

attention. Mak's work not only challenges our current understanding but also encourages us to rethink the dialectic relationship between Christianity and China's nation-building. <[johnfeng@cuhk.edu.cn](mailto:johnfeng@cuhk.edu.cn)>

JOHN FENG  
Chinese University of Hong Kong, Shenzhen

THAI SILVER AND NIELLOWARE. By PAUL BROMBERG. pp.232. River Books, Bangkok, 2019.  
doi:[10.1017/S1356186319000245](https://doi.org/10.1017/S1356186319000245)

Technically sophisticated and rich with symbolism, the objects explored in *Thai Silver and Nielloware* consist mainly of luxury items made for the personal use of Thai royals, minor nobles, officials and wealthy merchants in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, during the Rattanakosin Kingdom (1782–1932). Unlike contemporaneous silverwares from neighbouring India, Burma, and the Malay Peninsula—which were widely exported and promoted by colonial authorities during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—relatively little is known about these objects outside of Thailand. Important reference works such as Sylvia Fraser-Lu's *Silverware of South East Asia* and Naengnoi Punjabhan's *Silverwares from Thailand* are now dated, and publications on Asian silver in general are far rarer than those about the fine arts, so *Thai Silver and Nielloware* has been eagerly awaited and will be enthusiastically received. The author is the editor of the *Journal of the Siam Society* and draws on his years of experience as a collector of Thai silver. It is, therefore, a book intended for both specialist collectors and a general audience, and loses and gains for accommodating each perspective.

Bromberg divides the book into eight chapters, organised thematically rather than chronologically, prefaced by an introduction in which he sensibly excludes silverwares made before the eighteenth century and the material culture of various culturally distinct 'hill tribes' from the scope of the book—both have received much attention in other publications. The first chapter opens with a general overview of the usage of silver, which historically has been worked in villages across Thailand, but primarily in the regional centres of Bangkok, Chiang Mai, and Nakhon Si Thammarat. Much attention is paid to the influence of immigrant craftsmen in the development of the silverworking industry, particularly from the mid-nineteenth century onwards, when an influx of Chinese craftsmen spread Chinese forms and designs throughout Thailand. A major theme throughout the book, the author sensitively deals with issues surrounding the 'Thai-ness' of objects produced within an environment of competing foreign influences and interests. A concise introduction to the major decorating techniques of repoussé, open-work, filigree, etc., is informative, but would perhaps have better served general readers with accompanying photos of the various processes.

More detail is dedicated to the production of niello, an enamel-like mixture that is applied to incised lines on a metal surface and fired to produce a glossy black appearance. Until recently a major industry in Thailand, the material receives its own chapter, in which Bromberg outlines the manufacturing process and examines the history of the technique, which was probably introduced to the southern port of Nakhon Si Thammarat via Portuguese or Indian traders in the sixteenth century. He explores several alternative theories regarding its arrival in Thailand, colourfully illustrated by extracts from the writings of foreign diplomats, each of whom had their own ideas about its origins. The chapter concludes with a personal account of visits to niello workshops in Nakhon Si Thammarat in 2014 and 2015, which

provide some social context for the continuation of traditional craft industries, and indeed, would have been a welcome addition to chapters on other forms.

Chapters 3 and 4 examine the multiplicity of styles and object types that typified Thai silver in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, within the context of a modernising society that was undergoing profound changes in technology, labour organisation and social and cultural institutions. Much of the focus is on utensils developed for specific Thai customs, such as tobacco smoking and betel chewing, the latter of which required the use of elaborate sets of chased bowls for areca nuts and spices, small pots for lime, angular holders for betel leaves, cutters, and more.

In Chapter 5, the author situates the use of silver within the royal court, centring on the output of highly organised palace workshops, which began to produce ceremonial and commemorative items during the nineteenth century—reviving a practice established during the preceding Ayutthaya Kingdom before its sacking by the Burmese in 1767. Displayed during rituals or presented as gifts to loyal subjects or foreign rulers, these objects were designed to impress through the use of material and iconography, and out of all the objects in the book demonstrate most effectively why this material is worthy of its own monograph. Chapter 6 takes the same approach with devotional items—mostly statues and amulets with images of the Buddha—which were donated to temples or displayed on family altars as acts of merit-making. Given the long history and prolific production of silver religious objects in Thailand this chapter is comparatively brief; perhaps understandable in light of the recent work undertaken in this area by scholars like Justin McDaniel and Peter Skilling.

Collectors and researchers will be most interested in the final two chapters, which include an illustrated compendium of marks found on the underside of silverwares and advice for collectors. The first of its kind, the compendium explains the complexities of the different marking conventions used in Thailand, which, in the absence of a formal assay and hallmarking system, were applied entirely at the discretion of individual silversmiths. The final chapter provides brief advice for collectors. Though largely common sense (“look at the quality of the workmanship of the piece”), it includes some helpful tips on how to judge the age of objects by their patina and the use of specific designs.

With access to a large assemblage of objects, Bromberg has produced a clear, accessibly written book that is rich in photographs and quotations from primary sources, and whose only major flaw is that the narrative is occasionally too concise. In order to cover such a large amount of material over several centuries, he at times emphasizes connoisseurship over historical analysis, but this is to be expected in a pioneering foray into a largely unstudied material. The chapter divisions are somewhat arbitrary, and information sometimes overlaps—many of the forms discussed in Chapter 3 (‘Forms and Functions’) and the religious iconography in Chapter 4 (‘Designs and Motifs’), would have fitted naturally with the objects described in subsequent chapters on ceremonial and devotional objects. Those interested in learning more about the illustrated objects will be disappointed that their collection sources are not identified. But these are minor concerns, and *Thai Silver and Nielloware* remains an extraordinary effort that will surely encourage others to delve further into the history of this material. <bchiesa@hku.hk>

BENJAMIN CHIESA

*The University Museum and Art Gallery of the University of Hong Kong*