



The Elephant Man

Story and pictures by Jane Batchelor



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Nestled down a meandering soi in San-kampang, Chiang Mai, a herd of Asian elephants tilt their trunks towards the heavens. Their emotive eyes, encased with intricate creases, regularly draw gasps of awe from visitors, impressed by the artist's skill in highlighting the plight of these gentle giants.

Over the past 28 years, Petch Wiriya has whittled over 80,000 wooden elephants in the hope that Thais will gain a better understanding of the animal through his delicate carvings. "My work reflects a bridge for people to see how real elephants live," he explains: "I want people to be inspired by my work, to try and help elephants, and learn more about them."

A member of *Peun Chang* (Friends of the Asian Elephant Foundation), he has contributed several carvings to the charity over the years to raise funds, and also created the foundation's logo. Quiet and reflective, Petch enjoys nothing more than practicing his passion in the organised chaos of his northern studio. Sepia photographs of wild elephants adorn the walls while tools and hunks of wood signal work in progress.

On my visit, a chunk of teak occupied centre stage, the colour of rich soil with chalk lines outlining a face. On closer inspection, and with the help of a blueprint nearby, I realised I was gazing at Petch himself. It was slightly surreal to watch him pick up a chisel and hammer, and ardently chip away at his own head.

Petch's company *Baan Jang Nak* (House of Many Elephants), displays both his and his student's work. Locals occasionally bring visitors here, keen to show one of the best examples of Chiang Mai craftsmanship. The two-tiered wooden house near the workshop accommodates hundreds of elephants, from foetuses to fully-grown giants, with the lights' soft orange hue casting a warm glow on the jackfruit wood and teak carvings. From ceiling to floor, elephants are everywhere, carved in every imaginable position. Meanwhile, perched beneath the house, craftsmen transform wooden blocks into majestic creatures of the jungle with extraordinary precision.

Petch's fascination with the gigantic mammals came 32 years ago when he was an apprentice under master carver Khru Kham-ay Detduangta. Coming from a relatively poor family, Petch was keen to learn a trade with which he could support his family. He picked up his tutor's skills and conducted in-depth studies on elephants to add zest to his work. He produced over 80 sketches of elephants' movements, from frolicking females to protective fathers, to enable his creations to evolve from traditional carvings into masterpieces.



From left to right: An old-style wooden carving; a Baan Jang Nak worker whittles an elephant; and a close-up of an elephant print.

His own technique involves ‘putting true feelings into the elephants,’ and he claims to be the first wooden craftsman to adopt the practice. “I wanted them to look real, so I decided to add emotion into my work.” Petch’s own placid demeanour is captured in his elephants, and his passion explodes from their creased almond-shaped eyes.

The northern artist’s technique has subsequently been copied, and imitations flood Chiang Mai’s Night Bazaar and Bangkok’s Chatuchak Market. Nevertheless, serious collectors will only consider Petch’s faultless work, and his name is renowned throughout the art world.

In 2003, Petch was approached by the One Tambon (village) One Product (OTOP) project to represent his sub-district with Lanna’s ancestral art. This scheme, set up by the Thai government, promotes Thailand’s culture and heritage, while encouraging communities to work together economically for the good of their region, with products sold both domestically and overseas. Petch has been involved in the project ever since.

A plethora of elephant carvings from new artists in Chiang Mai lined the way to *Baan Jang Nak’s* stand, a reminder of the intense competition. However, Petch wasn’t concerned about the rivalry and noted with a coy smile, “On the surface they may look the same, but it’s experience that makes the difference.”

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The Ministry of Culture has also recognised Petch’s unparalleled craftsmanship and in 2000 voted him ‘Best Chiang Mai Artist in Visual Art.’ However, awards are not high on this modest artist’s agenda. “They don’t really matter; I just want Thai people to become involved in preserving our elephants.”

One of his current projects is the creation of a five-metre high Erawan elephant, sponsored by UCOM. The carving, due for completion in the near future, will have taken three years to complete. Each leg is made from one single tree trunk, while the remainder consists of thousands of pieces of Chinese and jackfruit wood.

His future plans involve finding interested sponsors to fund a giant iron mammoth. Although his true love lies with elephants, he is willing to try fresh ideas and has already chiselled gorillas and rhinos. In the meantime, he will continue to teach his students, who already number over 100, and encourage personal styles, so that “the past is successfully passed to future generations.”



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Friends of the Asian Elephant (FAE) was granted by the Office of the National Culture Commission on 19 October, 1993.

Donations can be paid into the FAE account at any Kasikorn Bank in Thailand. Account name: Friends of the Asian Elephant. Account number: 088-2-20983-0.

Or cheques/postal orders can be sent to:

Friends of the Asian Elephant,
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