

## TRADITIONAL THAI PAINTING

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Any one who wishes to study Thai painting should have some general background about its historical development, and artistic peculiarities such as line, composition, colour and technique.

Of course, an exhaustive critical discussion of the subject would require far more than one talk; but our present purpose is to hint at the principal characteristics of this art in order that whoever is interested may appreciate its beauty.

As I have explained on other occasions, in the past old Thai art was treated as archaeological matter more than as artistic expression. This was very detrimental to the paintings because, as the majority of them were relatively modern, they were not considered worthy of special attention and so were left to the care of incompetent people and, still worse, were not protected from the merciless ravages of our climate. The regrettable result was that the majority of those paintings vanished long since.

It was only a few years ago that some artists, particularly. Nai Fua Tongyoo, a painter of the Fine Arts Department, started to make orderly researches and reproductions in colour of those paintings which are bound to disappear in a short time.

Old Thai paintings are to be found in various districts of Thailand, particularly, in chronological order of time, in Sukhothai, Ayuthia, Pejaburi, Utaradit, Bangkok, Chiangmai, etc. In our short study we shall confine ourselves to the oldest remains of Sukhothai, Ayuthia and Ratanakosin (Bangkok) as it will give sufficient subject-matter to understand the development and the fineness of this art.

Painting as mural decoration may have started in Sukhothai, the first capital of the Thai kingdom founded in A.D. 1238, in the form of engravings on stone followed by some ornaments painted in monochrome in tempera. From the oldest examples to those of

modern times Thai paintings were made in distemper, which is a good medium in dry conditions but which, on the contrary, deteriorates rapidly through dampness. Certainly this accounts for the loss of the majority of our mural paintings.

In the 13th century, Sukhothai had direct cultural contact with Ceylon from which Indian bronzes of the 10th-13th century and designs were imported into Thailand, influencing the then emerging Thai artistic expression. With reference to this Thai expression, I would like to say few words which may help us to understand its racial individuality.

For centuries the Thai people of central Thailand had shared Khmer culture. If, after having established the kingdom of Sukhothai they had followed in art, particularly in sculpture, the Khmer characteristics, it would have been quite a natural fact. This was not the case; and the reason was that the Thai, being followers of Hinayana Buddhism, felt the Khmer Buddha images too severe, too Hinduish for representing the real essence of Lord Buddha's doctrine. The images imported from Ceylon were more spiritual and thus the Thai got inspiration from these Indian models to create a type of Buddha-image which is one of the most spiritual creations ever conceived by the Eastern peoples.

I have referred to sculpture because, as we shall see later, this art influenced painting.

In resuming our study of Thai painting we have to go back to those designs engraved on stone, decorating the ceiling of Wat Sijum in Sukhothai which show a striking likeness to Indian examples. But within a few years the Thai artists had found their own expression, and in fact from the figures engraved on a bronze cast in Sukhothai about forty years later than the engravings on stone just mentioned, we note already those characteristics which form the very peculiarity of Thai art—namely the rhythmical, undulating outline of the figures, the oval shape of the head, the parallel rhythmical and delicate lines of the facial features and the sensitive meaningful gestures of the hands.

From the Indianish designs and the Thai ones we learn two important facts. One is that while the Indianish engravings are composed of groups of figures dealing with a certain subject, the decoration on the bronze is formed by the rhythmical repetition of an almost identical figure. The other important fact is the peculiar undulating flame-like line which, as we have said, is the most striking feature of Thai art.

The next mural paintings so far discovered are those found in some Phra Prangs at Wat Mahatat and Wat Rajaburana in Ayuthia. (circa A.D 1400-1450). These paintings illumine for us the following facts:

- 1st . . . From the Sukhothai period up to the middle of the 16th century and maybe later mural painting had a monochrome character as only black, white and red were used to obtain the effect of chiaroscuro.
- 2nd . . . The composition of the decoration is obtained by superimposed rows of many sitting Buddha-figures separated from each other by an ornamental design symbolising the nimbus around the holy images. No grouping of figures to illustrate religious or mythical subjects is yet used as mural decoration.
- 3rd . . . The painted figures imitate exactly the sculptured specimens of Lopburi and Uthong, in particular the votive tablets. Accordingly, Lopburi and Uthong, two important centers of the Khmer culture, influenced Ayuthia from its foundation in 1350 up to the 16th century.

