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Review Article

Re-visioning Buddhist art in Thailand

Piriya Krairiksh

Enlightened ways: The many streams of Buddhist art in Thailand
By HEIDI TAN; with contributions by PETER SKILLING, JOHN LISTOPAD, AMARA SRISUCHART, JUSTIN MCDANIEL, ALEXANDRA DENES, BENJAMIN CHIESA, THERESA MCCULLOUGH and DISAPONG NETLOMWONG
Singapore: Asian Civilisations Museum, 2012. Pp. 267. Map, Notes, Glossary, Bibliography, Index.

Buddhist story telling in Thailand and Laos: The Vessantara Jataka scroll at the Asian Civilisations Museum
By LEEDOM LEFFERTS and SANDRA CATE; with WAJUPPA TOSSA [trans.]
Singapore: Asian Civilisations Museum, 2012. Pp. 162. Map, Notes, Glossary, Bibliography, Index.

The Asian Civilisations Museum, Singapore, is to be congratulated for organising a splendid exhibition of Thai Buddhist art entitled 'Enlightened ways: The many streams of Buddhist art in Thailand', which ran from 30 November 2012 to 17 April 2013, and for publishing the exhibition catalogue as well as a separate monograph, *Buddhist storytelling in Thailand and Laos,* which elucidates the long cloth scroll depicting the story of Prince Vessantara on display at the exhibition.

The scope of the exhibition was extremely ambitious, attempting to include all aspects of Thai Buddhist art in every medium, from the courtly art of the capital to folk art of North and Northeast Thailand. The organisers included ceramics for architectural uses, dishes and bowls, ritual furnishings — such as candleholders, elephant seats, textiles — and different types of amulets. Such a scope has not been seen since 'The Art of Thailand' exhibition that toured the United States in 1960,[1] which moreover did not include popular or folk art. To their credit, the organisers have acknowledged that the folk art of the Thai–Lao people of Northeast Thailand, such as the long Vessantara cloth scroll, is worthy of inclusion in a national museum and an international exhibition of Thai art. Hitherto such surveys have consisted solely of masterpieces of Buddhist and Brahmanic art illustrating the different periods of art in Thailand.

For the benefit of readers unfamiliar with Thai Buddhist art, the organisers of the 'Enlightened ways' exhibition assembled a number of scholars to provide background

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1 Theodore Bowie, ed., *The arts of Thailand: A handbook of the architecture, sculpture, and, painting of Thailand (Siam)* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1960).

on general as well as on particular themes. Peter Skilling, an expert on Buddhist art and literature, classifies Buddhist art into two groups, after the two bodies of the Buddha, namely his 'form body' and his 'dharma body'. The former is represented by the images and relics of the Buddha; the latter by his teachings as expressed through written scripts, such as on diagrams and manuscripts. According to Skilling, 'These two corpora constitute both the materiality and the spirituality of Buddhism: they are inseparable traces of the same coin' (p. 18). He reminds both viewers and readers that 'Buddhist art was not made to be viewed in a museum. The devotee's gaze is never disinterested; he or she physically engages with the sacred objects by praying, supplicating, thanking and rewarding' (p. 31).

John Listopad, who specialises in Thai art, writes on the art historical background to the Walking Buddha images. Iconographically, this type of Buddha image represents the Buddha in the attitude of 'walking back and forth in meditation'. He surmises that 'these images were created as visual aids to assist both monks and the laity in conjunction with a new emphasis on the practice of meditation and ascetic devotion. These were introduced from Sri Lanka during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries when Thai monks travelled there to study religious practice and reconfirm their ordination in the orthodox Theravada monastic tradition' (p. 32). Listopad states that the Walking Buddha images were popular in the 'Thai kingdoms throughout the fifteenth century, although in later centuries the number of images declined dramatically especially in the central Thai kingdom of Ayuthaya' (p. 39). Contrary to Listopad's assertion, this reviewer maintains that the large stucco images at Sukhothai and Sri Satchanalai Historical Parks were made in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries when these cities came under the suzerainty of Ayuthaya.[2]

