



The Influence of Buddhism in Historical Thai Art

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Abstract

There is a historical relationship between Buddhism and indigenous Thai art; Buddhism has had an immense influence on Thai art and culture. The emergence of Thai art reflects the integration of Buddhist components into cultural, political and societal Thai systems, and mostly in the way that Buddhism has been represented from generation to generation and in the way people have shown devotion; Buddhist components such as Buddha images, Buddhist monks, and Buddhist activities (e.g., festivals and ceremonies) have been acknowledged as significant components of Thai culture. The influence of Buddhism on Thai art and culture has been systematic and direct from the beginning of the Sukhothai Kingdom at the beginning of the thirteenth century. Subsequently, the indigenous art forms and styles engaged in the representation of Buddhism were integrated into the Thai cultural mainstream during the early Rattanakosin era, creating aesthetic art forms, which have been classified into “classical Thai art”, such as mural painting, sculpture and *Chang-sip-moo*, and “folk art”. Such influence of Buddhism on historical Thai art is relevant in the context of scrutinizing the relationship between Buddhism and Thai art.

This communication is aimed at pointing out the long-standing role of Buddhism in the development of Thai art in the past, especially the integration of the Buddhist context, which has led to the creation and the birth of indigenous Thai arts with the styles of “classical Thai art” and “folk art”, both of which are genuinely Thai. It is tenable that the study of historical Thai art with regard to the influence of Buddhism would lead to understanding of the development of current contemporary Thai art.

Key words : Buddhism, historical Thai art, classical Thai art, folk art

For centuries, since the establishment of the Thai Kingdom in the thirteenth century AD, the prime role of traditional Thai art had been to show devotion to Buddhism.¹ Buddhist art in the early period of

Thai history is believed to have emerged in the Sukhothai Kingdom, a highly sophisticated state in the golden Thai historical era, thirteenth to fourteenth century. However, long before the first Thai state became

the supreme power, there were different ethnic groups, cultures and religions in the region encompassed by modern Thailand.

Prior to the Thai people adopting Buddhism as their religion

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¹ The First Thai Kingdom was the Sukhothai Kingdom, established by King Ram Khamhaeng in 1287 AD.





in the first phase of the Thai Kingdom (in 1287 AD), the art of the Mon² and the Khmer³, both cultures of Hindu origin, were flourishing in the region.⁴

Despite regional diversities, Buddhism dominated much of this area as the Thai Kingdom began to subjugate other tribal groups. Even at this stage, Thai art was integrated with Buddhism as the religion came to dominate the indigenous Thai cultures.

Nevertheless, the relatively ephemeral existence of the kingdom of Sukhothai (compared with the other great Thai kingdoms of

Ayutthaya and Lanna) represents a golden age that laid the foundations of a structured state capable of establishing Theravada Buddhism as its state religion and asserting its power and cultural identity by assimilating the heritage of its predecessors (Girad-Geslan, et al., 1998 : 100).

In the early period, Thai art was genuinely an expression of the development of Buddhism in the Thai kingdom.

As part of their drive to implant Theravada Buddhism, the rulers of the Sukhothai imported patterns of art as they emanated from the

different populations subscribing to that form of Buddhism. Apparently distinguishing themselves as much as possible from their essentially Sinhalese, Mon, or, to a lesser extent, Pala models, the artist-monks of Sukhothai emerged from this ferment to develop a form of expression that met their religious preoccupations but was nevertheless unique, capable of imposing itself in turn as a model for the other Thai states (Girad-Geslan et al., 1998 : 100).

There is good reason to believe that the first known Thai artists were Buddhist monks active during the Sukhothai Period. Consequently, it is appropriate to suggest that the early existence of Buddhism was a major contributor to the foundations of a truly Thai art form.

The Buddhist art forms from Sukhothai and the historical frameworks of Thai art and culture within classical Thai art and Thai folk art are both forms that significantly revealed Buddhist influence.⁵

Early Historical Thai Art

As the establishment of the Thai Kingdom required the building of these structures, early Thai artistic forms have been found in palaces, Buddhist temples and monuments. The other sources are the Buddhist objects and manuscripts used for



Figure 1 A historical park in Sukhothai province depicts the ruins of Sukhothai style architecture, thirteenth century AD; a statue of Buddha in the foreground was built in 1957 AD.

² The Mon comprise a minority ethnic group in Thailand. Before the eleventh century AD, the Mon were the main ethnic group in what is the Thai Kingdom today.

