

# Thai Wood Carvings

THAI CULTURE, NEW SERIES No. 12





# THAI WOOD CARVINGS

BY  
PROFESSOR SILPA BHIRASRI



The Emblem of King Rama IV,  
carved wood, preserved in the National Museum, Bangkok.



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"Sattaphan", wooden Lanna-style candlestick.

## Preface

Thailand is very rich in precious arts and cultural heritage which represents a long-lasting independence, prosperity and stability of the country. These various fields of heritage have been preserved, accumulated and inherited throughout generations until the present. This legacy brings pride, dignity and prestige to Thai people. Therefore, it should be shared with the world so that Thai wisdom can be appreciated.

The Fine Arts Department is responsible for the preservation, promotion, transmission and dissemination of arts and culture of the Thai nation. As such it has compiled and published a book series of 25 volumes written by experts in their respective fields. Their areas of knowledge include artistic works, architecture, music and dramatic arts as well as language and literature. Each series has been reprinted from time to time. In this publication, there are no alterations to the contents although some illustrations have been added for the benefit of the readers.

The Department hopes that this series of books will be a resource among the international community to help them understand Thailand better through its unique arts and culture.

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## PROFESSOR SILPA BHIRASRI (C. FEROCI)

was born in Florence, Italy, and graduated from the Royal Academy of Art of Florence. He entered the Thai Government service (The Fine Arts Department) in 1924. He has to his credit a multitude of outstanding works, chiefly in bronze such as the statue of King Buddha Yodfah Chulaloke at the Memorail Bridge and that of King Vajiravudh at Lumpini Park. As Dean of the Faculty of Sculpture and Painting at Silpakorn University, he was a driving force of art study in Thailand. Professor Bhirasri devoted himself for over thirty years to the study of Thai art, and has been universally acknowledged as an authority. He did much to introduce Thai art to the world by writing extensively, gave insight on the subject by organizing a warmly received exhibition of Thai painting, modelling, bronze casting, etc. in London in 1947. He also initiated the annual Bangkok art exhibition.

He died in Bangkok on May 14, 1962 at the age of seventy. In honor of his accomplishments, and his service to Thai art, he was awarded the Knight Grand Cross (First Class) of the Most Noble Order of the Crown of Thailand, and the Dushdi Mâlâ Medal. Professor Bhirasri will always retain an honored place in the affections of his many students, and his friends in Thailand.



Fig. 1 Buddha image of Ayutthaya period, 16<sup>th</sup> century



Fig. 2 Wooden structure of the first quarter of the 19th century used to enshrine the remains of King Rama II of the present dynasty(Chakri Dynasty). An exquisite specimen of the Bangkok workmanship.



Fig. 3 A royal palanquin used to carry in state the King for the coronation ceremony. Fine workmanship of the last period of the Thai wooden carvings.



## THAI WOOD CARVINGS



Wood is one of the commonest materials available in tropical countries, its use having no limitation neither for structural nor for artistic purposes. According to the temperament of the people who use it, works executed in wood reach such high artistic value as those treated with stone and bronze.

Generally, in what concerns art expression of any people, the character of nature determines that of art and considering the exceptional fertility of the tropical flora of Thailand, it is imaginable how the old Thai artists were impressed by this fertile surrounding and how they reflected such a fertility in wood carving as well as in all other kinds of ornaments.

In the past, wood carving was used for Buddha images of small and large sizes, to enrich shrines, royal thrones and palanquins, for the decoration of the gables and doors of the temples, for pulpits and for enriching the fantastic large royal barges used in state ceremonies ; to adorn the flame-like shaped carriages for cremations and, to a lesser extent, for furniture. Indeed the Thai furniture is limited to a low platform having four lion - legs, very much influenced by Chinese prototypes used as bed, chair, or resting place, to a small low dressing table and eventually, in the later period, under western influence, to some cabinets with glass-panes. Indeed in olden times the Thai, as well as almost every eastern people, did not need chairs because they were sitting on the floor on mats; clothes were kept in some kind of wicker-work- case or wooden chest which eventually was decorated with ornaments in lacquer.



Fig. 4 A royal throne of the Rattanakosin period.

