

Khun Mote, the First Thai Photographer: A Glimpse of his Early Work on Paper

Joachim K. Bautze

Independent scholar, Berlin, Germany

ABSTRACT: Two numbered sets of photographs taken by Khun Mote Amatayakul in 1862–63, comprising at least 125 images, survive in private collections. This article presents listings of Khun Mote's English captions for the images.

Khun Mote, also known as Phra Wisut Yotamad and Mode Amatayakul (1819–1896), is generally acknowledged as the first Thai photographer. No other photographer in Siam active between 1862 and 1863 left such a comprehensive body of work. Based on prints in the respective collections of Serge Kakou in Paris, and Mr. and Mrs. Lee Kip Lee and Philippe Damas, both in Singapore, which I have personally examined, I estimate he produced at least 125 numbered images in two sets, as well as an unknown number of individual images, including portraits.

While the most comprehensive account, to date, on Khun Mote's life was published in Thai by Anake Nawigamune¹ in 2005, this brief article tries to shed some light on his early photographic works on paper produced between 1862 and 1863 based on his own work with English captions.

Mote Amatayakul was born in 1819 into a prominent Thai-Chinese family with strong royal connections. American missionaries knew of Khun Mote from 1849, when he became acquainted with John Hasset Chandler (1813–1891), who worked in Siam as a mechanic, inventor, engineer, designer, engraver, punch-cutter, type-founder, printer and bookbinder,² as well as being appointed Acting Vice Consul in Charge by the US government on 25 January 1859.³ According to the *Siam Repository*, Khun Mote “soon distinguished himself among his own people as a machinist, engineer and chemist. He

¹ Nawigamune, Anake aka Nāwikkamūn, Anēk: *Prawat kānthairūp yuk rāk khōong Thai*. Krung Thēp: Sarakhadī Phāp, 2548 [2005 C.E.]. (History of Early Photography in Thailand), pp. 678–703. I am grateful to Chris Baker for translating into English the main facts of this valuable chapter.

² For his activities in Siam, see Chandler, George (comp.): *The Descendants of William and Annis Chandler who settled in Roxbury, Mass 1637*. Worcester, Mass.: Printed for the Family, Press of Charles Hamilton, 1888. pp. 942–943.

³ *Bangkok Calendar: For the Year of Our Lord 1861. Corresponding to the Siamese Civil Era 1222-3. And Nearly so to the Chinese Cycle Era 4498. Being the 58th Year of the 75th Chinese Cycle of 60. The Chinese New Year commences on the Tenth of February; The Siamese New Year on the Twelfth of March. The Mohammedan New Year 1278, on the Ninth of July*. Compiled by D[aniel] B[each] B[radley]. Bangkok: Printed at the Press of the American Missionary Association, 1861, p. 37.

was the first native who attempted to multiply Siamese books with the aid of metallic types and the printing press.”⁴

Under King Mongkut (r. 1851-1868), Khun Mote was promoted to the rank and title of “Phra Wisute Yothamat” and became a Government Engineer. In 1868, King Chulalongkorn (r. 1868-1910) gave him the title of “Phraya Krasaponkitkoson” (often shortened to Phya Krasab), and put him in charge of the Royal Mint, the naval metalworks, and the government gasworks. He later became a member of the King’s Privy Council.

On 2 February 1866, according to the *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*:

Mr. Dubois exhibited to the Society some specimens of photography, which are chiefly remarkable as being the work of a Siamese artist, *Pra Wisut Yotamad*, a nobleman of high rank, and master of the Royal Mint at Bangkok. He understands no language but that of Siam, and learned the art at home. He has, however, an unusual aptitude for the higher class of mechanical arts, and for experiments in natural philosophy.⁵

Mr. (Patterson?) Dubois was obviously not well informed about Khun Mote’s language skills, as he studied English with the American missionary, Jesse Caswell,⁶ and came under the influence of the American missionaries. However, this is one of the earliest published non-Siamese sources about Khun Mote’s activities as a photographer. His portrait, in an engraving based on a photograph, first appeared in the travel memoir of Henri Mouhot, published in 1863 and 1864 in French and English respectively.⁷

Khun Mote appears in more recent Thai publications on photography in 19th-century Siam. Two photographs in particular are usually ascribed to him (Figures 1, 2). However, the reproductions of these two photographs omit the lower part with the Thai numerals

⁴ *The Siam Repository, containing a Summary of Asiatic Intelligence* by Samuel J. Smith. Volume 5. Bangkok: Printed at S.J. Smith’s Office, 1873, p. 451.

