Ambassadors and Missionaries, Converts and Infidels: Visualizing the 1686 Siamese Embassy to Versailles

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Between 1680 and 1688 six embassies were dispatched between King Narai (1633-1688) of Siam and King Louis XIV (1638-1715) of France. These extraordinary diplomatic events, which were the first official exchanges between the two kingdoms, captured the imagination of the French populace and generated a significant body of visual and material culture. This essay focuses specifically on the 1686 Siamese embassy to France, the most celebrated and well documented of the delegations, and analyzes the diverse prints, paintings, and small-scale luxury objects that depicted this momentous occasion. The primary purpose of the 1686 embassy was to ratify commercial treaties negotiated the previous year by Siamese officials and members of the 1685 French embassy to Siam. The mission consisted of three Siamese ambassadors, Kosa Pan, Ok-luang Kanlaya Ratchamaitri, and Ok-khun Sisawan Wacha, as well as an extensive entourage that included the French missionaries Guy Tachard (1651-1712) of the Society of Jesus and Artus de Lionne (1655-1713) of the Paris Foreign Missions Society. These two religious figures served as interpreters and their participation in a diplomatic embassy between France and Siam is unsurprising given that Catholic missions in Southeast Asia established some of the earliest contacts between the French and the Siamese.\(^1\) The

\(^1\) The Paris Foreign Missions Society (Missions Étrangères de Paris), for example, had been established in the Siamese capital of Ayutthaya by 1664, and Lionne himself had been living in the kingdom for at least five years before the embassy. “Artus de Lionne,” *Fiche biographique*, 78. Missions Étrangères de Paris Archives. The Catholic missionary presence in Siam during this period is thoroughly discussed in Adrien Launay, *Histoire de la mission de Siam: 1662-1811* (Paris: Missions étrangères de Paris: Les Indes savants, 2000); Ronald S. Love, “Monarchs, Merchants, and Missionaries in Early Modern Asia: The Missions Étrangères in Siam, 1662-1684,” *The International History Review* 21, 1 (March
presence of the missionaries is further explained by the naive hope of the French that these embassies would finally convert Narai and much of the Siamese population to Catholicism, strengthening France’s influence in the region. The French, however, represented only one of many foreign constituencies operating in King Narai’s cosmopolitan kingdom of merchants, soldiers, and court officials from across both Europe and Asia. In fact, Narai’s desire to reduce the growing power of Portuguese and Dutch traders in the region had prompted his initial decision to establish diplomatic relations with France in 1680.

Public enthusiasm for the 1686 embassy far surpassed that for the 1684 and 1685 diplomatic missions between France and Siam, and excitement surrounding the delegation was fueled by an incredible number of textual and visual representations. The Mercure Galant, a society gazette highly sympathetic to the monarchy, published four special editions detailing the latest news and movements of the Siamese ambassadors during their ten-month stay in France. Likewise, artists such as Charles Le Brun (1619-1690), Sébastien Le Clerc, the elder (1637-1714), and Nicolas de Larmessin II (1638-1694) captured the likenesses of the “exotic” ambassadors and depicted their reception at court in and on numerous prints, paintings, medals, and luxury objects. While several historians, most notably Dirk van der Cruysse, Ronald Love, and Michael Smithies, have analyzed the seventeenth-century diplomatic missions, the large body of visual material related to the 1686 Siamese embassy has received relatively little scholarly attention.


2 The most notable of these figures is perhaps Constantine Phaulkon, a Greek who served as one of Narai’s chief political counselors.

3 For more on the VOC in Siam, see Bhawan Ruangsilp, Dutch East India Company Merchants at the Court of Ayutthaya: Dutch Perceptions of the Thai Kingdom, c. 1604-1765 (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2007). The first Siamese embassy sent in 1680 never reached France.

4 These four special issues appeared as “seconde partie” or supplements to the regular issues for the months of September, November, and December 1686, as well as January 1687.

