THE INTEGRATIVE ART OF MODERN THAILAND

Rama IX Art Museum, Bangkok

HERBERT P. PHILLIPS

Lowie Museum of Anthropology
University of California at Berkeley

THE INTEGRATIVE ART OF MODERN THAILAND

Rama IX Art Museum Foundation

HERBERT P. PHILLIPS

Lowie Museum of Anthropology
University of California at Berkeley

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

Cover:
THREE CONCENTRATIONS, 1986, by Panya Vijinthanasarn
Acrylic, gold leaf, and silver paper, 4.5" x 7.63"

Designed by:
Gordon Chun Design
[Gordon Chun, Dana Nakagawa, Suzanne Chun, Mary Jo Sutton]
Berkeley, California

Printed and bound in Thailand by
the Amarin Printing Group Company Limited

Distributed by the University of Washington Press
PO Box 50096, Seattle, WA 98145

© 1992 by The Regents of the University of California
All rights reserved
Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 92-081701
ISBN Number 0-936127-02-3

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Phillips, Herbert P.
The integrative art of modern Thailand / Herbert P. Phillips
p. cm.
Exhibition catalog.
Includes bibliographical references.
ISBN 0-936127-02-3 (alk. paper)
1. Art, Thai—Exhibitions. 2. Art, Modern—20th century—Thailand—Exhibitions. I. Title
N7321.P437 1992
709'.593'07479—dc20 92-81701
CIP

Rama IX Art Museum Foundation

CONTENTS

The Essence of Contemporary Thai Art iv

Funding Sponsors vi
Acknowledgments vii

HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL CONTEXT

CHAPTER ONE: *The Emergence of Contemporary Thai Art* 3
CHAPTER TWO: *Other Artistic Genres* 17
CHAPTER THREE: *The Art Community* 31
CHAPTER FOUR: *International Influences* 51

EXHIBITION ARTWORK

Celebrations of Buddhism 63
Impressions of Daily Life 79
At One with Nature 95
In Search of Identity 111

Artists' Profiles 129

Bibliography 136

The essence of contemporary Thai art is that it be both uniquely Thai and characteristically innovative. These two recent art works (opposite page) are examples of such a synthesis. They are contemporary representations of the footprint of the Lord Buddha—which is one of the oldest and most ubiquitous icons of Thai culture and of Thai Buddhist belief.

Whatever their design or material, all Buddha Footprints share certain iconographic elements: a circle in the center and circles in the toes or heels representing the Buddhist law that all things are in perpetual change; one hundred and eight icons, often bound by grids, symbolizing one hundred features of the Lord Buddha's character and teachings, and the eight directions in which these teachings are disseminated. The grid design is itself iconic and appears repeatedly in Thai art to convey a spirit of order, constraint, and clarity of thought. The footprint is a symbol of the Lord Buddha as a wandering preacher.

Figure 2
A detail of one of the icons from the Wat Pho Buddha Footprints. The icons are made of lacquer and mother of pearl.

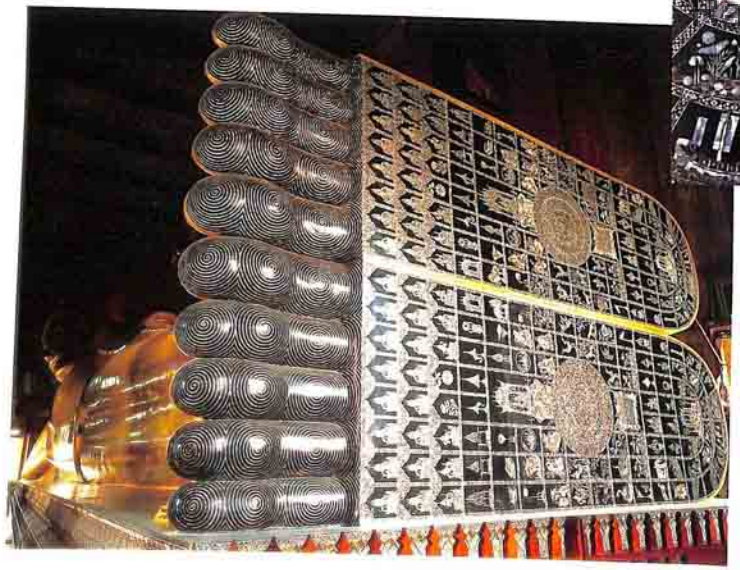


Figure 1
The footprints from the "Reclining Buddha" at Wat Pho in the Grand Palace area of Bangkok, dated 1815. Because of its craftsmanship, grand proportions (49 x 118 feet), and the fact that it is housed in Bangkok's oldest and largest temple, the statue and its footprints are among the most revered religious objects in Thailand.

