

Art of
Southeast Asian Textiles
The Tilleke & Gibbins Collection



Linda S. McIntosh



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Foreword

Focus. Patience. Creativity. Dedication to a craft. Many of the traits possessed by the best textile weavers also happen to be shared by skilled lawyers. So perhaps it was only natural that Tilleke & Gibbins, Thailand's oldest and largest independent law firm, chose to help to preserve local textile weaving—and the important cultural heritage that textiles represent—by establishing the Tilleke & Gibbins Textile Collection.

Founded in 1890, our law firm has a rich tradition. This tradition encompasses not only client service, which is of course our primary focus, but also community service and cultural activities. When my parents, Albert and Freda Lyman, acquired Tilleke & Gibbins in 1951, they made it their mission to contribute to Thailand's legal and social development. Their community activities included the founding of the American Association of Thailand (now the American Chamber of Commerce) and the Bangkok Stock Exchange (now the Stock Exchange of Thailand), and participating in charitable works, which my mother frequently carried out through her role in the American Women's Club of Thailand. In recognition of her work with disabled children, my mother was awarded the Most Noble Order of the Crown of Thailand 5th Class in 1961, making her the first foreign woman to be decorated by His Majesty King Bhumibol Adulyadej.

In the intervening years, Tilleke & Gibbins has grown from a small family firm to our current team of over 100 lawyers and 250 support staff serving multinational corporations across their full range of legal needs. Despite this growth, however, our tradition of community service remains a hallmark of our firm today.

As leading lawyers in Thailand and Vietnam, we know that we have an obligation to give back to our communities. We do this by committing our time and our resources to support a range of initiatives. These activities include contributing to the development of new laws and a just society, providing educational assistance for students from grade school through law school, teaching the public about the harmful effects of intellectual property infringement through our unique Museum of Counterfeit Goods, and protecting the environment through our Second Hundred Years reforestation program.

And as part of our commitment to corporate social responsibility, we are honored to have created, enlarged, nurtured, housed, displayed, conserved

and supported the Tilleke & Gibbins Textile Collection since 1987. What began as an aesthetic endeavor to decorate our offices has transformed into a serious task of collecting and preserving this important art form, the region's textile heritage. With offices in Bangkok, Thailand, and Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, Tilleke & Gibbins has a regional presence. This in turn has helped to give a clear regional focus to the Collection—compiling a museum-quality collection of the precious textiles of Mainland Southeast Asia.

I'm humbled that my vision for the Collection has been realized, and even exceeded. This has been accomplished thanks to the hard work through the years of the many guardians of our valuable textiles, beginning with Karen Bunyaratavej, who was responsible for the early growth of the Collection. Karen's work was later taken up by Wipawee Tiyawes, the Collection's current Curator, and Linda S. McIntosh, our Consulting Curator and the author of this remarkable book.

Art of Southeast Asian Textiles: The Tilleke & Gibbins Collection is an important work because it helps to fulfill the two key objectives of our law firm's Collection: preservation and appreciation. First, Linda has spent countless hours meticulously recording the fascinating history of each textile in this volume. This book will therefore provide an essential reference for further study of the region's textiles, preserving them for future generations. Second, through hundreds of illustrations, this book provides insight into the breathtaking beauty of this Southeast Asian art form. In reading these pages, textile aficionados and novices alike will surely come to appreciate textiles as true works of art created by masterful weavers.

All of us at Tilleke & Gibbins take pride in the Collection, knowing that we are playing a small part in preserving the cultural heritage of this region which has given us so much. We hope you enjoy this introduction to the Tilleke & Gibbins Textile Collection.

David Lyman
Chairman & Chief Values Officer
Tilleke & Gibbins
Bangkok, Thailand

January 2012

Author's Acknowledgements

Tilleke & Gibbins' dedication to the preservation of Southeast Asian textiles by building a museum-quality collection and its aim to widen the appreciation of this art has allowed this volume to reach fruition. My sincerest thanks go to David Lyman, the firm's chairman and founder of The Collection. I am very grateful to The James H. W. Thompson Foundation, especially President Emeritus William J. Klausner and Trustees William M. Booth and Eric Booth, for their support of field research and exhibitions on Southeast Asian textiles. I appreciate that Shane Suvikapakornkul of Serindia Publications has patiently seen the project through its final stage.

