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Thais Seek Control of the Thompson Art Collection

By HOWARD TAUBMAN

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BANGKOK, Thailand — The house that James H.W. Thompson, the American silk manufacturer who disappeared mysteriously in Malaysia more than a year ago, built into a remarkably tasteful repository of Southeast Asia art has become the object of a battle between his family and Thai officials. The dispute, which is to come before a Thai court in a few weeks, may well become a diplomatic issue before it is resolved.

Behind the trouble over the Thompson house and art collection is the long-smoldering resentment of Thai authorities over the disappearance in recent years of an increasing number of treasures.

Ancient sculptures regarded as irreplaceable, they say, are finding their way into other lands and markets, either through smuggling or diplomatic irregularities. Foreigners living here agree that there is considerable illicit traffic in precious art works but add that much of it is managed through Thai dealers.

Found in U.S. Museum

Typical of Thai irritation is the story Government officials tell about a stone lintel from a temple in a northeast province. Regarded as the only 12th-century or 13th-century sculpture of its kind, this lintel appeared, the Thais say, in the Avery Brundage Oriental Collection at the DeYoung Museum in San Francisco, though the temple and its lintel had been declared by the Fine Arts Department a national monument and not to be sent abroad.

The department wrote to the administrators of the Brundage Collection, asking for the return of the lintel and offering in its place another sculpture, something that was not unique and therefore could be duplicated here.

So far, the Thais assert bitterly, they have not even had an answer. If they do not get one soon, they intend to pursue the matter through diplomatic channels.

The Thompson house and its art works are caught up in a parallel situation, which was aggravated, it is understood, by the fact that the silk merchant had put together so choice an assortment of sculpture, painting and porcelain that it outshines proud collections of some members of the royal family.

The bad feeling erupted some time before Mr. Thompson's disappearance when Thai police appeared at his house and carried away five pieces of sculpture. They were re-



Brian Brake

Limestone torso of the Buddha, done in Dvaravati style

turned, but Mr. Thompson was so angered, his friends say, that he promptly wrote a new will. Under the old will the house and collection were to have been left to Thailand. Under the new will they were to be kept intact here and administered by Thompson's heirs.

As if to compound the mystery of the disappearance of Mr. Thompson, a 61-year-old bachelor, the new will cannot be found. As a result, the maneuvering among various claimants to the house and art collection has begun, with at least three parties involved. The family wants to retain control; the Siam Society, an organization made up of foreigners and leading Thais, would like to take over; the Government through the Fine Arts Department wants full possession.

Mr. Thompson's associates are most opposed to Government control. They fear that

official administration, whose work in the arts has been called lackluster, would lead to dispersal of the collection, and they feel that it deserves to be held together as a memorial to Mr. Thompson.

A careful examination of the house and collection confirms the high opinion they have won among connoisseurs. The house itself, put together in the Thai fashion out of five buildings from various parts of the city and countryside, is a gem.

It stands on one of Bangkok's many canals, which are giving way to paved roads under the pressure of urbanization. On the other side of this canal, the Klong Krung Kasem, is the village, now engulfed in the city, whose silk weavers became the pillar of Mr. Thompson's Thai Silk Company.

The house itself, largely of fine teak wood, is an exquisite work of art, with its unexpect-

ed and delightful arrangement of rooms, its terraces paved with 17th-century brick from Thailand's ancient capital, Ayutthaya; its parapet made of rare, old Chinese tiles and its carved pediments. Although Mr. Thompson provided himself with 20th-century comforts, he did not put in air-conditioning, and in his kitchen he installed an old Thai stove.

He started assembling the house 10 years ago and began collecting art 15 years ago. The collection as he left it a year ago ranges "from Cambodian deities to Chinese porcelains," in the word of William Warren, an American teaching here who has written the text for "The House on the Klong," a book with photographs by Brian Brake.

Thai Paintings

The sculpture is principally from Thailand and Cambodia with a few pieces from Burma. There is a set of traditional Thai paintings on cloth, paper and wood, done by anonymous priest-painters or commissioned laymen, reflecting a Thai genre hardly known in the West.

There is another unusual set of paintings showing such details of Thai life as rice-threshing, coconut-gathering, and the village market. These, curiously, Mr. Thompson found in New York. They had been commissioned from unknown Thai painters by an American missionary, Dr. J. H. Chandler, an early consul here, in mid-19th century.

In a collection gathered with so much sensitivity, it is difficult to single out individual pieces, but several are exceptional. Probably the finest is a 6th-century life-size torso of the Buddha, which Mr. Thompson placed by itself to excellent effect in a large terrace near the entrance.

Two mornings a week the house is open to visitors, who pay a modest charge, with the money going to a school for blind children. Mr. Thompson instituted this practice, and it continues.

Charles Sheffield, the Texan who worked for Mr. Thompson and has taken over the running of the silk company, has invited an American businessman here, William Riley, to live in it as a caretaker.

According to Mr. Sheffield, Mr. Thompson put together his collection with unlimited patience and care. Toward the end he was paying substantial prices for the 17th-century Chinese porcelain done on Thai patterns, to which he became greatly attached, but otherwise he paid modest prices for a collection now valued at close to \$1-million.