

## THE BANGKOK ART SCENE IN THE EARLY 1960s : A PERSONAL SOUVENIR

by

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Few people new to Bangkok in the mid-1970s can imagine the excitement and activity among the capital's painters, sculptors and printmakers in the early 1960s. From almost nothing during that period young artists suddenly blossomed, flowered, and for the most part then withered. Very few of the artists from that period have continued to produce, and if they do it is sometimes from safe havens abroad or more often from within the security of teaching jobs. The subsequent generation of young artists appears to be as somnolent as were its forebears 15 years ago, and seems content to cater to the passing tourist and to imitate successful styles of former leaders of the scene.

This memoir attempts to describe the world of the plastic arts in Bangkok around 1960, the changes that occurred and which led to a flowering of artistic expression and exhibitions. The facts appearing to militate against continuation of the sudden awakening will be examined, and reasons for the decline will be advanced. Having thus delivered the academic framework, two notes of extreme caution must be sounded. Firstly, the records for the period are widely scattered in ephemeral catalogues of exhibitions and in the reviews of those newspapers which bothered to report the exhibitions. A complete collection of these records does not appear to exist, and even newspaper files have gone astray. Secondly, as I was responsible for many of the reviews that appeared, this account is necessarily subjective and partial, and inconsistent even on these grounds, since my own records are incomplete and my memory probably not always accurate. It is to be hoped that a Thai artist from the period will be able to redress the balance and fill in the unintended gaps.

The year 1960 is taken as the starting point for this overview because that was the year before anything noteworthy had happened. The Fine Arts University, Silpakorn, had existed as a degree-giving institution since the Second World War, with numerous faculties. Poh Chang, the Arts and Crafts School founded during the War, turned out larger numbers of diploma students. The pre-university fine arts school, Chang Sin, existed, as its name implies, mostly to prepare students for entry to Silpakorn. Art was taught marginally if at all in some secondary (*mathayom suksa*) schools and at the College of Education, Prasarnmitr. There was no really art conscious public, no museum of contemporary art, no regular exhibition gallery and no need for one, since the only exhibition of any note or regularity was the National Exhibition held annually in the old Haw Silpa, subsequently pulled down to make way for the new National Theatre. This exhibition regularly covered a fairly broad range from neo-traditional to Western/modern styles, and its prizes were coveted by those exhibiting. The influence of the

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older, successful generation which had studied abroad—Khien Yimsiri, Fua Haripitak, and especially Swasdi Tantisuk and Chalood Nimsameur—was strong. The exhibits were largely imitative and dull. There were very occasional exhibitions staged by foreign embassies for visiting foreign artists, of no great importance or effect, and Basuki, the society artist from Indonesia, displayed his paintings at the gymnastic hall in the National Stadium.

Somewhat withdrawn from the public eye in this scenario were a few figures who were to do much to support the artistic impetus that came in the early 1960s. Most important was Carlo Ferróce, better known under his Thai name of Silpa Bhirasri. He came to Thailand from Florence between the two World Wars in pursuit of a commission for royal statues, which he received, the results of which can be seen today outside Lumpini Park and the Memorial Bridge. He stayed, took a Thai name and Thai wife, became a Thai civil servant, and when he died in 1962 was given a Thai Buddhist funeral. He was not a great artist. But he was something more important in the context of the art scene of the time—he was a tremendous inspirer of persons. Through his enthusiasm and personality he managed to fire the imaginations of a generation of young men and a few women, too. As head of the Faculty of Painting and Sculpture at Silpakorn, he was in direct contact with the students. He was without prejudice, and was careful to encourage students at the Arts and Crafts School as well. He was one of the first to write seriously about art in Thailand, in the Thai Culture Series of pamphlets published by the Fine Arts Department, and his book *The Meaning of Art* was translated into Thai. Thanks to him, the annual National Exhibition was started and continued, and because of him a precondition for contemporary art—namely, an outlet—existed.

Another person who was to provide a stimulus of a different kind was *Mom Rajwongse* Pantip Chumbhot, usually known to Westerners as H.R.H. Princess Chumbhot of Nagara Svarga. A lady of great wealth and strength of personality, she was interested in art generally, perhaps in part because her daughter was an accomplished watercolourist. In the grand, sometimes imperious manner reminiscent of the nobility of central Europe in the eighteenth century, the recently widowed Princess found a partial outlet for her energies by patronising promising artists, by presiding over formal openings of exhibitions in various parts of the city, and by providing a venue for exhibitions in Suan Pakkad Palace, where a changing mini-gallery existed for paintings and prints which were sold along with other touristic trophies to visitors to the Palace. *Khun* Pantip provided no directly artistic stimulus; but she used her rank to focus interest and attention on an area needing outward support, and in so doing she gave considerable help to young artists.