Asia Art Museum Foundation

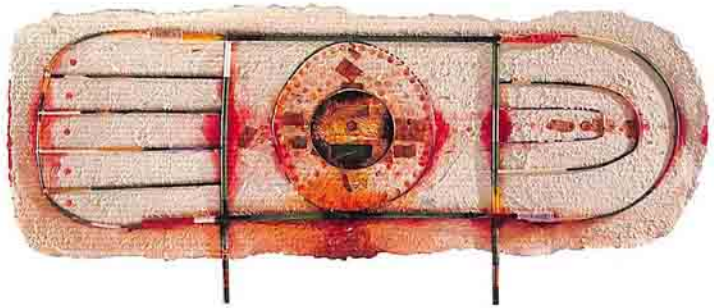


PLATE 1

KAMOL TASSANANCHALEE

BUDDHA FOOTPRINT, *NANGYAI* (2ND SERIES), 1982
Handmade paper, acrylic, gold leaf, ink, thread, wood dowels

This vision of Buddha's footprint is by a Thai artist who has lived and worked in California for more than two decades. While the form and basic components of the footprint conform to the classical Thai model, its design, materials, and colors are products of the artist's imagination. In the fabrication of the work, Kamol was inspired as much by the folk as by the classical traditions of Thai culture, using handmade paper from Northern Thailand and the same style of wood frame that has been used for centuries in Central Plain *nangyai*, or "large puppet" shadow-play theatre. *Nangyai* is the term for the puppet, its structure, and the theatrical performance.

Loaned by the artist

PLATE 2

PICHAI NIRAND

BUDDHA FOOTPRINT, 1968
Oil paint, glue, and sand on canvas

While this Buddha footprint emulates classical models, the artist's use of oil paints, glue, and sand gives the work a distinctive texture and, for Thai viewers, an innovative aesthetic quality. The use of polychrome designs on the periphery—many of which suggest shells, clams, and other marine creatures—represents a new way of expressing familiar Buddhist notions about the timelessness of the universe: a universe of infinite colors and infinite living forms.

Loaned by Visual Dhamma Gallery

This exhibition has been made possible by generous grants from

NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE HUMANITIES
AMERICAN PRESIDENT COMPANIES FOUNDATION
NORTHWEST AIRLINES
ESSO STANDARD OF THAILAND
MR. WILLIAM ALEXANDER

This catalogue is meant as a permanent record of the "Integrative Art of Modern Thailand" exhibition and a discussion of some of the major social and cultural factors that affect the production of contemporary Thai art. Both the mounting of the exhibition and the writing of the catalogue have been informed by my general knowledge of Thailand, derived from several field studies I have conducted in the kingdom over the past thirty years. However, the venture into examining the work and lives of contemporary artists, and the effort to organize an international exhibition, were totally novel professional experiences. I justified the research portion of the project on the grounds that it would provide a rich comparison with my recent work on contemporary Thai literature and writers (Phillips 1987). The art show was justified on the more compelling grounds that there never before had been in the United States a travelling exhibition of contemporary Thai works, nor had there been many exhibitions presenting contemporary non-Western art in terms of its indigenous cultural meanings and aesthetic values.

For a person who had spent much of his scholarly life working one-on-one with individual informants or by himself in the privacy of his study, the implementation of this enterprise came as something of a shock. In particular, the orchestration of the exhibition became an adventure in an extraordinarily complex managerial process. Funds had to be raised; museums and art owners contacted and contracts signed; the advice of museum exhibition professionals sought out; appraisals and insurance costs calculated; shipping crates and exhibit furniture fabricated; museum floor plans, brochures, an exhibit poster and catalogue designed; fine arts shipping, customs clearances, and museum registration procedures handled; videotapes shot, edited, and the accompanying narration written; programs accompanying the exhibit—lectures, Thai dance troupes, educational materials for children, and films with English subtitles—negotiated; catalogue-quality photographs shot and processed; and publicity materials written and distributed.

