A Guardian of Thai Treasures: Henry Ginsburg (1940-2007)

A display to mark the 70th anniversary of his birth – 5 November 2010
Henry Ginsburg

Henry Ginsburg (1940–2007) was for over thirty years curator of the Thai, Lao and Cambodian collections in the British Museum and the British Library, and an eminent authority on Thai manuscript painting, a field he largely made his own.

Henry David Ginsburg was born in New York on 5 November 1940 to parents who were both antique dealers, and from whom he inherited a life-long appreciation and sympathy for fine art. He studied Russian at Columbia University—his family was of Russian Jewish origin—and then served in the Peace Corps in Thailand from 1964 to 1966, an experience which set the course of the rest of his life. In 1967 he moved to London and commenced doctoral studies in Thai literature under Stuart Simmonds at the School of Oriental and African Studies, London, obtaining his Ph.D. in 1971.

In 1967 Henry joined the British Museum as a Special Assistant responsible for the Thai collections, and with other staff in the Department of Oriental Manuscripts and Printed Books (OMPB) he moved to the newly-formed British Library in 1973. For the next three decades Henry remained a part-time member of staff, successfully resisting all attempts by central administration to regularise his hours; the flexibility suited him and enabled him to travel and pursue numerous other interests. Even official retirement in 2002 saw little change to his routine, as he continued to appear in the Library on most days to work on various Thai manuscript projects.

When Henry joined the British Museum Library, the Southeast Asia collections very much reflected British imperial involvement in the region. The richest collections of manuscripts and early printed books were from countries formerly under British colonial administration such as Burma, Malaysia and Singapore, and even from Java, briefly under British rule from 1811 to 1816. Conversely, from regions where Britain had had little imperial involvement—the Philippines, Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia and Thailand—collections were relatively thin. As highlighted by Graham Shaw—head of the Asia, Pacific and Africa Collections, successor to OMPB—in an address at Henry’s memorial service in London on 15 June 2007, Henry’s unique achievement at the British Library was to build up, slowly and steadily, by discerning acquisition (and within all the constraints of the age), one of the finest collections of illustrated Thai manuscripts in the world.

Thus every year the accession registers for oriental manuscripts show a handful of choice acquisitions, usually of the genres of Thai manuscripts most likely to be illustrated, such as the tale of the monk Phra Malai, the ten birth tales of the Buddha, divination and astrological works, and elephant treatises. Sometimes considerable detective work was involved, as when Henry successfully tracked down paintings which had been removed from an elephant treatise before it was acquired by the British Library (Or.13652). Occasionally there was the opportunity to buy very rare material, such as in 1983, when eight drawings by the Thai artist Bun Khong commissioned by Captain James Low were acquired (Or.14179), to complement the album of drawings by Bun Khong for Low already held in the British Library (Add.27370). Low was the British envoy to the state of Nakhon Sihammarat in 1824, and these are the only known Thai examples of the Company School of painting, that is, paintings commissioned from local artists by officials of the East India Company. Another more unusual acquisition was of two gilt wood inscribed title indicators for Northern Thai religious texts (Or.14528–229) in 1990.

A foretaste of the formidable artistic and intellectual project that Henry had embarked on was revealed in a small exhibition held in the British Library from January to November 1983 on Thai manuscripts, which included six of the Bun Khong drawings for Low, as well as a number of illustrated Thai manuscripts. Two years later, together with other colleagues in OMPB, Henry contributed to the joint British Museum-British Library exhibition, Buddhism: art and faith; he wrote the introduction to the chapter on Thailand and Cambodia in the exhibition catalogue. All this paved the way for his book on Thai manuscript painting, published in 1989—the first major monograph on the subject.

Illustrated manuscripts were discussed in terms of their subject matter, followed by studies of genre painting and developments in style, and an important appendix listing Thai illustrated manuscripts in western collections. (Of the 36 illustrated manuscripts listed in the British Library, 28 had been acquired during Henry’s stewardship of the collections.) The publication was marked by an exhibition in the King’s Library from 16 February to 1 July 1990.

