



Thai Buddhist Art (Architecture)

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THAI BUDDHIST ART (ARCHITECTURE)

BY
PROFESSOR SILPA BHIRASRI



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Preface

Thailand is very rich in precious arts and cultural heritage which represents a long-lasting independence, prosperity and stability of the country. These various fields of heritage have been preserved, accumulated and inherited throughout generations until the present. This legacy brings pride, dignity and prestige to Thai people. Therefore, it should be shared with the world so that Thai wisdom can be appreciated.

The Fine Arts Department is responsible for the preservation, promotion, transmission and dissemination of arts and culture of the Thai nation. As such it has compiled and published a book series of 25 volumes written by experts in their respective fields. Their areas of knowledge include artistic works, architecture, music and dramatic arts as well as language and literature. Each series has been reprinted from time to time. In this publication, there are no alterations to the contents although some illustrations have been added for the benefit of the readers.

The Department hopes that this series of books will be a resource among the international community to help them understand Thailand better through its unique arts and culture.

(Mr. Borvornvate Rungrujee)
Director General,
The Fine Arts Department

THAI BUDDHIST ART (ARCHITECTURE)

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Phra Phuttha Sihing, Phutthaisawan Chapel, Palace to the Front, Bangkok.

PROFESSOR SILPA BHIRASRI (C. FEROCI)

was born in Florence, Italy, and graduated from the Royal Academy of Art of Florence. He entered the Thai Government service (The Fine Arts Department) in 1924. He has to his credit a multitude of outstanding works, chiefly in bronze such as the statue of King Buddha Yodfah Chulaloke at the Memorail Bridge and that of King Vajiravudh at Lumpini Park. As Dean of the Faculty of Sculpture and Painting at Silpakorn University, he was a driving force of art study in Thailand. Professor Bhirasri devoted himself for over thirty years to the study of Thai art, and has been universally acknowledged as an authority. He did much to introduce Thai art to the world by writing extensively, gave insight on the subject by organizing a warmly received exhibition of Thai painting, modelling, bronze casting, etc. in London in 1947. He also initiated the annual Bangkok art exhibition.

He died in Bangkok on May 14, 1962 at the age of seventy. In honor of his accomplishments, and his service to Thai art, he was awarded the Knight Grand Cross (First Class) of the Most Noble Order of the Crown of Thailand, and the Dusdî Mâlâ Medal. Professor Bhirasri will always retain an honored place in the affections of his many students, and his friends in Thailand.



Phra Prang, Wat Arun Ratchawaram
(The Temple of Dawn), Bangkok.





THAI BUDDHIST ART (ARCHITECTURE)

To trace the remote existence of the Thai in modern Thailand and to define their ethnical colonies since they began to settle in this golden country, to define when and where they started to manifest their artistic activity in relation to religion, and to state to what extent they intermingled with the Lawas, Mon-Khmer and Malayan races is not an easy task ; only our imagination may reconstruct the complex, long movement of the Thai migration into Thailand, their assimilation of higher cultures, and finally their gradual independence merging from the declining powers among which they had lived for so many centuries.

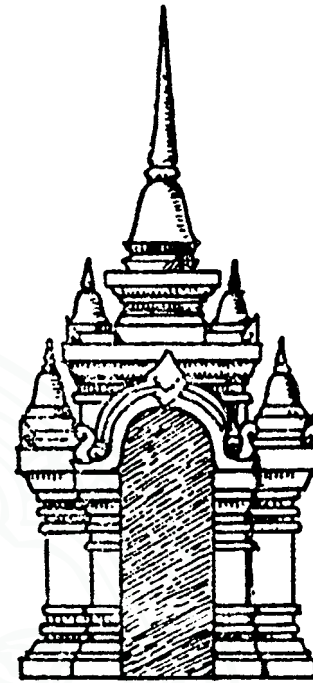
We may suppose that Indian colonies existed in Thailand since the beginning of the Buddhist Era. For centuries these colonies influenced the less cultured peoples of Farther India, an influence which went on for more than one thousand and five hundred years. Afterwards, in the 13th century A.D. the Indian cultural expansion

was checked by the Muslim invasion into India while Chinese power started to have an important ascendancy over the people of Indochina. It is very important to remark that the Chinese influence found cultures already firmly established, some of them even having already ended their historical cycle. Thailand retained Indian culture, but because it emerged as an independent nation in the 13th century A.D. just when the Chinese political power started to play an important role, so many features of Chinese art are to be noticed in the Thai one –this refers particularly to the polychromy of architecture, lacquer works, inlaid-mother of pearl works, porcelain, and to some extent mural paintings.





Phra Borommathat Chaiya, Surat Thani, Srivijaya's Style of Art.



Characteristic of the Srivijaya architecture noticeable in Thai art.

From Indian culture sprang up those of Dvaravati, (Mon people), Srivijaya, (Javanese) Khmer and Burma. Historically, the cultures of these people, except Burma, ran between the 5th to the 14th century A.D. Their religion was Hinayana or Mahayana Buddhism. Only the Khmers followed alternatively either Hinduism or Mahayana Buddhism.

Coming in contact with high civilizations, the animistic Thai adopted partially, if not totally, Buddhism. In what concerns art, we may presume the Thai started their activity in fusion with that of the Mon-Khmer and the Javanese of the Srivijaya period. Burmese influence over the independent northern Thai States must have been very important through King Anuruth's military conquests and his following pious and zealous spreading of Buddhism in the 11th century A.D. When the cultural and political cycle of the Dvaravati-Srivijaya and Khmer had reached its declining point, the Thai became the direct inheritors.