³ The Khmer (Cambodians) were powerful during the eleventh to thirteenth centuries AD before the Thai Kingdom developed. The Khmer Kingdom had influenced the art and culture of Thailand in the past.

⁴ Refers to the Sukhothai Kingdom in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries AD.

⁵ See Phillips in **The Integrative Art of modern Thailand**, 1992, for more details of classical Thai art and Thai folk art.



spreading Buddhism. The strong characteristics of early Thai architecture reflect its Buddhist themes and elements, and are seen in holy buildings such as palaces and temples. The early city of Sukhothai (figure 1) includes a large concentration of monastic buildings such as a meeting hall (*vihan*), a hall for the ordination of monks (*ubosoth*) and stupa (*jedi*) containing relics or holy images. These were built for Buddhist uses and filled with Buddhist elements. For instance, a stupa was built outside the walls of Sukhothai to house a colossal thirteenth-century plaster image of the Buddha Maravijaya Phra Achana. Whilst Buddhism so directly influenced Thai architecture, it has nevertheless developed a form that is uniquely Thai and continued this development from era to era with a similar focus on visual Buddhist identity.

As with architecture, Thai sculpture grew out of Buddhism. In Thai history, Buddhist elements such as the three-dimensional image of the Buddha have been a key subject of representation.

Buddha imagery was a primary motif in Buddhist iconography and the earliest form of Buddha imagery was in sculptural form. The sculpting of Buddha statues has been practised since the beginnings of Thai history and the making of Buddha statues has been highly significant in all Buddhist cultures. Sculptures and relief works were produced extensively from early in the twelfth century AD.

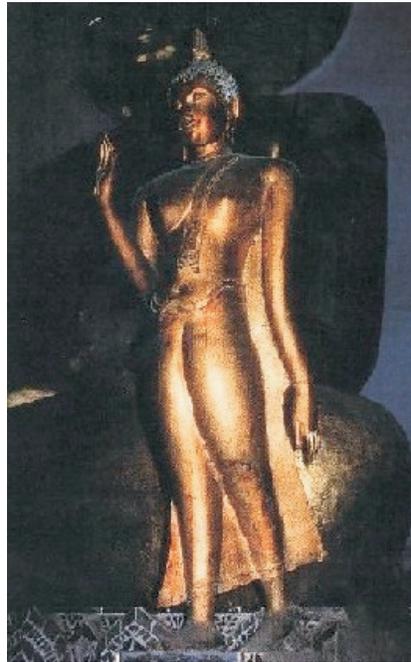


Figure 2
Buddha image at Wat Phraya Phu, Nan Province, 1426 AD, shows the influence of Sukhothai high classic style.

It has been a general impression that diverse art styles pre-existing in the region contributed to the formation of Thai art during the Sukhothai Period. Early in that period, the Thai Buddha belonged to the Mon-Khmer hybrid style. From the fourteenth century, one can begin to recognise a style of sculpture in Buddha statues that developed into the high classic Sukhothai style; for example, the Buddha image in the fourteenth century (figure 2).

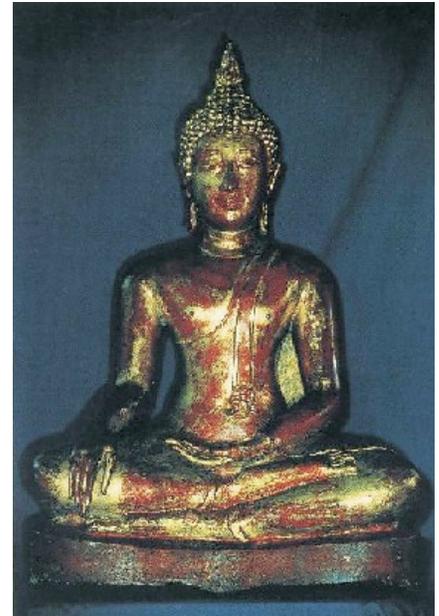


Figure 3
High classic style Buddha image in bronze, fifteenth century AD, Sukhothai.

This Buddha image appears elongated and dominated by a curvilinear form, the shape being similar to the S-shape of the historical Western aesthetic form in classical Greek art. The classical Greek art is highly regarded for its splendid idealised human sculptural forms that suggested by curve-line as seen in most Greek statues. Another similar form is seen in the fifteenth century Buddha statue, made of bronze with red lacquer and traces of gilding



that is regarded as the classic Thai historical sculpture style (figure 3). The Sukhothai Buddha image indicates that there was a serious integration of aesthetic form with the spiritualism of Buddhist sculpture.

