



# Textile Society of Hong Kong



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# The Tilleke & Gibbins Textile Collection

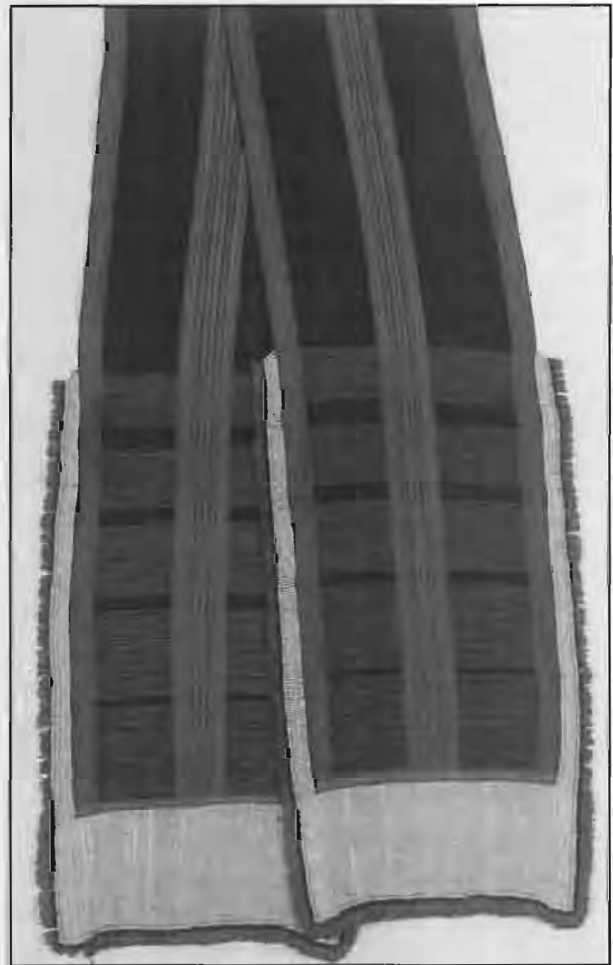
Linda McIntosh

The Tilleke & Gibbins Textile Collection began in the late 1980s when Tilleke & Gibbins, the oldest surviving law firm in Bangkok, Thailand, moved into their former offices near Lumpini Park behind the American Embassy. David Lyman, the present Chairman and Chief Values Officer, desired a different look, a Thai theme, for the interior design. A passionate carpet collector since his law school days, Mr. Lyman readily agreed to the suggestion to use a local art form, hand-woven fabrics, to adorn the office walls. Others were initially less enthusiastic but were won over by the art's beauty, and the responses from clients and employees became very positive. Soon, the law firm began to acquire more weavings of the various ethnic groups living in Thailand and neighboring countries. The seeds for starting the Collection were planted in 1987, and as the number of textiles grew, especially with the acquisition of 70 rare Lao fabrics, the Tilleke & Gibbins Textile Collection was officially established a few years later under its first full time curator, Karen Bunyaratavej.



**Tilleke & Gibbins International Offices.**

The mission of the Textile Collection is not only to decorate Tilleke & Gibbins' offices but to preserve Thailand's and other Southeast Asian countries' textile heritage 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 6 months, and the Textile Collection storage room in order to view the Collection's storage and preservation methods. The textiles are stored



**Detail of a Loincloth, Katu peoples, Attapeu Province, Laos.**

following international museum collection standards, and the UV filters are placed on the office lights to prevent damage to the displayed fabrics – light is the major enemy of textiles. Researchers also utilize the Collection's resources since each textile is photographed and documented and the data are stored in a museum collection software program.

The Tilleke & Gibbins Textile Collection presently consists of approximately 1,800 textiles. The majority of the textiles originate from diverse countries comprising mainland Southeast Asia: Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, Burma (or present-day Myanmar), and Vietnam. Insular Southeast Asian textiles, such as those from Malaysia and a few Indonesian islands, are also represented in the Collection, but the focus is closer to home: Thailand. Exceptions include Indian trade textiles made for



the Southeast Asian market, specifically Siam or present-day Thailand, and other non-Southeast Asian textiles are a few examples from ethnic minority groups living in southern China. Ethno-linguistic links connect these minority groups with the peoples living in neighboring Southeast Asia.

As stated above, the 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. 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, such as the Tai Phuan, Tai Yuan, Tai Lue, Phuthai, Tai Dam, and Tai Yai or Shan. The Collection has a solid foundation of this diverse material culture of the Tai groups.

Textiles originating from non-Tai groups living in Thailand are also represented in the Collection. These cultures include the Khmer and related linguistic groups such as the Kui. The Khmer are the dominant ethnic group of Cambodia. The Kui live in the southern provinces of northeast Thailand that border Cambodia. The Khmer and Kui weavers are particularly known for their weft ikat-decorated silks. The Collection holds fabrics from other minority groups, including the Malay, Cham, Hmong, Karen, Akha, and Mien. The ethnic groups comprising Thailand's population also live in neighboring countries, and the textile trail follows these branches into Laos, Vietnam, Burma, Malaysia, and southern China.

The Collection also houses textiles originating from ethnic groups not represented within Thailand's borders. 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 found their way into Thailand. The inclusion of textiles from other Southeast Asian groups is, therefore, logical. Burmese, Intha, Naga, Kachin, and Chin textiles from Burma, or Myanmar, are well represented. There are also some examples from minority peoples living in southern Laos and the central highlands of Vietnam. These geographically isolated cultures are the Jarai, Rhade, Katu, Ta-oi, and other groups.

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



**Skirt, Tai Lue peoples, Hun District, Oudomsai Province, Laos.**

Hand-woven or hand-adorned cloth maintains a prominent role in the religions of Southeast Asian cultures. Textiles function as religious offerings, tools to demarcate sacred space, and as conduits between



the natural and supernatural. The Collection houses many examples of woven materials associated with shamanic rituals and Buddhist ceremonies, for example. It is vital that these textiles are preserved since most of their production has declined or even ceased. Funeral banners, both shamanic and Buddhist, are religious textiles that are quickly disappearing so the Collection houses different examples of this type in order to preserve them for present and future generations' appreciation and learning.



**Shaman's Cloth, Tai peoples, Hua Phan Province, Laos Province, Laos.**

The Collection regularly loans textiles to local, regional, and international exhibitions in fulfilling its mission to preserve textiles as art and as an educational tool. In Bangkok, Tilleke & Gibbins' textiles have been exhibited at the Jim Thompson Centre for Textiles and the Arts. When this Foundation hosted its first international symposium on Southeast Asian textiles in 1999, a special display of the firm's textiles accompanied the event

at the Shangri-La Hotel. Other exhibits have been: "Power Dressing" (2003); "Tied Together" (2004); "Status, Myth, and the Supernatural" (2005), and "Weaving Paradise" (2007).



**Ceremonial Hanging, Khmer peoples, Cambodia, detail of floating offerings.**

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 – 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.

To accommodate its growth needs, in September 2008 Tilleke & Gibbins relocated to 7 floors of the Supalai Grand Tower near the Chao Phraya River in the newly developing Southeast corner of Bangkok. The expansion not only allows the firm to expand but the Collection as well. The Textile Collection's storage facilities have been enlarged to accommodate additional shelving and a larger workspace to care for the fabrics. More of the Collection will be on display throughout the offices. The present curator, Wipawee Tiyawes, is busily arranging the Collection in its new home.

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*As the collection's consultant, Linda McIntosh is writing a book highlighting some remarkable examples of the firm's heritage textiles. This volume is scheduled to be published in December 2008.*