There is a third person who deserves special mention. Darrel Berrigan was the individualistic American editor of the *Bangkok World*, which in those days was the only morning newspaper in English in the city. He felt the need to encourage the young and particularly creative artists. He was kind and well-intentioned, and without his giving free publicity to the different exhibitions that were to sprout up all over the city no one would have known about them. With his demise, in 1965, and the change of ownership of the paper, the Bangkok art world lost a powerful supporting figure.



It would seem in retrospect that the germination of the new artistic flowering took place on 25 June 1961 in a shophouse at Makkasan Circle, near a breast-rejuvenation centre, the billboard sign of which for years delighted overseas visitors. The occasion bore many of the marks of subsequent exhibitions: it was a general show of 34 oils and a number of works *hors catalogue* by painters of very mixed talents; it was organized primarily by one enthusiast with drive, Damrong Wong-Upparaj, a young and then somewhat traditional painter from Chiang Rai; and it was opened by Princess Chumbhot at the rather unlikely hour of 11.00 on a Sunday morning. Because of her presence there was a fair sprinkling of the diplomatic corps and society figures. The group showing, if group it really was, called itself the "Young Artists Exhibition", and it was their second show; the first, if memory serves right, was held in another shophouse subsequently pulled down near the Pathumwan Circle, but this went relatively unnoticed. It was the second show that got into the pages of the *Bangkok World* (the review appeared on 26 June), thanks to Darrel Berrigan who was at the opening and wanted "to help the boys". I was asked to do the review, and this started a series of notices over the next few years for which I adopted various pseudonyms (including Lesbia Brandon, W. Pater Jr., James Shaw and Finnegan Swake). To sustain interest in the subject I wrote controversial letters to myself under my own name and replied to them using the current pen name. This was unorthodox, but it had some effect, even if the notices were buried among the trivia of the women's pages along with recipes for cheesecake and notices of receptions and buffet dinners. Few other people wrote any notices (Hiram Woodward did later on). Reviews, as opposed to photographs of openings, never appeared in the Thai papers.

Perhaps an attempt should be made to pinpoint what were the impressive qualities to be found in the young painters of this period. Primarily it was a freshness of approach; they saw and described objects with an unjaded eye. They had considerable feeling for form: their actual composition could rarely be faulted and in this they possibly drew on the tradition of formal arrangement to be found in temple frescos. Like these fresco painters they had a ripe imagination, and in prints and drawings particularly a taste for allegory and mystery. They experimented in techniques, for example, by mixing sand into the paint to achieve a textured surface for certain subjects, and some made great use of the palette knife, almost carving the texture of the paint surface. Colour at best could be delightfully fresh, though some of the more imitative artists copied the darker tones of Western painting. Because they were drawing on no modern tradition of their own, they were totally eclectic: they produced a synthesis of Thai concern for disposition, intensity of colour and detachment, and allied this to composite techniques from the West, even to the use of oil and canvas. The models they took were largely the Impressionists, but they only knew of those from a few reproductions, so there was a local metamorphosis, as well as some derivation. In subject matter they were usually local and domestic, and particularly rural; most of them came from the provinces and recalled scenes that they knew from their experience. The city and city life were of no interest to them. The best of the artists were to develop their imaginations fantastically, painting scenes they had never seen with an outstanding surety of touch.

In contrast to Western artists, whose abstraction had worn itself out and whose art was beginning to go through its Op and Pop phases, and who frequently seemed to have little in



mind worth expressing, the young Thai artists were struggling to externalise their impressions of the world in a medium largely alien to them. They succeeded by being able to draw on certain traditions of religious art, imaginatively transforming these to a different sphere and in different media. With one exception they were desperately poor, so their work represented a commitment and vision that was impressive. The best had talent, imagination, youthfulness and enthusiasm in their favour, and they were struggling to project their art in a society that simply did not understand it or them; hence there arose the feeling that they needed all the support they could get.

The Makkasan exhibition was not immediately followed by a rash of others; the following six months saw things much as before, with only the National Exhibition marking the period. But in January 1962 there was a fine cross-section of styles exhibited at Suan Pakkad Palace, which constituted one of the first shows—if not the very first apart from the National Exhibition—not to be linked to a particular school or group. The older generation, represented by Swasdi and Chalood, was present; the young Silpakorn students, principally Damrong, Anand Panin and Praphan Srisuta, were on display; and the Poh Chang students were also included, notably Euayporn Kerdchouay. All four of the younger artists were to go abroad and change their styles radically in less than three years.

The same month saw an exhibition by Insom Wongsam at the Tourist Organization of Thailand (TOT) display room near the old Culture Hall (Sala Wattanatham). Insom was about to leave for Europe, and sold drawings and woodcuts for the most part firmly in the Thai tradition and at reasonable prices. He was to reappear on the scene in December 1962 in absentia at the Bangkok Gallery (sponsored by Princess Chumbhot and ESSO), by sending for sale drawings that he had made on his overland journey, during which he had run short of money; thereafter he was heard of no more. Insom's fate, and his talent, was to be symptomatic of many others. The TOT rooms continued to be used in a haphazard and intermittent way for exhibitions, and degenerated to a kind of 'art mart', the model of which was to be taken up by several private galleries; the aim was essentially the same, being to sell as many paintings and drawings as possible to tourists. There was consequently little art and much artifice in the works on display.