Amara Srisuchart, a former director of the Bangkok National Museum, discusses the Thai practice of giving a personal name to a Buddha image. The common practice is to name the image after the material from which it is made, such as the Emerald Buddha, although this is but a euphemism for green jadeite. Height is used to name an image that is eighteen cubits high, which is the same as the supernatural height attributed to the Buddha. Statues are also named according to the posture and movement illustrated, such as seated with legs crossed or pendant, or standing, walking or reclining. Weight is another popular appellation for a Buddha image, such as the Nine-Thousand-Kilogram image, or the Million-Units-of-Gold image. Another criteria reflects the construction material or casting technique, such as One Hundred Thousand Rivets. An image may also be known by the name of the person who commissioned it, or by its original provenance, such as the Sinhalese image. Royalty usually named an image after one of the epithets of the Buddha, as, for example, Lord of the Three Worlds, the All-Knowing Lord, and the Victorious Lord. One appellation that Amara does not mention, but is popular in the North, is the Lord Who Grants Immediate Gratification, because the process of making the image must be completed in a single day. By crediting the people of Sukhothai with 'introducing a new term for the Buddha image' in naming the brick-and-stucco seated image at Wat Si Chum Phra Achana — variously interpreted as 'steadfast',

2 Piriya Krairiksh, *Laksana thai: Phuttha patima* [Thai characteristics: Buddha images] (Bangkok: Bangkok Bank, 2006), pp. 475–77.

'immovable', or even 'an image intended to be worshipped' (pp. 42–3), Amara may be unwittingly supporting this reviewer's contention that the Inscription of King Ram Khamhaeng, which introduced this nomenclature, may have been a mid-nineteenth century creation of King Mongkut.[3]

Justin McDaniel in his article 'A Buddha in the palm of your hand: Amulets in Thai Buddhism' discusses the ubiquity of amulets in Thai society: 'Thai amulets are not just a part of modern popular religion and confined to the lower or less-educated classes. They are made and cherished by royalty, monks, millionaires, scholars, and collectors, both in Thailand and increasingly across the globe' (p. 48). Most amulets are made by monks from flowers and medicinal plants as well as from shell, seeds, monks' robes, pieces of manuscripts, and roof tiles all ground into powder. Others are made of clay or metal. While mixing the ingredient together monks chant the protective Pāli incantations. Many amulets have a portrait of the monk who commissioned them on one side and sacred diagrams (*yantra*) with scripts inscribed on their reverse. Some give the name of the monks who made them and the date of their production, for 'an amulet is only as powerful as the person who originally forged and consecrated it'.[4] One type of amulet, called *takrut*, are metal sheets inscribed with protective texts then rolled up and tied with sacred sting and sealed with molten metal. Whilst it is true that 'many high-ranking monks in Bangkok are astrologers, masters of the occult arts or entrepreneurs in the amulet industry',[5] McDaniel argues that such practices are not a commercialisation of religion but legitimate within the tradition of Thai Buddhism. He sees 'these famous monks and their amulets as simply creating new types of communities, communities of pilgrims, amulet trades, spiritual tourists and online communities' (p. 212). All contribute to the diversity of Thai Buddhism.

Alexandra Denes, an anthropologist, reiterates the dual aspects of Buddhism between the 'worldly' and the 'otherworldly' (above the world), between materialism and asceticism, in her contribution, 'Trees of offering: The Salak Yom festival in Lamphun Province', in which she discusses the dynamic interrelation between the monastic community (s*angha*) and the lay community through rituals and festivals. The Salak Yom festival, which takes place in Lamphun Province, North Thailand, between September and October, combines ancestral worship and a rite of passage for young women who gain merit and receive blessings in return for gifts to monks and ancestors. These offerings to monks as well as to the ancestors are presented as decorations for an artificial tree created for the purpose. So 'in popular practice the religion acknowledges and accommodates worldly desires for happiness, prestige and wealth — whether in this life or the next' (p. 61). Thus, the exhibition and its catalogue touch upon many facets of Thai Buddhism, as aptly expressed by its subtitle, 'The many streams of Buddhist art in Thailand'.

3 See James R. Chamberlain, ed., *The Ram Khamhaeng controversy: Collected papers* (Bangkok: Siam Society, 1991), pp. 53–159, 257–72, 553–65.

4 Justin T. McDaniel, *The lovelorn ghost and the magical monk: Practicing Buddhism in modern Thailand* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), p. 197.

5 Mettananando Bhikkhu, quoted in McDaniel, ibid., p. 191. The quote continues thus: 'The amulet market, also controlled by the Ecclesiastical Council in Thailand, is as lucrative as that of the underground lottery: billions of baht circulate in this business daily, and it is all tax-free'.

Buddhist storytelling in Thailand and Laos, on the long Vessantara Jātaka scroll at the Asian Civilisations Museum, reinforces the above proposition. Like the Salak Yom festival, the Bun Phra Wet festival involves the whole community. After months of preparation, the festival takes place over three days. The first day is given to decorating the monastery. The second day is taken with the procession of the Vessantara scroll, which concludes with the recitation of the Phra Malai story. The third day is the recitation of the Vessantara Jātaka, after which donations are given to the monks in return for which the donors receive blessing.

