

CHAPTER 3

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

In this study of the agents involved in art production and cultural identity projection in recent Thai art, it is useful to look at the historical development of Thai art in relation to the socio-economic and political development of Thailand. By exploring the interrelationships, phases, transitions and conflicts, we may be able to learn more about the wider contributing factors which can influence styles and expression of ideas. Historical experience is not understood by lists or catalogues, though some form of chronology may help map change and continuity. It involves looking at the important and essential things, and in this it must be conceded that selectivity and conscious choice are an element of any history.

Edward Said has proposed that culture and the aesthetic forms it contains derive from historical experience. This is not to suggest that artists are mechanically determined by ideology, class or economic history, but that they are very much in the history of their societies, shaping and shaped by that history and their social experience in different measure (Said, 1993: xxiv). In accordance with this approach to the study of art as a cultural form, we now look briefly at the historical background of art in Thailand in order to aid our understanding of the present phenomenon.

Early Art in Thailand

Primitive folk art has been found in caves around Kanchanaburi in Western Thailand, Ubon Ratchathani in northeastern Thailand, and in the South. These 3000-year-old figurative drawings of animals and humans, are assumed to be natural reflections of the early artist's environment and daily activities, such as hunting and fishing (see Fig. 2). Sophisticated copper and bronze workings, including bracelets and axes, found at Ban Chiang in northeastern Thailand are controversially reported to date back to more than two 3,000 years ago, while iron working and considerable pottery-making technology (see Fig. 3), have been dated to 2,500 ago. This activity has given rise to the region becoming known as a 'cradle of civilisation.'

In discussing the modern Thai identity, David K. Wyatt refers back to the Tai, a term referring to peoples sharing a common linguistic and cultural identity which in historic times has become differentiated into a large number of separate identities. According to Wyatt, the Tai brought the core elements of the contemporary Thai identity to what is now Thailand, arriving in the central portion of the Indochinese peninsula about 1000 years ago. Only over many centuries has a 'Thai' culture, a civilisation and identity, emerged as the product of interaction between Tai and indigenous and immigrant cultures (Wyatt, 1984: 1). Along with the Tai and the earlier Mon or Khmer inhabitants of region, the great east-west trade between India and China brought a number

of immigrants into the region and the subsequent impact of various cultures, belief systems, political and social structures. In his book Siam: Thai History from Prehistoric Times to the Ayutthaya Period, Thai anthropologist Srisakara Vallibhotama portrays ancient Siam in terms of communities which evolved into villages, towns, states and then kingdoms. Early Thai art is commonly periodised in relation to these influential kingdoms of the time: Carved stone wheels, stupas, and Buddha images from the Dvaravati period (6-11th century), found in central Thailand, indicate the Mon, Indian Gupta and Mahayana Buddhist influences which were dominant during this period. The southern Srivijaya kingdom, which was powerful during the 8-13th centuries, produced art objects similar to those found in Java. Lopburi art, found in central, eastern and northeastern Thailand and dated 7-14th century when this region was a province of Angkor, shows clear Khmer influences. In the north, the Lanna/Chiang Saen kingdoms asserted themselves during 11-18th centuries, and produced Theravada Buddha images which resemble both the Pala art of India and Sukhothai art. The features of U-Thong art found in the central region, dating 12-15th century, reflect a mixture of Dvaravati, Khmer/Lopburi and Sukhothai influences (Subhadradis, 1991).

This chapter is largely concerned with the three subsequent periods and kingdoms of Sukhothai (C13-15th), Ayudhya (C14-18th), (Thonburi) and Rattanakosin (Bangkok) (C18-20th). Although the focus of this thesis is on contemporary Thailand, by employing historical

materialism and exploring some of the more significant early movements and events in this region we may be better able to understand the elements of Thai art, society and cultural identity projected today. It must, however, be acknowledged that the history in history books is considered an elite and selective version of the country's origins.

Politico-Religious Art of Sukhothai and Ayudhya

The powerful Khmer Empire, centred in Angkor, Cambodia during the 11th and 12th centuries controlled virtually every route of communication and trade in the Indochinese peninsula. The Khmers constructed great monuments and numerous stone inscriptions, similar to those in Pagan, the other major empire in the region at this time. These efforts required considerable resources of labour involving temple slaves who were exempt from taxation and conscription in return for their work on buildings or in the service of the religion. Among the variety of means to control the fringe areas of their empires, major religious institutions were founded by Khmer rulers. These institutions were intended as pious homage to the gods and religion, and as religio-political devices to bind the society to the king who was both ruler and god. Thus, participation in the religious ceremonies that revolved around the temple was a political and a religious act (Wyatt, 1984: 27).

As Angkor began to fade as a major power, King Ramkhamhaeng became king of Sukhothai and began to build

an extensive kingdom through force and diplomacy. His inscription dated 1292 is said to be the first record of existence of a unified Thai kingdom, therefore the beginning of Thai history. It has become an emblem of national identity today. The inscription begins, "In the water there are fish, in the fields there is rice..." and describes a picture of an idyllic kingdom free of constraints, presided over by a just, kind and thoroughly accessible monarch loved by his people. It implies a contrast between the king's apparent paternal benevolence and accessibility, and the opposite qualities - rigid social hierarchy, arbitrary administration of justice, heavy taxation etc. of some other unspecified rule, presumably the Angkor style (Wyatt, 1984 : 54). King Ramkhamhaeng's power (economic, political or cultural), was extended and held together by pyramided personal loyalties rather than centralised. Referred to as "Lord Father", Ramkhamhaeng presented himself as a king who respected the animistic spirits, but also as a devout Buddhist. While Mahayana Buddhism was popular up to this period, Theravada Buddhism began to be given a place in the community. As a Buddhist state, Sukhothai lavishly supported the monastic community. The king shared his throne with monks, hence Buddhism and the state were very closely identified. The state was Buddhist, but the religion was also political, to the extent that political unity and identity were founded on a religious basis.