5 Dirk Van der Cruysse, Louis XIV et le Siam (Paris: Fayard, 1991); Ronald Love, “Rituals of Majesty: France, Siam, and Court Spectacle in Royal Image Building at Versailles in 1685 and 1686,” Canadian Journal of History 31 (August 1996): 171-198; Michael Smithies, Mission Made Impossible: The Second French Embassy to Siam, 1687 (Chiang Mai, Thailand: Silkworm Books, 2002). Primary accounts of these diplomatic events can also be found in the published writings of missionaries and ambassadors who traveled with the embassies, such as Abbé de Choisy, Journal of a Voyage to Siam, 1685-86 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); Comte de Forbin, Memoires of the Count of Forbin (London, 1740); Michael Smithies, trans., The Siamese Embassy to the Sun King: the Personal Memoires of Kosa Pan (Bangkok: Editions Duang Kamol, 1990); Guy Tachard, A
Rather than focusing on the textual sources addressed by previous scholars, my goal is to dissect how works of art made during and months or even years after the visit participated alongside texts in late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century discourses on Siam, diplomacy, and cultural and religious identities more broadly.

This essay is indebted to several recent studies of artistic productions related to the embassies between France and Siam in the 1680s. Sarah Benson and Meredith Martin, for example, have considered mirrors and medals exchanged between the two kingdoms, while Corinne Thépaut-Cabasset has examined how the 1686 Siamese embassy sparked the French taste for so-called “siamoise” fabric. These scholarly investigations demonstrate the impact of diplomacy on a burgeoning global economy as well as a shared value system for certain goods and materials.  

Rebecca Zorach, likewise, has analyzed several French almanac prints depicting the 1686 embassy. She argues that these works, which visualize the extreme reverence the Siamese ambassadors paid to King Narai’s letter, comment not only on the supposed idolatry of the Siamese but also on French anxieties about the divine status and religious authority of Louis XIV during the period. This small but diverse body of scholarship has begun to explore the large number and wide variety of objects related to the embassies between France and Siam, and this essay both relies and builds upon these earlier studies in its scope and method.

I aim to underline the formal and contextual heterogeneity, as well as the interpretive instability, of objects representing the 1686 Siamese embassy to Versailles. To this end, I examine works of art with varied media, makers, patrons, audiences, and dates, including previously unstudied objects with uncertain attributions and provenances. Likewise, my largely visual approach allows me to tease out contradictions and ambiguities both within a single work and between works. I argue that the objects depict the 1686 Siamese embassy as not only a diplomatic but also a religious and military triumph. They portray their primary subjects in heterogeneous and ambivalent manners, casting Louis XIV as a leader

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dedicated to both war and peace, the French missionaries as envoys for both Louis and Narai, and the Siamese ambassadors as both willing converts and defeated infidels. While the construction of such divergent narratives suggests the political power of France’s absolutist monarchy, I argue that it also reveals French anxieties about and ambivalence toward the Siamese embassy both at the time of and decades after its occurrence.

At least eight different designs for the 1687 almanac depict the 1686 Siamese embassy, demonstrating French interest in the diplomatic event and its signifying power. Printed annually with a calendar and predictions for the New Year, almanac broadsides were inexpensive to produce and distributed en masse as ephemeral wall hangings. One of these prints titled *Royal Audiences with Foreign Ministers at Versailles* (Fig. 1) pictures various foreign ambassadors who visited the French court in 1686. While the image includes representatives from nine kingdoms, duchies, and cantons, including Venice, Mantua, Switzerland, and the Holy See, it specifically highlights the three Siamese ambassadors extraordinary. These figures occupy the majority of the left mid-ground of the composition, where they are shown kneeling in front of and offering a letter and presents to Louis XIV. The other diplomats, by contrast, are relegated to the crowded background of the image. While the decision to make the Siamese ambassadors the most prominent of the foreign visitors can be attributed to their novelty as peoples from the most geographically distant and seemingly “exotic” of the lands represented, additional elements in the work lend their centrality further meaning.