Such an enterprise obviously could not have been undertaken without the help and commitment of a great many people, both in Thailand and the United States. I cite them here not only out of professional courtesy, but because the project would never have happened without each of their unique contributions.

Foremost among all these persons is my collaborator and spouse, Barbara H. Phillips, who has participated in the project since its inception. She shared in its earliest formulation, and in Thailand shared all interviewing responsibilities, the translation and recording of field data, the examination and selection of the art works, and the considerable in-country travel involved in locating artists and other members of the art community. She was also a crucial member of the exhibition planning team, helped write a portion of our principal funding grant application, returned to Thailand to obtain the artworks from their owners, and shared in the editing of this catalogue.

Special thanks are owed to the following persons and institutions in Thailand. Weena Sunthongjhin and Sucharat Rojanaphiraphajon were our two research assistants without whose skill and loyalty the project would never have gotten off the ground. Silpakorn University was especially critical in making the enterprise possible. My old friend, Professor Damrong Wong-Uparat, was our official host and sponsor with the Thai government, and gave us scores of hours of his precious time, particularly as an informant

Rama IX Art Museum Foundation

on the history and social organization of contemporary art. My recent Berkeley colleague, Dr. Chetana Nagavajara, expedited virtually every one of my requests with Silpakorn officials, and in his serendipitous style, stimulated me to follow a number of fruitful research leads. M.C. Subhadradis Diskul, recent president of Silpakorn, welcomed us to the Thai art scene, and his successor, Prof. Kaisri Sri-aroon, provided us with both the sponsorship to send the exhibition to the United States and the space to receive and pack the art for international shipment. Khun Somporn Rodboon, Director of the Silpakorn Art Gallery, and Mrs. Jutamat and Khun Veradej of her staff, were all especially helpful in this regard. In addition to being one of her nation's finest artists, Kanya Charonesupkul also played a critical role in overseeing the Bangkok printing of this catalogue.

Several persons played key advisory roles in the research. Domnern and Ti Garden, Piriya Krairiksh, Chartvichai Promadhattavedi, Marc Bogerd, Sivaporn Dardarananda, Alfred Pawlin, Sooklek Chanyawongse, and Pisanu Supanimit were critical informants on the state of contemporary art, criticism, collection, and dealership. Wattana Wattanapun and Thongchai Rakpathum were superb sources of information on the nature of Thai art education and the social structure of the art community.

Dow Wasiksiri and Kitti Amornpatanakul photographed almost all of the art work and contextual photos appearing in this catalogue, and Luca Tettoni and the National Identity Board of Thailand, through Khunying Temsiri Punyasingh, provided certain key photos in their possession. Very special thanks are due Chumpol Donsakul of the Bank of Thailand, Earth Saiswag of the Holiday Inn Group, Tom Jones, Samudavanija of Thai Airways, Vicharat Vichit-Vadakan of Capital Securities and Finance Company, and Tom Seale of the American Chamber of Commerce of Thailand for their psychological support at critical turning points in the project.

I am also indebted to Dean Juree Vichit-Vadakan of the National Institute of Development Administration for obtaining the films that were used in the special Thai movie program that accompanied the exhibit. Special thanks are also due to Revat Krabuanrat of ESSO Standard of Thailand for expediting the funds which helped us produce the in-house videotape, "Five Perspectives on Thai Art," and to the Centre Foundation of Thailand for providing support funds at critical points in the enterprise. Varvavuth Tulyayon of the Bangkok Bank Public Relations Department also provided material for use in the videotape. I am also grateful to Chukiat Utakapan of Amarin Publishing for his excellent cooperation in printing this catalogue.

On the American side, I am indebted to James Deetz, former director of the Lowie Museum, for his strong advocacy of the concept that an anthropological museum should sponsor an exhibition on contemporary non-Western art, and to his successor, Burton Benedict, for providing the support system of personnel and facilities to see the project through.