The Traiphum (The Three Worlds according to King Ruang), composed by King Ramakhamhaeng's grandson, King Lithai, is a text which describes the vertical realms of

the Buddhist universe - a totally integrated physical and mythical world with Mt. Meru in the centre of the cosmos. Eleven realms of the world of Desire (*Kamabhumi*), sixteen realms in the world of Form (*Rupabhumi*) and four higher realms in the world of Non-form (*Arupabhumi*) are outlined and, according to the *Traiphum*, birth into any one of the thirty-one cosmic realms is determined by the store of karmic merit one has acquired. The kingdom is given a central place and the teachings of the monarch are prescribed as equivalent to the teachings of a fully realised Buddha. Scholars of Thai history regard the motivation for the original composition as fundamentally political (Reynolds & Reynolds, 1982: 10) and some suggest Lithai wanted to legitimate his rule with religious authority (Chai-anan, 1980: 92). Rulers of the Sukhothai, Ayudhya, Thonburi and early Rattanakosin (Bangkok) periods continued to use the *Traiphum*'s cosmic order to model the social and political institutions described in it.

The Sukhothai period is widely recognised as the golden age of Thai traditional art, highlighted by elegant sweeping lines and walking Buddha images with flowing grace. Influences of early Mon and Tai traditions, and the art of Ceylon can be noted (Griswold, 1960). During this time, the Brahman religion which was long-practiced in the region, was given court patronage and court sculptors fashioned bronze images of the Hindu gods Vishnu and Siva in a style similar to that expressed in Sukhothai's Buddha images. Khmer-Hindu influences can be found today in the temples at Phimai

and Phnom Rung in northeastern Thailand, near the Cambodian border. Jean Boisselier notes that during this Sukhothai period, competitions were held between celebrated poets and artists on subjects designed to challenge their virtuosity (Boisselier, 1976: 28). Also as a consequence of trade during this period, potters were brought from China to help create the now famous Celadon and Sawankhalok ceramics of this period.

The Ayudhya kingdom which rose in the 14th century and sustained itself through 33 kings for 400 years until 1767, introduced radical shifts in ways of looking at the world, internally and externally. This was largely due to two international developments: an increase in international trade on the long routes between India and China which led to economic opportunities for Southeast Asian rulers; and a period of major religious and cultural change, most prominently the spread of the new more vigorous Theravada Buddhism which was very amenable to royal patronage and manipulation (Wyatt, 1984: 63). A shift in political structure from parental to absolute monarchy during this time gave kings more power and they were considered 'God-Kings' (*Devajaya*) holding sacred power associated with the Hindu gods Indra and Vishnu, while subjects were considered servants or slaves. Ayudhya's social order and administrative organisation, tightly organised and controlled, was compatible with Hindu cosmology, while the hierarchy was legitimised in the Buddhist concept of karma (*kum*) and respect for accumulation of merit (*baramee*). Court rituals were borrowed from Khmer Brahmins who were

captured as Ayudhya expanded into the weakening Khmer empire. The Brahmins educated the Siamese in the realms of ritual and arts, built palaces to befit the cosmology, and continue today to serve as court advisors, astrologers and ceremonial masters.

Of major social, economic and political significance during this period is King Boronnatrailokanat's (1448-88) Law of Civil Hierarchy introduced to strengthen the administrative institutions of the kingdom (Wyatt, 1984 : 73). The basis of this law was the hierarchical *Sakdina* system, a means of social stratification in which points were allocated to establish a person's status, with a primary function of controlling labour, the essential capital of the day. *Sakdina* correlated with the amount of manpower under one's control. The control of manpower brought wealth and political power (Akin, 1975 : 98). Under this *Sakdina* system, the King owned all the land and nobility were assigned to regions to control the national labour service known as 'corvee.' This new arbitrary and impersonal bureaucratic system was in contrast to the flexible and personal quality of the traditional patron-client relationship, and understandably citizens constantly sought means to evade it; by attaching themselves as personal clients to powerful officials, escaping to other territories, or even selling themselves into debt slavery (Wyatt, 1984: 71). From the *Sakdina* system, we can note that an indigenous core-periphery relationship (as outlined by World-systems theories) existed as the weaker vassal states paid tribute and

provided labour to the central region in a form of a royal flow of commodities.

On an international level, during the sixteenth century the Kingdom of Ayudhya expanded its trade with foreign countries, including nearby neighbours Cambodia, Laos, Shan States, the Mon region, and China. Also trade was opened with Portugal, Japan, the Philippines and Taiwan. By the early seventeenth century Dutch and English trading companies had established trading stations in Siam. Trade was welcomed to improve economic conditions and gain political strength. Siam was open to gains, cultural and material, from other countries or kingdoms, adapting elements of other cultures in order to improve and develop its own. Ayudhya kings also played a more important role in arts, using it to demonstrate religious performance and to characterise the kingdom. The monarchs built palaces and sponsored the building of temples and decorative arts, employed artisans and promoted religious art forms. John Hoskin suggests classical painting was developed as high art in Ayudhya in the 17th century (Hoskin, 1984). Architectural designs reveal Hindu decorative styles and elements, along with elaborate decorations, details, lines, a larger array of colours and the plastering of gold leaf. A large amount of the kingdom's income was invested in the erection of temples, which is considered the highest act of merit for a Buddhist. Temples were the centre of art, culture and the community, and were multifunctional, serving as schools, hospitals, centres of social welfare, entertainment, news, social interaction and life rituals.

During the Ayudhya and Early Bangkok periods, the temple (*wat*) was the only institution of education. Adolescent boys were sent by their parents to live in the *wat*, supervised by a monk known to the parents. Boys would be taught to read and write while serving their teacher. Akin Rabibhadana concludes religion was undoubtedly the main factor in the integration of the Thai state. The Buddhist monkhood had a church organisation, and a hierarchy, the centre of which was the capital (Akin, 1975 : 13).

