

# Neilson Hays Library

## - more than a historical landmark



When the Mughal emperor King Shah Jahan erected the Taj Mahal mausoleum in India in 1638 upon the death of his beloved wife, few could have imagined the expenses and energy he would pour into the monument, today a symbol of splendour and grandeur. Bangkok, a city of eyesores, is fortunate to have its own version of the Taj Mahal, though it is smaller in scale and intent (providing for the greater good of readers). The elegant, neo-classical Neilson Hays Library, on Surawongse Road, is similarly a testament of a husband's respect and admiration for his wife.

After Jennie Neilson Hays passed away in 1921, her husband Dr. T. Heyward Hays built the Neilson Hays library, and dedicated the building to his wife as a permanent symbol of his love. Jennie, born in Denmark, came to Siam in 1881 as a missionary, and became involved in several charitable projects.

*Jennie Neilson Hays*



She gave her time and energy to pursue the establishment of Bangkok's first English language lending library, devoting herself to the Library Association (established in 1869). Dr. Hays was an energetic man who contributed to late 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> century life in Bangkok in the fields of medicine, philanthropy and commerce. He was Surgeon Major to the Royal Siamese Navy, and was instrumental in the development of public



*Dr. Hays*

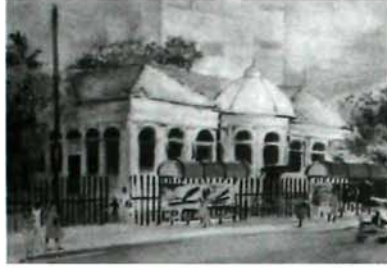
health. He was also resident physician at Bangrak Hospital which was his home for thirty years.

When the Library opened its doors for the first time on June 20<sup>th</sup> 1922, *The Bangkok Times* reported: "This magnificent building is a grand palace on a small scale. Its domes, pillars, ornate mouldings and louvred shutters remind us even today of a less hurried, more elegant Bangkok." In 1986, the Association of Siamese Architects officially awarded the monument the status of an historical landmark of Bangkok, under the Royal Patronage of Her Royal Highness, Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn. Today, the Library stands proudly as the oldest foreign non-profit entity in Thailand. Its collection, in keeping with current reading needs, is over 20,000 titles and is displayed on impeccably crafted solid teak shelves. Thirty-five per cent of the library's current members are Thai nationals with the remainder drawn from more than 18 other countries.

At the time of the building's inauguration, a local reporter made the following comment on the library: "Built on a concrete foundation, the Neilson Hays Library resembles an inverted saucer. The building is moisture-proof and well ventilated. Each of the three large rooms are skirted by bookcases snugly built in double walls, allowing an air space at the back, thus keeping them dry and insect-proof. The floors are of polished teak, making the building eminently suited for social functions, and an excellent lighting system has been installed."



*Windows of the library building*



*Rajane Prakkamakul*



*Rotunda Gallery*

*Art Fair*



*Bauhaus*



*Art Fair*



*William Marazzi*

On the 25<sup>th</sup> of January 1869, members of the Ladies' Bazaar Association came up with the idea of a library. It was decided that the money they had realised from their sales would be used to form 'The Bangkok Ladies Library Association', to serve the reading needs of the large English-speaking community in Bangkok. The amount raised was 550 ticals (the tical, commonly known as "bullet money," was the principal currency of Thailand from about the 13<sup>th</sup> to the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century), an enormous sum in those days, when a "good servant could be hired for 4 ticals a month." The constitution for the Library stipulated that 12 women must sit on the board, and to this day the constitution is still upheld, having 12 women

The Library serves the community by providing many outlets, one of which is a cozy children's section. It has a collection of best-selling classics, as well as the latest picture books. There are many stories for children to enjoy in the pleasant atmosphere created



*The Bangkok Ladies Association*



*Art Fair*

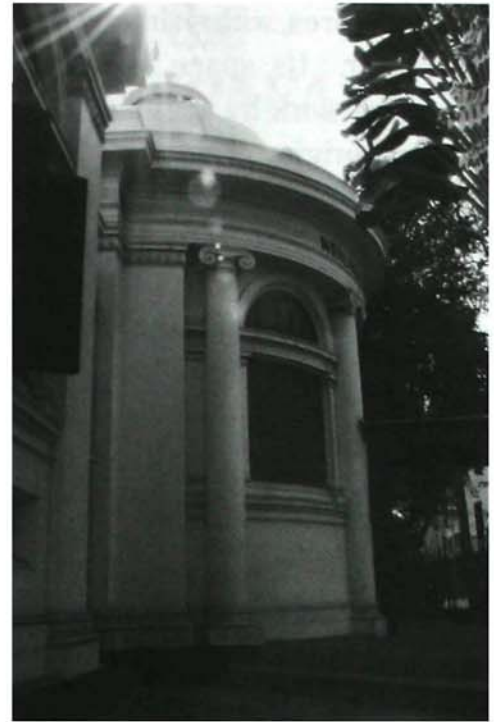
volunteers on the board. One of the many tasks the board members perform concerns the selecting and purchasing of novels chosen from the New York Times Bestseller lists, the London Times Literary Review and the Booklist Review, amongst other sources.

by the volunteers of the library. Throughout the year, children's programmes are hosted. They feature a selection of puppet shows, crafts and story-telling activities.



