

# Contemporary Art in Thailand

THAI CULTURE, NEW SERIES No. 8





# CONTEMPORARY ART IN THAILAND

BY  
PROFESSOR SILPA BHIRASRI



*Fig. 1*  
**Fua Haripitak**  
*"Nude" oil, 1957*



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**Misiem Yipintsoi**  
*"Dreamer's Avenue"*  
oil on canvas, 1949

## 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.

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Director General  
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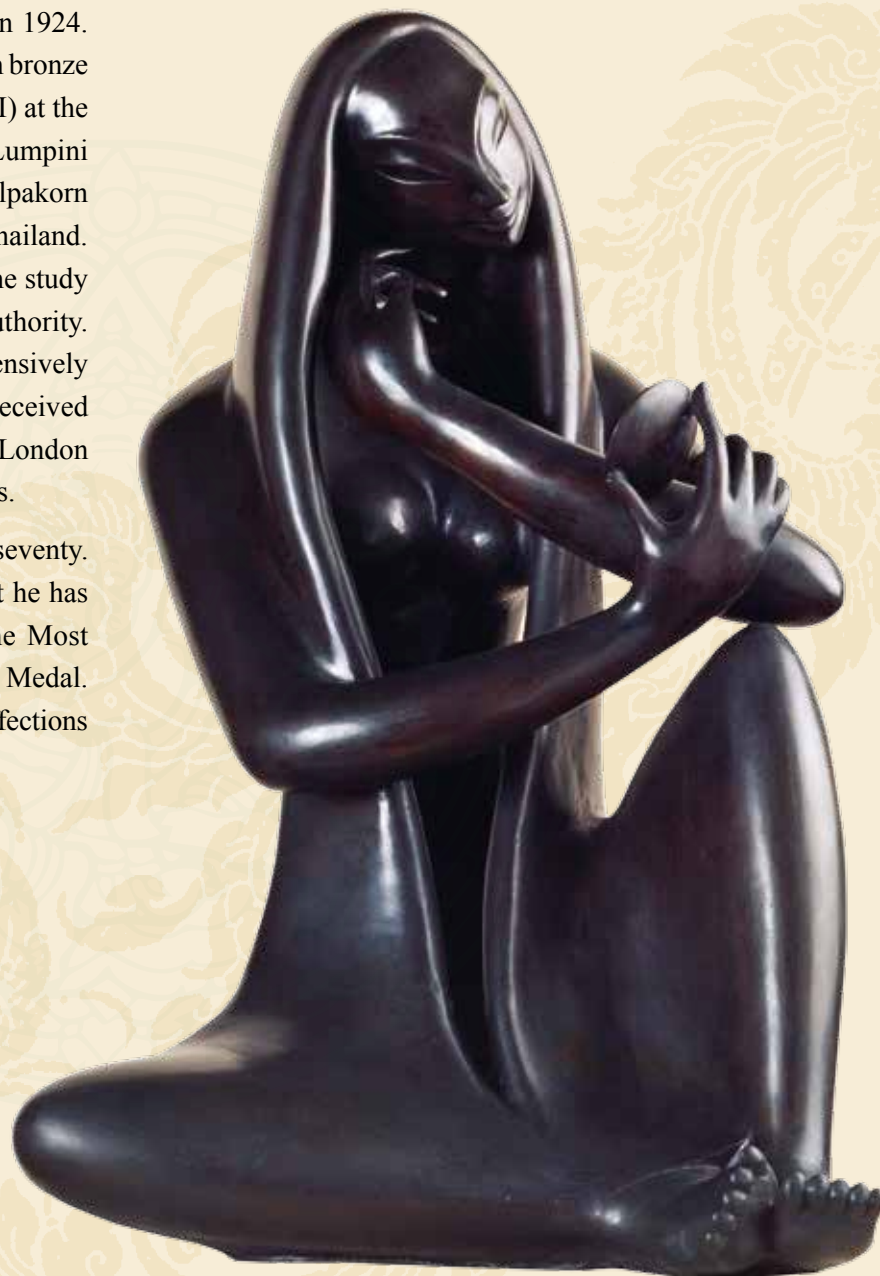
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## PROFESSOR SILPA BHIRASRI (C. FEROCI)

Professor Silpa Bhirasri 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 Yod fa Chulaloke (Rama I) at the Memorial Bridge and that of King Vajiravudh (Rama VI) at Lumpini Park. As Dean of the Faculty of Sculpture and Painting, Silpakorn University, he was the mainstay and live wire 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 and with insight on the subject and by organizing a warmly received exhibition of Thai painting, modelling, bronze casting, etc. in London in 1947. He also initiated the Bangkok annual art exhibitions.