⁵ Stated Meeting, 2 February 1866. In: *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, Vol. 10, No. 75 (Jan. 1866), pp.198-201, p. 201.

⁶ McFarland, George Bradley (ed.): *Historical Sketch of the Protestant Missions in Siam 1828-1928*. (Bangkok:) Printed by the Bangkok Times Press, 1928 [reprint: White Lotus Co. Ltd., 1999], p. 63. *Bangkok Calendar. For the Year of Our Lord 1862. Corresponding to the Siamese Civil Era 1223-4. And Nearly so to the Chinese Cycle Era 4499. Being the 59th Year of the 75th Chinese Cycle of 60. The Chinese New Year commences on the Thirtieth of January; The Siamese New Year on the Thirty-First of March*. Compiled by D[aniel] B[each] B[radley]. Bangkok: Printed at the Press of the American Missionary Association, 1862, p. 112.

⁷ Mouhot, Henri: *Voyage dans les Royaumes de Siam, de Cambodge, de Laos et autres Parties Centrales de l’Indo-Chine. 1858-1861. - Texte et Dessins inédits*. In: *Le Tour du Monde. Nouveau Journal des Voyages. Publié sous la Direction de M. Édouard Charton et illustré par nos plus célèbres Artistes*. Deuxième Semestre. Paris: Librairie de L. Hachette et Cie, 1863, pp. 219-352, p. 316: “Kun Mote, noble et savant siamois. Dessin de H. Rousseau d’après une photographie.” Mouhot, Henri: *Travels in the Central Parts of Indo-Chine (Siam), Cambodia and Laos, during the Years 1858, 1859 and 1860. In Two Volumes. - Vol. II. With Illustrations*. London: John Murray, 1864, p.74: “Kun Motte, a Siamese Noble and Savant.”

and English title.⁸ Less often reproduced is Figure 3,⁹ which invites comparison with Figure 4 photographed by Pierre Rossier.¹⁰ All four of these photographs show the Phra Meru or Pramane erected for the cremation of King Mongkut's second queen consort, Queen Debsirindra (1834-1861), mother of the future King Chulalongkorn. Although all four illustrations were taken in April 1862, there are obvious differences in the quality of the image between Figures 1-3 and Rossier's Figure 4. The first three have less contrast, less detail, and some vignetting in the corners, while the fourth is rich in contrast and in detail, and shows no vignetting at all.

Sir Robert Herrmann Schomburgk (1804-1865),¹¹ the British consul-general in Siam, referred to the poor image quality in a letter sent from Bangkok on 10 June 1862 to Andreas Fedor Jagor (1816-1900),¹² and reveals who apparently taught Khun Mote the art of photography:

Herr Rosier der Photographer ist nach Bangkok zurück gekommen, und hat sein Atelier wieder aufgestellt - unterdesen hat er aber einen großen Nebenbuhler in einem Siamesen Koon Mot, der, wie ich glaube Unterricht bei ihm genommen und die Sachen wohlfeiler obgleich nicht so gut ausführt.

[Mr. Rosier [Pierre Joseph Rossier, 1829-1886] the photographer returned to Bangkok and re-established his studio — but in the meantime he has acquired a serious rival in a Siamese Koon Mot, who, I believe, received instructions from him [Rossier]. He [Khun Mote] produces things more cheaply but not as good.]¹³

In 1865, Patterson Dubois also noted the comparatively poor quality of Khun Mote's prints:

Having also some aid from an artist, travelling with the Prussian Embassy, he succeeded in making some pretty fair pictures. As mere specimens of photography they are, as we would naturally suppose, quite inferior to our own. They are, nevertheless, interesting to us, as showing the Siamese architecture, scenery and

⁸ Pongrapeeporn, Pipat aka Phongraphīphiphōn, Phiphat: *Phāpmumkwāng khōng Krung Thēp Phra Mahā Nakhōn nai samai Ratchakan thi 4: kankonhop mai*. Krung Thēp: Mūrang Bōrān, 2544 [2001]. *Panorama of Bangkok in the reign of King Rama IV: a new discovery*, p. 58 & p. 59; Nawigamune, Anake aka Nāwikkamūn, Anēk (see Footnote 1), p. 695 & p. 697; *Khana Kammakān 'Amnūaikān Čhat Ngān Chaloem Phrakāt Phrabāt Somdet Phračhomklao Čhaoyūhūa*; Krung Thep: Krom Sinlapākōn, 2548 (National Government Publication, 2005 C.E.), p. 113, bottom.

