

## ON WAT SA BUA KAEO

The Siam Society is supporting the restoration of Wat Sa Bua Kaeo in Wang Khun Village, Nong Songhong District of Khon Kaen Province. Among the major attractions of this temple is murals in the traditional Isan (northeastern Thai) style, which is sometimes called Lao. Although much of the history of these murals has been lost, information on the temple and the murals is provided briefly here for the interest of members and other readers.

According to information of the Department of Religious Affairs, the temple was established on 10 March 1916. The temple received royal support in 1931. At about that time the abbot, Phrakhru Wibun, built the present ubosoth (assembly hall for monks). Phrakhru Wibun was a widely-respected religious leader at the time

with a recognized ability in architecture. He used the Ban Yang temple assembly hall, located in his hometown in Borabu District, Maha Sarakham District, as a model. Wat Sa Bua Kaeo's murals are located on the inner and outer walls of the ubosoth.

The artists first covered the walls with whitewash to which oils were applied. The colors used were yellow, indigo, earthen red, green, sky blue, and black with indigo, yellow, and green dominating. A chrome yellow was used in place of gold leaf. As typical in northeastern Thailand, scenes in the murals were divided by ribbon-like bands instead of the zigzag motifs used in central Thailand.

The murals extend from almost the bottom to the top of the outer walls. Inside the *ubosoth*,



the murals cover almost the entire area of the four walls.

The murals depict scenes from three stories. The inner walls show episodes from the life of the Buddha including that of the Buddha vanquishing Mara. Also shown inside the *ubosoth* is the story of *Sangkhasinchai*, a local folktale into which lessons from the Dhamma have been intertwined. On the outer wall are scenes from the northeastern recension of the *Ramakian*. These are of interest because they differ from how the story is told in the central Thai *Ramakian* as well as the Indian *Ramayana*, on which the *Ramakians* were based.

The value of these murals is manifold. They represent both the local literary genius but also the heights indigenous art can reach in depicting favorite aspects of northeastern Thai literature. The murals also provide a view of traditional

life in Khon Kaen. Of special interest is a view of the activities surrounding giving birth with a male midwife attending. Another scene shows the coronation ritual of a local ruler. Also shown is the wildlife of the time including deer, crocodiles, wild boar, bees, fishes, and monkeys. Other scenes depict palaces, temples, city walls, as well as ordinary houses. Buffalo carts and royal carriages are also shown.

Unfortunately, the physical state of the murals is poor. Rainfall from storms has washed off the lower sections of the murals outside the *ubosoth*. Paint has flaked off of some areas while other sections are pitted or pock-marked. In places close to where the temple pillars reach the ceiling, water has oozed in and marred the paintings. The dust and grime of decades has darkened many of the murals, especially inside the *ubosoth*. Captions on the pictures have faded and are hard to read.