There then appeared to be again a period of calm for three months. The Australian Embassy sponsored at the Silpakorn Gallery (the Haw Silpa) a fairly comprehensive exhibition of original paintings in April 1962. For many Thai artists this was the first time they were able to see original oils by Westerners. The British Council organized in May a general exhibition of contemporary Thai art lasting two weeks. It included all the established names (Swasdi, Chalood, Manit Poo-Aree) as well as a number of newcomers; altogether more than 100 works were displayed. The *Bangkok World* notice of the affair carried pictures of some of the exhibits and artists, not the least of them Damrong who was shortly to leave for the Slade School of Fine Art, University College, London, on a British Council scholarship. The British Council held another show the following year, and then fell out of the picture somewhat.

The death of Professor Silpa Bhirasri occurred in May 1962, but the event went outwardly unmarked in the art world for another 18 months. Another general show was organized by



the restyled Bangkok Arts Centre (which had no centre and was the Young Artists Group under another name) at the Royal Automobile Association's premises. This focused attention on the faults rather than the virtues of the new movement. Many pictures had been seen publicly before (Pichai Nirand's "Paknam" and Anand's "Townscape"), and a print by Praphan was currently on view (and likewise unnumbered) at the same time at Suan Pakkad. Too many indifferent artists were on display, prices were uniformly excessive—already there was an element of frightening the public away rather than cossetting it. But art had only just gone public. The artists did not know it was not ethical to show old work in new exhibitions unless they were retrospectives; they even did not know they should number prints. They knew only the high prices that certain successful Western artists could ask and sometimes obtain, and thought they, though unknown, could try to do the same.

A successful exhibition of an Indian artist, Miss B. Prabha, was held at Suan Pakkad Palace in June 1962, and at the Saranarom Gardens that same month the annual Poh Chang exhibition took place. The *Bangkok World* review noted "there have been so many art exhibitions lately that it is a wonder there is still something new left to show", going on to complain of the excessive number of *khlong* scenes and to suggest other subjects. Three general exhibitions in the space of one month in 1962 was considered unusual and excessive; by the middle of 1964 one had adjusted to a pace of ten per month.

My absence abroad for four months in 1962 left my records a blank, but it was during this time that Major Suwit, an amiable eccentric who knew nothing about art, opened in the former kitchen of his house a minute gallery almost opposite the Siam Society in Asoke Road. Whatever his reasons for doing this, which seemed to have been confused, he performed a public service by providing Bangkok with its first art gallery, the Bangkokapi Gallery. It did not double as a gift shop, and was soon to be in such demand that Suwit's kitchen was booked for weeks ahead.

The new gallery did not entirely supersede old centres, of course: the Student Christian Centre on Phya Thai Road held its fourth annual art show in November 1962 under the sponsorship of Ray Downs. As he felt, rightly, that painters were getting a good showing, the exhibition, which became a regular event, was devoted exclusively to sculpture, led by the doyenne of the craft, Misiem Yipintsoi, and Khien. Although the exhibition was noble in its attempt to foster interest in another form of art, the Thai genius cannot be said to be at its best in inhuman, three-dimensional forms; the sculptors at that exhibition as a whole showed nowhere near as much talent as the painters and printmakers. The Student Christian Centre was very active in more than mere support of artists: it was one of the first institutions to arrange assistance for the victims of the freak typhoon that occurred at Laem Talempuk at the end of November. An exhibition of 60 paintings and watercolours was organized and the whole lot sold by auction on 8 December, the proceeds going to the orphans of the storm. These works were gifts, and artists sent surprisingly good paintings, notably those of Anand, Pichai, Euayporn; Pairoj Somosorn, Manit Sueysaard and Chavalit Sermpongsul sent skilled watercolours.



There followed a number of exhibitions by foreigners who necessarily remain outside this survey, but they did help in reinforcing the exhibition-going habit; even if they had no influential friends they had their embassies behind them. They tended to be judged more severely than Thai artists in the columns of the *Bangkok World*, if only because they were expected to maintain international standards; whereas the younger Thai artists needed every encouragement. There was Joachim from Brazil at the Bangkapi Gallery in December 1962, and a lively Filipino art show at TOT in January 1963. The British Council produced an exhibition of Barbara Hepworth's work in February, and a delicate showing of watercolours and sketches by the Lebanese artist Amal Dagher took place at the Bangkapi in February. However, the exhibition accompanied by the greatest noise, and for the least cause, was a show by one Sajnani, a touring Indian artist of much pretension and little talent, who produced the dullest collection of geometrical abstracts on hardboard that could be imagined. He was wounded by a sharp review, persuaded a professor of painting and sculpture at Silpakorn to defend him, and then the whole 'Sajnani controversy' blew up. The *Bangkok World* received a number of letters (not mine) for and against Sajnani, and not a few from the artist himself. It was a silly storm in an Indian teacup. The show might have been better in retrospect if the artist had been damned with faint praise rather than dismissed outright.

