hinduism that characterised Angkor.

The successor Thai state to Sukhothai was Ayutthaya, founded in 1351 by U Thong, “an obscure adventurer” (Wyatt, 1984, p.65) who may have been the son of a leading Chinese merchant, who certainly married a princess of Suphanburi and who probably also married a princess of Lopburi. These connections presumably contributed to his success, as did his choice of capital. Ayutthaya, at the mouth of the Chao Phraya and at the head of the Gulf of Siam, was well placed to dominate the water-borne international trade that was rapidly increasing in the region. The Ayutthaya state quickly
established itself as a power in the region, but by about 1450 a revived Lan Na based in Chiang Mai and the new kingdom of Lan Sang, based in Luang Prabang, were challenging Ayutthaya for leadership of what had become the Thai world. Rivalry among these states prevented their combining in the face of constant incursions from the Burmese, who “captured and sacked all the major Thai capitals between 1558 and 1569” (Wyatt, 1984, p.99) before withdrawing to their capital at Pegu. Ayutthaya recovered, however, under the rule of King Naresuan, who slew the Burmese crown prince in single combat (on elephant back) at the battle of Nong Sarai in 1593, an event celebrated in many Thai historical paintings.

In the early seventeenth century the burgeoning empire of Ayutthaya forged an alliance with the Dutch, who were active traders along the Malay peninsula, and allowed the English East India Company to set up a trading station, although relations were less cordial with the competing Portuguese. Ayutthaya became an important hub in the trade with China and Japan, and France sent two diplomatic missions to King Narai with the dual purposes of diplomacy and Catholicisation. There was much resentment at court however, at what was perceived as undue foreign influence, and on Narai’s death in 1688 a complex palace revolution resulted in the French being thrown out and Catholic converts imprisoned, although Dutch and English traders were allowed to stay. The new dynasty of Phra Phetracha struggled to maintain its authority, and the chronicles of the period, which are the only source, “are filled with stories of dynastic squabbles, disputes over the succession to the throne, and glorious military expeditions” (Wyatt, 1984, p.125). For all its weakness, however, Ayutthaya was still stronger and more stable than Lan Na and Lan Sang, the other Thai states, which suffered repeated Burmese and Cambodian incursions. These attacks culminated in the major Burmese invasion of 1763-1767, which easily captured Chiang Mai and Luang Prabang before going on to make a long-threatened and devastatingly successful assault on Ayutthaya.

Following the fall of Ayutthaya the Burmese withdrew most of their forces to deal with a Chinese invasion at home. This withdrawal allowed an unlikely candidate to emerge as the most powerful Thai leader: Taksin, a young provincial governor who was the issue of a Chinese father and a Siamese mother. Forming a new capital at Thonburi, 20 miles south of Ayutthaya, Taksin won the support of those principalities that needed his help against the Burmese, and Lan Na forces sent against Taksin by the Burmese joined him instead. By the end of 1781 Taksin, with the aid of the Chakri, the Thai
military commander, had conquered Chiang Mai and was engaged in adding eastern principalities to the rapidly growing new empire based in Thonburi. The new state was initially called Siam by non-Thai outsiders, but soon adopted the name to refer to itself. The king himself, however, had succumbed to an extreme religious mania, and his authority was weakened by his increasingly arbitrary and cruel actions. A consensus emerged at court that, for the good of Siam, Taksin had to be replaced, and in early 1782 he was executed according to an ancient law by being tied up in a velvet sack and beaten with a sandalwood club. His chosen successor was the Chakri, whose father came from an old Siamese family and whose mother was Chinese. After a brief coronation ceremony the former military commander, now known as King Ramathibodi (Rama I), immediately ordered the capital moved from Thonburi across to Bangkok, on the east bank of the Chao Phraya river, where it would be less vulnerable to a Burmese invasion from the west.

The expected invasion duly arrived in 1785, but was beaten back in a brilliant campaign, marking “the beginning of the end of the Burmese threat to Siam’s existence” (Wyatt, 1984, p.152) and by the close of the century Siam was the strongest power in the region, counting Lan Na, Lan Sang and Cambodia as tributary states, and centred on a Bangkok court of cosmopolitan diversity and stability. Migration was encouraged, but immigrants were obliged to take Thai names and learn the Thai language, a policy that gradually facilitated the almost seamless assimilation of large numbers of Chinese into all levels of Thai society. Foreign traders were residentially confined to villages, or quarters, built for them along the banks of the Chao Phraya, but could otherwise mingle freely in the capital.

When the first Chakri king died in 1809, the succession passed peacefully to his son, who ruled as Rama II until 1824. By this time international trade in the region had revived, following the Napoleonic wars that had preoccupied Europe for the last thirty years. England was disputing the Siamese trade monopoly in the upper Malay peninsula, a region that was to become increasingly chaotic during the third reign, when Rama III also fought a long war against the Vietnamese over Cambodia. By the time of his death in 1851, though, Rama III had both expanded and stabilised the Siamese empire, remarking presciently on his deathbed that “there will be no more wars with Vietnam and Burma. We will have them only with the West” (cited in Wyatt, 1984, p.180).