For all of your comments and suggestions, I thank Bryce Beemer, Charlie Carroll, Keosiri Everingham, Tara Gudjadur, Herbert Harr III, Michael C. Howard, Patrick McCormick, Kiang McIntosh, William A. McIntosh, Udom Riantrakool, Digna and Neil Ryan, Than Than Win, Wipawee Tiyawes, and others. Also thank you to all of the weavers and other textile artists who patiently answered all my questions and sat for photographs during my visits.

For centuries, anonymous women throughout Southeast Asia have laboriously created works of art in the form of textiles. Their mastery has often been unnoticed. Words cannot begin to convey my respect for their painstaking devotion. This publication is a small token of gratitude to past and present textile producers.

Linda S. McIntosh



Collecting Southeast Asian Textiles: The Tilleke & Gibbins Textile Collection

Deeply honored with the opportunity to research and write about The Tilleke & Gibbins Textile Collection ("The Collection"), I continue to be amazed by the stunning beauty of the diverse textile heritage of Southeast Asia. A private collection often has the resources to acquire high quality and unusual art objects, and The Tilleke & Gibbins Textile Collection exceeds all expectations as a treasure trove of rare textile art. This repository of heritage Southeast Asian fabrics holds many artistic examples that are no longer available on the market or in their original settings, establishing a valuable archive. I have approached the monumental task of writing about The Tilleke & Gibbins Textile Collection by selecting examples of outstanding woven art rather than pursuing an ethnographic survey of Southeast Asian weavings. The Collection originated from the inspiration to decorate the offices of Tilleke & Gibbins, the oldest surviving law firm in Bangkok, Thailand, with textile art.

The Tilleke & Gibbins Textile Collection began in 1987 when Tilleke & Gibbins moved into its then new, but now former, location behind the American Embassy in Bangkok.¹ David Lyman, the firm's present Chairman and Chief Values Officer, was interested in a different look with a Thai theme for the offices' interior design. A keen carpet collector since his law school days, Mr. Lyman readily agreed to the suggestion of Jonathan Hayssen to use a local art form, handwoven fabrics, to adorn the office walls.² Others within the firm were initially less enthusiastic about this idea but were quickly won over by the beauty of this traditional art. The responses from clients and visitors were very positive. Soon the law firm began to acquire more weavings originating from the various ethnic groups living in Thailand and neighboring countries. The seeds for starting The Collection were sown in 1987, and the number of textiles grew under the guidance of Dagmar Canter.³ The Tilleke & Gibbins Textile Collection was officially established a few years later under its first full-time curator, Karen Bunyaratavej, who, in the following decade, built the foundation for The Collection with a diverse range of handwoven textiles originating from Mainland Southeast Asia and neighboring countries. Wipawee Tiyawes replaced her, expanding The Collection over the years, and has been and continues to be responsible for its care.

The mission of The Collection is not only to decorate Tilleke & Gibbins' offices but also to preserve the region's textile heritage for present and future generations' enrichment and appreciation. Although the production

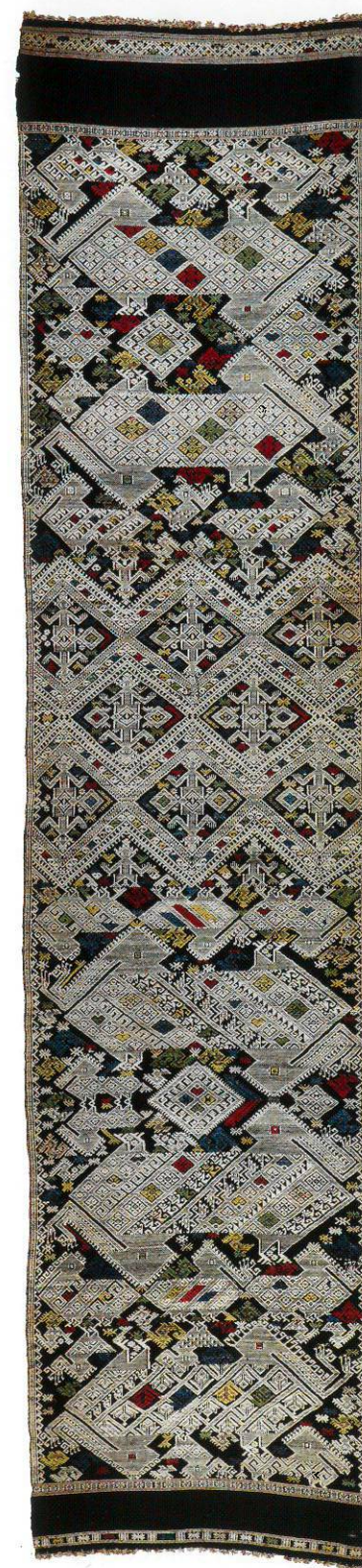


Figure 1. Shaman's Cloth or *Phaa Mau Phii*, Tai, NE Laos, 1890-1920, 1994.1.7 (Detail Opposite)

1. At the time, the firm was known as "Tilleke & Gibbins ROP," but it is presently "Tilleke & Gibbins International Ltd."