About this time an exhibition was held in Milwaukee, USA, of contemporary Thai art, organized by an earnest American lady to whom must go the credit for being the first to organize a show of modern Thai work abroad. The exhibition was a success, the best names were included, but not everything was sold because of the high prices demanded by Thai artists (even too high for Americans).

It was prices that were again remarkable at the National Exhibition, the fourteenth, that was opened by H.M. the King (some of whose paintings were also on show) in January 1963. The paintings formed the most important category; there were only 13 sculptures, one of the best of which, by Chalood, had already been installed in another version at the new Samila Hotel in Songkla just before the exhibition opened. Much of the work was frankly imitative, as might have been expected, but there was no shortage of individual talent either. Of the works of the 47 painters represented, "Faith", Pichai's Buddha's Footprint, received the first prize, but that meant no success for the painting which remained unsold for many months in the artist's home, even though the schematic presentation of the theme was to be repeated a thousand times by lesser artists in the next few years. This was the last national exhibition to be held in the old Haw Silpa. With it, and with the passing of *Acharn* Silpa, went the importance of the occasion. The Fifteenth National Exhibition was not held until July 1964, in a side wing of the Bangkok Museum, and it was a relatively feeble event.

The *Bangkok World* about this time started using the front covers of its *Sunday Magazine* to display particular works by individual artists, often with a short note about the artist and his work. This was organized by the magazine editor, another devotee of Thai art, Jack Scheidler. Though it is perhaps invidious to single out particular patrons, one of the most consistent exhibition-goers and avid supporters in this period was the French Ambassador Achille Clarac, himself an artist; he built up a large collection of contemporary Thai art, as



did a number of other foreigners, particularly members of the diplomatic corps. The *Bangkok World Sunday Magazine* also started publishing essays on Thai art of this period; the first was "The figure in Thai art", which commented that most paintings and drawings by Thais were of empty, figureless scenes, and that where figures did occur they were stylized and showed a poor command of anatomy (this characteristic perhaps derived from the iconographic traditions of Theravada Buddhist art).

Exhibitions by individual Thai artists at this time were not so plentiful as they were later to become. Princess Chumbhot did the honours of Chumpol Ratanachaiwan's artistically sound collection of prints, mostly of buffaloes, at the Bangkapi Gallery in January 1963. In March there was an exhibition by "Three Women Artists", of whom Pranee stole the show being much beyond the limited talents of Suwanee and Lawan. Pranee's husband, Swasdi Tantisuk, followed in April at the Bangkapi with an exhibition showing him to be a rarity indeed, especially on the Thai scene: an artist continually developing his own idiom. His palette of oils became ever lighter, and his watercolours showed unusual control of the medium. At the same time at the TOT gallery there occurred what was listed as the Twenty-sixth Exhibition of the Fine Arts Association, though this number seems hard to believe. Talent was thin among the 225 pictures on display, but new names continued to come forward showing promise—Taweethai Boriboon for his saltmarsh windmills, Roongthip Tertakul for stippled effects, and Phira with a wan charm.

Euayporn had a one-man show at the Bangkapi Gallery in May, again opened by the inexhaustible Princess Chumbhot. It was an important exhibition in many respects; the prices were extremely reasonable, ranging from 400 to 900 baht; there was a rare coherence about the exhibition, and not just in the painter's original style marked by use of the palette knife and pale colour. All were paintings on canvas, all were simply and well framed in teak. The works fell into three groups: portraits, souvenirs of a trip to Malaysia, and general scenes, all of which had original subjects—fighting dogs instead of *khlong* scenes. The catalogue for once had no mistakes in the English, and even the measurements of the canvases were given. All of this was most unusual. These novel practices were copied subsequently, not least the idea of having a central theme or themes and of having decent frames. But not all of the artists followed Euayporn's reasonable pricing policy. Almost every single picture at the exhibition was sold, ten within one hour of opening. Even this clear evidence that the public wanted good works properly presented and modestly priced could not convince many artists of the need to avoid trying to make a quick killing. Civil servants with limited salaries were able to afford these paintings. The exhibition broke new ground in this respect, too: it was not just patronised by rich Westerners.

On 28 May 1963 an exhibition of contemporary Thai art opened at the Alpine Club Gallery in London; this was reviewed favourably in *The Times*, and four artists were singled out by name: Damrong, Piriya Krairiksh, Euayporn and Tongterm Turandawiriya. It brought in some money for some of the artists, and perhaps some prestige, but caused nothing but trouble to the organizers, Richard Roberts in London and myself in Bangkok, though it provided excellent insight into the petty jealousies and infighting among the different factions of the



tiny Bangkok art scene, fighting which was to break out into the open in June of the following year. In Bangkok itself there were more exhibitions by foreigners: Theo Meyer in May at the Bangkapi; Margaret Cornelius, a batik painter, at the American Universities Alumni (AUA) Association headquarters; and Jennifer Cole, using oils as a medium, again at the Bangkapi.

