

# Siamese fashion, old and new

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*Siamese fashion,  
old and new*



Classical costume for the theatre.

The famous musical comedy *The King and I* which was performed in New York recently, contributed greatly to raising interest in Thailand, its people, art and costumes. (*Editor's note*: Let us add here that the friendly feeling that exists in Switzerland for this country goes back a long way, due to a great extent to the fact that two kings of Siam, H. M. Ananda Mahidol and his brother H. M. Pumipol Adulyadej both spent a long time in Lausanne where they grew up and were educated.) According to the descriptions of all the travellers of that time the sight of people crowding the streets of Bangkok in the reign of King Mongkut, the central figure of this play, was extremely colourful. During that period the dress for women was composed of two separate parts. For the lower part from the waist downwards a « panung » was used, while the upper part might be a blouse or a shawl or both. The « panung » took the form of a piece of silk or cloth, about 37 1/2" wide and 3 1/3 yds. long. This piece of cloth was worn with the top edge wound around the waist with the width hanging down towards the ankles. At the waist, in front, the two top edges were brought together and held tight by a belt, while from that point onwards to where the two ends were brought together, the garment was tightly rolled from the top edges in the downward direction. This rolling was carried out until the aperture of the lower edges of the garment was left just wide enough for the wearer to make a step forward comfortably. The end of the rolled portion was then passed between the legs of the wearer from the front to the back, and brought up at the back in the centre and tightly tugged around the belt at the waist. This lower part of the apparel



National Siamese costume of the reign of King Mongkut. (Courtesy of Berli, Jucker & Co., Bangkok.)



when completed as above, would give the appearance in front something like Turkish trousers. This method was used for everyday and informal wear by women.

For formal occasions the « panung » used would be of a more elaborate kind, having embroidery on it and worn in a different way. It would be worn hanging down loose without being rolled as described above. After the two top edges had been brought together tightly around the waist and held fast by an elaborate belt, the rest of the length of the apparel in front would be gathered from the edges in alternate folds of about 4 ins. wide inwards towards the wearer until tight, and fixed by the belt. So, when completed, it would have the appearance of a plain skirt all around but with the folds hanging down towards the ankles in front and would give freedom of movement to the wearer. The « panung » seen in the photograph is made of silk, and woven and embroidered with gold threads.

The upper part of the dress is a shawl embroidered with gold or silver threads and worn wrapped around the body

National Siamese costume of the reign of King Chulalongkorn.

leaving the right shoulder bare. This style of wearing the shawl is still used by the women of the northern and north-eastern parts of the country.

For the men, the lower part of the dress would be worn rolled as described for women for everyday and informal occasions, while the top would be a coat or a jacket.

During the time of King Chulalongkorn, son of King Mongkut, the dresses were less ornamented with gold and this trend towards simplicity better emphasised the natural grace of the Siamese figure. The women had, in addition to the usual costume, a blouse with high collar and long sleeves. The blouse shown in the picture is orange while the costume is light yellow which denotes that it had to be worn on Monday.



Photo Panich Chavanondha

« Oriosa » eyelet embroidery on batiste ground by Hausammann & Co., Winterthur. (Courtesy of G.-S. Piarasingh, Bangkok.)

Eyelet embroidery on batiste and on organdy by Chr. Fischbacher Co., St-Gall. (Courtesy of Berli, Jucker & Co., Bangkok.)



Embroidered allover by  
*Chr. Fischbacher Co., St-Gall.*  
(Courtesy of Berli, Jucker & Co.,  
Bangkok.)



Photo Panich Chavanondha

According to tradition, still well known but no longer in use, every day of the week had its own colour and it was easy, in olden times, to know from the first glance at the people in the street which day of the week it was.

It was auspicious to wear red on Sunday, light yellow on Monday, purple on Tuesday, yellow-red or a combination of colours on Wednesday (as in the costume of the Mongkut period shown here), yellow-green on Thursday, bluish-grey on Friday and black on Saturday. These colours as well as pastel shades are very popular nowadays in Thailand and the Swiss manufacturers working for this market have to use a special range of dyes.

