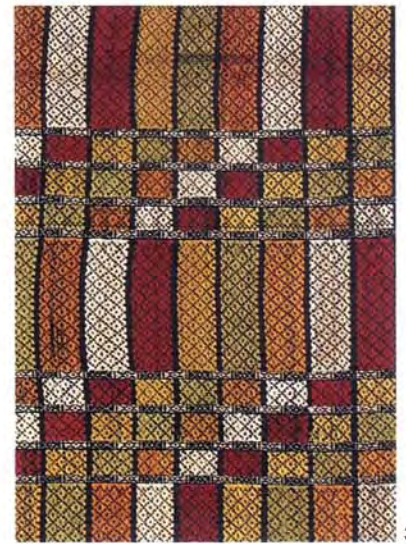




1 Tai coffin cover (detail), Oudomxai Province, Laos, ca. 1880-1900. 0.98 x 2.93m (3'2" x 9'7"). Tilleke & Gibbins Textile Collection, Bangkok, 1992.8.25
2 Naga blanket (detail), Nagaland, India, or Sagaing Division, Burma, ca. 1920-1940. 0.71 x 1.62m (2'4" x 5'4") T&G 1997.6.5



3 Tai skirt cloth (detail), northwest Vietnam, ca. 1900-1920. 0.83 x 0.72m (2'9" x 2'4"). T&G 1992.8.2
4 Khmer ceremonial silk ikat hanging (detail), Cambodia, ca.1900-1920. 0.89 x 3.22m (2'11" x 10'7"). 1991.5.14. All images courtesy Tilleke & Gibbins Textile Collection, Bangkok

material witness

THE TILLEKE & GIBBINS TEXTILE COLLECTION, BANGKOK

LINDA SUSAN MCINTOSH



The high-rise corporate offices of Thailand's oldest law firm are home to a little known treasure: a steadily growing collection of traditional Thai and other regional textile art. Accessible to the public, the T&G Textile Collection is displayed and managed to the highest international standards.





THE SEEDS OF THE COLLECTION were sown in 1987 when Tilleke & Gibbins, the city's oldest surviving law practice, moved into premises near Lumpini Park, behind the American Embassy in Bangkok. Senior partner David Lyman wanted a different look, a Thai theme, for the interior design of the corporate offices.

A passionate oriental rug collector since his law school days in America, Mr Lyman, today Chairman and Chief Values Officer, readily agreed to the suggestion to use a local art form, traditional handwoven fabrics, to adorn the office walls. Others were initially less enthusiastic but were won over by the beauty of the art, and the response from clients and employees was very positive. Soon, the firm began to acquire more weavings of the various ethnic groups living in Thailand and the neighbouring countries. The number of textiles grew steadily and, following the acquisition of more than seventy rare Lao fabrics, the Tilleke & Gibbins Textile Collection was officially established in the late 1980s under its first full time curator, Karen Bunyaratavej.

In addition to decorating Tilleke & Gibbins International's new corporate offices high in the Supalai Grand Tower, the collection has a declared mission to preserve the textile heritage of Thailand and neighbouring Southeast Asian countries for present and future generations, and is open to the public for research and educational purposes.

The collection presently consists of approximately 1,800 textiles, primarily made of silk and cotton, with a mere handful using bast fibre or wool. The majority originate from the diverse countries of mainland Southeast Asia: Thailand (Siam), Laos, Cambodia, Myanmar (Burma), and Vietnam. Insular Southeast Asian textiles, from Malaysia and a few of the Indonesian islands, are also represented, but the emphasis is closer to home: Thailand. Exceptions include Indian trade textiles made for the Siamese



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market, and a few examples from ethnic minority groups living in southern China with ethno-linguistic links connecting them to the peoples in neighbouring Southeast Asia.

The main focus is on cloth from the various ethnic groups living in Thailand, especially from Tai cultures. The ethnic Thais belong to the Tai branch of the Tai-Kadai ethno-linguistic family, which is composed of numerous subgroups such as the Tai Phuan, Tai Yuan, Tai Lue, Phuthai, Tai Dam, and Tai Yai or Shan. The Lao, the dominant majority in Laos and the most populous ethnic group of northeastern Thailand, also belong to this branch. The collection has a solid foundation of the diverse material culture of these Tai groups.