No other mural paintings chronologically following these monochrome specimens have been found yet. The next important paintings still existing in Ayuthia are those decorating the walls of Wat Buddhaisawan which may have been done at the end of the 17th or the beginning of the 18th century. The artistic differences between the painting in the interiors of the Phra Prangs of Wat Mahatat and Wat Rajaburana and those of Wat Buddhaisawan are such that no

parallel is possible. The latter paintings are polychrome: the composition is obtained by many compositions of grouped figures spread all over the surface of the walls, each group illustrating a different subject.

As regards artistic value, many parts of the paintings at Wat Buddhaisawan are rather objectionable but, being the only remains of the period, they are most valuable as records and for critical study.

Here Khmer influence has been completely eliminated, while Sukhothai characteristics have definitely dominated. The fineness of line, rhythm, and delicate gestures noted in Sukhothai art are to be traced again in the fully developed Thai painting. Accordingly the very spirit of Thai art is to be found in the Sukhothai period, particularly in the sculpture, which as line influenced the painting.

It is worthwhile to note that in the paintings of Wat Buddhaisawan there are some parts, particularly in the treatment of trees, rocks and water, which remind one closely of Chinese art. In this respect we are forced to conclude that Thailand had cultural contact with China ever since the thirteenth century and that the appreciation of colourful objects and polychromic architecture came from China. In the Sukhothai period, architecture, pottery and what is left of the painting were monochrome.

But any race with a strong artistic temperament cannot be satisfied to imitate. It assimilates other people's influence and afterwards create a new expression. So it was with the old Thai painters. A closer observation of Nature and of natural surroundings gave to the old painters a more vital source than Chinese conventionalism, the result being a pure Thai expression.

As we have seen, because there is a lapse of time of about two hundred and fifty years between the monochrome paintings and the polychrome ones still existing in Ayuthia, and because no other

intermediate paintings have been found to link these two extremes, we have to refer to the painted illustrations of the books *Trai Phum* (Buddhist Cosmology) made in Ayuthia and at present preserved in the National Museum of Bangkok. These books are truly precious and should be kept into twosided glass-screened frames in order not to deteriorate still more by handling.

Unfortunately Thailand has not yet developed a sense of artistic pride; otherwise such illustrations together with some of the best specimens of mural paintings would have been reproduced in colour long since as the most practical medium for spreading Thai culture abroad. Of course, not all these illustrations are fine, but many are beautiful and some extremely beautiful.

The oldest specimens of these books may go back to A.D. 1500, and the later ones to A.D. 1600. Between the designs of the former and latter specimens there are artistic differences which make us understand the slow development of the art of painting in Thailand.

The process of eliminating Khmer characteristics and of replacing them by those of the Sukhothai period, till this art reached its conventional idealism, is here very clear.

Although no gilding is used in these illustrations, the colours are as bright and light as those of the Western miniatures.

I think that it was precisely the rôle of miniatures to influence mural painting, both in composition and colours. Indeed Thai mural painting is composed of many groups of small figures, spread all over the surface of the walls, having a narrative character just as in the illuminations.

I would say it is just on account of its miniaturistic character that Thai painting is generally not so much appreciated as Thai sculpture and architecture are. In fact, many visitors to Thailand have a fine quick impression of architectural peculiarities and admire easily the beauty of old statuary; but those innumerable figures painted all over the walls are too many and too small to be appreciated in a short time. Most visitors to Bangkok are shown the

painting of the galleries of Wat Phra Keo because, being a modern degenerated production, they are easy to understand on account of the bright tints and sharp rendering of the human and animal figures as well of the architectural structures. Accordingly here we may walk around and have a quick notion of the various compositions. But the appreciation of the paintings of Wat Sutat, Phratinang Buddhaisawan, Wat Suwarnaram etc. requires that peculiar attention proper to art-lovers, not the sight-seeing of tourists.