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 has been awarded the Knight Grand Cross (First Class) of the Most Noble Order of the Crown of Thailand, and the Dusdhi Mala Medal. Professor Bhirasri will always retain an honored place in the affections of his many students, and his friends in Thailand.



**Khien Yimsiri**  
*"Harmony" bronze, 1959*



*Fig. 2*  
**Sawat Tantisuk**  
*"Still Life" oil on paper, 1960*



*Fig. 3*  
**Fua Haripitak**  
*"Professor Silpa Bhirasri" chalk, 1935*



**Manit Poo-aree**  
*"Everyday Life" tempera, 1959*



## ❖ CONTEMPORARY ART IN THAILAND ❖

### EFFECTS OF MODERN CIVILIZATION AND INFLUENCES OF WESTERN ART

A retrospective review of art in Thailand shows that after repetition in its own conventional style for hundreds of years it had reached at the end of the last century, a stage of inexpressive, stereotyped production. Only for inexpert persons and those influenced by a sense of the exotic, could such a kind of art still appear valuable.

Usually, if nothing comes to break the routine life of a people, such a declining art is accepted as a traditional expression and as such may go on for many more decades. But when some important event comes to alter its cultural status quo, then a part of the intellectual class, particularly those belonging to the young generation, is well disposed to a healthy reaction.

This was what happened in Thailand and to other eastern countries which adopted western civilization: namely its economic systems, and its scientific application. The new civilization profoundly affected traditional art.

Generally speaking, we may say that as far as the economy of the state is concerned, in the old days, there were few ways to dispose of financial resources on so many necessities or luxuries as in our time. A large amount of the income of the nation was invested in the erection of temples because this was the highest merit-making a Buddhist could perform in his life. Thus, religious structures rose one after another without interruption, which enabled Thai artists to be very active in all branches of art. (It is worth mentioning that, in Thailand, no other artistic expression was ever manifested in the past except for religious purposes.)

In the last quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, under the reign of King Chulalongkorn (1868-1910), western civilization was adopted, involving the construction of railways, hospitals, schools, water-supply installations, electricity, etc. Because the revenue of the nation was devoted to works of public welfare, the erection of Buddhist temples came to an abrupt stand-still and accordingly traditional art no longer had its natural outlet of expression.





*Fig. 4*  
**Khien Yimsiri**  
*"Harmony" bronze, 1959*

Adopting western civilization meant also adopting many peculiarities of western art. Sculptures and paintings of realistic semi-commercial character were imported into Thailand together with many other objects which for the sake of novelty endangered in the upper class a new taste in art. Foreign artists and architects were called to work in Thailand and this sealed the fate of traditional art, although, as mentioned above, it was in decadence.

During the first three decades of the present century Thailand experienced a disturbance in its cultural values, the disturbance of "growth" which affected many aspects of culture.

Through education imparted to young Thais either in Thailand or in western countries\* a new generation emerged from a dormant state of mind to a conscious existence. Twenty seven years ago the Fine Arts Department established an Academy of Fine Arts in order to give life to contemporary art. The basic principles of art training were the study of nature and of traditional arts; it is from this date that a movement in contemporary art began.



*Fig. 5*  
**Anik Somboon**  
*"Tree of Life" bronze*

\* During the first quarter of this century many young Thais were sent to European countries to study science, medicine, architecture, law, etc. On coming back to their homeland these Thais together with the others trained in Thailand gradually replaced foreign professionals.



