



THE INTRIGUE  
OF WORLD WAR II.  
A PASSION  
FOR LOCAL  
CRAFTSMANSHIP.  
AT THE  
INTERSECTION  
OF THESE TWO  
RESIDES A  
MAN NAMED  
JIM THOMPSON.

**BY RON  
GLUCKMAN**

*in the*  
*house*  
OF SILK

**BALLET PHOTOGRAPHY**  
BY ROY RITCHIE





THIS PAGE & OPPOSITE: COURTESY, JIM THOMPSON (S)

ARCHITECT, VISIONARY, AND  
DANDY-TURNED-SPY—  
JIM THOMPSON HAS BEEN CALLED  
BANGKOK'S JAY GATSBY.

**HIS PARTIES WERE LEGENDARY**, as was his role as an intelligence officer whose shadow spread across Southeast Asia, touching America, its friends, and its allies during World War II and the Cold War that followed. And he still looms large today, after vanishing without a trace in Malaysia in 1967, just like in a Hollywood thriller. The Jim Thompson mystery was never solved.

Yet Thompson's legacy is less about secrets than about the man's contribution to, and immersion in, Thai culture. It was Thompson who revitalized Thailand's silk industry when he founded the Thai Silk Company Limited—now known simply as Jim Thompson—in 1948, and Thompson who rescued and preserved some of the country's most historic and representative houses.

The fact that Thompson made a life in Thailand at all was a curious choice—too curious, in the view of some. He could have chosen to return to his architecture practice in New York, enjoying a post-war life of civilized ease designing country homes. Instead, he opted for a more enigmatic path—in a steamy, exotic city where teak boats maneuver through the water hyacinth to troll the Chao Phraya River—causing some to wonder if he hadn't left his spying days behind when the war ended.

In any event, Thompson's original calling came into play as he found six traditional teak homes, some a century old, relocated them, restored them, and then resided in them (the project was completed in 1959). The buildings, positioned within a tranquil garden alongside a *klong* (canal) called Maha Nag, are known collectively as the Jim Thompson House and today function as a popular museum that on a busy day welcomes 1,000 visitors.

The legendary figure's great love for Thailand and its culture is also evident on 1,600 acres in northeast Thailand, where thousands of villagers cultivate and weave silk, a craft passed down for generations, but nearly lost until Thompson arrived. Nowadays, they raise a special strain of worms developed by the Jim Thompson company, producing the long threads of prized silk that command top prices in the industry.

The Jim Thompson name still means something here, to say the least. It's emblazoned on shirts sold at the storied Mandarin Oriental Hotel (to locals, it's simply "The Oriental"), and lingers in the minds of residents like Bangkok textile collector Tom Vitayakul, owner of Rose Hotel and Ruen Urai restaurant. Vitayakul was just 11 when his mother gave him some Jim Thompson silk, which he had tailored into a shirt. "For a few years, I wore it until it was almost threadbare," he recalls.

Vitayakul's first visit to the Jim Thompson House, in the 1970s, also stirred him. "I was in awe of the antique collections," he says. "The house stood there as if Mr. Thompson had just stepped out." Jim Thompson's life is so intriguing.

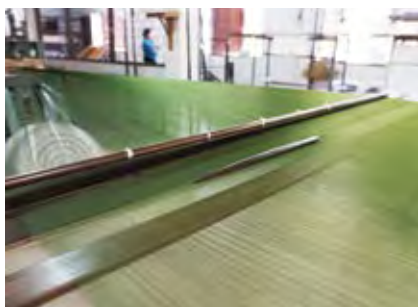
Much has been written about Thompson, and while the accounts differ on his exact motives, on his role in the Great Game that played out in Southeast Asia after World War II, and especially on his disappearance—assassination? accident?—there is no question that he was among the most famous and influential Westerners of his era in the region.

**SOME SUGGEST THERE ARE** three Jim Thompsons: the man, his myth, and the company he created that flourishes, devoted to his highest ideals.