Certain individuals at the organizations that provided financial support for the project require special acknowledgment. The exhibition would not have happened without the patient advice and cooperation of Dr. Suzi Jones and her predecessor Dr. Tom Wilson, at the National Endowment for the Humanities. Ted Hemmert of Northwest Airlines and his colleagues in Bangkok were wonderful in expediting the transportation of project personnel and the posters and catalogue from Bangkok. We are also deeply

indebted to Joel Greenberg, Deborah Soso, Christina del Villar, and Tom Olsen (Bangkok Office) of American President Lines for supporting and expediting the shipment of the art throughout its tour. William Alexander of Los Angeles is due very special thanks for his unsolicited support of the project, as is the Committee on Research of the University of California at Berkeley whose small annual research grants made my professional life run more smoothly.

There are five members of the exhibition planning team who crafted our inchoate ideas about the nature of the project into a professional art exhibition, and to whom we will forever be in debt. Marilyn Salvador, Chief Curator at the Maxwell Museum at the University of New Mexico, guided us in the development of the exhibit's principal themes and in the general process of transforming our scholarly pretensions into a format that would be enjoyed and understood by museum viewers. Judith Bettelheim of San Francisco State University assisted us in the excruciating process of selecting the final 57 works included in the exhibit (from a candidate list of 110 works) and in editing the phrasing of our interpretive labels; much of the coherence and clarity of the exhibit is a result of her professionalism. Hiram Woodward Jr. of the Walters Gallery of Baltimore was a significant source of information on the early history of contemporary Thai art, and Kamol Tassananchalee, the Thai-American artist, helped confirm our interpretations of the meanings and symbolism of the art works. Gordon Chun of Berkeley designed the exhibit, catalogue, poster, and brochure, and educated all of us in the elements of proper museum and art catalogue design.

Rama IX Art Museum Foundation

Several members of the Lowie Museum staff worked long and hard on the project. Thanks are extended particularly to Louise Braunschweiger for her splendid ideas and her undeviating, if always unique, encouragement, Susan Booth for her help in editing our NEH proposal, Therese Babineau and Al Brown for tolerantly handling our aggravating requests, Paula Floro without whose managerial brilliance things could have easily fallen apart, Madeleine Fang whose professional dedication to the conservation of the art works was equalled only by her good will, Joan Knudsen, Lisa Plato, Kathleen Butler, and Lisa Dahlquist for their extraordinary care in examining and registering the art works, Frank Norick and Dave Herod for overseeing the Lowie segment of the project, Frank Pinto for his multiple contributions in receiving and shipping the art, designing and fabricating the exhibit furniture and shipping crates, and for preparing the exhibit hall, Eugene Prince for his efficient and professional response to all of my photographic requests, and Martha Muhs for preparing the project's educational materials for children.

Four of my own graduate students were directly involved in the project. Dawn Cunningham's enthusiasm launched "Five Perspectives on Thai Art," the videotape that accompanies the exhibition, and she also worked on its formulation, narration, and interviews. Jill Forshee coordinated the project during the planning period, worked with the planning team, and handled the voluminous correspondence with artists, museums, lenders, sponsors, appraisers, shippers, and other parties involved with the project. Her advice, professionalism, and delightful disposition will be long remembered. Sarah Murray coordinated the exhibition during the crucial first six months of its implementation phase, and without her professional sense of priorities, her writing and interpersonal skills, and her decision-making talents, the mounting of the exhibit and its coordinate programs would have been seriously impaired. Pamela Myers Moro,

now a faculty member at Illinois Wesleyan University, selected and prepared the materials for the music tape that accompanies the exhibit and that has helped create its Siamese ambience.

Two members of the Department of Anthropology will always be remembered for the role they played in the enterprise. My colleague, Nelson Graburn, goaded, teased, criticized, and constantly encouraged me in every part of the project. His associate, Molly Lee, played a parallel role, although she was even tougher than he was. I will forever be in their debt for their professional honesty and warm support.