In 1996 the Office of the National Culture Commission of Thailand invited the British Library to produce an exhibition of original and facsimile Thai manuscripts
from the Library’s collections to mark the Golden Jubilee of His Majesty King Bhumiphol and the state visit to Thailand of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II. The exhibition, which was held from 31 October – 29 November 1996 at theChanging Exhibition Hall of the Thailand Cultural Centre, Bangkok, was officially opened by Her Majesty, accompanied by Her Royal Highness Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn. The success of this project owed much to the empathy between Henry and Her Royal Highness, who visited the British Library on several occasions. A lasting memento of the exhibition was the publication in 2000 of Henry’s book *Thai art and culture: historic manuscripts from Western collections*, which included most of the exhibited works. In a very natural scholarly progression from his earlier book, in this work Thai illustrated manuscripts were presented alongside texts of literary or historical merit, and important foreign source materials on Thailand, including East India Company trading records and a unique 17th-century Persian account of an embassy to the court of King Narai (Or.6942).

Henry’s close friendship with another member of the Thai royal family, M R Narisa Chakrabongse – daughter of Prince Chula and granddaughter of Prince Chakrabongse – led to the generous donation to the British Library in 2001 of the Chakrabongse Letters (Or.15749), a collection of over 250 letters from Prince Chakrabongse, his father King Chulalongkorn and his successor King Vajiravudh, to each other. Through his personal and professional contacts, Henry was also responsible for another important gift to the British Library in 2004, of manuscripts, paintings and gilded manuscript chests from Thailand and Burma from Doris Duke’s Southeast Asian Art Collection.

At the time of his death Henry was working on a catalogue of the Thai manuscripts in the Chester Beatty Library in Dublin and a book on Thai banner painting, while continuing to catalogue, transcribe and translate the Chakrabongse Letters. Throughout this period he was also graciously imparting his immense knowledge of the Thai books and manuscripts to his successor as curator, Jana Igunma, and still continuing to send the Library’s way important manuscripts which he felt should be added to the collection. He had brought in one such manuscript – a copy of the Ten Birth Tales, in Cambodian Muí script with illustrations of a very high quality – for consideration shortly before his final visit to New York; it has now been acquired by the British Library in his memory (Or.16552). From his estate, the Library has also received the donation of two fine gilt manuscript title indicators (Or.16554 and Or.16555), a small collection of Thai manuscripts, and an extensive photographic collection. (Henry’s private book collection was acquired by the Library in 2009.)


Henry had dedicated his book *Thai art and culture* to “the superb artists and scribes, nearly all anonymous, who created the life-enhancing works of art shown here, happily enduring memorials to the rich cultural heritage of old Thailand”, but he himself should best be remembered for his unique role in enhancing lives by preserving, documenting and interpreting these exquisite works of art, and greatly raising their public profile in Thailand and beyond.

**Annabel Teh Gallop**

Henry Ginsburg: Bibliography

Books


Journal articles and chapters in books


Reviews


Reviews of books by Henry Ginsburg

Henry Ginsburg Curator for Thai, Lao and Cambodian

A generous endowment from the Estate of Henry Ginsburg has enabled the creation of a full-time curatorial post at the British Library in his memory, the 'Henry Ginsburg Curator for Thai, Lao and Cambodian'. The post was inaugurated on 5 November 2010, on what would have been Henry Ginsburg's 70th birthday. The first incumbent of the new post is Jana Igunna, who worked closely with Henry Ginsburg for several years as his successor as part-time curator for Thai at the British Library.

The accompanying display has been organised to mark the 70th anniversary of Henry Ginsburg’s birth and the establishment of the new post. All the items on display reflect Henry Ginsburg’s personal involvement in building up the Thai collections in the British Library.

