

The Royal Barge *Suphannahong*



The Royal Barge *Suphannahong* is known worldwide as a masterpiece of Thai cultural heritage, having taken centre place in the Royal Barge Procession since the Ayutthaya Period. The barge is made from a single teak trunk, with the surface patterned through wood carving, covered in lacquer painting technique, inlaid with glass mosaic and gilded all over. This splendid

decoration is enhanced by the prow in the shape of a swan neck and head, known in Thai as *hansa*, which in itself is a magnificent sculpture that seems to take wings and fly up into the sky in dignified motion.

Built during the Ayutthaya Period, it was originally known as the Royal Barge *Suphannahong*, later renamed the Royal Barge *Chai Suphannahong* and eventually the Royal Barge



Si Suphannahong. During the Rattanakosin Period, King Buddha Yot Fa Chulalok the Great, Rama I of the reigning House of Chakri, after his accession to the throne in 1782, had a new Royal Barge built and named the Royal Barge *Si Suphannahong*. She was in constant use as the principal royal barge until she was laid up in 1911.

In the reign of Rama VI, Major General Phraya Rajasongkhram (Kon Hongsakul) was appointed architect in charge of building the new Royal Barge *Suphannahong*, to

be similar to the old Royal Barge *Si Suphannahong* of the reign of Rama I. The new royal barge, named *Suphannahong*, is 156 tons in weight, 44.90 metres in length, 3.15 metres at the beam and 90 metres in



depth, with a draught of 0.41 metre. Her full complement consists of 50 oarsmen, two steersmen and two officers fore and aft. It is said that the master craftsman threw away all his tools upon completion of the construction of the barge, vowing never to do such work again. The new Royal Barge *Suphannahong* was launched on 13 November 1911 and has been used ever since. The barge is well-maintained and kept in good operational condition by the Fine Arts Department and the Royal Thai Navy.

During the present reign, the barge *Suphannahong* is commissioned as the Royal Barge for His Majesty the King in the Royal Barge Procession on the occasion of presenting robes to Buddhist monks (Royal *Kathin* Ceremony) at Wat Arun Ratachawaram (also known as the Temple of Dawn) and for other eminent royal ceremonies such as the Royal Ceremony in Celebration of the Bangkok Bicentennial in the year 1982.

A spire-shaped edifice or a tier-roofed pavilion sheltering the throne of the King is carried mid-ship. The oarsmen's gilded paddles in rowing motion represent the sedate movement

of a swan's wings, seemingly flying up to the sky. This stylized movement can be changed, by royal permission, to other patterns.

The Royal Barge *Suphannahong* has become an outstanding symbol of the Thai cultural heritage. This supreme specimen of Thai traditional boat building is being deployed in principal royal ceremonies and, thus, preserves and sustains ancient Thai culture.

Her graceful and dignified features continue to display the most ingenious creation and decoration by the spectacular Thai traditional craftsmanship as well as the magnificent identity of the Thai nation.

In 1992, The World Ship Trust Maritime Heritage Award "Suphan-

nahong Royal Barge" of The World Ship Trust, under the patronage of H.R.H. Prince Philip, the Duke of Edinburgh, was bestowed upon this barge "owing to her beauty and superb craftsmanship" as highlighted in the personal, congratulatory message of H.R.H. Prince Philip in having this award presented on 4 June 1992, to H. M. the King who graciously had the award passed on to the Fine Arts Department.

The Royal Barge *Suphannahong* is the most intriguing of the symbols of Thai national identity, recognized worldwide as the embodiment of Thai culture. She is safely dry-docked in the Royal Barge National Museum alongside the Bangkok Noi Canal.