Tom Hutcheson and John Quick of the University of California Office of Media Services respectively directed and wrote the videotape, "Five Perspectives on Thai Art." Footage for the tape was shot over an eighteen month period by Quick, Tassananchalee, Barbara Phillips, and Joseph Scannella. The narrator of the tape is Pakvilai Sudhaswin, and Peter Kenevan and Susan Fulop Kepner helped translate much of the original Thai language footage. Nancy Chen also played a critical advisory role in the shooting of the videotape.

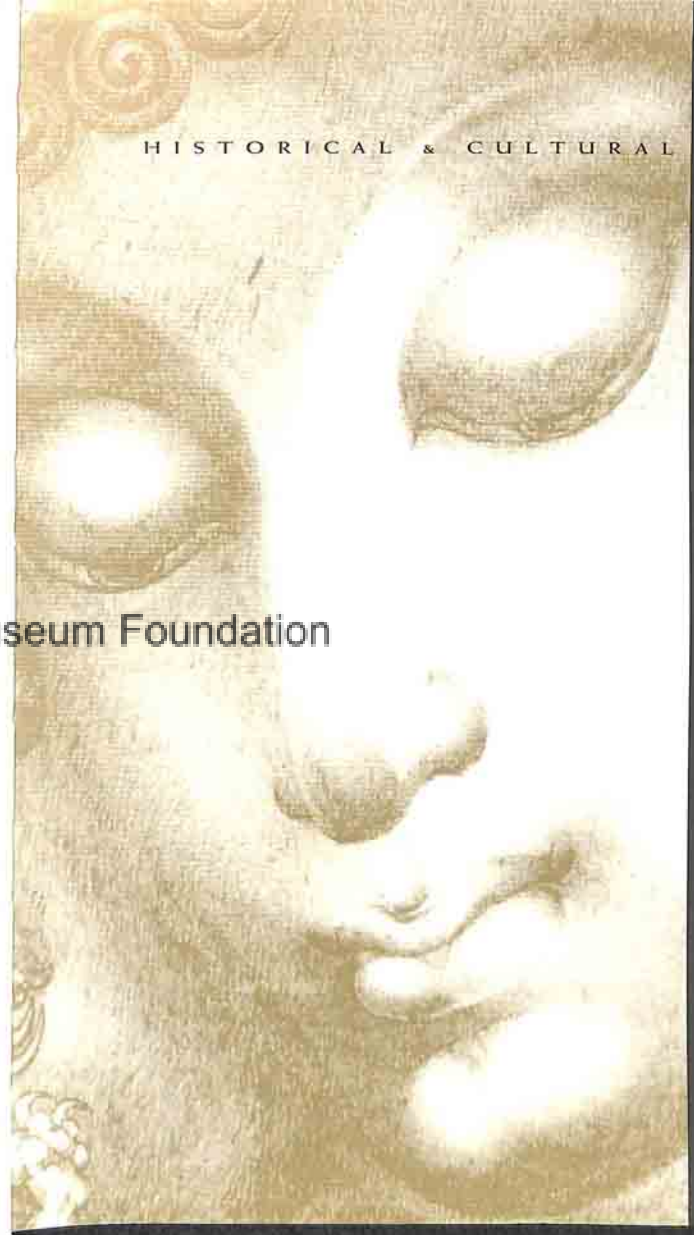
I am also indebted to Ruth Charloff who helped copy edit this catalogue, Karen Zukor and Carrie Ann Calay for their contributions in conserving several of the artworks, and Lynne Kimura for preparing the publicity materials. Sutham Songsiri and Pleam Kundhikanjana of the Thai Consulate of Northern California helped distribute these materials to the Thai community of California and helped bring the exhibit to the attention of the Thai media in both the United States and Thailand. Through them we also wish to express our appreciation to the abbot and monks of Wat Mongkolratanarm of Berkeley for blessing the exhibition at the beginning of its national tour.

My wife Barbara and I owe a special debt to our daughters, Heather and Claire, for their very real help and for their extraordinary tolerance, for five years, of their parents' intense preoccupation with "the project." It is our hope that they will someday come to see the value of "the project"—the year in Thailand, their own exploration of art, and their encounters with the people who live in the art and museum worlds—as just compensation for being deprived of their parents' time and attention.

