

ARTS AND CRAFTS IN SIAM

By WALTER BUCHLER

The Siamese have always been an artistic and musical people. In the early times they received their education in the Wats (temples), of which there are any number in Siam, the monks acting as their teachers. Thus it is not surprising to find today how great an influence religion plays in all the fine and applied arts of Siam. Forms and decorative details of the subjects or articles made are often copied from the Wats or are illustrative of some episode in the Ramayana, or the story of the Life of the Lord Buddha.

In olden times there were no schools of painting for the training of painters; a man who wished to become a painter would join the group of boys whom the experienced artist generally gathered about him. By watching him and helping him in his work these apprentices themselves became experts. The artist in Siam has always been highly respected by the people and is very conservative, working only when so inclined. In the olden days there were two sections of artists: one working under the king's patronage, the other doing private work. The king would inquire through his officials as to the best artists in the country and collect them when he had work for them to do. These artists were divided into ten groups (called *Chang Sib Mu*) and covering all the arts and crafts. They lived in their own houses and were paid by the king.

The older school of artists used mostly crude and highly contrasting colors, as can be seen from the paintings on the interior walls of Wat buildings and cloisters. They constitute a mass of bright colors and pictures, crammed with episodes (kings, courtiers, animals, spirits, towns, scenes of country life, etc.) from the Ramayana and other Siamese poetry and literature. All these wall paintings, which in reality are huge canvasses calling for an infinite amount of labor, are painted by hand. Books in olden times were also illustrated by hand, and that is why books of this kind are so rare. These books were more for show than for reading.

Artists of the old school used colored powders imported from China for their paints, and these were something similar to what is nowadays used for fresco work. Red, emerald green, navy blue, brick red, black, and gold were the more popular colors, and were used in their pure form. The powders were mixed in small porcelain bowls with water and a kind of gum arabic, and when required for use, a little more water was added. The paint brushes were made at home from hairs of the ears of oxen, being put together inside a bamboo, something after the style of a Chinese brush. The canvas con-

sisted of ordinary cloth stretched on a frame, and the colors would keep for years without any preserving medium or varnish being applied.

Nowadays Siamese artists use modern materials imported from abroad, though for certain kinds of work, such as bible containers and decoration in the Wats, the artists of the old school still use the old materials.

Siam has a tropical climate and the intense glare of the sun is apt to affect certain colors, such as white, yellow, and light blue, which turn paler and paler till they become almost white. White turns a dirty black, and yellow goes more quickly than any other color. No medium has yet been found in Siam to prevent this, and were it discovered, it would be of great value in this country and in other tropical countries too. Only one or two kinds of paper will stand the climate of Siam, and artists here are very careful in the selection of the material they buy, practically all of which nowadays comes from abroad.

There is still a great deal of painting done in the Wats, especially the Royal Wats, as the policy of the government is not to build new Wats but to maintain in repair the more attractive temples. Probably the chief attraction of the country from a tourist point of view are the Wats, especially in Bangkok, and the government of Siam is particularly anxious to do what it can to attract more tourists; hence the attention given to the repainting and decoration of the leading temples and palaces in the main towns. Artists engaged on painting in Wats and royal palaces are graded into several classes; if they do not ask for payment, they are allotted a whole section, and when the painting is finished, the name of the artist is engraved in marble and placed next to the painting; those who expect payment are paid according to the nature of the painting and the time required to complete it. Women also participate in this work.

The real Siamese artist does not expect or aim at making a livelihood out of his art, but does his painting as more of a hobby. It is cheaper to buy foreign water color paintings than those done by Siamese artists, who are of an independent nature and will not sell their work for less than they consider it worth. Many will take government positions and work at their art in their spare time. With the establishment of the Art and Crafts School in Bangkok (a government institution), more artists will undoubtedly come to the fore and work on their speciality as their sole means of livelihood. As the number of painters, architects, and other craftsmen increases, it will be interesting to see what the attitude of the Siamese public will be towards art and the purchase of paintings, etc. At present, the work turned out in Siam is not sufficient to meet the home demand, and though the prices asked would appear low to artists in America or Europe, it may be borne in mind that the standard of living is considerably lower in Siam than in those countries.

Formerly a Siamese artist who was very good at drawing and painting

did other work too, such as carving, preparing flowers for cremation ceremonies, inlaying, etc., and there are still many artists in the country who follow this practice. But the present tendency is to train men from the age of twelve or so to specialize in some particular branch of the arts and crafts and keep to it as a profession. After becoming moderately skilled in their particular craft, they are encouraged to go to the Wats and to the Museums and take examples there to guide them.