The destruction of Ayuthia in 1767 ended all artistic activity in that capital. In 1782 Somdech Phra Buddhayodfa started to build Bangkok. Many Wats were erected during the first three reigns of the present dynasty (1782-1850), and so the original paintings executed in that period must be regarded as the best examples of fully developed Thai painting. I say so for this reason: it is obvious that the art of painting reached its zenith late in Ayuthia, may be in the middle or at the end of the 18th century. Bangkok was built a few years after the fall of Ayuthia and consequently the characteristics of architecture and painting did not change. Sculpture in the later period of Ayuthia had declined so much that it could not inspire any more the artists of Bangkok.

Accordingly from the specimens in Bangkok we see the essential characteristics of Thai painting which may be summarised as follows:

- A . . . The large areas of the walls of the Wats enriched with painting are filled with a seemingly continuous composition but in reality they are various compositions of groups of small figures illustrating different subjects. These groups have as background either the dark tone of the luxuriant tropical forest or have architectural features; in general, architectural structures and human figures have light tints standing out from the dark background,
- B . . . The gestures and actions of the painted figures correspond exactly to the gestures and actions of the miming Thai classic theatre. Thus as in Thai music where different feelings such as joy, rage, love, sorrow, etc. are expressed by specific tunes, so in Thai painting different feelings are expressed by conventionalized expressive lines and gestures.

C . . . Figures such as that of Prince Gautama, of the Bodhisattavas, and royalty are rendered by very delicate distinct lines, the facial features always being expressionless. The figures of the royal attendants are rendered realistically, conveying the distinctiveness of their rank, but the face is always expressionless. The expressions and the designs of the common people are very realistic and are artistically rendered in a coarse way. The different artistic treatment of the figures representing different social classes is a characteristic originating, perhaps, from the Indian painting as we may notice in the beautiful Ajanta-frescoes where the representation of common people contrasts sharply with the fine figures of the upper class.

D . . . No violent posture, nor realistic vulgar expression is to be found in old Thai painting when treating stories of the Jataka, or other religious subjects. Also the scenes representing tense pathos are enveloped with such a suave idealism that death too appears beautiful. Such a remark may be applied also to those compositions illustrating subjects from the Ramayana. Here the violence of the combat, of the clashing armies of Rama and Ravana, or the single combats between the leading characters of Valmiki's epic are rendered with such fine relationship of lines, spaces and masses that each group is a perfect harmonious unity.

Lines are the most important factor in Thai painting. It is line that expresses; the fineness of the composition depends almost exclusively on its lines; line gives a sense of serenity and a melodious flowing character to the old painting.

*COLOURS* The linear space is filled with flat tints and so old Thai painting is essentially two dimensional. The chromatic effect is enriched by gilding crowns, jewellery and some architectural elements as in real life and real structures. About the representation of real life, we have to remember that once the Thai had

eliminated Chinese conventional influence they got direct inspiration from nature, natural surroundings costumes, ceremonies, etc. Accordingly these paintings represent a most valuable record of Thai history.

With regard to colours, if we consider the word decoration in the modern sense, that is to say as combinations of tints which give a fine and pleasant chromatic effect, then Thai painting is essentially decorative. It is well known that Eastern peoples have a special taste and facility for arranging colours beautifully, but it is also true that some of these peoples abused vivid, jarring colours, especially when used over large spaces. In Thai painting we never notice large areas coloured with vivid striking tints. Further when there is some rather large space of red, this is counterbalanced and harmonized by gilded parts or by black or by other dark-toned tints.

It was through the influence of Western art and the use of imported chemical colours that Thai painting lost its purity and harmony. It is for this reason that, in referring to the paintings around the galleries of Wat Phra Keo, I have termed them a degenerate production.

