



THE LACQUER PAVILION IN ITS FIRST REIGN CONTEXT

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The Lacquer Pavilion is a unique building with twelve gold and black lacquer mural paintings. It was discovered by François du Haut de Berenx, an antique dealer, in the grounds of the little *wat* at Ban Kling, a small riverside village some 10 km south of Ayutthaya. According to villagers, it had been brought to Ban Kling as two damaged buildings in the early nineteenth century. It was not known from where.

In 1959 Prince and Princess Chumbhot of Nagara Svarga acquired the buildings, re-erecting and restoring them in their Suan Pakkad Palace in Bangkok. These were separate but cognate buildings: one had been a repository or library for Buddhist manuscripts, the other was a scriptorium open on one side for the use of monks. In Bangkok the library was placed as an inner room. The mural panels of the three walls of the scriptorium were placed around this inner room on all four sides as a gallery. Each building has six incomplete murals. The inner room, the former library, has portions of seven non-matching baseboards which suggests it would have been twice as large. Each mural has the distinctive feature of an upper register presenting scenes from the Buddha's ministry and a lower register with episodes from the Ramakien. This process of discovery and reconstruction is described by M.C. Subhadradis Diskul in *The Lacquer Pavilion at Suan Pakkad Palace* (1960).

When the Lacquer Pavilion was brought to Bangkok, knowledgeable writers M.R. Kukrit Pramoj and Professor Silpa Bhirasri considered the two sets of murals to be products of the late seventeenth century created during the reign of King Narai (1656–1688). The reasons given were the striking depiction of three French cavaliers in seventeenth century dress in one mural and foreigners—Dutch, Mughal, Persian—in costumes characteristic of the Narai period. Another element considered was the use of the pointed arch in the Lacquer Pavilion windows. These motifs became popular during Phra Narai's reign but remained in use into the nineteenth century. For example, the British emissary to the Court of Siam in 1821, John Crawfurd, commented on mural paintings in Wat Phra Chetuphon (built 1789–1801) that the Europeans were in the “grotesque costume of the end of the seventeenth and beginning of the eighteenth centuries”.¹ Also considered in

¹ John Crawfurd *Journal of an Embassy to the Courts of Siam and Cochin China* 1828; reprinted Oxford University Press, 1987, p. 109.

1959 was a Ban Kling tradition that the buildings had come from a palace in Ayutthaya, destroyed by the Burmese in 1767.

Not observed at the time of the Lacquer Pavilion's discovery was that its distinctive windows of a pointed arch with a cusp on either side are in the same style and proportions as those at the Wang Na (Palace of the Front) built during the 1780s by the Uparaj Viceroy, younger brother of King Rama I (1789–1801). Also not realized in 1959 was that for the first third of the nineteenth century Bangkok's formal name given by King Rama I was *Krungthep-mahanakhonsi-ayutthaya*.² By the late 1970s scholars speculated that the Lacquer Pavilion was built sometime during the eighteenth or early nineteenth centuries.³

This paper aims to place the origin of the Lacquer Pavilion murals in the context of the First Reign of the Chakri Dynasty founded by King Rama I (1782–1809). There are four compelling reasons to do so. The first is the marked change in subject matter of temple murals from the Jatakas in the Late Ayutthaya period to that of the life of the Buddha during the First Reign. The second reason is the similarity of focus on the ministry of the Buddha in the Lacquer Pavilion murals with those of the Buddhaisawan Chapel (built mid-1790s). The third reason is the illustrations in the Lacquer Pavilion murals of the Buddha's visit to Lanka and other scenes from the *Mahavamsa*, the Sri Lankan epic translated into Thai by order of Rama I. Finally, the scenes in the lower registers of episodes from the Ramakien are those described in the version of the epic composed by Rama I. These changes took place in the context of Rama I's reformation of the Sangha, and his emphasis on the historic Buddha's life and ministry. Also important are the king's literary interests which included the translation of the *Mahavamsa* and the re-creation of the Ramakien.

Temples in Central Thailand

During the Late Ayutthaya period until the fall of the capital in 1767, with one exception, the subject matter of temple murals concerned the Jatakas, primarily those of the Tosachat, the last Ten Lives of the Bodhisattha prior to the Buddha's final life with his Enlightenment and his entrance into Nibbana. Similar to parables, the Jatakas were moral teachings illustrating the Ten Virtues which must be perfected in order to attain Buddhahood, and representing the righteous behavior, and sacrifices for others by the Bodhisatta as he progressed in his successive rebirths. These were painted along the lateral walls of the temple at eye level

² *The Dynastic Chronicles Bangkok Era First Reign* Chaophraya Thiphakorawang Edition, 1869 Vol I. Text translated and edited by Thadeus and Chadwin Flood, 1975, The Center for East Asian Cultural Studies, Tokyo, p. 18.