There is no room here to describe the Siamese jewels, famous in the past and at the present time. Let us just mention that the most popular stones are the nine sacred gems consisting of the diamond, ruby, emerald, topaz, garnet,

sapphire, moonstone, hyacinth or zircon and cats-eye.

It is still possible to have a fair idea of the scintillating splendour which struck the foreign ambassadors to Siam in the 17th century when they went to the National Theatre. During the dry season this theatre puts on a series of programmes of Siamese plays with costumes recalling the dresses worn in Ayuthya, the old and now ruined former capital of Siam.

The classical costume displayed in this issue by a member of the Siamese nobility is usually composed of 24 items. The head dress or crown is conspicuous by its high spire which reminds one of the ceremonial hats of the 17th and the 18th centuries. For the classical theatre and dance it is fitted with rows of cut crystals or zircons; ornamental chin-straps cover the temples of the dancer. A large flower, called the « uba », is affixed over the left ear.



« Fantosa », printed organdie with crepe weave by Hausamann & Co., Winterthour.  
(Courtesy G.-S. Piarasingh, Bangkok.)

« Flammé », plain staple-fibre by Hausamann & Co., Winterthour.  
(Courtesy of G.-S. Piarasingh, Bangkok.)



Photo Panich Chavanondha

Photo Panich Chavanondha

The costume itself is composed of a lower garment heavily woven with silk and gold threads, a cape embroidered with gold and silver with clusters of scintillating stones sewn to the fabric and falling gracefully at the back, an embroidered cloth used like a belt, but with its ends hanging down to the knees in front of each leg. It is impossible to give an account of the other less important items and of the different pieces of jewellery which glitter when the dancers move gracefully and rhythmically to the accompaniment of characteristic Siamese music. A complete classical dress would easily cost about 10,000 ticals or 2,500 Swiss francs.

The figures of the Siamese dances are classical and every gesture and position, like the one shown in this article, have a meaning and a name. Some choreographic evolutions bear colourful names such as « The lion plays with its tail », « The hare admires the moon », « The storm of universal destruction » or « The lotus plant raises its pod ». But these reminiscences of the past last only a few hours because Thailand, although faithful to its past and its tradition, is also a modern country which adapts itself every day to present techniques and needs.

Being used to high quality hand-woven fabrics and to bright and fine colours, it is quite natural that the Thai population is now asking not for the cheapest but for the best

qualities. It is therefore no wonder that travellers passing through Bangkok are struck by the high standards of the material sold on the market and by the simple elegance of the passers-by.

There is a special section in Bangkok called the Sampeng, a narrow street covered with awnings to provide some coolness and lined by textile shops displaying everything from the cheapest cloth for the coolies to the most expensive brocades and laces. Among the piles of bundles, the Swiss crease-resistant textiles are conspicuous. In 1946 Thailand imported 109,000 Swiss francs' worth of cotton, silk and rayon goods. This figure dropped in 1947 to 68,000. In 1948 the value of these imports rose to 400,000 francs, and climbed to 588,000 in 1949 and then to 1,662,000 in 1950. The highest figure reached yet is



« Osirosa », white embroidered organdy by Hausammann & Co., Winterthur.  
(Courtesy of G.-S. Piarasingh, Bangkok.)

Photo Panich Chavanondha

4,715,000 in 1951. The most popular items are spun rayon and cotton embroideries.

It is very gratifying to see pictures of Siamese society women wearing western clothes made of Swiss textiles because they are evidence of one of the best blendings of East and West. The rayon fabric for every-day use and the

cotton embroideries for social occasions, which are numerous, meet perfectly the requirements of a tropical climate. The quality of these textiles, made to meet the Far Eastern taste for high quality, for delicate and yet fast shades, is the best explanation of their increased popularity not only in Thailand, the country of friendly smiles, but also in the neighbouring countries.