Finally, my gratitude is greatest to the contemporary artists of Thailand and to the individuals and organizations who have loaned us their works during the tenure of the exhibit. The knowledge and friendship that they shared with us will be remembered as the single most enriching part of our experience.

Herbert P. Phillips
Berkeley, California

Rama IX Art Museum Foundation



HISTORICAL & CULTURAL CONTEXT

ONE:
The Emergence of Contemporary Thai Art

TWO:
Other Artistic Genres

THREE:
The Art Community

FOUR:
International Influences

ONE:
THE EMERGENCE OF CONTEMPORARY THAI ART

Rama IX Art Museum Foundation

This catalogue and its associated exhibition derive from a lengthy field study of the contemporary Thai art world. From its inception, the study was designed to be an ethnoaesthetic exploration of contemporary Thai art, not an attempt to analyze this art in terms of the history or aesthetic values of Euroamerican art. Our intent was to convey to Western viewers the ways modern Thai think about their art and, in so doing, to provide an account of the cultural meaning of contemporary Thai aesthetic activity. The project focussed on how indigenous Thai judge the merit of their art; their views on how contemporary art expresses Thai experience, perception, and emotion; and what artists, owners, and other members of the art community gain from their artistic encounters. From our point of view, it was much more important to find out what an artist was trying to communicate through his work or why Thai viewers appreciated [illegible] whether or not he was influenced by Matisse or Modigliani—although if he was influenced, we certainly wanted to know why and in what manner.

The twenty-eight artists whose works are represented here were all selected by their peers as among Thailand's most accomplished or provocative creative artists. In conducting the research for the exhibit, the investigators examined approximately 8,000 works created during the past three decades, interviewed most of the kingdom's major institutional and private collectors, patrons, critics, museum directors, and gallery owners, discussed art with scores of artists and art students, and through intensive interviews, collected the life histories of all the artists whose works are shown here, including the detailed examination of virtually their entire portfolios. The choice of specific works included in the exhibit was based on native judgments of their artistic excellence and cultural significance, with a view as well toward demonstrating to American viewers the richness and diversity of contemporary artistic expressions. Our concern with diversity and richness as determined by native judges—as contrasted to limiting ourselves to only a few artists who might appeal to Western viewers—was in keeping with the ethnoaesthetic purposes of the enterprise.

Throughout the preparation of these materials, there has been constant tension between using informant-centered explanation on the one hand (what artists, collectors, and others actively involved in the art world think, fantasize, and try to justify about their art), and art historical explanation (the positing of historical relationships between different styles and works and the role of unconscious learning)

on the other. To the extent that the two explanatory modes address different kinds of questions—the former issues of cultural meaning and value, the latter the genealogy of aesthetic forms—this tension has been largely reconcilable. However, since the art presented here was created by and for Thai, not Westerners, and since our purpose is to explain to Euroamerican viewers what the significance of this art is to those who are most directly associated with it, on balance we have given greater weight to ethnographic than to art historical formalist explanation.

Indigenous and International Influences

While the project was meant to be an exploration of contemporary Thai art, it was also meant to be a case study of one of the most widely occurring artistic phenomena of the 20th century—that of non-Western artists trying to contend with the conflicting standards of their indigenous aesthetic traditions and those of an encroaching international culture. The resolution of this conflict has taken a variety of routes, sometimes resulting in the enlargement or reinvention of the artist's own cultural traditions, sometimes in the straightforward copying of foreign models, and sometimes in an ongoing process of innovative accommodation among competing forces.

The evidence from Asia suggests that the choices made to deal with this [illegible] are in part a function of the larger political forces impinging upon the societies in which artists and their patrons live. Thus, the sending of Japanese artists to France during the last two decades of the 19th century and the subsequent impact of European realism and French impressionism on the development of Japanese art was clearly a result of the policies of the Japanese government to avail itself of all things Western in the years following the Meiji restoration. (See particularly Miyagawa 1967, Shively 1971, Sullivan 1989, Takashima, et al. 1987, and Yamada 1976.)