The next half-century saw much of the region fall under the suzerainty of
European powers — the British in Burma and Malaya, the French in Indochina. That Siam managed to preserve its independence, albeit with a much reduced territory, was mainly due to the remarkable abilities of the two kings who ruled for this period: Rama IV (Mongkut) until 1868 and his son Rama V (Chulalongkorn) until 1910.2 Although Chulalongkorn was forced to cede Cambodia and Laos east of the Mekong to the French in 1867 and 1893, and upper Malaya to the British in 1909, for the most part Siam was able to play the French off against the British, the two countries agreeing to respect the independence of that part of Siam drained by the Chao Phraya, doubtless recognising the value of Siam as a buffer zone between them. Chulalongkorn made extensive use of foreign advisors and also travelled abroad himself, visiting Europe and bringing back ideas and technologies that would help create the conditions for the modernisation of Siam in the 20th century. As Osborne summarises the achievements of Mongkut and Chulalongkorn over the sixty years of their reigns, they consistently followed “policies that revealed a remarkable capacity to gain the greatest benefit from the new and intrusive element of European power” (Osborne, 1988, p.73). Among these European imports at this time was the concept of public museums.

Rama VI was an ardent Thai nationalist, determined to resist further territorial incursions by France or Britain and spending liberally to build up Siam’s armed forces. Originally declaring neutrality in the First World War, Siam astutely joined in on the allied side in 1917, sending an expeditionary force to France the next year. Participation gave Siam a seat at the Versailles conference, where it lobbied vigorously, and eventually successfully, for full national autonomy and the ending of foreign powers’ extraterritoriality rights in Siam. Rama VI was not interested in political development however, and the absolute monarchy succeeded to by his younger brother, Rama VII, in 1925 was an increasingly contentious anachronism for a modernist state. The great depression of the 1930s caused an economic crisis in Siam, which gave rise to discontent at all levels of society. Rama VII was in fact away from the capital considering methods of constitutional reform when a sudden coup, led by the military, seized control of the government and forced him to return as a constitutional monarch. This arrangement continued uneasily for three years, but Rama VII abdicated in 1935, refusing to serve as a

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2 Mongkut is the monarch played by Yul Brynner in The King and I, a film still banned in Thailand today as being insufficiently respectful to the monarchy. The book by Anna Leonowens, Chulalongkorn’s tutor, on which the film is based, is also banned, and dismissed as a tissue of falsehoods.
figurehead for what he considered an autocratic regime. This regime, the National Assembly, promptly invited the 10-year-old Ananda Mahidol to become king, appointing a regency for him until he reached adulthood.

In 1938, Luang Phibunsongkhram (Phibun) became Prime Minister and remained in office until 1944. Phibun, a committed nationalist and an admirer of Hitler and Mussolini, was to have a lasting effect on the nation’s history, not least in arranging for its name to be changed from Siam to Thailand in 1939. This, he argued, reflected more accurately the identity of the nation as that of Thai-speaking peoples, Siam having been a name originally given to the country by foreigners. Phibun’s economic policies of ‘Thailand for the Thais’ were anti-Chinese and anti-foreign, but at the same time he encouraged the adoption of the Western calendar and the wearing of Western clothes to facilitate and signify the modernisation of the country. Militarily, Thailand exploited the Japanese defeat of France in 1940 to take back land in Laos and Cambodia, but was subsequently forced to accede to a Japanese demand for passage for their armies through Thai territory in return for Japanese assurances of Thai independence. Impressed by the Japanese successes in Southeast Asia, Thailand declared war on the U.S. and Great Britain in 1942, but the Thai ambassador in Washington, Seni Pramoj, refused to deliver the declaration, instead organising a Free Thai movement of resistance.

After the Japanese surrender, Phibun having been forced out of office in 1944, the Thai government repudiated all agreements with Japan and affirmed the illegality of the declaration of war, expressing its intention to invite Seni Pramoj back as Prime Minister. In fact, a chaotic period ensued, featuring several changes of government and the shocking death of the young king, Rama VIII. The youth, who had just returned to Bangkok, was found dead in his bed from a gunshot wound, and the mystery surrounding this event is still a taboo topic in Thailand. The instability was ended in 1948 by a coup that returned Phibun to power, where he remained until 1957 in an uneasy relationship with the new king, Rama IX. Economically, however, the situation improved, boosted by the demand for commodities occasioned by the Korean war and, later, by U.S. involvement in the Vietnam war. Development since then has been uneven, and political coups have been depressingly frequent, yet Thailand has entered the 21st century as a stable, modern nation, its territory unthreatened and its democratic institutions largely intact. Much of this stability is due to the moral authority of the king, Bhumibol Adulyadej, whose popular standing and good sense have served as “an ultimate resort in
times of crisis, accessible equally to individual petitioners and general public opinion” (Wyatt, 1984, p.306). The king studied at Harvard and is known for his enthusiasm for the Western pursuits of photography and jazz saxophone. At the same time, he is a deeply committed Buddhist, having spent time as a monk. He therefore symbolises in his person the twofold character of Thailand today — both a traditional and a modern nation.