Prasat Phanom Rung, a Shaivite Hinduism sanctuary, Buriram.

PRE - THAI ART IN THAILAND

I. From the 6th to the 10th century A.D. Dvaravati art saw its apogee. Influenced by Gupta examples, it developed many local schools spreading over central and north-east Thailand. From the 10th to the 13th century it followed its traditional non-creative activity. Nakhon Pathom was the capital of the Mon Empire, while Lavo (*Lopburi*), Suwanaphum (*U' thong*), and Lamphun were the principal towns.

II. From Chaiya, the then important port of south Thailand, Srivijaya culture spread up to the north of this country. In Lamphun the overlapping of the Dvaravati, Srivijaya and Khmer arts is noticeable. With reference to Srivijaya characteristics found in Lamphun and other northern towns, there are two theories : one is that the Srivijaya style was introduced in the north of Thailand by King Ramkhamhaeng of Sukhothai in the 13th century A.D. after his conquest of south Thailand ; the second theory is that Srivijaya art reached north Thailand in much earlier period. Considering the monuments having





Prasat Hin Phimai, a Mahayana Buddhist sanctuary, Nakhon Ratchasima.

characteristics of the Srivijaya in northern localities and considering the fact that King Ramkhamhaeng had no political influence over those northern towns, we could possibly accept the two theories corresponding to two distinct waves of Srivijaya influence : the first since about the 9th or 10th century and the second in the 13th century A.D.

III. Khmer art, which alternatively represented either Mahayana Buddhism or Hinduism, is to be found all over central and north-east Thailand. It covers a period of about two hundred years ; 12th-13th century A.D.

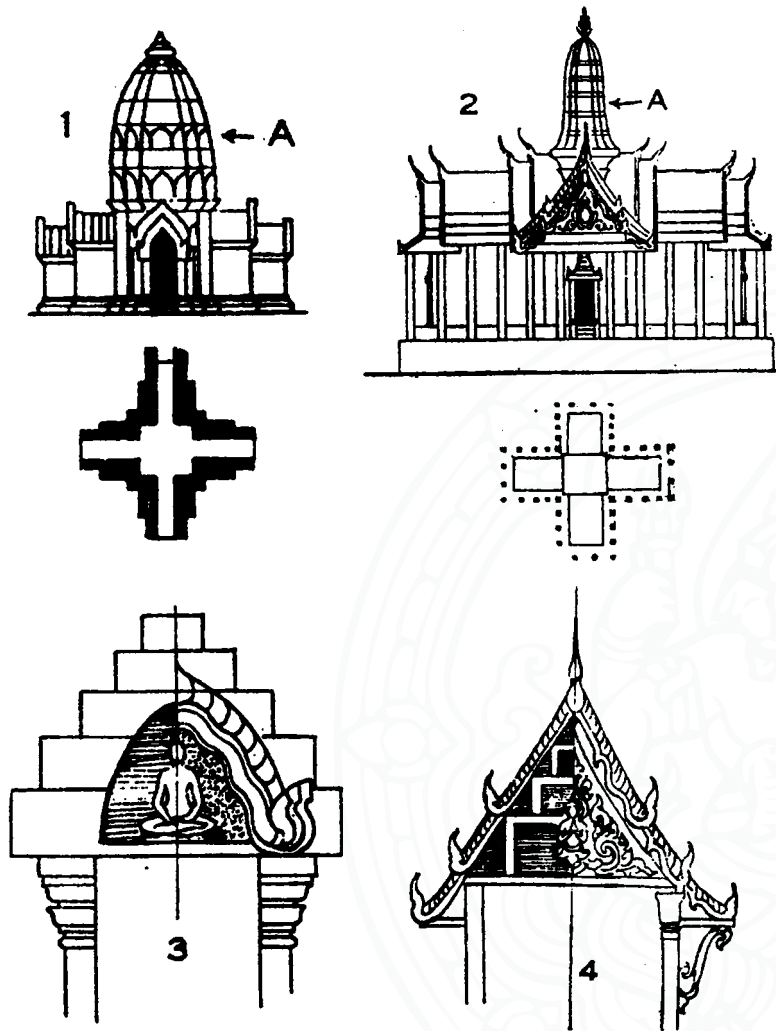
Khmer art had a great influence over the Thai one, so much that the Thai Nation rose over the declining Khmer power, hence directly inherited much of the Khmer culture.

IV. As already stated, considering the geographical position of Burma in respect to north Thailand, we may understand how much the northern Thai art was influenced by that of Burma.

V. In what concerns statuary, directly or indirectly, specimens of Buddha images of the Indian Pala art, 8th - 12th century A.D., had certainly their shares in forming northern Thai statuary. Finally, we have to remember the continuous influence of other Indian specimens, particularly the great impulses given by Ceylon to religion and art of Thailand.



THE THAI



1. Side elevation of a stone Khmer temple at Lopburi, 12th century A.D.
2. Thai Prasat. showing the same peculiarities, but the prang (A), which in the Khmer temple was structural, being the domical roof of the cell, in the Thai art became a traditional decorative element.
- 3.-4. The stone vault of the Khmer temple (3) was decorated at its ends (the gables) with a massive ornamentation framed by "nagas" (mythical snakes), while the gables of the timber roof of the Thai temple, although retaining the same ornamental elements, appears more delicate because they are made of wood, (4).