The print, created in the final months of 1686, depicts not only diplomatic envoys to France but also Louis XIV’s recent military and religious triumphs in conflicts with Spain, Algeria, and the Netherlands—a significant juxtaposition. The king wears the costume of a Roman emperor and is flanked on opposite sides by a classical warrior and an allegorical figure of Peace. This positioning of Louis, as well as his turn towards the female allegory, casts him as a powerful and benevolent monarch adept at war but dedicated to amity. Below the French king and the Siamese ambassadors are the allegories of Time and Religion. Time, represented on the left as a winged man with a tablet, is in the process of recording the many glorious accomplishments of Louis. His inscription praises the king for “bringing peace to the Algerians” and “calling the Spanish to prayer,” references to a 1684 treaty between France and Algeria that freed French Christians detained in North Africa and the 1684 Treaty of Rastibon that declared a twenty-year truce between France and Spain. On the right a lavishly adorned female figure

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8 The 1687 almanac, for which the prints discussed were designed, was a precursor to the *Royal Almanac*, which began to be published annually in 1700.

9 These earlier events are linked to the 1686 Siamese embassy not only by the inscriptions but also by visual correspondences between the Siamese ambassadors in this almanac print and the disgraced Algerian ambassadors in other representations of the period. A
representing Religion holds open a book that reads “under the care of religion the churches are restored,” and two closed books below this one are labeled “for the new converts.” The allusion to restoration likely refers to the 1685 Edict of Fontainebleau, which revoked the Edict of Nantes, ordered the destruction of Huguenot churches, and sanctioned coerced conversions of Huguenots. Directly beneath Time and Religion are two small roundels with scenes depicting the so-called “young heroes” who aided these victories and the installation of sculptor Martin Desjardin’s monument of Louis XIV in Paris’s Place des Victoires.10

Framing the scene of diplomatic reception, the many military and religious accomplishments that the image cites are presented as eliciting the adoration of the Siamese ambassadors. The First Ambassador, Kosa Pan, bows before the king’s throne and holds out a letter that reads “to the most majestic monarch who believes in Jesus, the elite and the arbiter of all Christian nations, the emperor of France, the lord of majesty, honor, and glory.” These honorifics highlight French notions of Gallicanism and, along with the prostrating bodies and outstretched arms of the ambassadors, suggest not only deference toward Louis XIV as a foreign monarch but also approval of his expansion of territory, trade, and Catholicism in Europe and an appeal for similar involvement in Siam. This notion was bolstered during the period by rumors that Narai had promptly dispatched an embassy to France after hearing of Louis’s past victories against the Dutch, a group the Siamese king felt had gained disproportionate influence in Siam. The print’s dual focus on war and religion, as well as on the outcomes of victory and conversion, runs throughout the expansive body of imagery related to the 1686 embassy, casting the Siamese ambassadors alternatively and sometimes simultaneously as willing converts and defeated infidels.

medal titled Africa is suppliant, since the pirate war has concluded, for example, depicts the 1684 Algerian ambassador before Louis XIV. As in the almanac print, the French king wears the garb of a Roman emperor and the visiting ambassador prostrates low offering his majesty a long scroll. Furthermore, the bow of a ship, barrel of a cannon, and a cannon ball appear behind Louis in the medal, echoing the military objects, including a helmet, shield, and arrows, at the king’s feet in the almanac print. The sculpture of Jupiter holding his bundle of thunderbolts in the background of the almanac print also recalls the imagery and inscriptions on two medals commemorating Louis XIV’s interactions with Algeria and Genoa, “Algiers struck by lightning” and “Thunderbolts are hurled at the proud.”