By this time the groundwork had been laid—art, or more correctly, the openings of art exhibitions, had become fashionable. In July 1963 there were no less than seven exhibitions, of which three were by foreigners (a Belgian painter Minos Jacquemyns at the Bangkapi; a semi-permanent Japanese resident, Yokata, whose watercolours were displayed at the Japanese Trade Centre, then on New Road; and a show of very high-quality graphics from the Philippines at the Philippine Embassy). Five of these exhibitions opened in one week, and given Bangkok's chronic traffic congestion and lack of centralization, even in those days, it began to seem as though art lovers should invest in a private helicopter before setting off to acquire works of art. There were two general shows, one at the British Council and one by students at Poh Chang (where Mani Sueysaard and Komol Tatsanachali were notable), and two individual shows. That by Chavalit at Suan Pakkad, prior to his departure for Holland on a scholarship, showed no outstanding talent, and that of Noparat Livisit at the Bangkapi was one of the worst ever seen there, being quite without talent, unselfcritical and immodestly priced.

The fashion led to the opening of a new gallery, the Fine Arts Gallery near Gaysorn. This started off with a show by six artists, three well known: Swasdi, Prapan and Prayat, and three relatively new though perhaps of modest talent: Banchong, Phira and Roongthip, of whom the last then appeared to be artistically the most promising. The Fine Arts approach was strictly commercial, soon degenerating into another art shop. The shop concept was adopted by TOT, which in August advertised an exhibition by an unknown Krachang; in fact it was a mixed show with no purpose, and purchasers could take away paintings as they left, supermarket fashion. A general exhibition of five artists at the Bangkapi was no better in standard; it began to seem that the proliferation in art simply allowed lesser talents to come to the surface, however briefly. The foreigners showing at the same time were perhaps not much better. A Hong Kong artist, Garfield Chao, exhibited at the Chao-An Association; the extrovert Brazilian Joachim came back again, this time at the Spanish Embassy with a jocularly decadent collection of drawings; and the boutiques started to present art: La Boutique held a memorial exhibition of scrolls, paintings and calligraphy by a Chinese resident in Thailand, said to have been called Tan Ting Teng and to have committed suicide after winning the national lottery and paying his debts.

September brought a five-man show at the Bangkapi of very indifferent talent (Prapan showing his less estimable efforts), and an exhibition of German reproductions of paintings at TOT. In October the Bangkapi held a show by 23 third-year Poh Chang students, and was also the scene of another poor show put on by the brother-and-sister team Krisadee and Sawana. There were two exhibitions of real importance, as well. One, at Suan Pakkad, where Princess Chumbhot maintained her high standards in showing the works of Anand Panin, who prior to going to study in France was rapidly moving to pure abstraction but remained



nevertheless very individualistic. The other, at the Siam Society, was a retrospective of paintings and especially sculptures by Misiem Yipintsoi, one of the modest old guard who has subsequently suffered many a plagiarism.

The Bangkapi Gallery stayed at the forefront of the rapidly changing art scene, however. It had a feeble one-man show by Tawon Inangon, and then a very good joint exhibition in November by Euayporn and Taweethai; the former maintained his originality of subject and treatment, and his palette became lighter, while the latter, less inventive, clung to darker tones and saltfield subjects. The general standard of the exhibition was high, with the same attention to detail as in Euayporn's one-man show earlier that year and the same success with a policy of modest pricing: the entire range was 100-1,200 baht, with the average at 700 baht per painting.

At the end of November the long-awaited "In Memoriam Silpa Bhirasri" exhibition was held at TOT. It was shameful that it had not been held sooner (the much-acknowledged master had died in May 1962, 18 months before). It was far from properly organized: some of the pictures on display, instead of being carefully nurtured for the occasion, had been publicly shown at exhibitions less than a month before, and of these only those that had not been sold were offered. A percentage of the profits was to go to charity, but the prices being asked were still too high. Only one person's work shone out of the mass of mediocrity or already-knowns, and that was the hauntingly original coloured prints of Pote Songwongse.

This rather saddening fiasco was quickly followed in early December by a resounding success: the itinerant Piriya Krairiksh, at one time a student of Kokoschka, held a one-man show at the Siam Society, and as all the proceeds were going to charity it was eligible for opening by H.M. the King. The scenic oils of Corfu, the society portraits and the drawings and watercolours were delightfully fresh (no *khlong* scenes, no turgid colours) and the prices reasonable, a maximum for oils being 2,000 baht. The year closed with an exhibition by Euayporn at the AUA branch in Chiang Mai, a novel location.