**OPPOSITE PAGE** JIM THOMPSON, WHOSE SUDDEN DISAPPEARANCE REMAINS A MYSTERY. **THIS PAGE, FROM TOP** THE JIM THOMPSON HOUSE, WHICH TODAY SERVES AS A MUSEUM; THE COMPANY'S ELEGANT SANCTUARY COLLECTION; THE COLORFUL ENTRANCE TO THE JIM THOMPSON HOUSE; ENTER THE DRAGONS, A THOMPSON COMPANY PATTERN INSPIRED BY A HAND-KNOTTED, 17TH-CENTURY SILK CARPET.





**THIS PAGE, FROM TOP** THE JIM THOMPSON COMPANY RAISES ITS OWN SILKWORMS AND CULTIVATES THE COCOONS TO ENSURE CONSISTENT QUALITY; THREADS OF SILK WAITING TO BE WOVEN INTO FABRIC; THE SHIMMERING SATEEN OF THE COMPANY'S PAILIN FABRIC; THE JIM THOMPSON FACTORY IN THAILAND. **OPPOSITE PAGE** JIM THOMPSON SILK FLOWS ELEGANTLY.

### JIM THOMPSON'S BANGKOK

Visitors to Thailand can still walk in the footsteps of the so-called King of Silk, observe his influences, and shop for his products.

■ Jim Thompson interior and outdoor fabrics, wallpapers, and trimmings are available worldwide. [jimthompsonfabrics.com](http://jimthompsonfabrics.com)

■ Jim Thompson House offers a museum of art collected by Thompson, exhibits explaining silk production, and a contemporary art center. [jimthompsonhouse.com](http://jimthompsonhouse.com)

■ The Four Seasons Hotel Bangkok features the "Explorer Suite," which evokes the memory of Jim Thompson using specially crafted furniture and fabrics, plus a boutique offering Jim Thompson souvenirs. [fourseasons.com/bangkok](http://fourseasons.com/bangkok)

■ The historic Oriental Hotel alongside the Chao Phraya River (managed by Mandarin Oriental) is one of the oldest luxury properties in Asia, and its boutique carries Jim Thompson goods. [mandarinoriental.com/bangkok](http://mandarinoriental.com/bangkok)

■ For a full list of Jim Thompson retail outlets, restaurants, and bars, visit [jimthompson.com](http://jimthompson.com)

This much is certain: Jim Thompson was born in 1906 to a wealthy family in Delaware. He studied at Princeton and worked as an architect in New York, before abandoning his career to join the Delaware National Guard in 1940. Because of his age, he was assigned to a coastal watch, where he was bored stiff. Then, his life and destiny changed direction when an old family friend recruited him to join the OSS (the Office of Strategic Services was a forerunner of the CIA) to work behind enemy lines in German-occupied France. An apt secret agent, he was moved to the OSS office in Bangkok.

Thompson officially resigned from service in 1947 and founded his silk company. Joshua Kurlantzick, author of the Thompson biography *The Ideal Man*, says he started with only \$25,000 and the backing of a group of friends, including Prince Sanidh Rangsit. Thompson proved as astute an entrepreneur as an intelligence officer. A natural salesman, he prepared the silk to go abroad to be shown to people best positioned to do his company some good.

Eric Booth, today the assistant managing director of the Jim Thompson company, says the former secret agent showed samples to a friend who knew Edna Woolman Chase, then the editor of *Vogue*. "Chase had [New York designer] Valentina design a dress from his silk," he says. In 1951, Thompson's silk was showcased by designer Irene Sharaff in the legendary Rodgers & Hammerstein Broadway musical *The King and I*. Sharaff earned

a Tony Award for Best Costume Design for her work, and snagged an Oscar for the same category when the show was adapted into an acclaimed film in 1956. Three years later, Thai silk once again graced the silver screen, draping the actors in the historical drama *Ben-Hur*.

Despite the fanfare, Thompson's impulses were more egalitarian than hierarchical. He gave away shares in the firm to his diligent weavers. Booth notes that the Jim Thompson House, which contains a vast collection of art and artifacts, sits on land in Bang Krua village—a parcel granted by the Thai king centuries ago to ethnic Cham weavers who were originally from Vietnam.

It remains a distinctly evocative site. The main house rests on stilts in the traditional way, the rooflines of all the structures gabled and steeply pitched. Finials shaped like flames rise to sharp points in the humid air. It's a stage set located in real life, in the ambiguous space between fiction and function. "Jim wanted to be here, close to the weavers and the weaving," Booth explains. "Some are still here, and they still hold shares in the company."

