

Traditional Values in Contemporary Thai Art

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"To appease the layman's anxiety,

it is important to understand that if a Thai (or any artist belonging to a distinct ethnic group) does not purposely imitate works of foreign artists, he will always express, under any new style, the individuality of his race which is formed by peculiar nature, temperament, climate, religion, atavistic feelings and thoughts, and other factors.

...At the same time, we have not overlooked the fact that western art embodies both the spirit of the modern age as well as peculiarities of Asian, African

and old American art. Under the enquiring mind of the westerner, the spatial understanding of the Chinese and Japanese painting, the warmth and vitality of Indian art and the expressive works of Africa and America have been fused in a universal conception reflecting the universal human soul.

...If sincerely expressed, a work done by a Thai or, by any other artist must be different from one made by a European. The difference will correspond to the individuality of the race."¹

The above extracts were taken from "Contemporary Art in Thailand" written in 1959 by Prof. Silpa Bhirasri (C. Feroci), who is considered to be the father of modern art in Thailand. It was perhaps due to such thoughts, that when the Academy of Fine Arts, which later became Silpakorn University, was founded in 1932 (led by Prof. Silpa himself), it was prescribed into the syllabus that students were required to study Thai architecture, arts, and crafts, in each week.

In 1949, sixteen years after the introduction of western style art education, the first national exhibition was held. It was then, that works of art produced along the lines of Prof. Silpa's teachings were displayed to the public. Although the second exhibition held the following year was described by reviewer M.R. Kukrit Pramoj (an intellectual and a politician) as consisting mostly of works which imitated the style of western artists, lacked originality and any individual technique, Prof. Silpa defended the works by citing the universality of certain influences.³

Along with the exploration of paintings in the styles of impressionism and cubism (1959-64)⁴, artists of the first generation were also developing a modern Thai style.

Painters of this pioneering period chose subjects familiar to them. Festivals and daily activities reflecting the spirit of simple folk communities such as "Songkran" (1956) by Chalood Nimsamer (fig. 1),

or "Gathering the Sugar-palm Juice" (1957)⁵, contrasted to the formal mural paintings of the past.

Angkarn Kalyanpongse, on the other hand, chose to hold firmly onto traditional subject matter. His works were inspired by the "Tri-Phum-Thai Buddhist Cosmology Text"⁶ in the spirit of the Ayuthaya school (14-18th centuries)⁷.

Near the end of this first generation, Damrong Wonguparaj presented a series of paintings in tempera which depicted scenes of the peace and tranquility of northern village life (1959), (fig. 2). The series was to become his archetypal style so personal to him because it captured the heart of the culture of his hometown⁸.

From the first to the 14th National Exhibition of Art (1949-63), sculptor Khien Yimsiri participated without fail. His acclaimed works earned him recognition. He was influenced by the classical Buddha images of the Sukhothai school (13-14th centuries), expressing subtle gestures through stable forms. Khien did not confine himself strictly to the traditional style, but used it as a source of inspiration for producing international style contemporary works. This can be seen for example, from the entry under the title of "The Unknown Political Prisoner" he submitted to the Tate Gallery of London in a competition in 1955. From entries submitted by up to 5,000 artists from all over the world⁹, Khien's passed into the final round of judging, and was selected to go on exhibit along with 146 other works. (The English

sculptor Reg Butler took the top award¹⁰).

His integration of international style and traditional Sukhothai style is an example of sculptures in the modern Thai mannerism that developed around 1956-57, which can be seen in his works "The Family" (1956) and "Two Sisters" (1957), (fig. 3).

Further possible developments in modern Thai sculpture came to a halt with Khien's death in 1971. His works covering the span of 14 years belong to the first generation of modern Thai artists.

In contrast to Khien's style, another artist, Swaeng Songmangmee, in the 2nd and 3rd Exhibitions (1950-51) created much controversy. His sculptures of nudes in the western style provoked strong criticism¹¹.

Two other sculptors who adopted the modern Thai style, were Chitt Rienpracha and Sittidej Saenghiran. Chitt produced works mainly in the decorative arts or crafts tradition.¹² Sittidej produced portraits of traditional Thai lifestyles, pieces of work widely recognised.

