

Preserving a Heritage

The Tilleke & Gibbins Textile Collection

*Text and Photographs by
Linda McIntosh*



Left: Rare Lao headcloth, phaa khan hua ethnic group, Tai, Hua Phan Province, Laos. 1920-1950. Above: Puan laisen, blanket from Chin State, Myanmar. Chin ethnic group. Early 20th century.

The Tilleke & Gibbins Textile Collection began in the late 1980s when Tilleke & Gibbins, the oldest surviving law firm in Bangkok, Thailand, moved into offices near Lumpini Park behind the American Embassy. The Chairman and Chief Values Officer, David Lyman, desired

a distinct look with a Thai theme for the offices' interior design. A passionate carpet collector since his law school days, Mr. Lyman readily agreed to using a local art form—handwoven fabrics of the various ethnic groups living in Thailand and neighboring countries—to adorn the

office walls. Others in the firm were initially less enthusiastic but were won over by the beauty of the art and the very positive responses from clients and employees.

From these original seeds planted in 1987, the number of textiles began to grow, especially with the fortunate



Phaa sabai,
healing cloth
from Hua Phan
Province, Laos.
Tai ethnic group.
Late 19th century.



Sampot hol samloy, skirt from
Cambodia. Cham ethnic group. Early
20th century. Inset: Detail of weaving.

acquisition of seventy rare Lao fabrics. The Tilleke & Gibbins Textile Collection was officially established a few years later under its first full-time curator, Karen Bunyaratavej.

The mission of the Textile Collection is not only to decorate the offices of Tilleke & Gibbins but also to preserve the textile heritage of Thailand and other Southeast Asian countries for present and future generations. The Collection is available to the public for research and educational purposes. Interested individuals and groups are welcome to visit Tilleke & Gibbins to view the textiles on display, which are rotated every six months, as well as the Textile Collection storage room, where they can observe the storage and preservation methods. The textiles are stored in accordance with international museum collection standards, and UV filters are placed on the office lights to prevent damage to the fabrics, as light is the major enemy of textiles.

Researchers utilize the Collection's resources since each textile is photographed and documented, and the data is stored in a museum collection software program.

The Tilleke & Gibbins Textile Collection presently consists of approximately 1,800 diverse textiles. The majority of these originate from countries comprising mainland Southeast Asia: Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, Myanmar and Vietnam. Other Southeast Asian textiles, such as those from Malaysia and the islands of Indonesia, are also represented in the Collection, but the main focus is on Thailand. Exceptions include Indian trade textiles made for the Southeast Asian market, specifically Siam, or present-day Thailand, and a few from ethnic minority groups living in southern China who have ethno-linguistic links with the peoples living in neighboring countries.

With its emphasis on cloth from the various ethnic groups living in

Thailand, especially those with Tai cultures, the Tilleke & Gibbins Textile Collection has a solid foundation representing the diverse material culture of the Tai groups. Ethnic Thais belong to the Tai branch of



Sin chok, skirt from Ratchaburi
Province, Thailand. Tai Yuan
ethnic group. Early 20th
century.



Textiles from the Tilleke & Gibbins Collection grace the walls of the firm's offices.



Loincloth, from Attapeu Province, Laos. Katu ethnic group. Early 20th century.



Sin koh, skirt from Savannakhet Province, Laos. Katang ethnic group. Mid 20th century. Inset: Finely worked weaving.

the Tai-Kadai ethno-linguistic family. The Lao, the dominant majority of Laos and most populous ethnic group of northeast Thailand, also belong to this branch, which is composed of numerous subgroups.

Textiles originating from non-Tai groups who live in Thailand, including the Khmer and linguistically related groups such as the Kui, are also represented in the Collection. The Khmer are the dominant ethnic group of Cambodia, and both the Kui and Khmer live in the southern provinces of Thailand's Northeast (Issan), bordering Cambodia. These weavers are particularly known for their weft *ikat*-decorated silks.

The Collection holds fabrics from other minority groups in Thailand, including the Malay, Cham, Hmong, Karen, Akha and Mien. And the textile trail has followed the ethnic groups of Thailand to neighboring countries such as Laos, Vietnam, Myanmar, Malaysia and southern China.

