

A passion for beauty

Story by **CAMILLA RUSSELL**

There is an unbridled passion amongst those individuals who find beauty in crafts and other artistic endeavours.

“Weaving is a construction of national identity,” says Linda McIntosh. Shy and demure, she does not enjoy speaking before the microphone, but finds comfort in the textiles she is keen on presenting, hidden from people and probing questions.

At six years old she was introduced into the Lao-Tai world through her mother, who is a Red Tai and a weaver. A traditional age to teach females how to weave, she admits that while there was an interest in textiles, her passion for the craft did not arrive until her twenties where she pursued a degree in textiles from Wisconsin University, Madison.

McIntosh has written several articles on Tai, Lao and Khmer textiles. She will be one of the many speakers to address the Jim Thompson textiles symposium to be held on August 4 and 5, as well as organising the present exhibition for the James H.W. Thompson Foundation which is aptly titled “Status, Myth, and the Supernatural-Ritual Tai Textiles”.

Working alongside the consulting firm Tilleke and Gibbins and the James H.W. Thompson Foundation to promote awareness of the Lao-Tai people and their creative talents in textiles, Linda McIntosh wrote the brochure, organised the event and is also the curator for the exhibition at the Jim Thompson House.

Tilleke and Gibbins has provided the textiles for the exhibition, while the James H.W. Thompson Foundation has made their museum available for the show.

“The exhibition focuses on social roles of textiles in Tai culture. The Tai people — most of them are residing in Thailand, Laos, and Vietnam — stress the importance of using textiles in ritual activities conducted, for example, at the time of birth, marriage, funeral and other ceremonial occasions.

“Similar to other Tai groups, women are the principal producers of clothing for household use as well as occasional gift giving and commercial purposes,” McIntosh explains.

The exhibition will examine new dimensions in textiles, specifically regarding the supernatural with male and female shamans, as well as ritual and status.

The collection showcases numerous pieces that demonstrate social status, values and the culture of the Tai people, and is a preview for the upcoming textile symposium.

According to her study, Tai women in the past typically practiced sericulture and grew cotton. But in the last two or three decades, sericulture has become less visible since most families have turned to commercial cotton production. However, textiles mean not merely clothing, patterns, and motifs such as animals, plants, the cosmos and stars but also illustrate their cultural, social, and religious values and supernatural beliefs.

While in the past the exhibitions have concentrated on the function of textiles with regards to power roles such as to signify gender, ruling class or ritual performance, the James H.W. Thompson Foundation is now focusing on the supernatural to communicate the diverse possibilities of textiles.

The art coordinator Christian Duke explains: “Supernatural powers in Asia are ancient as mankind itself, and they have evolved into various religions. People should be good to one another, be peaceful at heart.”

This humanistic way of thinking will also be the underlining theme for the Foundation’s August symposium.



Linda McIntosh ... the person behind the exhibition.