



MAKE A SPECTACULAR LUNAR LANDING WITH THE MOONCAKES AT THE PENINSULA 11B

This place of many petals

Sakul Intakul shares his love of the bloom at the new Museum of Floral Culture

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THE NATION ON SUNDAY

You would certainly expect Sakul Intakul, Thailand's leading floral artist, to present a lovely bouquet to Her Majesty the Queen on her birthday next weekend. He's often worked with her in the past decade.

He's not, though - he's opening an entire flower museum on her birthday, which is also Mother's Day, of course.

Letting a long-cherished dream blossom at last, Sakul has turned a century-old, colonial-style mansion into the Museum of Floral Culture. He found the venerable house, remarkably enough, in a tiny lane off Nakhon Chaisri Road in Bangkok's Sriyan district.

Perhaps no other museum in the world smells so sweet. Few museums

One man's homage to the Asian art of flower arrangement and the Kingdom's own rich floral traditions has in its front garden several auspiciously named plants. There's *ma kham* (tamarind), *ma yom* (star gooseberry) and a *sok* (ashoka), which, according to Thai belief, brings the home's inhabitants good luck and joy. Lushly purple vanda orchids surround the veranda, adding zest and vibrancy.

Out back is a one-rai botanical garden with a classic sala and a pool. Its flora includes *guay tancee* (*Musa balbisiana*, better known as wild banana), *pikul* (bullet wood), *dok rak* (crown flower), *pud* (a gardenia, the cape jasmine), *mali* (jasmine) and *champee* and *champa* (white and orange champak).

"These are all used in Thai flower arrangement," says Sakul, who has made his sculpture-like designs for Their Majesties the King and Queen and celebrated hotels from Bali to Rome. "This garden can be a place of learning, where knowledge about flower culture can be born."

"Floral art is an integral part of our culture - seen in royal feasts, religious ceremonies and other celebrations of life. During my research while writing the book 'Dok Mai Thai: The Flower Culture of Thailand' three years ago, I got passionate about having my own museum to record and conserve this exquisite art form while propagating its cultural value on the world stage."

The two-storey house with seven rooms still manages to dominate the 1,800 square-wah property.

Sakul's museum is 70-per-cent complete. The Dusit Gallery contains old photographs from the National Archives that evoke the exuberance and intricate refinement of Siamese floral culture as far back as King Rama V's time. There's a picture of a flower-bedecked motorcade and another of a prince's ordination where graceful arrangements fill the background. Still another is a portrait of a lady of the court with a fetching bloom on her shoulder strap.

Rama V's reign was "the Renaissance of Thai floral art", Sakul says. "The court ladies vied with one another to create delicate arrangements, and old designs were adapted while new forms were introduced."

Thai floral art subsequently declined in popularity due to economic crises and the world wars, but King Bhumibol and Queen Sirikit



OPENING NEXT WEEK, the Museum of Floral Culture unfolds a remarkable journey among Asia's sweet-smelling arts.



PHRA INDRA in floral needlework was fabricated from 'dok ban mai roo roei' for the palace banquet during celebrations for the King's 60th anniversary on the throne.



Sakul Intakul has amassed many wonders in his travels and they're now on view at his private museum.



A wide variety of intricate floral pendants are on display.



Sakul shows how Thai flower culture 'deconstructs and reconstructs' to 'extend a blossom's life'.



SAKUL'S SKETCHES show how his arrangements were conceived.

revived the classical Thai arts. "This is not only the golden age of floral design, but also of every genre of art and culture," Sakul says.

The World of Floral Culture fills another room with items selected to reflect the unique floral identities of India, China, Japan, Laos, Tibet and Indonesia (specifically Bali).

Given pride of place is a 1756 scroll that Sakul stumbled upon in a Tokyo bookstore. It explains classical *shoka* flower arranging, in which practitioners of *ikebana* - the oldest school of *ikebana* - used a three-branch asymmetrical style.

You can see an ancient flower-embossed silver tray used in *baisri* ceremonies in the Thai North. Its multiple tiers held offerings to the deities. Tibetan tormawood

sculptures shaped like flowers were offered to the gods too. There are vibrant Indian garlands on view as well.

"The charm of India's floral art lies in its garlands, while the Chinese style is freeform, set in a

vase," Sakul points out. "Japanese art respects a linear arrangement and portrays how nature and art relate to daily life."

"The distinguishing character of Thai flower culture is to 'deconstruct' and 'reconstruct'. Our tropical flow-

ers bloom fully every day but have short lives. To make them last longer we learn to deconstruct a flower - separating each petal - and then reconstruct it by sewing, binding, fabricating and stringing it into various forms.

These become *malai* (garlands), *khruang khwaen* (pendants) and *phum dokmai* (domes).

The exhibits in the Temple of Flowers focus on the interrelationship of forests, waterways and communities. Lessons are drawn from a conflict that embroiled residents of Saeng Pha, a village in northern Loei province's Na Haew district.

"The villagers have been able to preserve their traditional way of life and floral culture by fiercely resisting the granting of government logging concessions that since 1982 had wiped out more than 70,000 rai of rich forest cover in what is now the Phu Suan Sai National Park," says Sakul.

He's still working on the display room. So far it has some of the villagers' carved flowers, painted in vivid hues. Soon there'll be a mural comprising photos of the determined citizens, the vihara at the local Wat Si Pho Chai and the rich forest of the national park.

"I want to pay my respect to the strength of this community that helped save a forest," Sakul says. "Floral culture can't be born without a forest."

Another room called the Heritage features garlands, floral pendants and other decorations in both traditional and modern styles. Against the windows are Sakul's delicate, sweet-smelling gardenia arrangements inspired by traditional floral pendants. And there's a replica of a wooden window Wat Sommanat depicting a lovely flower chandelier.

Upstairs Sakul has his sketches, including plans for an intricate arrangement for the Grand Palace banquet in 2006 that marked His Majesty's 60th anniversary on the throne. Other drawings show what he came up with for the Queen's chambers at Phu Phan Rajanivet Palace in Sakon Nakhon, for the Rome International Film Festival and for one of Hong Kong director Wong Kar Wai's movie sets.

"This room is called Pen, Pencil & Possibility," says Sakul, "because everything is born from ideas and passions, which are illustrated through pen and pencil and then made possible through intention and devotion."

UNCOMMON SCENTS

- << The Museum of Floral Culture is open daily except Monday from 10.30am to 6pm.
- << It's on Samsen Soi 28, sub-soi Ong-Karak 13, off Nakhon Chaisri Road in Bangkok.
- << Admission is Bt150.
- << Find out more at (02) 669 3633-4, and in The Nation's video at www.NationMultimedia.com and on the "Sunday Leisure The Nation" Facebook page.



AN 18TH-CENTURY Japanese scroll reveals the secrets of 'shoka' flower arrangement.