Comparing old sculptural works made in the past by the Thai with those made by westerners one notices a striking difference which should be taken into consideration by anyone who wishes to appreciate eastern art in its real value. The difference lies in the fact that while the movement of the postures of the human figures represented in western art is rather emphasized and the drapery is treated realistically in large volumes, ornaments were used more sparingly, leaving many architectural parts and mouldings plain. Quite opposite, the posture of the Thai sculptured human body, related almost exclusively to statues of the Buddha, is static and the very conventionalized drapery adheres tightly to the human forms. In fact, the robe of the sculptured Buddha images is hinted by lines more like an engraving than real folds. But when dealing with ornamentations, the Thai were limited neither in application nor in richness. When reference is made to the richness of these ornaments, the reader should not be misled into thinking that they are a bore looking repetition of geometrical patterns; on the contrary, Thai ornaments are bold and full of vibrating vitality.

The above-mentioned difference of artistic expressions noticeable between Thai ornaments and statuary corresponds in the first place to the nature of the country, whereas the simplicity in representing human forms corresponds to the philosophical idea of renunciation taught by Buddhism : accordingly, while the Buddha image represents an abstract idea, the ornaments are the reflection of the luxuriant vegetation of Thailand.

Among the many kinds of wood available in Thailand, teak was universally used both for ornaments and for statuary works. Teak yields easily to the will of the carver who may impress in it the nervous cut of the chisel. Teak has the advantage not being liable to attacks by termites and stands fairly well under the exposure of the atmospheric agents, but in the long run, when exposed outside, although protected by a coat of lacquer, it is corroded by the rain in vertical streaks. This, coupled by the fact that in olden days many temples were continuously erected, leaving in many cases the old structures to the unmerciful effects of the tropical climate, is the reasons why of the numberless works of old wood carvings, relatively only few reached our time. Of course, the specimens usually kept inside are in a much better condition of preservation.





Fig. 5 Royal carriage to bring the last remains of the Kings to the Crematory pavilion (Phra Meru). Here the ornaments at the sides of the carriage suggest flames enveloping the urn which is placed under the canopy (bussabok).



Candlestick with coloured glass decoration.

Wood carving was certainly made since olden times, but due to the humidity of the climate and the perishableness of the material, we cannot state whether the carving in wood of the Sukhothai period (the first capital of Thailand established in 1257) still exist, but archaeological discoveries may also bring to light carvings of that period.

Ayutthaya\* was the second capital of this country (1350-1767), and it was there that the taste for fine, lively ornaments in metal, lacquer, stucco and wood reached its most beautiful expression.

This high taste for decorative effects affected also architecture which became polichromatic and more graceful than what was in the classical style of Sukhothai. Indeed, from the ruins still existing in the old capital, one may imagine the marvellous effect issuing from the imposing polichromatic temples, stupas, prangs and palaces looking, on the whole, as large bunches of flowers amidst the evergreen vegetation and refreshed by the sight of the ribbon-like river Chao Phraya encircling that town. Descriptions recorded in the past on the magnificent appearance which Ayutthaya offered to the visitor corroborate with what our imagination may conceive from its ruins.

\* In the former editions the spelling of this word "Ayutthaya" was "Ayudhya" according to the pronunciation in the Pali and Sanskrit languages which have been frequently used in this book series.



Wood carving depicting a Divinity image.

Ayutthaya wood carving was not limited to mere ornamentation because, as already mentioned, many Buddha images were done in this material. But in what concerns art, with exceptions, these statues lack that sense of creativeness so evident in others executed in bronze, stone or stucco. On the contrary, the wood carved figures representing mythological beings such as kinnaras, rākshas, garudas and other subjects not bound by traditional canons were rendered with strong energy and sometimes in a charming primitivism.

Fig. 1 illustrates an image of Buddha carved in wood of the 16<sup>th</sup> century wherein the characteristics of the Lopburi art (Khmerish style) are still traceable. Later on by blending these peculiarities with those of the Sukhothai art it was formed the national style of Ayutthaya.

From the 17<sup>th</sup> century onwards, the outline of the Thai architecture becomes more and more graceful till towards the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the exaggeration of such a characteristic affected the solid appearance of the brick buildings.