In summary, early Thai art style has its origins in Buddhism within the development of the Thai state and its emerging culture. Thai architecture, sculpture and paintings, all have their roots in the Buddhist art of this early phase, and Thai objects and artefacts have been associated with this interaction of religion and art. Accordingly, early Buddhist tablets and amulets are evidence of historical art practice.

Whilst Buddhism is now the state religion in Thailand, and the

identity of the nation has been based on the two sanctified institutions, Buddhism and the Thai monarchy, in an historical Thai context, the original role of Thai art during the period from the thirteenth to the seventeenth centuries was to show devotion to Buddhism alone, by displaying its sanctity and religious content for the purposes of teaching and spreading the belief.

Through its preoccupation with Buddhist elements, with serving the Thai monarchy and with the emerging historical and cultural identity of its people, Thai art developed into a unique original style.

Thai art historians refer to art forms that are genuinely Thai as

“classical Thai art”, a result of the long development of visual images from earlier stages.⁶ This art form is unique in the sense that it is the most widely known mature form of Thai art, and its forms and characteristics are in contrast to “Thai folk art”, although they are related through the influence of Buddhism.

The indigenous art forms and styles engaged in the representation of Buddhism were integrated into the Thai cultural mainstream. This integration, plus that of Buddhism, into Thai art can be identified in both “classical Thai art” and “Thai folk art”.

Phillips (1992) described these two artistic genres as indigenous Thai art movements that are culturally Thai.

Classical Thai Art

The Classical Thai Art period began when the first monarch in the Chakri Dynasty, King Rama I, ascended the Throne in 1782. At that time, following the destruction of Ayutthaya, the capital was relocated south to Bangkok, also known as the capital of Rattanakosin (*Krung Rattanakosin*), in a programme of ambitious temple building and restoration projects (figure 4)⁷. The new palace has all buildings of Buddhist corporeal; these include temple (*Wat Phra Kaew*), *vihan*, and *jedi* (stupa) and the main chapel or *ubosoth* within the Grand Palace which contains a series of mural painting representing Buddhist themes (late eighteenth century).



Figure 4 Wat Phrasirattanasatsadaram (popularly known as Wat Phra Kaew) is a chapel on the Grand Palace ground in Bangkok. It was built by the Chakri Dynasty in 1782 AD, which continues to the present.

⁶ See also Boisselier, 1976, for more details of classical Thai art.

⁷ The Rattanakosin era which started in 1782, continues into the present, with the reign of the current Thai monarch.



Classical Thai art portrayed scenes from the life of the Lord Buddha, Buddhist teachings, classical tales such as the *Ramakien* (the Thai version of the Indian epic, the *Ramayana*) and Thai literature, which is most of all associated with royal patronage, as well as scenes of contemporary events.

The essence of classical Thai art is its religious content, didactic purpose, and highly decorative designs. Like its medieval European counterpart, Thai classical art has always been in the service of the kingdom's religious and political institutions, as well as the human values associated with them (Phillips, 1992 : 18).

Classical Thai art is the description for a Thai art form that is considered the most highly sophisticated and beautiful in the Thai historical context. It served equally the Thai monarchy and Buddhism, and ultimately became important for the country's identity. In classical Thai art, royal patronage was strong. It is considered that this period produced the richest, most genuine Thai art, in which the height of Thai aesthetic achievement and quality was reached.

Classical Thai art is the most culturally familiar and widely respected --- if for some Thai, also somewhat well worn --- of all of Thailand's artistic genres. Based

in part on Sinhalese and Khmer prototypes, it has been practiced for more than a millenium on the walls and architectural elements of temples and palaces, on the surfaces of cabinets, screens, and manuscripts of both royal and village Thailand, and in individual Buddha images representing as many as nine historically different styles (Phillips, 1992 : 17).

The media that were widely used in Classical Thai art include painting, sculpture, stone and wood bas-relief, stucco, lacquerware, woodcarving, nilloware and leather. Painting, now regarded as the most outstanding traditional medium in the history of Thai art, originated during the Classical Era in the form of wall paintings.

“The practice of painting murals on the walls of temples reached its florescence in the murals of the early and mid-19th century”, that is the “classical” time of Thai art when the Thai style of painting began to develop from murals (Phillips, 1992 : 19).

Painting in the classical Thai art style adorns the walls of temples, especially temples built during the early Rattanakosin period and exemplified by mural paintings (figure 5).