Textiles from non-Tai groups living in Thailand are also well represented. These include the Khmer, the dominant ethnic group of neighbouring Cambodia, and related linguistic groups such as the Kui who live in the southern provinces of northeastern Thailand, bordering Cambodia. Khmer and Kui weavers are particularly known for their weft ikat-decorated silks. The T&G collection also holds fabrics from other minority groups within

5 Tai coffin cover (detail) of a type also used by the Khmu, Xiang Khuang and Hua Phan Provinces, Laos, ca 1880-1900. 1.13 x 4.06m (2'10" x 13'4"). T&G 1992.8.26
6 Tai Lue skirt cloth, Oudomxai Province, Laos, ca. 1900-1920. 0.66 x 1.12m (2'2" x 3'8"). T&G 1992.4.7



Thailand, including Malay, Cham, Hmong, Karen, Akha, and Mien peoples. Of course, the main ethnic groups comprising Thailand's population are also found in neighbouring countries, and the textile trail follows these branches into Laos, Vietnam, Burma, peninsular Malaysia, and southern China.

There are also some textiles originating from ethnic groups not represented within Thailand's borders. The successive civilisations forming Thailand over the centuries did not exist in a vacuum but interacted with their neighbours. Weavings of other Southeast Asian groups and the distant cultures of India and China found their way into Thailand, so their inclusion in the collection is a logical extension. Ethnic Burmese, Intha, Naga, Kachin and Chin textiles from Myanmar are well represented, and there are examples from minority peoples living in southern Laos and the central highlands of Vietnam. Among others, these geographically isolated cultures include the Jarai, Rhade, Katu, and Ta-oi.

The textiles range from high status court cloths to household items, collected with the philosophy that all types are an art form. Utilitarian items – blankets, curtains, and mattress covers – are often elaborately adorned with intricate designs. Many of these domestic accessories comprise a bride's trousseau and are meticulously decorated for this joyous rite of passage; women celebrate this festive life event with symbols of beauty. Other types of textiles include clothing for everyday use and special occasions. The materials used are sometimes simple but also luxurious, depending on an item's intended function and its owner's status. Court textiles often include costly imported materials such as gold- and silver-wrapped thread. The collection also has a firm grounding in diverse types of clothing from various ethnic groups living in Thailand and other parts of Southeast Asia: skirts and other lower garments, head cloths, shoulder cloths, shawls,

sashes, and rare tunics or robes for both men and women. It is especially strong in its array of Tai women's ceremonial skirts, which contain the most variety in their combination of designs, techniques, materials, and colours.

Hand-woven or hand-adorned cloth continues to play an important role in the various religions of Southeast Asia. Textiles function as religious offerings, tools to demarcate sacred space, and as conduits between the natural and supernatural. The collection holds many examples of woven materials associated with Tai shamanic rituals and Buddhist ceremonies. It is vital that these are preserved since their production has, for the most part, declined or even ceased. This is particularly the case for funeral banners, both shamanic and Buddhist, which are increasingly rare. The collection includes a number of different types of these cloths in order to preserve them for the appreciation and learning of present and future generations.

The age of the textiles ranges from new or recently produced to approximately two hundred years old. Most fall into the twenty to 120 year category. In Southeast Asia, environmental factors such as high humidity, insects and vermin, as well as man-made events, including funerals and other rites of passage, cause the destruction of textiles. In the religious practices of the region, textiles often accompany the deceased on their journey to the supernatural world, and are sacrificed as acts of piety. Fabrics may be placed on graves and left to disintegrate, draped over a coffin and destroyed in the cremation, or buried with the deceased. Although many cultures continue to weave high quality heritage textiles, the products may vary from generation to generation. New styles emerge while others fade away either temporarily or permanently.

As part of its mission to preserve textiles as art, and as an educational tool, the collection is a regular lender to local, regional, and international exhibitions. In particular, Tilleke & Gibbins' textiles have been exhibited at the Jim Thompson Centre for Textiles and the Arts at the Jim Thompson House Museum in Bangkok, and when the Thompson Foundation hosted its first international symposium on Southeast Asian textiles in 1999, a

