

The Colour Of Thai Art

As a six-year-old in kindergarten, I remember bringing my best finger-painting art pieces home to show my parents—convincing them of the excellent artistic potential I could possibly possess. In Thailand, however, many children of that age would have already learnt the basics of an artistic skill. As we explored Bangkok's famous flower market, Plak Khlong Talad, many children were helping their mothers weave tiny jasmine flowers into elaborate flower creations used as offerings at the Buddhist temples. In Thailand, many children learn a form of artistic skill because it is simply the means by which their parents earn a living. With the country's continued urbanisation and development, however, Thailand's younger generation is increasingly focused on doing well at mathematics and science. Many parents would even discourage their children from learning the skill by which they make a living, telling them to study hard instead because weaving flowers into wreaths doesn't make much money, especially if there are hundreds of other merchants selling exactly the same thing.

Recognising this trend, the Thai government has come up with the One Tambon (village) One Product (OTOP) policy that the queen herself is the spokesperson for. This OTOP strategy's main objective is to keep Thailand's unique art forms from dying out. Not to mention, it's also a great way to draw tourist dollars to smaller villages away from overcrowded Bangkok as each area markets a different unique product. We stopped by a village where the main product was Thai desserts, finger foods and snacks. There we found the famous luk chook—miniature agar-agar replicas of fruits filled with mung bean paste. These are a favourite of tourists who often buy boxes filled with mangosteens, chillies, bananas and apples, all no bigger than their baby fingers, to bring back home as proof they'd been to Thailand.

Thai people, we found, are extremely proud of their traditional arts which are especially unique because the country has never been occupied by a European country. This has allowed ancient Thai art to flourish untouched by foreign influences. One of the distinctively Thai traditional arts, is kae sa luk or the art of carving. Its most popular form is that of fruit and vegetable carving which, has a rather morbid beginning. Back in the days before coffins and crematoriums, Thai people lay their dead on piles of banana trees, decorated with fruit and vegetable carvings—when these were soaked in a preservative solution, they lasted longer than fresh flowers. Now that the practice has become practically redundant, the art of kae sa luk has been adopted as a means of decoration in the food industry. All over the best hotels, you'll find these gorgeous flower designs as centre pieces for buffets or functions—much like how ice sculptures are used.

If you thought making flowers out of tomatoes and carrots was vegetable carving, think again. With thousands of years of history, kae sa luk has developed into a highly intricate art form. Imagine carving rose petals out of a watermelon, cutting into the fruit just deep enough to expose its rosy red flesh without damaging the upper layer of white and the rind of green. Imagine using the thinnest of hand-held blades to craft three-dimensional leaves out of a flat slice of pumpkin. Imagine shaping an orchid flower, with all of its subtle nuances and curves out of an ungainly white radish.

The CW Asia team were invited by the Carving Institute to a display of the craft by master carver Dam Rong Sak Nirund, his brother Rawat Nirund and their students. The team also included Laong Hertz, a student of Dam's, whose husband Larry Hertz spearheaded the setting up of the Carving Institute. The three recently won high honours at the worldwide competition The Virtual Salon Culinare, for fruit and vegetable carving where Dam took home the top prize. Dam learnt his craft from his father, who is credited with designing the most intricate of all flower carvings—the phev Siam, or the diamond of Siam, named because of its very layered and multi-faceted design. For the past 25 years, Dam has taught the art at a local university and has also operated a mini carving school out of a six foot by nine foot shop at the Chatuchak weekend market. Adorning the walls of the tiny space are yellowed picture frames of Dam's most beloved accolades and certificates of achievements, one's even from the king of Thailand! Thousands of students have come through Dam's small business; some come to buy the colourful life-like soap carvings of birds and flowers on display, but many others come to perfect their carving techniques. As the resident master carver of the Carving Institute, Dam wants to bring the art of kae sa luk overseas. In fact, many of his students now are from Japan, who learn kae sa luk in Thailand and then teach it back home.

From children to chefs and from Thais to tourists, Dam doesn't put a restriction on who he teaches kae sa luk to. After all, Thai people are known to be the masters of the art of sharing. CY

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