In what concerns art, we may say that the Thai have a remarkable artistic temperament. To decide upon the natural gift a race has for art, we have to study its folk expression. It is from folk art that the higher expressions develop. On average, the Thai children model in clay or do wooden artistic objects with astonishing facility. With flowers the Thai do the most decorative compositions we may imagine. With an ordinary handkerchief a Thai girl is able to do a small animal such as rabbit, monkey, cow, or snake having the very characteristic of the respective animal, etc.

RELIGION

As we have seen in our sketchy outline about the people among whom the Thai settled and lived together, the dominant religion was Buddhism, in a less degree, Hinduism.

Periodically and alternatively the Thai, being not yet independent, may have followed Hinayana or Mahayana Buddhism and in part Hinduism. The faith they finally accepted was Hinayana Buddhism. The cause of this spiritual preference is to be found in the nature of the Thai. These people live in a land of serenity, abundance and freedom. The word 'Thai' means 'Free' and indeed till, modern times no other people enjoyed a life so simple and so natural. Truly they did not care for wealth or glory. They followed the cycle of their terrestrial existence without wanting more than what the generous Nature offered them. Among the religions of the races with which the Thai came in contact we understand that Hinayana Buddhism was the very Faith to harmonize with the spiritual need of the Thai. The Doctrine could be understood also by simple people. Cause and effective a life as pure as possible-no gods to worship-no power to bribe for helping us in our misdeeds. Bad or good depends on our own actions. Only one symbolic image is to be venerated, the image of the TEACHER reminding that desire is the evil tempter. This simple, but so truly profound doctrine, has been the Faith that for more than, seven hundred years has guided the material and spiritual life of the united independent Thai.



ARCHITECTURE

We have quoted the Thai were the direct successors of the Khmer culture in Thailand and as such one could expect Thai architecture to follow the Khmer style. But the purpose of the religious buildings erected by the Thai was different from that of the Khmer.

In Buddhism, second to the symbolic stupa, the most important structure is the Chaitya Hall, in Thai called BOT. Here the bhikkus meditate, study the philosophy of the Doctrine, ordain the novices and perform all other ceremonies. The Bot is spacious because it must room a congregation of one or two hundred monks. Structurally, a wide span cannot be roofed with the Khmer vaulting system. The Khmer temples were formed by narrow corridors and by relatively small square cells ; the former vaulted with horizontal layers of stones while the sanctuary was covered with a tower-like structure originated from the Sikhara of the northern Indian temples : here too horizontal layers of stones were used. It was quite natural for the Thai to roof their large halls with timber. After the Hinayana Buddhism had become the official religion of the kingdom of Sukhothai (1257 A.D.), many Thai retired into monastic life. This meant the necessity to build a considerable number of monasteries which could not be built either of stone or totally of bricks as the powerful Khmer Empire had done in the past.

Difference of materials engenders difference of architectural style. This was the very cause from which the Thai style emerged. It was not due to any reaction against the Khmer art ; in fact, for the sake of tradition the Thai retained of the Khmer art many architectural features even if they were no longer constructive. In the beginning, Thai architecture maintained the monochrome character of the Khmer temples, afterwards, through Chinese influence, it became polychrome

MATERIALS USED BY THE THAI IN THEIR RELIGIOUS STRUCTURES

Wood as a total material for building.

Wood as roofing for brick buildings.

Wood as ornamental and decorative parts generally gilded and enriched with glass mosaic.

Glass Mosaic gilded, dark red, green, blue and violet to decorate gables, pillars and all other wooden and stucco ornaments.

Gold-leaves used to gild ornaments either in wood or stucco, architectural mouldings and lacquer designs.

Porcelain Glazed terracotta ornaments were used to decorate old temples, afterwards, especially in Bangkok period small differently coloured pieces of porcelain, from broken vessels, were used to form ornamental patterns to enrich the surface of some brick structures.



Chinese porcelain decorations, Phra Prang, Wat Arun Ratchawaram, Bangkok.