In the Thai Classical Period, sculpture was, like painting, also widely practised in the tradition of showing devotion to and serving Buddhism. Buddha images have

been the most enduring subjects in Thai sculpture.

Buddha images have over the centuries been the single most important focus of Thai artistic energy. Thai art historians recognize as many as nine different styles of these images. The most “classical” of the schools --- in the simplicity and elegance of its imagery --- is the 13th - 15th century Sukhothai style. Because of its similarity to modern aesthetic forms, it is the most emulated of all classical Buddha figural styles (Phillips, 1992 : 19).

As mentioned previously, the Sukhothai sculpture of the Buddha image is acknowledged as the classic form of Thai style (see figure 3). The sculptural style of the Rattanakosin Period reflects the prevailing aesthetics of the Thai Royal Court, with highly decorative motifs as seen in the nineteenth century Buddha Shakyamuni (figure 6). It is believed that it was carved during the reign of King Rama III (1824 - 1851).

In summary, it may be observed that in the tradition of other earlier Thai art genres, classical Thai art reached its peak in aesthetic form in the early Rattanakosin Period, having served the Buddhist religion, the Thai monarchy, especially the royal court, and the kingdom's identity, reflecting values held dearly in the life of the Thai people.



Figure 5 Details of a mural at the corridor of Wat Phra Kaew in the Grand Palace.



Figure 6 The Buddha Shakyamuni in Parileyyaka Forest, Rattanakosin Period (1822 - 1853); bronze, lacquer, gold leaf, coloured glass; 155 cm.

Thai Folk Art

In contrast to classical Thai art, Thai folk art emerged as a genre that is associated with “a wide variety of craft skills and secondarily to an array of distinctive styles” (Phillips, 1992 : 21). Moreover, it is widely practised in various social settings and often for both decorative and functional purposes.

According to Phillips (1992) and other Thai art historians, Thai folk art encompasses the production of many different forms and qualities of weaving, ceramics, jewelry, silver and gold work, wood carvings, stucco work, lacquerware, vegetable and fruit carvings, lathe turnings, papier-mâché fabrications, flower decorations, leatherwork, nilloware and mother of pearl mosaics.

In terms of the numbers of practitioners and the development of regional and local traditions, it is the most widespread, highly ramified, deeply rooted, and heavily patronized of Thailand’s artistic genres (Phillips, 1992 : 20).

Thai folk art has also been associated with Buddhism. However, whereas classical Thai art portrays Buddhist and traditional values, Thai folk art is more elementary in its decorative and functional values. These can be found in utilitarian items such as food and garment containers, house supports, clothes, swords, buffalo yokes, manuscript cabinets, betel-nut boxes, etc.

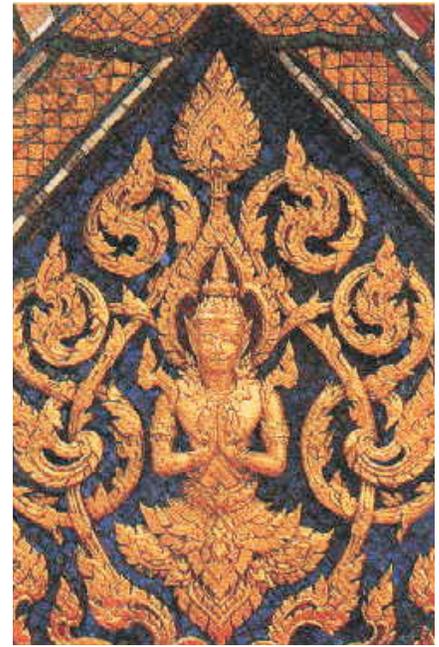


Figure 7 A detail from a temple’s gable shows some of the decorative work in Thai traditional art style.

Phillips (1992) suggested further that the elaborately drawn decorative elements from the folk tradition, as seen on the windows, doors, gables, pillars and ceilings of most of Thailand’s Buddhist temples, are meant to beautify and reinforce the sacredness of the temple environment. Figure 7 shows a restored facade of a nineteenth century temple gable with folk mosaic work and spiral vines surrounding a “godling” from the Buddhist pantheon.

Classical Thai art involves mainly the expression of sacredness and religious representation and, although Thai folk art was not formed to serve Buddhist iconography, it is related with classical art in the way that its elements were frequently



“modified to make them even more ‘classical’, such as when they are painted gold, the colour of Buddhism, or red, the colour of heaven and of those who reside there” (Phillips, 1992 : 21).

