

Date:23/11/2008 URL:**<http://www.thehindu.com/thehindu/mag/2008/11/23/stories/2008112350300800.htm>**[Back Magazine](#)

Heritage

Treasure trove of history

KEYA ACHARYA

Sriyongyong's innocuous-looking house in Thailand holds everything from mammoth heads to dinosaur bones, a massive testimony to the man's obsession with collection and natural history.

Photo: Keya Acharya



The envy of museums: A part of the collection and Praserd Sriyonyong (below).

From the outside, the compound and the old, wooden Thai house, about two-and-a-half hours by road out of Bangkok, looked much like other semi-rural ones, far from the flash of the city. But with one difference: There were two old and rusting World War II GI jeeps in the compound. Any aficionado of antiques would become alert at the sight of broken-down jeeps and machinery adorning a residential compound, instead of greenery.

But not even a well-honed antennae prepared me for the veritable treasure-trove locked in air-conditioned rooms within those heavy, old rosewood doors. There were old-looking antlers and heads of bison on the walls wherever you looked; some were of very rare mountain goats with four horns. There were huge elephant tusks, of a size definitely not found live anymore, statues of Vishnu with a distinctly oriental touch, pointing to the historical era of Southeast Asian Hinduism,

an ivory Ganesha of similar flavour, at least three-and-a-half feet tall, carved from one single elephant tusk, oil paintings of Siam's kings Rama V and Rama IV, the latter also known as King Mongkut, who reigned from 1851-1868 and inspired the Hollywood movie, "The King and I".

"I have 300 heads of "kouprey" (Cambodian forest ox) alone; neither the British Museum nor the Louvre has even one specimen of this extinct animal. I also hold the world's record for antlers", says Praserd Sriyonyong with pride, a tall, striking-looking man in his early fifties.

In the blood

Sriyonyong, who comes from an old "zamindari" family and whose father and grandfather were in senior government administrative positions with no culture of collecting such items, says his interest in natural history led him, even as a child, to follow the gentleman known as the father of Thailand's natural conservation, Dr. Boonsong Legakul. "I have been collecting for 50 years now, it's in my blood," he says as he points to letters on the wall signed by Thailand's well-loved King Bhumibol Adulyadej, certifying his natural history collection. "Every item is legal", he states firmly.

In fact, there are around 4,00,000 pieces of natural history items, including an incredible mammoth head and dinosaur skeleton inside this very unusual house. Sriyonyong says he bought them from some "rich people" in Thailand's rural hinterland that had them in their possession for generations. It points to the probability that there were dinosaurs in this region of the world too, he says, since most of these treasures were family heirlooms.

Sriyonyong says it is "very difficult" to buy such items from families inside old houses: "They say they don't want to sell because it belonged to their great-grandparents or that it has been in that corner of the room for as long as they can remember."

But he perseveres and generally wins, mostly due to economic reasons. "I offer them good money, or alternative land, for the whole house. I put an ad in the papers, pricing the house higher than the quote I give to the owners, and I then keep the profit, which I use to buy more items. I also deal in gold and precious gems," Sriyonyong grins, by way of explanation of his financial resources for buying such items. He then points to the two holsters bulging discreetly over his bush shirt. "I have seven of these pistols," he says, "So security is not really an issue." Sriyonyong, however, is sensitive about publishing the whereabouts of his priceless collection. "Don't write the name of the neighbourhood", he requests.



More surprises

As amazing as the whole scenario are two pairs of black elephant tusks and the white hairs of an albino “white elephant”, considered very auspicious in Thailand and now no doubt extinct, hanging over a doorway. “Stand under it, it will bring you luck”, says Sriyonyong in all seriousness.

One room has fossils of all shapes and sizes, mostly of antlers. Sriyonyong takes what looks like a fossilised hook and places it next to a full antler, pointing to how the hooked parts were broken off to be used as implements for fishing or dragging dead animals killed for food in what must surely have been in the early ages of man’s history. Most of the fossil pieces have come from the banks and what was once the riverbed of the famous Chao Phraya river as it changed course and left a collector’s fantasy in its wake.

And following as naturally as the river’s history is the interest that the world’s natural history museums have shown in Sriyonyong’s collection. “Over the past years, researchers from many government and non-government institutions, including universities, museums and wildlife NGOs have visited the collection”, writes conservation scientist Antony Lynam of the Asia programmes of the Wildlife Conservation Society, “All who have seen the collection agree that it represents both a unique resource for scientific research and education.”

But Sriyonyong is determined that the collection should remain in Thailand, not be shifted into foreign museums and has even refused a lucrative offer as curator, complete with citizenship for him and his family, for an American museum to house his collection. He is as determined that the Thai government should not take over his collection. “It will not be looked after”, he laments.

Future plans

Sriyonyong is now looking for partners, financial and related specialists, to build and house his fabulous collection as a modern museum, to be centred around a tourist complex by the side of the main road near the ruins of Ayutthaya, Thailand’s historical city founded in 1350 A.D. and destroyed in 1767, now a UNESCO heritage site.

1/2/2009

<http://www.hinduonnet.com/thehindu...>

“We have counted nearly 700,000 vehicles, mostly tourists, crossing the road at Ayutthaya. At least the world will get to see Thailand’s natural heritage. The government will get revenue too”, says Sriyonyong.

Interested? Call him at +66 1 433 2044.

© Copyright 2000 - 2008 The Hindu