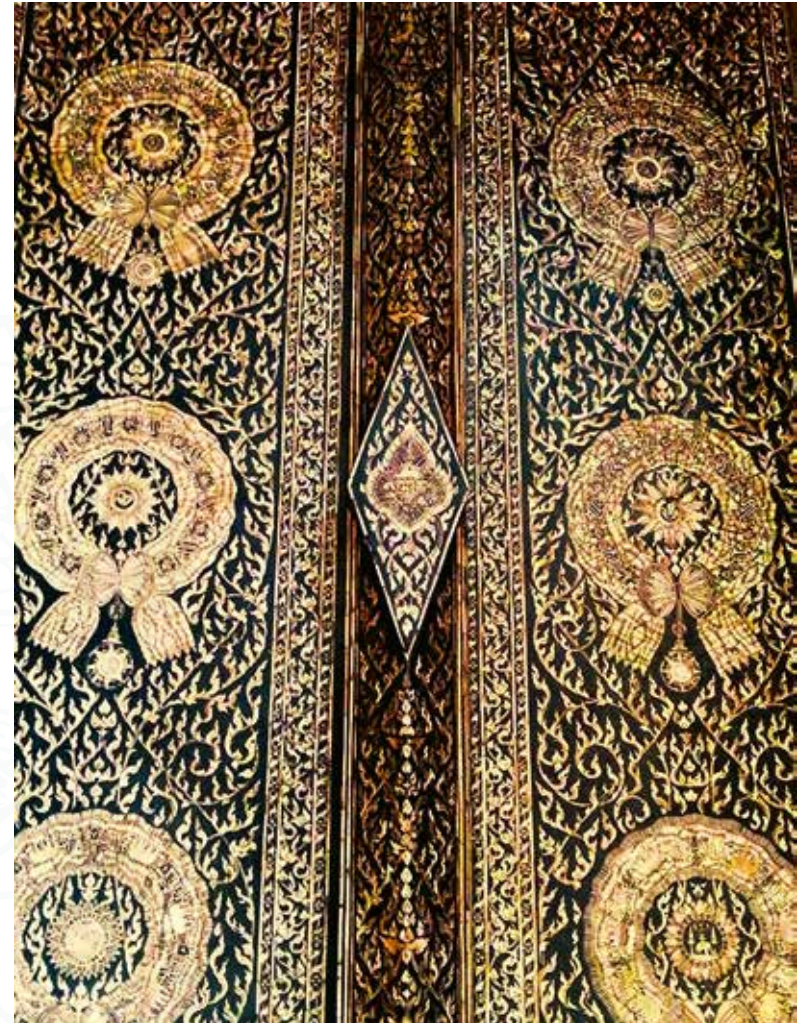




Gold - gilded sculptures and ornaments of the Ordination Hall (Bot), the Temple of the Emerald Buddha, Bangkok.



A Portal of Wat Benchamabophit, Bangkok, decorated with stucco ornaments enriched with glass-mosaic. The door-panels are in embossed copper, but universally are decorated with ornaments in lacquer and gold or in inlaid mother of pearl.



Details of the ornaments of a door-panel executed in mother of pearl inlaid in black lacquer.

Stucco extensively used to enrich architectural moulding, to model ornaments of window and door frames and to decorate gables when this decoration was not made of wood.

Lacquer usually used for the designs of window and door panels. The designs are gilded while the background is left in black lacquer.

Inlaid Mother of Pearl used also to decorate window and door panels.



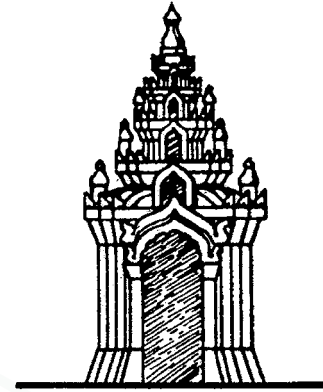
TERMS CONCERNING THAI RELIGIOUS BUILDINGS

WAT : The term Wat refers to a group of religious buildings generally enclosed by a wall with gateways. According to artistic importance, the principal religious buildings in Thailand are : the Phra Chedi, the Bot and Vihara, the Phra Prang, the Mondop and Prasat. The other structures architecturally not very important are : the Kuti, Ho Trai, Sala Kan Parian, ordinary Salas and Ho Rakhang. One Wat may contain some of these structures, essentially the Bot, or all of them.

In general, likewise in all other eastern countries, with the exception of the Bot or of the Vihara, whose plan is conceived as a single unity within its enclosing gallery, the rest of the monuments are added time by time without special consideration of the general planning. But on account of the contrasting forms of the large Bot or Vihara with the slender pinnacle of the stupas or the solid vertical mass of the Phra Prangs and also because the variety of colouring of these structures, the resulting effect is always harmonious.

We have cited the enclosing walls of the Wats with gateways. These gateways give matter for a comparative reference with the Indian architecture, comparison very instructive to understand the origin, direct or indirect, of certain features of the Thai architecture. The Thai gateways have such a variety of designs that one could say each Wat has a proper type. At large in these gateways we notice reminiscences of Indian forms. Some old specimens such as those of Wat Phra That in Lampang or those of Wat Phra Kaeo (*The Temple of the Emerald Buddha*) of Bangkok resembling closely the Indian gopuram.

In comparing the Indian gopuram with the Thai gateway we note that the decoration of their overstructure has the same elements of the old Buddhist Vihara built on land of which we have an idea from the Raths of Mamallapuram (*India*). These Viharas were formed by a large square cubical hall over which there were two or three



1. Northern Thai Gateway



2. Typical Thai wooden superstructure



3. Indian Buddhist Vihara





Wat Phra Si Rattana Satsadaram (The Temple of the Emerald Buddha), Bangkok.

In the fore-ground we notice the enclosing gallery which inside is decorated with murals depicting stories of the Ramayana epic. The central part of the photograph shows one of the doorways giving access to the Wat, over it on the foreground is the slender stupa covered with golden mosaic, behind it there is the Mondop containing scripts and other objects for ceremonials and the last structure is the Prasat enshrining eight statues of the kings of the present dynasty. At the right is the ample roof of the Bot-containing the emerald .Buddha image.



receding terraces with cells, abodes of the bhikkus. The structure was crowned by a small temple in the same form of the cells, the whole reminding closely the Mesopotamian temple. The tower of the Indian gopuram is very high and for this reason, although retaining the same architectural elements of the Vihara, the former terraces became horizontal tiers projecting very little one another. On the contrary, the Thai gateway is much shorter and as such it approaches more the Vihara prototype because the storeys recede sensibly and so the motif of the cell is very noticeable. The northern Thai gateway, besides what originally were the “cells” may be also enriched with small stupas, a characteristic borrowed from the Burmese art.