Rama IX has also been a tremendous source of support for the minority hill tribes of Thailand. In the late 18th century, groups of shifting cultivators began to move down from the Himalayan foothills of southern China and Tibet into the heavily forested areas of northern Thailand, Burma, Laos and Vietnam, “forced across the borders by civil war, political pressures or simply a need to expand into new areas” (Davies & Wu, 1989, p.19). Ignored for a long time by otherwise preoccupied central governments, hill tribe populations grew steadily, both through migration and reproduction, and by 2000 there were perhaps over one million hill tribe villagers in Thailand. The Thai government officially recognises six main tribal divisions, and its policy towards them is that of “assimilating Thai culture through trade contacts and education” (Levine, 1980, p.187). In fact, hill tribe villagers are subject to severe discrimination and exploitation by both Siamese Thais and local opium warlords, and many live in such remote areas that such illegalities go largely unchecked. Outside the cash economy and unable to speak, read or write Thai, the villagers have few opportunities in mainstream Thai culture, from which they are excluded and to which they feel no allegiance. “Although members of some tribes have embraced Islam, Buddhism, or Christianity in response to missionary work, most retain strong animist convictions” (Levine, 1980, pp.186-7). At the same time, with hill tribe populations doubling every ten years or so, and shifting cultivation becoming increasingly difficult with Thai expansion into the forests, self-sufficiency is no longer an option. Cultural tourism has represented one alternative source of income, but many villagers are forced into growing opium as a cash crop as a way to buy food. The king has personally initiated a number of crop substitution projects and other ventures to help the hill tribes, but their situation is a somewhat anomalous one in the Thai body politic, and their social problems are increasing.
The History of the National Museum

The first recorded museum in Thailand was established in 1862, when King Mongkut (Rama IV) ordered the construction of a building in the grounds of the Royal Palace to be used as “an exhibition hall for his collection of art and antiques” (Yupho, 1990, p.3). This was to be the king’s private museum, with no thought of opening the collection to the public although, as in the case of the European princely cabinets of curiosities on which it may have been modelled, Rama IV allowed distinguished visitors to view the contents. The name of the building in Thai was Prapas-Bibidhabhanda, or ‘visiting various materials’ but the collection strongly reflected the king’s interest in Buddhist sculpture and religious artefacts. Prior to ascending the throne, Mongkut had been a monk for many years, and had intended to remain a monk all his life, never expecting to become king.

In 1874, six years into the reign of King Chulalongkorn (Rama V), the king had the collection moved to a larger building, the Concordia Hall, within the grounds of the Royal Palace, and opened it on a restricted basis to the public. The English word museum was used for the institution, which was the first public museum in Thailand. In 1887 Wang Na, the Prince-Successor’s ‘Palace of the Front’ became vacant when the incumbent died, and King Chulalongkorn had the museum transferred to the three halls at the front of this palace, abolishing the title and office of Prince-Successor, a kind of deputy king, in favour of a more modern and internationally recognisable Crown Prince. By royal decree the museum was reorganised into a directorate, placed in 1889 under the Department of Education and opened to the public twice a week. The collection was organised into art objects, antiques and natural history specimens, and catalogues describing the collection were produced in Thai and English. The museum also expanded its activities at this time into archaeological excavations in Thailand.

In 1926 King Prjadhipok (Rama VII) founded a Royal Institute of Literature, Archaeology, and Fine Arts with Prince Damrong Rajanubhab as President and Professor George Coedes, a French Academician, as Secretary General. The king donated the remaining buildings of the Palace of the Front to the Royal Institute, giving them responsibility for reorganising the museum, now renamed the Bangkok Museum, as well as administering the newly-formed Vajirañana Library on the same site. New buildings were constructed for storage, display and administration, and old ones were renovated.
and remodelled. Although most of the new structures were made of wood, a brick shed was constructed to house the royal funeral chariots. At this time, the art objects and archaeological finds comprising the museum collection were apparently displayed for the most part according to their materials of construction, such that there was a Bronze Room, a Terra Cotta Room, a Stone Room and the like.\(^3\) As Yupho remarks, “visitors could appreciate the collection arranged under such a system only if they had had a basic knowledge of art history and archaeology” (Yupho, 1990, p.7).

In 1933, following the coup of the previous year that ended absolute monarchy in Thailand, responsibility for both the museum and the library were transferred from the Royal Institute to the newly-formed Fine Arts Department and renamed the National Museum and the National Library. For many years subsequently, however, the Fine Arts Department found it difficult to fund its institutions adequately, since the government and public “at the time did not appreciate the importance of a museum and it was easier to make organizational changes and site improvement than to change attitudes to the museum” (Yupho, 1990, p.8). At the same time, use of the museum site was shared by many different official bodies and the only access was through the museum gates; since these had to allow unrestricted access, “the Museum was swarming with people day and night . . . guarding the treasures of the Bangkok National Museum was very difficult” (Yupho, 1990, p.8).

The economic boom of the 1950s at last made more money available for structural improvements and reorganisation, and new homes were found for many of the institutions that had shared the National Museum site, giving the Museum both room to expand and a budget to enable it to do so appropriately. Major repairs and renovations were undertaken, some of the buildings were relocated to conform to a more accessible ground plan, and two new structures were constructed in 1967 to display the huge sculpture collection. In the same year the museum grounds were landscaped, and as part of the renovation initiative an international museum consultant from UNESCO was invited to advise on future exhibition and administration practices. Also over the same period, the Fine Arts Department launched a public relations campaign to persuade the public of the importance and value of museums. Valuable recognition of the museum’s role has also been provided by the royal family: Rama IX formally opened the new

\(^3\) Reportedly, these usages are still current among some of the older museum staff today, although the classificatory system itself is defunct.
exhibits in 1967, inspiring the local Standard newspaper to conclude that “never has public money been better spent than on this effort to preserve and display the heritage of a nation of South-East Asia” (cited in Yupho, 1990, p.24). There have also been several royal visits since then.