The year 1964 opened with a series of indifferent exhibitions. This poor standard, with a few exceptions, was to continue. Quantity replaced quality. Bangkapi had three joint exhibitions, all run-of-the-mill, of Pipat Thedvisal and Sanga Mukmanee, Thanee Tappawatana and Ronarong Tanomtup, and lastly a father-and-son exhibition, Kid and Banchong. Sloppiness, which was already a hallmark of the lesser shows, became the rule. The catalogue of the father-and-son exhibition did not even bother to list the works on display.

February saw five exhibitions. Two were mixed shows, one of sculpture at the Student Christian Centre, enlivened with a few watercolours—the standard of sculpture was even lower than the previous year—and one of 12 abstract artists at TOT which included all the important names: Damrong, Piriya, Praphan, Anand, Thawan. Only Thawan and Piriya showed much talent, but the prices asked were absurdly high. Almost no one bought. This exhibition was followed by an essay in the magazine section of the *Bangkok World* which doubted that Thai painters really understood the philosophical implications of abstract art, much less the Thai public which had still to be educated in modern art. This was followed by another essay pro-



posing subjects in Thai art, and wondering if Thai artists had risen to the challenge; it was financially easier to do the Floating Market and esthetically more fashionable to be abstract. Angkarn Kalayarnapong, the poet-draughtsman, had a small exhibition at the Faculty of Architecture, Chulalongkorn University. There were two foreigners exhibiting both at the Bangkapi: an Indian, Farokh Contractor, and the Japanese *khlong* painter Nino Yokoto. The Indian's work was original and fresh, and reasonably priced, too. This could not be said of the next Bangkapi offering, a Thai-style exhibition of doubtful artistic validity and esthetic effect.

The Bangkapi Gallery was reconstructed and expanded at this period, though this work did not prevent Noparat Livisit having a second exhibition there hardly better than his previous one. The Fine Arts Gallery, in a new location in Suriwongse Road, was devoted to Silpakorn University products, and held a showing of Thawan Duchanee and Banchong Kosalwat. The former showed muscularity, as ever; the latter changed his style with each picture, without ever being able to hit on one in which he seemed at home. The Raja Gallery in Gaysorn, which had inherited the mantle of the old Fine Arts Gallery, had by May 1964 gone over exclusively to twice-monthly change-rounds for tourists, though Tanee did have some good linoblocks on display there. In the same month another gallery, the Elizabeth, opened in another converted kitchen, and its proximity to Ploenchit Road and a travel agent seemed to confine it from the start to a diet of *khlongs* and Buddha images in oils. The foreigners continued: Philip Battaglia had a dreadful show at the Bangkapi, and an extrovert Turk named Yuksel went berserk at AUA with an incredible showing of fashionable rubbish.

In June, in aid of Dr. Pierra's home for reformed prostitutes, a group from the Arts and Crafts School got together a collection, mostly of old work, at the Elizabeth Gallery and gave 50 per cent of the proceeds to charity. Damrong came back, at the Raja Gallery, showing the very different post-Slade Damrong—one wondered if his stay away had done him much good. The Bangkapi held a shortlived, backdoor show of works by Taweethai, Sana and Anek. Silpakorn held its annual of current students' work which was quite dreadful, varying between Soviet realism and the Floating Market. A *Sunday Magazine* essay noted the exodus of artists: Praphan to Japan and Germany, Chavalit to Holland, Anand to France, Insom somewhere unknown, Manit Poo-Arree to Rome, and Damrong anxious to go to America. Others were to go later—Euayporn, Thawan, Jamlong, Phira, Banchong. Not a few were to be corrupted, stylistically and perhaps in their artistic values.

But already in May rumours concerning the fate of the National Exhibition were circulating. The first prize was supposed to have gone to a Thai-style artist, with many talented younger artists having their works refused altogether. By June the younger artists had questioned the competence of the selection committee, and the '*querelle des anciens et modernes*' broke out into the open. It would be giving away no secrets to say that the younger artists complained that the first prize was given to a Thai-style artist because H.M. the King had bought some paintings by such a person—as His Majesty was to explain afterwards in a personal communication, to give as a present to an American friend. The apparent cause of the quarrel naturally upset the Royal Family. Prince Karawik, a faithful opener of exhibitions and a talented water-



colourist himself, asked me to help dampen the fires of dispute. This was not so easy, but it did seem both unreasonable and illogical to submit paintings to a jury and then to wish to withdraw them because they did not get prizes. The Fine Arts Department overreacted, threatening sanctions against the 14 dissident artists. Finally the whole affair simmered down with H.M. the King subtly calling a truce over a lunch at Chitrlada Palace at which all sides were represented and, with royal words being said in favour of both sides, the quarrel publicly evaporated. The Fifteenth National Exhibition, held in a makeshift location at the Bangkok Museum in July, was a much-truncated affair. The selection committee was to be reorganized, and calm was restored. But it did herald the element of student power that was to become noticeable in other domains nine years later—officialdom was shown to be not always right.