⁹ For which see: *Khana Kammakān 'Amnūaikān Čhat Ngān Chaloem Phrakāt Phrabāt Somdet Phračhomklao Čhaoyūhūa*; Krung Thep: Krom Sinlapākōn, 2548, p. 111, top.

¹⁰ Reproduced: Bautze, Joachim K[arl]: *Unseen Siam. Early Photography 1860-1910*. Bangkok: River Books, 2016, p. 66, Plate 21.

¹¹ Appointed 1858, cf. *Bangkok Calendar 1861* (note 3 *supra*), p. 38.

¹² Bautze 2016 (note 10, *supra*), pp. 26-43.

¹³ Letter in F. Jagor's estate, part of which is kept in the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Ethnologisches Museum, Sammlung: Ethnologisches Museum | Süd- und Südostasien.



Figure 1: Wor Edifice in which the Burning of the Remains of the late Queen-Consort of Siam took place. View taken in the court of the Quadrangle.



Figure 2: Wor Edifice constructed for celebrating the Obsequies of the late Queen-Consort of Siam. Side View.



Figure 3: The Edifice in which the Remains of the late Queen Consort of Siam were burned.



Figure 4: The Phra Meru or Premane of queen Debsirindra as photographed by Pierre Rossier.

domestic habits, as well as the native talent, which might otherwise have been undeveloped and dormant.¹⁴

Dubois probably confused the “Prussian Embassy,” which was established only in January 1862, with the Prussian Eulenburg expedition, which visited Bangkok from mid-December 1861 to February 1862, but his remark on the “Siamese architecture, scenery and domestic habits” suggests that he had seen some of the photographs ascribed to Khun Mote.

Khun Mote’s work

There are two sets of Khun Mote’s photographs bearing Thai numerals and English language titles. The first set, with 100 numbered images, has illustrations of monuments and sites in Bangkok as well as studio photography portraying Thai habits and customs. The titles given here follow these captions below the photographs as much as possible, including the partly inconsistent punctuation, capitalization and misspellings.

- ๑ View in Wat Pò, Bangkok. Temple of the great reclining Buddh.
- ๒ View in Temple grounds of Wat Pò, Bangkok.
- ๓ View in Wat Pò, Bangkok.
- ๔ View in Temple grounds of Wat Pò Bangkok.
- ๕ View in Temple grounds of Wat Pò Bangkok.
- ๖ View in Temple grounds of Wat Pò Bangkok.
- ๗ View in Temple grounds of Wat Pò Bangkok.
- ๘ View in Temple grounds of Wat Pò Bangkok. The Bell Tower.
- ๙ View in the Temple Court of Wat Pò Bangkok. Pagodas &c.
- ๑๐ View in Temple grounds of Wat Pò, Bangkok. The Library.
- ๑๑ View in Temple grounds of Wat Pò Bangkok. The Garden.
- ๑๒ Wat Chèng, a Buddhist Temple & Monastery, Bangkok as seen from the River.
- ๑๓ The grand Pagoda or Spire of Wat Chèng, Bangkok. 200 ft high.
- ๑๔ View in the Temple grounds of Wat Chèng, Bangkok. The boat landing.
- ๑๕ View of Wat Chèng Bangkok. S. Side of the Grand Pagoda.
- ๑๖ View in Wat Chèng temple grounds, Bangkok.
- ๑๗ View in Wat Chèng, Bangkok. One of the Four lesser Pagodas.
- ๑๘ View in Wat Chèng Bangkok. Entrance to the Chief Temple.
- ๑๙ View in Wat Chèng Bangkok. Demons guarding entrance to Temple.
- ๒๐ View in Temple grounds of Wat Chèng
- ๒๑ The Grand Pagoda in Somdetch Ong Noi’s Wat Bangkok Siam
- ๒๒ View of Temples &c. in Wat Kanlaya-namit. Bangkok.
- ๒๓ Wat Kanlaya-namit, Bangkok. The bòt or most sacred temple.
- ๒๔ View in the temple-grounds of Wāt Kanlaya Bangkok

¹⁴ Dubois, Patterson: Photography in Siam. In: *The Philadelphia Photographer. An Illustrated Monthly Journal, Devoted to Photography*. Philadelphia, Pa: Beneman & Wilson, September 1865, p. 151.



Figure 5: ๕๙ Store-houses &c. at mouth of the New Canal Bangkok.