Around 1964, many of the artists in the later group of the first generation travelled to Europe for further education. Between 1964-74, artists who graduated from Silpakorn University did little to deviate from the norm that had evolved for modern Thai paintings. However, one outstanding artist of this period was Pratuang Emcharoen. His works were not based on academic concerns or folk culture, but was

independent of all conventional norms. He used his skills in illustrations to give new meaning to virtually all themes relating to Thai traditions, ranging from the life history of Buddha, to the plough, lotus leaves¹³, water, as well as the more popular romantic land and sea scapes. His works were successful in their own way¹⁴ (fig. 4).

Further developments in modern Thai painting from 1974 have continued up to the present day (under various encouraging factors such as the state of economy, the wide publicity through competitions and exhibitions, and educational support). However, over the 16-year period of development (1974-90), works produced by the new generation of artists, or the third generation, appear to be lacking in imagination or essence. Broadly speaking, the works can be classified into 6 groups:

1. Paintings that focus on Thai architecture or its details, as the main subject matter, or depict activities emphasising space in Thai architecture.
2. Paintings that depict mountains, forests, or oceans, based on scenes from Theravada Buddhist literature with the application of Thai motifs and traditional figures in the compositions.
3. Paintings that portray significant events inspired by or based directly on themes from Theravada Buddhist literature.
4. Paintings that depict religious rites

or ceremonies taking place in the natural landscape with a Thai architectural structure as the central focus of the compositions.

5. Paintings that are based on the patterns derived from traditional Thai mural paintings.

6. Paintings that are based on the Mandala theme in Buddhism.

There are also however, other works which do not fall under any of the above classifications. The first artist to stand out in this third generation is Preecha Thaotong whose paintings from 1974 brought forward the spatial dimensions of classical Thai architecture through the interplay of light and shade which fall upon walls and other building components. In 1979, he changed his subject matter and focussed on patterns derived from Thai mural paintings.

At the same time, between 1974-82, two young artists Surasit Souakong and Praiwan Dakliang, studied classical central Thai and northern (Lanna) Thai architecture or building parts, in oil and acrylic¹⁵. Surasit painted to capture the atmosphere of the northern temples¹⁶ whilst Praiwan's paintings are representations of traditional objects. The works of these two artists sometimes claim to be in the modern Thai tradition, and sometimes as contemporary works.

From 1974-77 Phong Senging depicted the serenity and intrigue of scenes from the life of river boat-house dwellers. Chalernchai Kositpipat painted in the traditional

Thai style under a new framework to express the metaphysical dimensions of Buddhism. Panya Vijintanasarn on the other hand incorporated surrealism into his Thai paintings¹⁷ which appear to have received influences from artist Thawan Datchanee. Thawan Datchanee was a second generation artist who attained highest achievement in 1978 during an exhibition of his works in Germany which drew references from the "Tri-Phum Text", Jataka Tales, and Buddhist philosophy. His drawings are full of force and energy. Using the human form, unimaginable creatures and beasts intertwine into a single body of greed and lust in the unending cycle of birth life and death¹⁸ (fig. 5).

Prasong Luemuang gained recognition in 1987. His works portray festivals, rites and living patterns that reflect the cultural identity of a specific ethnic community as the major theme. Prasong rejects neither the Lanna culture nor the modern day culture in which he lives¹⁹ (fig. 6) and thus became the first artist to succeed in executing works along this concept, which can be seen from the "With Earth and Water" series which was exhibited at the River City Complex in 1989²⁰.