Her Royal Highness Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn with Henry Ginsburg, viewing an illustrated Buddhist manuscript from the British Library's Thai collections in January 1991. Her Royal Highness, who holds MA degrees in Oriental Epigraphy and in Sanskrit and Pali Studies, as well as a PhD degree in Education Development, pays regular visits to the British Library and is well informed about the Thai collections, mainly through her long acquaintance with Henry Ginsburg. Photo 1213(3)

Above
Children of King Mongkut (Rama IV)
This rare photograph from Henry Ginsburg’s private collection dates from about the time of King Mongkut’s death in 1868. It shows the sons of the king who were under the age of 11. Most of them would have studied under Mrs Anna Leonowens, who taught in the palace school during the 1860s.

Photo 1218(7)

Left
Sudhana Manoharā
Left

**Letter from Prince Chakrabongse Bhuvanadh to his father, King Chulalongkorn (Rama V), dated St Petersburg, 6 November 1905.** Prince Chakrabongse came to St Petersburg in June 1898 to become a member of the elite Corps des Pages. In this letter he describes the situation during the 1905 Russian Revolution, which he called a ‘revolution of a new kind’, led by intellectuals with strong support from students and workers demanding basic human rights and a parliament.

The collection of more than 250 royal Thai letters from the Chakrabongse Archive was donated to the British Library in 2001 by M R Narisa Chakrabongse. Henry Ginsburg carried out extensive research on the correspondence between Prince Chakrabongse, King Chulalongkorn and King Vajiravudh (Rama VI).

Or.15745/8.12

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Right

**Henry Ginsburg, Thai Art and Culture: Historic Manuscripts from Western Collections.**


In this book Henry Ginsburg examines not only the development of Thai art and manuscript painting styles, but also explores the social and historical context of manuscript production. The lavish illustrations portray Thai Buddhism, traditional beliefs and imagery, as well as the history of early relations between the Thai kingdom and the West. The book accompanied an exhibition at the Thai Cultural Centre in Bangkok in 1996 to mark the Golden Jubilee of His Majesty the King of Thailand.

The chapter on ‘The life of the Buddha’ reflects one of Henry Ginsburg's main research interests. His publications on this topic have become crucial to a full understanding and appreciation of Thai manuscript art and Buddhist culture. 

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Above

**Ten Birth Tales**

This illustrated folding book (Samut Khoi) was acquired by Henry Ginsburg in New York prior to his sudden death in 2007, and was purchased by the British Library in his memory. Henry Ginsburg’s unique achievement during thirty years as curator for Thai at the British Library was to build up one of the finest collections of illustrated Thai manuscripts in the world.

This manuscript, which combines Pali and Thai text in Khom script, is from the second half of the 19th century. The illustrations show scenes from the Ten Birth Tales. The scene on the right where Prince Vessantara gives his royal elephant to the Brahmins is a very popular image in Thai manuscript painting, as it symbolises the virtue of giving (dāna).

Or.16852

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**Vessantara Jātaka**

Water-colour on cloth, Central Thai school, second half of the 19th century. The painting shows Prince Vessantara leaving his palace and giving away his sacred white elephant to the Brahmins, who he encounters on an excursion with his courtiers. Set in a typical Thai-style environment with palaces, Buddhist temples, forests and a village scene outside the palace walls, this painting has strong similarities with Thai manuscript illustrations.

This fine work by an anonymous Thai artist was a gift from Doris Duke’s Southeast Asian Art Collection to the British Library in 2004, together with other Thai and Burmese paintings, manuscripts, and manuscript chests and cabinets. Henry Ginsburg helped to negotiate the distribution of items from Doris Duke’s Southeast Asian Art Collection to several institutions in the UK and the US.
The Thai Collections at the British Library

The British Library holds Thai language material, including Northern Thai and some Tai minority languages. The focus of the collection is on humanities and social sciences. The Thai manuscripts collection consists of approximately 300 manuscripts in Thai and Northern Thai, and more than 100 manuscripts in Pali (in Thai/Northern Thai script).

We also have a large collection of printed books in Thai, including some rare books from the 19th and early 20th centuries, as well as extensive holdings on Thailand in Western languages.