The Building and its Physical Setting

As described above, the national Museum occupies buildings that previously formed part of Wang Na, the ‘front palace’ of the Prince-Successor, which was traditionally built to guard the entrance to the ruling king’s palace. Following the transfer of the capital from Thonburi to Bangkok in 1782, the Royal Palace was designed with its main entrance to the north. Wang Na was accordingly built to the north of this gate, although its entrance has since been moved around to the east. Originally much more extensive in area than it is now, Wang Na has been subdivided over the years to provide grounds for Thammasat University, the College of Fine Arts and the National Theatre, among other institutions, and the large park that Wang Na once contained has been incorporated into the open public space of Sanam Luang that now separates the National Museum from Wat Phra Keo and the Royal Palace. The structures forming the museum at present were built at different times, some in places different from their present location, and have a resulting stylistic variation, but the entire complex achieves a pleasing cohesion. “Much of the charm of the National Museum lies in the graceful traditional galleries and the pavilions, even if the modern galleries that embrace the original buildings are better suited to the display of objects” (Kelly, 2001, p.101).

The oldest buildings in the museum were built in the 1780s in early Rattanakosin, or Bangkok period, style. Traditional Siamese buildings were wooden, and because little of Ayutthaya survived the Burmese sack of 1767, Rattanakosin architecture is by far the most prevalent style for religious buildings and palaces in Thailand today. It is based on traditional forms, and although some scholars see this style as a debased one, in which a “highly ornate reinterpretation of older styles blunted the edge of their quality” (Rawson, 1990, p.154). Others are more generous, concluding that “a combination of delicacy and surface decoration, especially in wood, resulted in graceful reminders, if not copies, of traditional styles” (Fisher, 1993, p.182). The Rattanakosin style is certainly distinctive, featuring white brick and stucco walls supporting high
gables, overhanging eaves and long, steep, stepped roofs tiled usually in orange rectangles with green borders. The ridge poles end in flamboyantly soaring finials known as chofa, meaning ‘sky tassel’ and said to represent a hamsa, the goose-like mount of the Hindu god Brahma, who is often depicted on the gables. Gable boards are often carved in the undulating shapes of naga serpents, mythical creatures believed to be protectors of Buddhism and also associated with water and with royalty. Although the Rattanakosin style partakes of elements of traditional Khmer and Burmese architecture, the surface decoration shows definite Chinese influences, perhaps unsurprising given “the large expatriate Chinese population of Bangkok and its environs” (Rawson, 1990, p.155).

The Prince-Successor of Rama IV in the 1860s, Pin Klao, was an early Siamese Europhile, and his private residence is a visually jarring blend of European and Thai architectural elements. Appropriately, the museum uses the building to display contemporary examples of furniture from Thai, European and Chinese traditions. A man of eclectic taste, Pin Klao also had built a traditional Chinese house, decorated with murals depicting scenes from Chinese literary classics. Pin Klao’s most charming legacy to the museum, however, may be the Red House, a fine teak building from the late 18th century. Originally the private residence of a sister of Rama I, it was moved from the Royal Palace on the death of Rama II to the old palace at Thonburi, where it became the residence of Rama II’s dowager queen. When her son, Pin Klao, was named Prince Successor to King Mongkut (Rama IV), he had the house where he had lived as a child moved to Wang Na, where it has now been furnished in early Bangkok style, including objects that once belonged to Pin Klao’s mother.

The most recent additions to the National Museum’s buildings are the two large, L-shaped exhibition wings at the rear of the compound. Although clearly built for function rather than grace, their exterior appearance conforms harmoniously with the style of the older structures they enclose and their symmetry contributes a pleasing balance to the museum layout. Perhaps the least attractive building on the site is the concrete shed built to contain the royal funeral chariots: huge, ornately decorated vehicles that are still used for royal cremation ceremonies. Several small open-air pavilions from different periods provide interest to the compound without cluttering it,

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4 In spite of its rather ungainly appearance to many Western eyes, this eclectic style remained popular in Thailand, being employed for some buildings in the Royal Palace as well as for the National Theatre.
and shade trees and ponds have been placed so as to form delightfully peaceful courtyards. The grounds also serve to display a varied mix of museum objects including Chinese stone sculpture, iron cannon and decorative architectural elements.

As is the case with all buildings in Thailand, the National Museum has its own spirit house, a miniature shelter built to house Phra Phum, the lord of the land, who may have been disturbed by human construction. The Thai spirit house is usually placed on top of a pole, at eye level, where the shadow of the main building cannot fall on it, but that of the National Museum surmounts a 12-foot rocky mound, offerings being placed on a platform at its base. The mound was constructed during the reign of Rama V, and is a representation of the Himalayan Mount Kailas, the abode of the Hindu God Shiva. Apparently, a similar structure in the Royal Palace was used in the Tonsure Ceremony for royal princes, and it is “thought that the artificial Mount Kailasa in the Wang Na Palace probably had a similar role” (Coleman, 1996, p.66). Whatever its original function, the spirit house is an attractive reminder to non-Thai visitors of the importance of older Animist and Hindu beliefs in Thai Buddhism, and an indispensable spiritual feature of the museum for locals.