Thongchai Srisukprasert whose works have only recently appeared around 1989-90 and developed from his art thesis, studies the dynamism of energy existing in the universe spinning itself about its centre, through a scheme of black, white and gold (fig. 7). This type of work has certain appeal, but has

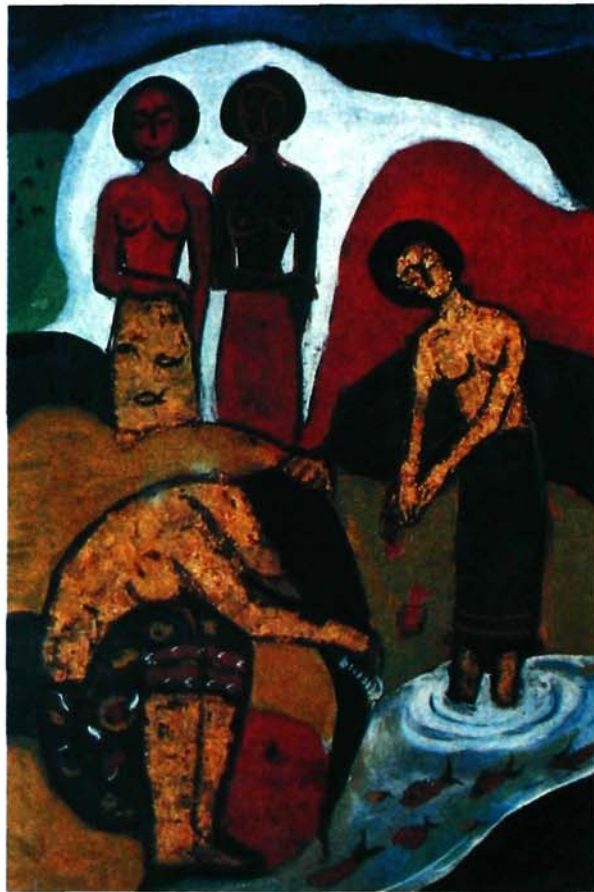


FIGURE 1 CHALOOD NIMSAMER, SONGKRAN (OIL) 1956.



FIGURE 2 DAMRONG WONG-UPRARAJ, NORTHERN VILLAGE (TEMPERA) 1959.



FIGURE 3 KHIEH YIMSIRI, *TWO SISTERS* (BRONZE)
1957.



FIGURE 4 PRATUANG EMCHAROEN, *DIVINE way* 1980-1990.



FIGURE 5 THAWAN DATCHANEE, *The VIDHURAPANDITA JATAKA* (DRAWING) 1978.

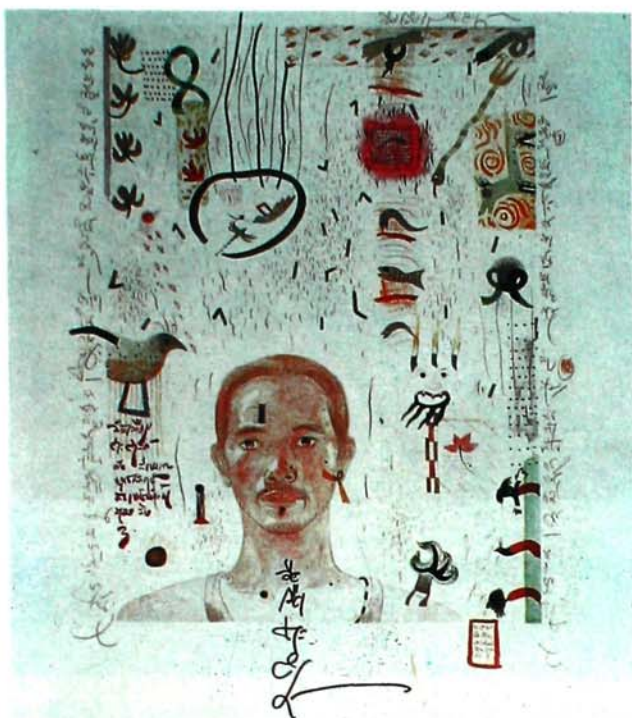


FIGURE 6 PRASONG LUEMUENG, FRONT PAGE OF WATER-MOON, EXHIBITION PAMPHLET 1990.



FIGURE 7 THONGCHAI SRISUKPRASERT, THE POWER OF CHANGE IN NATURE 3 (ACRYLIC) 1990.



FIGURE 8 KANYA CHAREONSUPKUL, *SEASON NO. 22*
(TEMPERA ON CANVAS) 1990.



FIGURE 9 MANIT PUAREE, *TAKRAW-GAME* (WOOD CUT)
1958.



