

Emil Groote, Court Photographer to Three Kings of Siam

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Emil Groote (1870-1948) was the only German court photographer to serve three kings of Siam: Chulalongkorn, Rama V (reigned 1868-1910), Vajiravudh, Rama VI (reigned 1910-1925) and Prajadhipok, Rama VII (reigned 1925-1935). Thanks to his autobiography in German placed at my disposal by his son, Günter Groote, we now know details about his life and career as outlined below.

Born on 10 August 1870 in Dortmund (Province of Westphalia, Prussia), Emil Eduard Groote was the seventh child of Wilhelm Groote, a ladies wear manufacturer, and his wife Johanna (née Berg). He grew up at 21 Betenstraße with his five brothers and three sisters.

Groote wanted to become an artist and was trained by his grandfather, Eduard. After visiting the photographic studio of Otto Siepmann in Iserlohn (North Rhine-Westphalia) and watching a retoucher at work, he noted in his autobiography, “Since Mr. Siepmann is a very wealthy and highly esteemed gentleman, I gathered that also his job must be lucrative. Besides, the practitioner gets the opportunity to work as an artist.” He thus abandoned his education and on 15 September 1886 began a two-year apprenticeship in the photographic studio of Borschel & Jordan in Dortmund (figure 25). Subsequently, he was employed in five photographic studios situated in five different German cities.

After Groote’s father died on 6 December 1890, his former teacher, Mr. Jordan, invited Groote back to Dortmund where he could support his mother running the studio, and become first assistant in the Borschel & Jordan studio. Soon afterwards, Groote’s brother Otto, who was managing an ice and carbonated water factory in Moulmein (Mawlamyaing), Burma, convinced Emil to travel to Moulmein to work as a photographer, especially since Philipp Klier, another German photographer, was making “big deals” in Burma. Groote sailed from Genoa on 20 May 1893. Arriving at Rangoon, Philippe Klier offered him a job in his studio. Groote travelled on to meet his brother in Moulmein, arriving in July, but discovered that much of his photographic equipment had become almost useless because of the humidity, so he returned to take up Klier’s offer in Rangoon.

In April 1894, Groote ran a temporary studio under Klier’s name in Moulmein for four weeks. In April 1896, he left Burma and returned to Germany, where he became a joint partner of G. Greul’s photographic studio in Mannheim (Baden-Württemberg). The next year, on 26 January 1897, Groote married Henriette Caroline

Clare Storck with whom he had a son, Karl Theodor Groote (1899-1964). Henriette died soon after the birth in 1899 and Karl was raised by one of his grandmothers.



Figure 1. Rear page of a carte-de-visite of the studio of E. Groote in Dortmund, circa 1899. P&G collection, Karlsruhe-Berlin.

Groote founded his own “Atelier für Photographie und Malerei” (Studio for Photography and Painting) in Dortmund (figure 1), which he later sold to Hermann Meyer. In late 1904, Groote sailed to Bangkok to become general manager of the Siam Photo Supply studio and “Robt. Lenz & Co.” (figure 7), belonging to the “Prussian”¹ photographer Robert Lenz² (1864-1939). His partner was Carl Pruss, who had succeeded Groote as assistant to Philipp Klier in Rangoon. Portraits signed by “E. Groote” or “C. Pruss” survive from 1908.³

On 7 July 1906, Groote was appointed “Court Photographer” to King Chulalongkorn through his private secretary, HRH Prince Sommot Amarabandh. A few months earlier on 30 September 1905, the king had taken a photograph of Groote, which he developed and printed himself (figure 6).⁴ Possibly, this had come about because

Groote and Pruss had a studio close to the palace.⁵ During one of his first meetings with King Chulalongkorn, Groote began nervously playing with a *kris*-shaped letter opener on the table in front of him. The king asked Groote if he liked the knife and, when Groote answered in the affirmative, presented it to him as a royal gift. In his early years at Bangkok, Groote as a matter of course took several photographs of King Chulalongkorn. No less important is his series of photographs showing tribal depictions as well as different scenes from Siamese dramas (figure 10). In 1905,

