

This hall was once used as a residence of the Prince Successor of King Rama III. Today it houses a collection of Theatre Arts including puppets and masks used in "Khon", classical dance-drama performances of the Ramakien, the Thai version of the Indian Ramayana tale of the triumph of good over evil. The masks are made of papier-mâché. Above the doors are shadow play figures made from water buffalo hide. In the cases under the window are games such as the Thai version chess, chequers, mah-jong and dominoes, the porcelain chips with Chinese characters were used in gambling houses in Bangkok.

Nang Yai, or great shadow play, is a dying classical Thai art. But hopefully not for good, for efforts are being made to revive this fantastic performing art form. A Nang Yai performance involves manipulating puppets made of cowhide in front of a backlit white screen with musical and narrative accompaniment. The performance is so beautiful that during the reign of King Rama II of the early Rattanakosin Period, it is said that the play shook the whole city. This prompted master craftsmen of the Royal Court to create a set of Nang Yai puppets which they called Phra Nakhon Wai, or Shaking the City. Made 180 years ago, the puppets were used for royal functions and special occasions.

Nang Yai performances were suspended in 1960 after a fire at the National Theater damaged some of the puppets. The great shadow play lost its popularity as time went by, and the remaining puppets were left unattended at Bangkok's National Museum.



Theatre Arts

To honor His Majesty King Bhumibol Adulyadej on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of his accession to the Throne in 1996, various government agencies and the private sector have joined forces in launching a project to restore the Phra Nakhon Wai set of Nang Yai puppets. A total of 28 master craftsmen and artists of the Fine Arts Department's Traditional Arts Division are participating in this restoration project. Before starting the restoration work, a ceremony was held to pay respect to teachers and worship deities in accordance with Brahman tradition. The ceremony was also meant to boost the morale of the Nang Yai artists and craftsmen.

Materials and tools used to create Nang Yai puppets include cowhide, rattan, chisels of different sizes, a whetstone, scissors, a hammer, a large wooden chopping block, wooden and stone mortars and pestles, fresh Momordica leaves, soot, pencils, various colors such as red, blue, green and white, Chinese ink, paintbrushes, glutinous rice flour, brushes, a napkin a bucket, molds, acetate plastic, and ink.

To create a Nang Yai puppet, acetate plastic is used to make a mold. The Nang Yai Conservation Project involves restoring 352 puppets and making another 100 to illustrate the war between Sattasul and Wirunchambang, adapted from an episode of the Ramakian, the Thai version of the Indian classic Ramayana. The project began in December 1994 and will continue until May 1996, in time for the Golden Jubilee celebrations which will run through December 1996. The Nang Yai Conservation Project will not only contribute to the revival and conservation of the Thai shadow play, but it will also promote craftsmanship in making the puppets needed for this ancient performing art. Both are Thai national heritage that must be passed on to the next generations.

Another Theater Arts displayed in the hall is **Khon**. In earlier times there were no theatres for public entertainment in Siam. Kings, princes, noblemen and high-ranking officials maintained their own troupes of classical dancers and musicians, many of them trained at the palace. Performances were given for occasions such as birthdays, important visitors, cremations, or simply the wish of the patron. Theatre programmes weren't necessary because almost all those who were invited to attend already knew the story always portions of the Ramakian. Ordinary people found their entertainment at temples, cremations or other special celebrations. As recently as 1935 there were troupes of court dancers. Many of the costumes, although very beautiful, are heavy and uncomfortable--especially the female head-dresses and the masks of the male characters. Since many roles of the Khon demand extremely boisterous performances, the costumes are often fitted and sewn on the dancer prior to the performance. The different positions demanded of each character must be posed while the fitting and sewing are being done. This not only assures the proper drapes and folds, but helps to avoid an embarrassing rip of a seam during the action. The most popular characters of males are Totsakan (the Demon King), Rama (the Righteous King), the Hanuman (the Monkey Warrior). Students are often selected to train for specific roles because of their size or build. The formalized movements of Khon performances make the acting and dancing inseparable. Each step has a meaning, emphasized by the appropriate music, narration and song. Each is practiced over and over again until it is mastered. Mom Rajawongse Kukrit Pramoj once called the Khon training "inhuman". In many of the dances, the head cover identifies the character being performed. The jeweled crown head-dresses (chada) that are worn are all much the same, but for the Khon, the mask is the character. Masks were not worn by Khon performers before the Ayutthaya period (1350-1767). Instead the faces of the characters were painted on the dancers. Mask making evolved from the wish to have a more permanent means of identifying the characters; one which would retain the basic characteristics and features, and be easily recognized. During the Ayutthaya period, Khon performances were held in palace halls or courtyards lighted by torches. Complete

performances of the Ramakian could continue for days. Often those who watched would leave for a while and then return to pick up the story, since it was already familiar to them. While each part of a Khon costume has its own significance, the mask is the single most important piece. Contrary to popular belief, masks for each character can vary from troupe to troupe yet all maintain the necessary identifying characteristics. Each mask maker has a certain artistic leeway in his interpretation, however there are certain fundamentals of the character masks which remain constant. Blunt, curved tusks on a demon mask signify old age; straight, blunt tusks that point upward indicate that even though he is a demon, he has mellowed and become kind-hearted in old age; curved, sharp tusks are those of a middle-aged demon and sharp pointed tusks which point downward are those of a youthful demon. There are other decorative details which are used in differentiating between the masks. Eyes of the demons are not the same as the eyes of other characters. Demon eyes are of two types--"crocodile eyes" with half eyelids, and bulging "fish eyes". Tusks were formerly made of ivory, but today it's both scarce and expensive so other materials are used in most cases. All Khon masks are revered and considered sacred. This is even more stringent for the Khon masks made especially for the Wai Kru ceremony. Their facial expressions are different from others, and some of these masks are entirely gilded. Many years ago, an artisan who was commissioned to make a Master mask was required to be dressed all in white on the day he began work, and the work was usually begun on a Thursday. When a Master mask was completed the mask maker prayed to the sacred spirits to enter the mask.

The last highlight of Theatre Arts is **The royal puppet** which also known as "The Great Puppet" or "Hun. Yai", was first called by national artist Montri in his book on Thai traditional entertainments in 1952. Historical and literary evidence, which dates to the late Ayutthaya period or the reign of King Narai (1656-1688), suggests that royal puppet represents the earliest type of puppet performance and had been continued until the reign of King Chulalongkorn or Rama V (1868-1910)

A great puppet is about 100 cm tall, adorned with costumes similar to those used in theater art performance and mask dance. It can be said that the royal puppet is an imitation of figures in the performing of theater art and mask dance. A puppet is made of hard, light wood and is consisted of different parts tied together by 16 strings.

To perform the show, there must be a number of puppeteers; each one of the puppeteers is responsible for a puppet. The puppeteer moves the strings to perform different actions of different body parts.

The royal puppet performance was in decline popularity during the reign of King Rama VII and eventually was out of sight after A.D. 1932. To date, there are only 6 puppets left on display in the Bangkok National Museum. They were in bad condition when found but later underwent careful restoration by Mr. Chakkrabhand Posayakrit, another well-known national artist.