Buddhism and Art

Central to Buddhism is the idea of action and consequence; that good actions generate merit (*bun*) and bad actions generate demerit (*bap*). This may be similar to the saying 'we reap what we sow' and the idea exists together with the belief in reincarnation - that rebirth occurs because of karma (*kum*), which is the consequence of *bun* and *bap*. Life is viewed as suffering and the highest aim is to reach nirvana (*niphan*), a state of eternal bliss and of not being born again. One may reach this by eventually accumulating merit little by little each life. The *Jataka* tales, stories of the Lord Buddha's 547 previous lives, outline the life lessons to be faced on the road to nirvana or enlightenment. One consequence of this belief is the notion that one's status and circumstances in this life depends on the amount of *bun* and *bap* which one has accumulated in previous lives. According to this belief in karma, Thai Buddhists could

be considered status-conscious individuals who connote power with status and allow the existence of unequal hierarchical relations (Akin, 1975: 12).

Buddhist and Hindu influences have been explored by researchers interested in the characteristics of Thailand's political and social structures which are still found in contemporary Thai society (Hanks, Jackson). Girling summarises these characteristics as: sacredness of the monarchy, the distinctive role of "leader" and followers, an elitist society based on unequal relations between patron and client, regionalism, the conjunction of merit and power within the Buddhist worldview, the role of Thai values of tolerance for the individual and respect for authority (Girling, 1981:18-19). Peter Jackson has explored the functional role of Buddhism in legitimising political authority and found it has been employed to integrate the chiefdoms and legitimate the power of the ruling families (Jackson: 1989). By referring back to the theories of dominance and hegemony outlined in Chapter 2, we may develop some insight into how these positions of power are attained and sustained, with regard to cultural and economic capital, and how this 'social-positioning' mechanism can be interpreted in the Thai situation.

Thai art in the past was originally conceived as an expression of religion, with a didactic function, and unlike today was confined to temples. Sculptures of Buddha images were carved and cast, regardless of the Lord Buddha's rejection of image worship. Temple murals typically depict scenes from the life of the Buddha, or

the previous lives of the Buddha (*Jataka* stories) and were painted by teams of skilled artisans who realised the orders of patrons and only very occasionally signed the works (Hoskin, 1984). Art techniques were transmitted from generation to generation and supported the habit of imitation. Following Indian texts, the supremacy of the line is paramount and Thai art expert Jean Boisselier suggests that graphic art represents the essence of Thai art, with the search for beauty of form and quality of line coming before all other considerations and transcending all imperatives of technique (Boisselier, 1976: 40).

Following the destruction of Ayudhya by the Burmese in 1767 and the loss of art and historical records and the lives of many artists and artisans, a new kingdom was established by General Taksin further down the river in Thonburi. After a brief eight-year period, King Taksin was toppled in 1782 by General Chakri who founded the *Chakri* dynasty which rules the Kingdom of Thailand today. The capital was moved across the river to Bangkok and General Chakri was installed as King Rama I, beginning the Bangkok period of Thai history. The Ayudhya (Hindu-Khmer) model was followed for political and social structure, and this can be seen reflected in the architecture of the Bangkok palaces and temples built during the reigns of Kings Rama I-III. The layout of the Grand Palace in Bangkok follows this design which relates to the religious beliefs of the *Traiphum* (Buddhist cosmology). One of King Rama I's first projects was to compile a new version of the *Traiphum*, suggesting

the priority of religious texts and art in the establishment of authority. King Rama II is recognised for his artistic talents and the wooden doors which he helped to carve for Wat Suthat are now in the National Museum. He commissioned the rebuilding of Wat Arun (Temple of the Dawn) again reflecting the Buddhist cosmology with Mt. Meru (the centre of the Buddhist universe) as the central spire and the cardinal spires representing the four directions. King Rama III increased trade with China, which led to the introduction of Chinese art styles and details and infusion with traditional Thai art. Stone statues of Chinese generals, used as ballast in the rice boats, were regarded as gifts from Chinese congregations and were installed within the Grand Palace grounds, as guardians (see Fig. 4). Many temple doors in the capital were refurbished with traditional Chinese lacquer technique and motifs. Chinese pottery, with its distinctive blue and white glazes appeared. While opening Siam to wider influences, King Rama III also instigated the reactionary preservation of Siam's own cultural heritage. Mural paintings of the Rama III period in the Royal Chapel of the Temple of the Emerald Buddha depict Europeans as members of Mara's evil forces. The 'trouble-making foreigners' can also be seen in murals of the same period at Wat Suwannaram. In the paintings of the *Vessandorn Jataka* on the south wall, the evil beggar, Jujaka, who takes away Phra Vessandorn's two children, is depicted with red hair (see Fig. 5).

Modernisation and European art

During his forty years in the monkhood and throughout his reign, King Rama IV, King Mongkut (r.1851-68) progressively developed his knowledge of Western as well as Buddhist teachings, adopting a more rationalist, scientific view of the world and starting the reformist *Thammayut* sect of Buddhism. He introduced a programme of modernisation and included elements of Western culture in an effort to avoid the threat of colonisation by European powers, as faced by Siam's neighbours. Indochina, in the east, was dominated by the French, the British forces controlled Burma and Malaya in the west and south, and to the southeast, the Dutch and Portuguese dominated the Indonesian archipelago. International trade agreements such as the Bowring Treaty, 1855, officially opened Thailand to world markets and influences, and facilitated a boost in prosperity over the following two decades. The new ideas which flowed into Siamese society made the Siamese leaders realise the existence of the world economy and its relationship to Siam. Letters were sent to Queen Victoria of England, Napoleon III of France and the President of the USA. By learning English (as well as Pali and Sanskrit) and Western technology, King Mongkut felt he would be able to better understand the West and lead his country on a more universal path of civilisation, while at the same time preserving the core of Siamese identity (Sulak, 1990: 43). King Mongkut created a concept of 'state' beyond the principality (*muang*) and village (*baan*), and introduced a spirit

Guardian of Siam (*Phra Sayam Devadhiraraja*) which is still popular today. Such nationalistic and unifying introductions can be interpreted as a 'balancing' response to hegemonic external forces, as Wallerstein describes in Chapter 2.