10 The Siamese were given gold and silver medals commemorating the erection of the Place des Victoires monument as well as copies of François-Séraphin Regnier-Desmarais’s description of the monument. Robert Wellington, Antiquarianism and the Visual Histories of Louis XIV: Artifacts for a Future Past (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2015), 75.
In addition to depicting the Siamese as adoring fans come to pay tribute to the French king, numerous representations of the diplomatic visit suggest the ambassadors’ religious tolerance and potential conversion to Catholicism. In particular, the presence of French missionaries in several images of the Siamese delegation signals the foreign diplomats as ready converts. Artus de Lionne, for example, appears prominently in a number of the almanac broadsides portraying Louis XIV’s reception of the embassy, such as *The Royal and Magnificent Audience* (Fig. 2) by Larmessin II. Despite his role as a missionary, Lionne also acted as an unofficial diplomatic representative for both Narai and Louis XIV, traveling as a member of both the 1686 Siamese embassy to Versailles and the 1687 French embassy to Siam.¹¹ Lionne’s dual role as missionary and diplomat is clearly

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¹¹ Though he was a member of the Paris Foreign Missions Society, Lionne grew up in one of the most prominent diplomatic families in France, with his father, Hughes de Lionne (1611-1671), serving as Louis XIV’s Secretary of State from 1663 until 1671.
communicated in Larmessin’s image. The missionary, identifiable by his clerical attire, is positioned alongside members of the Siamese embassy as they approach the king’s throne. He stands immediately adjacent to the first Siamese ambassador, Kosa Pan, their bodies overlapping and the three objects they present forming a vertical line. While Kosa Pan offers a filigree goblet and a rolled scroll (likely his letter of credentials), Lionne holds out a letter that reads “harangue given to the King by the first ambassador of Siam, explained in French by Monsieur Abbé de Lionne.” The position of the letter directly in front of Kosa Pan’s mouth underlines the missionary’s words as an exact replica of the Siamese ambassador’s sentiments. Lionne’s translation of the speech from Siamese to French likewise mirrors his conversion of souls from infidel to Christian, one of the primary goals of the embassies between France and Siam. The intermingling words and bodies of Lionne and Kosa Pan visualize the blurred lines between missionary and diplomat, French and Siamese, and Christian and non-Christian and intimate a perceived willingness of the Siamese to establish not only trade relations but also cultural and religious affiliations with France.

The promise of the Siamese ambassadors as ready converts is again suggested by the inclusion of Lionne in a painting (Fig. 3) by Jacques Vigoureuex Duplessis (1680-1732) in the Abbaye de Chaalis. This work, perhaps commissioned by Jules-Paul de Lionne, brother of Artus, between 1715 and 1721, shows the three diplomats and the missionary looking out over a balcony. 12 A mille-fleurs tapestry covers the railing in front of the figures, and the corner of an architectural structure with a classical balustrade, archway, and pilasters appears behind them, creating the appearance of an enterable balcony space. The painting’s focus on non-European ambassadors and its construction of an illusionistic architectural environment recalls both the Staircase of the Ambassadors completed in 1679 at Versailles and the Sala Regia frescoes painted in 1616 at the Palazzo del Quirinale in Rome. 13 The presence of Lionne, however, ties it especially closely to the latter, which decorated the reception hall for ambassadors and other important dignitaries visiting the papal palace.

12 Jules-Paul de Lionne was in residence at Chaalis from 1668 to 1721. The painting was probably completed several decades after the embassy during the height of Duplessis’s fame as a painter of chinoiserie.

13 The Staircase of the Ambassadors at Versailles was built and decorated by François d’Orbay and Charles Le Brun between 1672 and 1679. The original stairway and paintings were destroyed in 1752, but the plans and designs are known through Le Grand Escalier du château de Versailles dit escalier des ambassadeurs ordonné et peint par Charles Le Brun ecuyer premier peintre du Roi, consacré à la mémoire de Louis le Grand, an eighteenth-century book of engravings by Louis de Surugue de Surgis and Charles-Louis Simonneau. This painting is also similar to a 1682 painting at Versailles by Antoine Coywel of the Moroccan Ambassador, Mohammed Temim, gazing out over a balcony at the Comédie Italienn.
By depicting members of numerous non-European embassies that traveled to Rome during the papacy of Pope Paul V, the Sala Regia frescoes, as argued by Mayu Fujikawa and Opher Mansour, provide a vision of global conversion. As in Duplessis’s painting, the foreign ambassadors are shown gazing down from a series of balconies. One of the eight balconies represented holds members of the 1615