Central to the Bun Phra Wet festival is the painted scroll depicting all of the thirteen episodes from the Vessantara Jātaka, plus a prelude in which the Buddha introduced the story of Prince Vessantara. The story of Phra Malai is sometimes depicted either at the beginning or at the end of the Vessantara story. Phra Malai was a monk who visited Hell and Heaven, where he met the future Buddha, Phra Sri Ariya Metteya. Metteya told Phra Malai to go back and tell the people that they should listen to the complete recitation of the Vessantara Jātaka and make merit, so as to be reborn at the same time as he. The scroll in the Asian Civilisations Museum, does not depict the Phra Malai story, but has a dedicatory frontispiece giving the names of those who commissioned it, the name of the painter, and the date of its execution.

The monograph attempts to give as much information on the scroll as it possibly can, including full English translations of the captions. It discusses the social and political importance of the Bun Phra Wet festival (pp. 44–7). A chapter is devoted to the scroll painting techniques, composition, styles, and iconography (pp. 63–93). Admirable as it is, however, the monograph could be improved with a brief art historical background to the representation of the Vessantara Jātaka in Northeast Thailand. This *jātaka* first appears in Kalasin Province in the ninth century CE on a *sīmā* stone, or boundary marker for a consecrated precinct in which ecclesiastic functions could be held, as part of a set depicting the Mahānipāta Jātakas, or the last 10 of the 550 past lives of the Buddha, which probably derive from the local 'Mon' listing.[6] Also lacking is a definition of what constitutes 'traditional' Thai–Lao mural paintings, such as that given by Bonnie Brereton.[7]

An important aspect of Thai Buddhist art that has been ignored by most art historians is the tradition of copying; whether it be architecture, sculpture or painting, a facsimile of the prototype is considered a virtue. Originally, this reflected the wish of the devout to capture the likeness of the Buddha, as represented by images believed to have been made during the Buddha's lifetime. Subsequent copying became associated with deference to the works of the masters, so that 'the scrolls produced in Ban Kau are identical in all major aspects' (p. 72), because they were made by the use of stencils: 'When Ban Kau painters were asked how they distinguished between scrolls produced by different artists, they replied that they looked at elephant toenails, since each painter has a characteristic way of completing these' (ibid.).

Ignoring elements of tradition, such as the copying inherent to Buddhist art, both Prince Damrong Rajanubhab and George Coedès, the doyens of art historians of

6 Piriya Krairiksh, '*Semas* with scenes from the Mahānipāta-jātakas in the National Museum at Khon Kaen', *Art and Archaeology in Thailand* (Bangkok: Fine Arts Department, 1974), pp. 46 n42, 55–7.

7 Bonnie Pacala Brereton, 'Towards a definition of Isan mural painting: Focus on the heartland', *Journal of the Siam Society* 98 (2010): 185–93.

Thailand, used contemporary Western art history to study Thai Buddha images, classifying them according to stylistic similarities and then correlating them with historical periods, as in their seminal works, *Tamnan Phuttha Chedi Sayām* and 'Les Collections archéologique du Musée National de Bangkok'.[8] As Skilling puts it in his essay for the catalogue reviewed above, 'the concept of historical style or modern art history as an academic exercise was developed in the early twentieth century by scholars like Prince Damrong, George Coedès, and Reginald Le May. Styles were defined and assigned geographical or historical names like Srivijaya, Lopburi, U-Thong, Ayutthaya, Sukhothai and Lan Na' (p. 31).

This periodisation has since become an inviolable truth, taught in schools and learned by rote. It constitutes the core curriculum for the students of Silpakorn, the University of Fine Arts, who on graduation become teachers and museum curators. An example of Prince Damrong's and Coedès' methodology was to classify antique standing images of the Buddha with both hands executing the gesture of argumentation, discovered around the head of the Gulf of Thailand, as Dvāravatī style and assigning them to that period, which they dated to the sixth to eleventh centuries. Since no Mahayana images of bodhisattva dating from that period had been found, Prince Damrong and Coedès assumed that Buddhism in the Dvāravatī period was predominantly Theravāda. However, had they acknowledged the Buddhist tradition, they would have realised that the similarities common to images classified as Dvāravatī derived from the same iconographic model because prior to the nineteenth century an image of a Buddha was always a replica, so that the iconography of every image derived from that of its prototype. Accordingly, the standing image with both hands in the gesture of argumentation would have represented Amithābha, the Mahāyāna devotional Buddha who presides over Sūkhāvatī, the Land of Bliss in the Western Paradise, to whom adherents wish to go after their death. Since Sūkhāvatī is open to both Mahāyānists and Hīnayānists, Amitābha preaches to both groups, symbolised by the double argumentation gesture.[9]