Lifestyles began to change, along with dress, architecture and other exterior aspects of identity. The form and the function of art began to change from solely religious and royal, to art concerned with aesthetic values. Khrua In Khong, a highly-regarded monk and painter, began to include western techniques of light and three-dimension in his mural paintings, departing from the flat, unrealistic traditional portrayals. Narrative historical trends also began to emerge in this period, evident in the murals of European landscapes, people and vessels at Wat Suthat Thepwarawaram, Wat Boromniwat and Wat Borworniwes (see Fig. 6). Boisselier describes how one of the first American consuls, Dr. Chandler, who introduced the first printing press into Thailand, commissioned a series of twenty-seven scenes of life in Thailand from an unidentified Bangkok artist (see Fig 7).

Adopting a European colonial idea, the first museum was created in 1862 to display King Mongkut's private collection of royal regalia and antiques and established a notion of 'high art' in Siam. While it was not open to the general public, the museum was an attempt to display the monarch's aura and power, and to show progress. In 1876, Siam participated in the first World Fair in Philadelphia and later in Paris (1888), Chicago (1893, 1900) and Louisiana (1904). The Siamese entries of

crafts and Buddha images were beautiful and exotic, winning several awards and therefore giving rise to further invitations. But such exhibitions were expensive and Siam's participation depended on the organisers, the benefits and the costs. Participation and success in world galas were used as a means to evaluate the place or status of a country in the world order.

In his presentation at the Siam Society conference to mark the Centenary of King Chulalongkorn's European sojourn, Thai scholar Thongchai Winichakul asserted that the numerous museums, exhibitions and World Fairs invariably told a narrative of the advance of Western civilisation and the exoticism of the 'Others' from the rest of the world. He suggests that the Siamese elite were humiliated to find themselves in a lowly position in the new world order, after viewing themselves at the 'zenith of a small cosmos', and used Europe as the model for 'siwilai' (civilised and a full member of the modern world) in their attempt to catch up and rid their country of its undesirable, inferior status. However the 'renegotiation of identity' process, and associated self-confirming displays, involved comparison and contrast to an 'Other' rapidly-changing space of civilisation and resulted in an identity crisis. Thongchai relates this movement to the new generations of Thai elites driving to stand ahead and above the crowd of undistinguished people, domestically and internationally, scrambling for 'desirable identity' via displays of quick wealth, acquired or purchased items of nostalgia, or by "having culture" (Thongchai, 1997: 15-26).

King Chulalongkorn, Rama V, (r.1868-1910) continued his father's policy of modernisation and 'civilisation in the Western image', though in reality the young king appeared to have little control over the kingdom during the early years of his reign. The real centre of power lay with the *phu yai* (important senior people). King Chulalongkorn's strategy of compromise ('bending with the wind') was to gain power and respect by maintaining peaceful relations, developing military and economic power and improving administration standards. Territorial accessions were made to France and Britain, slavery was abolished which maintained internal peace, and British experts were employed to advise the restructuring of the major ministries and departments. Railway, telegraph and printing technology was introduced producing significant increase in communication and trade. Siam changed from subsistence agricultural to a market/trade-based economy. Agreements were made with the British and French for logging, tin and rubber, and Siam became one of the region's leading rice exporters. The number of Chinese immigrants grew dramatically during this reign. These immigrants took on a profitable economic role rejected by Thais because of Buddhist values - that of the middleman and merchant between Thai farmers and foreign buyers of rice (Wyatt, 1984). Fundamental economic and bureaucratic changes were undertaken emphasising centralisation, including interior ministries and education. The idea of absolute monarchy came from the French Charter of Emperor Louis Napoleon and the British system of a Privy Council to control

state taxes (especially opium) was imitated. These reforms overthrew the existing social order and undermined the economic status of the bureaucratic elite (*khun nang*), the Bunnag family, giving the monarch more power than any king since the latter part of the Ayudhya period. Paid officials from Bangkok replaced some of the ruling families in the regions. Schools were established for military training, civil service, and medical and university education, modeled after Western schools, teaching Western subjects. Government scholarships were made available to the aristocracy or wealthy and powerful families to study abroad in Europe, and from 1887, Chulalongkorn sent a number of his sons to study in Europe. Through these considerable educational changes, the Thai elite were provided with strength in economic and political resources with which to strengthen their indigenous authority. This fifth reign modernisation is seen as a period of uneven development, with different social groups becoming modern at different rates. Great social distance between the educated elite of Bangkok and the peasant mass of Siamese society was created by education, wealth, lifestyle and exposure to the outside world. By referring to the World-systems theories of core-periphery development and Pierre Bourdieu's ideas of cultural capital and reproduction outlined in Chapter 2, we may be able to interpret these transitions with reference to art and cultural identity in Thailand. Wallerstein's concept follows that in economic expansion, higher status groups extend beyond the economic realm, bettering their position through cultural forms of

legitimation. Bourdieu's concept of 'habitus' and cultural capital as a means of power projects that as a result of social position, the dominant class is the beneficiary of economic, social and symbolic power which is embodied in economic and cultural capital, and in society's institutions. This power is reproduced by these institutions and practices and an economy of taste is developed as a result of the self-structuring sense of taste and style.

When King Chulalongkorn first travelled to Europe in 1897 to look into the sources of European wealth and models of civilisation, he visited fourteen countries and was impressed by the art. Aiming to further his 'siwilai' mission by absorbing foreign 'expert' concepts of beauty and combining western art with traditional Thai art, the king commissioned European artists and architects to work in Siam. The Ananta Samakhom Throne Hall at the Grand Palace was designed by Italian architects Tamagno and Allegri, with the interior decorated by another Italian, Carlo Rigoli. English architect John Connish designed the Chakri Palace in the Grand Palace grounds and was persuaded to place a traditional Thai roof on top of the Victorian base, creating a controversial mix of styles. Secular art gained in significance and traditional art received less support or attention. The changes in styles, elements, forms, and tastes, responded to the needs and priorities of royal patronage and commissions, and King Chulalongkorn supported the production of semi-commercial sculptures and paintings of western art. He often had Italian sculptors and painters do his

portraits, and brought into Thailand western paintings and sculptures to decorate royal palaces and public gardens. The Bang Khun Prom Palace designed for Chulalongkorn's son Prince Paribatra Sukhumbhand was decorated in Renaissance, Baroque, Rococo and Art Nouveau styles and was one of the centres of arts parties at the time. The Italian murals by Carlo Rigoli and the building itself were given a complete renovation in the early 1990s by the Bank of Thailand, the owners since 1945 (see Fig. 8).

