

Forty Years of the National Museum Volunteers

Like ripples from a pebble dropped into a pool of quiet water, the idea of study and service orientated to the arts has spread

1969

- **January:** **Khun Chira Chongkol**, Head of Education and Public Relations at the National Museum Bangkok discussed with an American friend, **Laurena Stifel**, the idea of volunteer guides. As a result a group of women, from the American Women's Club began to prepare a tour in English of the Thai Art Collection.
- **June:** Approved by the Director General of Fine Arts, **Khun Chua Sariman**, the first tour in English of the art collection was given by volunteer guides.
- The group was known as **The National Museum Work Study Group**. Study excursions to broaden the volunteer's knowledge commenced. No membership fees were charged. Members received 'Activity Sheets' offering guided tours of the museum, workshops on Southeast Asian History and lectures on Buddhism and Thai and Khmer Art.
- **November:** An overnight weekend river trip to Supanburi was undertaken.
- **December:** A research group commenced under the guidance of **Victor Kennedy**.

1970

- **February:** A weekly ceramic workshop started
- **April:** The foundation of the group's library was created with the purchase of twelve second hand books. These included books by George Coedes, Madeleine Giteau and A. Griswold. *40 years later these books are still in the library.* A slide library was also started.
- The first out of country excursion went to Pagan, Mandalay and Rangoon. Burma would be a popular and frequent destination for study-tours as much of the rest of mainland Southeast Asia was difficult to visit because of the Vietnam War.
- The Activity Sheet changed its format to a newsletter and an annual membership of 20 Baht was introduced, to cover the production and mailing costs
- **September:** The first 'Open Meeting' a forerunner of the Annual Coffee Morning was held at the museum's auditorium.
- **Roger Welty** commenced the first of his twelve weekly lecture series on Buddhism. He gave these lectures for almost twenty years.

1971

- **January:** Four study-groups of ten weeks each were held on Thai Architecture and Painting, Oriental Ceramics, Thai Life Study Group and Indian Art and Architecture. *Almost forty years later a very successful 'Indian Art' study group has just reached completion and a new study group 'Inside Thai society' is about to commence*
- Towards the end of the year guided tours in German were introduced and Japanese guide training commenced

1972

- **March:** The library grows to five hundred books and 1,500 slides. Members were now able to borrow two books for a period of fifteen days. In a city with only a few bookshops and with little in English on Thai history and art, this was an absolute treat!
- **May:** Guiding was flourishing: there were thirteen guides for Thai Art; ten guides for the Thai Culture Tour; five for the Buddhism Tour and four for the Kamthieng House at the Siam Society. In addition there were fifteen German speaking guides, six supplementary guides and a pilot project, 'Creative Art and Adventure for Children' was offered twice a week in June and July

1973

September: A special tribute was paid to a founding member Dorothy Fickle who was leaving Bangkok. Dorothy had a huge involvement in cataloguing the museum's Dvarvarti, Srivijaya, Hindu and Lopburi images. She had also written a '**Glossary of Terms Used in the Arts of Thailand**'. *In 2009 this glossary is still in demand by guiding workshop participants and has since been translated into other languages.*

1974

- Several lecture series were offered during the year; a ten week introduction to Thai Traditional Art, a twelve week series on Buddhism and a five week course on Thai history.
- Japanese tours commenced.
- Guided tours in French were offered.
- The group changed its name to **The National Museum Volunteers**
- **October:** All group activities were suspended because of the cremation ceremonies being held for the student martyrs who had died in the student uprising that occurred the previous year.

1975

Early in the year the first overnight excursion to Laos visiting Vientiane and Luang Prabang was made. Towards the end of the year a group visited Nepal.

1977

The National Museum Volunteers worked on providing background information about every item in the museum. The resulting card catalogues, *remain in the library in 2009 and are still very useful.*

1978

A National Museum Volunteer's study excursion group to Sukhothai was robbed at gunpoint while visiting the kiln sites at Si Satchanalai

1979: 10th Anniversary of the National Museum Volunteers

One hundred study-groups had been offered covering fifteen topics and enrolling more than one thousand participants. Tours were now conducted in English, German, Japanese and French and a Thai Art Lecture series had been presented twice a year to the public since 1970. The library now with more than 2,000 books and 8,000 slides was considered amongst the best in Southeast Asia.

Before the end of the year, '**The Artistic Heritage of Thailand**', a joint effort by the Museum Volunteers and the American Women's Club magazine, Sawaddi, was published.