2. Jonathan Hayssen was the proprietor of the now-defunct Rasi Siam, a store specializing in Thai handicrafts.

3. Dagmar Canter was formerly employed at the Textile Museum, Washington D.C., USA.



Figure 2. Hip Wrapper or *Phaa Lai Yang*, Indian for Thai or Siamese market, Coromandel Coast, India, 1780-1810, 2004.5.433 Indian trade textiles made specifically for the Siamese Thai market were adorned with motifs reminiscent of other Thai arts, such as temple decor. Historical records state that these fabrics first appeared in the kingdom of Ayutthaya (1351-1767 CE).

of handwoven cloth has never been static and has always adjusted to fit the needs of society, the accelerated changes occurring throughout the 20th century and into this century have affected not only handwoven textile production but also other areas of indigenous material culture. Many scholars, collectors, weavers, and other members of society believe that traditional production is an endangered art. One method to preserve the region's heritage is to build a collection to systematically catalogue its cultures' diverse textile traditions, which is an ongoing task of The Collection. Public access to this type of collection allows the community to learn about this heritage and hopefully develop an appreciation of this highly complex art form.

Most of the textiles in The Collection originate from countries comprising Mainland Southeast Asia: Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, Burma (present-day Myanmar), and Vietnam. Insular Southeast Asian textiles, such as those from Malaysia and a few Indonesian islands, are also found in The Collection. Exceptions to the Southeast Asian origin rule include Indian trade textiles made for the Southeast Asian market, specifically Siam or present-day Thailand, and examples from some ethnic minority groups living in southern China. (Figs. 2 and 3) Ethno-linguistic links connect these non-Han Chinese ethnic groups with the peoples residing in Southeast Asia.

During the mid-1970s, after the end of the Vietnam War and the communist takeovers in Southeast Asia, Cambodia, Vietnam, and Laos were further isolated from the region and the rest of the world due to embargoes placed against these new nations. As peace and stability settled in the region a decade later, there was an opportunity to build a museum-quality collection of Mainland Southeast Asian material. These communist regimes also began to relax their restrictions on commerce, opening their borders to trade, which led to a flood of indigenous and traditional art into Thailand. Insular Southeast Asian, especially Indonesian, textiles were already highly desired in



Figure 3. Blanket or *Phaa Hom*, Dai, China, 1920-1950, 2008.18.5 Among the Tai-related minorities residing in southwest China, some fabrics resemble Central Asian carpets. This is an excellent example of the assimilation of "foreign" elements into one culture's textile repertoire reflecting the exchange of design aesthetics, materials, and textile techniques that occurs worldwide between cultures.

the international art market and museum collections, but before the 1980s, there was considerably less interest in Mainland Southeast Asian textiles. Although some local individuals and institutions possessed Southeast Asian handwoven textile collections in the late 1980s, such as the National Museum of Thailand-Bangkok, few were widely accessible to the public when Tilleke & Gibbins decided to build a museum-quality textile collection. Members of the local and international communities have been visiting The Collection since its establishment. Thus, since its founding, The Collection has served not only to decorate the firm's offices but also to preserve Mainland Southeast Asian textiles, exposing a wide audience to the region's cultural heritage.

Forming The Collection

Ethnic Origins

Handwoven textiles of the various ethnic groups living in Thailand, especially cloth from Tai cultures, dominate The Tilleke & Gibbins Textile Collection. The ethnic Thais belong to the Tai branch of the Tai-Kadai ethno-linguistic family, and the Lao, the dominant majority of Laos and most populous ethnic group of northeast Thailand, are also part of this language family. The Tai branch is composed of numerous subgroups, such as the Tai Phuan, Tai Yuan, Tai Lue, Phuthai, Tai Dam, and Tai Yai or Shan, and members of these subgroups reside in Thailand. (Fig. 4) The various Tai peoples inhabit other Mainland Southeast Asian countries such as Laos, Vietnam, Burma, and China, while small populations are also found in Cambodia and India. A considerable portion of The Collection's examples are therefore comprised of Tai weavings originating beyond Thailand's borders.