³ Jean Boisselier, *Thai Painting*, Kodansha International, Tokyo, 1976, p. 96.



so that monks could more easily explain them. The appeal of the Tosachat was apparently paramount for the laity who could perhaps appreciate the circumstances of the characters and relate to them. In addition to the Jatakas, those scenes illustrating certain major, miraculous experiences in the Buddha's life were painted high on the front or rear walls of the temple. Always on the front wall, over the doors, was the Mara Vichai/Victory over Mara. On the rear wall above the altar might be illustrated the Great Departure or the Descent from Tavatimsa Heaven, or the cremation and distribution of the relics. The one exception to this Late Ayutthaya custom of focusing on the Jatakas was in Wat Ko Keo Suttharam, Petchburi 1734, the murals of which dealt with episodes in the life of the historic Buddha.

Murals of the First Reign

Beginning with the reign of Rama I, there was a marked change of subject matter in temple murals from those of the Late Ayutthaya period. This important shift was to illustrate scenes from the life of the Buddha instead of those of his previous lives. These new murals were also painted along the lateral walls at eye level. The temples for reference are those First Reign *wats* which still have their original murals or portions thereof. They are the *ubosots* of Wat Dusidaram, Wat Ratchasitaram, Wat Chaiyathid (re-touched), the *viharn* of Wat Chompuwek in Nonthaburi and the Buddhaisawan Chapel. Other temples of the period have had their murals replaced by those of later reigns.

These First Reign temples each had different combinations of scenes from the Buddha's life. Mural illustrations would vary from temple to temple. Most scenes were in the period prior to the Buddha's ministry as teacher of the Dhamma. Those illustrations might be miraculous events in Prince Siddattha's early years, then his renunciation of his privileged life, followed by his Great Departure for the ascetic life. The latter was represented by Gotama's six years of deprivation and self-mortification, then his appreciation of the Middle Way. After his Enlightenment the Buddha spent seven weeks of contemplation meditating on the Dhamma he had discovered. After these, the murals might illustrate only three or four experiences during the Buddha's ministry of forty-five years as teacher of the truths he had come to understand. Illustrated might be one of his conversions such as that of the Jatilas or fire worshippers, or miracles such as teaching his mother and other deities in Tavatimsa Heaven. Always illustrated would be his *Parinibbana*. The Mara Vichai continued to be placed on the upper portion of the front wall facing the altar and presiding image (except in the Buddhaisawan Chapel and Wat Chaiyathid on the lateral wall). The wall behind the altar was illustrated with the Traiphum (Three Worlds of Heaven, Earth, Hell). This might have been in reference to the compilation of these scriptures as ordered by Rama I.

The Lacquer Pavilion and the Buddhaisawan Chapel

Among the First Reign temple murals, the striking departure representing the particular emphasis of Rama I are those of the Buddhaisawan Chapel. This was built by the Uparaj, construction beginning in 1795. Of its 32 bays (following the Muang Boran Publications designation), four bays deal with the Buddha's youth, four with his ascetic life and awakening. The twenty-four remaining bays are concerned with the forty-five years of his ministry. It is within the context of the Buddha's ministry that the illustrations in the upper registers of the Lacquer Pavilion murals are presented. Fifteen of the episodes from the Buddha's experience illustrated in the Buddhaisawan Chapel are also found in the Lacquer Pavilion. As mentioned previously, since the original library was twice as large, we cannot know all the scenes which were presented. We can assume the series started with the Mara Vichai in Panel 11 because the lower register's Ramakien illustrates foreign princes traveling to the Great Bow-Lifting Contest for the hand of Sita. This is the beginning of the story of Rama.

In considering the affinities between the Lacquer Pavilion murals and those of the Buddhaisawan Chapel, it is important to note that in both buildings, the illustrations of the Mara Vichai show the Buddha sitting in *dhyani mudra* rather than the usual *bhumisparsa mudra* (Buddhaisawan Chapel Bay 7, Lacquer Pavilion Panel 11). With the exception of Wat Chaiyathid, these are the only two buildings that present the Buddha in this position. Further experiences illustrated in both buildings are the Buddha's conversions of the Jatilas, or fire-worshippers, and Sakka offering a stone. Among the Lacquer Pavilion murals is the Buddha preaching at Sankassa. This episode follows the Descent from Tavatimsa Heaven, which is illustrated in the Chapel. In the Lacquer Pavilion Panel 13, however, the creatures of the Three Worlds—Heaven, Earth and Hell—look from the mural to the left, to the Buddha's descent, the Hell figures with arms outstretched in supplication. The Descent from Tavatimsa is one of the missing panels in the Lacquer Pavilion. Two episodes, Sariputta's Nibbana and the Story of Alavaka, are illustrated beside each other in both sets of murals, the Pavilion Panel 12 and Bay 24 of the Chapel.