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Japanese embassy to Rome, which was led by the ambassador Hasekura Tsunenaga (1571-1622) and the Franciscan friar Luis Sotelo (1574-1624). Like Lionne in Duplessis’s painting, Sotelo appears alongside the Japanese but is clearly identifiable by his dress and physiognomy. Rather than the black robes, clerical collar, and crucifix worn by Lionne, however, he dons the traditional long brown robes and hooded cloak associated with the Franciscan order. In addition, the Japanese ambassador’s colorful kimono with vegetal patterns and images of deer mirrors the bright and densely decorated robes and hats of the Siamese ambassadors. Both the Sala Regia image of the Japanese embassy and Duplessis’s painting of the Siamese embassy highlight the close relationships between non-European ambassadors and Catholic missionaries, a connection that European rulers hoped would result in both diplomatic advantage and religious conversion. In fact, Hasekura and several other members of the Japanese delegation were baptized during their embassy to Europe, and Lionne instructed and baptized twelve members of the 1686 Siamese embassy during their stay in France.\(^\text{15}\)

Comparing the Siamese ambassadors with earlier Christian converts played a key role in convincing Louis XIV and the French court of Siamese religiosity. Narratives like Hasekura’s of non-Europeans, particularly ambassadors, converting to Christianity would have been familiar and fresh in the minds of members of the French court. For example, the Christian ambassador from the African kingdom of Arda (Allada in what is now Benin), Matteo Lopes, visited France in 1670.\(^\text{16}\) Likewise, many French courtiers may have been present in 1684, when the Jesuit missionary Philippe Couplet (1623-1693) brought the Chinese Christian Michel Shen Fuzong (d. 1691) to Versailles.\(^\text{17}\) These previous instances of conversion, along with missionaries’ assurances of King Narai’s interest in Christianity, persuaded French audiences that it was only a matter of time before a mass conversion of the Siamese population took place. I argue that this expectation not only influenced how the Siamese ambassadors were represented in French texts and images but also affected how French audiences would have read representations such as Larmessin’s and Duplessis’s that picture missionary figures alongside the foreign embassy.

\(^{15}\) "Artus de Lionne," *Fiche biographique*, 78. Missions Étrangères de Paris Archives.

\(^{16}\) Christina Brauner, “To be the Key for Two Coffers: A West African Embassy to France (1670/1),” *IFRA-Nigeria E-Papers Series* 30 (2013).

While the presence of Lionne in Duplessis's painting links the Siamese ambassadors to non-European Christian converts such as Hasekura Tsunenaga, the differences between the French canvas and Italian frescoes should not be ignored. While the fresco shows the Japanese ambassador cradling his head in his hand and gazing attentively at Sotelo, who appears to engage him in conversation, the Siamese ambassadors seem unaware of and uninhibited by Lionne's presence. In fact, unlike Sotelo, who appears beside Hasekura and in front of the other figures
in the balcony, the French missionary is positioned slightly behind the Siamese and marginalized to the far right side of the composition. The dynamic poses, intense expressions, and divergent gazes of the Siamese ambassadors further distance them from both Lionne and Hasekura. Instead, the sudden movement and even disorder created by the crisscrossing of the diplomats’ limbs and sightlines echoes the chaos seen in the Sala Regia’s depictions of embassies from Persia and other Islamic lands. The visual associations of the Siamese ambassadors in Duplessis’s work with Persians or Muslims is further supported by the subject of the painting’s pendant, the 1715 Persian embassy to Versailles. This second painting, along with the fact that Duplessis was only six years old in 1686, supports the theory that the artist executed both works sometime after 1715. The dating of the work almost three decades after the embassy, when Duplessis and his French audience would have been well aware of the ultimate failure of France’s trade, military, and missionary endeavors in Siam, might also explain its ambivalent treatment of the subjects.