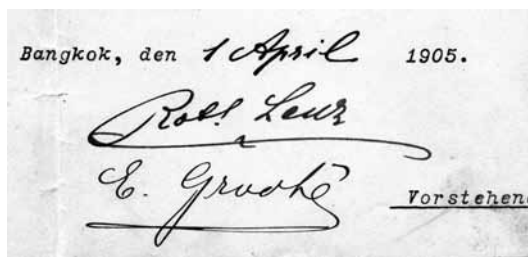


Figure 2. Signatures of Robert Lenz and Emil Groote on the contract selling the studio. Collection of G. Groote.

the king commissioned Groote to take a series of photographs of the Emerald Buddha image wearing the dress for each season of the year (figure 9). Groote built a scaffold for this task.

On 1 April 1905, Robert Lenz sold the studio to Groote (figure 2) and, according to the *Bangkok Times*,

¹ In the contract, a copy of which still exists, both Groote and Lenz are styled “Prussian.” The contract consists of eight paragraphs on four pages with the rubber stamp of the “Kaiserlich Deutschen Minister-Residentur in Bangkok” and the signatures of both Groote and Lenz, followed by the accreditation of Herrn Schulze. See Wright and Breakspear, 1908, p. 277ff.

² For his career as a photographer in Bangkok, see Anake, 2005, pp. 567-614.

³ Wright and Breakspear, 1908, p. 265; Sakda, 1992, p. 177; and Anake, 2005, p. 591.

⁴ Reproduced with the accompanying notes in Sakda, 2012, p. 177. Reproduced without the notes in Sakda, 1992, p. 173.

⁵ For the precise location, see Sakda, 2012, p. 170.

Robert Lenz left Bangkok on 30 January 1907,⁶ but photographs by Groote and Pruss were still labelled “Robert Lenz & Co”,⁷ including the famous photos of the nine temporary gates erected by the government and municipality to welcome King Chulalongkorn on his return to Bangkok on 17 November 1907 from his second journey to Europe (figure 8). In the directory of Bangkok for 1908, the Siam Photo Supply Co. is listed as a branch office of “Robt. Lenz & Co.”, with E. Groote and C. Pruss as partners.⁸ The directory for 1914 reads:

“Robt. Lenz & Co.”: Photographers to the Court of Siam. E Groote / C. Pruss
– Partners. O. Pruss – assistant. Mann Cheen – book-keeper. Som Boon / Ah
Lock – collectors.⁹

The residential address of Carl Pruss and Mrs. G. Pruss is given as “Poh Yome-road.”¹⁰

Among their large-size photographs reproduced in Europe are scenes showing King Chulalongkorn’s cremation.¹¹ Their work included portraits for graduates from the Law School (figure 11).

Groote painted portraits of King Vajiravudh and King Prajadhipok which still hang in the Main Auditorium of Chulalongkorn University (figures 17, 18, 19). According to his son, Günter, Groote painted three portraits of King Vajiravudh in all, one of which is in a Bangkok private collection.

When Siam declared war on Germany on 22 July 1917, Groote was detained at a detention centre in Yercaud (Tamil Nadu, India), where he began to write his autobiography. After his release in 1920, he moved to Worms where his sister, Helene, lived with her husband, the photographer Paul Blumberger. There he met Katharina Heimerle (1895-1956), whom he married on 2 December 1920 (figure 26). The couple moved to Giessen an der Lahn (Hesse), where a son, Wilfried, was born on 30 March 1924.

In 1927, Groote travelled to Bangkok to investigate the possible revival of his business. He rented a house on Siphya Road, and was joined a year later by his wife and son. A second son, Hans Günter, was born on 9 December 1928. His former partner, Carl Pruss, died in Munich in April 1929, aged 58.¹² The same month,

⁶ Quoted in Sakda, 1992, p. 170.

