



*His Serene Highness
Subhadradis Diskul*

Prince of Art and History

To many, he was known as Prince Suphat; to those in the diplomatic circle, "His Serene Highness"; and yet to others, the great art history teacher. Celebrated art historian Prince Subhadradis Diskul, who was director of SPAFA between 1987 and 1993, passed away on 6 November 2003 after suffering a stroke. He was eighty years of age. Ean Lee reports.

Widely honoured and decorated for his contributions to Thai culture and world heritage, His Serene Highness is recognized as one of the Kingdom's most eminent art historians, as well as a Chevalier de la Legion d'Honneur by the French Government. He was bestowed the Knight Grand Cross (First Class) of the Most Illustrious Order of Chula Chom Klao by His Majesty King Bhumibol Adulyadej of Thailand.

Prince Suphat was born in Thailand on the 23rd of November 1923. His father, Prince Damrong Rajanubhab, grandson of King Monkut (Rama IV), is regarded as the "Father of Thai history". Prince Suphat became the first Thai to study art history and archaeology overseas. He took after his father, and was profoundly interested in those subjects, accumulating a deep knowledge and contributing immensely to Southeast Asian arts and culture.

He began his career with the Education Ministry, after graduating from Chulalongkorn University in History and English and a diploma in Education (he was the only one from Vajiravudh College to go into the arts; his friends and classmates chose engineering). The restrictions and the occupation of Thailand by the Japanese during the Second World War did not allow him to continue his education abroad. During this period, the prince worked, first at the Department of Elementary Education, and then at the Department of Fine Arts; after which, he furthered his art studies in history and archaeology in Paris at Ecole du Louvre, which is attached to the Louvre Museum. During this time, he studied under the direction of Philippe Stern, the art historian who systematised the dating of Khmer art, and introduced Prince Suphat to Khmer archaeology. He also became friends with Jean Boisselier, the renowned archaeologist who specialised in Eastern arts, and spoke fondly of France, which he considered his home. The prince then studied



at the Institute of Archaeology, University of London, in a postgraduate programme.

A pioneer in art history and archaeology, the scholar became well recognised in both local and international academic circles. Between 1953 and 1964, he was curator of the National Museum; Prince Suphat was known to be very generous with his works, and did not hold his archaeological findings from the general public. Just as his father had done, he donated or loaned his art objects and other collections to the National Museum. He said that his professor in Paris taught him that a museum man should not have a museum of his own.



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He took up the posts of professor and dean of the Faculty of Archaeology at Silpakorn University in 1964, and his aspirations to establish a Graduate School of History of Art and Archaeology in the university were realized when he was appointed dean of such a school (1976-1981) and then rector of the university (1982-86). Prince Suphat was a highly-respected figure at Silpakorn University, where he endeared himself to many. During his term as dean, the prince supervised several excavations that yielded many discoveries; and he carried out analysis of the historical objects, and determined the dates (he was also involved at the Dvaravati site in Singburi Province which dates back to the Seventh Century).

His knowledge of Thai and Khmer art was highly sought after, and he lectured at several universities around the world, spreading the history of Thailand and Southeast Asia. Over four decades, Prince Suphat led fascinating study trips; particularly to the Grand Palace complex and to various Khmer sites in Cambodia and Thailand. Among his major interests are statues, particularly those influenced by Khmer culture. Demands for his contribution were so great that he was kept busy in meetings of the National Museum Committee, the UNESCO Committee on Culture, the International Council of Museums,



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and countless other committees on Thai history and archaeology. In his spare time, prince relaxed by reading, writing and swimming at the Royal Bangkok Sports Club.

His work in preserving the cultural heritage of the region was also furthered in his role as director of SEAMEO-SPAFA, where he continued the development of archaeological research, training and education. He was also Vice President of the Jim Thompson Foundation, and President of the Siam Society (1979 - 1981), and was affiliated with the Siam Society for forty-two years.

However, he was reported to have said that it was his time as a curator that he enjoyed most. He was fond of research, while administrative tasks did not adequately inspire him. It was also reported that his administrative assistants had overheard the prince making the following remark: "I don't want to spend my life signing cheques." During a commemorative lecture, he said: "If you asked me what I am most proud of, the works that I have done, I would like to reply that there are two subjects. The first one is my teaching of Art History because I think that I am the first one to open these courses in Thailand. The second one is the return of the stone lintel of Phnom Rung Temple in northeastern Thailand. I am the first one to recognise it in the Art Institute of Chicago, and reported the find to the Thai Fine Arts Department."

The distinguished authority on Thai art was also known to have a disarming sense of humour, enjoyed life immensely, and was a very "gracious, spirited, fun-loving individual who approaches life with vivacity." He was devoted to his profession, and nurtured his students with passion and patience. A friend wrote that the prince "treasured the relationship he shared with those whom he cared about: he was, indeed, the perfect example of a modern day prince charming. Yet, he was also a modest man." Another friend remembered Prince Suphat thus: "...striding through the hot countryside, followed by an eager crowd, to view yet another lintel; surrounded by friends in a convivial atmosphere in an upcountry noodle stall; seated at ease in a restaurant or private home in Bangkok, reminiscing about his adventures with our group, always focusing on his beloved teaching of art." He lived his extraordinary life as an ordinary person, exemplified by his favourite poem, 'The Quiet Life' by Alexander Pope, the first and last stanzas of which the prince was able to quote:



Happy the man, whose wish and care
A few paternal acres bound,
Content to breathe his native air
In his own ground

Thus let me live, unseen, unknown;
Thus unlamented let me die;
Steal from the world, and not a stone
Tell where I lie.



The Prince as a grandfather (left); and a child (right) Images in this article are reproduced with permission from the family of Prince Subhadradis Diskul.

I was granted - what was a privilege to me - the experience of being part of the cremation ceremony of Prince Subhadradis. It was an occasion blessed with a very dignified ambience, royal attendance and at least five hundred relatives, friends, acquaintances, and patrons in black. Grandiose wreaths or dramatic fanfare were absent at the Thepsirin buddhist temple, where Thai royal funeral ceremonies were usually held. In their place were lit candles and little flowers and motionless clouds above arch-roofs. Sitting inside the compound of the large temple complex ground, I gazed up; a greyness permeated the sky. Breezes. The rain came down softly as if the heavens or gods were weeping, gently. There was still light in the skies. The crowd patiently filed through the central *sala* (pavillion) with its gold-gilded roof, to pay their last respects to the remains of the prince. Thunders. The royal music troupe stood wet in the downpour but continued to produce ancient sounds of high-pitched blaring trumpets, flute shrills and drum beats reminiscent of a past in the distant history of Thailand. The throngs of black flocked through, unfazed by the rain and thunders and darkened skies, a body of mourners calmly maintaining an equanimity against chaos and dishevel, as if collectively understanding that to run for shelter would damage the solemnity and grace befitting the final homage to a generous and humble human being now no longer with us. The procession must go on, and it did - without an awkward scattering for dry cover. It would need more than rain to disrupt bidding farewell to a modest prince. Early evening, the rain made a gentle sound on the ground as the cool air rendered the setting with a poetic beauty and ethereal feeling of serenity, not of sadness for the passing of someone great and endearing to many, but of an auspiciousness that divined these moments. Had the rainfall been heavier, it might have changed the atmosphere; but it was transient and evocative, a mystical shower of blessings. The Thais have a belief that when it rains on the cremation ceremony, the coincidence signifies that the person - for whom the ceremony is held - was an extraordinary and outstanding human being. I thought, how appropriate ... for this serene prince of art and history, Prince Subhadradis Diskul.



Wat Thepsirin, Bangkok