*Fig. 6*  
**Prof. Silpa Bhirasri**  
*"Khun Malinee Bhirasri" plaster, 1959*



*Fig. 7*  
**Sawat Tantisuk**  
*"Flowers water-colour, 1955*



*Fig. 8*  
**Fua Haripitak**  
*"Blue Green" oil, 1958*



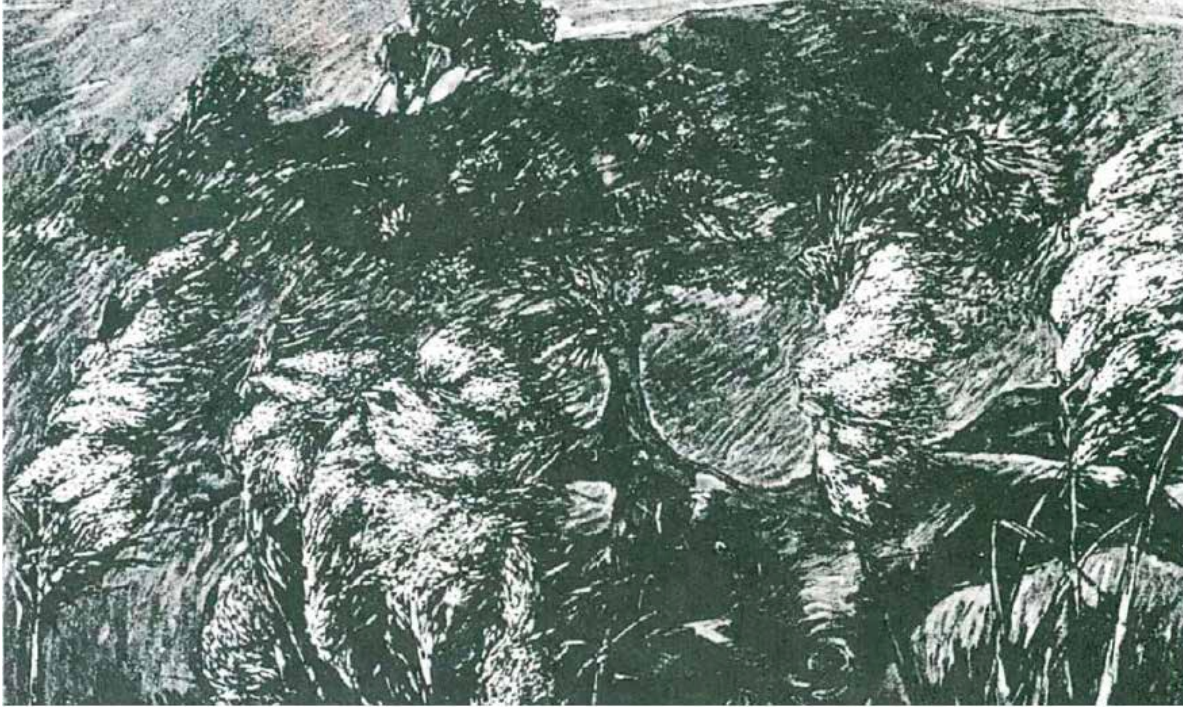
*Fig. 9*  
**Fua Haripitak**  
*"My Grandmother" oil, 1940*



**Chalood Nimsamer**  
*"Black Eyes" oil, 1955*



*Fig. 10*  
**Chamras Kietkhong**  
*"Adult (Sawaeng Songmangmi)" oil, 1957*



*Fig. 11*  
**Tawee Nandakwang**  
*"The White Phantasms" oil, 1956*



*Fig. 12*  
**Chamras Kietkhong** *"Portrait" oil, 1957*



*Fig. 13*  
**Paitun Muangsomboon** *"Kid" bronze, 1949*



**Fig. 14**  
**Manit Poo-aree**  
*"Gathering the Sugar-palm-juice" tempera, 1959*



**Sompot Upa-in**  
*"Lady and A Bird Cage" Oil on wood, 1963*



**Fig. 15**  
**Paitun Muangsomboon** *"Calf" bronze, 1951*

## SURROUNDINGS

At present, the activity of contemporary art in Thailand is confined to Bangkok whose characteristics, during the last fifty years, have undergone a complete change. Roads replaced canals\*, ferroconcrete replaced wood as building material; traditional dress gave way to western clothes; the simple dwellings which in the past were built amidst a luxurious flora, near canals or rivers changed into monotonous rows of buildings along monotonous streets where here and there a tree strives for its existence, Where once the silent boat glided on its way, today there is noise, the deafening engines of the numberless motor-cars which strain the nerves of passers-by. Dynamism is sovereign, where a few decades ago the life of human beings quietly spanned its cycle like that of a plant. Willingly or unwillingly, the pulse of the nation's life is now dictated by the universal constructive, and at the same time destructive, impact of modern life. Indeed one cannot oppose such a civilization. It is imposed more than wanted, but no nation can escape from this fatalism of modern progress.