Many times we have lamented the fact that mural paintings are bound to disappear on account of the atmospheric conditions of our country and to corroborate what I have been saying I wish to point out a remarkable instance. Six years ago the painters of the Fine Arts Department prepared some faithful reproductions in colour of some characteristic paintings to be exhibited in London. Among these copies there was one of a group of musicians from the Phratinang Buddhaisawan in Bangkok. On account of dampness the plaster preparation of this rare painting rotted and the paintings vanished almost completely. For a long time I had admired this wonderful expression, and in fantasy I thought I could hear the fine melody issuing from the musical instruments cleverly touched by those divine girls. Such losses are not regrettable for people in Thailand only, but for everyone who is touched by beauty.



In beholding the fine specimens of Thai paintings, we seem to live among the old Thai folks, squatted under the shadow of the towering evergreen vegetation and telling each other the cherished stories of the Jataka, or with awe and in subdued voices, repeating innumerable times the wondrous facts of the Lord Buddha's life. If the painting relates to the Ramayana, our imagination may see again the exciting gestures of the young people listening to the wonderful exploits of Rama.

Indeed here the brush has masterfully replaced the pen, leaving the imagination of the beholder to create an individual, legendary and mythical world.

The students of the old Thai paintings have so much to learn, so much to admire, so much to discover, that their intellectual faculties will be entirely captivated and they will feel that peculiar peace of soul which art alone may give to human beings.

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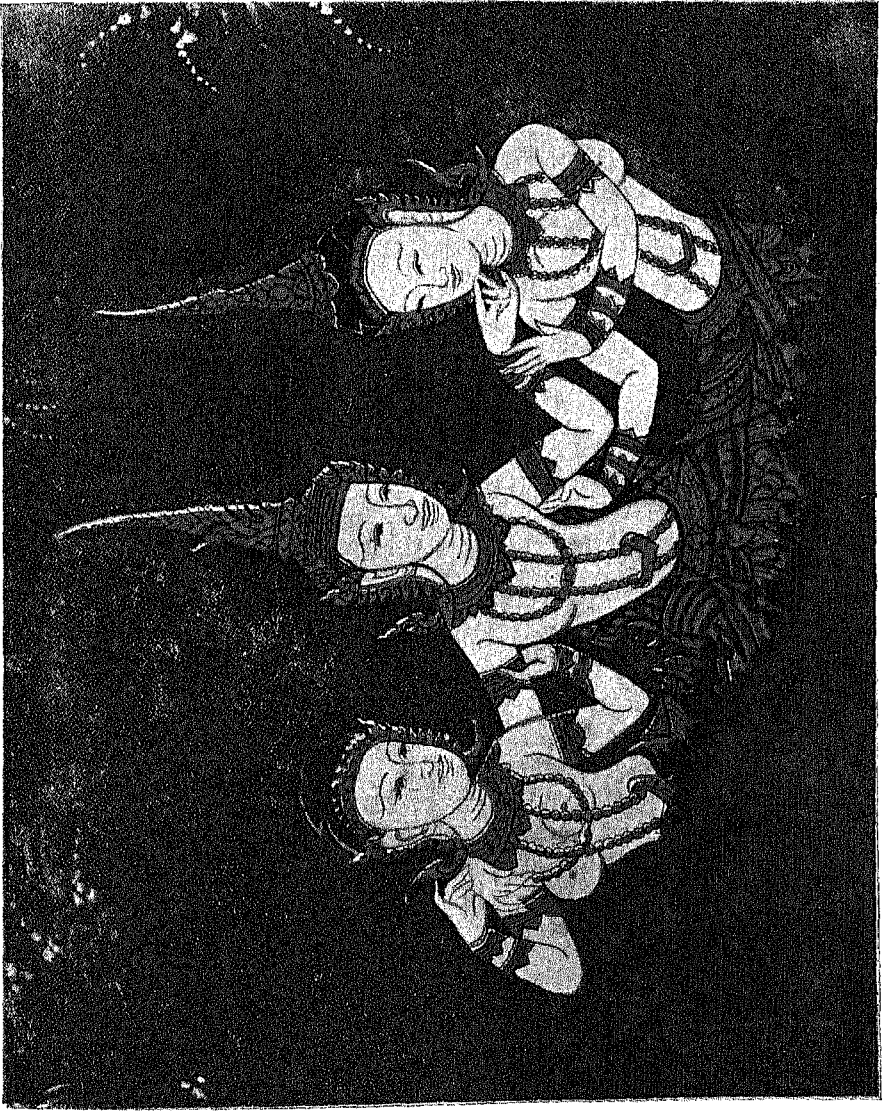
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Detail of a mural painting at Wat Sutat ( Bangkok )

