

' HO KHAM ''



GUIDE TO THE ROYAL PALACE MUSEUM

LUANG PRABANG

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## A Brief History

*1904*  
The "Golden Palace" (Ho Kham) was built between 1904 and 1909, a few years after the Kingdom of Luang Prabang was declared a protectorate, and the rest of Laos a colony, of France. It was crowned in 1904, to symbolize the new relationship between Laos and France, and to mark the beginning of the promised modernization of Laos. The former palace, which was built entirely of wood, was considered out of date and was therefore demolished. The new building was commissioned by the French colonial administration. Its design combines the French "beaux arts" style with elements of Lao vernacular architecture.

The original architectural composition had three main parts: the throne room in the centre, the royal office in the main facade, and the royal residence at the rear. By the 1930s both wings at the front of the building had been extended in conformity with the original drawings. The building can be said to have been finally completed when the king decided to replace the pinnacle on the roof above the throne room by a new one with a more appropriate Lao design.

King Sisavangvong died in 1959. He was succeeded by his son, Sisavang Vatthana. For the coronation ceremony, the Crown Prince enlarged the throne room by adding two equal-sized rooms, one on each side. He commissioned a mosaic decoration on the interior walls, and carried out various other works to modernize the whole compound. The latter included rearrangement of the partition walls in the residence area, installation of new ceilings, renovation of electrical installations, and construction of a new building for large receptions.



The establishment of the Lao People's Democratic Republic on 2 December 1975 prevented the coronation from taking place. The King abdicated from the throne, and was appointed Supreme Advisor to the President. On his return to Luang Prabang, he moved to his private residence close to Xiangthong temple and offered the palace to the Government. The palace was then converted into a national museum, the main aims of which are to preserve the palace and the royal collection and inform the public of the history of the former monarchy.

The exhibits in the royal offices have been kept exactly as they were arranged by the King. In the royal residence, the large items of furniture remain, but smaller day-to-day items such as clothing have been transferred to the storage area. Carpets from China and France used to cover the whole floor, but some of them have recently been removed because they have been attacked by termites. Otherwise, the palace looks exactly as it did in 1975.

The chandeliers and bracket lamps are from Czechoslovakia, and the large mirrors from France. The throne and most of the lacquered and gilded furniture, such as couches, cupboards and showcases, were designed by Chao manivong Kattiyarath and made by local craftsmen. The fine bronze drums belonged to the royal collection, which numbered about 60 altogether, and were used for decorative and practical purposes.

## The Entrance

The pediment is decorated with a three-headed elephant, a parasol and seven inter-twined serpents. The elephant is a traditional Lao symbol, the original name of the country being Lane Xang, or a land of a million elephants. The three-headed elephant symbolizes the unification of the three former Lao kingdoms under the Luang Prabang monarchy. It is also a vehicle of the god Indra in Hindu mythology, from which are derived many Lao legends. The parasol, as well as reflecting the divine source of the king's authority, symbolizes the submission of the Lao people and the founders of the first kingdom. In Lao mythology the Naga protect the nation's water for the benefit of its people.

Visitors to the palace may note the fleur-de-lys emblems on the pillars: these are the symbols of French royalty. The steps are paved with marble imported from Italy.

## The Hall

The hall used to serve simply to channel visitors to other rooms in the palace, but it gradually took on other functions. Various events took place there, such as religious and other traditional ceremonies, including the Lao New Year "Baci" ceremony attended by the government and the diplomatic corps, family meetings and small gatherings with people from Luang Prabang. The decorated chair was used by the Sangkharaja, or "King" of the Buddhist monks, when blessing the king, but it was later destined to be used as a coronation chair.



The hall contains statues of Buddha and other religious items from various parts of the country, particularly the Luang Prabang area, brought by monks from abandoned Wats or Stupas that had collapsed. In accordance with the king's Buddhist faith, they were displayed in showcases and still remain there.