After hundreds of years of repetition of the conventional style, Thai murals of this time have been viewed as 'stereotyped and inexpressive' (Hoskin, 1984). The leap towards European art techniques and forms was partly a result of this condition, as well as a desire to break out of the vertical confines of the *Traiphum* cosmology and become part of the modern world. The commissioning of Thai artists and craftsmen declined steadily along with projects and budgets to preserve or renovate national art monuments, including temples. In the later part of King Chulalongkorn's reign, indigenous artists, including the Italian-graduated Phra Soralaklikhit (Mui Chandralak), were trained in the western style and portraits became popular among the well-to-do. Helen Michaelsen notes that during this period, substantial amounts of the nation's revenue was used for development of public services such as railways, electricity, roads, hospitals, schools etc. (Michaelsen, 1993). As well, considerable funds were also spent on

this new "modern" art which was featured in prominent public locations.

Nationalism and Militarism in Art

Modernisation continued on through King Vajiravudh's (Rama VI) reign (1910-25), but a stronger nationalistic flavour emerged. Efforts were made to give traditional Thai art a lift, to balance the effects of intensive Western influences. King Vajiravudh's article entitled "Siamese Art", written in English under his pen-name 'Asvabahu', lamented the decline of Siamese art and argued that art was "part and parcel of our national life" as it expressed "the individual ideas of our nation", it could not be allowed to die, for "then we shall cease to be Thai." (Piriya, 1982: 62). He therefore enthusiastically set about supporting local arts according to his nationalistic programmes. In 1911, the Fine Arts Department was established, under the jurisdiction of the Palace ministry, to preserve traditional arts and national heritage. It was largely concerned with traditional performances, arts and crafts, the casting of Buddha images, and managing the Museum Department. Shortly afterwards, the Poh Chang School of Arts and Crafts was opened by the king and although a European curriculum was designed, the school also aimed to preserve traditional arts by refining craftsmanship in a formal academic setting. The institutions of nation (*chat*), religion (*satsana*) and monarchy (*phramahakasat*)

were promoted and employed to create loyal and patriotic sentiments (Wyatt, 1984: 229).

Italian sculptor Corrado Feroci (later to take the Thai name Silpa Bhirasri), who was to become the most influential figure in shaping Thai modern art, was selected by his government and invited to Thailand in 1922 by King Vajiravudh. Feroci aimed to raise the standard of Thai art to an international level, while encouraging Thai artists to appreciate the value of cultural heritage. He promoted western styles and methods including the mastering of nature, and one which freed artists from the duty of illustrating old literature (Silpa, 1954). His task was to establish trust and gain credibility for Western art styles with the Thai powers. A statue of King Rama I (see Fig. 9), now located at the Memorial Bridge, was his first contracted undertaking. A four year project which called for bronze casting in Florence, this well-received work gained Feroci government acceptance and fame.

During the world depression and difficult economic times, King Prajadhipok's (r. 1925-35) policy called for heavily-reduced funding of all sectors, including art, hence a decrease in artistic activities which had been so encouraged during the previous reign. The Arts and Crafts Fair held since 1913 was discontinued and the Siamese Kingdom Exhibition planned for 1925 was cancelled (Michaelsen, 1993). Western dominance in secular art and influences on traditional art remained even as Thai architects who studied abroad gradually returned to Thailand and replaced foreigners. Among the

returnees was a group of young elite who had studied politics in France and were inspired by new values and ideas of democracy, elections and a constitution. Led by Pridi Panomyong, they staged a bloodless coup on June 24, 1932, putting an end to the absolute monarchy in the country. The change to constitutional monarchy led the political shift of power to the state, abolishing the traditional Siamese political order. Amongst other far-reaching repercussions, this had an important impact on the art of the period. Change in the art patronage system during this period saw the main demand for commissions moved from the palace to government offices, creating a new relationship between politics and art. The Department of Fine Arts which was responsible for national art was subsequently transferred from the Ministry of Palace Affairs to the Ministry of Education in 1933. The new School of Fine Arts, established in 1934 by the Department of Fine Arts, made Feroci responsible for the curriculum, writing texts and teaching most of the classes. Although the significance of tradition in Thai modern art was underlined, the decision to follow Western training was made 'to enable the graduates to find work after they finished their studies' (Piriya, 1983: 65). Feroci felt it was not possible to go back to old forms 'because modern surroundings are quite different from those of the past' (Silpa, 1961: 79), hence his interest in Impressionism and Realism filtered through the curriculum.

The new government was run by two sectors: civilian and military: Pridi Phanomyong and Phibun

Songkram, respectively. Pridi proposed a plan to develop the economy in a way which would render Siam agriculturally and industrially independent of foreign nations. However, his economic plan was branded as a communist doctrine and he was exiled to France. The military regime which followed fostered the growth of a nation-state which using nationalistic drives to carve an identity separate from the colonial powers. Phibun, prime minister 1938-44, supported a policy of militarism, economic nationalism, chauvinism (especially against the Chinese) and cultural nationalism (Michaelsen, 1993). Again, we can see how the World-systems theories operate at these national cultural levels.

The economy was controlled by a small group of Sino-Thai families who had successfully managed to build up economic clout via roles as middlemen and merchants in the booming rice trade. The new leaders believed that the economy needed restructuring to serve the Thais. Attempts were made to takeover business monopolies from the Chinese, to close Chinese schools and to close Chinese newspapers. Numerous occupations were forbidden to non-citizens and an alien registration fee imposed. Phibun's fascist policy followed developments in Italy, Germany and Japan at this time. The military budget doubled. Wyatt claims, 'this was an age of militant nationalism in which strong military men were depicted as leading the nation amidst a dangerous world' (Wyatt, 1984: 250). In 1939 Siam was renamed Thailand, 'Land of the Free' and by connecting the name with the Tai in the periphery, the aim was to strengthen the region as a whole.