FIGURE 10 SAN SARAKORNBORIRAK, *REALM OF MATTER* (WOOD CUT) 1965



FIGURE 11 WIJIT APICHATKRIENKRAI, *THE SAME OLD IN SOMETHINGS* (INTAGLIO, SILK SCREEN AND HANG COLOURING ON PAPER) 1987.

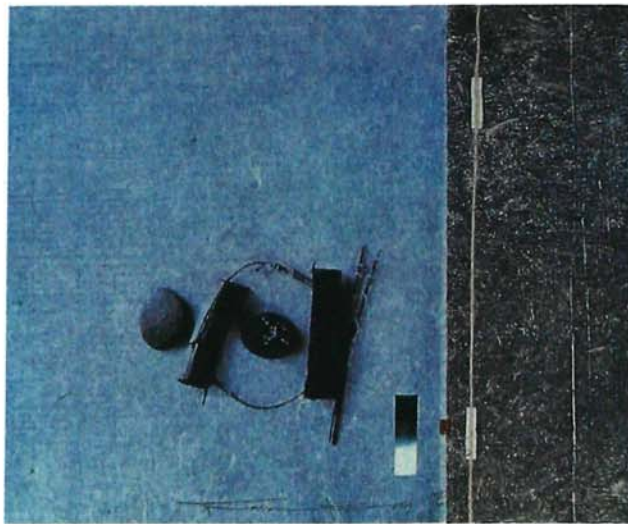


FIGURE 12 THAVORN KO-UDOMVIT, *SYMBOL IN RITUAL 25*
(WOOD CUT & SILK SCREEN) 1990.



FIGURE 13 KAMOL TASSANANCHALEE, *NANG-YAI BANGKOK*
SERIES 2 (MIXED MEDIA ON PLYWOOD OIL AND ACRYLIC) 1990.



FIGURE 14 MONTHIEN BOONMA, *A PAIR OF WATER-BUFFALOES*
(MIXED MEDIA: UNHUSKED RICE, SACK, STRAW, HORN, STOOLS)
1988.



FIGURE 15 VASAN SITTHIKET, ONE IN SIXTY OF THE *INFERNO*
SERIES (ACRILYIC PAINT ON CANVAS) 1991.

limitations that by 1991, it seems as if the artist has entered into the inert pace of the microcosmic world²¹.

The Chinese were active in the economics, politics, and culture of Thai society since 1350. Their culture influenced the mural paintings of the Ayuthaya school, and architecture of the Bangkok period from 1824-51. The Chinese influence appears in the contemporary arts through the works of Chang Tang from 1960 until his recent death. He produced both abstract works and self portraits²² which were essentially conscious allusions to Chinese culture.

Kanya Chareonsupkul seriously returned to producing her works once more around 1985. Picking up where she left off in 1972²³, she continued with abstract work in brush and black ink on Sa paper, or otherwise lithographic techniques, to create spatial structures of Chinese and Japanese impressionistic style. "Statement in Space" (1987) is an example. She plays with the interactions between brushstroke and negative space²⁴. In 1989 she still produced such works²⁵ but in 1990 she turned to using colours. Gradually, works in tempera and water colour emerged and eventually developed into a series of works in tempera on canvas. This new development followed a Southeast Asian sensibility (fig. 8).

Graphic arts played a minor role in the first and second generations. By the third generation, graphic arts incorporating Thai traditional values may be considered to rank amongst the international avant-gardes.

The majority of the artists of the third generation concentrated on subjects from their culture. Manit Phuaree depicted traditional activities, such as playing takraw (fig. 9) or cock-fighting. He began in 1958; however he has not been seriously active since 1963. Inson Wongsam depicted for a brief period in 1960, his mystical visions of northern Thai architecture. San Sarakornborirak presented the life of the elderly, such as in "Old Friends" (1963) and the heart rending "Realm of Matter" (1965)²⁶ (fig. 10). In 1962, Prayat Pongdam introduced metaphysics into his works. Animals such as cats, buffaloes, geckos and other reptiles²⁷, represented a variety of thoughts and meanings. In 1965 Pote Sangawong made woodcut prints to express the pains and torments of hungry ghosts (Preta) in Lokantara Hell of the Tri-Phum text. He depicted the Preta rising from the depths of the oceans through infinite curls of wave motion.²⁸

