



Léa Silk

Preserving an Ancient Art Form

By Matt Totsky
mtotsky@yahoo.com

Léa, like many before her, fell in love with Thai silk because of its innate quality and beauty. She began to think of ways to use the textile in her designs. By chance, she and her husband discovered Ban Reng Khai, a remote village in Northeastern Thailand that is a fertile ground both for silk and expert weaving.

Perhaps if she had disappeared in the jungles of Malaysia, Léa Laarakker-Dingjan might be as famous as another well-known Thai silk proprietor from the West. But in her own way, she has done much to keep the art of silk weaving in Thailand alive for generations to come.

Before settling permanently in Thailand, Léa was employed as a fabric designer in Germany, Italy, Switzerland and the Netherlands. While she worked primarily with laces and linens, Léa, like many before her, fell in love with Thai silk because of its innate quality and beauty. She began to think of ways to use the textile in her designs. By chance, she and her husband discovered Ban Reng Khai, a remote village in Northeastern Thailand that is a fertile ground both for silk and expert weaving.

"Back then, we had a foster daughter who was born in Ban Reng Khai," Léa explains. "My husband and I took her there to see her parents, and found this amazing village totally isolated from society, but rich in the silk-weaving tradition."

However, the village was not without its problems. A craft that had been passed down through generations was all but abandoned due to lack of direct markets to sell it and exploitation by unscrupulous buyers. Poverty had forced younger villagers to seek work as un-

skilled laborers elsewhere and those remaining in the village became dependent on funds sent by relatives who had departed. While finding most of the village's handlooms in disrepair, the uniqueness of the surviving silk fabric impressed Léa and, given her expertise in textiles and fabric design, she was quick to recognize its potential.

When she moved to Thailand two years later, Léa devoted herself to raising funds for the villagers to revive their craft in order to sell the silk in established markets throughout Thailand and abroad. Once this practical base for village income was secured, Léa then inaugurated a development program in

which proceeds from silk sales, combined with personal and donated funds, could be used for installing electricity, increasing the water supply, improving sanitation, advancing farming techniques and education.

As the program began to take hold, many who had been forced to leave Ban Reng Khai returned to their families and the work they loved. Léa began to conceive the idea of an organization capable of helping the village sustain this development, and soon thereafter, the Ban Reng Khai Foundation was established.

Her next step was to set up an outlet in Bangkok to sell the silk of Ban Reng Khai and act as a showcase for the fabric. After finding a location in The Promenade shopping area of





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the Nai Lert Park Hotel, she christened the store 'Léa Silk' and started to offer a wide variety of silk products including bed spreads, curtains, gift boxes, wine bottle covers, pillows, place mats, napkins, table cloths, re-upholstery for furniture, and wall hangings. And while all of these items are made from silk fabric woven in Ban Reng Khai, they also feature custom, hand-painted designs applied by Léa herself.

"Initially, I started painting the silk to do something different," she says. "I wanted to be the only place that offers 100% Thai silk that has been painted by hand."

The results are totally unique creations that appeal to a broad customer base. The King's sister has visited the village and Queen Beatrix of the Netherlands wears clothing made from Léa Silk.

"Our customers are 50% Thai and 50% expat," remarks Léa. "To me, the fact that half of them are Thai is an indication of the high quality of products that we offer. Because our silk is woven by hand and not by machine, it results in a softer fabric that can even be cleaned in a washing machine."

Aside from the talent of the weavers who create it, there are several other factors behind the high quality of Léa Silk. One such detail is the soil in Ban Reng Khai. While it may be too dry

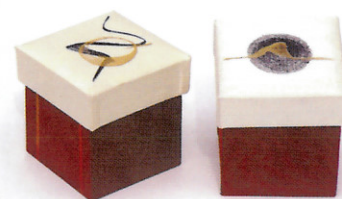
for most cash crops, it is excellent for growing mulberry trees, whose leaves provide the food source for the silk worms that spin the strong Sen-Hua and Sen-Lue thread that is essential to the silk's durability. This production is entirely natural with no toxic chemicals or industrial machines used in the process.

"We are constantly developing new weaving methods to keep up with the times," says Linda Belonje, the marketing manager for Léa Silk. "We aim to combine traditional weaving methods with contemporary designs and techniques."

One such technique developed by Léa is solar dyeing. This innovative method employs dye mixed with a fixative that reacts to the sun. It produces a dazzling rainbow effect when exposed to direct sunlight.

Essentially, Léa Silk is a non-profit enterprise, with a percentage of their proceeds used to cover operating expenses while the rest goes to the Ban Reng Khai Foundation.

"It's very important that people buy this silk because when they do, it helps preserve a dying art and enhances the lives of the people who create it," Léa says. "All proceeds go back to village, improving not only the quality of the weaving, but the community as well."



On Wednesday, August 22 from 18:30 to 21:00, Léa Silk will host an exciting event to promote the sale of silk for the Ban Reng Khai Foundation. "Unwrapped In Style" will feature a mix of stunning silk, beautiful models and a hint of lingerie to entertain the crowd at the Promenade at Nai Lert Park Hotel. The event will be complimented by special "Unwrapped" discounts at Léa Silk shop, and each person to spend over 5,000 Baht will receive a free Léa Silk gift. As always, all funds raised at "Unwrapped in Style" will go to the Ban Reng Khai Foundation.

**For more information, contact:
LÉA SILK
The Promenade, Nai Lert Park Hotel
2/4 Wireless Road, Lumpini,
Pathumwan
Tel/Fax; 02-252-0623
Email: info@lea-silk.com
www.lea-silk.com,
www.banrengkhai.com
Open Monday-Saturday 10.00-18.00**