We have purposely explained the decorative component parts of the superstructure of some Thai gateways in relation to the functional parts of the old Buddhist Indian monasteries because the superstructure of many religious and civil Thai buildings maintain, although much conventionalized, the same elements of old Indian architecture.

A more original design of gateway and more harmonious with the rest of the Thai architecture, is the type of Wat Benchamabopit and of Wat Mahathat of Bangkok. This type may have one or three openings—with a triangular arch enriched with the universal ‘Naga motif’ harmonizing in this way with the main structures which have always triangular gables.

A later design is that of Wat Pho in Bangkok : its superstructure having the shape of the royal Thai crown, is enriched with ornaments in porcelain. The design of the crown as well as the enrichment with pieces of ceramic is common in the later period of Bangkok. The emphasis of the curve of the outline and the exaggeration of the ceramic ornamentation are features of an art in its declining period.

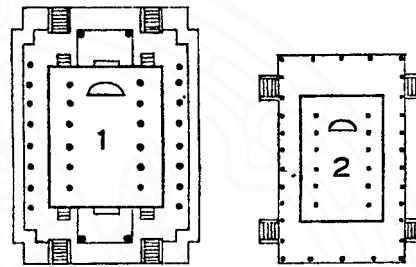
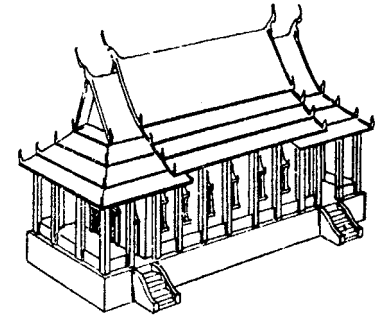
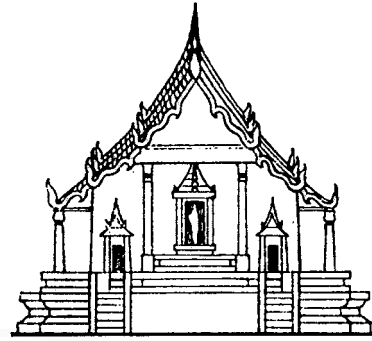


Interior of the Bot of Wat Suwannaram, Thonburi, 18th century.
The gilded bronze image of the Buddha harmonizes perfectly with the tonality of the murals enriching totally all the walls.

THE BOT corresponds to the Indian Chaitya Hall, and like this it may have one large nave or one nave and the lateral aisles. Its classic type has a rectangular plan—at its end it enshrines a large gilded sitting Buddha image modelled either in stucco or cast in bronze. The image is placed over a high pedestal whose rich ornamentation contrasts sharply with the plain modelling of the image and seems to symbolize the unrestfulness of our life in comparison with the serenity of the Enlightened One. On account of the limited light the interior receives and also because in general the walls are decorated with paintings having a rather dark tonality, the large image is principally designed by its shining highlights, an effect apt to add mysticism to these holy interiors. The shape of the Bot may have originated from the thatched Indonesian-Thai house.



Of course, the roof of the Bot has in time become more complex than the common house on account of lateral additions and the superimposed roofs. The lateral additions are meant to widen the interior and as usual a feature dictated by functional necessities becomes a characteristic of a style. The roofs of the front and rear porches with their lower height than those of the main structure add movement and beauty to the mass and outline of the building. At the end of each ridge of the roof of the Bot of central Thailand there is that graceful finial called 'chofa'. It may be a reminiscence of a horn of some animistic protective mask as those we see in the houses of Indonesian clubs used for animistic ceremonies, or may be a reminiscence of the "Makara" motif made in glazed terracotta used for the same purpose in Sukhothai art. The gables are enriched with wooden carved ornaments gilded and having a glass mosaic as background. The triangular wooden framing of these gables, as well as that of the other superimposed roofs, is decorated with the universal design of the 'Naga' as it was in the Khmer temples. In old specimens of Ayudhya and other localities, the Bot, instead of panelled windows, had, rather high up in the side walls, narrow vertical openings, a rude reminiscence of the fine windows of the Khmer temple. At a later period series of windows with wooden panels were added laterally at the height of about one metre from the level of the inner floor. The Bot may have one, two or three doors, both in front and at the back of the building. Outside, the doors and windows are decorated with ornamental frames in stucco gilded and enriched with glass mosaic. The panels of the windows and those of the doors are decorated outside with gilded lacquer ornaments while, in general, the interiors have mythical figures of guardians painted in vivid colours. Some Bots instead of lacquer decoration have ornaments in inlaid mother of pearl. In this case the design of the ornaments is very detailed..



1. Wat Na Phra Mane in Ayudhya.
2. Type of Thai temple with colonnade around the main structure and a more complex roof than Fig. 1.
3. The northern Thai temples are characterized by a lofty roof which dominates the understructure.



"MAKARA"
Sukhothai Period



CHOFA
Ayudhya and Rattanakosin Period





Bot (Uposatha), Wat Na Phra Mane, Ayudhya, 16th century A.D.

Some examples of Bot such as that of Wat Na Phra Mane in Ayudhya (ca. 16th century A.D.) have between the two lateral doors a large and high niche containing a standing Buddha image. Both front and rear façades have the same niche. The effect of this composition is imposing and beautiful.