The museum has an impressive range of auxiliary facilities, including a modern lecture theatre, a reference library with books and other publications mainly in Thai and English, a bookshop and a simple cafeteria. Situated in the heart of old Bangkok it is easily accessible by public transport and is very much an architectural feature of the city, although few signs direct the visitor on foot to its location. The grounds and buildings are tidy, clean and well-maintained, and the museum as a whole, although in some ways “an overwhelming place, perhaps best absorbed in a series of visits rather than all at once” (Kelly, 2001, p.109), is nevertheless a haven of calm and beauty in the midst of noisy, dirty, bustling Bangkok.

The Stated Mission of the Museum

As far as I have been able to discover, there is no official written statement in English of the mission of the National Museum of Thailand. According to the Chief Curator, Dr Mongkol Samansuk, in a personal communication of September 2001, no precise equivalent exists in Thai either, in large part because what was to become the National Museum was first established by royal decree, and no formal guidelines were
either given or thought to be necessary. However, Khun Mongkol added that Thailand has been a member since 1947 of the International Council of Museums (ICOM), an organisation closely related to UNESCO, and subscribes to ICOM’s definition of a museum as a “permanent institution which conserves and displays, for purposes of study, education and enjoyment, collections of objects of cultural or scientific significance” (cited in Yupho, 1990, p.12). While attempting to perform all of these generally accepted functions of a museum, Dr Mongkol added, the National Museum Bangkok paid special attention to conservation, as so many of the pieces in the collection were valuable, rare and fragile.

A further clue to the implicit mission of the museum is supplied by the official guide, written by a former Director, which states that Thailand’s National Museums “are all museums of art and archaeology” (Chongkol, 1999, p.7). There is no mention in the guide of natural history, for instance, and the description of the permanent exhibition on Thai history claims that: “Historical remains of the ancient splendour of this nation consist mainly of ruins and religious objects of artistic value” (Chongkol, 1999, p.16). Dr Mongkol confirmed this general aesthetic orientation by stating that the first consideration in choosing objects for display in the historical galleries was their beauty. He also told me that the history exhibition was mainly designed for the foreign visitor with only a couple of hours to spare who wants a brief introduction to Thai history. The other two permanent exhibition galleries, comprising the bulk of the museum’s gallery space, are devoted, according to the Brief Guide to the National Museum, to the archaeological and art history collections and to the decorative art and ethnological collection. The architectural monuments in the grounds, such as the Red House and the pavilions, are described in the guide as: “Other exhibits of interest.”

Education is reported to be a leading concern of the museum, and school children in uniform are allowed in free of charge at any time, as are monks and military personnel. A school outreach program brings groups to the museum and provides them with special tours and use of the library; also, training courses for teachers are run by museum staff to help schools make the most of the museum’s facilities. An active organisation of National Museum Volunteers trains docents and provides frequent free tours in a number of languages to visitors from other countries. Admission fees are set at an affordable 20 Baht (50 cents) for locals, 40 Baht for tourists, including a copy of the excellent Brief Guide mentioned above, available in a range of languages, and there are regular free
days. Approximately 50 per cent of the visitors to the National Museum Bangkok are tourists, and Dr Mongkul would like to see more locals at the museum, perhaps through an expansion of the existing outreach program. A new course in Museology was set up in the late 1990s by the Department of Archaeology at the University of Fine Arts, and the museum curators are increasingly professionally trained. Academic research by museum staff is encouraged, but in practice little gets done because of time constraints; as Dr Mongkul mordantly confessed: "Most of the time we just have to concentrate on making sure objects are not stolen."

Political and Financial Control

To describe its bureaucratic affiliation, the National Museum Bangkok is administered by the Office of Archaeology and National Museums in the Fine Arts Department of the Ministry of Education. In a conversation with the Director, Dr Somchai Na Nakhonphanom, in March 2002, Dr Somchai made it very clear that he felt free of any political control over the direction or policies of the National Museum Bangkok, but he also said that he was very aware of the responsibility involved in representing Thailand and its heritage to tourists in particular. For this reason, he felt that it was not the museum's rôle to mount an exhibition on anything that might be deemed controversial, since the issues involved were likely to be too complex to convey adequately to foreigners, although at the same time he did not feel that there was "one historical truth" that had to be presented. As an example, he referred to the museum's even-handed exposition of the five competing theories with regard to the original homeland of the Thai people, even though some of these were more obviously nationalist than others. Also, he said, the government was the Royal Thai Government, the museum and its collections were to a large extent a royal benefaction, the king and the royal family often visited the museum, and it would be disrespectful to display anything that might offend them.

The operating budget for the National Museum Bangkok comes down the bureaucratic chain from the government, such that the museum feels that it is competing for budget share not only with other National Museums around the country, but with archaeological projects, schools, art galleries and other institutions under the Ministry of Education umbrella. The budget has been a serious concern since the Asian financial
crisis of the late 1990s, and many anticipated projects have had to be shelved. More and more, the museum has been appealing to sources of private sponsorship, mainly Thai companies, for the operating revenue to mount special exhibitions or maintain permanent ones. This has apparently been a successful policy in general, but many of the local companies themselves are feeling the effects of the economic downturn. A vivid example of the disparity in corporate sponsorship could be seen at the time of the special exhibition on “Four Centuries of Thai-Danish Relations” in 2001, mounted to commemorate the state visit to Thailand of the Danish royal family. The superb catalogue for this exhibition (Trier, 2001), produced by a Thailand-based Scandinavian media company in Thai and English, but not Danish, lists a group of 9 companies and charitable foundations for their sponsorship; 8 of them are Danish, and the only local representative is Thai Airways International.