In addition to Tai fabrics, distinctive textiles produced by non-Tai peoples living in Thailand, such as the Malay, Hmong, Mien, Khmer, and Kui, compose part of The Collection. The Malay are renowned for luxurious silks decorated with gold patterning; the Khmer and Kui are adept at creating fine twill-woven, weft ikat-decorated silks; and the Hmong and Mien are highly skilled at adorning cloth with embroidery, appliqué, and batik, for example. (Figs. 5 and 6) These ethnic groups comprising Thailand's population also live in neighboring countries of Southeast Asia, and the textile trail follows these branches into Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam, Burma, Malaysia, and southern China.

The Collection is further a repository of weavings from ethnic groups not originating within Thailand's borders. The civilizations forming Thailand did not live in isolation, but have interacted with their neighbors for centuries. Trade has led to traditional textiles produced by neighboring Southeast Asian groups and distant cultures of India and China finding their way into Thailand. The relations among the various Thai kingdoms may not have always been peaceful, but all types of contacts have allowed the cultures to be intimately connected. The Thai kingdoms' dealings with those composing Burma are an excellent example. Spoils of victory allowed for the removal of artisans, including weavers and other textile crafts persons, of the losing side to live in the triumphant kingdom's territory.⁴ Political instability has also driven members of various ethnicities, including the Kachin and Chin, to move, both willingly and forcibly, to areas in Thailand. Weavings produced by the peoples



Figure 4. Skirt or *Sin Tiin Chok*, Tai Yuan, Ratchaburi Province, Thailand, 1890-1920, 1998.5.2 This Tai Yuan skirt is unusual, primarily composed of naturally dyed silk while newer versions are generally woven in cotton. The supplementary patterning is refined, allowing the background to be visible. Later versions are composed of densely woven designs.

4. Chris Baker and Pasuk Phongpaichit, *A History of Thailand* (Cambridge University Press, 2005), 43.



Left: **Figure 5.** Skirt or *Kain Songket Sarong*, Thai/Malay, Nakhon Sri Thammarat Province, Thailand, 1890-1920, 2004.5.175 The southern Thai courts created exquisite silk textiles for their own use and to send to the central Thai courts, whose members highly desired these luxury items. The delicate supplementary patterns woven in the garment's "body" are distinctly Thai, contrasting with similar weavings found farther south into the Malay Peninsula.

Below: **Figure 6.** Skirt or *Sin Mii Hol*, Khmer, Surin Province, Thailand, 1950-1980, 2000.2.21 This Khmer ikat-decorated skirt cloth is woven in a twill technique, allowing more of the weft to be visible on one side. The weaver's combination of colors from synthetic dyes resembles the natural dye palette, and the addition of fuchsia enlivens the composition.





Above: Figure 7. Blanket or *Vai Puan*, Northern Chin, Burma, 1920-1950, 1997.6.17

According to Chin weavers, the completion of the fine patterning confined in narrow bands is considered the most difficult to master. Weavers from related subgroups make similar textiles, and the symbolism of the motifs and fabrics themselves vary from group to group.



Right: Figure 8. Skirt or *Kain Songket Sarong*, Malay, Malaysia, 1920-1950, 1999.3.4

Islam prohibits the realistic representation of living beings; thus, Islamic Malay textiles are often decorated with geometric designs and plaid or checked patterning. The Malay believe that the first design their weavers began to weave was the plaid pattern, which originated from India. The small gold motifs dotting this lower garment symbolize the clove flower.

Below: Figure 9. Prestige Cloth or *Patola*, Indian made for Indonesian markets, Gujarat, India, 1890-1920, 1998.1.12 Decorated with double (warp and weft) ikat, this cloth type is considered the inspiration for locally woven, weft ikat-decorated textiles found throughout Southeast Asia. Weavers from various Southeast Asian cultures have created their own renderings of these highly coveted textiles.



living in Burma, such as Burmese, Intha, Naga, Kachin, and Chin, are well represented in The Collection. (Fig. 7) Another illustration includes the ancestors of non-Tai minority peoples living on the Boloven Plateau in southern Laos and the central highlands of Vietnam, such as the Jarai, Rhade, Katu, Ta-oi, and Katang, that were captured and moved to lowland areas of present-day Thailand. Contact among the “newly” settled and those already residing in the area allowed for exposure to each other’s traditions and the assimilation of some characteristics, such as textiles, across cultures.