An elaborately carved ivory box (Fig. 4) that portrays Louis XIV’s audience with the ambassadors on its lid makes a more direct comparison between the Siamese and Christian converts from outside Europe. Now in the British Museum, the provenance of this object is unknown but it was likely created sometime after 1689 when the source for the lid, an engraving by Sébastien Le Clerc, was published in an illustrated book of medals and other objects glorifying Louis XIV. The royal reception scene shows the three Siamese ambassadors kneeling before an enthroned Louis XIV in the Hall of Mirrors. The French king looks down on the foreign visitors from his high perch, which is surrounded by an elaborate tapestry, carved cherubs, and other splendid objects. Meanwhile, two of the ambassadors prostrate with their hands clasped and the third ambassador bows and presents a gift. While Artus de Lionne is not included in the scene, imagery that runs around the body of the object maintains the suggestion of religious conversion.

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18 At least two of the balcony scenes depict embassies from Persia, the members of which are shown shoving one another and climbing on the balustrades.


20 Little is known about this object but trustees’ papers in the British Museum files indicate that it came into the collection in 1941 through the London dealer Alfred Spero. I have not been able to trace its longer history, however, such as who might have been the maker or the patron of such an object. Similar ivory boxes were common across Europe in the seventeenth century and were often used to hold snuff or small precious items. The object could have been produced in the French port town of Dieppe, which was famous during the period for its ivory carvings made from raw materials imported from Guinea. Claude-François Ménestrier, Histoire du roy Louis le Grand par les médailles, emblèmes, devises, jettons, inscriptions, armoiries, et autres monumens publics (Paris: J.B. Nolin, 1689).
The side (Figs. 5) of the cylindrical box contains four vignettes framed by strands of garlands and separated by alternating organic and grotesque designs. Two of these vignettes include African figures, who are shown in profile with feathered headdresses, cowrie-shell necklaces, and partially exposed bodies. Both of these figures are derived from porthole portraits by Larmessin II that appear in The August Representations of the Kings of France, a 1688 book containing over 200 engraved images of French kings and queens, as well as of important state officials, members of the clergy, and foreign monarchs. The texts that accompany each engraved portrait label the two figures seen on the box as representatives of the West African kingdoms of Guinée and Kongo. The rulers of the latter...
converted to Christianity in the late fifteenth century after the arrival of Portuguese explorers and Roman Catholic priests, and Catholicism remained the popular religion in the region throughout the seventeenth century. In fact, the scene adjacent to that of the Japanese embassy in the Sala Regia fresco cycle depicts the Christian ambassador from Kongo, Antonio Emanuele Ne Vunda (d. 1608), flanked by two Europeans. The other two vignettes on the body of the box show European figures wearing buttoned coats and brimmed hats while smoking and holding pots and pieces of cloth. These details suggest that the figures likely were intended to represent Dutch traders, who had previously been a major force in West Africa and who remained France’s largest competitors in trade relations with Siam. By juxtaposing a scene of the 1686 Siamese embassy with images of African Christians and Dutch merchants, this object suggests that the religious conversion of the Siamese would be a key step in both establishing French commercial ties with the region and driving out the Protestant Dutch. Moreover, the object’s ivory material, which was imported from both Africa and Asia, previews the type of treasures that ties with Siam would bring to France.

Fig. 5 Ivory box with Louis XIV receiving Siamese Ambassadors (side view), after 1686. Ivory, 8.2 cm in diameter. London: British Museum, 1941,1209.1. Photo (CC BY-NC-SA) © Trustees of the British Museum.

kings and peoples. South Guinea referred to Kongo, but North Guinea could refer to numerous diverse countries. The text states that this figure is from the part of West Africa that spans from the Atlantic Ocean to the Senegal River, and the Encyclopédie describes Tombut as a kingdom in Africa bordered by Combour, Guinée, and Gabi. This figure might be representative of the Kingdom of Tombut, which Europeans fantasized about as home to the “lost city” of gold, Timbuktu.