**WHILE JIM THOMPSON'S COMPANY** has grown to nearly 2,800 employees (not counting contract farmers) with annual total group revenue of \$100 million, it still resembles a family enterprise. Eric Booth's father William came from Seattle in 1962, serving first as Thompson's assistant, then as managing director since

THIS PAGE: COURTESY, JIM THOMPSON (4)



**PAGES 64-65 AND THIS PAGE:** HAIR: MARCO BERTOLDI  
MAKEUP: RALUCA LASCU  
BOTH FROM NUDE THE SALON, BIRMINGHAM, MICH.  
DANCER: JOORI JUNG, ARTLAB J, DETROIT

1972, after exhaustive searches failed to find any trace of Thompson. Eric joined the Jim Thompson company in the 1990s, and recently oversaw the openings of new showrooms in Atlanta and Paris.

Jim Thompson is fast becoming a lifestyle brand, with restaurants from Bangkok to Singapore and Japan. The original King of Silk may have gone missing, and his brand may have gone global, but his personal touch remains: "They operate very much like a bespoke tailor," notes Todd Avery-Lenahan, whose interior design firm, TAL Studio, has tapped Jim Thompson fabrics to spice up everything from a spa at Wynn Resort & Casino in Las Vegas to a Four Seasons hotel in Hawaii. "The fact that they aren't a big outfit in terms of the industry makes it special to deal with them," he adds. "They offer truly unique products, along with a level of personal contact and detail that really stands out."

"We're one of the very few companies in the world to control every aspect of the entire process, from raising the worms to cultivating the cocoons right through dyeing, weaving, and sales," explains the Thai-born Jim Thompson creative director, Ou Baholyodhin, who assists a design team of 40. The company produces two new collections every year, in January and September, showcasing 500–600 new items. "It's an incredibly huge amount," he concedes, "but we do it all in house, so we can produce small quantities as needed."

The process begins with 30,000 eggs, delivered in boxes to contract farmers. The Jim Thompson company provides everything: the special strains of worm, racks of "cocoon condos" and mulberry bushes that sustain the silkworms. "It's extremely labor-intensive," Booth says. Mulberry leaves must be cut to miniscule portions and meticulously spoon-fed to



#### ROCKWELL ON THOMPSON

Famed interior designer David Rockwell has used Jim Thompson fabrics for clients such as Nobu and the Cosmopolitan of Las Vegas. He wrapped the Green Room at last year's Academy Awards in Jim Thompson silk, and has partnered with the firm for his first textile line, Spotlight Collection.

"Spotlight combines our unique and playful point of view with Jim Thompson's design sensitivity and exquisite craftsmanship," Rockwell says. "Our goal was to reflect our deep interest in the play of light, natural materials, and texture. We experimented with various weaving techniques and surface treatments for a modern collection that illustrates both natural patterns and the ever-shifting light on geometric shapes."

"Jim Thompson offered their deep well of knowledge in weaving techniques and materials to bring our concepts to life," he adds. "It was a rare and amazing experience to visit Jim Thompson's headquarters in Bangkok and see their manufacturing process in person. There, we were able to experiment with or tweak a design, watch a sample being hand-woven on their looms, and examine it the following day." [rockwellgroup.com](http://rockwellgroup.com)

the worms. "You have to get everything just right. Too much food and they get fat and lazy. Not enough and they don't have the nutrition to make good cocoons."

Jim Thompson is famed for its own dyes and colors, but what really sets the textiles apart are the 400 weavers who do everything by hand. "That's what Jim discovered in the 1940s," Booth says. Then, as now, silk from China dominated the market, and there was ample competition from Vietnam to Japan. "What makes this

unique is that it's hand-reeled and hand-woven." Booth points out inconsistencies in various samples. "See, it's uneven. You have rough patches, and places where the dye penetrates in different ways. That gives it sheen and character and texture. That makes it unique."

Sheen. Character. Texture. All attributes that define the man who dispersed beauty, then vanished, leaving a legacy both intriguingly intangible and gloriously tactile. ●