7 Tai Lue skirt cloth, Oudomxai Province, Laos, ca. 1900-1920. 0.58 x 1.10m (1'11" x 3'7"). T&G 2006.3.1

8 Cotton hip wrapper (detail), India for the Siamese market, ca. 1820-1840. 1.16 x 2.73m (3'10" x 8'11"). T&G 2000.5.1

9 Katu loincloth (detail), Boloven Plateau, Laos, ca. 1900-1920. 0.40 x 4.18m (1'4" x 13'9"). T&G 2001.4.1

10 Tai shaman's cloth, Hua Phan Province, Laos, ca. 1900-1920. 0.39 x 0.81m (1'3" x 2'8"). T&G 1990.1.1





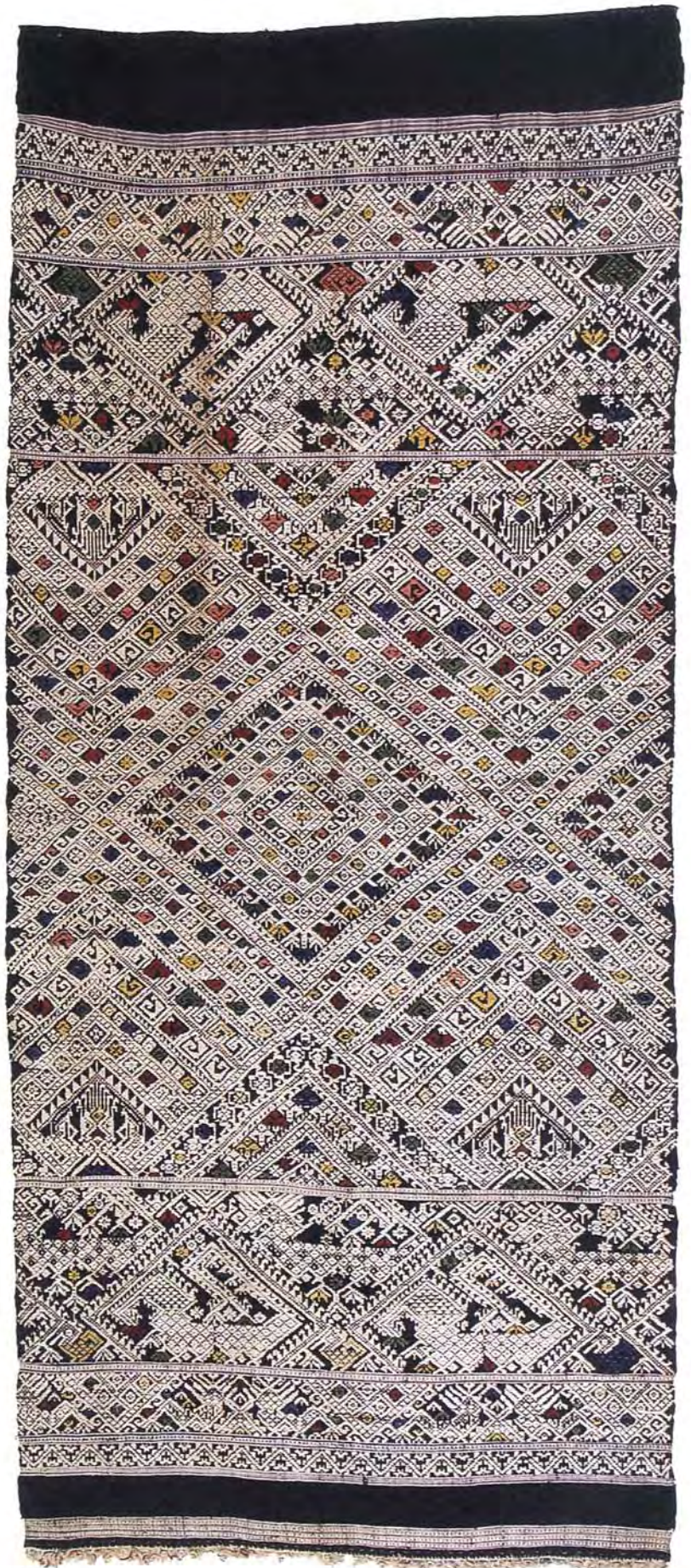
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special display of the firm's textiles accompanied the event at the Shangri-La Hotel. This was followed in 2003 by 'Power Dressing'; 'Tied Together' in 2004; 'Status, Myth, and the Supernatural' in 2005, and, most recently, 'Weaving Paradise' in 2007. Further afield, textiles from the collection were also included in regional exhibitions such as 'Invisible Hands', the first temporary exhibit at the National Museum of Laos in Luang Prabang in 2005, and, internationally, in 'Weaving Tradition: Carol Cassidy and Woven Silks of Laos', held at several locations in the United States, among them the Museum of Craft and Folk Art in San Francisco.

The textiles on display in the company's offices are rotated every six months, and UV filters are used throughout to prevent light damage. Interested individuals and groups are welcome to see the textiles and to visit the Textile Collection storage room to view storage and conservation methods: the textiles are stored to international museum standards. Researchers are also able to utilise the collection's information resources: each textile is photographed and documented and the data stored in a museum collection software programme.

To accommodate its growth needs, in September 2008 Tilleke & Gibbins relocated to seven floors of the Supalai Grand Tower on Rama 3 Road near the Chao Phraya River. The move not only allows the firm to expand, but also the collection. Ever more textiles are on display in the 20th-26th floor offices, and there are increased storage facilities and a larger workspace to care for the fabrics, under the stewardship of curator Wipawee Tiyawes (wipawee.t@tillekeandgibbins.com).

Linda Susan McIntosh is consultant to the Tilleke & Gibbins Textile Collection in Bangkok, and is the author of a book highlighting some of the most remarkable of the firm's heritage textiles, due for publication in 2009.



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