

PRIVATE MUSEUMS IN THAILAND

NICOLIE IN BANGKOK

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1

THIS IS THE FIRST in a series of articles that will highlight some of the smaller private museums operating in Thailand. The presentation of its artistic and cultural heritage to its citizens and to visitors has not been a high priority for government officials in Thailand. This is apparent from the poor condition of many of the national museums, both in Bangkok and throughout the country. Collections are all too often poorly displayed and even more poorly described.

Fortunately, members of the private sector have made up for this deficiency by establishing interesting and well-displayed private museums that are often a labour of love. Such museums—often established by an individual with a collecting passion—thus play a vital role in showcasing Thai arts and crafts, but are often off the beaten track. My aim in publicising these museums is to allow more people access to the artistic and cultural gems that can be found in each.

As described in the article below, there is no limit to how much time and effort a passionate collector will devote to their collection, nor a limit to how many objects they may amass. Money of course is always a concern, but as legendary collector Avery Brundage once said, "It's not a hobby, it's a disease. I've been broke ever since I purchased my first object." Fortunately, Thailand is blessed with a multitude of discerning collectors willing to break the bank, several of whom have invested in setting up museums to display their treasures for wider public appreciation.

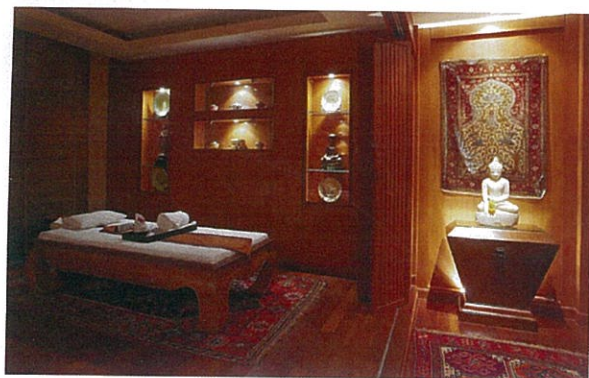
Nicolie Wellness Centre: the only wellness centre in Bangkok with a cultural soul

The collector

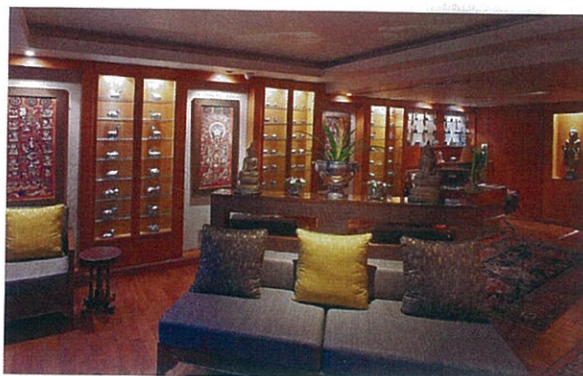
Anders Normann (1) arrived in Thailand in 1967 as twenty-one year old sales apprentice of the East Asia Company, the famous Danish trading company operating throughout Southeast Asia and the first Danish commercial enterprise to be established in Thailand in the late 19th century. He subsequently had a glittering career that required him to travel extensively throughout Asia, and resulted in him eventually becoming Chairman of East Asiatic Company Thailand. He has made Thailand his home and intends to remain in the Kingdom for the remainder of his life. In recognition of his contribution to Thai-Danish relations, Normann was appointed Honorary Consul General of Denmark in Thailand in 1997 and bestowed the Knight of Dannebrog Order by Queen Margrethe II of Denmark in 2004.

Born in Odense, Denmark, Normann was not a wealthy man on arrival in Bangkok, but he already had collecting in his blood. As a child, he often accompanied his mother to antiques fairs, flea markets and museums, and his home was full of antiques. He is more than happy to credit his mother with installing in him the discipline always to search for items of beauty and quality.

Normann decided to start collecting immediately on a



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rival in Bangkok. The antiques market was quite different in the 1960s and 1970s. Every Saturday, Normann used to rise very early to visit the weekend market, at that time located at the Sanam Luang, opposite the Grand Palace. Vendors from all over Thailand arrived between 4 am and 5 am to lay out their treasures, and Normann recalls rarely returning home empty handed. Each Sunday, Normann would then make the one hour car trip to the former capital Ayutthaya where an early morning street market used to be held. He found much of his Sukhothai and Sawankhalok ceramics collection at this market that sadly no longer exists. As much as 80% of his entire collection was thus acquired more than thirty years ago. Normann recalls that when the weekend market moved to its present site in Chatuchak District in 1982, the frequency of his visits and purchases also decreased.

