

THE
INTEGRATIVE
Museum Founda
ART OF
MODERN
THAILAND

NOTHING IS PERMANENT, ALL THINGS CHANGE.

These words state one of the basic realities of the Buddhist worldview which has been a foundation of Thai life for more than a thousand years.

During these times of accelerated change worldwide, the perception seems ever more valid. In Thailand, the past three decades in particular have seen dramatic changes in all aspects of life—political upheaval, explosive industrialization and urban growth, the advent of the international tourist economy, and the massive impact of continuous hostilities in the neighboring Southeast Asian countries of Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam. Not surprisingly, these decades have also seen an unprecedented outburst of artistic ferment and experimentation, as artists have dealt with the challenges presented by the rapid transformation of life in modern Thailand.

Perhaps the most significant result of all this experimentation is the creation of an artistic genre which aims at integrating three distinct and powerful traditions. The first is Thailand's

thousand-year-old classical tradition which revolves around the expression of Buddhist themes and aims. The sinuous and elegant Sukothai Buddha images of the thirteenth through fifteenth centuries are likely the most well-known evocations of this classical tradition. Vivid animal figures and delicate floral arabesques are visual components of an even older folk tradition that predates by millennia the introduction of Buddhism and Buddhist art forms from the Indian sub-continent. Finally, an international tradition dominated by European and American artistic concepts, techniques, and images has become increasingly influential in the twentieth century as interest in Western media and training has increased.

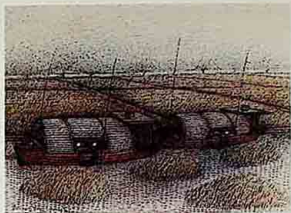
Each artist working in this new genre "borrows" elements from two or more of these traditions. By adapting and fusing different styles, materials, techniques, and subject matter, the artist changes these elements in a way that resonates with contemporary Thai perception and experience. For example, the chaotic abstract forms that



Panya Vijithanasarn, *THREE CONCENTRATIONS*, 1986
Acrylic, gold leaf and silver paper, 4.5" x 7.63"
Courtesy of Marc Bogerd

emerge from the center of Panya Vijithanasarn's collage "Three Concentrations" may seem to resemble a section from an abstract work of Western art but their cultural meaning is derived from their Thai context. When combined with the images of demon, an androgynous hero gracefully poised in classic Thai manner, and the broken fingers from the hand of a Buddha image, the abstract forms are redefined. Panya here uses the forms to represent another basic reality of the Thai Buddhist universe, that experience is characterized by illusion. He presents this concept in terms relevant to a contemporary Thai audience by being both conventional and modern at the same time.

The characteristic themes explored by these artists reflect a similar drawing together of conventional and modern elements of art and experience. Buddhism has been the primary focus of artistic activity in Thailand for centuries, and it maintains that central position today. Works done in the Buddhist classical tradition put stress not on creativity but on adherence to ancient



Damrong Wong-Uparaj, *TWO BOATS*, 1986
Watercolor and pen, 11" x 15"
Private collection

models, reflecting conservative Theravada Buddhist doctrines which took as their own ideal the life and conduct of the historical Buddha. Using traditional Buddhist concepts and symbols in "integrative" art has provided contemporary Thai artists with the opportunity to explore new dimensions and develop distinctive personal styles different from the classical tradition, while still producing work that demonstrates to their audience the continued relevance and legitimacy of Buddhism in the modern-day world.

While to many Thai the "modern-day world" consists of skyscrapers, bustling throngs, and fast food, this aspect of life is rarely portrayed in Thai art. Instead, artwork dealing with daily life tends to express a spirit and attitude about life rather than reveal it with documentary precision or clarity. "Two Boats" by Damrong Wong-Uparaj, done in watercolor and pen, depicts a scene suggestive of peace, plenitude, and comfort. For a native viewer, this view of rural Thailand does not portray a particular place, but instead invokes a sense of the familiar and,



Prateung Emjaroen, SHEAVES OF GOLDEN RICE, 1977
Oil on canvas, 39.5" x 35.5"
Courtesy of Sivaporn Dardarananda

perhaps, a touch of nostalgia when contrasted to the stress of urban lifestyles.

Although the content of such scenes of daily life is pure Thai, the concept of daily life as a subject for artistic expression is largely a Western one, and its emergence in Thailand is a twentieth-century phenomenon. Similarly, although the celebration of the natural universe has long been a recurring theme in Thai literature and ritual, the use of visual images to express the Thai sensibility about Nature is in part a contemporary response to Western ideas about landscape as an artistic genre. This sensibility is apparent in the swelling stalks of rice emerging from a golden field in Prateung Emjaroen's "Sheaves of Golden Rice." The painting is an almost mystical vision of the perfect state of nature—rich with sustenance, intimately involved with the human cycle of life.

This sense of harmony is not part of Wattana Wattanapun's painting "Dewa and Apsara," an example of the artistic exploration of the nature



Wattana Wattanapun, DEWA AND APSARA, 1977
Acrylic on paper, 17" x 14.5"
Courtesy of Ashok Gangadean

of Thai identity amidst the conflicts and confusion of the modern world. The precisely drawn figures and sensual red garb of the gods contrast with the murky browns and greys of the color fields in the background that dwarf and threaten them. Unlike other peoples of Southeast Asia, the politically independent Thai have always had some control over the changes they have admitted to their lives. This has not, however, lessened the impact of these changes, the ambivalence Thai feel toward these changes, or people's profound need to make sense of them.

Thus, the question being asked in Thailand, as in many parts of the world, is how does a nation participate in the modern realm of international culture while remaining in touch with what is characteristic and valuable of its own? The answer for these artists, and many of their compatriots, lies in drawing together elements from the past and the present, the traditional and the innovative, the indigenous and the international, to create a mode of expression both undeniably "modern" and unmistakably "Thai."

"The Integrative Art of Modern Thailand" was developed and organized by Herbert P. Phillips, Professor of Anthropology at the University of California at Berkeley and Research Associate Barbara H. Phillips. Professor Phillips is the author of the fully illustrated four-color catalogue of the exhibition, published by the Lowie Museum of Anthropology and distributed by University of Washington Press.

The exhibition has been made possible by grants from:

National Endowment for the Humanities
American President Companies Foundation
Northwest Airlines
Esso Standard of Thailand
Mr. William Alexander

na IX Art Museum Founda

Participating Museums

LOWIE MUSEUM OF ANTHROPOLOGY

University of California at Berkeley
October 19 – December 15, 1991

ELVEHJEM MUSEUM OF ART

University of Wisconsin, Madison
February 8 – April 12, 1992

THE ART MUSEUM

Arizona State University, Tempe
May 24 – August 2, 1992

THE BURKE MUSEUM

University of Washington, Seattle
September 16 – December 15, 1992

THE BOWERS MUSEUM

Santa Ana, California
January 15 – March 15, 1993