⁷ Sakda, 1992, p. 176.

⁸ *The Directory for Bangkok and Siam*, 1908, p. 273, p. 266.

⁹ *The Directory for Bangkok and Siam*, 1914, p. 331.

¹⁰ *The Directory for Bangkok and Siam*, 1914, p. 367 and p. 378.

¹¹ See for example the double-page reproduction in *L’Illustration*, 68^e Année, No.3539, Samedi, 24 Décembre 1910, pp. 488-9; or the full-page illustrations in *L’Illustration*, 69^e Année, No.3558, Samedi, 6 Mai 1911, pp. 362-3.

¹² “Our Siam Letter,” *Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, 17 April 1929, p. 20.

Groote was elected a member of the Siam Society,¹³ which published some of his photographs of archaeological monuments.¹⁴ Groote also photographed the newly built premises of the Society (figures 4, 5).¹⁵

On 9 May 1929, a German team of experts travelled to “Khoke Bodhi,” now Khok Pho, a district in Pattani province near Thailand’s southern border, to observe a total solar eclipse, assisted by Groote “who has had a life-long experience of photography in tropical countries.”¹⁶ In January-February 1930, HRH Prince Damrong Rajanubhab led expeditions to historical monuments including Phimai,



Figure 3. Envelope and card sent by Prince Damrong Rajanubhab to Emil Groote. Collection of G. Groote.

Prasat Hin Khao Phanom Rung and Prasat Mueang Tam (figure 12, 13). Groote, the only non-Siamese member of the expedition team, photographed the sites, then in unrestored condition.¹⁷ Groote and Prince Damrong became friends, thereafter exchanging Christmas greetings (figure 3).

In 1931, Groote and his family travelled to Germany to visit family. On their return to Bangkok, they moved into the premises of the former “Siam Photo Supply / Robt. Lenz & Co.” on New Road (Thanon Charoen Krung),¹⁸ now known as “Narasingh Studio / Court Photographers” (figure 16).¹⁹

In commemoration of the 150th anniversary of the Chakri Dynasty and the foundation of Bangkok, King Prajadhipok inaugurated the Phra Phutta Yodfa Bridge, commonly known as Memorial Bridge. The album with Groote’s photographs recording this event (figures 20, 21) has a frontispiece showing all seven rulers of the Chakri dynasty in a photomontage composed by Groote (figure 22). Groote also provided photographs for several publications by Prince Damrong,²⁰ and made a photographic record of many royal elephants (figure 24).

After the 1932 coup, royal support of the Narasingh Studio declined. Prince

¹³ *Journal of the Siam Society*, 24, 1, October 1930, p. 233.

¹⁴ *Seidenfaden* (1932), 11 full-page illustrations.

¹⁵ *Journal of the Siam Society*, 26, 1, 1933, p. 141; 26, 2, 1933, p. 143.

¹⁶ *Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, 10 April 1929, p. 8, column 4.

¹⁷ See the album “The archaeological exploration of the ruins at Phimai, Phnom Rung, Muang Tam, Raengaeng, Kampaeng and Phra Viharn under the leadership of H.R.H. Prince Damrong Rajanubhab, Jan.-Feb. 1930” in the National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Australia, under: <http://catalogue.nla.gov.au/Record/1585578>.

¹⁸ Sakda, 1992, p. 205, p. 373.

¹⁹ For a groundplan of the premises and photographs showing the logo of the studio see Sakda, 1992, pp. 206-7, pp. 238-9.

²⁰ “The illustrations . . . have been prepared with the co-operation of Chao Phya Varabongs, Minister of the Royal Household, by whose order the artistes [sic] of the Royal Orchestra assembled before the camera, with Mr. E. Groote behind it.” Damrong, 1931, pp. i-ii of the English text.