Normann has also bought from many of the leading antiques dealers in Bangkok and from international auction houses, often buying pieces he cannot afford. Like many avid collectors, he remembers all too well the heartaches and disappointments of the pieces he did not manage to buy. Yet, he takes great pleasure and satisfaction from the experience of being able to walk around his home or museum and view his collection every day.

As a regular visitor to Myanmar over the last forty-five years, Normann has amassed a great collection of Burmese silverwares. He used to arrive in Yangon the day before his business meetings to see dealers who would bring their best

objects to his hotel. Often he would be able to acquire on one trip as many as thirty quality pieces to add to his collection. A few years ago, he counted himself lucky if he returned to Bangkok with one or two items. Now he usually cannot find any pieces of quality. He points to what has recently happened in Myanmar as a good example of the way prices have increased across the board. "As an old collector, I still remember prices from just a few years ago and cannot bring myself to pay today's high prices (that have quadrupled from ten years ago). In ten years' time, I am sure that people will look back to 2012-2013 as a period when (they consider) Burmese antiques were cheap!"

Normann's achievement in establishing Nicolie gives him pride and peace of mind. His collecting may have diminished to a degree, but he has created something that not many others have achieved, and he is the only living expatriate in Bangkok with his own museum.

The museum

Located on Sun Square, Silom Road, just around the corner from the Jewelry Trade Centre and Holiday Inn Hotel, Anders Normann and his partner Orawan Choeyesawat decided to found the Nicolie museum and wellness centre (2-5) in 2005. Normann had acquired the building some years previously with no specific plan for its use. Subsequently, Orawan, the former manager of the health spa at the Oriental Hotel in Bangkok, asked to rent the building



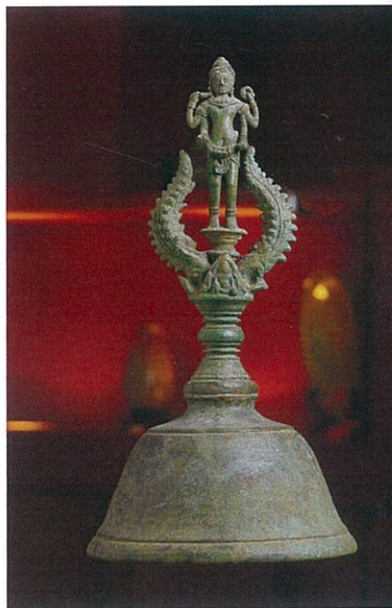
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to set up her own spa. Normann agreed, but with the conditions: 1. He would have nothing to do with the management; 2. He wanted something totally unique that could not be copied; and 3. The spa should also be a venue for his large and varied collection of Asian antiques.

Normann explained that ten years ago his riverside condominium was packed so full of antiques that his family had no spare living space. He perceived the idea of a museum with a wellness centre as a great opportunity to share the collection with the public and to maintain it for the appreciation of the next generation.

Nicolie is located on five floors of a town-house building. The museum is open daily from 11 am to 7 pm and entry is free, although Normann requests that visitors call ahead to schedule an appointment. The interior design is superb and offers the sense of tranquility one would expect in a leading oriental spa (2). Gentle Thai classical music played on the sound system, while all the floors and staircases are one hundred year old Burmese teak covered with a fine collection of antique Caucasian carpets (3, 4, 5).

The artefacts on display are not set out in any special order, but reflect the multitude of places in Asia visited by Normann over the last half century. They have been arranged meticulously in a way that is both attractive and aimed at connecting with the viewer. The collection portrays the very best of Asian art and craftsmanship, and includes among others: a fine collection of 14th to 16th century Sukhothai and Sawankhalok bronze Buddha images and ceramics (6), ancient Khmer bronze artefacts (7), 15th century Burmese Buddhas and silverwares (8), 19th and 20th century Burmese lacquer objets d'art, antique hill tribe silver jewellery, a collection of 17th century Chinese blue and white vases and bowls, including some excavated from



10

the Vung Tau shipwreck, early 20th century Khmer silver betel boxes in the shapes of various animals (9), 19th century bencharong bowls and spoons ordered by the Thai royal household, Indian textiles and stone figurines, and Chinese ivory carvings (10) including an exquisite Guanyin (11). All of the cabinets or objects are clearly and attractively labelled in English to provide appropriate information to the visitor.