Other formats include journals and newspapers, maps, music, microfilms and microfiches, philatelic material, sound recordings, audiovisual and electronic media.

Printed books and periodicals
The earliest period of Thai printing, from ca.1840–1890, is well represented in the collection due to the gift by Christian missionaries of about 100 books and pamphlets, some of which are unique copies including the only known copy of the first Thai book ever printed in Thailand, a Christian text published in 1838 (ORB.30/894). A copy of the Treaty of Friendship and Commerce between Great Britain and Siam (Siam.29) – also known as the Bowring treaty – printed in 1856, is an excellent example of Thai printing outside Thailand. In the early 20th century, all publications by the National Library of Thailand were deposited at the British Museum Library. Recent acquisitions are normally made by purchase.

The collection comprises more than 4000 titles of printed books, dating from the mid-19th century onwards, and 45 periodical titles. Thai printed books and serials which were acquired before 2001 are accessible through a card catalogue in the Asian & African Studies Reading Room, with author, title and subject sequences. Thai language material that has been acquired since the year 2001 is searchable in the Integrated Catalogue. Printed books on Thailand in Western languages can be found in the Integrated Catalogue as well.

Archival resources
There are some Western-language archival resources on Thailand in the India Office Records, which are the documentary archives of the administration in London of the English East India Company and the pre-1947 government of India.

The India Office Records include files relating to the activities of the English East India Company and the English Factory in Siam. Apart from the Library's own catalogues, published listings of resources most relevant to the study of Thailand can be found in:

Visual material
The Library has a small collection of visual materials relating to Thailand. An impressive collection of Thai-style drawings is Captain Low’s Album of Thai paintings from about 1800–1820 A.D. [Add.27370 and Or.14179], which was compiled by Captain James Low while serving in the East India Company in northern Malaya and Penang.

More than 100 drawings from the Finlayson Collection are related to Thailand (Siam). George Finlayson was one of the best naturalists of the early 19th century, and his studies in southern Thailand and the Malay peninsula were pioneering. In addition, the British Library holds several 19th-century paintings in the Rattanakosin style, as well as the Thalang letters from the Marsden Papers, and Thai drawings from the Wyndham Album.

A few Thai lacquer manuscripts boxes and cabinets, received as a gift from Doris Duke’s Southeast Asia Art Collection in 2004, are on display in front of and inside the Asian & African Studies Reading Room.

Recorded sound and audio-visual resources
The British Library Sound Archive holds one of the world’s largest collections of world and traditional music. Recordings from Thailand include the Tom Vater field recordings and the John Moore music collection, as well as theatre plays, classical Thai music, Thai folk and pop music, and recordings of religious ceremonies.

There are other relevant resources from Thailand in the oral history, drama and literature collections, and a large collection of field recordings of wildlife from all regions of Thailand.

These resources may be accessed through the Sound Archive catalogue.
Electronic resources
A number of key electronic resources for the study of Thailand are also available at the British Library. For licensing reasons, most of these may be accessed only from the Library’s reading rooms. A number of important reference resources are held, including Southeast Asia in the Ming Reign Chronicles (14th–17th Centuries), the Cambodian Genocide Program, Digital dictionaries of Southeast Asia, and a database on Thai mural paintings.

Through the Endangered Archives Programme, the Library is receiving digital copies of Thai gay, lesbian and transgender publications.

A digitisation project is currently digitising a selection of Central Thai manuscripts from the Thai Collection.

Philatelic material
The Row Collection
The Row Collection is an outstanding collection of stamps from Siam from 1883 to 1918 in 22 volumes, chiefly unused with many blocks, and strong in the various provisional surcharges. It includes some postal stationery and issues used in Kedah and Kelantan. The collection of stamps was formed by R W H Row and presented in 1919 by his mother Mrs Eliza Row. Philatelic material can be accessed through the Library’s Philatelic Collection catalogue.

Jana Iguma

More detailed information on the Thai Collection can be found online at http://www.bl.uk/reshelp/findhelplang/thai/thai.html
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