The Buddha image reproduced in *Enlightened ways* (pp. 70–71) shows the standing Buddha flanked by two attendants: the one on the Buddha's left 'holds a jar and what appears to be a lotus bud'; the one on the Buddha's right holds a flywhisk:

> A boss on the back and a hole drilled through the middle suggests that the entire piece was attached to a larger form, possibly the hub of a large stone Wheel of the Law. Although broken, the outline of a bird-like creature can be seen below the Buddha, holding in each hand the stem of a lotus, on which the two attendants stand. Sometimes called 'Banaspat' or 'Phanasbodi' (Lord of the Forest) (ibid.).

If this image is interpreted as being an exemplar of the Dvāravatī style and period, then it must have been made in the service of Theravāda Buddhism. This conjuncture led to the correlation with the Wheel of the Law, which, in Thai art, symbolises

8 Prince Damrong Rajanubhab, *Tamnan Phuttha Chedi Sayām* (Bangkok: 2469 BE), trans. Sulak Sivarakasa and A.B. Griswold, *Monuments of the Buddha in Siam* (Bangkok: Siam Society, 1973); George Coedès, 'Les collections archéologiques du Musée national de Bangkok', *Ars Asiatica* 12 (Paris: G. Van Ouest, 1928).

9 Piriya Krairiksh, *The roots of Thai art*, trans. Narisa Chakrabongse (Bangkok: River Books, 2012, pp. 88–92).

Theravāda Buddhism par excellence. The 'bird-like creature' is identified by Dhanit Yupho, a former director of the Fine Arts Department, as 'Phanasbodi' (Lord of the Forest), which has the face of a garuda, the horns of a bull and wings of a wild goose; in short a composite form of the vehicle Trimūrti, thereby, suggesting that the Buddha is greater than the three great gods of Brahmanism.[10] Such guesswork was made in the spirit of Thai nationalism and had no basis on the evidence whatsoever, thus conforming to McDaniel's observation about the dominant mode of historical writing in Thailand: 'It is often not the duty of young historians to criticise or correct their predecessors. Instead they simply add'.[11]

On the other hand, if the same image is seen as Amitābha, it represents Amitābha's descent from Sūkhāvatī to receive the souls of the dead, accompanied by the Bodhisattvas Mahāstammaprapta and Avalokiteśvara, while holding the jar of *amita*, the water of immortality, in his left hand. The 'bird-like creature' might have represented *garuda*, a symbol of the sun, that alludes to the meaning of Amitābha, which is 'infinite light'. Similar depictions of the same triad, each standing on a lotus, are known in Chinese art of the Sui and the Tang dynasties, the periods when the worship of Amitābha superseded that of Sākyamuni.[12] Moreover, according to the seventh-century Chinese Buddhist monk, Yijing, Dvāravatī was the country in which a famous Chinese Mahāyānist monk named 'Mahāyāna Pradīpa' or the 'Light of Mahāyāna' received his ordination.[13] Thus, the standing Buddha with both hands executing the argumentation gesture should be identified as Amitābha, the Buddha of the Sūkhāvatī sect.

The pluralistic view of Thai Buddhist art presented by the exhibition and catalogue reviewed above seems jarringly at odds with the myopic dominant approach to Thai art history. This blinkered vision continues to support the nationalistic view that, as Denes puts it, 'sought to promote unity ... by propagating monolithic constructions of Thai history and culture' (p. 60). Reading *Enlightened ways: The many streams of Buddhist art in Thailand*, readers may well wonder why there has not been any progress made in the study of Thai art history since its inception nine decades ago.

10 Dhanit Yupho, *Brahma with four faces* (Bangkok: Department of Fine Arts, 1967), pp. 13–15.
11 McDaniel, *The lovelorn ghost*, p. 29.
12 D.L. Snellgrove, *The image of the Buddha* (London: Serindia; and Paris: UNESCO, 1978), p. 206.
13 *Mémoire composé à l'époque de la grand dynastie T'ang sur les religieux éminents qui allèrent chercher la loi dans les pays d'Occident par I-tsing*, trans. E.E. Chavannes (Paris: E. Leroux, 1894), pp. 68–9.