Report: Asia Trip

Thanks to a generous faculty grant, I had the opportunity to travel to Thailand and Vietnam in the fall of 2006. There were multiple purposes underlying the trip, but the two that related directly to my work in fashion were:

1. The opportunity to study the relationship between ethnic and western clothing in a very different region of the world for a potential future book project relating to fashion and culture.
2. To do research for the Fall Bob Mackie eveningwear project, the direction being "Asian Princesses."

Thailand

My research for both projects began on the Thai Airlines flight to Bangkok. The female flight attendants wore colorful silk ankle-length skirts and fitted tops, [Thai Chakri] with filigree combs in their shiny black hair. The male attendants conversely wore Western-style dark tailored jackets and silk ties with generic trousers. This was the first indication that the effects of western culture might differ in terms of gender, which proved consistently true in both countries. In the use of national costumes at hotels and other commercial venues, Thai and Vietnamese women are the cultural mannequins for the tourists.

I also had the good fortune on my flight to sit next to a young Thai woman returning to Bangkok. We chatted, and I was able to inquire about the function of traditional costume in her urban environment. She replied that older people still exhibited some native influence in their dress, but the younger generation’s wardrobe was almost completely westernized.

Surprisingly, this included even wedding ceremonies, [Ill. 1] as I had been to several Chinese weddings in the states featuring an appearance in traditional red costume by the bride. I asked if any of her clothing came from the West, and she told me that large manufacturing companies in Thailand produced western-style clothing and her wardrobe was almost completely of Thai origin.

Her observations proved accurate. I saw a number of older women in Bangkok whose dress reflected the Thai aesthetic. [Ill. 2, 3]
There was little or no Asian influence in the dress of either older or younger men, or in younger women and children. [Ill. 4-8] This continued in the smaller, northern city of Chang-Mai, though the strong presence of saffron-robed monks added an exotic element to the picture.

Bangkok is an enormous city filled with modern buildings and skyscrapers. Across the street from our hotel (a five-star Holiday Inn) were a Starbucks and also a McDonalds, with few items that we recognized from the American menu. Nevertheless, the city, like the resident’s clothing, seemed, at first impression, rather generic. Fortunately, we found an entrance to almost hidden canals used primarily by natives, which served as a conduit to what seemed a more authentic Bangkok “interlining”. A rather funky speedboat traversed the canals, leading to the French Quarter where most of the temples and older buildings are located. The busy waterways were lined with the crowded apartments of the working class Thai people, and the wooden balconies often served as closets for their colorful, albeit western-looking clothing, as well as a place to hang laundry. [Ill. 9] It was a strange juxtaposition of a visually exotic scene peopled with families dressed very much like us.

In visiting the vast and impressive temples of the old city, we saw many statues and paintings of ancient Tibetan people in costume. The filigree and “pointy” shoulder silhouettes seemed to relate directly to the architectural style that is ubiquitous in the temples and older buildings of the two cities we visited. I am unaware of any other people where the ancient cultural aesthetic was so consistent between architecture and dress. The western influence has effectively erased this relationship, and again there was, for me, a visual disconnect as a result.

In the book “Dress, Gender and Cultural Change”, author Annette Lynch talks about the use by the Hmong (an ethnic group with Chinese and Laotian origins, many of whom immigrated to America after the Vietnam war, passing primarily through Thai refugee camps) of ritual ethnic costume to maintain and differentiate their culture in a foreign environment. In a country overrun with tourists like Thailand, there seemed to be little impetus for cultural differentiation through dress. On the contrary, emulating their foreign visitors seemed more the trend. On the other hand, the Asian aesthetic has exerted a strong influence periodically on Western fashion, and I can reasonably speculate that there may be more Eastern influence in my closet than in that of younger Thai females.

In 2007, Miss Thailand, Fahroong Yutitham, the country’s entry for Miss Universe, caused a furor by wearing a Hmong costume, reflecting her own origins, instead of the classic Thai national dress. [See Page 4] Because I have yet to find a use of the Thai costume for anything but business/tourist purposes, except by the oldest residents, I find it somewhat surprising that it should have been such an emotional issue. My cynical side suspects that this emotionalism is somehow tied to either tourist economics or an ethnic class system.

Certainly other regional countries like Japan have seen sweeping changes in their dress due to Western influence, but, to their credit, the youth have embraced many of the more extreme trends,
like Goth and Punk, and made them their own. Because they have developed such a personal and radical fashion scene, young Japanese are featured in a popular magazine called “Fruits” and have become global trendsetters.

Illustrations 1-8 (Thailand)  Illustrations 14-21 (Vietnam)
Vietnam

Ethnic clothing was thankfully more in evidence in Saigon (Ho Chi Min City). Though it is an enormous city overrun with motor scooters, the Saigon streets are graced with lovely conical hats, colorful pajama-style outfits, and other ethnic paraphernalia worn by the native populace. [Ill. 14-18] Outside the city, women working in the rice paddies consistently wear native garments. Even the more western-influenced clothing seems to be a hybrid of east and west. [Ill. 16] Though Vietnam is known for its manufacture of designer western clothing, it was almost impossible to find evidence of such garments in even the most upscale stores.

As it was in Thailand, the men, with the possible exception of the very old, wore generic western clothing. [Ill. 19] This inevitably supplied the females with a more visually compelling dynamic than the males.

I speculate that the long-term isolation of the country after the war contributed to this maintaining of some cultural identity in feminine garments. Now that the country is more open, I fear for the survival of their native identity.

As for my research for Bob Mackie, the visual splendor of the art in the temples of both countries and even in our Chang-Mai hotel [which was filled with paintings and sculptures] provided ample inspiration for the project. A visit to an orchid farm was especially inspiring in terms of color, [Ill. 23]
and ornate accoutrement like chandeliers [Ill. 21] engendered visions of elaborate embellishments and exotic headdresses. I would also like to think my experience provided a more authentic and informed viewpoint concerning the subject matter. Ultimately the design project was fun and a great success for the fashion show, and Mr. Mackie was pleased.

--Kathryn Hagen
Fashion Design

*Kathryn Hagen: Sketch*