The taste for slenderer pinnacles, vertical and horizontal curved lines and the slightly inclined poles originated certainly from wooden prototypes. The above mentioned characteristics are very typical in the later period of Ayutthaya and of Rattanakosin. By observing the shrine illustrated with fig. 2 and the royal palanquin, fig. 3 it is easy to notice the strict relationship between wooden and brick structures, this relation is particularly due to the fact that the brick buildings always had a wooden overstructure. Of course, such a remark can be applied to every style of art because its characteristics



Fig. 6 Typical “kranok nang” an ornament characteristic of the Thai art.

become universal in all works executed in any material. Fig. 2 is a very fine specimen of the first quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century preserved in the National Museum in Bangkok and although every part is enriched with ornaments it retains that simplicity of lines and restraint of rendering proper to classic expressions. It served to enshrine the ashes of the Second King of the Chakri Dynasty (Rama II). Comparing fig. 2 with fig. 3, we notice in the latter an over-emphasis of vibration and of details denoting an art starting to decline.



The details of Royal Palanquin showing the relationship between wooden and brick structures.

Fig. 4 represents a royal throne the king used to sit and give audience to his ministers or officials, while fig. 5 illustrates a carriage for carrying the last remains of the kings to the ‘Phra Meru’ (crematory pavilion). At the sides of these structures the reader will observe the flame-like ornaments repeated in many tiers, each tier receding pyramidically from the lower to the higher part. Truly, in the case of the carriage, the repetition of these flamboyant elements suggests flames enveloping the golden urn containing the king’s remains.\* Both the two examples are workmanship of Rattanakosin.\*\*

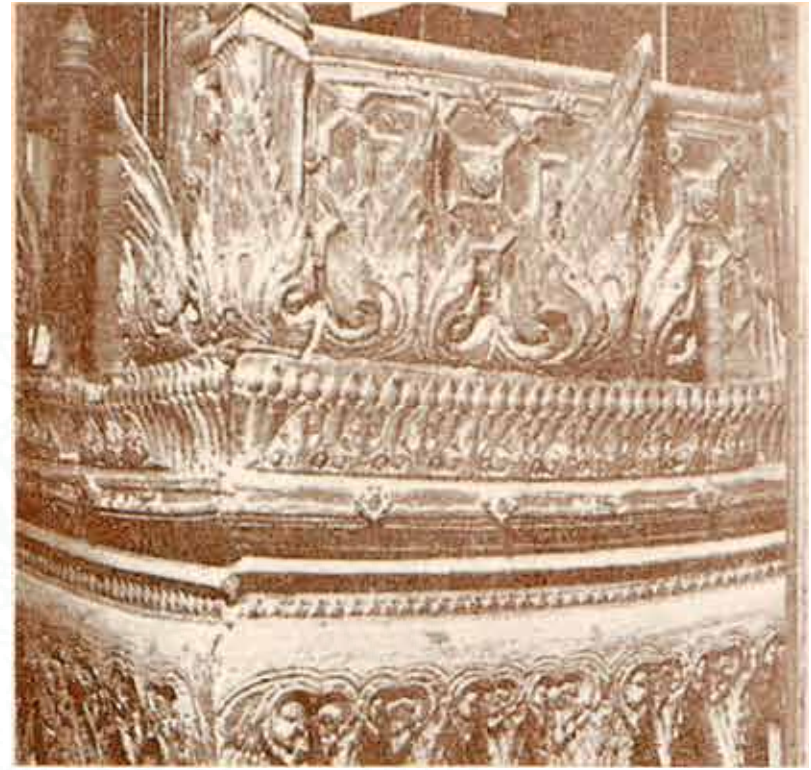


Fig. 7 A lively ornament inspired by the lotus flower and termed as “kra chang”

Illustration No. 6 is a detail of the said ornament which is universally used and called “Kranok Nang” ; its vibrating and soaring sense is very characteristic and noticeable in Thai painting, sculpture and decorative arts, Illustration No. 7 shows another motif generally applied to enrich mouldings ; such a design was inspired by the lotus-flower and by a process of stylization, by placing smaller petals over large ones and by changing proportions it took varied forms and is referred to in different terms. In carving, the vertical section of this ornament also bears the said flame-like appearance (see diagram I).

\* The golden urn containing the remains of the king is placed in the middle of the canopy (Busabok); the carriage being pulled by 160 men dressed in colourful costumes, while another 40 men are in the rear of the carriage.

\*\* When we refer to the Rattanakosin period, it should be understood the production made up to the third quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, afterwards for many reasons, principally western influence, art changed its course of traditional expression.



Fig. 8 An old wooden gable of the Ayutthaya period representing Phra Narai (Vishnu) riding on krut (garuda) and surrounded by tepanoms (angels).