The Bangkapi reopened, with far more space, in June 1964 with one more general show by artists displaying no great talent. Another shophouse in Nakorn Sawan Road was briefly turned into an art gallery, called the Dhevakam; its first exhibition was yet another mixed show. In August a building designed as a gallery opened far down Petchburi Road Extension with the silly name of "Gifts Gallery", under the enterprising Uab Sanasen, himself a Silpakorn artist. June closed with an outstanding exhibition at AUA of 50 prints by Pote Songwongse, all highly individual, and 25 paintings and 25 drawings by Euayporn who maintained his own real talent and individuality throughout. Prince Karawik, who opened the show, rightly indicated they were not just young men of promise but with real accomplishments behind them already. The display, the catalogue and framing all showed professional standards, and the prices were reasonable (the highest price was 900 baht), with the result that the exhibits sold rapidly.

The chronological presentation has to stop at this point because of incomplete personal records and my departure from Bangkok. Of course, art life continued. But the pace had become too frenetic, and people were bored. The quality declined with the increased exhibitions; the artists seemed unable to maintain standards, or perhaps too few wanted to have any standards. There was also the pressure-cooker aspect of the scene to which the catalogue of the London exhibition in 1963 had referred—modern art was an intensely new phenomenon in Thailand, and had been brought to the boil very rapidly. The corollary was that the artists had not had time to mature, to develop an individual idiom and work it out. The artists needed a more solid basis of experience and thought, both of which they had had little.

Perhaps the greatest fault was that the Thai artists did not attempt to involve or educate the Thai public. Thais were not ready to accept the decoration of their homes with pictures—the middle class was neither sufficiently mature, self-assured nor culturally minded. There was no tradition in Thailand of Western painting, or indeed of art as secular decoration, for art had



always been associated with religion. There was simply no art-buying habit—not even an art-seeing habit. Without a broad educational programme for the average Thai, the native market for modern art was limited to a handful of people. The often indifferent quality and above all the high prices of many exhibitions frightened many people away. It was a serious mistake to overprice, for artists alienated their potential public who assumed that all art would always be beyond their means.

So the public was largely limited to the wealthy, aristocratic few who supported art for various reasons, and to the ephemeral diplomatic and foreign communities. Many were not interested in art proper, but in souvenirs (as were the tourists who were to come in flocks in the 1970s), and those who were residents, once they had built up their collections, become bored and lacked space for further acquisitions. The transient foreigners genuinely interested in modern art were again very few in number, and even they did not always have the financial means to build up large collections. In such circumstances patronage was limited to a minute number of persons, mostly non-Thais, which was fatal for the development of Thai art in the long run.

The Thai artists not only failed to build up local patronage, they also failed to develop and renew their sources of inspiration. They were far too content to copy each other, especially the more successful of their kind, and their art became blotted by a wearying monotony. They not only used the same techniques, but also the same subjects: the Floating Market, most obviously, the fishing nets at Mahachai, Wat Po gateways and so on. Bangkok and Thailand as a whole were undergoing tremendous changes in the days of Field Marshal Sarit Dhanarat, but very few artists bothered to record scenes of contemporary life, the traffic jams, the massage parlours, the evil effects of ill-considered industrialization. Few even bothered to record the everlasting lot of the contemporary farmer. They had a concept of the saleable pretty-pretty which was repetitive and arty rather than artistic.

The failure of Thai artists to establish and maintain material standards can be spelled out in technical details. They often used inferior canvas poorly stretched on warped stretchers. Some limited their work to shaving board, from which the paint fell from surfaces poorly prepared, and which became eaten by termites and cockroaches. They often did not bother to frame their canvases properly. The printmakers were unaware of the need to limit the number of prints from any one block, and to number each print. They either produced no catalogues at all, or produced them in gibberish which passed for English; sometimes they produced them without any Thai language as well. The pricing of their work was erratic, and they sometimes allowed works to be removed by impatient new owners before a show was over.

If Thai artists were to blame for many of their difficulties, it must in fairness be added that they could hardly have known how to react sensibly in a situation largely without precedent. Furthermore they had to live. It became increasingly obvious as support dwindled that almost no artist could afford to survive on his art alone (in this, of course, Thai artists are in no different a position than the majority from other countries). They needed money—the most obvious way to earn a living was to teach art, and this inevitably led to a dispersal of talent and energy



in all but a very few dedicated persons. Fewer still were lucky enough to make a sufficient name for themselves, mostly abroad, to support themselves entirely by combining patronage and sales. Those who could not get jobs teaching art—and both Silpakorn University and the Arts and Crafts School grossly flooded the market with unemployable graduates—had no alternative but to abandon the pursuit, or to take jobs which were a very denial of art, such as painting cinema billboards. In this atmosphere it was small wonder that the majority of artists fell by the wayside.

