

Jim Thompson - Thai Silk King

By Clem McMurray

In Thailand, no other post-war story evokes more mystery and questions than Jim Thompson's disappearance on Easter Sunday, 26 March 1967, when he took an afternoon walk in the Cameron Highlands of Malaysia and was never seen again. Although a manhunt on an unprecedented scale was launched, not a single sign of him was found then or afterwards.



Wearing a dress made of Thai silk, Deborah Kerr in The King and I (1956)

Today, Thailand is famous for its vibrant silks, but from the early 1940s its silk industry had fallen into decline because it could not compete with machine-made textiles such as nylon. Almost single-handedly, Jim Thompson revitalised (some say saved) the industry, which first attracted his interest during his military deployment in Thailand (then known as Siam). Jim's

contributions to Thailand and its people were formally recognised when he was awarded the Order of the White Elephant in 1962. How did this all come about?

Jim Thompson attended the University of Pennsylvania in 1928 studying architecture, but did not complete his degree



Jim and his pet bird Cocky – in the 1960s

owing to a weakness in calculus. However, he had a flair for design, so he stayed in the architecture industry and his blueprints were signed off by certified architects. In 1942 Jim married Pat Thraves, an ex-model who shared many of his interests. The couple enjoyed only six months of married life before he enlisted and was shipped to North Africa to assist in the Allied war effort. Later he was recruited to the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) and, following the Japanese surrender in 1945, was sent to Thailand where he organised the Bangkok OSS office. During this period Jim met Connie Mangskau, who would become one of his greatest friends. Connie and Jim shared a passionate interest in Asian art and antiques and Connie later developed the most highly regarded antiques shop in Asia. Jim returned to the United States in 1946 to arrange his discharge and to persuade his wife to return to Thailand with him. The discharge presented no problem, but the couple's extended separation had taken its toll and this led to a divorce.

Being financially independent and with no reason to remain in the US, Jim returned to Bangkok where he became a part owner of the Oriental Hotel and was briefly involved with its refurbishment. He had a falling-out with his partners although he remained a resident in the hotel. Following up on his early interest in the silk industry, in the mid-1940s Jim encouraged weavers in Ban Krua to work independently from their own homes, then purchased the silk on a consignment basis and sold it wherever he saw an opportunity. Ban Krua is one of Bangkok's oldest communities and dates back to the end of the 18th century when Cham Muslims from Cambodia and



Kanyalax Mungjittamman, a guide in the Jim Thompson house, demonstrating how silk is woven



Jim with Connie Mangskau at the opening of The Thai Silk Company



Jim inspecting silks with a Cham weaver in 1962

Vietnam fought on the side of the new Thai King. They were rewarded with a plot of land east of the new capital, beside the *Klong Maha Nag* (Maha Nag Canal). The immigrants brought their silk-weaving traditions with them.

As a consequence of the influx of cheap fabrics from Europe and Japan, many Thai weavers had walked away from their craft. Thai families wove silk by hand predominantly for their own use and used colours that were mainly the products of natural dyes, which faded with repeated washing. Jim firmly believed he could revive and uplift the centuries-old industry while creating financial benefits for those involved and build a business rooted firmly in the soil of Thai culture. He frequently toured the north-eastern region of Thailand to gain a basic understanding of the sources of silk and the weaving process.

Jim's intentions regarding the redevelopment of the silk industry hinged on a few key factors. The first was ensuring all products were colourfast, which meant traditional dyes could not be used. After substantial testing of dyes from various sources, those that met his criteria were imported from Switzerland. The quality control aspect of production had to be foolproof and dependable, so customers could be



Kanyalax showing off a contemporary Thai silk shawl

sure that when they re-ordered they would get precisely what they expected. The third objective was based on the fact that the majority of weavers didn't care or need to know who bought their products, but the management needed to know what customers' tastes and

requirements were in order to target and satisfy the market.

Besides creating the bright jewel tones and dramatic colour combinations nowadays associated with Thai silk, Jim's efforts raised thousands of Thailand's poorest people out of poverty. His determination to keep his business cottage-based was significant for the women who made up the bulk of his work force. Jim managed to persuade some

weavers to create samples for him in colour combinations not seen before. He took the samples to New York in early 1947 and convinced the fashion magazine *Vogue* to publish an article with colour pictures, which took the fashion world by storm. The silks were displayed in a beautiful dress designed by none other than Valentina, frequently called "America's most glamorous dressmaker" with Jim given credit in the caption.

The enthusiastic reaction to *Vogue's* coverage convinced Jim there was a market for his product in the West so his next task was to find the means to satisfy the demand that soon developed. In late 1948, in partnership with George Barrie and a group of Thai friends, Jim founded The Thai Silk Company Limited. Costume designer Irene Sharaff used the company's textiles in the 1956 production of the Oscar-winning movie *The King and I* and the resultant publicity really stimulated international interest.



Jim holding a silk textile sample

Following Jim's disappearance, the demand for hand-woven silks diminished as the Thai Silk Company increased production of machine-made silks. Many weavers simply abandoned their craft while others re-trained in the new manufacturing techniques and remained in the employ of the company. The company also established its own mulberry farm and silkworm egg production facility to ensure a reliable source of supplies. The Thai Silk Company's sales have continued to grow and currently there are more than 3,500 employees producing over 1.6 million metres of silk each year. Jim Thompson showrooms and distributors operate in major cities throughout the world.

Clem McMurray lives in Australia. An initial visit to the Jim Thompson House in Bangkok led to his deepening interest in Thai silk history.

All photos by the author