Fig. 9 Carving on a temple at Wat Pho in Bangkok showing the graceful decoration of the frontal end of each roof formed by aquatic snakes termed 'nāgas'



A Pediment of a monastery at Wat Matchimawat, Songkhla.



Fig. 10 Carving on a gable at Wat Pho representing a scene of combat from the Ramayana epic.



Fig. 11 A magnificent specimen of a door-carving of the Ayutthaya period. It is one of the best Thai carving of the 16th century.



A Door Panel, carved into designs at the National Museum, Songkhla.



Bracket, carved into designs at Wat Phra Sing, Chiang Mai.



Fig. 12 Door panel with two heavenly guardians in high-relief. The figures are rather rigid while the ornaments are finely executed.



Fig. 13 Tracery-like wood carving on a door of the pavilion (sala) at Wat Yai Suwannaram in Phetchaburi, 18<sup>th</sup> century.



Fig. 14 Circular pulpit (Thammat) in the National Museum in Bangkok, 18<sup>th</sup> century.





Fig. 15 “Kinnari” (half human half bird creatures) of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. A beautiful example of Ayutthaya classical decorative art.



Fig. 16 “Kinnari” For finesse of modelling, flexuous lines of the body and for the vibrating delicate ornaments this figure represents an exceptional work of the Thai wooden carvings.

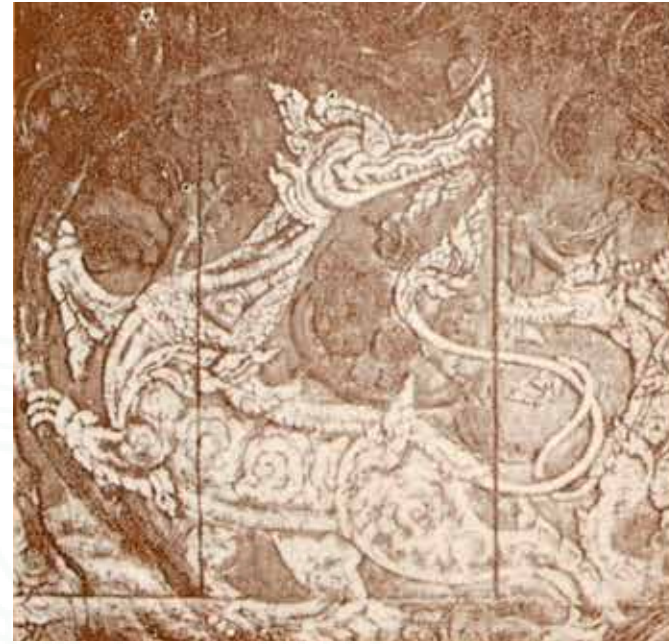


Fig. 17 A lively strange animal, having a lion’s body and a head of a crocodile. The movement portraits well the life of the tropical forests.

One of the most attractive features of the temples or other minor religious structures of Thailand is the decoration of the gables (Lai Na Chua) and the frontal ends of each roof. While each carved gable has a different design and relief according to the artist’s judgement, the frontal end of the roof is enriched with the universal theme of the naga (mythological snake). Both gable-carving and the roof decoration are covered with a coat of lacquer and gilded, the body of the snakes being filled with gold glass mosaic, one of the characteristics of the Thai decorative art. These two gilded elements contrast with the deeper colour of the tiles of the roof and with the white washed walls; the effect of the whole polichromatic appearance is truly attractive. In particular, this effect is still more emphasized when the rays of the sun play obliquely on the carvings which is such a case appear at their best as the artists had imagined when nervously carved them.



Fig. 18 Another mythical creature and her little one. A charming composition representing the naughtiness of the little creature and the benevolent expression of the mother.



Fig. 19 Suphannahong Royal Barge (the swan-barge), Rattanakosin period, used by the King in state ceremonies. Note the elegant line of the barge and the traditional shape of the canopy (bussabok) where the king takes place.

Fig. 8 is a large carving at Wat Na Phra Men in Ayutthaya representing the god Vishnu (Phra Narai) riding on Garuda (Krut) and surrounded by many worshipping heavenly beings (Thep Phanom). Remarkable is the composition developing into the triangular space with its strong central vertical mass contrasted by the horizontality of the figures of the angels. The carving has a very high relief which plays beautifully on the front of the temple.

