



ANTIQUING IN THAILAND

Siam..the temple of the Golden Buddha in Wat Poh, the old Northern capitals of Chiangmai and Chiangrai..these conjure up the smell of jasmine, sandalwood incense and visions of glittering golden images of the gods. As a long time collector of things Asian, specifically Chinese and Tibetan, I had yet to set foot in Thailand, although I do own several Buddha images and a few ceramics from the place. I had worked for a major collector and was extremely familiar with the latter. I had spent nearly five years handling his growing collection of over one-thousand pieces and probably knew more about them than any curator in the States. They, frankly, bored me. On the other hand, the bronze and stone sculpture of Thailand fascinated me.

When an opportunity arose to visit not only Bangkok but also those Northern capitals last September I was delighted. I secretly hoped to add another fine Ayutthaya cast and gilt bronze image of the Buddha to my collection to match the one already there.



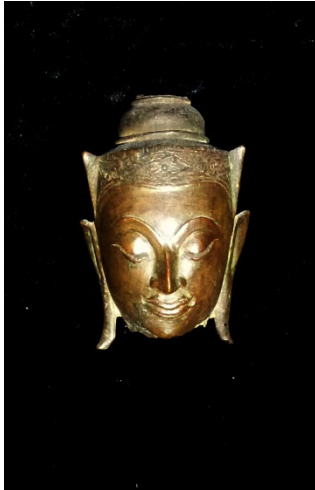
Ayutthaya Buddha, 16th Century

Upon my arrival in Bangkok, as soon as I was able, I started my quest. The first problem I encountered was a rather large one, the antiquities regulations. They now prohibit the exportation of any image of the Buddha in bronze or metal that exceeds five inches in height. Even then the item may be subject to seizure at the port of departure if it is found and deemed to have archaeological or other national interest. Oh well, that kind of thing never stops the ardent collector. My first pass through Bangkok was rather disappointing, from a distance, what appeared to be stores packed with interesting material turned out to be dens of iniquity instead of antiquity.



Typical Bangkok 'Antiques' Stall

All of the material, artfully arranged, was reproduction. This was repeated time and again throughout the City. I will now add that the same applies to Chiangmai and Chiangrai. Legitimate dealers do exist, but they generally offer Chinese and other antiques that are not subject to the export regulations. The prices are steep. When I did find Thai material it was offered within regulations and was priced in a similar manner. A small Buddha head, 3 inches high, snapped from a figure of the 17th Century, was being offered at \$1,200



17th Century Buddha Head

There were plenty of amusing vendors of brand new 'antiquities' such as this Chinese importer selling ceramics under the name 'Jingdezhen', the site of the old Chinese Imperial kilns.



'Jingdezhen' Ceramics Vendor, Bangkok

Of course, no pretensions were made as to the age of these pieces. Other shops simply offered large scale reproductions that made for some interesting photographs.



New Images for Sale, Bangkok

Off to Chiangmai and Chiangrai where I hoped the 'pickins' would improve. Chiangrai was a grave disappointment in that regard but my hopes for Chiangmai persisted. Chiangmai had the first and largest 'night market' in the Country. From 7pm until midnight stalls sprouted like mushrooms on every street for 2 square miles of the downtown modern city. Everything and anything could be found there.



Chiangmai Night Market in Full Swing, Around 10 pm

Well, everything except for antiques or antiquities - of any kind. I suppose it might be unfair to say that since I was only able to cover about half of the market in three nights, but that's close enough. During the day I prowled the 'antiquities' dealers. Yes, there was stuff to be had. Some of the ceramics that I had been bored with, rusty Hill Tribe knives, amulets, decorative baskets and related ethnographic material. I did manage to find a small 16th century celadon glazed stoneware figure of an adorant at one dealer for the equivalent of \$30.00. It's about four inches in height.



Thai 16th Century Celadon

Another dealer yielded a mold-made Lamphun terracotta image of the Buddha beneath the Bodhi tree, probably 15th Century, which measures only 3 inches high. It cost \$25.00.



Lamphun Terracotta

While this may satisfy some, it took quite a lot of digging and a lot of experience and scholarship to come up with two really small pieces. I think the point of all of this is to save the average reader of this article from the heartache of overweight baggage charges or extra baggage fees when it comes to antiques or antiquities.

What then can one turn to if art is what you crave? I found that while in the North visiting the Hill Tribes I was able to buy Akan jewelry directly from them. Yes, you can get the stuff in the States. This wonderful Akan necklace cost about \$6.00 there and would be a couple of hundred in New York. By the way, I get my best Asian antiquities in the States, not Asia since they overprice their antiques and antiquities (when real) to the point of absurdity as noted above. It's a patrimony thing.



Akan Necklace

The necklace is not silver but silvered metal. Still it turns heads and could be mounted in a shadow box if not worn. In Chiangmai I found a group of textile artists producing a line of batik clothing. Most of the designs were unique. I immediately recognized the Japanese character of the designs. They said that they were encouraged by Japanese clients and so worked to taste. These garments are striking. The 'moon and clouds' dress at \$25.00 was a steal and is a real work of art. The short jackets are fabulous at \$15.00 each.



'Moon and Clouds' Cotton Batik Dress



Artisinal Batik on Cotton Jacket

The textile arts are alive and well in Thailand and I would urge the wouldbe 'antiquer' to turn his or her attention there. Indigo dyeing is another area of interest. An ancient art, it is still practiced in the same manner today with some minor modern modifications for the protection of the artists. Note: buyer beware of the dreaded 'blue transfer' to skin or other fabric problem.



Of course, no discussion of the textile arts in Thailand would be complete without mentioning silk. I will avoid the obvious and stay away from the well discussed areas of silk scarves, shawls, table runners and other things that are available in every night market at reasonable prices as well as high-end shops at un-reasonable prices. Yes, do buy them. I brought back a collection from the countries of the Golden Triangle. Thailand, Laos and Myanmar. They pack well, are appreciated as gifts and if bought at the night markets or stalls or small shops are a bargain.

I have one further silk related bargain that a 'picker' might miss. Trying to avoid the blistering sun when visiting Bangkok's Grand Palace and Museums I ducked into the Gift Shop of the Queen Sirikit Museum of Textiles. I was delighted to find that there was a large selection of unique jewelry pieces by local artists each of which incorporated silk. I naturally shyed away from asking prices at first but then as I couldn't stand it I broke the silence. I was shocked to find that prices were another steal. Once again, wear it or shadow box it.



Artisinal Silk and Beadwork Necklace

This stunning braided salmon silk and beadwork unique necklace cost a mere \$25.00 at the shop. Others of equal interest were priced below \$50.00.

It has not been my purpose to disappoint you but merely to prepare those about to visit Thailand for the first time or those likely to tear themselves away from the beaches of the South long enough to head North for some ancient culture, not to expect too much with regard to the finding of those golden images of the gods. They do exist but in the museums, temples and private collections of the Country. If you really *must* have a piece of Thai antiquity then perhaps wait until you return and go to a small auction here. As so many people do, you can always make up a legend of how you found your 'treasure' in a dusty shop on a back street in Chiangmai one hot and steamy day with the scent of sandalwood incense in the air.