

Introduction

Jim Thompson's life and growing legacy is of enduring interest to media professionals covering Asian culture and heritage, art, architecture, design, fashion, textiles, food and travel.

The following is a brief overview of this legacy, including Jim Thompson's biography, house, revival of Thai silk, and company. It also covers today's Jim Thompson products, shops and restaurants, as well as cultural activities by the James H. W. Thompson Foundation, Jim Thompson House Museum and Jim Thompson Art Center.

The founding of the company

Hand-woven Thai silk, with its superb colour and texture, captivated a New York architect named Jim Thompson soon after he first came to Bangkok in the 1940s. At that time, however, the local craft of silk weaving was in steep decline, threatened by machine-made fabrics and imported synthetics. Yet Thompson believed Thai silk would appeal to textile lovers in America and Europe, whose patronage could support weavers and farmers. By 1950, he had organized a network of artisans in one of Bangkok's last remaining communities of weavers, who lived in the neighborhood of Baan Krua, across the canal from the site where he established his now-famous antique house. The artisans continued to work from their homes, as before, but Thompson helped them upgrade their looms, techniques and designs so as to craft new fabrics that would dazzle the world. The Thai Silk Company was born.

Thompson used his mansion to showcase these quality silk designs to affluent international travelers, the emerging jet set. He ventured to New York and California, promoting it there. Thai silk soon won a devoted following among interior designers, couturiers and makers of costumes for stage and screen. By the 1960s, Thai silk had become a new design classic, creating a luxury craft industry that benefited thousands of families, just as he had hoped.

Jim Thompson himself

James H. W. Thompson was born in 1906 in Greenville, Delaware. He graduated from Princeton University in 1928, and later studied architecture at the University of Pennsylvania. During the 1930s, he worked as an architect in New York, until volunteering for service in the army in 1940. During World War II, he served as an intelligence officer in the Office of Strategic Services, which brought him to Thailand in 1945, just after V.J. Day. He soon fell in love with Thailand, its people and culture, so after his discharge from the military he returned. At first, he occupied himself in an effort to revive the famous Oriental Hotel. By 1946, he had already become interested in silk, which soon led to his collaboration with weavers in Bangkok.

Jim Thompson's Bangkok house

The lasting world renown of Jim Thompson's residence is a testament to the exceptional beauty of the traditional Siamese house, and Jim's belief in the importance of preserving this architecture, with its elegant lines, dynamic proportions and fine materials. This unique form of house stands two meters above the ground on solid timber posts, with inward-sloping walls that give it a trapezoidal shape, topped by a steep, concave roof. Such a design has the practical aim of keeping the house cool and dry in Thailand's often rainy, hot weather, but it shows characteristic Siamese flair; some observers say it resembles a sailing ship. Each cabin is assembled of panels of teak wood joined by expert traditional carpentry, without the use of nails.

In the 1950s, as more and more Thais abandoned this form of abode in favor of masonry structures, Thompson was able to buy several old ones from their owners, including one house that dated to the 18th century. The traditional Thai house is built of pre-assembled modules of wood, to allow rapid disassembly and relocation, so Thompson easily moved the buildings to his canal-side compound near Bangkok's Baan Krua silk weaving community.

Drawing upon his insights as an architect, he put up six cabins, joining them with covered walkways, surrounding them with gardens, and thereby creating a spectacular place to entertain guests and display his collection of Thai and Southeast Asian antiques and traditional art, including ceramics, sculpture, carved wood, paintings and Chinese furniture.

It was fortunate that Thompson enjoyed people, because the renown of both the house and Thai silk brought him many hundreds of visitors from around the world, including celebrated figures from the worlds of art, culture, show business, design and politics.

More information about the house is available on www.jimthompsonhouse.com.

Thompson's disappearance

By the mid-1960s, the acclaim of Thompson's silk initiative had, much as he had once hoped, led to a widespread revival of silk weaving in Thailand, supported by thousands of silk farming families, thousands of weavers, and more than a hundred silk shops in Bangkok. In 1967, the Thai Silk Company reached a new peak when Thompson designed and built a spacious new store at 9 Surawong Road in Bangkok, which remains the company's flagship retail venue today.

