

# BANGKOK'S ITALIAN HERITAGE

Sailee Sarangdhar takes a look at the Italian lines of some of Bangkok's most important heritage buildings

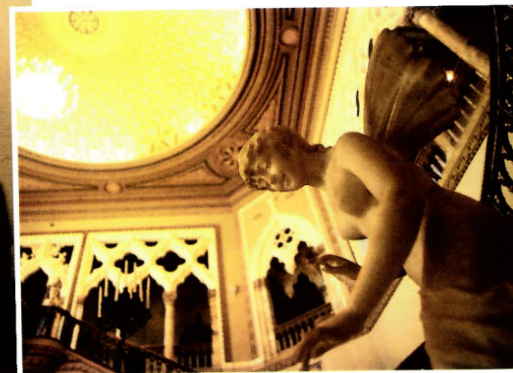
**I**TALIAN ARCHITECTURE IN BANGKOK. A slightly paradoxical statement to citizens of Bangkok perhaps, but of late I have been forced to change my perspective. The Italians apparently, have played a very great part in many of Thailand's historical and cultural landmarks. King Rama the VI was infatuated with the elegance of Europe and it was this desire to inculcate the same beauty and luxury into his own land that caused him to bring into employ western artists like Carlo Rigoli and architects like Annibale Rigotti in the early 1900s.

The Italian Embassy of Thailand had sometime ago organised a tour to highlight Italy's contribution to

Bangkok's skyline; buildings mostly designed by Italian artists during the reign of King Rama the VI. Of the lot four buildings are of great importance, each holding within itself the elements of years gone by and the splendour that the King hoped to incorporate into the Thai bureaucratic and cultural buildings of the time.

## THE MINISTRY OF ENERGY

This building was one that was quite difficult to read from the exterior. It definitely held a western touch, but nothing more could be guessed by merely looking at it. However, the reasons for visiting the ministry were the





three ceiling murals and one wall fresco painted by the renowned artist Carlo Rigoli. Rigoli was invited by HM Rama VI to bring with him the beauty he had seen while studying in Europe.

The first two ceiling murals were very similar as they both depicted scenes from the *Ramayana*. The first scene depicted Meghasa and Rama playing the game of lightning and thunder, while the second scene was of Jatayu, the eagle who warred for Rama. Here it was clear that in spite of the theme being Thai, the artist was unable to keep his own culture out of the murals. The body and features of the characters in the murals are distinctly

western. Their bodies are shown to be muscular and well-defined and the faces have long noses and large eyes.

Carlo Rigoli was well aware of how to balance his own cultural background with the work he was doing for the King. The work attested to how well Rigoli had managed to blend all the different elements that surround both what he was expected to do in terms Thai culture and also his own heritage.

The third was a wall mural which once again had a Thai theme and featured a female figure placed at exactly the middle of the mural, two male figures stood above her and a somewhat disengaged deer was also a part of the fresco. This mural was different from the other two in the sense that the colours used were not bright and the effect was shadowy to compliment the forest setting. Another feature was the abundance of flowers. I was told that this particular style of painting was highly influenced by the Baroque, and Rafaeli periods and the flowers are significant because they illustrate that Carlo Rigoli, who lived from 1883 to 1962 was heavily influenced by a blend of periods that he witnessed during his lifetime.

The final work was unlike any of the ones previously seen. This painting was clearly allowed to Rigoli by the King as a consolation prize, it was Rigoli's chance to leave his mark. It featured several cherubs playing about in the air. The theme was clearly European and the colours used were blues and lavenders which were very unlike those used in previously viewed paintings. It seemed as though the artist had decided to depict the most glorious period of art in Europe through this particular work; it was clearly Renaissance.

#### THE THAI GOVERNMENT HOUSE

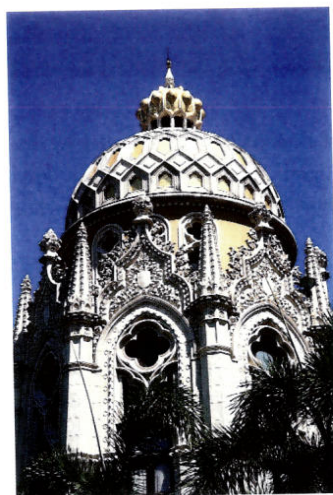
This structure is easily one of the most beautiful buildings in Thailand and every element of it speaks of royalty, beauty and splendour. Currently used as a meeting place for dignitaries, it is adorned with presents brought to



**WAT RACHATIWADWIHAN**

This externally traditional Thai temple was the only place where I figured a European influence would not easily go unnoticed, but yet again, Rigoli managed to sneak up where least expected through his usual medium of murals. The temple's main idol of a gold Buddha was surrounded on four sides by another Carlo Rigoli mural. The scene was from the story of *Vessandara Jataka* and yet again Rigoli gave the characters western features and bodies. One of the scenes depicts soldiers who appear peculiar because of their serene faces. This showed that although Rigoli understood the Thai mindset, he still went with his natural inclination which was to create characters with no cruelty on their faces and thus gave away his own origins. These murals were heavily influenced by the Baroque style of painting.

Thailand from far away lands. As the building is not open for public viewing, we were only permitted to view the entrance hall. From the outside the structure looked as if it were some kind of castle in Europe but nothing could have prepared me for the grandeur inside. The use of materials from Italy gave the feeling of being suddenly transported to a completely different place. Once again, it was Carlo Rigoli who caused Victorian, Roman Gothic, Greek, Arabic and Oriental styles to all merge together in the entrance hall to create a new style altogether, one where the whole is somehow greater and more exquisite than its parts. The building's purpose is clearly to impress diplomats arriving from other nations. It was the wish of King Rama VI that Thailand be considered a land that was civilized and beautiful enough to be recognized by those who visited it.



### SIAM COMMERCIAL BANK

This river-side branch of Siam Commercial Bank was designed and built by Annibale Rigotti on request of Siam Bank back in 1908, construction ended 1910. The building cost only Bt 300,000 at the time. The exterior is modern and says nothing of its age or Thai heritage for it appears blatantly European. An interesting fact about the building is that although it has been right next to the Chao Phraya for nearly 100 years, it has till today never been flooded unlike the other buildings in its surroundings.



What made the building different from the others we viewed was that it gave one a perspective of Italian architecture that was modern and functional as opposed to artistic. The first floor of the building was clearly a workplace for tellers and managers. The original flooring and light fixtures appeared old and yet were distinctly western. A narrow, wooden staircase led downstairs



to what must have been the bank's vaults while it was still in use. The second floor of the bank was used to host parties and functions for the officials and employees of the bank. When we saw it, it was clear as to why. The open windows let in the river breeze and the ambience of the chamber was very pleasant. There were also many objects from the yesteryears on show to attest to the age of the bank.



Seeing these buildings in Bangkok made me realize that although I call this place home, there are still many facets of it that I have not yet seen. It's strange

how when you claim to know a place inside out, it can still sneak up and surprise you. From now on wherever I go, I'll be looking for Italian twists in Bangkok. [w](#)

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