Unexpected Consequences
The Javanese batik collection of Thailand’s King Rama V (r. 1868–1910)

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The Queen Sirikit Museum of Textiles (QSMT) opened in Bangkok on the grounds of the Grand Palace in 2012. The museum is housed in an 1870s building by an Italian architect. It had been unoccupied for several decades when it was granted to Her Majesty Queen Sirikit in 2004 by His Majesty King Bhumibol Adulyadej (r. 1947–2016) for the creation of a state-of-the-art textile museum.

It was in 2009, during the course of seeking inspiration for the opening exhibitions, that the curatorial team was permitted access to the inner court of the Grand Palace. Textiles and clothing belonging to King Rama V had sat in locked storage there, undisturbed since his passing in 1910. During the course of looking at a variety of Thai court textiles and a few Indian sarihs from two of the king’s short visits to India, suddenly Javanese batik sarongs were placed on our worktable. Why were Javanese batiks in the Grand Palace in Bangkok? We learned that King Rama V had traveled to Java in 1871, 1896, and 1901. Since 1910, however, no one outside of two or three Palace intimates had ever seen the collection.

Time, war, and the environment are often hard on objects as fragile as textiles. As a result, although there are examples of Javanese batik dating before the dawn of the 20th century, they are relatively rare and many have little or no documentation regarding their date and circumstances of production. This was an important find for the history of Thailand and Thai-Indonesian relations as well as for the study of Indonesian batik. Accordingly, those present at this rediscovery were encouraged to remember the collection for a future exhibition and publication.

Like the museum itself, the batik project was an international team effort requiring years of planning and research. In October 2018, our collective dream became reality with the opening of the exhibition, A Royal Treasure: The Javanese Batik Collection of King Chulalongkorn of Siam. This short essay presents highlights both of the collection and significant discoveries made along the way, as well as a brief outline of the king’s travels in Java.

King Chulalongkorn was dedicated to keeping Siam independent of colonial domination, as well as modernising the country. Visiting Singapore and Java in 1871, 1896, and 1901 trips; expense accounts of the second visit – including batik purchases; a hand-written English translation of descriptive notes from the 1896 visit in local Dutch newspapers on Java (made for the king, who could read English but not Dutch). In addition, there are photographs from the 1896 and 1901 visits, as well as hand-written inventory cards in Thai and English accompanying many pieces in the collection.

An official visit: 9 March–15 April 1871
No photographs are extant from this brief, 11-day visit of the 17-year-old king. We do know that he rode a tram in Batavia (modern Jakarta) – a great novelty – and stopped in only one other city, Semarang. There, at a local official’s home, the king witnessed “the dyeing and printing of sarongs and benevolently accepted a finished saran.” Unfortunately, it was impossible to identify this piece in the surviving collection – if it still exists.

Five pieces in the collection, however, came from a famous batik workshop owned by Carolina Josephina von Franquemont (1817-1867), the earliest known Eurasian female entrepreneur. Her pieces are distinctive and were highly prized for decades after her workshop was destroyed in 1867 by a volcanic eruption in which she is believed to have perished. The sarongs (hip wrappers) attributed to her workshop in the collection all have their ends sewn together, indicating they had already been worn when acquired; sarongs purchased new would be unwoven. It could not be determined how the King acquired these pieces and whether it was on the first trip or a later one. But they are among the rarest pieces in any batik collection. Note the rich green dye, for which von Franquemont was famous (fig. 2).

A private journey, 9 May–12 August 1896
Although this was a ‘private’ visit for the king’s health, it was avidly followed by the local Dutch-language press, and he was granted by both Colonial and Javanese officials throughout his time there. The Sultan of Yogyakarta, HRH Hamengkubuwono VII (r. 1879–1921), assigned the first professional Javanese photographer, Kassian Câphos, to photograph the royal party during their entire visit (fig. 3). It was on this visit that His Majesty’s interest in Javanese art and culture, particularly batik, is most evident: the king’s diaries mention visiting batik workshops and local markets and purchasing from itinerant sellers. For example: “Went to the residence of the Raden Adjpati [in Garut] and saw the sarong production process [batik] and I tried my hand at it.” Possibly the most important workshop visited by the king was on 3 July: “In the afternoon, I went to see lawn making at the Western woman’s house … there are 100 workers … This workshop is one of the best in the city except for the keraton (palace) … each finished piece was sold for 25 guilders.” Ultimately the king bought at least 41 pieces from this workshop (which he visited again in 1901).