In contrast to Japan is the Indonesian situation where, despite almost three hundred years of Dutch colonialism, Western art was largely ignored and untaught until the 1920's and 1930's. (See Holt 1967 and the essays by Kusnadi, Spanjaard, and Soedarso SP in Fischer 1990.) Dutch colonials clearly respected the beauty and integrity of Indonesian classical and folk traditions, but in accord with the Western orientalist vision (Said 1978), they maintained a system of aesthetic apartheid, defining the indigenous arts as the products of an idealized, but essentially static, Indonesian past. It was not until after independence in 1949 that a modern Indonesian art, utilizing indigenous and Western elements, began to bloom. However, in concordance with the numerous cross-currents of Indonesian society, this modern art has since its inception been marked by vigorous debate on whether it should be distinctively indigenous or directed toward the international world, should be tied to Indonesia's past or be radically innovative, should serve to define an "Indonesian identity" or should only serve aesthetic purposes, and whether in this most ethnically diverse nation on earth, a "national" art could actually be fashioned from regional and local differences.

Rama IX Art Museum Foundation

The Thai Encounter with Western Art

The Thai experience lies somewhere between these two extremes. Like Japan and unlike Indonesia, Thailand has been both a politically independent kingdom for all of its history and one of the most ethnically unified nations in Asia. Its initial, mid-19th century encounter with Western art came at a time when European domination was a real, if uncertain, possibility, but one to which the Thai political leadership had responded with diplomatic skill and self-confidence. While there is never a one-to-one relationship between politics and art, it is not surprising that the Thai reaction to European art was congruent with this political response—rushing neither to copy nor reject European models, but using Western elements to enhance and illuminate their own vision of the world.

Figure 3.
Khrua In Khong's mid-19th century conception of the Lord Buddha reincarnated as a lotus blossom, preaching to a Thai congregation.

Thus, the first evidence of Western influence on Thai art are the wall murals at Bangkok's Temple Bovornives, dating from the late 1850's. Painted by Khrua In Khong, they portray Thai in a most unlikely [illegible] environments, living in an antebellum environment, and bidding farewell to persons sailing off in what seem to be European men-of-war (see figures 3 and 4). Despite their anomalous qualities, the murals are an expression of the traditional didactic purpose of all temple art—to glorify Buddhism—with the artist using Euroamerican references to convey the universality of Buddhism and the modernity of the Thai of his period. Thus, what appear to be men-of-war are in fact contemporary versions of the ships that can take Buddhists to *nirvana*, and what seems like a gigantic lotus blossom is a reincarnation of the Lord Buddha preaching to a congregation of the faithful. The artist's knowledge of Euroamerican models derived from two sources: the drawings he had seen on foreign postal cards and on the walls of the homes of American medical missionaries who had come to Thailand in the late 1820's (drawings which also may have helped to introduce three dimensionality to Thai painting), and European vessels that often docked in Bangkok, the most recent of which had carried British officials to negotiate a treaty with Thailand.

Figure 4
Khrua In Khong's portrayal of Thai bidding farewell to those who are sailing to nirvana.

In the years that followed, the Thai interest in European art became increasingly complex. Toward the end of the century, members of the royal family who had visited or studied in England became familiar

with European cultural tastes, and returned to Thailand with the notion of art as collectible and as a form of interior decoration, thus enlarging the traditional Thai conception of art as a form of moral education. These aesthetic values quickly diffused to other members of the Thai elite.

In 1923, King Vajaravudh, who had been educated in England, invited an Italian sculptor to Bangkok to design and construct public monuments to glorify Thai history, its monarchs, and other heroes and heroines of the realm. The sculptor, Corrado Feroci, did create numerous patriotic structures—some of which were done in early Italian fascist style. But Feroci also fell in love with Thailand, changed his name to "Silpa Bhirasri," and during the next four decades introduced European artistic techniques, historical sources, and aesthetic values to thousands of Thai. With the help of others, he also induced the government to create a university of fine arts, sent scores of his own best students to Europe and America for further study, and established a national art competition. Bhirasri died in 1962, but three decades after his death he is still lionized by many Thai artists—principally for the spirit of artistic adventure and discovery he instilled in them. Too, more than anyone else, he helped elevate them from being unknown craftsmen (*naaj chaang*) in the service of others, repetitively creating conventional art designs, to artists (*silpakam*)—persons who were capable of perceiving and rendering new versions of the Thai world. His accounts of the mystique of European artists and their creative role in society were particularly inspiring to his Siamese students.