๕๙ View in the temple-grounds of Wat Kanlaya Bangkok. The boat-landing.

๕๖ View in Wat Kanlaya-namit, Bangkok. Stone Temple.

๕๗ View in Wat Kanlaya-namit, Bangkok. The largest Temple containing a colossal image of Buddha.

๕๘ View in the temple of Wat Kanlaya-namit, Bangkok.

๕๙ Entrance to the chief Temple of Wat Kanlaya-namit, Bangkok.

๖๐ View in Wat Kanlaya-namit Bangkok The Pagoda

๖๑ Temple grounds of Wat Kanlaya-namit Bangkok. A Gateway.

๖๒ The ruined Pagoda of Wat Saket, Bangkok.

๖๓ The Priest's Houses at Wat Saket, Bangkok.

๖๔ View in Wat Saket, a Buddhist Monastery, Bangkok. Priest's houses.

๖๕ View in Temple Grounds of Wat Saket, Bangkok. Burning-Place for the Nobility.

๖๖ View in Temple Grounds of Wat Saket, Bangkok. The Potter's Field.

๖๗ View in Wat Samplum Bangkok. The Dwellings of the Priests.

๖๘ View in Wat Samplum Bangkok. The Grand Pagoda.

๖๙ Wat Liap, a Buddhist Temple Bangkok, as seen from the street.

๗๐ View in Wat Liap Temple Grounds, Bangkok

๗๑ Wat Liap Temple Grounds, Bangkok

๗๒ View in Temple grounds of Wat Liap, Bangkok

๗๓ Wat Liap, Bangkok. The Image House

๗๔ Wat Liap, Bangkok. The Grand Pagoda.



Figure 6: En Priests' Residences at the Wat Saket Monastery or Temple Bangkok.

- ๔ Residence of a Siamese Nobleman.
- ๕ View in court of a Siamese Nobleman's Residence.
- ๖ Dwelling-house of a Siamese Gentleman.
- ๗ Siamese Boats & Floating House (back view).
- ๘ The British Consulate, Bangkok, Siam.
- ๙ The Brick Chinese Junk in the Temple grounds of Wat Kôkwai, Bangkok, Siam
- ๑๐ The Audience-Hall of a Siamese Prince.
- ๑๑ View in the Temple Grounds of Wat Samplüm, Bangkok.
- ๑๒ Store houses &c. at mouth of the New Canal Bangkok
- ๑๓ View in the grounds of the Protestant Cemetery, Bangkok
- ๑๔ An inside view of the City Wall, Bangkok.
- ๑๕ A Tower on the City Wall. Mouth of Tappan-han Canal, Bangkok.
- ๑๖ A Bangkok Street View. Earthen Water Jar Emporium.
- ๑๗ View in Bangkok. Shops at mouth of Ong Ang canal
- ๑๘ Royal Palace, Bangkok. The Grand State Audience-hall.
- ๑๙ View in court of King's Palace. Bangkok
- ๒๐ Court of the Royal Palace, Bangkok. The Aviary.
- ๒๑ View in court of Royal Palace, Bangkok. The Aviary. Roof of the old Audience-hall.
- ๒๒ Royal Palace Bangkok. The New Audience-Hall
- ๒๓ Pavilion of the King of Siam, during the Funeral Ceremonies of the late Queen-Consort
- ๒๔ Edifice in which the Remains of the late Queen Consort of Siam were burned.



Figure 7: 86 View in the grounds of the Protestant Cemetery, Bangkok.

- 86 Edifice constructed for celebrating the Obsequies of the late Queen-Consort of Siam. Side View.
- 87 Edifice in which the Burning of the Remains of the late Queen-Consort of Siam took place. View taken in the court of the Quadrangle.
- 88 Funeral of the Queen Consort of Siam. Stands for fire-work. Poles for rope dancers, Booths &c.
- 89 Stand from which Silver coin concealed in limes, was thrown to be scrambled for by the crowd, at the Funeral of the late Queen Consort of Siam.
- 90 Image of the Reclining Buddha Wat Po, Bangkok.
- [71 neither number nor text. Portrait of a gentleman seated on a chair.]
- 92 Royal State Barge 123 ft. in length, in which the King of Siam makes his annual visits to the Temples.
- 93 [untitled. Portrait of a lady seated on a chair]
- 94 Siamese Lady bathing. Two female servants assisting
- 95 Women playing Musical Instruments. Siamese female Band.
- 96 Siamese women, embroidering
- 97 Performer on the Laos organ, Dancer & Singer.
- 98 Siamese Lady having her hair cut. A servant cleaning the comb; one fanning.
- 99 Twisting into a top-knot, the hair of a Siamese gentleman's son
- 100 Siamese Goldsmiths.
- 101 Siamese family preparing their meal.

