

THAILAND

CATE, Sandra. *Making Merit, Making Art: A Thai Temple in Wimbledon*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2003. xiv + 218 pages. Figures, color plates, glossary, bibliography, index. Cloth US\$50.00; ISBN 0-8248-2357-5.

The purpose of this book is to demonstrate the deeper cultural significance underlying the production of modern Thai art by means of an anthropological investigation of the murals in Wat Buddhapadipa (WB), the Thai royal temple built in Wimbledon, England.

In chapter two, it is pointed out that Thai elites with a rich experience of staying in Western countries, such as businessmen, civil and military officials, the Thai king, and government figures played a central role in, and were the main sponsors for the construction of this Wat. The activities in particular of businessmen, military personnel, and government civil servants as sponsors, were called long-distance merit-making. The painters of the murals secured permission to paint freely and established so-called "neotraditionalism" which is said to represent the identity of the Thai nation in the world of contemporary Thai art.

In chapter three, the author attempts to illuminate the formative process and the background of this "neotraditionalism" (43–44). According to her, at the time when Thai nationalism was on the rise in the late 1970s, temple murals were recognized as being an important visual source for Thai local history and were conceived as elements constituting Thai national heritage and identity. In the late 1970s the Thai art world was split into a "modern group" and a "Thai group" (64–65). Panya and Chalermchai, the main painters of the murals at WB, represented the neotraditional group. They sought to mediate between Thai art of the past and the international modern art of the present.

In chapter four, the author analyzes the murals at WB as a visual tale-telling directed at audiences of a culturally distinct background. As a result of her analysis, she points out that the mural painters have an impact on and attract these audiences because they combine the past Thailand with the globalized present Thailand by placing it in the three worlds of Buddhist cosmology, whereby they emphasize not the educational but rather the artistic aspects of the murals using iconographic innovations and a much brighter palette. Furthermore, through these murals, which are based on the teachings of Buddha, they convey their own critical message about world events, including those of contemporary Thailand, namely about contemporary capitalism, consumerism, technology, environmental problems, and so on. By including various foreign locations in the murals, the painters try to globalize the teaching of the Dhamma. In this manner they also assert the primacy of the Thai Buddhist worldview over that of the West.

In chapter five, the author turns to the artists themselves and to their experiences of going to London in order to examine whether this faraway place and their remarkable efforts made there provided a new scope and changes to Thai social relations. Most mural painters at WB came from the countryside. They moved to Bangkok where they learned their art professionally. They learned and understood what "Thainess" means by regularly visiting Thailand's cultural remains, museums, and monuments (102). They then went to England to paint the murals of WB. Their experience had several important meanings: 1) Seeing the stimulating art of England they were released from the predictability and repetition of familiar styles and iconic conventions and could paint freely and creatively; 2) Their going to a foreign country raised their social status in Thailand; 3) The weakened

authority of the abbot at WB provided them with space to paint the murals with freedom and creativity.

In chapter six, the author concentrates her attention on Chalermchai and Panya, the leaders of the mural painters, and considers in greater detail the ways by which these artists find a place for themselves in the fragmented, chaotic, and fluctuating world of contemporary Thailand. The two presented themselves to the Thai public as reincarnations of mural artists and of monks of the 19th century, emphasizing their nativistic aspect as well as the historical importance of the mural project at WB. They helped to raise the status of mural artists, and Chalermchai made an effort to strengthen their connection with Thailand's emerging wealthy middle class. Members of this middle class, with their concerns and anxieties about "Thai identity," discovered their identity in the art of Chalermchai, and became eager collectors of his art. Panya, on the other hand, dedicated himself to the training of art students, teaching them the conceptualism of Thai art in distinction from the perceptualism of Western art. In addition, through his art he criticized the trend of materialism in contemporary Thailand.

Chapter seven offers further observations about art and religion as issues of identity, authority, and value, and how they intersect in the murals of WB. The murals at WB represent an attempt by their artists to reconcile contradictions and incompatible aspects of different epistemologies regarding painting: art as telling the story of Buddha and art as art. In short, they are an attempt at creating hybrid forms. I believe that in the following words the author suggests the point of this book: WB's mediation of oppositions discussed in this study—traditional/modern, religion/art, global/local—suggests an alternative, poststructuralist perspective of "both/and" rather than "either/or" (159).

In conclusion I wish to make the following points: 1) with this study the author has produced an outstanding example of an ethnography of art; 2) this book offers a rich array of suggestions for researchers interested in studying art trends, Buddhism, nationalism or issues of national identity, and the new middle class in Thailand.

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