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Thai artist sparks new life into common cloth wear often disregarded and its origin forgotten

KLOYKAMOL SIRIBHAKDI

Nothing could better represent Thai folk way of life than a piece of loincloth. With simple patterns and colours ranging in blue, red, green and white plaid, the loincloth or *pha khao mah* can be adapted to countless purposes. It can be a towel, a turban, a rope, a pillow (by rolling it firmly), a fan, a shoulder bag etc. The loincloth, however, has become an unfamiliar wear for Bangkokians. Recently, Jim Thompson launched a new *pha khao mah* collection to bring a fresh new approach to this accessory deep in tradition.

The whole collection is designed by Navin Production, an art production group led by Indian-Thai artist Navin Rawanchaikul and several other young designers.

"People often think *pha khao mah* is outmoded, but I find it's really relevant to Thai people," said the foreign artist, who has a deep interest in Thai folk culture.

To make it more accessible for urban people, the collection consists of polo shirts, hats, bags, slippers, sandals, picnic mats and bean bags. In 2006, Navin designed a limited edition of *pha khao mah* handbags to commemorate the centennial birth of Jim Thompson. He also created several art projects for the celebrations, including a cartoon series *Long Kroong*, in which Navin himself plots the imaginative return of Jim Thompson, after mysteriously disappearing in Malaysia some 40 years ago.

"Jim Thompson loved *pha khao mah*. It has its own charm," added Navin, who now is based in Chiang Mai.

Pha khao mah is defined as a rectangular strip of cloth in plaid or stripe prints. It is widely used in the rural areas of the Central and Northeast plains of Thailand, as it offers much versatility.

There are many theories on the origin of loincloths. The most popular theory is that the word *khao mah* is derived from the Persian word *kamar band*, which translates to "belt" or "waist strap". There is a mural portraying a man using a *pha khao mah*, which signifies that Thai people have been using this type of cloth for hundreds of years.

Revival of loincloths



Navin Rawanchaikul found Thai folk culture such as 'pha khao mah' or loincloth has universal meaning. KLOYKAMOL SIRIBHAKDI

BELOW
A contemporary interpretation and approach to 'pha khao mah' by Jim Thompson. Photos courtesy of JIM THOMPSON

Another theory claims that *khao mah* is derived from *khor khamur*, which means to apologise. This suggests that the cloths were used in ceremonies asking for forgiveness. Regardless of all the theories, the *pha khao mah* collection is in no way Navin's first introduction to this local wear.

In 1997, Navin and his team presented *pha khao mah* on a tour — an interactive art project — at the Museum of Contemporary Art, in Tokyo. Navin and his production crew marched around modern areas of the city in psychedelic costumes made from *pha khao mah*, and handed out thousands of loincloths to passers-by. The project also travelled to numerous major cities across the world.

"It's very amazing. The Japanese don't know anything about this kind of cloth, but embraced it! They seemed to understand the significance of it," he recalled.

Navin's work primarily focuses on

exploring identity and social issues. Thus, his travels to India, Korea, the US and several Asian countries was to find this quality to best represent his vision. He even went as far to form an imaginary political party called the Navin Party for Navins of the World. While in China, Navin handed out red books containing cartoon characters named Navin to the locals. Unfortunately, the Chinese police did not get the message and sent him to jail for one night.

Navin's style of work is unique and easy to distinguish. He loves working as a group and using various kinds of media, from installation art and films to mobile galleries, comics and fictional tales.

"I don't limit myself with only one kind of medium to express my ideas," he said.

Humour and playfulness are the essential ingredient in Navin's art projects, which obviously reaches out to people on a large scale who appreciate his work. In one project, Navin had his team paint the present image of Bangkok, but in traditional Thai mural-style — often found in temples — which had no specific perspective. The images included dirty streets, prostitutes, drunken men and religious rituals, which reveal the various facets of the city.

After more than 10 years of creating stimulating art, Navin recently launched Navin's Sala, the artist's oeuvre. The magazine-like art publication will be a great start in exploring the colourful world of Navin and his artistic vision.



The 'pha khao mah' collection available at Jim Thompson shops.

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