Normann managed to acquire one of the finest collections of Khmer silver betel boxes in animal shapes in the late 1960s when he travelled regularly to Phnom Penh and Siem Reap as a part-time tour guide. Among the collection are some unusually large and fine examples in the shape of elephants, lions, deer, buffalo, rabbits and fish. These boxes date back to the early 20th century and are clearly superior to the shoddy replicas that can now be found on sale in Siem Reap. The silver workmanship is of very fine quality and many have gemstones or cut glass as eyes.

Apart from an interesting group of ceramics moulded together over time on coral found inside the Vung Tau shipwreck (that was excavated off the coast of southern Vietnam in 1991) (12), Normann has also managed to acquire several small blue and white vases and bowls. Yet, he was not one of the successful bidders at the famous Christie's auction in Amsterdam in 1992 of 28,000 pieces of porcelain from the wreck, where prices reached ten to twenty times pre-sale estimates. Instead, after the auction, he visited the Vung Tau fishing village and was able to buy several beautiful pieces directly from local villagers who had kept some of the retrieved artefacts for themselves.

There is a large number of Buddha figures in Normann's collection originating from Mandalay (13), Ava (14) and the Shan States (15) in Myanmar and Sukhothai, Ayutthaya and Bangkok (16) in Thailand, although some of the finest examples remain in his home. He even has a very rare Thai-style Chinese happy Buddha (17) in his collection. "I have always felt that Buddha images communicate a strong sense of calm and tranquility; people don't argue in front of a Buddha", Normann said when explaining his buying rationale.

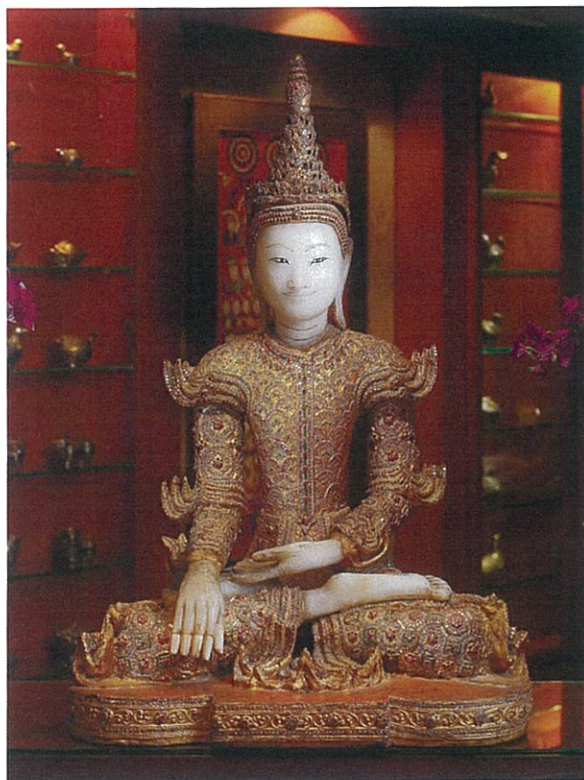
The highlight of the museum is the magnificent golden robe (18) given by King Rama V (Chulalongkorn, reigned 1868–1910) to his trusted aide and confidante Vice Admiral Andreas du Plessis de Richelieu (1852–1932), a Danish national who was in the service of the King for twenty-five



