

Domestic Arts of the Grand Palace



by M.R. Putrie Kritakara Viravaidya

In Thailand, it can be said, the home (*baan*) centers the household, the temple (*wat*) focuses the village, and the palace (*wang*) unifies the nation. At home a child learns respect for elders and responsible codes of behavior that guide him or her throughout life. Traditionally, the temple was the place of instruction for social and religious values, schooling a youth for increased work and responsibility. Greater knowledge and broader horizons would later be gained in service to the throne.

For over 700 years, craftsmen have served the throne by building grand palaces of successive kingdoms with their residential complexes, audience halls, and pavilions. Form and ornamentation attest to their skills honed in lengthy training and apprenticeship. Not only villagers became craftsmen, but children of the king and his retainers,

A court lady, her short hair and sleeveless bodice popular fashions around the turn of the century, strings a floral garland within the compound of the Grand Palace. Photo courtesy Thailand National Archives, Department of Fine Arts

male and female alike, also learned crafts.

The domestic arts of the court ladies residing in the inner sanctum of the Grand Palace primarily served the king in his observances of the traditional rites that pay homage to royal ancestors or that make merit by presenting food, ceremonial robes, and ecclesiastical fans to Buddhist monks. These ladies were proficient in culinary skills, perfumery, and flower arranging, as well as sewing and embroidery. Court ladies today continue these arts as employees of the court.

In cooking, court ladies create the ideal traditional Thai meal, which blends spicy, salty, subtle,

sweet, and sour tastes and is appealing to eye, nose, and palate. In addition court ladies painstakingly embellish the royal cuisine by weaving papaya strips into goldfish shapes and carving vegetables and fruits into leaves and flowers to be cooked or used as containers for other food.

Palace perfumery includes the traditional knowledge of making water-based scents (*nam ob*), alcohol-based perfume (*nam prung*) and chips of scented talc (*paeng ram*). It was said that the imprint of a lady of the court was a lovely scent on the floorboards, even though she had long left the premises.

Ladies of the court also practice traditional skills of flower arranging to decorate altars of homage. Compositions vary from flowers or petals on a cone-shaped, sawdust base (*poom chud*) to flowers on short wooden sticks inserted into a cone-shaped, clay base (*poom puck*). Offerings are also made of plantain leaves folded and sewn as containers or as shapes with symbolic meanings.

Hanging floral compositions include a circular formation (*puang keo*) suspended from ceilings or between curtain openings, a miniature window of strung flowers (*viman taen*) hung in a window opening, and compositions usually of gardenia petals threaded and woven into net-like arrangements of three elongated shapes (*jarake*) that to the initiated resemble a crocodile. Garlands (*malai*) put around the bases of Buddha images or hung from one's wrists or neck are strung in various sizes. Individual petals are often used and leaves are sometimes added to provide contrasting color and texture. A delicate touch and an eye for pattern are

the traditional skills of domestic crafts at court.

The art of embroidery demands the same talents. Gold threads embroidered in the bodice scarves worn by female members of the royal family and silver and gold threads embroidered in ecclesiastical fans presented by the king to Buddhist clerics had to be handled very carefully with dry fingers lest they became tarnished and tangled. Court embroiderers made intricate designs with patience and dexterity.

Ladies of the court still practice the art of making the monks' robes presented by the king at the royal *kathin* rites for 16 royal monasteries at the end of the rainy season. They cut bolts of material in irregularly shaped patterns and sew and hem them to make rectangular pieces of cloth which they then dye, wash, iron, and fold. The hours of labor involved are inestimable, as each individual stitch in the robes requires rubbing the sewing needle in beeswax to make it easier to pass through the heavy material.

The ladies of the court, or *fai nai* (those inside), are committed to the perpetuation of traditional domestic arts.

When used to describe these arts, the words *chao wang*, literally "[of] the people of the palace," have always been a guarantee of exquisite beauty, high quality, and superb workmanship.

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