Damrong went into exile, and Groote decided to leave Siam,²¹ travelling by train to Penang to embark on the *Lalandia* ocean liner for Europe.²² Upon reaching Germany, he acquired the photographic studio “Porträtatelier Elite” in Hagen (North Rhine-Westphalia), and later the studio of Max Emil Lichtenberg in Honnef (North Rhine-Westphalia), where he worked until he passed away on 28 November 1948. His grave is in the Neuen Friedhof (New Cemetery) at the Linzer Straße, Bad Honnef.



Figures 4, 5. Emil Groote's photographs of the exterior and interior of the Siam Society's new building, 1930-1.

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²¹ *Bangkok Times*, 30 December 1933, p. 3, carried a photograph captioned “Mr. E.E. Groote, President of the Deutscher Klub and an old Bangkok resident, who left Siam for good on December 27th.”

²² *Straits Times*, 27 December 1933, p. 3, column 2, under “Lalandia.” *Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, 28 December 1933, p. 12, column 2, under “passengers homeward.”

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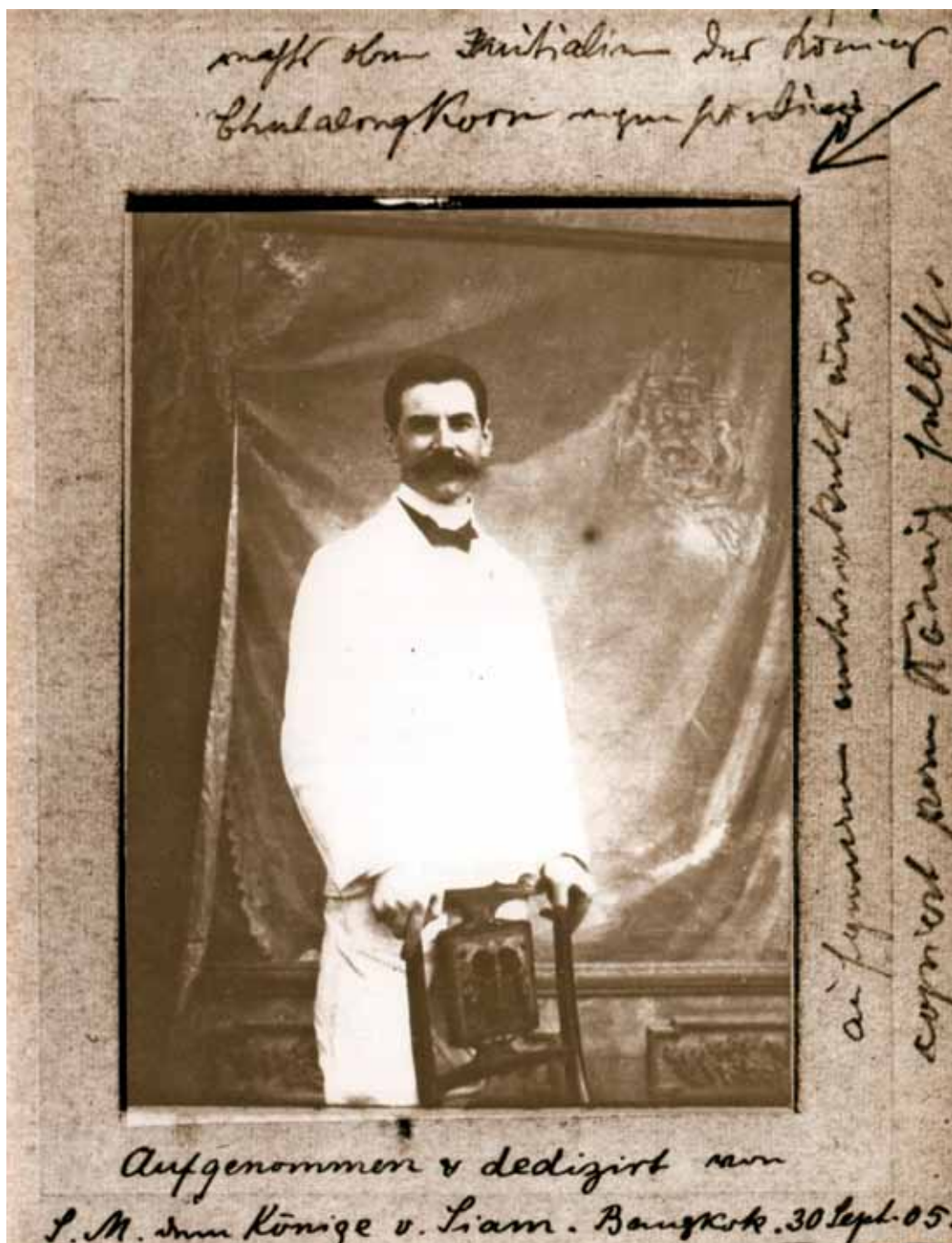