22 For more on Ne Vunda and his imaging in Europe, see Kate Lowe, “Representing’ Africa: Ambassadors and Princes from Christian Africa to Renaissance Italy and Portugal, 1402-1608,” Transactions of the Royal Historical Society, Sixth Series 17 (2007): 101-128.
In addition to comparing the Siamese ambassadors to non-European Christian converts, images of the 1686 embassy also align the diplomats with defeated Muslims. Returning to The Royal and Magnificent Audience (Fig. 2), a decorative cartouche containing a raging battle scene appears below the depiction of Louis XIV receiving the Siamese ambassadors. Two turbaned figures flank the scene and a small box of text labels it as “the city of Buda, in Hungary, taken by assault on 2 September 1686 by the army of Emperor Leopold Ignatius I.” By juxtaposing the embassy from Siam with this military triumph and the Siamese ambassadors with defeated Ottomans, this image connects diplomatic exchanges to both the military and religious defeats of non-Christians. The Siamese are further associated with the Muslim figures in the print through their dress, which had been heavily influenced by Persian styles following the admiration of Persian culture and the large Persian community in Ayutthaya during King Narai’s reign. The ambassadors’ sashes, jeweled daggers, and long patterned robes recall those of Persian and even Ottoman Muslims. Their conical hats, one of the most fascinating parts of Siamese costume for eighteenth-century French viewers, did not derive from Persian sartorial traditions of binding the turban. These pieces of headgear do, however, resemble corozas, the long pointed hats worn by accused heretics in the auto-da-fé ceremonies of the Inquisition, a connection that was perhaps not lost on French audiences.

Another 1687 almanac broadside titled The Audience Given by the King to the Siamese Ambassadors at Versailles on 1 September (Fig. 6) also juxtaposes the Siamese embassy with imagery of conquered Muslims. A complex network of seven discrete scenes, each framed by twisting scrolls of vegetation, is situated immediately beneath prostrating members of the Siamese embassy. The central cartouche encircled by a laurel wreath displays an aerial map of the city of Buda, and ten roundels evenly spaced around the frame each show decisive battles that led to the final victory there. Crowning this central scene is the floating head of a Turk, identifiable by his moustache and striped turban, the pattern of which echoes that of the nearest prostrating Siamese figure. A scroll that runs along the top of the cartouche over the head of the turbaned figure reads, “The triumphs of the Church under the reign of Louis the Great, and the conquests by Christians of Infidels in 1686, including imperial conquests in Hungary and Venetian conquests


24 Thanks to Julia Landweber for bringing this connection to the coroza to my attention.
in Morée [modern Peloponnesus].” On either side of this central cartouche are six smaller scenes of events advancing the Catholic faith, including the establishment of Catholic missions in the Indes, the creation of the chivalric Order of the Holy Spirit, and the defeat of Protestants in Savoy. King Narai’s reception of the 1685 French embassy to Siam is positioned in the upper left alongside these various religious triumphs, situating this diplomatic event within the larger category of victories by European Catholics. This scene is particularly suited to emphasizing the theme of triumph. It shows the moment when the French ambassadors not only refused to prostrate before Narai but also forced the Siamese king to bend down to receive Louis XIV’s letter, a supposed diplomatic victory by the French that was heavily publicized.25

Fig. 6 The Audience Given by the King to the Ambassadors of the King of Siam at Versailles on the first of September, 1686, published by Nicolas Langlois, 1687. Engraving and etching, 86.6 x 56.3 cm. Paris: Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Estampes, Collection Michel Hennin, inv. 5551. Reproduced with permission.

25 This event is depicted in a full sheet engraving attributed to Jean-Baptiste Nolin. Bibliothèque nationale de France, Estampes, Collection Hennin, Vol. 61, No. 5429. It is also recounted in several memoires by the French ambassadors and missionaries who visited Siam.
The Taking of Buda (Fig. 7), a third almanac print from 1687, further intimates a connection between the defeat of the Ottomans by Leopold I (1640-1705) and the reception of the Siamese by Louis XIV. This print is divided into two discrete scenes, one on the battlefield during the siege of the city and the other at the court of Vienna when the defeated Turkish officers are presented to the Holy Roman Emperor. The second visually echoes depictions of diplomatic reception,
such as the many images of Louis XIV’s audience with the 1686 Siamese embassy, and in fact, this event is shown in a small roundel just above the head of Leopold I. Both Leopold and Louis appear on the left seated on elevated platforms and surrounded by high-ranking members of their courts. Likewise, the two sets of foreigners enter and approach the thrones from the right, and onlookers watch these meetings between European rulers and foreign officials from the sides and backs of the rooms. Similar to the Siamese ambassadors, the Ottoman figures are clearly identifiable not only by their placement in the composition but also by their distinctive dress, including patterned robes and turbans. In addition, two of the figures bow, with their hands chained behind their backs, while a third prostrates low on his knees with his head almost touching the floor, recalling many representations of the Siamese ambassadors before the throne of Louis XIV.  