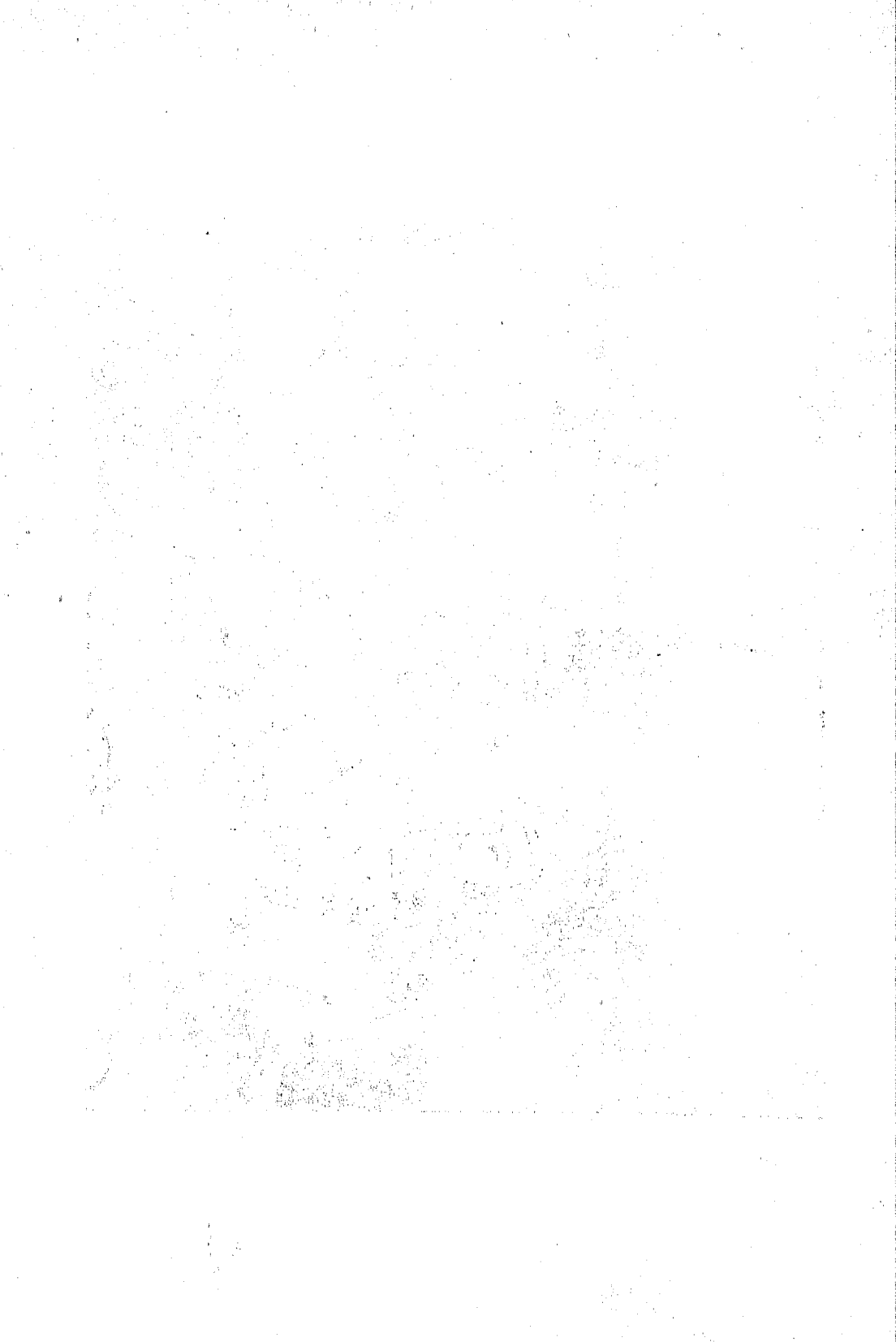




Fig. 1 Engraving on stone decorating the ceiling of Wat Sri Jum at Sukhothai  
 (Late second half of the 13th century A.D.)

