

# *Book Review*

# Royal Porcelain from Siam – Unpacking the Ring Collection

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In 1904, during the last years of the reign of King Chulalongkorn the Great, Theodor Ring, a Norwegian naval officer and adventurer called in 1897 by His Majesty to serve in his Royal Navy as part of the transformation of Thailand to a modern state was promoted as Commander of the Maha Chakri, King Chulalongkorn's Royal Yacht.

In that same year a large shipment arrived from Siam destined to form the core of the treasures of the newly opened Ethnographic Museum in the Norwegian capital (now Oslo University Museum of Cultural History) The sender was that same Theodor Ring and the content nothing less than 250 pieces of exquisite Bencharong Royal Porcelain, used in the household of the Royal family and Thai nobility since the Auythaya period nobility. Commander Ring left his post in 1906 but later met King Chulalongkorn at a dinner given by the Norwegian King at his palace the following year. It is not reported if King Chulalongkorn saw the collection during his Norwegian sojourn.

The King had himself donated a collection to England in 1876 and another Norwegian explorer Carl Bock known for his Thai travelogue “Temples and Elephants” (1884) had donated a smaller collection to the Museum a few years later. Both of

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these collections however lay hidden from the public eye in the museum vaults. On the initiative of Professor Bussakorn Binson of the Faculty of Fine and Applied Arts, Chulalongkorn University and the author a Family Day of Thai Culture was arranged a few years ago when some choice pieces of Thai porcelain were also put on display.

And so through the initiative of Professor Jend Erland Braarvig of the Oslo University Department of Culture Studies meeting in April 2012 with His Excellency Mr. Theerakun Niyom, Ambassador of the Kingdom of Thailand to the Kingdom of Norway and shortly afterward with the Anne Haabu, Conservator and Martin Hager-Saltnes, Museum lecturer a unique project was launched. It would include close cooperation between Thai and Norwegian researchers in the fields of cultural history, leading up to an exposition in 2013-14 and the publication of the present volume.

And here it is – a broad documentation in 4 chapters on Bencharong, its history and characteristics, collectors and collections of Thai artifacts in Europe, motives and influences, and the fascinating history of creating the exposition itself. Three Thai researchers have been involved in the project:

- Prapassorn Posrithong, former Curator and Director of the National Museum Division of Thailand and Assistant Director at the Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn Anthropology Center.
- Arthid Sheravanichkul, Ph.D., Lecturer at the Department of Thai Studies, Chulalongkorn University.
- Pariwat Thammapreechakorn, Ph.D., Director of the South East Asian Ceramics Museum at Bangkok University.

A model project of building research partnerships across continents inspired by a deep commitment to serving the cause of intercultural understanding has resulted in a publication worthy of the glorious art genre it has set to portray. It should be noted that the complicated enamel technique itself crossed the continents, being discovered in Europe, developed in China and perfected as an art form in its essence incorporating Thainess in King Chulalongkorn's Siam.

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