Malay textiles belong in The Collection since the dominant ethnic group of Thailand’s most southern provinces is Malay. The distribution of Malay cloth spreads into Malaysia proper and further south into parts of Indonesia, including Sumatra. (Fig. 8) The textiles of coastal Islamic Malay peoples symbolize the historical and cultural connections among the former kingdom of Pattani in what is now Thailand, the northern Malaysian sultanates of Kelantan and Terengganu, and Palembang in Sumatra.⁵ There are other types of weaving produced by other ethnic groups living in insular Southeast Asia, but The Collection refrains from acquiring many examples from these other island cultures since they are too numerous to represent adequately and fall beyond the mission of The Collection to focus on Mainland Southeast Asian textile traditions.

Some textiles produced outside of Southeast Asia, particularly India, have played important roles in adaptations to local textile production, leading to their inclusion in The Collection. The former courts of Cambodia and Thailand, such as at Angkor and Ayutthaya, respectively, imported fabrics from India. Royalty controlled the use of these highly desired textiles, restricting their consumption to their own personal adornment and palace furnishings and distribution to high-ranking members of society. The kings presented loyal rulers of weaker principalities with these textiles, and local court and village weavers began to assimilate some aspects of the foreign textile forms and aesthetics into their own weaving repertoire. Local adaptations of the silk *patola* from Gujarat in India continue to be woven even in remote villages throughout Southeast Asia. (Fig. 9) By including foreign textiles with historic and cultural links to Mainland Southeast Asia, Tilleke & Gibbins has successfully built a multifaceted and comprehensive collection.

5. Similar textiles found in Cambodia signify links with the Cham, a related ethno-linguistic group whose first settlements are found in present-day central Vietnam.



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11



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Figure 10. Sleeping Mat or *Phaa Lau*, Tai Lue, Oudomxai Province, Laos, 1950-1970, 1991.6.32

Figure 11. Skirt or *Sin Koh*, Tai, NE Laos, 1890-1920, 1994.1.36

Elaborately decorated skirts of Tai women function as garments and as ceremonial covers during funerals. The Tai believe that the motifs' symbolism of animals and other items lead and protect the deceased's soul on its journey to heaven or the ancestor world.

Figure 12. Buddhist Temple Hanging or *Tung*, Tai, Thailand, 1920-1950, 2003.3.2 Names of those sponsoring the weaving and offering of a temple banner are sometimes woven into the fabric. Three parties are, thus, able to accumulate merit from this deed: the sponsor(s); the weaver; and the deceased. The weaving of names was a technical feat since most women were illiterate in the recent past.

Figure 13. Manuscript Wrapper or *Sazigyo*, Burmese, Burma, 1890-1920, 1999.5.15 In Burma, laypeople commission the production of manuscript wrappers to offer to Buddhist temples. This long, narrow weaving is created on a tablet loom, a technology rarely used in mainland Southeast Asia and has almost disappeared in present-day textile production.



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Types

The examples of textiles in The Tilleke & Gibbins Textile Collection range from high-status court textiles to household items, following the philosophy that all types of textiles are an art form. Utilitarian items, such as blankets, curtains, and mattress covers, are often elaborately decorated with intricate designs. In numerous Mainland Southeast Asian cultures, many of these domestic accessories comprise a bride's trousseau and are meticulously decorated for the joyous occasion; women celebrate this festive rite of passage with symbols of beauty. These weavings are also prominently displayed during funerals, another major life event. Their motifs are not merely decorative but play important roles in connecting members of the natural world with their kin and other spirits residing in the supernatural realm. Traditional belief systems give talismanic qualities to the designs, which guard against malicious spirits that cause illness. Many people view this type of protection as vital, especially during rites of passages. New generations of weavers continue to embellish their fabrics with these protective symbols, allowing for the continuity of symbolism and aesthetics in cultures. (Fig. 10)

Other types of textiles found in The Collection consist of clothing worn for everyday use and special occasions. The Collection has a wide selection of skirts and lower garments, head cloths, shoulder cloths, shawls, sashes, rare tunics or robes for both men and women, and various accessories. Of particular interest is its array of Tai women's ceremonial skirts, in which the combinations of techniques, designs, materials, and colors vary extensively. The Collection preserves everyday attire, which may not be elaborately adorned, since these types of items embody clues of the wearer's identities and statuses within society. These items may not have high monetary worth, but they are of historic value.

