

TEMPLES AND ELEPHANTS: AN EXHIBITION ABOUT CARL BOCK (12 DEC.–6 APRIL 2025, BANGKOK & OSLO)



FIGURE 1: View of the exhibition, *Temples and Elephants*, Museum of Cultural History, Oslo, March 2025 © Museum of Cultural History, University of Oslo

Carl Alfred Bock (1849–1932) was a Norwegian adventurer and naturalist who undertook two exploratory journeys to Southeast Asia between 1878 and 1882, during which he wrote travel accounts of his experiences for a Western audience. His first expedition, in 1879, took him to the interior of Borneo and resulted in the publication of *The Head-Hunters of Borneo*. His second

expedition, in the winter of 1881–1882, brought him to Siam and Lan Na, where he traveled from Bangkok to Chiang Mai and onward toward the present border with Myanmar. Support from King Chulalongkorn, Rama V (r. 1868–1910), was instrumental in making this journey possible—into regions that were said to be more remote than Europe.

During this second journey, which lasted 14 months, Bock documented his surroundings in both words and drawings—capturing images of people, nature, houses, artifacts, animals, and the route he traveled. The result was *Temples and Elephants: The Narrative of a Journey of Exploration Through Upper Siam and Lao* published in London in 1884. It gained widespread popularity and was translated into Norwegian that same year, into German and Swedish in 1885, into French in 1889, and into Thai in 1962. It has been reprinted multiple times.¹

According to Mr Phnombootra Chandrajoti, Director-General of the Thai Fine Arts Department, the book has “become a valuable primary source, serving as a reference for further research in geography, ethnography, anthropology, and natural history relating to Siam”.² Upon his return to Europe, Bock sold objects he had collected to the British Museum in London and the Ethnographic Museum in Kristiania, today part of the Museum of Cultural History in Oslo. The latter holds a

collection of 95 artifacts, of which 85 were gathered in Siam and Lan Na during the winter of 1881–1882.³ This includes a group of 24 buddha figures, as well as several pieces of lacquerware and porcelain, silver bracelets, garments, and everyday objects from the northern parts of the country [FIGURE 1].

Celebrations in Thailand

In December 2024, two events took place in Bangkok and Chiang Mai to commemorate the 140th anniversary of the publication of *Temples and Elephants*. Mr Siam Saenkhat, President of the Norwegian–Thai Historical and Cultural Studies Association, invited representatives from the Museum of Cultural History in Oslo to travel to Thailand to participate. The delegation consisted of the Museum Director, Dr Aud V. Tønnessen; Head of Section, Dr Olav Hamran; and me, Anne Håbu, Curator and Conservator, as well as our assistants Dr Marianne Berger Marjanovic and Mr Tor Øvrebø.

On 9 December, the delegation took part in the opening ceremony of the seminar on “Northern Culture in Temples and Elephants” at Chiang Mai University. There, we also viewed the superb bronze bust of Carl Bock, created by Thailand’s prominent sculptor Mr Thawatchai Srisompetch [FIGURE 2]. We had the pleasure to meet the sculptor in person, who accompanied the bust to Bangkok the following day.

¹ *Temples and Elephants* was first translated into Thai under the title *Samai Phra Piyamaharat* (สมัยพระปิยะมหาราช) by Sethi Phanrangsi & Amporn Thikhara, serialized in *Chao Thai* (ชาวไทย) newspaper between August 1960 and January 1961, and published in book form in 1962. It was reprinted several times, including under the revised title *Thongthin Sayam Yuk Phra Phutthachao Luang* (ท้องถิ่นสยามยุคพระพุทธเจ้าหลวง). The Thai titles do not follow the English original but instead frame the work within the historical and cultural context of King Chulalongkorn’s reign, emphasizing local life in Siam over the author’s travel narrative. See *Matichon Weekly*, 5 February 2025: https://www.matichon.co.th/weekly/column/article_825495 (accessed 10 July 2025)—*Editor’s note*.

² From his opening remarks at the opening ceremony of the exhibition and academic seminar held in Bangkok on 9 December 2024.

³ To see the Bock collection in Oslo: <https://www.khm.uio.no/english/index.html>; see also Bromberg 2019.



FIGURE 2: Sculptor Thawatchai Srisompetch and his wife, Sodchuen Srisompetch, with the bust of Carl Bock, Chiang Mai University, 9 December 2024 © Anne Håbu

To further commemorate the 140th anniversary of Carl Bock's work, the National Library of Thailand in Bangkok hosted the exhibition "Exploring Siam through Temples and Elephants" in the old Watchirayan Library, from 9 December 2024 to 28 February 2025. The exhibition presented a stunning collection of Bock's original drawings lent by the owner Mr Jan Olav Aamlid, a Norwegian numismatist and property developer residing in Thailand, along with first editions in six different languages. The opening featured a grand program including traditional music and dance performances, as well as the unveiling of the Carl Bock bust.

A panel discussion followed, led by Siam Saenkhat, with contributions from Dr Aud V. Tønnessen, Mr Jan Olav

Aamlid, and myself. Several dignitaries were in attendance, including the Norwegian Ambassador to Thailand, HE Astrid Helle, among others [FIGURE 3].

