

Thai Mother-of-Pearl Inlay

A (Not So) 'Minor' Art for Court and Cloister

By John J. Toomey

Sadly, when one thinks of shell work, the mind conjures up images of cheap carnival trinkets or beach souvenirs. But Thai mother-of-pearl (MOP) inlay lacquer has an ancient history as one of the highest forms of artistic expression and was reserved exclusively for court and cloister.

Thai lacquer is made from the sap of the *Melanorrhoea Usitata* tree, called *yang* in Thai. The history of Thai lacquer and of MOP inlay (*khruang pradab muk* in Thai) dates back to the Dvaravati period (9th to 10th century). Dvaravati craftsmen used whole rough shells or their parts, cut round or in ring shapes, or shapeless platelets of shells to inlay into black lacquered stucco. Other than the inlay eyes of bronze Buddhist statuary of the later Lanna and Sukhothai periods, we cannot trace a continuity of shell work. We can presume that the Thais later learned to refine MOP inlay from examples they saw and handled from the surrounding countries of China, Japan, Korea and the Ryukyu Islands, all carried in the cargoes of Ryukyuan ships that linked the sea lanes with Ayutthaya.

Chinese MOP began to have a direct influence on Thai techniques and styles from the time of King Rama III (1824-51), although the quality of Thai lacquer of earlier periods had often been much better because they had been made for royal and ecclesiastical use. The motifs and ornaments as well as the technique, however, always remained purely Thai.



Cover of monk's begging bowl, detail showing Indra's mount, the triple-headed elephant Erawan (Airavata) and royal lion, with an inscription that King Rama V on the occasion of his own coronation gave to the Supreme Patriarch. 20th century, collection of Prince Paribatra

The older works of MOP made for court and temple ritual used a shell of better quality than the more recent and souvenir pieces that we see in today's market; they are made of abalone and other bivalves. High quality Thai MOP uses a shell of the family *Turbinidae turbo marmoratus-Linn Linnaeus*, a sea snail known as 'great green turban' which comes from the Gulf of Siam. This *hoi muk fai* (flaming mother-of-pearl) has a rough, hard, green-brown outside and a deep and iridescent pink and green lustre reminiscent of fire opals inside, making other kinds of MOP pale by comparison.

Because the shells are curved, it takes considerable dexterity to cut straight, flat pieces from the most colourful parts, which are away from the edges. The basic tools are small saws, files and *burins* (pointed tools). The best and fastest workers can cut about 30 platelets a day, fewer if the pattern is a complicated one, such as a flame-like *kranok* design; but it takes

1,500 to 2,000 platelets to cover just the upper portion of a Thai *talum* food box. The pieces are quickly stuck with an adhesive to a larger paper used as a temporary backing, while giving sensitive attention to the harmonious placement of the gradations of colour. The wood, bamboo, rattan or *papier mâché* object is then lacquered once all over to ensure smooth and consistent drying. Next it's given a coating of a better quality and fast-drying lacquer termed *rak smook*, made from powdered charcoal from the stem veins of banana leaves or certain grasses mixed with the sap of the lacquer tree, creating a paste that is applied several times. When the piece has almost dried, but is still flexible, the tiny platelets of MOP are forced very delicately into the lacquer, so as to keep the surface of the piece uniform.

The paper is removed after the work completely dries, more *smook* is filled into the spaces between the platelets of MOP, and the lacquer surface is rubbed with hard stones to restore



Naga and Thai kranok flame motifs on detail of door of sutra cabinet from doors of Wat Borombuddharam, Ayutthaya, 18th century, collection of Prince Paribatra



Detail showing a royal order with ribbon on a window shutter of the ubosoth (ordination hall) of Wat Rathchabhopit, the royal mausoleum temple built by western architects in western cathedral and various other styles, 20th century



20th century sutra cover from the collection of Prince Paribatra, showing the prajamyian, four-petalled flower motif

the sheen. The whole exterior is finally polished with cocoa butter.

In former ages in Thailand, MOP inlay was used exclusively on ecclesiastical objects, such as *sutra* covers for Buddhist scriptures and their boxes, *sutra* cabinets, and the doors and window panels of monasteries, where the finest inlay is still seen today. Some of the best doors are now on the Monthien Viharn of the Temple of the Emerald Buddha and also in its collection of *sutra* cabinets. A cabinet made from the 1,751 doors of Wat Baroma Buddharam is now preserved in the National Museum Bangkok. Doors from 1753 are on the Phra Viharn Yod in the Emerald Buddha compound. The best of the Rattanakosin Period doors are in



Table screens showing the Buddha between disciples Shariputra and Mogellana, as celestials shower them with flowers, 20th century, collection of Prince Paribatra

the Chapel Royal of the Emerald Buddha and also on its *mondop* (repository for sacred scriptures) in the same compound, all made during the reign of Rama I (1782-1809).

The Ayutthaya Palace Law of 1358 prescribed the MOP utensils to be given to certain royal ranks. Some examples are the umbrella of the king's sons – decorated with mother-of-pearl inlay – and the king's grandson's containers and pedestals. The members of the royal family were to eat from a "...turtle shell or mother-of-pearl inlay..." So important was the grandeur of MOP to royal prestige that the ninth king of Ayutthaya, Trilok, established a Department of Mother-of-Pearl to direct its craftsmanship and limit it to courtiers within the royal household. The building that housed this ministry was of MOP inlay and situated near the throne hall, showing how important MOP inlay was to the monarchy. In the late Ayutthaya period, the use of MOP inlay utensils was extended to commoners who could afford them.

After the fall of Ayutthaya in 1787, the MOP royal craftsmen were re-grouped by the new Rattanakosin government into the Department of Mother-of-Pearl Craftsmanship. One of the most important of their products was the state throne of wood inlaid with MOP motifs of *singha* lions, *garuda* birds holding *naga* snakes, and *thepanom* angels.

In the Mother-of-Pearl Room of the National Museum Bangkok, one can see some of the most exquisite examples of royal and ecclesiastical ware, many from the collection of Prince Paribatra. Articles of special interest are the table screen showing the Buddha attended by Shariputra and Mogallana, with angels showering flowers down upon them, a throne for the supreme patriarch, tall covered *tiep muk* trays for presenting food to monks, *jiad* hat boxes, small rounded *krob* clothing containers and sutra covers and boxes for scriptures.



Lung food box with prajamyian and other floral motifs, 20th century, collection of Prince Paribatra

By the end of the 19th century, MOP inlay had become less popular and the Department of Mother-of-Pearl Inlay Craftsmanship was closed, signifying the end of royal patronage. Nowadays the craft is carried on by private groups of craftsmen who still produce fine work for both court and cloister.

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All photos by the author, courtesy of the Bangkok National Museum, Fine Arts Department of Thailand