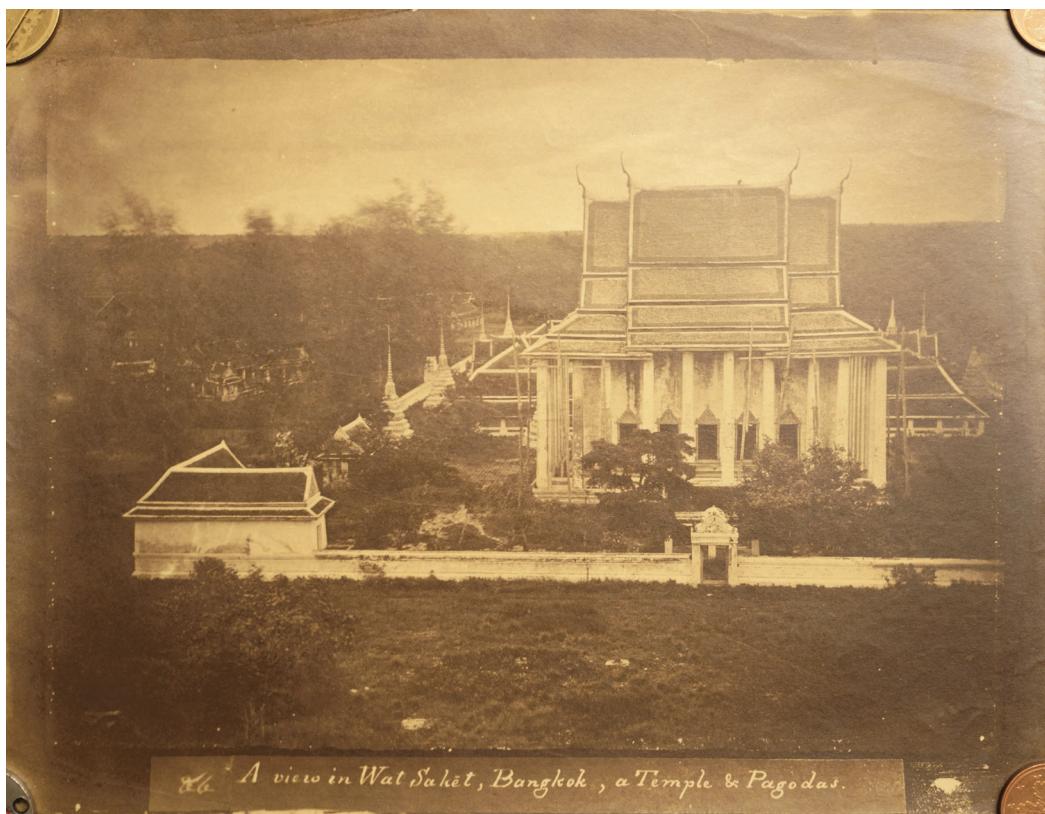


Figure 8: A view in Wat Saket, Bangkok, a Temple & Pagodas.

- ๙๙ A Siamese Band of Music.
- ๙๙ Siamese Nobleman eating, the wife serving, servants fanning & serving.
- ๙๙ Siamese Nobleman smoking & dictating to a Writer
- ๙๙ Siamese Pugilists
- ๙๙ Siamese cleaning rice
- ๙๙ Siamese gamblers
- ๙๙ A Siamese Nobleman & his train.
- ๙๙ Siamese gambling
- ๙๙ Woman (Siamese) spinning.
- ๙๙ A Seller and Purchaser. Siamese carrying water & waterjar.
- ๙๙ Siamese Mother's month of confinement. Husband tending the fire. Grandmother bathing the babe.
- ๙๙ A Siamese Sport.
- ๙๙ Siamese Nobleman shampooed & fanned by his Wives.
- ๙๙ A Siamese Cotton-gin Preparing cotton
- ๙๙ Siamese Nobleman in his sedan
- ๙๙ Siamese Play-Actors
- ๙๙ Fencing. The long pole exercise in Siam
- ๙๙ A Siamese Preacher, his hearers & his fee.
- ๑๐๐ Gambling in Siam



Figure 9: ๖๐ View in court of King's Palace. Bangkok.