1980 – 81

- **Prince Subhadradis Diskul** gave two series of lectures on Thai and Khmer Art, joined the group's excursion to Sri Lanka, led a special tour of The Grand Palace, conducted tours of the National Museum for active and prospective guides and led a trip to the Khmer temples of North East Thailand. **In February 1981** he became Consultant to the Steering Committee
- **August & September 1981** The first articles, '*Thai Spirit Houses*' and '*Mid Autumn Festivals in China*' from a newly established research group, were published in the newsletter. Articles from this group began to appear on a monthly basis.

1983

April: The longest edition of the Newsletter was produced. It had sixteen pages and included three articles by members. In **August** the format changed from loose typed A4 sheets to a thirty-two page printed booklet

1984 October: The Japanese group had their first Lecture Series.

1985 April: The first excursion to China took place.

1987

- **January: Khun Chira Chongkol**, Director General of National Museums and founder and mentor of the group, announced her retirement. Very sadly she died in November.
- **November: H.R.H. Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn** attended the monthly lecture, '*The Crowned Buddha*' given by **Professor Jean Boisselier**, one of the leading experts on the archaeology of Southeast Asia.
- As a contribution to the celebrations marking the 60th birthday of **His Majesty the King**, The National Museum Volunteer's publication, '**Treasures of the National Museum**' written, photographed and produced by members, was published.

1988

- **October: Prince Subhadradis Diskul** delivered the monthly lecture, '*Thai Objects in the United States*'
- **November:** The Prince was head of the Thai committee responsible for the return of the Vishnu lintel from the Art Institute of Chicago. The lintel had originally been sited at Phnom Rung in N.E. Thailand.

1989: 20th Anniversary of the National Museum Volunteers

- **January: H.R.H. Princess Galyani Vadhana** surprised both museum staff as well as members of the museum group by attending the monthly lecture, '*Sukhothai Art From Inscriptions*' given by popular guest lecturer **Dr Piriya Krairiksh**
- **April:** The National Museum Volunteers were awarded **The Thai Heritage Award**.
- **May:** The opening of the long awaited Pre History Gallery, a project sponsored by the group, was the highlight of the party held at the museum to celebrate the 20th Anniversary of the National Museum Volunteers.
- Another excursion went to China. They were in Beijing on May 4th when one million students and workers protested in Tiananmen Square.

1990

- The National Museum Volunteer group was awarded the privilege of coming 'under the auspices of the Fine Arts Department'. Permission was given to allow the group to use the Ganesha symbol.
- An intrepid group left for a study excursion to Pakistan. As they approached the Khunjerab Pass they encountered rock slides and avalanches! Eventually they had to be guided across the mud by foot.
- **Acharn Smitthi Siribhadra** gave a lecture on Laos and led excursions to Laos and Ayutthaya

1991

- **February:** Their Royal Highnesses, **Princess Galyani Vadhana** and **Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn**, attended **Professor Boisselier's** lecture to the Museum Volunteers, '*Si Tep in the Light of New Research: Recent Archeological Finds at an Ancient Site*'
- **October:** '*Sumatra's Ritual Weavings*' was the first subject of a new program **At Homes**. These informal presentations in member's homes continued monthly.

1992

- **January:** After being off limits for years, a group, with **Acharn Smitthi Siribhadra** as guest lecturer, visited Angkor in Cambodia

1993

- **February:** The renovated Entrance Hall of the museum was officially opened. The renovations had been sponsored by the National Museum Volunteers to commemorate **Her Majesty Queen Sirikit's 60th** birthday.

1995

- **January:** A proposed trip to Angkor was cancelled because of the worsening political situation. Three western hostages who had been tourists were killed.
- **September:** Seven members represented the Museum Volunteers at ceremonies held at the Grand Palace to honor the late Princess Mother.

1996: The Museum Volunteers book '**Writings from Asia**' was published. It was dedicated to **His Majesty the King** on the occasion of the 50th Anniversary of His Accession to the Throne.

1997: The Museum Volunteers donated twenty-seven wooden benches to the museum for use in the halls and galleries.

1999: 30th Anniversary of the National Museum Volunteers

- **April:** In coordination with The Fine Arts Department and with assistance by four students from an US based university, cataloging and computerization of the artifacts of the National Museum was completed
- Computerization of the library was completed. All works were classified, relabeled and re-shelved.

2001

- **March: H.R.H. Princess Soamsawali**, graciously presided over a charity gala to highlight the treasures of the museum and to raise funds to renovate the Textile Gallery, This included an exhibition '*Bringing the National Museum to You*', and a fashion parade featuring textiles from the Support Foundation of **Her Majesty Queen Sirikit**.