Several Buddhaisawan Chapel bays appear modeled on scenes illustrated in the Lacquer Pavilion. For example, the composition of the Buddha's last meal on the right side of Bay 29 in the Buddhaisawan Chapel is very similar to that on the right side of Panel 4 in the Lacquer Pavilion gallery. The bay and the panel are both vertical compositions with the Buddha preaching to monks at the top. Below them are simple wooden buildings of the same style as in the Lacquer Pavilion. The Buddha is eating his last meal on a veranda, female musicians are playing nearby. In the Chapel mural the paint in the bottom section has flaked off, so what

presumably showed cooks preparing food is no longer there. In the upper part of Bay 30 is illustrated the Buddha's *Parinibbana* in Kusinara as he lies under two *sal* trees in Malla with Subhad the last convert seeking entry. This illustration reflects that in Panel 1 of the Lacquer Pavilion.

Almost a copy of the Lacquer Pavilion's Panel 8 is that of the Buddhaisawan Chapel's Bay 31 where Ananda is announcing to the King of Malla the Buddha's imminent *Parinibbana*. Royalty and townspeople are invited to say their farewells to the Teacher. The composition and architecture of Bay 31 is similar to that of Panel 8 and at the bottom almost a copy. In Bay 32, the last of those in Buddhaisawan Chapel, there are several scenes which are similar to those illustrated in the Lacquer Pavilion murals but are not direct copies. These Buddhaisawan Chapel mural scenes mentioned appear to be copies after those scenes in the Lacquer Pavilion indicating they were painted later.

A further connection of the Lacquer Pavilion with the First Reign is in Wat Phra Chetuphon. This was the major monastery built by Rama I. The First Reign murals have long since been obliterated. However, among the bronze images created by order of Rama I is the large image in the North Viharn of the Buddha during his retreat in the Parileyaka Forest. The Buddha sits in a Western position. He is attended by the elephant bringing him water and the monkey offering honey. This scene is replicated in Panel 10 in the Inner Room of the Lacquer Pavilion.

Restoration and Reform

The change in the subject matter of temple murals from the Jatakas of the Late Ayutthaya period to scenes of the Buddha's life in the murals of the First Reign was the result of Rama I's restoration and reform involving the Sangha, the monkhood, and the laity of Thai society. The destruction of Ayutthaya by the Burmese in 1767 brought about the disintegration of society. The population was dispersed into the countryside or taken into Burma by the invading military. After the Burmese had looted monasteries, destroyed temples, images, texts, the Sangha, too, with its impoverished, demoralized monks was dispersed and ineffective. Many monks had to provide for their own living since they could not count on the laity. Adherence to the Vinaya depended on sufficient alms from lay people. The population had nowhere to turn for its religious needs.

Rama I, when called to the throne in 1782, after Taksin's later ineffective rule, re-established the Sangha, reforming its traditional disciplines, reasserting the position of the monks within it and their distinction from the laity. Within his first year, he decreed seven new laws for the Sangha. He restored political order, re-established traditional practices of government for the laity, setting out new rules as he had done those of the clergy, and thus reformed the social order. Within his

first month as king, Rama I ordered the re-compilation of the Tipitaka/The Three Baskets: the Vinaya Pitaka with rules for the order of the Sangha, the Suttanta Pitaka with the words of the Buddha's teachings, and the Abhidhamma of higher teachings.

Rama I was interested in the monkhood returning to the basic practices of early Buddhism, to live as monks had done in the time of the Buddha. He wanted to foster understanding of Buddhist principles among laymen. What more effective way to reach people, many of whom were illiterate, than through mural paintings in the *ubosots* or *viharns* or other temple buildings. The murals were used by monks to explain the life of the historic Buddha, his experiences in reaching Enlightenment and his dedication thereafter to teaching the Dhamma. Consequently, among the detailed depictions of scenes from the life of the great religious leader, those of the historic Buddha in his last life would have been of paramount importance. It is understandable if the changes in mural paintings were of major concern to the abbots and royal sponsors of the new temples being built during and after the foundation of Bangkok.

The Mahavamsa

In addition to Rama I's efforts to reconstitute the monkhood and society, plus his military responsibilities, there were further directions taken by the king. Since a couple of these other developments are reflected in the Lacquer Pavilion murals, it is appropriate to discuss them here.