Perhaps the last major reason for decline in the art scene is the very excess of activities in which it indulged. Towards the end of 1964, from virtually no exhibitions at all in 1960, there were as many as five new shows per week and two openings in one evening. This is more than a sophisticated European capital city can easily bear, and it proved fatal to the small and wornout band of art lovers in Bangkok. They became physically exhausted as well as financially and mentally tired of the scene. Attendances at openings dwindled, galleries closed. The art scene was killed by excess as well as by indifference and apathy.

It should also be said that the young Thai artists did not try to group together. There were far too many rival factions all jockeying for position. Silpakorn was opposed to Poh Chang and divided within itself. Artists threw away many chances with their infighting, and also threw away the chances of converting the public to their work.

The year 1964 by no means marked the end of the art scene. New galleries continued to appear. By far the most important was the well-run, architect-designed Trio Gallery in Petchburi Road Extension. The *avant-garde* Gallery 20 had a short-lived existence over a bookshop in Rajprasong; the Sala Gallery in Gaysorn was set up to catch the tourists, as was the Gaysorn Art Hall. None lasted. Major Suwit was killed in a car crash, and the Bangkoki Gallery gradually wound down before closing. Supit of the Trio found that even openings were poorly attended. By the end of the decade all the galleries proper had closed, and one simply had art shops. The movement was dead. The public, small as it was, had evaporated. And so the artists dispersed. Of all the excitement there remains only the memory for a few people.

However, one concrete result is the permanent gallery of contemporary art, the Bhirasri Institute of Modern Art, set up with the help of Princess Chumbhot in memory of Silpa Bhira-sri. For many years it seemed that this project would get nowhere. But finally some ten years after Ferrocce's death the building went up, partly with Government money on a site far from ideal on Atthakarn Prasit Lane. It is small for its purpose, and its storage areas will never be enough to cope with its function of being a museum as well as a gallery. In its short life it has already experienced management disputes and clique rivalry.

The flowering was stimulating while it lasted. But it is a pity that the movement could not have been sustained. It is perhaps not too much to hope that a new artistic flowering will occur, which will not repeat the errors of the false spring of the early 1960s.



# THE ORIGIN AND MEANING OF THE THAI 'CITY PILLAR'

by

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Until the reign of King Chulalongkorn (1868-1910), when Bangkok's administration gradually established effective control over its more distant provinces, the *myay*<sup>1</sup>, or provincial city with its surroundings, often had a great deal of autonomy. Nowadays many of these old cities possess a relic of those times, the *låg myay* or 'city pillar'. The *låg myay* was erected in the name of the highest political authority, and up to the present day the religious practices connected with the guardian spirit of the *låg myay* (*câawphô låg myay*) are reminiscent of attitudes towards a seat of political power.

The city pillar has attracted much attention in literature. However, information about the institution is piecemeal, and scattered through various types of sources. Sometimes a *låg myay* is referred to in an ancient chronicle; there may be a passing comment in an archeological survey, and quite often there is a passage devoted to a town pillar in a detailed description of a provincial city. In this essay it is intended to draw together much of this information. In doing so, an attempt is made to answer questions regarding the possible origin of the town pillar, and questions surrounding the symbolism attributed to this object as well.

A city pillar can often be found in or near the exact geographical centre of a provincial city, that is, near the centre of the rectangle formed by the old city walls<sup>2</sup>. Thus it is logical that another meaning of the word *låg myay* is the 'zero' milestone of a city or town<sup>3</sup>. However, there are several exceptions to this rule, for example those cases where an old city pillar has been removed to a site in front of the town hall<sup>4</sup>, a move which underlines the traditional link between city pillar and authority. In other instances, a *låg myay* can be moved from an old site to a new one made available by the municipality. Thus Rama II (1809-1824) ordered the Ratchaburi pillar to be shifted from its ancient resting place to a position on the eastern side of the Mae Klong river<sup>5</sup>. Similarly, a new city pillar was recently erected in Phetchaburi, on a

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout the text, Thai words are transliterated according to the Haas system. Exceptions are made in the case of proper names of provinces, and the transliteration of Thai personal names.

<sup>2</sup> This has also been remarked by G.W. Skinner, who personally visited many city pillars. See the account of his personal conversation with R.B. Textor in Textor's unpublished dissertation, "An inventory of non-Buddhist supernatural objects in a central Thai village" (Cornell University, 1960), p. 508.

<sup>3</sup> G.B. McFarland, *Thai-English Dictionary* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1969), p. 920. In this essay, all other types of ritual poles, such as ornamented sacrificial poles and the post in the middle of the threshing floor, have been left out of the argument.

<sup>4</sup> Such as the three pillars of Lampang Province. See *ñaanchalṅṅ 25 phúthasādtawād* ("Twenty-five Centuries of Buddhism", Commemoration Volumes, Bangkok, Udom, 1957), hereafter *BCV*, vol. 3, Changwat Lampang, p. 14.

<sup>5</sup> *BCV*, vol. 3, Changwat Ratchaburi, pp. 27-28.