For example, elements from both the classical and Thai folk art traditions are often seen combined in a single work such as a wood carving on a large panel used in wall decorations (figure 8). Symbolic elements of animal figures and filigree designs that come primarily from Thai classical art traditions surrounded a Buddhist symbol, the *Thammachak* or the Wheel of Dhamma (teaching) from the classical art tradition.

Thus, it could be said that Thai folk art is indirectly associated with Buddhist traditions, and that it is closer to everyday Thai life than classical Thai art, which serves mainly the royal court. In addition, Thai folk art styles have been used mainly to beautify and honour material objects of value, typically as a way of highlighting the status of the object’s owner. Thus, it must be distinguished from “classical art” on the ground of its non-Buddhist sources and uses.

Even though folk art is significantly distinguishable from classical art, most Thais now recognise the two Thai art traditions as a single, unified art form known as “traditional Thai art”.

In summary, it appears that Buddhism is indeed the most historically important inspiration for Thai art, and that this is supported by evidence of the emergence of early Thai art, reflecting Buddhist elements in the thirteenth century.

Indigenous Thai art consists of “classical Thai art” and “Thai folk art”, which together have contributed to a fully developed form of indigenous art; this is the origin of “traditional Thai art”. It is elements of traditional Thai Art that are seen as integrated into the artworks of contemporary Thai art, especially “neo-traditional Thai art”, in the works of Thawan Duchanee, Angkarn Kalayanapongse, Chalermchai Kositpipat, Panya Vijinthanasarn, Thepsakdi Thongnopkoon, and Alongkorn Lawwattana.



Figure 8 A wood carving with the *Thammachak* symbol reflects the existence of both classical and Thai folk art.

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บทคัดย่อ อิทธิพลของพระพุทธศาสนาในประวัติศาสตร์ศิลปกรรมไทย
 เลิศศิริร์ บวรกิตติ
 คณะศิลปกรรมศาสตร์ มหาวิทยาลัยบูรพา

ศิลปกรรมไทยได้รับอิทธิพลโดยตรงตลอดมานับแต่กรุงสุโขทัยก่อตัวขึ้นเป็นศูนย์กลางของอาณาจักรของสยามเมื่อต้นศตวรรษที่ ๑๓ อิทธิพลนี้เกิดขึ้นเคียงคู่ไปกับแนวคิด ปรัชญา และความศรัทธาในพระพุทธศาสนาที่นำไปสู่ค่านิยมและพฤติกรรมของคนไทยที่สะท้อนถึงการเมืองการปกครอง และวิถีชีวิตโดยรวม ดังนั้น อิทธิพลทางตรงของพระพุทธศาสนาจึงปรากฏผลต่อรูปทรงและสุนทรียภาพของศิลปกรรมไทยตลอดมาจนถึงยุครัตนโกสินทร์ตอนต้น ดังเช่นงานจิตรกรรมฝาผนัง งานประติมากรรม งานช่างสิบหมู่ และงานหัตถกรรมพื้นบ้าน อิทธิพลดังกล่าวมีความสำคัญลึกซึ้งในการวิเคราะห์ประวัติศาสตร์ความสัมพันธ์ระหว่างพระพุทธศาสนากับศิลปกรรมไทย บทความนี้แสดงให้เห็นบทบาทและอิทธิพลของพระพุทธศาสนาที่มีต่อวิวัฒนาการของศิลปกรรมไทย อันกล่าวถึงการผสมผสานเรื่องราวทางศาสนากับการพัฒนาและการสืบทอดของศิลปกรรมไทย ตลอดจนแง่มุมและหลักการต่าง ๆ อันเป็นลักษณะและแบบกระสวนศิลปกรรมไทยดั้งเดิมกับแบบประณีตศิลป์และศิลปหัตถกรรมพื้นบ้านอันเป็นเอกลักษณ์ของไทยแท้ที่ถูกต้องตามประวัติศาสตร์ของศิลปกรรมไทย การศึกษาประวัติศาสตร์ถึงทิศทางของศิลปกรรมไทยได้นำไปสู่องค์ความรู้ด้านอิทธิพลของพระพุทธศาสนาและพัฒนาการของศิลปกรรมร่วมสมัยของไทยในยุคปัจจุบันด้วย

คำสำคัญ : พระพุทธศาสนา, ศิลปกรรมไทยแบบดั้งเดิม, ศิลปกรรมไทย, ศิลปหัตถกรรมพื้นบ้าน