17 years later, artists began to look for other means of representing their impressions of Thai life rather than through the depiction of human beings. Pongdej Chaikakut used etching techniques to produce "Still Life No. 28" in which the subject being a set of antique silverware in an old cupboard evokes a nostalgia for the old lifestyles of the upper class Thai. And in 1987, Wijit Apichatkriangkrai encapsulated the spirit of northeastern culture. He depicted a village-like structure sitting on a mound as if it were an island in space, and included objects or items used in daily activities. The mood created gives a sense of

both hope and sadness²⁹ typical of the people of the northeast in the past and even of those today (fig. 11).

By 1989, Ittiphol Tangchaloek a well-known graphic print artist, had further developed his style, which he established in 1968, to include wave patterns as in the works of Pote and Thongchai.³⁰ He derived his waves from those represented in Thai paintings or replicas of Buddha's footprint and combined them with geometric forms in his subsequent mixed media series.³¹

Thavorn Ko-Udomvit has worked with mixed media since 1981. In 1983, he worked on the "Ritual" series using hand-made Sa paper, the surface and texture of which constituted the essence of his works since 1985³². Thavorn ingeniously integrated blank planes of space, stones, twigs and strings on Sa-paper. All elements are part of the spatial structure rather than using space merely as the background on which the objects are featured as was generally practised in the past (fig. 12).

Nipan Oranives uses materials and objects in a similar way. He developed his style in 1986 by using bands of subject matter in a collective pattern of stones and twigs and blank spaces on Sa-paper to give dimensions to the objects, suggesting metaphysical significance³⁴.

In 1982, a number of Thai artists who had studied in England and the U.S. came back and took up conceptual art. In 1985 they held an

exhibition of "Thai Reflections of American Experiences". Installation works created by the participating artists were mainly based on Joseph Cornell's 1943 works, and Andy Warhol's in 1965³⁵. Art by Kamol Tassananchalee who had studied and resided in the U.S. for 10 years, proved to be highly original and most avant garde when they were brought back to Thailand for public exhibition in 1980.³⁶ In 1990, he returned with the "Nang-Yai (Shadow Play Figures)" series which drew aspects from traditional Thai fine arts both in concepts and structure, and applied them in a contemporary manner that brought out its oriental essence, which placed him in the international art scene³⁷ (fig. 13).

Conceptual art which embodies Thai values also appears in Monthien Boonma's "Story from the Farm" series (1989). His installations examined ways to express the identity of Thai farmers³⁸, the significance of which may intriguingly be extended to

encompass all those in Asia as a whole. (fig. 14). In an exhibition in 1990 his works reflected upon life, religion and beliefs of indigenous communities in the context of urban environment. His works contained elements of intrigue³⁹, and at times satirized the affluent society, such as in "Venus of Bangkok" (1990) which utilized urban effluents (construction) in depicting the rosy romanticism of the metropolis.

Around mid 1991, a new wave emerged. Vasan Sithiket held two major exhibitions. In the "Inferno" series, 60 pieces of work went on exhibit at the National Art Gallery⁴⁰. Each piece represented condemnations, making references to the Tri-phum text, of sins of Man in modern Thai society. Vasan is considered to be the first Thai artist to use traditional ethical values in making social commentary on contemporary society (fig. 15). His second exhibition was held jointly with six other artists in "Print

Installations". His "Cobra and the Farmer" series which was exhibited, illustrates a farmer who produces rice to feed the nation being betrayed by the mouths which he feeds. The installations in this series were designed to surround and physically overwhelm the observer⁴¹.

Contemporary Thai art has been struggling for over the past 20 years. Over the past 10 years, many institutions of higher learning have opened courses in fine arts, such as at Chiang Mai University, Chulalongkorn University, and at private universities. It is therefore consequential that in the next generation, Thailand will have artists producing works in greater variety of creations compared to the past when artists were moulded out from Silpakorn University. The mass media also play important roles in encouraging and promoting art. The state of art in the future will therefore be up to the artists themselves, their creative abilities, and their sense of responsibility.