Fig. 16  
Tawee Nandakwang "Lotus Flowers" oil, 1956

\* Up to forty years ago Bangkok was intersected by a net of canals which, as in Venice, served as the indispensable means of transportation. Only a few roads could be counted in the capital up to forty years ago.

## FIRST EFFECTS OF MODERN CIVILIZATION

The old Thai living a simple natural life had a pure, naive mind, spiritually supported by Buddhism. In those days their wants were minimal; peace reigned in the old people's hearts. Under such circumstances artists could paint murals with hundreds of figures executed like miniatures or model images of the Buddha reflecting the very essence of their faith. Nowadays the wants of material life are coupled with the dominating dynamism, for which an artist has to create works of art like a printing machine; the old kind of spiritual work is no longer possible. In our days the making of an image of the Buddha has become a commercial enterprise where the client needs to spend the minimum while the artist needs to profit financially by asking the maximum. In this contrasting dualism nobody can be blamed, but the result is that in such cases the word "art" becomes meaningless. Although neither understood nor admitted, this remark more or less applies also to the architecture of or the paintings in the few temples erected in our day. On the other hand, art is necessity for the human spirit, so expressions other than the old ones must be created-- hence contemporary art.

An artist is more sensitive than the average laymen and as such he experiences emotions stimulated by his surroundings and as modern surroundings, particularly urban, differ profoundly from the old, so contemporary art differs from past artistic expression, disregarding direct foreign influences.

The laymen who are usually so attached to traditional art do not accept new forms easily; it is an understandable sentimentalism which is gradually overcome only through new aesthetic appreciation arising from the same modern surroundings as those of the artist. To appease the layman's anxiety, it is important to understand that if a Thai (or any artist belonging to a distinct ethnic group) does not purposely imitate works of foreign artists, he will always express, under any new style, the individuality of his race which is formed by peculiar natural temperament, climate, religion, atavistic feelings and thoughts, and other factors.



## EDUCATION AND WESTERN INFLUENCE

In olden days the Thais had their primary education in Buddhist temples and in general this education was based on religious ingredients.

The modern system of teaching, following the western example, has schooled our young generation on fundamental and universal subjects. Of course, this fact has wrought a deep change in the mental capacity of the Thai. As far as art is concerned, modern education has freed artists from the duty of illustrating old literature. General knowledge has widened the field of imagination and the result is that young Thai artists “want” to create something new corresponding to their own conceptions and plastic realizations. In doing so, they work against the current of public artistic appreciation, but it is indispensable for them to follow their natural instincts because it sincerely reflects their own historical surroundings which are now the surroundings of everyone in Thailand.

As this is a transitory period, whether the new expressions are yet completely successful or not, has no immediate value, What is important is to understand that contemporary art even in Thailand has entered an historical phase which has to follow its ascensional parabola to its complete achievement.



In the sphere of education, we should not undervalue the facts that the majority of the text books are works of western scientific research; Easterners, in the past, having applied their minds mostly to philosophical speculation. Because education is the major factor forming the thinking of a people, so an Easterner cannot help but be influenced by Western ideas as Westerners nowadays are influenced by Eastern philosophy.