Paradoxically, in the following years, Phibun's measures taken to define a new Thai identity were very western. While he paid attention to traditional values, Phibun recognised the necessity of introducing western culture as a means to progress and modernity. Twelve cultural mandates (*ratthaniyom*) were issued between 1939-42, extolling western behaviour and outlining the "ideal" Thai culture. The Western calendar, the use of central Thai language, and Western forms of nationalism such as saluting the flag and the composition of a national anthem were adopted. Citizens were required to stay informed of current affairs, use the national language, eat and sleep appropriately, and engage in a full day of productive labour. They were encouraged to give up imports and buy Thai products, and to dress in western clothes (Wyatt, 1984: 255). One of these 'state approved norms of action' was for Thais to spend their free time at night going to art exhibits (Piriya, 1986: 66). All this was so the world could see that Thailand was a modern nation, which closely parallels the strategy adopted by King Chulalongkorn at the turn of the century and as we shall see, the situation in the 1990s.

Phibun's nationalistic drive, which continued through his second term in power, 1948-57, employed modern art forms to carry out propaganda. There was a great demand by the state for monuments, statues, medals etc. Large commanding pieces of political work were commissioned by the government and placed prominently in the community, 'promoting mass nationalism, not just elite nationalism' (Wyatt, 1984: 252). Democracy

Monument, created by Feroci and his students in 1939, features reliefs which communicate an integration of civil and military life; education, economic productivity and Buddhism are depicted, and Phibun saw it as "the great symbol of the nation" (Michaelson, 1993) (see Fig. 10). Victory Monument (1940), also created by Feroci and his team, similarly followed the heroic, realistic formula. The Prime Minister's office began to directly supervise the Fine Arts Department and Luang Wichit Wathakan, the ambitious director of the Department of Fine Arts and fan of Hitler and Mussolini, played a major role in building Phibun's nationalism. A Cultural Development Act was passed in 1940 (amended in 1942 and 1943) and a National Council for Culture was established in 1941 (later becoming the Ministry of Culture, the National Identity Board and the National Research Council, in various incarnations.)

Close Japanese-Thai relations during this period resulted in Thailand declaring war on the USA and the UK in 1942. Meanwhile, the Japan Cultural Institute in Bangkok organised an art poster competition in 1943 and Thai artist Chit Buabus travelled to Tokyo to study. When the Japanese surrendered at the end of World War II, Phibun's government resigned and Pridi and his supporters took over, dissolving the cultural mandates. This change of circumstances impacted the quantity of art production negatively as the new government did not commission many artworks.

The birth of modern art in Thailand is commonly taken as the time the status of the School of Fine Arts

was upgraded and it became recognised as Silpakorn University in 1943. At the time it was the only institution providing formal academic training in art. Feroci was dean of painting and sculpture and taught academic western style, continuing to emphasise realism and nature drawing, and encouraging individual style, instead of imitation. Although the new western art was enthusiastically received, Feroci saw the need to protect Thai culture and the aesthetic value of Buddha images and mural paintings. He included research in temples and historical sites in the curriculum.

After King Ananda Mahidol (Rama VIII) was mysteriously assassinated in 1946, Pridi was accused and dismissed. Phibun regained control (1948-57) during this Cold War period and further developed his anti-communist and anti-Chinese campaign over the next ten years. The conservative-nationalist military regimes of Pote Sarasin (1957), Thanom Kittikachorn (1958) and Sarit Thanarat (1959-63) which followed continued to reemphasise traditional values, following the ideology based on principles of authority, traditional social and political hierarchy, and paternalistic rule. As a leader, Sarit performed as the most powerful patron in a society built on patron-client relationships. Corruption was widespread. While King Bhumibol Adulyadej (Rama IX) no longer possessed absolute power, he became the most important unifying symbol in the turbulent Thai society and the military leaders were aware of the need to cooperate with the monarchy and the monkhood (*sangha*) to achieve their aims. Theories of hegemony and patronage in

the West, outlined in Chapter 2, may be usefully related to this Thai situation in analysing the paths of social dominance.

While working for the government meant a certain lack of artistic freedom, Feroci's influence enabled him to persuade national leaders to become key supporters of Thai art. In 1949, Silpa Bhirasri (Feroci's Thai name after WWII) managed to organise the first National Exhibition of Art, with the support of the Department of Fine Arts. By employing the European concept of art competitions, the organisers hoped to boost art awareness and encourage art development. One of Feroci's top students, Khien Yimsiri won the Gold Medal that year and again in 1950 with sculptures reminiscent of Sukhothai style, depicting Thai daily life (see Figs. 11 & 12). Art collector and founder of the Siam Rath newspaper, M.R. Kukrit Pramoj, wrote criticising the works of the 2nd National Art Exhibition as "imitations of western art, lacking personal style and individual technique," but suggested the public should support the artists by purchasing their works "for artists must eat and live like any of us." (Piriya, 1982: 69). Feroci also accompanied an exhibition of contemporary Thai art and antiquities shown at the Royal Thai Legation in London in 1948, under the patronage of H.E. Direk Jayanama, the Minister to the Court of St. James (Piriya, 1982: 68). Thai art appeared in international exhibitions in Asia, Europe and America later between 1953 and 1960. Bhirasri's students including Fua Haripitak, Chalood Nimsamer, Sawasdi Tantisuk, Manit Poo-aree, Prayat

Pongdam, and Tawee Nandakwang travelled to study art at the Accademia di Bell Arti di Roma under a scholarship scheme from the Italian government which has continued up to the present day. As the Bangkok elite moved to adopt modern Western style, perhaps in an attempt to gain recognition and acceptance from the West, traditional art was increasingly considered out of fashion. However, these new styles were successfully applied to traditional Thai themes and concepts, seen in works by Silpa Bhirasri's students such as The Emerald Buddha Temple (see Fig. 13), an Impressionist piece by Sawasdi Tantisuk (1954) which won the Gold medal at the National Exhibition that year, Songkran Festival (see Fig. 14) by Chalood Nimsamer (1956) and Lotus (see Fig. 15) by Tawee Nandakwang (1956) which both took the top awards in the 1956 National Exhibition. Cubism began to influence Thai artists, evidenced in Wat Pho by Prasong Padmanuja (see Fig. 16). Fishing Village by Damrong Wong-Uparaj (1960) (see Fig. 17) which depicts a rural Thai scene won first prize in the annual competition and Takraw by Manit Poo-Aree (1961) (see Fig. 18) took the honours the following year for its portrayal of the typical Thai game. Again, it is the combination of western technique in the Thai cultural and environmental background which makes these artworks interesting. New ceramic techniques brought back to Thailand by Chalood Nimsamer in the sixties appealed to the Princess Mother, stimulating a visit to Silpakorn University with H.M. King Bhumibol to view the work.