Figure 6. Emil Groote in a photograph taken by King Chulalongkorn, 30 September 1905. At the top with an arrow pointing, “rechts oben Initialen des Königs Chulalongkorn ...” [top right the initials of King Chulalongkorn...]. Right border, “aufgenommen, entwickelt und kopiert vom König selbst” [taken, developed and printed by the King himself]. Below, “aufgenommen, dediziert von S. M. dem Könige von Siam. Bangkok, 30 Sept. [19]05” [taken, dedicated by H.M. the King of Siam. Bangkok, 30 Sept., 1905]. Collection of W. Groote, Monaco.



Figure 7. Frontage of the studio "Robt. Lenz & Co." on New Road, Bangkok, June 1909, by C. Pruss (?). Collection of G. Grootte.

Figure 8. Arch of the War Department, one of a series of photographs by Emil Grootte of the ceremonial gates to welcome King Chulalongkorn on his return from Europe in 1907. P&G collection, Karlsruhe-Berlin.





Figure 9. The Emerald Buddha, from a series commissioned by King Chulalongkorn showing the image in each of its robes, 1905. Collection of G. Groote.



Figure 10. From a series of photographs of lakhon (drama) by Emil Groote. P&G collection, Karlsruhe-Berlin.

Figure 11. Chulalongkorn University graduation portrait, 1917 (?). Dedication: สำหรับคุณอัน รัตนาวานิต เนติบัณฑิต เพื่อนรักสนิท [For Khun An Ratanawanit, law graduate, my close friend]. The signature is unclear but the surname may be กาญจนสวัสดิ์ Kanchanawasit. P&G collection, Karlsruhe-Berlin.

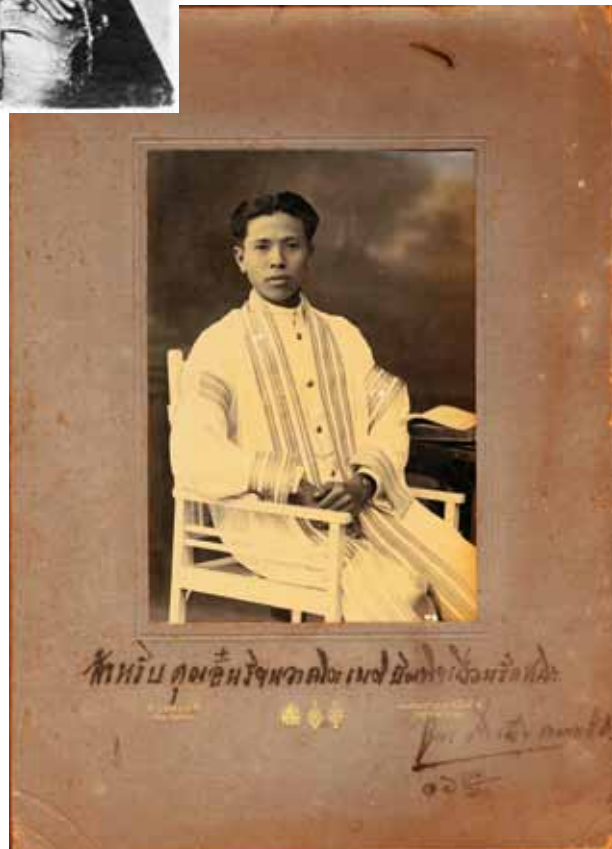




Figure 12. Prince Damrong Rajanubhab photographed by Emil Groote in front of the central prang of Prasat Sikhorphum, Surin, January-February 1930. Private collection through G. Groote.