Wood-Carving

The first king of the reign in Siam took up carving as a hobby and this gave a fillip to others to take up this craft. The men trained themselves by watching other carvers at work. Their scope was almost unlimited in early times, the Wats calling for much of this kind of work as the doors, windows, gable ends, and columns, as well as other sections of the construction work are richly carved in teak or other timber. Birds, animals, and flowers are carved on temple doors, and one also finds the figures of sentries carved on the outer temple doors in high relief, some nearly lifesize. Most of the furniture used in the palaces in Bangkok today is richly carved including the throne and sections of the buildings such as tops of doors and windows. Private houses of the well-to-do Siamese also have such carved work as well as carved furniture. Formerly most of this carved work was done by Siamese working in their own homes, but today it is done by Siamese and Chinese carpenters in collaboration with Siamese carvers. The Chinese, however, are not so good in carving after the Siamese way, as the Siamese carve in a decorative style and do not run to naturalism. The Chinese in Siam aim at naturalism without getting a real effect, their work being clumsy and heavy compared to that of the Siamese craftsmen.

Teak is the wood mostly used for carving, but a kind of box wood, called *Mai Moh*, is also used. The latter, after carving, is often varnished or covered with black lacquer and gilded or ornamented in color.

Ivory carving is done mostly in the north of Siam, where the art has been practiced since very early times. Siam has a plentiful supply of ivory and it is surprising that ivory carving has not been developed to a much larger extent that it actually has. The reason for this lies in the fact that the Siamese carvers produce better finished articles than the Japanese, though the latter turn out much more work at the same time. The Siamese way of carving is different from the Japanese, the former rating time and care as no object and aiming only to produce something "perfect". Exquisite examples of carved elephant's tusks have been produced in Siam, and sword handles, chess men, bangles, vases, and other *objets d'art* are carved in ivory.

Stone carving is also pursued as a craft in Siam, but nowadays mainly for home use. The Siamese carver in stone is usually a stone-cutter or

engraver. He works in his home, using small chisels and a hammer. A reddish stone obtained locally is used for cheap and coarse work ; for smaller articles, such as jewelry, images of the Buddha, a bluish or black stone, something like black onyx, is used.

Inlaying and Gilding

One of the chief attractions of many Wats in Siam is the great deal of inlay and gilding in evidence on these structures. Very thin glass is used, cut into small tessera, colored, backed with a metal foil, and laid into a background of prepared gums, the whole effect is that of a scintillating mirror, glittering in the rays of the tropical sunlight. The carved or stucco ornamentation of these Wats is generally gilded or painted yellow to represent gold. A rougher sort of mosaic, consisting of pieces of broken pottery is extensively used in temples with great effect, and is as a rule worked in patterns of flowers. Glazed tiles ornamented with pattern work in colored enamels are often used to cover whole wall spaces or are worked out in repeating and spot patterns on the plastered walls. But while all these forms of ornamentation are perfect in their way, they are not uncommon and are also found in other countries in the Orient. In the inlaying of mother-of-pearl, however, it is the Siamese who excel. Such decoration is to be seen on the doors of some of the Wats, the designs generally being birds and animals, and mythological figures. Vessels used for ceremonial purposes are also ornamented with such inlay.

A very fine form of decoration much in use in Siam is that of bookcases and other articles with a lacquer background. First the article is smeared with a stopping of lacquer and ash. The surface is then smoothed down with the aid of a rough stone, then cuttle fish, and then with a very fine polish. Another layer of lacquer is then applied, after which the artist draws the design and paints the background with a special solution of gum and earthen powder, which is so absorbent that it leaves the design standing out in black. A very thin solution of lacquer, especially prepared, is put all over the surface, and over this gold leaf is laid by hand and then gently dusted off. The resist is then washed away, leaving the rich background with the design in gold. This type of decoration is also used on doors and window panels of Wat buildings as well as for screens, gongs, etc., lasting for an indefinite period. A book cabinet decorated in this style will cost from 800 to 1,000 ticals (1933).