Illustrations Nos. 9 and 10 are gables of two buildings at Wat Pho in Bangkok. The former has an ornamental design with the usual lai kranok and in the centre the figure of an angel, Thep Phanom, in the posture of worshipping or paying respects; this motif is common in all Thai decorative arts. The latter, fig. 10, represents a scene from the Ramayana; the vitality of the composition displays the artist's natural excitement when painting or carving stories from the Ramayana epic. How contrasting are these scenes having figures so alive, darting, grinning and fighting against one another with a dynamic energy, in comparison with the serenity of the Buddha images. One reflecting the exuberance of the tropical nature, the other the spiritual serenity of Buddhism.



Fig. 20 A large wooden statue of Krut (Garuda), the vehicle of Vishnu which was placed at the stern of a royal barge of the Ayutthaya period.

From fig. 9, besides the aforementioned ornament, it will also be noticed the very elegant motif of the “nagas” decorating the frontal end of each roof.

Besides the decoration of the gables and the roofs many of the old structures had also the doors enriched with carvings; particularly this remark applies to the Ayutthaya period because, with a few exceptions, in Bangkok the doors were decorated with designs in lacquer or in inlaid mother-of-pearl.

Of the many wooden doors of Ayutthaya very few remain and also these few are in a bad state of conservation, especially we would refer to the wonderful specimen of a large carving preserved in the National Museum in Ayutthaya. It is a door-panel which came from Wat Vihan Thong, about four metres high by ninety centimetres in width. Unfortunately the surface of the carving has been corroded by the rain, but even in these dilapidated conditions any lover of art may still admire its exceptional beauty. The design is very fine and the well distributed chiaroscuro of the carving plays both delicate and strong effects. According to its high artistic qualities it must have been executed in the 16<sup>th</sup> or beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, that is to say the best period of the Thai decorative art. Fig. 11 shows all the panel and a detail of it.

Illustration 12 is a door-carving with a high relief representing two guardians standing on a basement and shadowed by umbrellas. The ornamental parts are finely executed while the figures look rather stereotyped. Doors having panels with mythological figures carved in high relief were usual in Ayutthaya, while in Bangkok the heavenly beings or demons guarding the temple were usually executed in goldleaves applied on black lacquer or were painted on the window and door-panels.

Fig. 13 shows another type of door decoration wherein the repetition of scrolls fill up the space as tracery work. It is a door of a large and beautiful sala (pavilion) which was sent from Ayutthaya to Phetchaburi before the old capital of Thailand was razed to the ground by the fire in 1767.

The National Museum in Bangkok preserves a characteristic round pulpit (thammat) in wood (fig. 14) of the 18<sup>th</sup> century which came from Nonthaburi. In its former state of condition this pulpit



Wooden bas-relief, depicting a group of women

must have been one of the finest Thai wooden works, but even from its actual preservation one is able to enjoy the originality of design as well as the beauty of its carvings. The lower part of the basement is formed by a series of superposed mouldings enriched with delicate ornaments; the middle part is divided into six parts wherein mythological figure in high relief, symbolically stepping on small lions, are carved with bold and sure cut. Around the upper part of the basement there is the universal decoration of the krachang of which actually very few remain. Six ornamented pillars hold the crown-like top ending as usual in a slender and high finial. The sides of the ladder, from where the Buddhist monk stepped up into the pulpit, is formed by two ‘nāgas’ ending with figure of praying angel. As can be seen from the illustration, only one side preserves the figure of the angel. These nāgas may be represented either as shown by this specimen, or as snakes having one, three, five or even seven conventional heads. Usually, the nāga decorating the Thai roof has three heads, but as the nāga is seen in profile so we notice only two heads.

Besides carving in low and high relief artists of Ayutthaya sculptured also many figures in round; figs. 15 and 16 illustrate two of these valuable specimens. The wooden statuettes 90 cm. high represents kinnaris, half human half bird creatures, or all human



Wood-carving on the basement of Circular pulpit in mythological figure in high relief.



Fig. 21 Wooden bas-relief depicting a group of nine women figures forming the outline of an elephant, 17<sup>th</sup> century

figures with bird's wings and tail. In their graceful movements, perfect, fine modelling and delicate ornaments these stauettes are indeed exceptionally beautiful. Here we are in presence of two specimens of art of the best period of Ayutthaya. We would like to draw the attention of our reader to the sensitive, flexuous movement of the walking kinnari, a movement so natural of the Thai women, and the delicacy of the ornaments which, although richly applied, do not alter neither the suppleness of the posture nor the finesse of modelling of the human forms. These carvings belong to the private collection of Prince Yachai Chitrabongse.