Figure 5
A 1933 portrait of Corado Feroci, the Italian-born sculptor who directed the contemporary Thai art movement from the early 1920s until his death in 1962. This work is by Fua Haripitak, one of his earliest students.

Bhirasri's empowerment of Thai artists coincided with and was reinforced by the 1932 revolution that changed Thailand from an absolute to a constitutional monarchy, opened up the Thai social order, and greatly accelerated the modernization of the kingdom—which at the time was synonomous with "Westernization." Although Bhirasri urged his students to look to their own roots for inspiration and instituted programs in the history of Thai art and the restoration of temple paintings, most of his own energies went into teaching Western aesthetics, art history, and theories of art. This was very much in accord with the pro-Western interests of the various Thai military and civilian governments he served. In fact, Bhirasri's students were so captivated by the foreign aesthetic forms he taught them that for a period of twenty-five years before and after World War II, "contemporary Thai art" seemed almost indistinguishable from Euroamerican art—although in an oblique kind of way it also seemed ten to twenty years behind its Euroamerican prototypes. Many of his students later pointed out that Bhirasri's teaching of Western art usually stopped with post-impressionism, mainly because he believed (Silpa 1961:81) that abstract expressionism and subsequent 20th century movements were too alien to the Thai aesthetic spirit.

Rama IX Art Museum Foundation

The Integrative Art of Modern Thailand

Contemporary Thai art changed dramatically after Bhirasri's passing from the scene. Whether as a result of the freedom afforded by the death of any powerful teacher or the dramatic changes that occurred in Thailand's historical circumstances, the past three decades have been marked by an outburst of artistic experimentation and ferment. The most significant of these experiments was the rediscovery and reworking of Thailand's classical and folk artistic traditions by many of the same artists who had earlier been trained by Bhirasri in Western art. A department of "Traditional Thai Art" was established at Silpakorn University, the fine arts institution that Bhirasri had helped to establish. But instead of retreating to the replication of classical Thai styles and motifs, the artists working in this program began to use traditional models as sources of inspiration and as elements for exploring newer contemporary forms. Simultaneously, many artists—particularly those who had studied in the West and returned home with an enhanced confidence in their own talent—greatly expanded the use of Euroamerican techniques, materials, and styles. Equally important, there was a revival of interest in classical Thai art which had been largely dormant during the Bhirasri years. While most of the persons working in this tradition were considered to be copyists, a few—Tarn Kudt, Somnuk Permthongkum—achieved considerable distinction for their extraordinary craftsmanship, use of modern materials, and their willingness sometimes to make fun of contemporary [illegible] classical media.

The result of these events has been the development of a contemporary artistic genre that in its most essential features aims at integrating Thailand's thousand year old classical tradition, an even older folk tradition, and the Euroamerican tradition that has been known for 150 years. Although it was completely a local event, the eclectic, freely borrowing qualities of this genre are strikingly similar to what in the Euroamerican context is now called "postmodernism." It is our view that this particular form of "postmodernism," although always local, is also a world-wide phenomenon, and wherever it occurs, contains some elements that derive from indigenous, pre-modern aesthetic traditions.

It must be emphasized that, like postmodernism in the West, this synthesizing art of modern Thailand is very much an open-ended enterprise. It has no recognized artistic leaders, no canons of priority or choice, and lacks precise criteria of how it differs from other established genres. It also occurs across an extremely broad front that includes the expropriation and merging of techniques, materials, colors, conceptions, styles, inspirations, and subject matter. Its essence, however, is that it always utilizes artistic elements drawn from one or more of the three prior aesthetic traditions and amends these elements in a manner that resonates with contemporary Thai perception and experience. Some of the aesthetic forms presented in this catalogue may seem familiar to Western viewers, but, if our Thai informants are correct, they have been defined in the contemporary Thai context so that their meaning is significantly different from what Western viewers might surmise (see plate 37 by Somsak Chowtadapong and plate