One other consequence of the financial uncertainty occasioned by the 1997 crash was that the museum, in planning its renovation of the Thai history exhibit in 2002, was obliged to award the contract to a Thai contractor with no experience of designing and building museum exhibitions, because the more experienced foreign companies, under the mountingly disadvantageous exchange rate, were all too expensive. After several delays and misunderstandings, the new gallery finally opened almost one year after its scheduled completion date, and represents something of a compromise from what the curatorial staff had originally envisioned. Nevertheless, the museum staff are clearly a committed, optimistic group and have achieved impressive results in spite of their increasingly meagre financial resources.

Divisions and Themes

The closest building to the entrance, apart from a charming pavilion, is the 18th century Siwamokphaphiman Hall, originally an audience chamber for the Prince-Successor. It is now used as the Thai history gallery, subdivided into three sections, the Sukhothai period, the Ayutthaya period and the Bangkok period. Behind this gallery is the Red House, as noted above, a painted teak structure from the late 18th century containing furniture and household items from the same period. Just across from these two buildings is the Buddhaisawan Chapel, built in 1787 to house the revered Buddha image Phra Buddhasihiing. Popular legend has it that this Buddha was originally made in
Sri Lanka, but as the Guide disarmingly admits, “the style of the image seems to resemble the later Chiang Saen style of the Lan Na state or Sukhothai style” (Chongkol, 1999, p.113). The chapel is not really used as a gallery, being both a functioning religious building and itself an exhibit as “an outstanding example of monastery architecture of the early Bangkok period” (Kelly, 2001, p.101). The interior walls are decorated with superb paintings from the lives of the Buddha.

Directly behind the chapel is the Issarawinitchai Hall, built in the reign of Rama III as the main Audience Hall for Wang Na and sometimes referred to as the throne room. It is used for special temporary exhibitions. The new shed for the royal funeral chariots is off to the side outside this hall, tucked away as discretely as is possible for such a large building. Behind the Issarawinitchai Hall is the main complex of the old central palace, a labyrinthine cluster of buildings divided into about a dozen different linked galleries and enclosing two small courtyards. The exhibition spaces comprising this complex are arranged thematically, featuring collections of precious objects; transportation devices; theatre arts and games; ceramics; ivory; mother of pearl inlay; old weapons; gold treasures; stone inscriptions; wood carvings; costumes and textiles; Buddhist religious articles; musical instruments.

To the southwest and northwest of the old palace complex, forming the back corners of the museum compound, are two purpose-built structures erected in the 1960s to ease the museum’s display congestion problems. They are spacious, well-lit galleries that blend remarkably well with the overall character of the museum compound. The south wing gallery is devoted to artefacts from “the world-renowned prehistoric site at Ban Chiang” (Chongkol, 1999, p.22), a UNESCO World Heritage site, and also contains the museum’s pre-13th century art history collection as well as its Asian art objects, conceived of as religious sculptures from the region influenced by the religious and artistic traditions of India. Apart from the Ban Chiang and Asian art sections, the gallery is arranged principally though not exclusively along chronological lines, different sections dealing with Lopburi art, ancient Hindu sculpture, Dvaravati art, Javanese sculpture and Srivijaya art. The north wing gallery displays the art traditions of Thailand since the 13th century, housing art objects from the Lan Na, Sukhothai, Ayutthaya and Bangkok styles. Other sections in this gallery feature coins, banknotes and stamps, and a display of Bangkok-period decorative arts.

While the north wing and south wing galleries confer a pleasing symmetry to the
museum compound overall, there are enough irregularly placed structures to prevent any monotony in the design. Tucked behind the north wing gallery are the Chinese house built by Pin Klao and a 1988 construction, the Chao Phraya Yommarat Hall, also containing scenes from Chinese literary classics. Just in front of these, between the north wing gallery and the royal funeral barge shed, is Pin Klao's hybrid house, next to the museum cafeteria and the spirit house mound. And although they are not galleries in that they do not display anything except themselves, the four delightfully airy pavilions of different styles and periods that are placed around the compound add grace and charm to the layout as well as furnishing "an outstanding example of the Thai woodcarvers' art" (Ringis, 1995, p.91).

Exhibition Strategies

Perhaps inevitably, given the history of the collection and the buildings in which it is housed, the display policies at the National Museum Bangkok tend to emphasise its value as a historical site in itself as much as a repository of objects. That is, the cultural and historical significance — and, in the case of the Buddhasawan Chapel, religious significance — of the architectural elements are as much features of the museum visit as viewing the collection. With the exception of the purpose-built south wing and north wing galleries, therefore, exhibition strategies have always to be subordinated to the demands of a building not necessarily suitable for the display of objects. Where this strategy works best, of course, is in buildings such as the Red House and Pin Klao's house, which contain furniture and household items of the period. A sense of that period is thus powerfully evoked by the use of items that actually occupied the same space at the time. A distinct restraint in the employment of explanatory labels no doubt contributes to the verisimilitude of the experience, but can also be frustrating in view of the official guide book's rather spare and offhand mention of "furniture of the period and some original items of European furniture" (Chongkol, 1999, p.153).