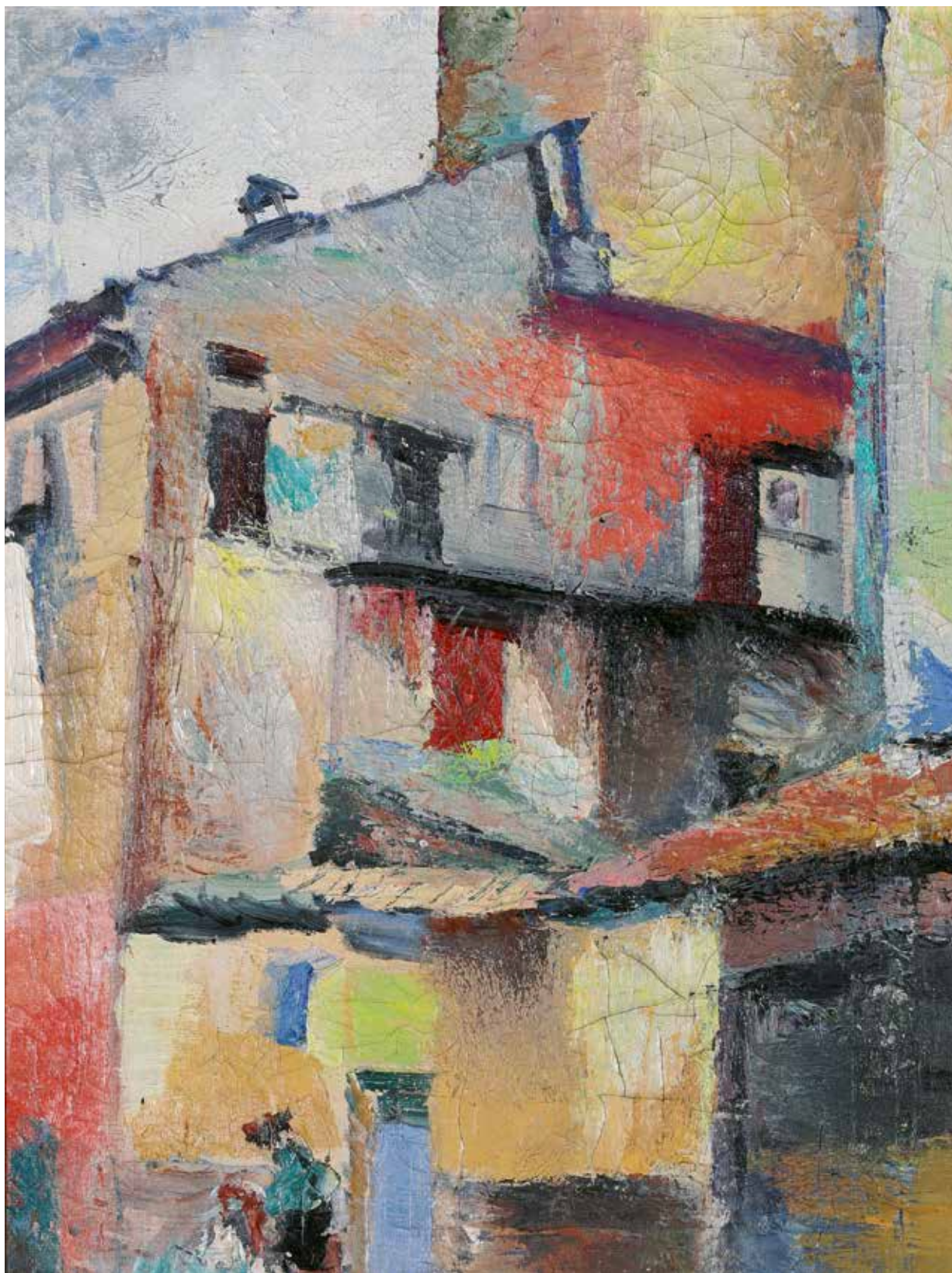
Speaking about these educational Western influences, Easterners need not be alarmed because, for a good mind, and it is always a good mind which produces fine works of art, such influences are exerted solely in the field of knowledge and not of the spirit.

Referring in particular to Western influences on Thai art, we must take into consideration books illustrating works of Western artists. For about thirty years and with an impressive “crescendo”, the flow of these books and their consequent influence over the minds of young Thai artists has been very considerable indeed.

Touching this aspect, the question should be asked whether, besides Western books on art, it would not be desirable and useful to have books on contemporary Eastern art also circulating regularly among all Eastern countries, implying that this would have an important influence on stimulating an art with more accentuated Eastern characteristics. At the same time, we have not overlooked the fact that Western art embodies both the spirit of the modern age as well as peculiarities of Asian, African and old American art. Under the enquiring mind of the Westerners, the spatial understanding of the Chinese and Japanese painting, the warmth and vitality of Indian art and the expressive works of Africa and America has been fused into a universal conception reflecting the universal human soul.

From this brief analysis of the pros and cons of the influence that books of Western art have over the Easterners, we believe that besides being a valuable source of ideas and technical knowledge, they also give us a new understanding of how many peculiarities of our own traditional art may be amalgamated into contemporary expression.

*Fig. 17*  
**Thawee Ratchaneekorn** “Trees” oil, 1960



**Fua Haripitak**  
*"Rome" oil on canvas, 1956*



*Fig. 18*  
**Damrong Wong-uparas**  
*"Fishermen - village" tempera, 1959*

## TRANSITORY UNAVOIDABLE EFFECTS OF THE WESTERN INFLUENCE

In all periods, intrinsic and cultural values apart, art has been appreciated for that fashionable expression called "style". This kind of fashionable appreciation has always affected fair judgement and such is the case in our time also. Although more than ever we have a wider universal understanding, we too judge according to our modern fashionable tastes.