Metal Work

Tompat or, as it is generally known, *niello*, is the principal work done in metal in Siam. This is the decoration of silver articles with designs on a dull background. The art has been in existence in Siam for eight hundred years and longer, but due to the invasion of the Burmese it was discontinued

from time to time. During the past thirty or forty years there has been a distinct revival, and the demand for *niello* ware is greater than the supply. All kinds of silverware are made in *niello*, especially trays, flower vases, bowls, betel boxes, cigarette cases, forks and spoons, etc. The following is the procedure generally followed in making *niello*:

Silver is melted in a crucible and then flattened out into thick pieces, after which they are beaten into shape by hand. The artist then draws the design with a pencil and paints it black. The lines of the design are then hammered with a fine chisel and hammer, and the space hammered in is afterwards filled with a mixture called "*niello*" (from the Latin *niger*, meaning black) and consisting of a mixture of silver, copper, and lead. The *niello* has a lower melting point than silver, and it fuses when the whole piece is heated by blow pipe or fire. When the piece comes out of the fire it is all black and has to be carefully scraped entirely clean, but only up to a point when the design just appears. The metal work is then reshaped and after reshaping it is inspected by another worker for any flaws or holes. Only at this stage can any repairs be effected if at all required, as any repairs—refiring, soldering, etc.—are apt to spoil the design and metal. To make a small *niello* vase will take a fortnight, while a large vessel will require a longer time, as it is more difficult to heat it, for the heat must be uniform all round so as to cause the *niello* to run uniformly. *Niello* silverware which has been hammered is inferior to that which has been done by engraving tools, which render more artistic and smoother lines and permit the craftsman to use a much harder solution of *niello* than would otherwise be practicable. The soft kind of *niello* will wear out before the silver, while what is termed as *niello* of a hardness equal to that of the silver will last almost indefinitely. The introduction of a harder solder has made this possible.

The unit on which the Siamese craftsman works in drawing the design on any piece of *niello* is a triangle, from which he builds up designs of dragons, angels, the twelve animals of the current cycle (horse, goat, monkey, peacock, dog, etc.), and designs inspired by paintings in the Wats as well.

Silver work is also decorated in repousse, in which the usual designs are represented in high and low relief. This art is also a very old one in Siam, and more of this type of silverware is nowadays seen on the market, as it is cheaper and not made as finely as *niello*. A great variety of articles is nowadays made in Siam in repousse, photograph frames, napkin rings, and household utensils being among the most popular. Both Siamese and Chinese engage in this craft, the people in the north (Chiengmai in northern Siam is famous for its silverware) being better craftsmen in repousse work than their fellow-workers in Bangkok, the capital, as they are more skilled in handling silver and are able to work in very thin silver, which the Chinese can not.

Enamelling on metals is an art which has been introduced into Siam from

abroad and is now widely practiced by special craftsmen who received their training by working with Europeans on this class of work. Various smaller objects for use and adornment are made of gold and silver enamelled work. Some of the ceremonial vessels and large water bowls used in the Wats are enamelled, usually on copper.

At one time a fair quantity of jewelry for personal adornment in gold and silver set with precious stone was made in Siam, but very little is done at present, as modern European jewelry is preferred and in great demand by all classes in Siam, both Siamese and Chinese. The people of Siam are very fond of jewelry and even those whose means do not justify their wearing jewelry will endeavor to have some small piece, such as a ring or other ornament.

Embroidery

Weaving has always been practiced in Siam and still thrives in the northern parts of the country. The principal attire of the Siamese is the *panung*, a cloth about two and a half feet wide by about seven long, the middle part of which is passed round the body, covering it from the waist to the knees, and hitched with a twist in front so that the two ends hang down before. These ends being twisted together into a rope are passed backwards between the legs, drawn up, and tucked into the waist at the back. Both men and women wear this garment, and some beautiful silk *panungs* are made in Siam either in plain rich colors—custom decrees a distinctive color for each day of the week—or decorated with designs worked out in stripes, checks, and flowered patterns. There is a tendency for women in Siam to adopt the *pasin* (a kind of skirt similar to that worn by the Malays who call it a *sarong*) in place of the *panung*, and these too are worked out in gold threads or colors.

It is customary for Siamese monks to carry a fan and a bag made of cloth embroidered with silk or velvet. The bag is for his personal use to keep flowers, joss sticks, nuts, etc., which are presented to him by the people as offerings. These bags are made by Siamese women in the home and are usually embroidered with Siamese designs and with a crest or monogram in the center. The majority of Siamese monks carry fans as a sort of sign of their calling. These fans may be nothing more than a palm leaf, quite plain, the handle of plain wood or ivory, in the case of the ordinary poor monk; the more expensive fans are made of silk or velvet with designs embroidered on them to match the bag.

The present king of Siam has always taken a keen interest in the arts and crafts of his country, and by patronizing the Arts & Crafts School of Bangkok, a government institution and the only one of its kind in Siam, the future of the arts and crafts here described is assured.

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