Labelling is in fact patchy and inconsistent throughout the museum. Even in the purpose-built south wing and north wing galleries, which are the most closely modelled on conventional western models, there are region or period explanatory signboards at the entrances to the galleries, together with useful maps, but individual objects are poorly served, often with a one word identifier, and perhaps a date, but no contextual
information. Furthermore, although the vast majority of the objects in these galleries are religious sculptures, the signboards, which deal clearly and informatively with archaeology and art history, provide little or no information about religion. Given the complexity and interest of Thailand’s Buddhist heritage, “the three streams of Buddhism, Brahmanic ritual and animism” (Klausner, 1993, p.375), as well as the impossibility of appreciating the full power of the sculptures without understanding at least something of their religious significance, this dearth of contextual information is both a surprising omission and a missed opportunity, although this failure to provide adequate context is certainly not something confined only to the National Museum Bangkok.\(^5\) Yao-hwei Chuang, writing of the presentation of Buddhism in museums in Taiwan and Britain, has written that “the display of Buddhist objects in museums is not always successful. The sublime significance of the objects is sometimes virtually lost once they become part of museum collections. Displays can often fail to expound the in-depth significance of Buddhist objects, as people see their value as residing only in aesthetics” (Chuang, 2000, p.113). In the National Museum Bangkok, the display of “objects relating to the Buddhist church,” as the gallery is called, also wastes an opportunity to explain the significance of monks’ bowls, robes, and votive paraphernalia as it is labelled for the most part only in Thai.

A similar failure to provide information in depth is to be found in the gallery of stone inscriptions, a cluttered, poorly-lit space in the central cluster. Some of these impressive steleae date back to the 8th Century, and in a variety of shapes, sizes and styles there are examples of inscriptions in a wide range of Asian languages and scripts, including some of the earliest examples of the Thai alphabet. These steleae were all discovered in what is now Thailand, and could be used imaginatively and dramatically to tell the story of the country’s history and development. Instead, they are crammed together haphazardly, many with no labels, some with labels in Thai only, and a few with identification in English only of the date and the script.\(^6\) No translations of the inscriptions are available, and the official guide book claims that the tablets are “significant as archaeological and historical evidence” (Chongkol, 1999, p.148) without

\(^5\) Some fuller information on religious sculpture is supplied by the official guidebook, but the emphasis is still on art history rather than religious significance.

\(^6\) The museum has a general policy of labelling in Thai and English, but often more space on the label is taken up by the Thai since information in detail is considered “not necessary for foreigners” (Mongkol Samansuk, personal communication, March 2002).
explaining why. The casual visitor has no idea even of the subject matter of the inscriptions: religious, legal, commemorative, bureaucratic? It is not a gallery in which many people will linger.

In many of the other galleries in the central cluster, such as those holding weapons, musical instruments, gold treasures, puppets, masks and palanquins, the labelling tends to stress the royal provenance of the object rather than its use. Articles are merely said to have been presented to Rama IV or owned by Rama I, and the official guidebook adds little further information. One gallery is devoted entirely to gifts received by the Thai kings from the leaders of other countries, a rather appealingly heterogeneous curiosity shop of items from around the world, but the aim of the exhibition seems not to display the articles themselves as to demonstrate the recognition afforded the Thai monarchy by heads of other states. The textile gallery is poorly lit and inadequately labelled, and is given over mainly to the display of military uniforms and court dress, rather than celebrating the rich tradition of Thai weaving. A more successful gallery is that displaying mother-of-pearl inlay work, with items ranging from huge temple doors from the early Rattanakosin period to contemporary articles such as a telephone, showing, according to the signboard, "that the technique and the art of mother-of-pearl inlay is still up to date."

Overall, the exhibition strategies employed at the National Museum Bangkok must be described as conventional, at best. The old palace buildings are obviously hard to work as display areas, but too much has been crammed into them in many cases, and although the galleries are thematically organised, the result is still closer to a cabinet of curiosities than to a modern museum. Even in the bright, open spaces of the north wing and south wing galleries, which offer the greatest potential for imaginatively varied presentation styles, the regular, formal display of religious sculptures without the contextualising information necessary for full appreciation of anything other than their aesthetic qualities tends to be monotonous. On the end wall of one of these galleries, a huge map purports to show the routes by which Indian culture reached Southeast Asia, an excellent idea, but the execution is poor. There are no dates anywhere on the map, and this chronological indeterminacy is exacerbated by inconsistency among the map labels, which in some cases give geographical identifications such as Borneo or Java, while other areas are identified only by political designations from widely differing eras, such

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7 The musical instrument gallery is frustratingly silent, given the distinctive, delicate sound of Thai classical music.
as Thailand and Champa.

A good signboard could have resolved some of this confusion, but none is provided. Nor is there any explanation of one of the most evocative objects in the museum: a delicate, 1st Century Roman lamp, found near Kanchanaburi. Not only is it a marvellous object in its own right, but it could have been used dramatically to illustrate the unexpected trade linkages of two thousand years ago.

Overall impression

The Thai national slogan is said to be “nation, king, religion” (Neher, 1991, p.29), the concepts symbolised by the colours of the Thai flag. In the National Museum Bangkok evidence abounds for the centrality of royalty and religion in the culture, but representations of the nation are more elusive. There are no secular heroes of Thai history in the museum displays, nor is there any celebration of the achievements of ordinary people. Archaeological and historical objects from other cultures in the Southeast Asian region are displayed just as prominently as things that are specifically Thai, although the indigenous walking Buddha style of the Sukhothai period is hailed as a “highlight of Thai culture” (Chongkol, 1999, p.78). Nationalist assertion of any overt kind is, in fact, markedly absent, and most of the maps in the National Museum Bangkok are for the purpose of showing archaeological sites such as Ban Chiang, which happens to be in present-day Thai territory but has no claimed connection with Thai culture. Indeed, the museum classifies any art heritage before the 13th Century, when the Thais declared Sukhothai to be independent from the Khmer Empire, as “Pre-Thai” (Chongkol, 1999, p.32).