Before Bock's statue left Bangkok for Norway, an anointing ceremony was held on 24 February 2025 at Wat Saket. The event was attended by Dr Laliwan Kanchanachari, Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs; Ms Thea Martine Ottmann, Minister Counsellor at the Royal Norwegian Embassy in Thailand; and many distinguished guests.

Celebrations in Norway

The bust of Carl Bock was presented as a gift to the Museum of Cultural History and arrived in Oslo on 28 February. To mark the occasion, the museum



FIGURE 3: Guests of honor at the opening ceremony of the Carl Bock exhibition, National Library of Thailand, Bangkok, 9 December 2024 © National Library of Thailand

organized a small exhibition titled *Carl Bock: Temples and Elephants*. The exhibition was on view from 4 February to 6 April. It featured editions of *Temples and Elephants* in various languages, alongside a selection of small artifacts from the Bock collection. A remarkable 16th-century bronze buddha sculpture was on display as well, 59 cm high, sitting on a lotus throne on a base with a long inscription. It is shown in the book *Temples and Elephants* (Bock 1884: 278) and further described by Paul Bromberg (2019: fig. 12). In addition, two projection screens were installed—one showing a loop of photographs of artifacts from the Bock collection, the other a three-minute film on the life and work of Carl Bock. For the unveiling of the bust, on 3 March, the museum opened its doors to specially invited guests for a celebration, including

Buddhist monks from Thailand, Singapore, and Norway. Museum Director Dr Tønnessen welcomed the guests, followed by a speech by HE Ms Nitivadee Manitkul, Thai Ambassador to Norway. This was followed by addresses from Venerable Phrapromsitti, Chief Monk of Wat Saket in Bangkok and member of Thailand's Supreme Sangha Council; Venerable Shi Ming Yi, Secretary-General and Chairman of the International Committee of the World Buddhist Sangha Council in Singapore; and Professor Mette Halskov Hansen, Vice Rector of the University of Oslo, of which the museum is a part [FIGURE 4].

A ribbon-cutting ceremony took place in front of the Carl Bock bust, reinstalled in its new premises. For this special occasion, several artifacts from the Bock collection were displayed on a table, giving guests a unique



FIGURE 4: Guests of honor at the Carl Bock exhibition and ceremony, Museum of Cultural History, Oslo, 3 March 2025 © Museum of Cultural History, University of Oslo

opportunity to examine them up close [FIGURES 4–5]. After a photo session, all attendees were invited to explore the Bock exhibition, the Viking exhibition, and the Heritage exhibition at the museum, before the Museum Director delivered closing remarks.

Thailand and Norway— Close Connections

Carl Bock's expedition was not the only connection between King Chulalongkorn and the Scandinavian kingdom. Between 1894 and 1914, 16 Norwegians served as officers in the Royal Siamese Navy. One of them, Commander Theodor Ring, left behind several letters describing his work in Siam and donated a considerable collection—primarily of Bencharong porcelain—to the Museum of Cultural History in 1904. This collec-

tion was later shown in the 2013 Oslo exhibition *Royal Porcelain from Siam* and featured in a published anthology (ed. Håbu & Rooney 2013).

In 1905, King Chulalongkorn was the first head of state to send a congratulatory telegram to King Haakon VII (r. 1905–1957), recognizing Norway's independence from Sweden. Two years later, he visited the kingdom during his second European tour, spending the entire month of July 1907 in the country. The journey—made by boat, horse, and railway—allowed the Siamese king and his large entourage to experience the length of Norway, from Flekkefjord in the south to Nordkapp in the north.

This historic visit is commemorated on the reverse of the current 100-baht banknote, where King Chulalongkorn is shown on the left seated in a car with the Director of Norsk Hydro, Sam Eyde,



FIGURE 5: Bust of Carl Bock, with artifacts from the Bock Collection displayed in front, Oslo, 3 March 2025 © Museum of Cultural History, University of Oslo



**FIGURE 6: Reverse of the 100 Thai baht banknote (2018 series), depicting King Chulalongkorn's historic visit to Norway in 1907, shown at bottom left
© Bank of Thailand**

in Notodden [FIGURE 6]. The king's letters from the journey to his daughter Noi (HRH Princess Nibha Nobhadol; 1886–1935) were later collected and published under the title *Klai ban* (ไกลบ้าน), *Far from Home* in English.

The state visit to Norway by King Bhumibol (Rama IX; r. 1946–2016) and Queen Sirikit in 1960 is still remembered by former museum staff in Oslo. Their visit included a stop at the Viking Ship Museum, part of our institution.

In 2025, Norway and Thailand celebrated the 120th anniversary of diplomatic relations. To mark the anniversary, a commemorative event took place in Oslo on 22 June: a Charity Run & Walk organized by the Royal

Thai Embassy in cooperation with the Siriraj Foundation in Thailand. Professor Apichat Asavamongkolkul, Dean of the Faculty of Medicine at Siriraj Hospital, Mahidol University, participated in the event alongside HE Nitivadee Manitkul, and HE Astrid Helle. Proceeds from the event were donated to Siriraj Hospital. The run was enjoyed by approximately 70 participants on a glorious summer day in Oslo—proof that good weather and good will can, on rare occasions, arrive at the same time.

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