The same strange creatures, conceived by the fantasy of the old Thai folk and which were inspired by the numberless animal forms intermingled with tropical plants of the dense forests, were also used to decorate interior panels of wooden structures. Sometimes parts

of different animals would be composed together forming strange looking figures like Illustration 17 representing a lion with the head of crocodile; here, too, it will be noticed the darting vital movement of the creature. In other instances the fantastic composition would include half human and half animal body as illustrated with fig. 18. In this amusing carving we notice the mother retaliating the naughtiness of her little one who pulls her tail. The little creature seems to enjoy very much the joke while the expression of the mother is a mixture of severity and amusement. In all cases these realistic or stylized forms are surrounded by floral designs, the whole resulting in a fresh spontaneous artistic expression.

The illustrated examples are parts of the carvings decorating the interior or a library of the 18<sup>th</sup> century belonging actually to the collection of antiquities of Chumbhotbongse Paribatra, Prince of Nakorn Savarn.

Wood carving was largely used also to decorate royal barges, fig. 19, particularly the bow was the most important spot where the carver would concentrate his talent by carving a dynamic projecting figure which give to the barge a sense of advancing speed. These crafts were and are used in states ceremonies where the king is moving in a fantastic procession either as a parade of military force or as a pious act to bring presents to various Buddhist temples. The barge with gilded carving, enriched with coloured glass mosaic, are manned by fifty two rowers dressed in brilliant costumes. The king sits under a wooden canopy (bussabok) also carved and gilded. Other lesser decorated barges carry military or official personages according to the character of the ceremony. In the National Museum in Ayutthaya there is a vigorous statue of Krut (garuda), fig. 20, in which the carver succeeded in giving life to this mythological half human half bird creature. Garuda as vehicle of the God Vishnu, was, since remote times, adopted as the symbol of the Thai royalty: hence if a building, a barge or any other object has the design of the garuda, it means that it belonged or belongs to a king. In this specimen the mythological being has been rendered with an admirable dignifying strength proper to a goddish creature.

Bas-reliefs with composition including many figures are rather rare, but from fig. 21 one may have an idea of the capacity of old artists in creating the outline of an elephant by the means

of nine female figures. This work conveys the peculiar humoristic side of the Thai artists, a characteristics noticeable also in painting and lacquer designs. The “show” of representing animals by the means of group of human figures is common in eastern countries as it may be traced also in China and India. This carving is a clever arrangement of the nine figures from which issue successfully the characteristic of the outline of the pachyderm. In what concerns art, the bas-relief has a flavour of primitivism very pleasing and very apt to the subject. Indeed we could not imagine a better and more appropriate style to render it.



Wood-carved, representing Monkey and Yaksha.



Candlestick, wood carving with coloured glass decoration.

If we refer to some distortions of the human bodies noticeable in the female figures, distortions so dear to modern art, then we see that old artists had preceded long ago our conception in changing natural proportions for the benefit of the composition. Here, too, the carver has elongated or shortened limbs or parts of the human body in order to obtain unity and harmony of composition. The carving belongs to the collection of Prince Sanit Rangsit.

We shall end these notes on Thai carving by illustrating two pieces of furniture. One, fig. 22 termed “thammat” is a low chair used by monks to deliver their sermons. The term thammat is applied irrespectively of its height and corresponds to the western term “pulpit”. Without the low rail and about twice longer, the same form served as a bed-stead. The main characteristic of the Thai chairs, beds and other objects having legs is the design of the lion-leg which in wood carving may have at the upper part a stylized head of a lion (see diagram I). This motif originated from Chinese prototypes, but was used so universally by the Thai that it became one of the peculiarities of the Thai architectural mouldings of the Ayutthaya and Rattanakosin periods. From diagram I, it will be noticed the difference between the same lion-leg carved in wood and the other more conventionalized made in stucco on brick buildings.