The implied classification of both Pre-Thai and Sukhothai sculpture as art objects restricts the scope of Thai history still further. “Objects of historical significance mostly belong to the Bangkok period since the majority of objects from the Ayutthaya period were destroyed with the city in 1767” (Chongkol, 1999, p.16). The history of the nation, then, as presented in the museum, coincides precisely with that of the Chakri dynasty. “Theoretically and legally above politics,” writes Clark Neher, “the Thai monarch is the national symbol, the supreme patron who reigns over all, and the leader of the Buddhist religion” (Neher, 1991, p.35), and the National Museum Bangkok provides strong support for this identification of the king with both the nation and Buddhism. By
exhibiting objects related to the monarchy and its trappings, that is, the museum is representing the nation. Thongchai Winichakul concludes his study of Thai maps with a discussion of nationhood and its symbolic representation: “The symbolism of nationhood is normally the conjugation of several discourses, each of which is effective in itself. That makes the symbol of nationhood a rich and potent icon” (Thongchai, 1994, p.171). It is interesting, and surely admirable, that the museum does not seek to represent or reinforce nationhood through any of the other discourses discovered and discussed by Thongchai which, as well as spurious maps illustrating a wholly imagined past, include the official fostering of hatred for external enemies such as Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos and Burma as “one of the most effective strategies to differentiate We-self and otherness” (Thongchai, 1994, p.169).

Many of Thongchai’s gloomier observations on Thai nationalism, then, and the manipulation of its symbols by the “hegemonic conservative culture” (Anderson, 1998, p.296) of state institutions, are not really supported by the displays in the National Museum Bangkok. In one important respect, though, the museum is in accord with Thongchai’s thesis, when he discusses the case of “minorities who are well inside the geo-body but are on the edge of Thainess, ethnically, religiously, or ideologically, and are not well accepted into the domain of Thainess. These are the sensitive areas where a confrontation is imminent” (Thongchai, 1994, p.170). Striking by its absence in the museum is any representation of people who, while having Thai nationality, are not speakers of Thai or adherents to Thai Buddhism. Among such groups would be the Chinese, the hill tribes, and the Muslims. None of these minority groups is openly discriminated against legally, and in fact the government has striven to provide opportunities for them to participate more fully in Thai society while retaining their cultural distinctiveness. The economically powerful Chinese, who were until the 1980s confined to a system of “pariah entrepreneurship” by which they and the Thai political authorities “agreed to respect and support each other’s spheres of influence” (Neher, 1991, p.48), are now playing a more active, open rôle in politics. The encouragement of sustainable development in hill tribe communities has been a personal project of the king and, in particular, of the Crown Princess, for many years. And “the state of Thailand has allowed the Muslims of Southern Thailand to maintain their own religious schools and the ‘khadi’ courts to adjudicate matters relating to such things as marriage and the family” (Parekh, 1999, p.74).
Nevertheless, popular discrimination exists against these and other minority communities, and the National Museum Bangkok could do much more to acknowledge, for instance, the rôle that the Chinese have played in Thai history, especially in view of the fact that the first Chakri monarch had a Chinese mother. Similarly, the centrality of Buddhism to representations of national identity in the museum implicitly excludes those Thai visitors who profess different creeds, who are not represented at all in the permanent exhibitions. In a 2001 temporary exhibition celebrating 400 years of Thai-Danish relations, a signboard on Thai-Danish anthropological collaboration noted that 20 per cent of Thailand’s population belonged to minority cultures, including 10 million Chinese and the forest-dwelling Mlabri, “the oldest settlers on the indochinese peninsula.” Of the other minorities, the signboard asserts that “the more spectacular ones are the hilltribes,” but provides little or no information on their origins, lifestyles, languages, religious beliefs, giving instead the impression that they are considered an attraction belonging to the country like historical or architectural monuments. A few photographs showed Mlabri and hill tribe villagers, but no material culture items were displayed. Other institutions in the National Museum system may deal with minority cultures, and there is a museum of hill tribe culture on the campus of Chiang Mai University, but given the centrality and prestige of the National Museum Bangkok, and its aim to “preserve and display the heritage of a nation of South-East Asia” (Yupho, 1990, p.24), these lacunae in the museum’s exhibitions are regrettable.

For all the criticism levelled against it above, however, it must be emphasised that the National Museum Bangkok is nevertheless an extraordinary institution housing a great collection, and a wonderful place to visit. A new gallery of Thai history opened in 2002, and a new Director is to be appointed in the near future. It will be fascinating to see whether the museum’s exhibition policies begin to change in a more inclusive direction. Kristin Kelly maintains that “as a survey of the art of Southeast Asia, and in particular that of Thailand, the collection of the National Museum is unsurpassed” (Kelly, 2001, p.109), as indeed it is. But the National Museum should and could be a great deal more than an art museum.

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8 William J. Klausner reports that “Indian and Chinese communities in Thailand are often the butt of jokes and subject to prejudice” (Klausner, 1993, p.380).

9 Like all the labels, this was in Thai and English, but not Danish.
REFERENCES