- **December:** The National Museum Volunteers received the **Thai Cultural Heritage Preservation Award**. **H.R.H. Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn** presided over the ceremony in the grounds of the National Museum

2002

- **January:** An '*Activity Kit for Kids*' was introduced. These self guiding kits were designed to give family visits to the museum a sense of fun and adventure
A fund raising event '*Glorious Traditions*' was held in the grounds of the National Museum to raise the balance of funds required to renovate the Textile Gallery. As a prelude to this event an exclusive exhibition, '*A Royal Collection of Garments Celebrating Her Majesty the Queen's Support of Thai Textiles*' was opened in the Throne Hall of the museum presided over by **H.R.H. Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn**
- **September:** The National Museum volunteer guides officially welcomed the newly initiated National Museum Thai Volunteer guides to the museum's guiding program.
- The National Museum Volunteers were recipients of the **U.S. Ambassadors Fund for Cultural Preservation**, for the conservation of the National Museum's textile collection.

2003

November: The National Museum Volunteer's long time Honorary Consultant, **Prince Subhadradis Diskul** passed away after a long illness. In his honor and memory the National Museum Volunteers sponsored an evening of chanting at Wat Benchamabophit and gave a donation to the H.S.H. Prince Subhadradis Education Foundation in recognition of his assistance and support for more than 30 years.

2004

- Through accrued donations, the Museum Volunteers donated a gold cigarette case which had formally belonged to **King Chulalongkorn** to the museum.
- The National Museum Volunteers were awarded for the third time, **The Thai Heritage Preservation Award**. The award was presented by **H.R.H. Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn**

2005: The major focus of the group, volunteer guiding at the museum, continued to flourish. This year there were thirty-one English guides, twelve French Guides, nineteen German guides and forty-eight Japanese guides.

2006

- '**Treasures of the Museum**' was reprinted for the third time. For the first time a French version was also printed.
- **The Blind Access Project** commenced. Volunteers worked with staff from the National Museum to develop a Touch Program to encourage blind and low vision Thais and foreigners to visit and enjoy the museum. Two blind students from the Thai Association for the Blind attended the Guiding Workshop.
- **Dr Roxanna Brown** led a study group on '*South-East Asian Ceramics*'.
- The National Museum Volunteer's web site was launched. www.museumvolunteersbkk.net

2007

- **April:** Volunteers working on the Blind Access Project took part in a session led by **Dr Roxanna Brown** to learn about ceramics through touch.
- **May:** A study-group '*Buddha Images from South East Asia*' took place in The Museum of Buddhist Art.

- **October:** A photographic exhibition 'Though Our Eyes' showcasing photos taken by National Museum Volunteer members was held in the Throne Hall of the National Museum to honour **His Majesty the King** in the year of his 80th birthday and to recognize his lifelong interest in photography. A second facet of the project was the production of a book '**Through Our Eyes: Thailand Close Up**' containing photos accompanied by poetry in the four languages that the guides use at the museum. The photos from all corners of the kingdom show the detail that is so often missed in the overall spectacle.
- **November:** **M. R. Chakrabort Chitabongs** agreed, to the delight of all members, to become Patron of the group.

2008

- **February:** Twenty young participants from various organizations including Bangkok School of the Blind and Thammasart University took part in the first blind access pilot project at the National Museum
- **June:** **M. R. Chakrabort Chitabongs** gave a special lecture on the history of Thai royal funeral rites and the traditional procedures required for **H.R.H. Princess Galyani Vadhana's** funeral in November
- A new computerized system was created for managing the library's complete data base of 4000 books and periodicals in English, French, German and Japanese.

2009: The National Museum Volunteers turns 40

- **March:** A gala event in the grounds of the Museum to celebrate 40 years of the National Museum Volunteers takes place. The newly renovated Textile Gallery is officially opened by the Director General of The Fine Arts Department.
Work is in progress on a new publication, a catalogue, which will showcase forty museum master pieces and much loved favourites.

Membership: 444 members, thirty one nationalities, 427 local members and seventeen overseas members.

Guiding is still the core activity of the National Museum Volunteers, with approximately 120 active guides in English, French, German and Japanese. During 2008, approx. 3600 tourists were guided round the National Museum Bangkok. In addition there were 31 special tours hosting 640 visitors in six languages.

After 40 years the successful format of The National Museum Volunteers remains unchanged. The group continues to provide guides for the National Museum, continues to stimulate an interest in all aspects of South-East Asian history, art and culture through a wide variety of activities while at the same time remains open to pursuing new approaches.