

Sita taking royal bath before wedding (Thai Ramayana mural)

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Sita is shown taking a royal bath before her wedding to Rama in a mural at the Emerald Buddha Temple. Sita bathes sitting on the edge of an elegant platform shelter extending into a large tiled pool. Two women servants pour water from a gold basin over Sita and scrub her. A third woman sits in the shelter above, either arranging Sita's clothes and possessions or entertaining her while she bathes.

Besides portraying the luxury of royal life in ancient Siam, this image also indicates the importance of bathing in Southeast Asia. When Europeans first arrived in Southeast Asia in the 1500s and 1600s, they were amazed to see people who bathed twice a day when they themselves bathed only twice a year--or at least very infrequently given the cold climate, shortage of heating fuel, and fears of illness caused by chills.

Europeans were surprised to find Southeast Asians to be relatively healthy and long-lived peoples, which they were not yet able to link scientifically to factors such as diet, exercise, and scrupulous bathing habits.

In addition to routine bathing in streams for cleanliness, Southeast Asians also incorporated baths into their ceremonial rituals such as those around marriage and the early stages of childhood. For these baths, water was stored in basins and poured over the body. To the present day, most Southeast Asians never sit in a bath because that would dirty the water they were using to clean themselves. Rather, they pour water from a basin over themselves using a handheld dipper, or else they take showers.



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