*The Indian-like character of the drawing is very remarkable.*



Fig. 2 *Design of a Buddha-image engraved on a bronze cast in Sukhothai some decades after the execution of the engraving illustrated in fig. 1.*

*The undulating, rhythmical outline, the oval shaped head and the gentle gesture of the hands, peculiarities of Thai art, are already fixed in this remote artistic expression.*

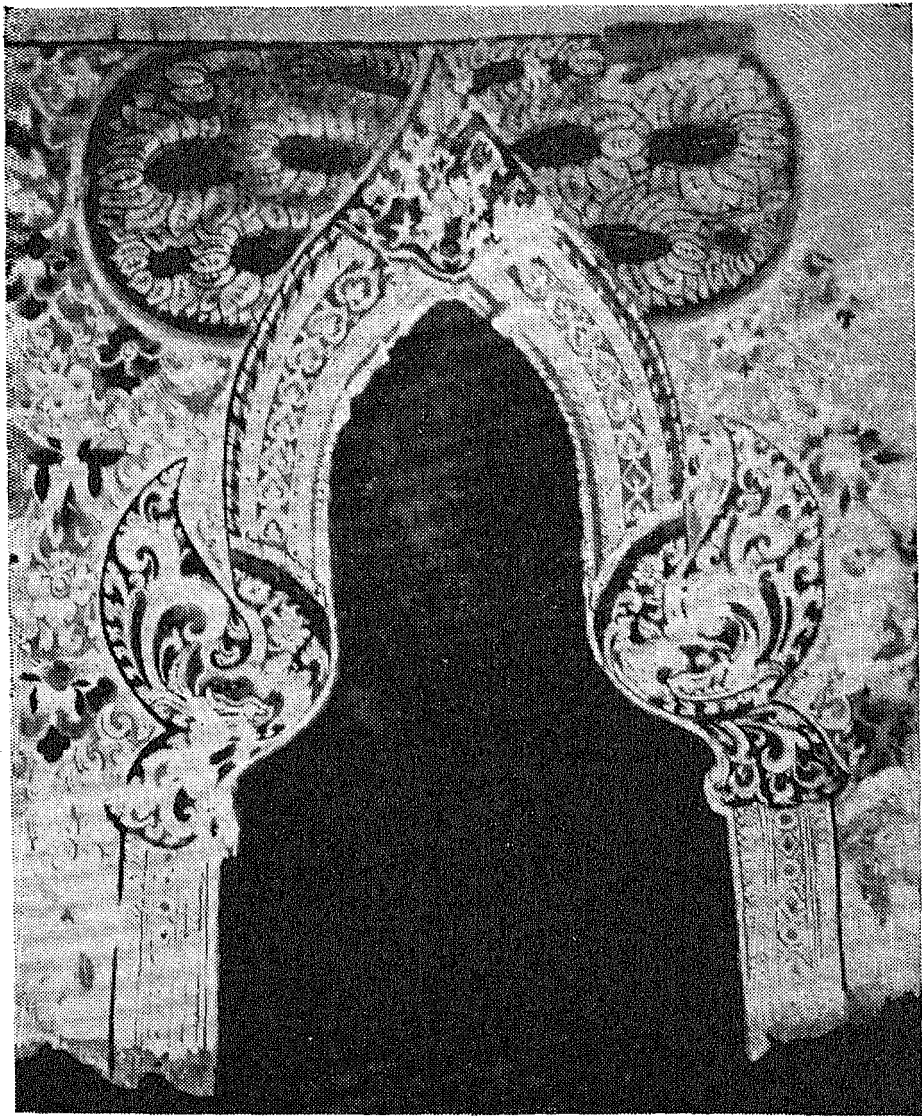


Fig. 3 "Ruan Kheo". Universal Thai ornamental nimbus around the images of Buddha. Mural-monochrome-painting in the interior of a Phra Prang at Wat Muhatat in Ayuthia (ca. 1400 A.D.) The bold, lively character of the Thai ornaments is very noticeable in this specimen.