In old Thai architecture, the pillars of the interior and exterior of the Bots are octagonal, the interior ones are generally enriched with painted ornaments. The capitals of these columns have a lotus form. If the inner columns were in wood, then their natural circular form was respected, the shaft was painted in red and enriched with gilded ornaments. Like the old Christian Basilicas,

old Thai structures had no ceiling, this is a later feature. The wooden Thai ceiling is painted in red and enriched with gilded studs. The large mass of the building is in brick, plastered and white washed. The colour of the large very sloping roofs, covered with glazed tiles which in general have dark orange or green or violet colour, contrasts with the plainness of the main white mass. This white mass is relieved at its lower part by the series of the gilded window frames. The polychromic effect is beautiful and harmonious.

Like the Greek peripteral temples, some of the larger Bots have also pillars around the main rectangular hall.





Vihara, Wat Phra Sing, Chiang Mai.

In general a large Bot is erected over a terrace which gives more nobility and beauty to the monument.

The distribution of colours in relation to mass and details is so well understood that a fine Bot seen amidst the tropical flora seems to embody the exuberance of the eastern Nature. Outside, around this structure, there are eight 'semas' (sima) having the form of the Indian cell. The semas may be placed over some basement or may be contained in some small square temple-like structures. They indicate the holiness of the ground over which the Bot is erected. Some Bots built in more recent times have plans in the shape of Latin cross.

THE VIHARA* is a replica of the Bot—it is used to keep Buddha images. In central Thailand the Vihara is smaller than the Bot, while in the north of Thailand it is the reverse. The reason of this difference is because in the north there are so many Wats that each Wat has few bhikkus—hence the Bot does not need to be large.

The Vihara or the Bot, according to the importance given to one of these structures when it was erected, is generally built in the centre of the courtyard enclosed by a gallery walled outside and open inside having generally square pillars to support the roof. Along the gallery there are many Buddha images modelled in stucco, or cast in bronze. In a few cases the walls of the verandah are decorated with paintings.

Four or more gateways give access to the courtyard. The roof of these galleries and gateways is covered with the universally used glazed tiles in brilliant colours, while the walls are painted in white. The general planning corresponds to the Indian prototype.

* The term Vihara refers to a hall containing images of Buddha and so the Thai Vihara corresponds to the function of the building. But referring to the history of Indian Buddhist architecture the term Vihara has been generally understood as the residence of the Buddhist monks, the monastery.





Three Pagodas of Wat Phra Si Sanphet, Ayudhya.

PHRA CHEDI (*Stupa*). The most venerated religious structure for Buddhists is the stupa. Originally it enshrined some relics of Lord Buddha. Later on it contained relics of some holymen or kings, etc ; finally it has become a religious symbol as the cross is for the Christians.

As we know, the prototype of the stupa originated in central India. It is composed by the drum, (*basement*), the dome (*tumulus*), surmounted by a cubical chair symbolizing the seat of Buddha and over it the chat (*umbrella*) which originally had only one tier and later on it became a slender pinnacle formed by many tiers. In Thailand we find stupas of so various forms that we have to limit our remarks to the principal ones only.

i) The northern type formed by a cubical solid mass having four niches at its sides containing images of Buddha in high relief or round relief : this cubical mass is superimposed by one or more

storeys and crowned by the domed stupa. If the structure is hollow, then one of the niches serves as entrance door.

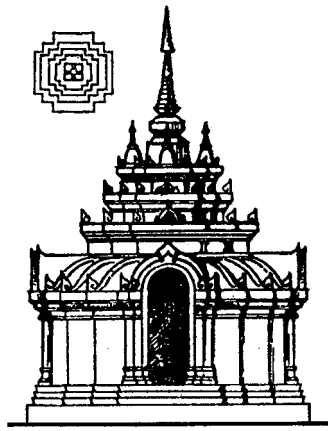
Almost always at the corners of the cubical basement and even at the corners of the superposed storeys, there are small stupas which remind both Srivijaya and Burmese art.

Difference of proportions in relation to width and height varies the appearance of this kind of stupa.

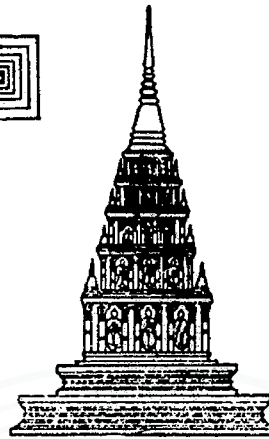
ii) Another type of Phra Chedi is the one resembling the Sat Mahal Pāsāda at Polonnaruva in Ceylon formed by many receding cubical storeys enriched with horizontal rows of standing Buddha images in high relief. This type of Phra Chedi is to be found in the north of Thailand.

iii) In general, the form of the round-planned stupa built in Thailand is the one having the same elements as the Indian proto-

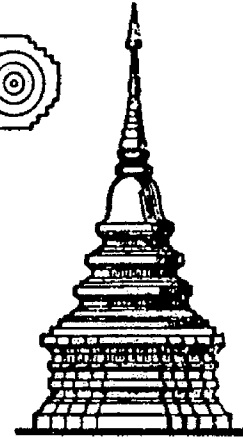




1



2



3

Three types of stupa in northern Thailand.



4

Classic type of Phra Chedi



5

Composite Thai Phra Chedi of Ayudhya

type which was introduced from Ceylon. The form of this stupa is eminently Thai because it is included in a high pyramidal curved outline, a characteristic noticeable in all Thai religious buildings. This stupa has a high drum formed by many mouldings of the same design, a bell-shaped dome, a square throne surmounted by a low circular colonnade supporting the high and slender chat (umbrella).