The civilizations forming Thailand over the centuries did not exist in a vacuum but interacted with their neighbors. Weavings of neighboring Southeast Asian groups and distant cultures of India and China naturally found their way into the country. Burmese, Intha, Naga, Kachin and Chin textiles from Myanmar are well

represented. There are also some examples from minority peoples living in geographically isolated cultures of southern Laos and the central highlands of Vietnam, such as the Jarai, Rhade, Katu and Ta-oi.

In keeping with the philosophy that all types of textiles are an art form, those in the Collection range from high-status court textiles to household items. Utilitarian articles, such as blankets, curtains and mattress covers, are often decorated with intricate designs. Many of these domestic accessories comprise a bride's trousseau and are meticulously decorated for the joyous life event that women celebrate with symbols of beauty. Other types of textiles include clothing for everyday use and special occasions. Some materials are simple while others are luxurious, depending on the intended use of the article of clothing and the owner's status. Court textiles are often made with

Weaving Paradise, one of several exhibits drawing on the Tilleke & Gibbins Collection, gave visitors the opportunity to closely examine fine works of textile weaving.



Pha-so, hip wrapper from Amarapura, Myanmar. Burman ethnic group. Late 19th century.



Sin mii tiin chok, skirt from the Chiang Mai court, Thailand. Tai Yuan ethnic group. Early 20th century.

costly, imported materials, such as gold-and-silver-wrapped thread.

Handwoven or hand-adorned cloth retains a prominent role in the religions of Southeast Asian cultures. Textiles function as religious offerings, as tools to demarcate sacred space, and as conduits between the natural and supernatural. The Collection houses many examples of woven materials associated with religious ceremonies, and it is vital that these textiles are preserved since their production has declined or even ceased. Funeral banners, both shamanic and Buddhist, are religious textiles that are quickly disappearing, so the examples in the Collection are safeguarded for present and future generations.

In fulfilling its mission to preserve textiles as art and as an educational tool, the Collection regularly loans textiles to local, regional and international exhibitions. In Bangkok, Tilleke & Gibbins's textiles have been exhibited at the Jim Thompson Center for Textiles and the Arts at the Jim Thompson House Museum. When the James H. W. Thompson Foundation

hosted its first international symposium on Southeast Asian textiles in 1999, a special display of the firm's textiles accompanied the event. Other exhibits drawing on the Collection have been *Power Dressing* (2003); *Tied Together* (2004); *Status, Myth, and the Supernatural* (2005); and *Weaving Paradise* (2007).

Examples from the Collection have also been part of exhibitions held regionally and internationally. *Invisible Hands* was the first temporary exhibition held at the National Museum of Laos in Luang Prabang in 2005, and Tilleke & Gibbins gladly participated with the loan of textiles. International loans include *Weaving Tradition: Carol Cassidy and Woven Silks of Laos* held at several locations in the United States, such as the Museum of Craft and Folk Art in San Francisco.

To accommodate its growth, in September 2008, Tilleke & Gibbins relocated to seven floors of the Supalai Grand Tower near the Chao Phraya River in the newly developing southeast corner of Bangkok, a move that allows further expansion



*Tunic from Chin State, Myanmar.
Chin ethnic group. Mid 20th century.
Inset: Detail of weaving.*

of the Collection. The enlarged storage facilities accommodate additional shelving as well as a larger workspace to care for the fabrics. More textiles than ever will be on display throughout the offices. The present curator, Wipawee Tiyawes, is busily arranging

the Collection in its new home.

With humble beginnings as office decorations twenty years ago, the Tilleke & Gibbins Textile Collection has transformed into an important cultural and historical resource. The Collection encourages the study and

preservation of heritage textiles of Thailand and its neighbors, promoting research of the Collection and lending items to exhibitions outside the office walls. The expansion of Tilleke & Gibbins International allows for more textiles to be simultaneously displayed while the rest are housed in a secure environment. In its new home, the Collection will continue to care for and foster appreciation of the region's textile heritage. ❖

Linda McIntosh, consultant for the Collection, researches Southeast Asian textiles, specializing in the weavings of the Tai ethnic groups of Laos and Thailand. She has curated Status, Myth, and the Supernatural: Ritual Tai Textiles and Weaving Paradise: Southeast Asian Textiles and Their Creators at the Jim Thompson Art Center, Bangkok, and is writing several publications on Southeast Asian fabrics.