Fig. 23 illustrates one “khanchong”, small dressing-tables used since old times. Although, there are many sizes of these mirrors, the majority are small and low because the ladies who used them sat over a mat on the floor. As the illustration shows, the dressing tables were formed by a small base having the universal lion legs and by an inclined mirror. Here too the conventionalized nāgas are used to frame the mirror. Usually this piece of furniture is richly decorated and gilded; the rather intricate ornaments resemble those of the rococo style. The illustration shows also two very characteristic small vases containing cosmetics and perfume.

In our time carving in wood has no more application in religious nor in royal structures. Modern civilization has affected Thai culture and nowadays, private houses or public buildings are planned according to modern comfort and modern materials. Therefore, our contemporary sculptors use wood for carving their statuettes according to a new taste and new demand as can be seen from illustration No. 24 by Chit Rienpracha.

Ornamentations in old style are used only for repairing some wooden part of old temples and even for such a purpose experts are reluctant to push the reparation too far, preferring preservation to restoration. In fact, instead of replacing with a new panel, one of the two central door panels at Wat Suthat Thepwararam in Bangkok which was destroyed by fire in November 1959, the Committee concerned with this matter preferred to remove the saved panel and place in the



Door Panel at Wat Rakhongkhositaram.

museum instead of making a new one, although having as an example the uninjured specimen. This door was partly carved by King Rama II in the first quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and was venerated by the Thai both for its intrinsic artistic value as well as for sentimental reason towards the reigning dynasty. The carving is very important, the door having an opening of 5.45 by 2.40 m, but artistically it has a too complicated an ornamentation denoting an art in its last expressive period, Illustration 25 is a detail of this carving from which it is noticeable the intricate design.



Fig 22 “Thammat”, a low chair used by Buddhist monks to deliver their sermons, National Museum in Ayutthaya.

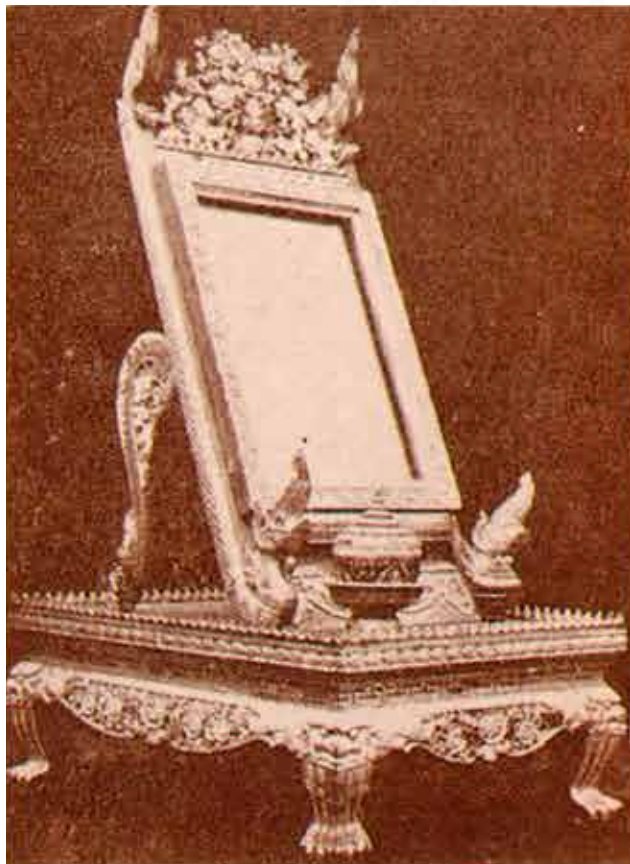


Fig 23 Typical graceful Thai mirror. Collection of Chumbhotbongse Paribatra, Prince of Nakorn Savarn.



Door Panels at Wat Suthat Thepwaram.





Fig. 24 Contemporary statuette in wood carved by Chit Rienpracha. 1959.

At the beginning of the present notes we have said that the humid climate has wrought havoc over artistic antiquities, particularly referring to paintings and wood-carvings but we have also to add that since a few years ago, only few people knew the value of old art and in particular of an 'old piece of wood'. Till few years ago it was not realized that all arts of the past cannot be done any more and accordingly anything antique is a sacred object. The Fine Arts Department does its best to educate all people concerned to preserve everything of old art and make understand that also a piece of wood which a nonexpert may think not valuable may in effect be of a great value for our artistic heritage.



Fig. 25 Detail on one of the door panels at Wat Suthat Thepwararam in Bangkok. First half quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

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