The second set consists of fifteen numbered images of gods, deities and divinities as well as ten numbered images of drama (*lakhon*) actors:

- ๖ P'ra Atit, riding a Traison, holding a serpent-shaped bow. A Brahmanical divinity (the Sun deified) invoked by the Siamese, to avert evil & ensure success.
- ๗ P'ra Tsan, riding a horse, holding a circular shield and sword. The Moon god. A Brahmanical deity invoked in Siam to avert misfortune &c.
- ๘ P'ra Añk'an, riding a buffalo, holding an oblong shield & a sword. The Planet Mars deified. A Brahmanical divinity, invoked in Siam to avert evil &c, &c.
- ๙ Pra Püt, riding an elephant and holding a sword in each hand. A Brahmanical deity (the Planet Mercury personified) invoked to avert calamity &c, &c.
- ๑๐ P'ra Hat bodi, riding a deer & holding a long handled lance. The planet Jupiter personified, a Brahmanical deity, invoked in Siam to avert evil &c.
- ๑๑ P'ra Suk, riding an ox and holding a snake-shaped bow. The planet Venus deified. A Brahmanical divinity invoked in Siam to avert evil &c.
- ๑๒ P'ra Sa'u, riding a tiger & holding a trident. A Brahmanical divinity (a deification of the planet Saturn) whose aid the Siamese invoke to avert evil &c.
- ๑๓ P'ra Rāhū, riding K'rut, holding a mallet, a Brahmanical deity to whom offerings are made in Siam when evils are to be averted or success sought
- ๑๔ P'ra Kēt, riding a serpent & holding a sabre. A Brahmanical deity to whom



Figure 10: ๖๐ A many-spired Sacred Edifice, the Lohaprashat, at Wat Ratchanatdaram, Bangkok.

offerings are made in Siam, when evils are to be averted or success sought

- ๖๐ P'ra P'rom, with 4 faces and 8 arms, riding the bird called Hóng a deity of the Bramins to whom offerings are made, sometimes, in Siam
- ๖๑ P'ra In Sua'n, riding an ox & holding a trident. (the Siva of the Brammins)
- ๖๒ P'ra Narai, four-armed riding a K'rut younger brother of P'ra In Suan.
- ๖๓ P'ra maha Wikinet (Gunesha of the Hindūs) a son of P'ra Insuan, held in great esteem by Siamese physicians.

14 [No number or text: The image of a Buddha in Crystal flanked by two parasols as well as a central, equally 5-tiered umbrella (ฉัตร) below which he sits in meditation.]

- ๖๔ P'ra P'lón holding a sword, riding a rhinoceros, - a Brahmanical deity, invoked by the Siamese.
- ๖๕ Siamese Play-Actors
- ๖๖ Siamese Play-Actors
- ๖๗ Siamese Play-Actors
- ๖๘ Siamese Play-Actors¹⁵
- ๖๙ Siamese Play-Actors
- ๖๑ Siamese Play-Actors
- ๖๒ Siamese Play-Actors

¹⁵ This is the only picture with three actors. All other images thus titled show one actor only.



Figure 11: Grande pagode maha prasat dans l'enceinte des murs du palais du roi.

၁၆ Siamese Play-Actors
 ၁၇ Siamese Play-Actors
 ၁၈ Siamese Play-Actors

There are other numbered images, which might belong to another set depicting the monuments and sites of Bangkok, but no complete set is known. Some examples are shown in Figures 5 to 10. Some appear to be alternative shots of the same scene. For example, Figure 5 has the same caption as Number 53 in the first set; however, the view is different. Others seem to belong to a different set as the scenes and captions are not found in the first set.¹⁶

Some other numbered images may belong to a further set, since they are labelled differently—with the Thai numeral in the lower right rather than the lower left and no printed title, but descriptions written in Thai and French. An example is Figure 11 which has an unreadable numeral[?] at the lower right and a penciled caption as “Grande pagode maha prasat dans l'enceinte des murs du palais du roi.”

A hitherto unpublished self-portrait of Khun Mote in the size of a carte-de-visite is shown as Figure 12.

¹⁶ Figure 7 bears some similarity to “Cimetiere protestant a Bangkok - Dessin de Catenacci d'apres une photographie” cf. Mouhot 1863 (note 7, *supra*), p. 352 (= Mouhot 1864 [note 7 *supra*], illustration facing p. 102: “Cemetery at Bangkok.... from a Photograph”).



Figure 12: Photographic self-portrait of Khun Mote