

HEADLINE: Cultural fantasia

SUBHEADLINE: The National Museum Volunteers are weaving links for the love of textiles

BYLINE: WANPHEN SRESHTHAPUTRA

In the mid-afternoon searing heat, a couple of foreign tourists with sweat trickling down their necks are making an effort to find what they are seeing interesting. Behind thick and dusty windows, metres of finely weaved fabrics are piled up. The poor lighting of the showcase doesn't flatter the ancient silk fabric's unique and intricate embroidery. The explanations are succinct; ``gold fabric embroidered with silk and beatings ..."

The textile gallery of the National Museum in Bangkok _ set up in its present form 20 years ago _ displays more than 700 items within 210 square metres of space.

Exhibition techniques and preservation techniques to some extent leave much to be desired. Some pieces though, such as the Royal dress uniform, cannot be seen anywhere else, while every piece including high-ranking and court officials' fabrics dating from the reign of King Mongkut (1851-1863) have a very high value in terms of the aesthetic and the preservation of Thai cultural heritage.

This deplorable contradiction didn't leave the dynamic National Museum Volunteers unmoved. Thoroughly dedicated to assisting the National Museum of Bangkok in advancing the study and informed appreciation of the arts of Thailand, the organisation of approximately 350 members _ mostly foreigners _ took the matter in hand.

They came up with the idea of organising, together with Jim Thompson and the National Museum, a ``Cultural Fantasia" gala dinner in order to raise funds for the renovation of the textile gallery.

That is how the promising evening of Saturday, March 17 at the Grand Hyatt Erawan Hotel will take shape.

To be presided over by Her Royal Highness Princess Soamsawali, the event will include an exhibition entitled ``Bringing the National Museum Bangkok to You". There will also be a khon performance by the Fine Arts Department, a Hun Lakhon Lek show by Joe Louis Puppet Theatre, and a fashion show by Nagara for Jim Thompson, featuring textiles from HM the Queen's Support Foundation. Not forgetting of course, exquisite cuisine.

A silent auction of fashion by Jim Thompson and jewellery from Lotus Arts de Vivre will also be held during the course of the evening.

The proceeds of the entire event will thus go towards the renovation of the National Museum Textile Gallery.

Further planning concerning the renovation have already been done: the size of the exhibition space will be increased to 310 square metres.

The aesthetic value of the collection will be enhanced, the preservation and exhibition techniques improved together with the way the collection is presented to be more pleasing and didactic, with proper written explanations.

The cost of the renovation is estimated at around three million baht, according to the National Museum director, Somchai Na Nakhonphanom, who expects the renovation works to be completed by the early months of 2002.

``Cultural Fantasia will be the cultural night of the year, a night of art, elegance and beautiful fashion," declared Elisabeth Coley-Saner, chairperson of the National Museum Volunteers Special Projects. ``The National Museum Volunteers has been in existence since 1969, or over 31 years, and we are proud to kick off the new millennium with `Cultural Fantasia'.

``This is the first time we contacted companies to sponsor and the response to our appeal has been very good," Elisabeth said during a press conference at the National Museum, before listing the numerous founding sponsors: Jim Thompson, Gaysorn Group, Transpo International, BNP Paribas, and on.

Judging from the previous success of the group's Special Projects _ they have recently pledged the sum of 1.5 million baht to renovate the ceramics room of the National Museum _ one can rest assured that the target of collecting between one and two million baht will be met. Not to mention the assurance that this evening will indeed truly be a dazzling ``night of art, elegance and beautiful fashion".

* The Cultural Fantasia gala dinner, brought to you by the National Museum Volunteers, will be held at the Grand Hyatt Erawan Hotel on Saturday, March 17, at 6:30 pm. Tickets cost 2,500 baht for members and 2,800 baht for non-members. For more information, contact Elisabeth Coley on 254-5985 or Elke Franke on 712-8476.