Fig. 1 (left): Portrait of HM King Chulalongkorn, 1896. Studio of Robert Lenz, Singapore. The Royal yacht stopped in British Singapore on both the outbound and return journeys of each of the king’s three trips to Java.
Photo courtesy of the National Archives of Thailand.

Fig. 2 (right): Attributed to the workshop of Carolina Josephina von Franquemont, Semarang, Java. Sarung (waist). Hand-drawn wax resist, brush-and-vat-dyed on plain weave cotton. 1896. 109.3 x 104 cm. Bureau of the Royal Household, Inc. #110. Photo courtesy of the Queen Sirikit Museum of Textiles, Bangkok.

Fig. 3: HM King Chulalongkorn and his wife Sutdavan Phrabatsonavas (1895-1930) arrive in port in the Keraton of Surakarta, Java, 6 July 1896. Photo courtesy of the National Archives of Thailand.
Accompanying the collection are inventory cards handwritten in Thai and English with the name of the pattern, the price in Dutch guilders, and the place of purchase, if known. These alone are rare survivals, especially in 1896, when the bulk of the collection was purchased. This practice probably began in the mid-19th century when Batik was considered the "Paris of Java," with a large foreign population and establishments selling fashionable batiks, many made in towns along the north coast of the island.

There are eight pieces in the collection from the workshop of the famous batik entrepreneur, Mrs. A.J.E. Jans (b. 1856-1909), who produced some of the finest batik in Central Java. They were members of a famous aristocratic family with deep roots in the Indies and high-level connections in both Java and the Netherlands. Despite the fame of their production from the latter half of the 19th century to the death of the daughter (2018), Queen Sirikit Museum of Textiles (QSMT) in Bangkok. Contact: janandole@hotmail.com

Notes
1. The author wishes to acknowledge QSMT colleagues: Piyaworawat Naretnoi, director; Saritartat Muddin, curator; Piyawan Petchaprasittipin, editor; catalogue co-authors: S. Muddin, Judi Achjadi, and Dr. Sandra Niessen, and Project Advisor: Dr. Marich Via Warnanupatu. Some information in this article is drawn from the excellent catalogue contributions of Muddin and Achjadi. Look at space prevents acknowledging all those who contributed to this multi-year project.
5. Kassian Chavan, The largest archive of photographs by Céphas, including those of the 1896 visit to Java, are in the collection of KITLV and now housed in the Leiden University Libraries.
6. Hill King Chulalongkorn, Rayathang thin chhow kea song duan (Narrative of a Journey to Java of Over Two Months in Rotterdam and Java, 1915), Creations Volume. Bangkok, B.E. 2458 (1925), p. 90. [In Thai, translated by S. Muddin]. This is the king’s travel from the 19th century to the present day, National Archives of Thailand, Bangkok.
9. Crafts of the Netherlands East Indies were the focus of the Dutch government’s propaganda. Batik pieces were particularly highlighted. A handful of the sample patterns were from the 1917 workshop in the Tropenmuseum match full-size batik in the king’s collection. There is no doubt all were produced in the same workshop.
10. See Sandra Niessen, “Kain ma’ng on the Western Women’s House.” The van Lowick van Pabst Story,” in Dale Gluckman and Sartarth Muddin (eds. and co-authors), A Royal Treasure. Jaavanese Batik Collection of King Chulalongkorn of Siam, 2018, Queen Sirikit Museum of Textiles, Bangkok, Chapter 2, pp. 57-59.