Shortly after that opening, Thompson traveled to vacation with friends in Malaysia's Cameron Highlands, where one afternoon he vanished without a trace. Thompson's mysterious disappearance made headlines around the world, and later inspired books, exhibitions, television programs and movies. But the mystery remains unsolved.

Thompson's silk venture carried on however, growing slowly but steadily over the decades while staying true to its founder's high standards and values.

The Jim Thompson House Museum

After Thompson's disappearance, his family, friends and colleagues eventually decided to preserve his house the way he had left it, opening it to visitors as a museum. Today it is one of Bangkok's most visited cultural sites, offering a unique opportunity to experience a traditional Thai house, collection of antiques, and one of the best residential gardens in Bangkok.

Visitors explore the house led by a guide. The guided tour lasts less than one hour. Before and after this tour, guests can stroll the lush gardens around the house, visit a free exhibition at the Jim Thompson Art Center (see below), enjoy café-style Thai and international dining indoors or outdoors at the Jim Thompson Restaurant, or visit the Jim Thompson store (see below) for gift shopping. Together, these attractions offer a uniquely pleasurable and relaxing way to spend a morning or afternoon.

Location: Opposite the National Stadium, off Rama I Road, on Soi Kasemsan 2 (The number of the *soi*, or lane, is pronounced 'song').

Getting there: Situated in the center of Bangkok, the Jim Thompson House is conveniently reached by car, taxi, tuk-tuk, or a short walk from the National Stadium station of the BTS Sky Train (Bangkok Transit System).

Nearby landmarks: the National Stadium, the Bangkok Art and Culture Center (BACC), in Thailand's leading shopping area, the Siam district.

Opening hours: 9:00 am to 6:00 pm every day. Last guided tour at 18:00.

Admission fee: Adult, 150 baht (about \$5). Student, 100 baht (about \$3)

Contact information:

Jim Thompson House Museum : 6 Soi Kasemsan 2, Rama 1 Road, Bangkok

Tel: (662) 216-7368 Fax: (662) 612-3744 www.jimthompsonhouse.com

The company today

Today, the Thai Silk Company carries on its founder's vision of quality, innovation and contribution to society, making acclaimed home fabrics, fashions and accessories. The firm grew from about 100 people in 1967 to more than 3,000 at present, with more than 30 shops in Thailand and abroad as well as several restaurants. As in Thompson's time, the company's executives, designers, staff and shareholders are almost all Thais.

Thai silk

Silk has ranked as the world's most prized textile fiber since it was first cultivated in China more than 5,000 years ago. Chinese silk propelled ancient trade extending as far as classical Egypt, Greece and Rome. Silk reached Thailand some 4,000 years ago, either through trade or local cultivation, according to archaeological evidence uncovered not far from Khorat province, where Jim Thompson's workshops operate today.

Silk's chief virtue is its lustrous color, unrivalled by other natural fibers. This vivid color is an optical effect produced by the prismatic structure of the silk thread itself. Silk's other qualities are its elegant drape, coolness and sheen. All this is a marvel of nature, produced by the silk moth caterpillar. This creature spends a month feeding on mulberry leaves, then spins a cocoon from a single, fine filament up to 900 meters long.

Thai silk is unique among fabrics and among other silks, with a handsome, natural texture and extraordinary colour. Transforming the Thai silk cocoon into this regal fabric is an artesian process that cannot be done by machine. Villagers grow and pick mulberry leaves, feed silkworms, harvest cocoons, spin the yarn, dye it and loom the fabric by hand. Women invest much time, patience and skill in this effort because silk is part of the rituals and meaning of their lives.

By enhancing such traditional methods, Jim Thompson has become the largest maker of hand-woven fabric today, with some 800 manual looms operated by skilled artisans. For decades, the Company has invested intensively in research and innovation to improve sericulture, spinning, dyeing, weaving, printing and design.

Jim Thompson fabrics

Jim Thompson is best known for its handwoven Thai silks, especially the beautifully textured ones using 6-ply threads. It also makes other naturals including linen, cotton, wool and nature-rich blends. Jim Thompson fabric designs include plains, sheers, woven and printed patterns, floral designs, elephant imagery of all sorts, superb plaids, stripes, filigrees, geometrics. Many reveal a sophisticated Oriental or influence, sometimes with a tropical touch.

