In 1686 King Louis XIV of France had the great Hall of Mirrors in the Versailles specially prepared to receive, with exceptional pomp and ceremony, a group of foreign envoys. The envoys brought with them two shiploads of gifts for the court. In fact, they delivered so many objects of gold, silver, and lacquer that the French complained that their list would be as long as a book.

The envoys had been sent from the kingdom of Ayutthaya, or "Siam" as it was known in the West. Though little remembered today, Ayutthaya was one of the largest and most important kingdoms of Southeast Asia. Founded in 1351, the kingdom flourished for more than four hundred years - longer than China's Ming dynasty. It was a major trading center with diplomatic ties with China, Japan, Persia, and the Ryukyu kingdom (Okinawa), and, from the seventeenth century on, with Great Britian, France, the Netherlands, and Portugal. The envoys' gifts
reflected this trade activity - more than fifteen hundred pieces of porcelain (mostly Chinese), Persian, and Indian carpets, and many other objects from Japan and China were given to the French king and his relatives.

Despite the kingdom's power, prosperity, and influence, it was completely destroyed by a devastating invasion from neighboring Burma in 1767. As a result, many Ayutthaya artifacts, especially made of fragile materials, were destroyed, and the kingdom's splendor gradually faded from memory. The Kingdom of Siam: The Art of Central Thailand, 1350-1800 - the first exhibition of classical art from Thailand shown in the United States in more than thirty years - collects eighty-nine of the finest surviving works from Ayutthaya, drawn from collections in Thailand, Europe, and the United States; many of these are being displayed for the first time in the West. They include stone and bronze Buddha images, sculptures of Hindu deities, figural and decorative wood carvings, temple furnishings, illuminated manuscripts, jewelry, and textiles.

Despite the length and importance of Ayutthaya kingdom, this period of Thai history has received little scholarly attention. This book, combining essays by leading scholars and entries examining each of the objects in the exhibition, at last sheds light on a one of history's greatest, but least known, cultures.

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