

# An Introduction to Traditional Thai Crafts

By Ruth Gerson

Thailand has a rich tradition of crafts, some of which had almost become extinct, but were revived by Her Majesty Queen Sirikit. These are some that have withstood the test of time.

## Lacquer Ware

Thai lacquer ware has a black background applied with gold leaf designs. These designs include traditional foliage with flame-like tendrils, flowers, birds and squirrels. The technique is unique. The object is covered with a sticky lac, and a design is drawn on it. The background is then covered with water-soluble paint and dried, and gold leaf is applied to the sticky lac. The object is washed in water, dissolving the paint and leaving the gold leaf design intact on the surface.



Lacquerware on door panel, Chinese influence, photo by Ruth Gerson

## Mother-of-Pearl Inlay

Mother-of-pearl inlay is an art that requires infinite patience and skill. The shell commonly used is found only in the Gulf of Thailand and is called 'Flaming Mother of Pearl'. Pieces are cut out of the shell with a tiny and very fine saw, then glued in reversed design on sheer paper, which is pressed onto an object covered with several layers of soft lac. When the lac dries the surface of the inlay is polished.



Round food box decorated with mother-of-pearl inlay, photo by John Toomey

## Nielloware

Nielloware is a special technique of working with silver and gold, typically from southern Thailand. The metal's surface is hammered then covered with a black alloy which is fused to the silver or gold base through heat and the surface is smoothed. The design is then incised through the alloy, allowing the silver or gold pattern to shine in contrast to the black.

## Woodcarving

Woodcarving and wood ornamentation are widespread crafts in Thailand. Teak was abundant in Thailand and was used because of its hardness, durability and resistance to insects. It was richly carved, using Thai designs in architecture, for furniture, the royal barges, funeral chariots and Buddha images. With the present shortage of teak, other woods are used in carving objects.



Carved teak wood panel depicting rural Thai scenes, photo by Ruth Gerson

## Ceramics

Pre-historic ceramics dating as far back as 5000 years have been found in Thailand. They include the cord-marked and painted ceramics of Ban Chiang. The kilns of Sukhothai (13<sup>th</sup> century) produced celadon and cream-coloured ceramics painted with fish or floral designs at the center. The Ayutthaya (1351 – 1767) and Rattanakosin (1782 to 1910) periods produced five-coloured Bencharong ceramics – some with gold, made in China to Thai specifications.



Prehistoric pottery from Ban Chiang NE Thailand, about 3,000 years old, photo by Ruth Gerson

## Textiles

The craft of weaving and dyeing cloth is centred in villages. Influences from India and Cambodia are expressed in fine patterns, while figurative and geometric designs in a wealth of colours came from Laos. The *ikat* design, known there as *mudmee*, with the threads of the warp and the weft pre-dyed in a pattern then matched in the process of weaving, is popular. Both cotton and silk are used, with natural as well as chemical dyes. Large frame looms are generally used today, but some minority groups still use back-strap looms that fit around a woman's back, limiting the size of the finished textile.