Taking advantage of the virtues of silk, Jim Thompson fabrics often feature subtly unusual but appealing colours and colour combinations, a tradition begun by the founder himself in the 1950s. Even many plain fabrics seem to express intermediate hues that are rarely encountered in such variety elsewhere. This is because Jim Thompson produces so many of its fabrics from the very beginning, from growing mulberry and harvesting silk cocoons, to dyeing and hand-weaving.

Unlike textile houses that are limited to specific seasonal palettes provided by outside yarn suppliers, Jim Thompson can draw on infinite colours because it produces and dyes its own yarns and threads. Jim Thompson designers have the unusual freedom to create very precise colour effects and combinations. This is apparent when visiting a Jim Thompson shop, showing items in a rainbow of subtle hues.

Personal goods

From the beginning, the company has been known not only for superb textiles but also the clothes made from them. These include classic fashions available at the Jim Thompson shops as well as couture creations by leading designers.

Jim Thompson's offerings for women are highlighted by a wide variety of head scarves, neck scarves, shawls, ponchos and wraps made from Thai silk as well as other fine materials including cashmere and pashmina. In addition there are blouses, skirts, dresses and robes in silk, linen and cotton. Accessories include handbags, shoulder bags, purses and cosmetic cases.

In menswear, Jim Thompson is known for silk neckties, in a full spectrum of colours and printed and woven patterns, as well as summer shirts, polo shirts, bath robes and other goods in silk, linen and cotton.

The Jim Thompson shops also offer a selection of clothes for girls, boys and infants.

Home textiles and furnishings

Jim Thompson's acclaimed collections of home textiles enhance styles ranging from traditional to modern to contemporary. Designers choose Jim Thompson fabrics to bring the finishing touch of beauty to great interiors. Suitable for curtains, upholstery and soft furnishings, these fabrics are available to Jim Thompson's retail customers as well as professional clients.

The creators of Jim Thompson home fabrics include several of the world's leading textile designers, who are inspired by the company's unique heritage and unmatched production expertise. Jim Thompson collections have been created by such names as Ed Tuttle, Richard Smith, Campion Platt, Paul Bidault and Tony Duquette. Jim Thompson's own award-winning masters of design are Gerald Pierce and Tinnart Nisalak.

The Jim Thompson shops offer fabric by the yard as well as finished silk furnishings like cushion covers, table napkins, placemats and silk-chenille blankets.

Beyond fabrics, Jim Thompson also features several collections of furniture created by leading designers like Ed Tuttle.

Shops and showrooms

Jim Thompson clothes, fashion accessories, home fabrics and furnishings are offered through the company's more than 30 shops and interior design showrooms around the world, in Thailand, Singapore, Malaysia, China, the United States and Germany, listed below.

Whether fashions or home textiles, Jim Thompson products emphasize the beauty and comfort of very high quality fabrics, rather than one particular style. As a result, each shop has items to suit a variety of tastes, from classic to contemporary and from elegant to casual, in feminine, masculine and neutral flavors. This variety makes Jim Thompson stores appealing to gift shoppers.

Thailand

Bangkok

9 Surawong Road (*main store and interior design showroom*)

Siam Paragon Shopping Mall

Central World Shopping Mall

Jim Thompson House & Museum

The Emporium Shopping Mall

Isetan Department Store

Shangri-La Hotel Bangkok

Anantara Bangkok Riverside Resort and Spa The Oriental Hotel
Anantara Siam Hotel Marriott Resort & Spa
The Peninsula Hotel Suvarnabhumi Airport
Royal Orchid Sheraton Hotels & Towers DonMueangInternational Airport

Chiang Mai

Four Seasons Resort Chiangmai

Pattaya

Dusit Resort Royal Cliff Beach Resort

Phuket Island

Canal Village Laguna Le Meridien Phuket Beach Resort
Central Festival Phuket Shopping Center Turtle Village
Phuket Airport King Power Phuket Complex

Hua Hin

Sofitel Centara Grand Resort & Villas The Hilton Hua Hin Resort & Spa

Samui Island

Samui Airport Central Festival Samui Shopping
Center

Malaysia

The Pavilion shopping mall, Kuala Lumpur
Cameron Highlands Resort, Pahang
Shangri-La's Tanjung Aru Resort, Kota Kinabalu