Numerous examples of traditional textiles with religious functions are housed in The Collection since they have traditionally held prominent roles in the region's various belief systems. Textiles function as offerings, tools to demarcate sacred space, and as conduits between the natural and supernatural realms. The Collection contains many examples of the precious cloths associated with shamanic, Buddhist, and Muslim ceremonies. Fabrics serve as shrouds, coffin covers, or banners during funerals. (Figs. 11 and 12) In Buddhist societies, laypeople offer textiles to monks and temples to accumulate merit, which is the product of performing good deeds and thoughts and is necessary to have a better standing in the next life. (Fig. 13) In animist practices, the iconography of weavings helps one to contact ancestors and other spirits to heal illnesses or extend the life of the living. (Fig. 14) Handwoven textiles, thus, serve numerous roles in small and large rituals among the region's diverse cultures. Sadly, the production of many of these textiles has declined or ceased altogether.



Figure 14. Funeral Banner or *Phaa Long* (*Man Baang*), Tai Phuan, NE Laos, 1920-1950, 2001.3.12 When a death occurs, long weavings adorned with motifs of flora and fauna are hung outside a home to signify a death in the household. They are used to frame the deceased's body during the wake and are also placed atop the gravesite. These banners represent ladders leading to the supernatural world.

Ages

The ages of the textiles in The Tilleke & Gibbins Textile Collection range from new or recently produced to approximately two hundred years old. Most of the examples were produced 20-120 years ago. Similar to tastes in today's clothing fashions, textile types, styles, forms, and aesthetics are also vulnerable to changing tastes, and weavers adjust their products to satisfy their individual and groups' desires or needs. New styles emerge while others fade away temporarily or, sometimes, permanently. Preserving examples from each decade assists in the documentation of these changes. Traditional fabrics age with their owners, becoming biographies, and are transformed into records of historic and social change. As a type of educational material, textiles of various periods are important to save for future generations' education and appreciation.

Some textile connoisseurs argue that only antiques—objects aged one hundred years and over—are collectible, and newer items are less valuable. In the realm of Southeast Asian fabrics, the existence of centuries-old textiles is uncommon although not unknown. There are environmental factors to consider, such as high humidity, mold, and vermin. Natural disasters, including flooding, also obliterate material objects. The region's last 250 years of political instability has created man-made disasters, forcing populations to flee their homelands with little or no possessions, if not perishing themselves. Other man-made events, such as funerals and other rites of passage, cause the destruction of textiles. In the various religious practices of Southeast Asia, textiles often join the deceased in their journey to the supernatural world and are sacrificed as acts of piety. Fabrics may be placed on graves and left to disintegrate, draped over a coffin and burned in cremation, or buried along with the deceased. It is exceptional to discover 19th-century or older examples in pristine condition. Although The Collection possesses textiles classified as antiques, including some that are approximately two hundred years old, it does not limit its acquisitions by the concept of antiquity.

The determination of the exact age of each textile can be difficult since The Collection has not acquired the majority of its textiles directly from the original owner or maker. Even if a producer is available to provide a fabric's age, she may not give a precise answer since recording time according to the international Roman calendar is a relatively new concept in agrarian Southeast Asian societies. The Collection has not utilized carbon dating since is too costly and not always accurate. The Collection has had to rely on its curators to calculate an age for a textile. After researching the masterpieces to be illustrated in this publication, I personally have given conservative estimates for the ages of the artworks, using archival photographs, previously published research, and textile materials and styles as resources to assist me in assessing a weaving's age.





Figure 15. Hip Wrapper or *Phaa Puum*, Thai, Khon Kaen Province, Thailand, 1990-2000, 2004.5.417 Contemporary weavers replicate old textile styles but add their own innovations in color, materials, and design. This fabric's creator incorporated plied silk thread (two colors of yarns are twisted together) into the plain weave, which is normally woven in solid colors. (Detail below)

Antiquity, therefore, is not a determining factor for acceptance of a traditional textile into The Collection. Weavers throughout Southeast Asia presently produce outstanding work. They continue to create new designs and incorporate new materials in their productions while preserving older designs and technology. Their mastery of skills and composition is commendable, and The Collection acknowledges their artistry by including new production in its holdings. These examples of new production will become historical records in the future. (Fig. 15)