Figure 13. The sanctuary in Phimai: the central tower viewed from South. January 1930. Private collection through G. Groote

Figure 14. The “Deutscher Klub” (German Club) probably photographed by E. Groote in late 1904.





Figure 15. Lenz & Co. invoice to Phya Suphakorn, 1907. Collection of Patrick Laycock, Belgium

Figure 16. Protective case for photographs printed by the Narasingh Studio, Bangkok. Collection of G. Groote.





Figure 17. Emil Groote's portrait of King Vajiravudh, 257x189 cms, painted 1926-33, now hanging in Chulalongkorn University Main Auditorium. Courtesy of Chulalongkorn University.

Figure 18. Emil Groote's portrait of King Prajadhipok, 257x189 cms, painted 1929, now hanging in Chulalongkorn University Main Auditorium. Courtesy of Chulalongkorn University.



Figure 19. Emil Groote at work on the portrait of King Prajadhipok, 1929. Collection of G. Groote.



Figure 20. King Prajadhipok photographed by Emil Groote at the celebration of 150 years of the Chakri dynasty, 6 April 1932 in Bangkok. Private collection through G. Groote.

Figure 21. Inauguration of Memorial Bridge by King Prajadhipok on 6 April 1932, prior to the unveiling of the statue of King Rama I. Private collection through G. Groote.





Figure 22 (above). Photomontage of the rulers of the royal house of Chakri by Emil Grootte. Private collection through G. Grootte

Figure 23 (below). Emil Grootte at his desk in the Narasingh Studio, New Road, Bangkok, circa 1930. Two joined prints. Collection of G. Grootte.



Figure 24: A royal elephant photographed by Emil Groote. Private collection through G. Groote.



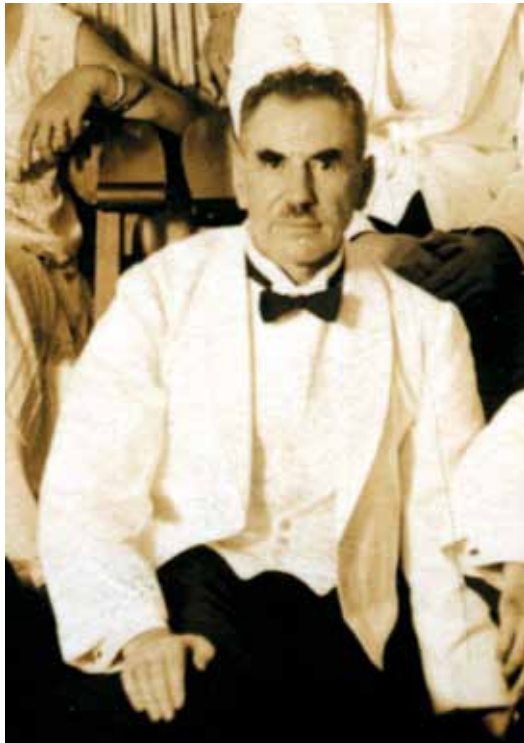


Figure 25 (top left). A portrait of “Emil Grootte als Lehrling, 1887” (Emil Grootte as apprentice, 1887) in the studio of Borschel & Jordan in Dortmund. Collection of G. Grootte.

Figure 26 (top right). Emil and Katharina Grootte photographed by P. Blumberger in Worms, 1922-24. Collection of G. Grootte

Figure 27 (left). Emil Grootte, detail from a group photograph at the “Deutsche Vereinigung in Siam” (German Union in Siam), about 1929-30. Collection of G. Grootte.