

Kalagas

Thailand's Exquisite Wall Hangings

By MaryAnne Stanislaw



Beginning to sew the figures onto a kalaga

Excitement in the village is high. It's festival time at the temple and a makeshift stage is being erected. The dancers are donning their costumes and the orchestra is warming up. A large, ornate curtain serves as a backdrop for the spectacle. As the drama begins, the villagers are transported back to the time of the Ramayana to enjoy a story they all know very well. As they wait in anticipation for the dancers and prepare themselves to become one with the performance, their gazes rest on the sumptuously embroidered backdrop, a *kalaga*.

Since the late 1800s in the area of Mandalay, Burma, *kalagas* embroidered with the stories of the Buddha's lives have graced temple walls and inspired worshippers. The most exquisite pieces were used to decorate King Mindon's palace walls in Mandalay. Some *kalagas* depicted foreign faces, attesting to trade with foreigners, while others depicted very Italian-looking angels, perhaps inspired by priests and made for export. *Kalaga* means 'foreign curtain' in Sanskrit, which leads us to believe that the original idea was imported. Perhaps tapestries from Europe brought about the idea of the 'curtain', but the embroidery work of the *kalaga* can be traced back to 12th century Sukothai in Thailand. It was during this time that appliqué embroidery became a part of court costumes. At the height of the

Ayutthaya period (1350-1767), Thai art and culture was the envy of neighbouring kingdoms, which led to a series of wars between the Burmese and Thais and finally to the siege and destruction of Ayutthaya in 1767. Many Thai prisoners were taken, especially dancers and court attendants, in order to copy their costumes and culture. Sadly, very little remains of the splendour of the Ayutthaya court. In the early Ratanakosin or Bangkok period that followed, bronze statues, mainly of Buddha, showed the opulence and detail of those costumes.



This one depicts the Ramayana. Large kalagas often have borders of animals



Prince Siddhartha cuts off his hair to become an ascetic



Channa, a courtier, and his horse, from a Siddhartha kalaga

The *kalaga* is the ultimate appliqué art form. A design is drawn freehand on the base cloth, which is often plain black cotton, but can also be black or red velvet, then embellished with sequins, glass beads and embroidery. The figures on the piece are often stuffed with kapok as they are being sewn on, to give the *kalaga* a 3D effect. The base cloth is first stretched on an embroidery loom and a theme is drawn. The figures that will be featured in the *kalaga* are outlined and sequins made from a silver/nickel mixture are applied. Next, the details in the figures are embroidered and coloured threads dyed with vegetable dye are stitched onto the fabric. Finally, more coloured threads are made especially for the borders. Glass or mother-of-pearl beads are added to the base cloth with the threads keeping them in place. On many earlier *kalagas*, the figures were not stuffed, but simply applied onto the base cloth. This made them much lighter and easier to pack up. They were designed to be folded up, for ease of transportation by travelling troupes. The *kalagas* first made their way to the West during World War II, in the hands of Allied soldiers who simply folded them up and took them home.

Kalagas can range in size from quite small to as large as 20x5 feet. The larger ones usually depict stories, while smaller ones can be themes or have just a single figure.

During the late 1940s Jim Thompson made a trip to Burma where he found some *kalagas* for sale. Although he was interested in them and sold a few in his shop, his main focus was on developing the silk business that he had revived in Thailand. It wasn't until 1971 that my grandmother, Connie Mangskau, owner of *Monogram Antiques* and a good friend of

Jim's, would be offered a collection of *kalagas* in Chiangmai. These pieces were quite large and a few ended up with collectors and in museums. As interest in the art form grew during the 1980s, a renaissance took place and *kalaga*-style embroidery was being used for clothing items such as vests and hats. These were a far cry from the court costumes this art form once embellished, but one can still enjoy what the costumes must have looked like by taking a close look at traditional Thai dancing costumes. New *kalagas* have a brighter look as the threads being used today are dyed with synthetic dyes versus the muted look of *kalagas* made before the 1990s.



A snake kalaga which was made to depict the year of the snake.



Detail of a prince, usually the border of a larger kalaga

The most popular *kalaga* themes are: the life of the Buddha, the ten lives of the Buddha, the Ramayana, Burmese *nats* (spirits), the god of the planets, animals of the Buddhist years, horoscopes, ceremonies, mythical beings and ordinary animals.

MaryAnne Stanislaw grew up in Bangkok learning about antiques through her family business Monogram. Her book *Kalagas: The Wall Hangings of Southeast Asia* is available on Amazon.com.

Photos by Teresa Lai Stanislaw