

FROM THE ARCHIVES

Buddhist priests blessed  
Jim Thompson's Thai  
house in Bangkok, 1959.  
UPM Image # 194079.

# Jim Thompson, the Thai Silk King

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**Y**OUNGER GENERATIONS MAY NOT know Jim Thompson (1906–1967?), but in the 1950s and 1960s he was famous throughout the world as Thailand's "Silk King," and as an arbiter of international taste. Born of a wealthy Delaware family, Thompson graduated from Princeton and attended the University of Pennsylvania School of Architecture. Though he never completed his degree, he became an architect nonetheless, designing houses as well as landscapes and interiors. By his mid-thirties, however, he had grown dissatisfied with his life as a carefree bachelor and had begun to alienate his family with his increasingly liberal political views. World War II prompted him to quit his job and enlist. He traveled to North Africa, Italy, and France before being sent to Thailand.

Thailand was never colonized, and, though ostensibly an ally of Japan during the war, it did not participate in the fighting and suffered little damage. Upon his arrival, Thompson was immediately enchanted by the country's unique character and by the city of Bangkok, with its people and their art. He also saw business opportunities. His passion was taken by Thai silk, a local tradition he helped revive, creating a demand all over the world. He formed the Thai Silk Company in 1951 and, with a keen sense of color and indefatigable salesmanship, became extremely successful. His creations became famous—worn by celebrities and socialites—and were even used in the 1956 film *The King and I*. In addition to silk, Thompson's passions included collecting antiquities from temples and caves around the country, and the house he built to display them and entertain his constant stream of guests. That house is now a museum.

## Excerpts from “Cockatoo” by Elizabeth Lyons (1980s)

JIM THOMPSON AND ELIZABETH (LISA) LYONS were friends and colleagues in Thailand. Lisa Lyons’ manuscript collection, available in the Museum Archives, includes a number of her writings, such as an unpublished murder mystery called *The Bangkok Case*, and a set of reminiscences of her time in Thailand. The following are excerpts from “Cockatoo,” about Jim Thompson’s inseparable companion.

Fascinated by the tameness of such a large bird, but a little frightened by those strong claws and especially of that Turkish scimitar beak, I gingerly held out my arm. Jim lifted him with both hands and set him on my wrist; he...climbed up to my shoulder and slowly ran his beak over my ear and cheek, pressing his head to mine. I wasn’t sure I liked it. Not that the feathered caress was unpleasant, but I thought it an unnatural way for a bird to act. As far as I knew there were only two kinds of birds, wild ones singing in the trees, and canaries in cages, and both would flee or go into hysterics if you came close to them. But this bunch of feathers on my shoulder was actually nuzzling me like a puppy.

Cockatoo talked a great deal, sometimes clearly verbal phrases in an unknown tongue, but mostly a chuckling, twittering stream of sound that was such a parody of the hundreds of dinner conversations we had known...

Suddenly the bird hopped from the chair onto the table, ran a few steps and flapped to the window. Horrified that he was going to take off into the night and be lost, we scrambled after him, but in the time it took us to get out of our chairs he had turned around, lifted his tail and defecated into the garden.

Cocky became a great social prize as a guest and was invited all over town. He and Jim looked like a couple out of a Cocteau film as they came into a room, the man in a black dinner jacket, the white bird on his shoulder, blue eyes and little round black ones on the same level, both heads turning to the welcoming hosts. By and large, Cocky’s party manners were perfect although it was well to see that he was close to an open window since he did hate to leave good company even for a moment; and you had to watch that he didn’t steal nips of liquor after dinner...And I must admit that he had a low taste for practical jokes. Let there be someone in the room with a phobia about birds and he would sense it. He would ruin the poor woman’s evening simply by keeping his eyes fixed on her and giving a menacing, maniacal chuckle every time she looked his way. Or, when everyone’s attention was diverted he would sneak along the back of chairs and then quietly wait by the victim’s shoulder until she turned around...and shrieked.

Jim Thompson with his frequent companion, Cockatoo. UPM Image # 194077.





Elizabeth (Lisa) Lyons appeared on Japanese television to discuss Asian art, 1956. UPM Image # 194047.

In 1955, Thompson met Elizabeth Lyons, an art historian from Michigan who had studied at Columbia University, with stints in Paris and Brussels. At the time of their meeting, Lyons had been appointed cultural attaché at the U.S. State Department, touring an exhibition of modern American Art around South and Southeast Asia and acting as a cultural ambassador in the region. When she originally applied for the job, she had not been considered a serious candidate, since the State Department wanted a man. But as no men applied, it was she who was selected.

Lisa Lyons and Jim Thompson became fast friends, and were also briefly lovers. They shared an intense interest in the art of Southeast Asia. Lyons planned to write a monograph on Thai painting, as she continued to lecture for the State Department in the ensuing years. She also curated exhibitions, worked on an archaeological survey of Thailand, and assisted with the opening of the new National Museum in Bangkok in 1967, as well as in planning provincial museums. It was in part through the efforts of Thompson and Lyons that art from Southeast Asia is much more highly prized today.

In 1967, Thompson disappeared suddenly while visiting friends in the Cameron Highlands of Malaysia, a mountainous region covered by intractable jungle. Search parties set out to look for him—including 325 Malaysian police, British soldiers on leave, 30 aboriginal trackers, and a number of psychics, including Peter Hurkos, who had helped with the Boston Strangler case. Thompson was never found. Many explanations were given for his disappearance, including theories that he was kidnapped by Communists, killed during a CIA mission, or eaten by a tiger. No one could explain, though, why he left the cottage without taking his cigarettes or his pills for gallstone pain. The mystery was compounded after his sister was murdered in her house in Delaware six months later by an unknown assailant.

The discovery of the site of Ban Chiang brought Lyons to the Penn Museum as Assistant Curator of the

Asian Section in 1968, a year after Thompson's disappearance. She then spent five years (1971–1975) administering the Ford Foundation program in Southeast Asian art and archaeology. She later returned to the Penn Museum as Keeper of the Asian Section Collections in 1976. She co-curated the Buddhism exhibition as it appears today and eventually donated her own collection, which included some pieces given to her by Thompson, to the Museum. Her papers, including her unfinished monograph on Thai painting, a stash of letters from Thompson, and a number of reminiscences from her Thailand days, are now available in the Penn Museum Archives.

In his letters to Lyons, Thompson writes most of all about traveling around Thailand to collect antiquities and the problems arising from the building of his grand house. Though the disappearance of the “Thai Silk King” remains shrouded in mystery, these records reveal something about his passion for Southeast Asian art and the history of his collections. 🏠

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