Important in considering the period of the Lacquer Pavilion's murals is the legendary Buddha's visit to Lanka in Panel 3 and Buddhaisawan Chapel Bay 12. The subject appears in no other Thai mural painting. The episodes are from the Sri Lankan epic *Mahavamsa* which Rama I ordered to be translated from the Pali into Thai. The purpose of the Buddha's visit is to rid Lanka of the *yakkhas* (aboriginal people) because their settlement was in the place where the Dhamma would later be glorified. In both the Buddhaisawan Chapel Bay 12 and the Lacquer Pavilion Panel 3 the Buddha floats through the air in a storm, then settles on his mat on the ground. The terrified *yakkhas* swim to a nearby island which the Buddha has caused to float by Lanka. Unique to the Pavilion murals is the scene of Vijaya, a prince from Bengal, coming to invade Lanka in the fourth century B.C. He is shown conversing with the Yakkha king and the Yakkhini Kuveni. Also described in the Sri Lankan epic and in the Pavilion Panel 6 is the Buddha's stay in Lake Anottata prior to his visit to Lanka. To have this sequence illustrated in the Lacquer Pavilion indicates it was most certainly created in the First Reign.

Rama I had the *Mahavamsa* translated into Thai from the Pali because for generations prior to that it was known only to monks. A consideration as to why

this was important might have been that there were certain parallels between his career and that of King Duttha Gamani (161–137 B.C.). This king was able to drive the Tamils/Damilas out of Lanka to unify the island as one kingdom for the first time in history. His goal was to re-establish the religion of the Buddha. The parallels could have been Rama I unifying his kingdom, restoring Buddhism and reestablishing the Sangha. *The Mahavamsa* describes in some detail Duttha Gamani's building of the Mahathupa/Great Stupa at Anuradhapura, the Lankan capital. The Chronicle of the First Reign also describes similar constructions of Rama I with related purposes. They were two warrior kings.

The Ramakien

In the Lacquer Pavilion, in addition to scenes from the ministry of the Buddha in the paintings of the upper registers, the other distinctive element is the subject matter of the *Ramakien* in the lower registers. This is distinctive because the episodes are from the version composed by Rama I in 1785.⁴ Performances of the *Ramakien* had long been in the *khon*, the *nang yai* and the *nang talung*. The gold and black lacquer illustrations in the Lacquer Pavilion were obviously derived from the figures and landscape details illustrated in the *nang yai*.

If there were written texts of the *Ramakien*, they did not survive the destruction of Ayutthaya. The distinctive aspect of the version written by Rama I was the introduction of the adventures in Lanka of Rama's younger brothers Prot and Satrud. This additional tale composed in the First Reign involves the dethronement of Piphek, ruler of Lanka, established by Rama after the overthrow of Tosakan/Ravana. In his teens, Paina, son of the latter, learns of his father's defeat and thinks he should be ruler of Lanka, not his uncle Piphek. With the help of fellow *yakkhas*, Paina does gain the throne. Rama sends Prot and Satrud to remove Paina and reinstate Piphek in what might be called the second war for Lanka, a First Reign invention.

This added section in the First Reign version of the *Ramakien* is depicted only in the Lacquer Pavilion and the cloisters of the Emerald Buddha temple in the Grand Palace built by Rama I. Of the 178 episodes illustrated in the murals in these cloisters, 28 are devoted to the adventures of Prot and Satrud. These murals were repainted in subsequent reigns but the scenes are original from the First Reign. Examples of *Ramakien* figures of this period are on pediments, and window frames of the Wang Na, and the supplemental library in the Emerald Buddha temple grounds also built by the Uparaj. The First Reign *Ramakien* screen in the Buddhaisawan

⁴ Ray Olsson, M.D. *The Ramakien A Prose Translation of The Thai Ramayana*, Introduction. Praepittaya Company, Bangkok, 1968.

Chapel is an important example. Some of the figures and landscape details are close to those in the lower registers of the Lacquer Pavilion.

Conclusion

The four primary reasons for considering the creation of the Lacquer Pavilion's murals as a product of the First Reign of the Chakri Dynasty have been presented. To recapitulate: the subject matter of illustrating episodes from the Buddha's historic life, rather than his previous lives as a Bodhisatta in the Jatakas, is characteristic of temple murals created during the reign of Rama I. The ministry of the Buddha is the subject of the Lacquer Pavilion's mural illustrations in the upper registers of the inner room and the gallery. Most significant are the affinities between the Lacquer Pavilion's subject matter and similarities of iconography with those of the Buddhaisawan Chapel. Of unusual importance are episodes from the *Mahavamsa* of apparent importance to Rama I and the adventures of Prot and Satrud in the *Ramakien*.



The Lacquer Pavilion, Suan Pakkad Palace, Bangkok

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