Regarding support for artists, Bhirasri wrote in the late 1950s that it was only the young artists, stimulated by their enthusiasm, who produce art. Afterwards, on account of the lack of artistic demand, they were obliged, one by one to yield to the necessities of material life, often abandoning their ambitions in the field of art (Silpa, 1966). Bhirari was disappointed that his students could not earn a living as professional artists, but were forced to supplement their income by teaching, government service or commercial work, due to lack of demand for paintings and sculpture (Piriya, 1982: 71). He wrote to the newspapers berating the government for not financially supporting artists by buying artwork to decorate office buildings, as the private sector did.

Development and Internationalisation

During the 1960s, the world political focus was on Southeast Asia, with a fear of communism and Chinese domination. The Communist party of Thailand grew, but more threatening were Thailand's neighbouring countries, Laos, Vietnam and Cambodia. Foreign, in particular US, economic and military aid flowed into Thailand (US\$2 billion over two decades) and was used primarily to strengthen the Thai military (Pasuk and Baker, 1996: 170). Viewing development as a hedge against communist advancement, the World Bank began investing in 1960, and at the same time Thailand began its five-year National Development plans, designed mainly to encourage economic



growth with little concern given to social and cultural development.

Privatisation of business and the opening of Thailand to international enterprise and foreign investment brought a large foreign community to Thailand. Exports increased, roads were built and the construction business grew. This creation of many new jobs drew the rural youth to Bangkok. Social relations which had traditionally revolved around the family, village and temple (wat) were disrupted by this urban migration. Mass communication spread, and western culture was made available to the middle class through television. Shops were full of imports. New schools and universities were built, replacing the role of temples as sources of higher education for men. Fullbright scholarships were offered to Thai students to study in the US. Bangkok, as the centre of power and prestige for the elite, of government, industry and commerce, and education, expanded as a 'polar opposite' to rural Thailand, widening the gap between rich and poor. In World-system theory terms, the centre-periphery relationship within Thailand became exaggerated with the larger centre-periphery relationship between the United States and Thailand. The interest of the core, the U.S., became the interests of the ruling elite in the Thai central administration, The relationship between Thailand and the U.S was one of client to patron, an extension of the indigenous workings of the Thai bureaucracy (Bond, 1987: 75). The interests of the elite were met in this period, but not in the periphery.

The influx of international economic interest created a boom for Thai art, with the opening of many small private and commercial galleries and numerous exhibitions, many opened and supported by H.R.H. Princess Chumbot Nagara Svarga or M.C. Karavik Chakraband, relatives of the royal family. These first private galleries gave Thai art more independence from the state and introduced art to a wider audience. Dealers, as mediators, supported both buyers and artists by offering advice and encouraging keen buyers, who were mostly foreigners in Bangkok. Through this international interest in Thai art, many local artists gained opportunities to travel abroad on art scholarships offered by foreign embassies and cultural organisations including the British, French, American, Italian, German and Dutch.

Following Silpa Bhirasri's death in 1962, abstract expressionism became very popular, perhaps as a reaction to the absence of Bhirasri's controlling disapproval of this form, or possibly because abstract was considered an international language fitting the more open world position. Abstract continued to be popular for a decade, while traditional art declined further. The Thai public, however, seemed to find abstract art (art for art's sake) difficult to relate to, with no obvious environmental or social comment that they could apply to their lives. A challenge to the 1964 National Exhibition was made by disgruntled young artists who felt that the awards had been skewed by a biased judging panel, with the top prize going to a painter of rustic Thai scenes,

Prapat Yothaprasert (see Fig. 19), who was popular with H.M. King Bhumibol. This incident was the first of many still-continuing complaints of favouritism in the competition. It also reflects the role of the monarch as adjudicator during crisis or 'problem-solver' and in this situation the artistic talents of H.M. King Bhumibol provided him with the necessary background to be able to settle the matter effectively and sensitively. A keen self-taught artist, H.M. the King has exhibited his works at each National Exhibition of Art since 1963, experimenting with different styles including cubism (see Fig. 20) and producing many portraits of H.M. Queen Sirikit (see Fig. 21).

The 1973 international oil crisis brought about economic and political problems which were compounded by government corruption and bribery. Pro-democracy student-led demonstrators protested against the widening gaps between urban and rural, rich and poor, the dominance of Japanese goods in the Thai market, and Thailand's military dependence on the U.S. They argued that the U.S. had conspired with the ruling elite for economic dominance and the exploitation of up-country resources, and that the government was politically manipulated by the U.S., and that its cultural decadence had spread into every realm of urban youth culture (Chai-anan and Morell, 1982: 165). In October 1973, the demonstrators over-ruled Thanom Phrapas's bid to be re-appointed Prime Minister, successfully ousting the 15-year military regime.