NOTES

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2. The Committee for the Rattanakosin Bicentennial Celebration. **Rattanakosin Painting**. 1982. Bangkok pp. 33-34

3. Piriya Krairiksh and Paothong Thongchua. **Art Since 1932**. Bangkok:

Thai Khadi Research Institute, Thammasat University, 1982 pp. 68-69

4. Silpa Bhirasri. *Ibid*, Fig. 14

5. Piriya Krairiksh. *Ibid*. p. 130

6. See Frank E. Reynolds & Mani B. Reynolds (Translated). **Three Worlds According to King Ruang, A Thai Buddhist Cosmology**.

Berkley California: Univeristy of California, 1982.

7. M.C. Subhadradis Diskul. **Art in Thailand: A Brief History**. Bangkok: Silpakorn University, 1986. pp. 25-28.

8. Piriya Krairiksh. *Ibid*. pp. 66-70

9. The funeral book In Memory of Asistant Professor Khien Yimsiri Bangkok: 1971.

10. Frances Spalding. **British Art Since 1900**. London: Thames & Hudson, 1986. pp. 166-167.
11. Viboon Leesuwon. **Contemporary art in Thailand, contemporary art exhibition catalog**. Bangkok: River City 1984. (in Thai) p. 18
12. Viboon Leesuwon. **Chit Rienpracha**, Bangkok: 1987 (in Thai) pp. 8-9.
13. The Japan Foundation ASEAN Culture Center. **Narrative Visions in Contemporary ASEAN Art**. Tokyo: 1990. p. 27
14. Pratuang Emjaroen. **Retrospective exhibition 1980-1990 catalog**. Bangkok: 1990. P.16
15. Piriya Krairiksh. **Ibid**. Plate 79. p. 163.
16. The Japan Foundation ASEAN Culture Center. **Ibid**. Plate 19. p. 28.
17. Silpakorn University. **The 26th National Exhibition of Art catalog**. Bangkok: 1980.
18. Klaus Wenk. **The Buddhist art of Thawan Datchani**. Zürich: Inigo Von Oppersdorff Verlag, 1978.
19. Prasong Luemueng. **With earth and water**. Pamphlet of Art exhibition at River City Complex, Bangkok: Sept. 21-Oct. 5, 1989.
20. Prasong Luemueng. **Water Moon**, Art exhibition of a pamphlet at Goethe Institute Bangkok, 3 Nov.-15 Dec., 1990.
21. Thai Farmers Bank. **Contemporary art exhibition 1991-catalog**, National Gallery, Bangkok, 1991. p. 29
22. Silpakorn University. **The 27th National Exhibition of Art catalog**. Bangkok: 1981.
23. Silpakorn University. **The 21st National Exhibition of Art catalog**. Bangkok: 1972. p. 150
24. Kanya Chareonsupkul. **Lithograph-Ink Painting by Kanya**, Exhibition catalog, Bangkok: 1987. p. 17
25. Japan Foundation and National Museum (of Modern Art), **Inspiration from Japan**. Art Exhibition catalog. Bangkok: 1989.
26. Piriya Krairiksh. **Ibid**. p. 142
27. Silpakorn University Faculty of Fine Arts. **Contemporary Art in Thailand**. Bangkok : 1969. Plate No. 6 of the 14th National Art Exhibition (1963).
28. Silpakorn University Faculty of Fine Arts, **Ibid**. Plate No.1 of the 17th National Art Exhibition (1966).
29. The Japan Foundation ASEAN Culture Center. **Ibid**. p. 26
30. Silpakorn University. **The 19th National Exhibition of Art catalog**. Bangkok: 1968.
31. Silpakorn University, The Faculty of Painting, Sculpture, and Graphic Arts. **The 6th National Art Exhibition catalog**, Bangkok: 1989.
32. The United States Information Service, **Thai reflections on American experiences**. An Art exhibition at Bhirasri Institute of Modern Art catalog. Bangkok: 1986.
33. Silpakorn University, **The 35th National Exhibition of Arts catalog**. Bangkok: 1989. p. 34