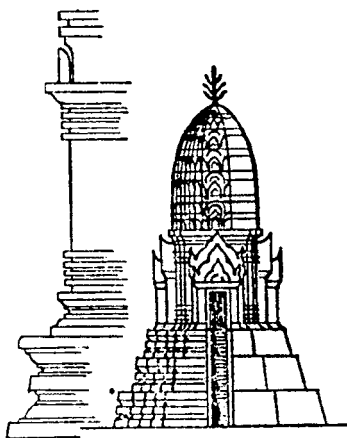
In Ayudhya period, by adding four niches, borrowed from the northern art, to the dome of the classic Phra Chedi, the Thai composed a very fine new type. The beautiful architectural group of the three Phra Chedis of Wat Phra Si Sanphet of Ayudhya show this type at its best development. Afterwards the outline became slenderer and

slenderer losing in such a way its monumentality. Generally this type of stupa is hollow— one niche serving as entrance door—the interior containing, as usual, Buddha images. Also in northern Thailand there are many stupas of the classic type—all of them have a high square basement and a high drum. In some instances the drum is octagonal suggesting Chinese influence. The Phra Chedis are built in all sizes—from the small ones about two metres high to the large stupas of Nakhon Pathom which soars from the ground 115 metres, and to the imposing Phra Chedi Luang in Chiang Mai which in its original condition must have been one of the most beautiful architectural monuments of the Thai Buddhist art.

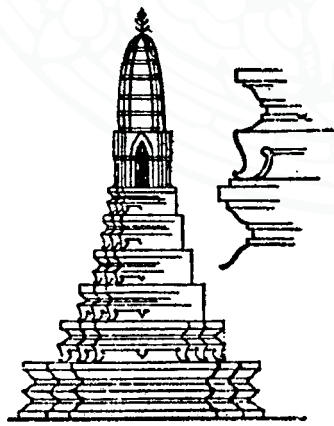




Wat Mahathat, Muang Chaliang, Sukhothai.



Classic Phra Prang
up to the 16th century.



Phra Prang of the 18th century.

PHRA PRANG The Phra Prang originated from the corner tower of the Khmer temple, becoming a new form of Thai stupa. Square in plan and domical in roofing it rises elegantly from a large base to an elliptical shape mass, designing a very fine looking outline. As usual, it has three niches and one entrance door reached by the means of a very steep staircase. The interior contains images of Buddha. The best example of Thai classic Phra Prang is at Wat Mahathat in Sawankhalok. This old monument originally was part of a single architectural unity with the Bot erected in front of it. Such planning corresponds to the Khmer type borrowed from the Indian temple of the northern style.

From about the end of the 17th century A.D. onwards the shape of the Phra Chedi and that of Phra Prang started to degenerate



on account of two causes : one cause was to include the structure into a too slender narrow space and to give too much prominence to the basement, reducing sensibly the space of the cell of the Phra Prang or that of the dome of the Phra Chedi ; the second cause was to replace old architectural mouldings with the ‘S’ shaped lion-leg of the Chinese low table. By transporting characteristics of Chinese wooden structures into brick ones, the Thai buildings lost their monumentality. This remark should be applied also in reference to the concave line of the longitudinal mouldings of the Bot or Vihara under the level of the windows (*outside*). This concave line is meant to imitate the Chinese ‘sampan’ (*boat*). Of course, the effect is not quite architectural and should be reckoned as a sign of decline in architectural understanding.

MONDOP The Thai Mondop resembles closely the Mandapa of the Indian temples. Square in plan, cubical in form, it has a pyramidal superstructure for roofing. The Thai Mondop may be built all in bricks or may have the square hall and the pillars around it in bricks with a timber superstructure. Some of the all-brick built Mondops are plain and their pyramidal upper part is formed by two or three layers of roofing superposed one another.

The more recent type of Mondop has wooden superstructure decorated with wooden carvings, gilded and enriched with glass mosaic; this mosaic is applied also over the vertical sides of the pillars and by combining two or three different coloured glasses, ornamental designs are composed. As usual, the wooden superstructure is formed by a series of receding storeys enriched with the same decoration descending from the Indian ‘cell’. The Mondop may serve to enshrine some holy object as is the Mondop of Saraburi enshrining the Footprint of Lord Buddha or may serve as a kind of library and store-room for objects used in religious ceremonies as is the Mondop of Wat Phra Kaeo in Bangkok.

In later period the roofs of some Mondops were decorated all over with mosaic composed of small pieces of porcelain.



Mondop of Phra Phuttha Bat, Saraburi, enshrining a Buddha’s footprint.
Note the typical roofing structure composed of many receding storeys decorated with elements reminiscent of the “cells” of the Indian Vihara. Note also the form of the pinnacle almost universal in Thai architecture.





Prasat Phra Thep Bidon, The Temple of the Emerald Buddha, Bangkok.

The Thai Pantheon of the present dynasty, crowned with a small prang. The walls of the Prasat are decorated with ceramic while the pillars have ornaments in glass-mosaic.

PRASAT This structure too is a direct descendant of the Greek-cross-planned Khmer temple composed by a square sanctuary with its domical sikhara and the four porch-like antechambers attached to the sides of the cell. It is interesting to note that these antechambers projecting from the main body of the building have two different elements : one formed by the mass attached to the walls of the cell, the other formed by the portal. If we observe the profile line we note that the different heights of these two elements design a step-like contour. In the timber roof of the Thai buildings, the stepped outline is still more noticeable on account of addition of projecting masses and also on account of superimposed layers of the roofs (*see illustration No.2 page 12*).