With the increase in economic activity since the 1960s, the banking sector in Thailand grew and banks

began to play a significant role in the sponsorship of art. The Bangkok Bank was the most powerful commercial bank among exporters during the export boom of the 1970s, and in 1974 led the way for other banks and corporate institutions to follow by holding the first *Bua Luang* (Great Lotus) art competition. Dr. Puey Ungphakorn, governor of the Bank of Thailand, a leader of the Free Thai (*Seri Thai*) resistance movement during WWII, and rector of Thammasat University, was an enthusiastic and committed art benefactor. He was a key force behind fundraising for the Bhirasri Institute of Modern Art (BIMA), Bhirasri's dream which was cut short by his death. Dr. Puey secured the help of many prominent bankers and businessmen such as Boonchu Rochanasathian and Pichai Rattakul, and in two years raised one million baht from art sales plus donations. Another one million was donated by the government through the Department of Fine Arts. The Bhirasri Institute of Modern Art finally opened in 1974 and was popular and active, with international cultural institutes such as the British Council and the Goethe Institut enthusiastically contributing funds and artworks. Known for its cutting edge and sometimes controversial events, BIMA exhibited a wide cross-section of Thai and international art. H.R.H. Princess Chumbot of Nagara Svarga was an avid art patron and as president of the Bhirasri Foundation, largely supported the BIMA. This heavy dependency on the philanthropy of private donations forced closure of the museum in 1989, one year after Princess Chumbot's death.

Reverberating artists' dissatisfaction in 1964, the Artists Front of Thailand and the Art Exhibition of Thailand formed in 1974 to challenge Silpakorn University and the National Exhibition of Art. Government financial support was given to this Artists Front during the brief democratic period (1975-6) of M.R. Kukrit Pramoj's term as prime minister. The premier was particularly drawn to Tawan Duchanee's art, opening his 1973 solo exhibition and declaring him the most valuable living Thai artist' in 1976 (Apinan, 1992). This endorsement of the artist by the government leader is a significant form of promotion and support.

As Indochinese capitals fell to communists in mid-1975, the Thai army planned a return to military rule resulting in a violent crackdown led by the returned-Thanom in October 1976. Out of this crisis, the 'art for the people' movement rose, directly addressing the compelling social and political issues of the day. The Dharma group, which was led by Pratuang Emjaroen and Chang Sae Tang, held its first show in 1975. Pratuang's Dharma and Adharma (1973) and Sacrifice (Fasting Buddha) (1976) (see Figs. 22 & 23) dramatically capture the violent energy and suffering of these times. Activities of the Dharma group and other associated exhibitions indicate a change in the role of artists at this time, to one of activism and social criticism (Apinan, 1992). Accused of communism during this chaos, Dr. Puey was forced to leave Thailand, however he had purchased many paintings personally and for the Bank of Thailand, which

was a stimulus and example for other banks and government offices to buy art work.

Anti-Western sentiment during the demonstrations prompted calls for a return to traditionalism in the form of support for the monarchy, the *sangha* (monkhood) and the nation. Traditional art forms were promoted and new forms of semi-traditional work which were meaningful to Thai people were invented. Tawan Duchanee's drawings (see Fig. 24) and paintings which are strongly Buddhist-based yet often misunderstood were slashed by fundamentalists who considered his work depraved and offensive. Angkarn Kalayanapongse's Right Views (see Fig. 25) was later bought by the Bank of Thailand for its collection and is an example of the neo-traditional work which became more popular.

Misiem Yipintsoi, gold medal winner of the first National Art Exhibition and a student of Prof. Silpa Bhirasri, also became a central benefactor to Thailand's art circles, providing annual scholarships to students of the Painting Faculty of Silpakorn University and amassing a substantial collection of drawings, paintings, prints and sculptures. As a shareholder in Thai Farmers Bank and cousin of the chairman, Misiem encouraged the bank to start their annual Contemporary Thai Art competition in 1979. The Siam Commercial Bank and other corporate institutions including TISCO (Thai Investment and Securities Plc.) and Toshiba also began to sponsor art by starting their own collections during the 1970s. TISCO's 1974 group show of 26 invited artists was promoted with the corporate policy that 'business and art are not

mutually exclusive rather than they complement and benefit each other' (Piriya, 1982: 80).

The comparatively-recent opening of the National Gallery of Art in 1977 by the Department of Fine Arts, signifies a belated move by the government to provide a location and limited funds for supporting Thai art. Further government efforts, such as the establishment of the Office of the National Culture Commission in 1979 and the issuing of a magazine called 'Thai Identity' by the Office of the Prime Minister, indicate the increased state efforts to preserve and promote a standardised form of Thai culture, advocating that a strong national Thai culture is vital to the country's independence and sovereignty. The opening of the Department of Traditional Thai Art at Silpakorn University in 1976 was described at the first Italian-Thai conference in November 1997 as a move to 'preserve the uniqueness of Thai art' (Presentation by Somporn Rodboon, 1997). Graduates from this department have gone on to find positive reception from the banking and business sectors in the form commissions and sponsorship of exhibitions in the 1980s and 1990s.

From this chapter we may conclude that Thai art has seen many changes in form, content, function and patronage patterns during its history. Support for art has moved from early royal sponsors to government funding and on to more recent support from the private sector. Art in Thailand in the past has been used by monarchs and state powers to project images that they saw fit for the country, which at the same time supported and legitimised

their ruling positions. Early monarchs supported religious art, portraying Buddhist and Hindu belief systems, which reinforced concepts of social hierarchy and royal power and status. Increased trade and international relations introduced new Western ideas and art styles which were adapted and absorbed into the indigenous Siamese system. Modernisation of the country included the implementation of a centralised bureaucracy with Bangkok at the core dominating economic and political power. This system of development also continued to support extreme gaps between elite and commoners, and fostered status differentiation based on reference to European standards and styles. Those socially-positioned could access education, wealth and foreign travel thereby further enhancing their social standing and opportunities. Major political, social and economic change followed the events of 1932, engendering a strong sense of nationalism. Military leaders commandeered art and culture to promote their own agendas, exploiting traditional and modern forms. That Italian Corrado Feroci became known as the 'Father of Modern Thai art' indicates the influence of the 'foreign authority' in Thai art. World developments such as the Cold War encouraged foreign investment in Thailand which stimulated economic growth and democratic demands in the 1960s and 1970s. Increased bank and corporate power subsequently led to sponsorship of art by these organisations seeking prestigious, patriotic images.