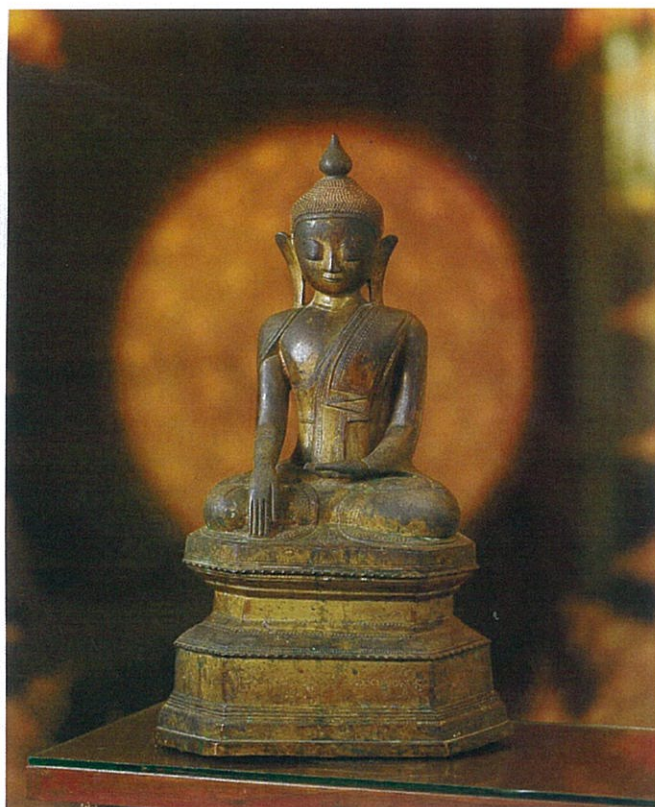
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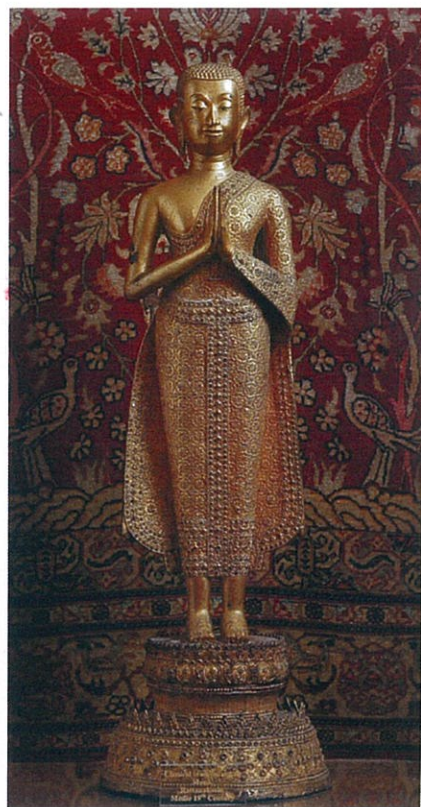
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years (19). He latterly became Siam's first, and only, foreign Commander-in-Chief of the Royal Siamese Navy from January 16th, 1900 to January 29th, 1901.

On the second floor of the museum, the robe gleams from its custom-made display cabinet that contains special lights and a mirror placed underneath to show both the front and the back of the robe without causing deterioration. Normann explained what makes the robe so special saying, "It is a unique piece of art, not a standard robe in any way. It reflects the Danish Admiral's status as



18

Commander-in-Chief of the Royal Thai Navy with special maritime symbols. It also contains, woven in the robe, King Chulalongkorn's Royal Cypher Medal. This robe thus reflects one of the most important historic connections between Denmark and Thailand."

The robe itself is a delightful work of textile art with gold metallic embroidery on white cotton netting, with the finest quality needlework depicting several naval motifs intertwined with floral patterns of the royal court. It is a very fragile artefact that required an eight-month restoration process by renowned US-based textile conservator Julia Brennan after Normann acquired it from Andreas du Plessis de Richelieu's relatives in Denmark in 2008. Normann believes that, as the robe is utterly unique, it has added a dimension that makes his museum without compare.

Many of the visitors to Nicolie thus far hail from Scandinavia. They are interested in learning about the culture and history of Thailand, and Normann is happy that his compatriots demonstrate this level of interest in Thai culture. However, he would now like to expand the number and nationality of museum visitors. As he proudly points out, the "Nicolie Collection" is the only massage centre in Asia with a cultural soul". It is difficult to disagree.

Nicolie is located at 1041/5 Sun Square, Silom Road (between Soi 21-23), Bangrak, Bangkok 10500. Visits to the museum can be arranged by contacting the Nicolie Wellness Centre at phone number +66-2-233-6957 or email reservation@nicolie-th.com.



19