*Children's Section*

Two annual events the Library hosts, both of which are becoming permanent features on the local community's calendar, are the Art Fair in February and the Book Fair in November. The Art Fair is organised with a broad definition of art since it features everything from street performers to a



*Facade of the Library*



*Teak floor of the Rotunda Gallery*

“painters’ garden” (a display of paintings in a garden setting). Local crafts for sale include jewellery, ceramics, fabrics, decorative art pieces, and a wide range of fine art exhibits. The entire library, inside and out, is turned into a showpiece for the Art Fair. An event

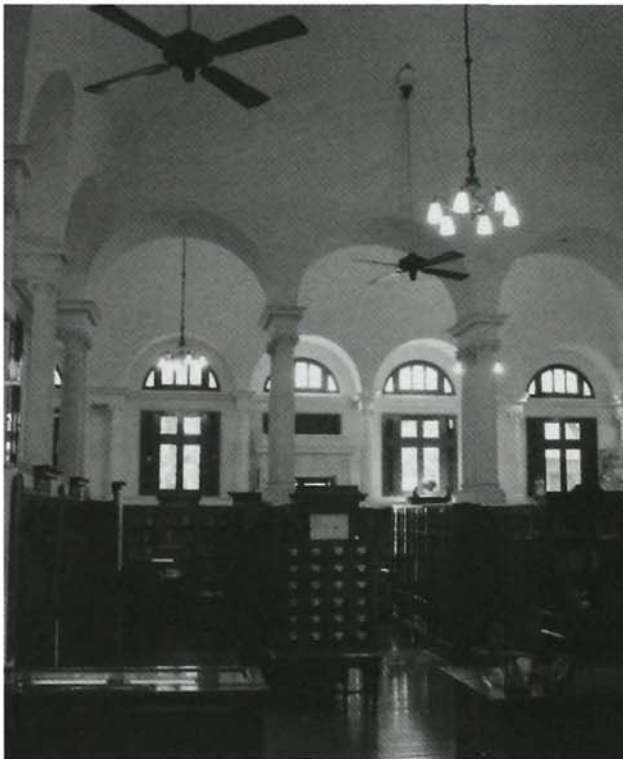
not to miss. The other event, the Book Fair, which is held in November, is a celebration of books. This annual fair brings together book-shops from across Bangkok, and features an extensive second-hand booksale as well. There will be booths to display novels, non-fiction books, calendars, and other book-related products. Participating in the event are the local bookshops, Kinokuniya, Asia Books, and Books@53 and others, including a number of smaller ones that sell antique books, and unique publications on Southeast Asia.

The Rotunda Gallery of the library was formerly the front door entrance to the building. After the entrance was moved to the back, to ease congestion along the main street, the stunning entrance was turned a gallery. The Rotunda Gallery is a

charming area, with an interesting shape and character. Its space is used effectively to exhibit work by artists of Thai and international origin. The work have been of a



variety of media, including oil painting, mixed media, installations, furniture collections, etc.. The gallery is scheduled to host a series of exhibitions of photographs, ceramics, watercolours,



acrylic paintings, decorative lamps, jewellery and installation art. Exhibitions change every three weeks; and information can be found on the Library website as well as in Thailand's printed media.

The following exhibitions will be held in the first quarter of 2003: January 2003, Thitiwan Thubtimthing with "Solitude", an exhibition of paintings, jewellery and installation art; February 2003, Sjoerd Bakker with "Diary of a Traveller", an exhibition of etchings and watercolour paintings; March 2003, Paul Beiboer with "Absolutely Asia", an exhibition of black and white photographs.

The Library also provides the unique opportunity for members of the public to meet writers of international fame. Visits by authors are hosted annually. Among those the library has welcomed are Margaret Drabble, Paul Theroux, Norman Mailer, and Jung Chang. Neilson Hays Library has also been privileged to welcome prominent local authors such as Steve van Beek, James Eckhardt, Christopher Moore, and Roger Crutchley.

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Contact the website for membership application. Flyer and application forms are available at the library. See website for a detailed map. The closest BTS (the city's train transportation system) station is Chong Nongsi

*The above edited article was written by Lisa Scherman*