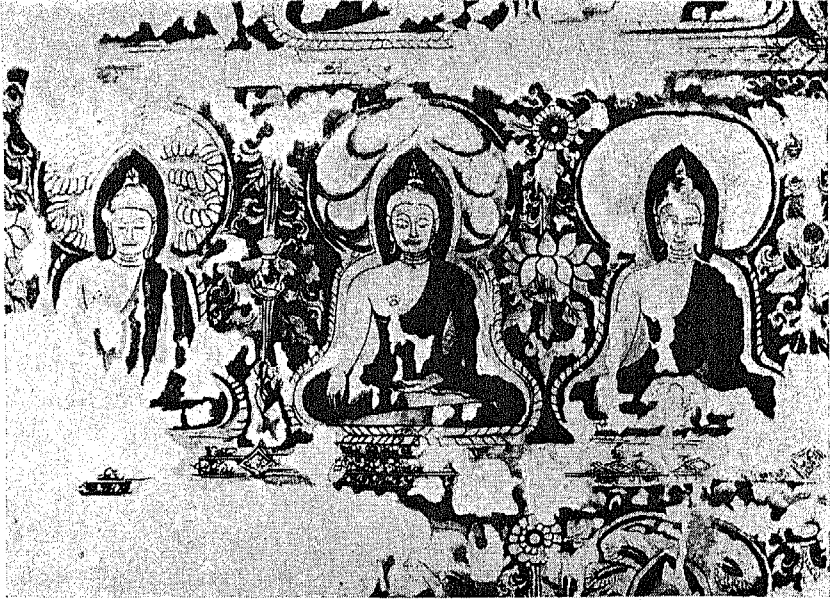


Fig. 4 *Mural—monochrome—painting in the interior of a Phra Prang at Wat Rajaburana (ca. 1450 A.D.)*

*The influence of sculptural images of the Lopburi and Uthong schools is clearly noticeable both in composition and style.*



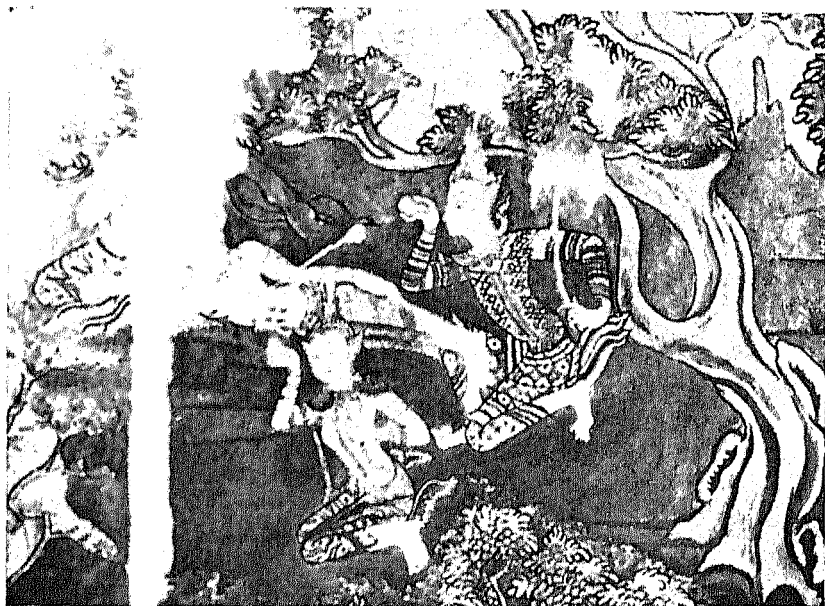


Fig. 5 "Syama Jataka". From a polychrome-painting in Wat Buddhaisawan at Ayuthia. (ca. 1700 A.D.)

