



## Siam

**Through the Lens of John Thomson 1865-66**

**Text by Paisarn Piemmettawat**

**Text by Joachim Bautz**

**Text by William Schuptbach**

**Text by Betty Yao**

**Text by M.R. Supbhawat Kasemsri**

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- The first time these Thai photographs have been collected together
- 150th anniversary of John Thomson's visit to Bangkok
- Fascinating new research into the sites, objects and personalities shown in the photographs
- Beautiful duotone reproductions

Legendary Scottish photographer and travel writer John Thomson (1837-1921) set off for the East in 1862 and over the next ten years undertook numerous journeys to various countries including Siam, Cambodia and China, becoming the first person to photograph Angkor Wat, Cambodia. The photographs from these journeys form one of the most extensive records of any region taken in the 19th century. The range, depth and aesthetic quality of John Thomson's photographic vision mark him out as one of the most important travel photographers.

At that time cameras were large and heavy. The photographic images were exposed onto a glass negative and this had to be done in complete darkness, on location, in a portable darkroom tent. Thomson travelled with a large number of cumbersome crates, glass negatives and highly flammable and poisonous chemicals. Given that his journeys took him through difficult terrain and insect-infested jungles, sometimes to regions where a white man had not been seen before, it is all the more remarkable that Thomson was able to make photographs of such beauty and sensitivity. During an era when his contemporaries took portraits in which their subjects looking stilted and wooden, Thomson managed to capture the individuality and humanity of the diverse people of Asia, whether royalty or street vendor.

In Siam, Thomson was able to photograph King Mongkut (Rama IV), his royal family and entourage. In Cambodia, Thomson was the first photographer to visit Angkor, to record what is now, one of the most important sites of ancient architecture in the world. These photographs form a unique archive of images documenting 19th century Asian landscapes, architecture, people and customs. The collection of over 600 glass plates traveled back with Thomson to Britain in 1872 and since 1921 has been housed and expertly preserved at the Wellcome Library, London.

The 150-year-old glass negatives are in excellent condition allowing the exhibition to showcase very large prints, some life-size. Altogether 43 photographs taken in Siam, six taken in Angkor and 15 from Southern China are displayed in this ground-breaking exhibition.