Singapore

Orchard Towers (*office and interior design showroom*)
The Raffles Hotels and Resort
Takashimaya Department Store

Germany

Jim Thompson Europe, Munich (*Europe headquarters and interior design
showroom*)

United States

Jim Thompson U.S.A., Atlanta (*US headquarters and interior design showroom*)

France

Jim Thompson showroom, Saint-Germain-des-Prés, Paris

Jim Thompson restaurants

Jim Thompson was well known for his hospitality, hosting guests for dinner almost every evening at his home. Inspired by this legacy, The Thai Silk Company opened its first cafe in 1996 at the main Jim Thompson shop, at 9 Surawong Road. There are now more than half a dozen Jim Thompson restaurants, bars and cafes in Thailand, Singapore and Tokyo. The group's flagship is Jim Thompson: A Thai Restaurant, in Singapore's Dempsey Hill district. Situated in a heritage venue, it offers definitive Thai cuisine in an atmosphere both elegant and dramatic. The Miele Guide chose Jim Thompson as Singapore's best new restaurant in 2010.

Jim Thompson Farm and annual Farm Tour

When the company began setting up its own weaving workshops in Khorat province in the early 1980s, it also established its own large mulberry plantation there for the advancement of sericulture. Tapping local and international silk expertise, the company has long conducted research and development to create its own race of silkworm, in order to improve fabric quality and make silkworm-raising easier for farmers. At the farm, Jim Thompson produces silkworm eggs for free distribution to families throughout the many provinces of Thailand's northeast region, Isan. Families profit by selling silk cocoons to Jim Thompson.

By improving techniques to raise mulberry bushes, which are food for silkworms, the company was able to greatly raise the farm's efficiency and reduce the amount of land needed to support its sericultural efforts. As a result, it had an abundance of extra land that it has converted for use in farming a variety of crops, including ornamental palm trees, sunflowers, vegetables like pumpkins, and fruit.

Since most farms in Thailand are very small, usually specializing in a single crop like rice, the Jim Thompson farm offered visitors a chance to see a variety of unusual crops being grown in a beautiful setting near a small mountain. So in 2001 the company introduced its festive farm tours, offered each year from mid-December through early January, creating a day trip that has become popular with families from Bangkok and throughout Isan.

The tours provide a unique opportunity to observe the full life cycle of the silkworms and the silk farming process as part of the Isan way of life. Other highlights include vegetable plots and an ornamental plant nursery. The farm serves a variety of

authentic Isan foods, and sells plants, cut flowers, homemade snacks, fresh fruits and organically-grown vegetables.

For more information, please see www.jimthompsonfarm.com

Popularity of the farm tour led to the creation of a pair of on-site heritage villages, in Isan and Khorat styles. In consultation with experts, the company acquired a collection of antique timber houses in local styles, in order to help conserve this important regional architectural heritage. The village project also celebrates the Northeast's unique crafts and way of living. During the Farm Tour, the villages host traditional ceremonies, music and dance as well as demonstrations of crafts like silk spinning, silk weaving and rice milling.

Since 2009, the Farm Tour has also featured contemporary art by Thai artists, thanks to the Art on the Farm project organized by the Jim Thompson Art Center. Most of the works are site-specific presentations of art adapted to unusual venues at the farm such as the antique farm houses, disused textile workshop buildings, and out-of-doors.

Social purpose

Jim Thompson began collaborating with local silk weavers out of a sense of social purpose that continues to guide the company today. His primary intention was to help Thais gain good livelihoods from occupations rooted in their own culture and traditions. Today, the company's more than 3,000 employees enjoy pleasant working conditions, good pay and excellent benefits. Most of the firm's workshops are upcountry, supporting communities where jobs are needed, rather than in industrial districts near the capital. The company's system for buying silk cocoons directly from farmers at fair prices benefits thousands of families throughout the Isan region.

The company is committed to doing business with integrity and fairness towards shareholders, employees, business partners, suppliers and local communities. Likewise it is dedicated to serving customers with excellent products and services that meet or exceed expectations.