## The Audience Room

King Sisavangvong used this room as his personal office and reception room and gave audiences in the throne room. His son and heir, Sisavang Vatthana, did not have the right to use the throne room because he was not crowned. He therefore transformed his father's office into an audience room for receiving foreign envoys on the occasion of the presentation of their letters of credence, and government officials upon their appointment and other formal occasions. The room was also used for other purposes such as royal ritual ceremonies. A bronze statue of Buddha was placed on top of a cupboard behind the royal seat so that the image of a king ruling under Buddha's protection would be remembered by his visitors.

The walls are decorated with paintings, signed by Alix de Fautereau in 1930. They represent traditional festivals and scenes from everyday life in Luang Prabang. The two unique and magnificent lacquered and gilded panels, depicting scenes from the Ramayana, were made by the famous master of Lao crafts, Thit Tanh.



### The Throne Room

This room's large size, its high domed ceiling and imposing square columns, together with the colourful mosaic on a red back-ground on the walls, the gilded furniture and the magnificent throne, convey to visitors an impression of grandeur. The wall decoration depicts legends such as "Nithan Khounbourom Rajathirat", or the ancestors of the Lao people and their royal dynasty; Thao Kattanam, stories about the foundation of Lao cities; Khun Lu Nang Ua, a love story; and some traditional festivals such as the rocket festival, boat racing, the Lao New Year, and the That Luang festival. The creators of these wonderful scenes were Thit Bun Thanh and Thit Duang. The mosaic glasses were imported from Japan.

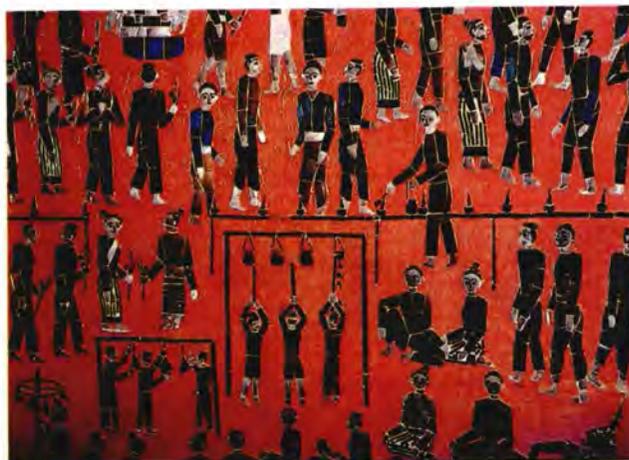
Treasure from That Mak Mo, which collapsed in 1910, is displayed in two elegant showcases, one in the middle of each of the side wings. The treasure consists of remarkable and valuable objects dating back to the end of the 15th century. Among them are a golden miniature stupa decorated with more than 400 precious stones, gold and bronze statues of Buddha, and jewelry of gold and other materials. The smaller showcases contain swords and other objects belonging to the royal regalia, royal costumes and small statues of Buddha. The latter are made of clay covered with thin gold or silver leaf and decorated by "repousse" techniques.

### The Secretariat

Before the construction of the dining hall, which is in the left-hand corner of the palace grounds on passing through the entrance gate, this room was used for official dinners and banquets. Official visitors were registered here before meeting the King. The showcases display the gifts the King received from many heads of state.

### The Reception of the Queen

The original plan mentioned that this room was for smoking and snooker, but it seems that the Queen used it for providing official reception to her guests since it was completed during the 1930s. Oil paintings on the walls portray the royal family: the King, the Queen and the crown prince, their author is Ilya Glazurov, an eminent artist from the former USSR.





### The Prabang Room

The Prabang has been the chief source of spiritual protection for Laos since it was brought from Cambodia in the 14th century. According to legend it was made from pure gold, in India, and then presented to the King of Sri Lanka and subsequently to the King of Cambodia. Eventually, King Fa Ngum, founder of the Kingdom of Lane Xang, obtained through his wife, who was a daughter of the King of Cambodia. The Prabang was worshipped with the same veneration as, and together with, the Emerald Buddha, or Prakeo Morakot, which was taken to Bangkok in 1778.

This room was used as the royal library before the Prabang was moved to the palace from Wat May. It was to have been transferred to a temple which was then under construction in the right hand corner of the palace grounds on entering the main gate. The room contains stone statues of Buddha from the 12th century, amongst offerings and other objects associated with the Prabang.