The Thai Prasat is formed in plan by a square central room with three projecting long wings and one short, or may have the four wings of the same length.

There are two distinct forms of timber superstructure of the Prasat. One retaining the traditional sikhara as finial of the roofs ; in this type we note that for the sake of tradition the sikhara, which formerly was structural, has become a mere decorative part of the building. The other superstructure has the same form and same ornaments as that of the Mondop, namely, many superimposed horizontal low storeys and at about one third of the total height of this elaborated roof a vertical element formed by what looks a conventional stupa ending in a very high and thin pinnacle. (*See figure No.2 on page 12*)

The Prasat serves two distinct purposes : one as the royal throne hall ; the other to contain some venerated objects such as the Prasat of Wat Pra Kaeo in Bangkok which enshrines the statues of the Kings of the present dynasty.





Ho Trai, Wat Phra Sing, Chiang Mai, build by King Kavila in 1811
Some of the northern Thai Ho Trai have the ground floor built of bricks and the upper floor of wood.

HO TRAI Ho Trai is the library where book cases are kept. There is no definite design of this structure. It varies in form and size. In the past, most libraries were built in wood on poles over ponds to prevent the white ants from harming the palm-leave books. Some Ho Trai has a basement in brick and the room in wood, others have the ground room in brick and a wooden one over it. Of this type, which is common in the north of Thailand there are fine examples in Chiang Mai and Lamphun.

Usually the Ho Trai has no interior decoration but some, like that of Wat Rakhang in the west bank of the Chao Phrya River in Bangkok, have fine paintings on the walls, window and door panels. This Ho Trai is formed by three parallel attached rooms, each room having a proper roof. The inner sides of the roofs of the right and left rooms join the slopes of the central one and the water of the four slopes is received by two gutters.

To build two or three rooms attached to each other with separated roofs, typical of the Thai common houses, is quite logical because by roofing each room the Thai avoided building a large and high roof which had to span the total breadth. In this case the lower part of the building would appear too small in comparison with the roof.

The fine proportions of the small Ho Trai of Wat Rakhang and the finesse of design of the windows show the remarkable artistic sense of the old Thai of the Bangkok period previous to the influence of modern materials.





Ho Trai, Wat Rakhang, Thonburi.

To build two or three adjacent rooms each with its own proper roof is common in Thai architecture. For the harmony of the mass and the finesse of details, this small structure is a very remarkable example of the Thai wooden architecture.



Ho Trai, Wat NaPhra That (Wat Ta Khu), PakThong Chai, Nakhon Ratchasima.
To prevent the white ants harming the holy-book of palm-leaves the libraries were erected over ponds of water.



Sala Kan Parian, Wat Yai Suwannaram, Phetchaburi.

SALA KAN PARIAN In old time the Buddhist Doctrine was taught to the laymen only in the Sala Kan Parian, which usually is a common room differing in size according to the needs. Only few Wats have large Sala Kan Parian and in this case they have the same form of Bots or Viharas. In some cases the Sala Kan Parian are overelevated about two metres from the ground.

SALA The Sala is an open pavilion used for resting. Usually rectangular in plan, it is erected over four wooden or brick pillars supporting the architrave over which rests the steep roof. From the level of the architraves an eave is applied around the Sala to widen the shade. This characteristic is almost universal in Thai buildings. Some more ornamented Sala have eight brackets corresponding each one to the exterior side of the four pillars. These brackets, which in many examples of the Ayudhya buildings, were massive and functional, in Bangkok became a mere feeble ornamentation, or were abolished. Like the more important buildings, fine salas have glazed tiles and wooden gilded ornaments on the gables.





Sala Samran Mukkhamat, a typical Thai Sala, Palace to the Front, Bangkok.

Some salas are more complex looking on account of two projecting additions along the longitudinal sides of their rectangular plan, forming in this way a cross plan. In general, this kind of salas has no pyramidal superstructure, but in other cases, such as the salas at the royal summer residence of Bang Pa-In, near Bangkok, have the universal pyramidal roof.

Salas have always been built in large quantity also for civil purposes along roads or canals where people use to pass and rest for a while. In tropical countries where the sun is so strong it is a relief for the passers-by to find here and there some shelters. So much this idea is rooted in the mind of the Thai that to build a sala has become a kind of merit-making.





Ho Rakhang (Belfry), Wat Pho, Bangkok.

HO RAKHANG The Thai belfry has no special artistic appeal. The Thai who have such fine taste and are so fond of fine outlines of their buildings seem to have disregarded the beauty of these structures. There is no definite type for the Thai Ho Rakhang. The simplest is formed by four wooden poles on the top of which there is what looks a small temple. Others, built in brick, have a high platform with steps in one or four sides—over this platform there is four pillared pyramidal roofed small building into which the bell is suspended. The bell is struck by hand and so the belfry in general is not high. Only the Ho Rakhang of Wat Phra Kaeo in Bangkok is high and pyramidal in form ; the small structure at the top supporting the bell is reached by an inner staircase.

In general the Thai belfry is white washed but some, such as that of Wat Phra Kaeo, are decorated with porcelain all over their surfaces.

KUTI (*Sangarama*). The Thai monastery does not present any special constructive or artistic features. It is formed by a series of small rooms, some of which have a verandah in front of it. The rooms may be built in a row or separated.



Kuti, Wat Buppharam, Trad.



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