

United States & Thailand Celebrate Bhutanese Textiles



LEFT: Installation view of men's and women's clothing styles from Bhutan from *Bhutanese Textiles: Weaving from the Heart* at the Bank of Thailand Museum, Chiang Mai, Thailand. BELOW LEFT: Torie Olson, Aum Sonam Llamo with natural dyes in Chume Valley, Bumthang District, Bhutan, 2006; photographic print. BELOW RIGHT: Torie Olson, Haa Valley girls, Bhutan 2006; photographic print. 2006; photographic print.

MUCH LIKE THE COMPLEX brocade patterns of the textiles in *Bhutanese Textiles: Weaving from the Heart*, on view at the Bank of Thailand Museum, Chiang Mai, Thailand, November 10, 2008–February 10, the people behind this exhibition are woven together in a collaborative effort unique for all the parties involved—one which brings together three countries in the spirit of art and cultural exchange.

The project began in Brattleboro, Vermont, in 2007, when Jay and Rungnapa Bommer teamed up with Adam Silver, executive director of the newly incorporated Asian Cultural Center of Vermont (ACCVT), to display their expansive collection of Bhutanese textiles. Torie Olson, another Vermont resident, was also invited to include her stunning photographs of Bhutanese people in native dress. The Bommers, who have strong connections in Chiang Mai, which is in northern Thailand, facilitated a relationship between the Bank of Thailand Museum and ACCVT, to send the exhibition to Thailand.

The Bank of Thailand controls the economy of Thailand, much in the same way the Federal Reserve does in the United States. Prasopsuk Puangsakorn, the director of the bank's Northern Region

office, is also the director of the Bank of Thailand Museum in Chiang Mai. The importance of his role was especially evident to me on the morning of our scheduled interview, November 27, 2008, when due to protestors from the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD) taking over the Bangkok airport the day before, he was called

into an emergency meeting with government officials, including Prime Minister Somchai Wongsawat (who was later pressured by the coup into stepping down).

Dedicated to the conservation of traditional Thai arts and culture, the Bank of Thailand Museum's focus is on two areas, money and textiles, with permanent collections of antique coinage in one section and *Tai* textiles in another. This may seem to be an odd combination but makes perfect sense in light of *Tai* textiles' historic role as valuable trade commodities—the term *Tai* extends beyond Thai nationality and refers to an ethnic group made up of many subgroups who live predominantly in the regions of Thailand, Laos, and Myanmar (Burma).

Once a year the museum hosts a special exhibition; the *Bhutanese Textiles* exhibit represented the first time the museum had shown a significant body of non-Thai



textiles. While Bhutan is a relatively closed society, the last two years their King Jigme Singye Wangchuck has enjoyed vacationing in Thailand. Significantly, he visited Buddhist temples without a huge entourage and was greatly accessible to the Thai people. Because of their high regard for the Bhutanese king, Thais were extremely excited to learn more about the culture and customs of Bhutan through this recent exhibition.

The Bommer's extensive collection includes twentieth-century textiles from colorful brocade *kira* (the traditional wrapped dress) and *kera* (woven belts) to older, ceremonial tunics made from natural dyes. What is evident from observing these objects is their imbued aura of use. Small patches, repairs, and stains remind us that these textiles played a significant role in daily life. The fabrics provide clues to a narrative about fashion, technical skill, trade, and cultural identity. To complete the story, Olson's photographs charmed viewers with a sparkling humanity that distinctly reveals Bhutanese culture. ●



Asian Cultural Center of Vermont's website is www.asianculturalcentervt.org. The Bank of Thailand Museum's website is www.bot.or.th/english/BOTMuseum.

ABOVE: Napsham kira; silk, cotton; supplementary weft brocade; 57¼" x 90½". Photo courtesy of Jay and Rungnapa Bommer.