*The paintings of Wat Buddhaisawan present strong differences of style and artistic qualities. Some of these paintings, like the above, show in the treatment of trees and rocks Chinese characteristics, while the drawing is very inferior, suggesting that the painter was not a Thai artist.*

*It is worthy of notice that the style of all the figures at Wat Buddhaisawan is no longer that of Uthong or Lopburi but entirely the style of Sukhothai.*



Fig. 6 *Fine specimen of the mural paintings at Wat Buddhaisawan in Ayuthia.*

*The sweeping, bold line of the drawing and the wonderful vitality of the demon's expression contrast sharply with the weak rendering of the figures of the previous illustration and show fully the essential character of Thai art.*



Fig. 7 Particulars of a painting on a pillar at Wat Sutat in Bangkok (beginning of the 19th century A.D.)  
Thai mural decoration started as a linear expression and remained such till modern times. Classic specimens such as the above show how the Thai artists obtained the highest expression by means of extremely fine and sensitive lines.



Fig. 8 "The birth of Rahula". From a mural painting at Wat Sutat in Bangkok. The artist has depicted the scene of the birth of Siddhartha's son with the simplicity of a primitive. Indeed the artist has presented the event according to real Thai life and costumes and has told the story so truly and convincingly that we too seem to participate in the rejoicing over the happy event.

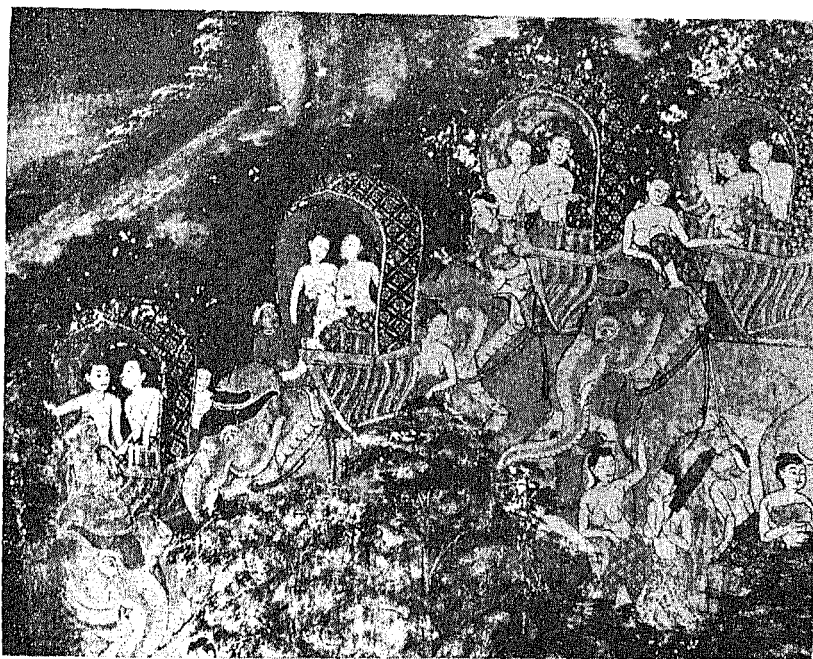


Fig. 9 *Detail of a painting representing the cortege accompanying Queen Maya in her journey to Lumbini Park where she gave birth to Buddha. Mural painting at Wat Suvarnaram in Thonburi (begining of the 19th century A.D.)*

*Here too the artist has given us a real picture of old Thai life. The waving, rhythmical outline of the elephants renders perfectly the sense of the movement of the pachiderns walking on the undulating ground. In looking at this fascinating painting one seems to hear the merry voices of the maidens chatting and joking, while the serpentine line of the cortege winds through the luxuriant Thai forest.*



Fig. 10 *Détail of mural painting representing the departure of Prince Vessantara at Wat Suwannaram in Thonburi.*

*The pathos of the sorrowful departure of Prince Vessantara, with his wife and children, from their royal parents is rendered by the peculiar gesture of the hands and side-inclination of the heads.*

*The complexity of feelings is masterfully rendered by the contrasting masses of the composition as well as contrasting colours.*

*Note how the calm posture of the sitting maidens gives dignity to the composition and at the same time emphasizes the intense feelings of the leading personages in the story.*