Presenting the 1686 Siamese embassy as a religious triumph on par with the siege of Buda would have been particularly useful for Louis XIV during this period, when he was highly criticized for his close relationship with the Islamic Ottoman Empire. In addition, given that Emperor Leopold and the Triple Alliance, which did not include France, led in the taking of Buda, the Siamese embassy also provided the French king with a much-needed example of France’s contribution to the advancement of Catholic interests.

Comparing the Siamese embassy to military actions against Muslims and Protestants also highlighted that the French king had no qualms with using force to further his interests in Siam. In fact, in 1687 Louis sent his own embassy to Siam, which included French diplomats and missionaries as well as hundreds of French soldiers and five French warships. Furthermore, he instructed General Desfarges (d. 1690), who led the military component of the mission, to establish troops in the ports of Mergui (now Myeik in Burma) and Bangkok and if necessary to take these locations by force. A suggestion of Louis XIV’s willingness to use force in Siam appears in a final almanac print from 1687 titled The Audience Given to the Siamese Ambassadors Extraordinary (Fig. 8). In the foreground, three Roman soldiers pillage the gifts brought by the Siamese ambassadors, while in the background behind Lionne, a throng of men gather carrying pikes. Similar references to violence are seen in representations of Louis XIV receiving the Algerian and Genoese ambassadors, such as the medals Africa is suppliant and Thunderbolts are hurled at the proud. The former, showing the Algerian

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26 A thorough discussion of French representations of Turkish slaves during the reign of Louis XIV can be found in Meredith Martin and Gillian Weiss, “ ‘Turks’ on Display during the Reign of Louis XIV,” L’Esprit Créateur 53, 4 (Winter 2013): 98-112.

27 This criticism is seen in several satirical images of the king that present him as an enemy of Christendom and an ally of the Turks. See Martin and Weiss, as well as Peter Burke, “The Reverse of the Medal,” in The Fabrication of Louis XIV(New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 135-149.
ambassador kneeling before the French king, includes the bow of a ship, barrel of a cannon, and a cannon ball in the background, while the latter pictures Louis as Jupiter raining lightning on the Genoese. The inclusion of such militant imagery in a representation of the 1686 embassy alludes to the Siamese as potentially suffering the same defeat as these non-Catholic ambassadors.

Fig. 8  *The Audience Given to the Ambassadors Extraordinary of the King of Siam*, published by Pierre Landry, 1687. Engraving and etching, 94.1 x 59.8 cm. Paris: Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Estampes, Collection Michel Hennin, inv. 5549. Reproduced with permission.
The prints, paintings, and decorative objects depicting the 1686 Siamese embassy to Versailles perform an extraordinary amount of cultural work. They compare the Siamese ambassadors alternatively and even simultaneously to converted diplomats from Japan, Christian princes from Kongo, conquered Muslims in the Ottoman Empire, and defeated Protestants in Savoy. This ambiguity is common of diplomatic imagery of the period, which often redefines the identities of diplomatic actors as fluid and negotiable rather than fixed and determined, highlighting diplomatic exchanges as channels for negotiating not only national interests but also cultural and religious identities. The heterogeneity and contradictions of these works of art, however, also echo the complex and precarious nature of early modern diplomacy, which had as much potential to challenge as to affirm national power and foreign subservience. Such uncertainty boiled over in 1688, when the Siamese Revolution ousted King Narai and suddenly terminated France's diplomatic relations with Siam for over 150 years.