The company's philanthropy includes annual scholarships for children of workers. In addition to education, it provides various support for art and cultural heritage in Thailand. Beyond the company's own contributions, the James H. W. Thompson Foundation is one of Thailand's leading benefactors of the arts.

James H. W. Thompson Foundation

Jim Thompson's disappearance led eventually to the settling of his estate, in 1976, which resulted in the creation of the James H. W. Thompson Foundation, a non-

profit organization devoted to the preservation and development of art, culture and heritage in Thailand. It operates under the royal patronage of Her Royal Highness Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn.

Led by a board of experts, the Foundation oversees the operations and upkeep of the Jim Thompson House Museum, which is officially registered as a national museum.

In addition, the Foundation helps organize and/or fund a variety of activities and programs, including exhibitions, performances, publications, lectures, and research.

The Foundation has created and funded two new institutions: the Jim Thompson Art Center, and William Warren Library (see below). It is supported in part by entrance fees at the Museum.

The Jim Thompson Art Center

The mission of the Jim Thompson Art Center is to nurture artistic activities and create public awareness of both contemporary and traditional arts within today's context.

The Jim Thompson Art Center features a gallery, situated in the compound of the Jim Thompson House Museum, which presents rotating exhibitions of contemporary and traditional art, crafts and design, often featuring textiles.

Among highlights of more than 20 exhibitions since the gallery's launch in 2003 are:

- *Tied Together: Khmer Lao and Thai Mudmee Textiles*. Traditional textiles, in 2004.
- *temporary insanity*. Contemporary art by Thailand's Pinaree Sanpitak, in 2004.
- *Christian Lacroix Dialogues!* Haute couture and contemporary art, in 2005.
- *Tomyam pladip*. Japanese and Thai contemporary art, in 2008.
- *Songs of Memory: Traditional Music of the Golden Triangle*. Traditional music, instruments, and costume of mountain peoples in Southeast Asia, in 2009.

In conjunction with its exhibitions, the Center organizes and hosts parties, events, seminars, lectures and workshops, to serve as a place to mingle, interact and exchange dialogue. It conducts educational and outreach programs; produces publications; and networks and collaborates with local and international cultural institutions.

Beyond Bangkok, the Art Center organizes an annual art project upcountry, 'Art on the Farm,' which features installations of contemporary works by Thai artists at the Jim Thompson Farm in Khorat province (see above).

Other facilities at the Jim Thompson Art Center include the William Warren Library, two artists-in-residency rooms, the Office of the Thai Textiles Society, and workspace for Conservators Without Borders (Conservateurs sans frontières).

Hours: 9:00 am to 6:00 pm every day.

Admission fee: free

The William Warren Library

The William Warren Library is operated under the James H.W. Thompson Foundation. Its mission is to provide a study center for both Thai and foreign students and the general public. The library includes books, magazines, research materials and exhibitions catalogues. It hosts lectures, mini-exhibitions and workshops.

The library is named after William Warren, author of many books including *The Unsolved Mystery, the Biography of Jim Thompson*. Born in Georgia in the United States, Warren settled in Bangkok over 50 years ago. He served as lecturer at Chulalongkorn University for 30 years and has written numerous articles and books about art, culture, architecture, and landscape gardening in Thailand and Southeast Asia.

William Warren knew Jim Thompson personally and his writings are a key source of information about him. The James H.W. Thompson Foundation has named the library after William Warren in recognition of his efforts to document Thompson's life and accomplishments.

The Library's collection of books, magazines and DVDs are largely related to Jim Thompson and his interests. The collection covers such fields as textiles, architecture, visual art, culture, design, travel, antiques, painting, and sculpture. Some materials are for on-site reference only; most books are available for lending.

Hours: 9:00 am. - 5:00 pm., Tuesday through Saturday

Closed: Sunday, Monday and public holidays.

Membership: Registration requires an ID card and annual subscription fee of 500 baht.

Location: The William Warren Library, 4th Floor, Henry B. Thompson Building,
Soi Kasemsan 2, Rama 1 Road,
Wangmai, Pathumwan, Bangkok 10330

Contact: Tel: 02-612 6741 Fax: 02-219 2911 www.thejimthompsonartcenter.org

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