These fashionable tastes affect young Eastern artists very much for two reasons. First, because for centuries Eastern art followed a traditional style which in many cases was very conventional and transmitted from generation to generation with severe observance of technique and ideas, such a conditioning created a habit of imitation.

The second cause is opposite and at the same time has the same root as the first: on account of unlimited repetition of the same forms and ideas, the young artists want to free themselves from this kind of mental slavery and accordingly are inclined to reject "in toto"

all the past and accept everything which is new. The result is that many works of Eastern artists lack any racial or individual peculiarity; they are imitations of Western works and we discover that they were produced in the East only from the name and nationality of the artist.

Of course, in such cases we cannot blame Western influence, nor can we judge too severely the authors of these works. Contemporary art in many Eastern countries is in its transitional period, a fruitful period from which a more individual expression will take a definitive form.

A kind of universalism in artistic expression is determined by our modern civilization and has been adopted everywhere, but, as has been said, this is not a plausible reason why art must have a monotonous character. If sincerely expressed, a work done by a Thai or by any other Eastern artist must be different from one made by a European. The difference will correspond to the individuality of the race.

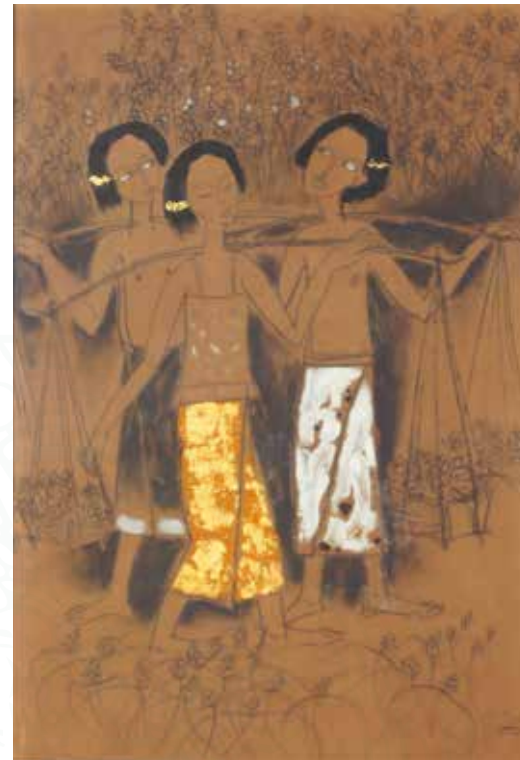
Furthermore, even works of different Eastern peoples having different cultures from ours, say, of the Chinese, should not have the same characteristics. Reciprocal influences are indispensable to stimulate new ideas but we should oppose any academic principle which kills the spontaneity of the artist.



*Fig. 19*  
**Chalood Nimsamer**  
*"Sleeping lady" oil, 1960*

## CRITICS OF ART

Very often young Eastern artists are hypnotised by the critics of Western works of art. Objectively or subjectively, some critics make an “apotheosis” of certain works which is commonly rather incomprehensible, resulting in the misleading idea that to be modern one must create strange, mysterious conceptions. Such a belief is harmful and handicaps the more impressionable Eastern artists from finding their natural individuality.



*Fig. 21*  
**Manit Poo-aree**  
*“Three sisters”*  
charcoal, oil-gold fail,  
1959

Naturally we cannot blame the Western critics, but at the same time the Easterners should have their own critics corresponding to their own ethnic and philosophical traditions. For this reason we reiterate the necessity to have books and periodicals treating contemporary Eastern art.

It is said that such publications are not possible because Eastern states lack the financial means to support contemporary art, implying a heavy burden upon the nation. The fact is that the majority of responsible authorities have not yet realised the importance of contemporary art in the life of their respective people. Here, too, we experience a transitional crisis due to the abrupt end of traditional art and the beginning of new ideas and forms. We have to draw attention again to the fact that in the past in Thailand no art was ever done except for religious purposes, accordingly once such art was no longer demanded, other expressions were neither understood nor aesthetically needed.

*Fig. 20*  
**Khien Yimsiri** *“Musical Rhythm”* bronze, 1949



## TECHNIQUE

Concerning modern art-- techniques in Thailand, although we have made remarkable progress, we have not yet reached the standard of other important countries. In the past, tempera only was used both in murals or paintings on cloth or paper. Statuary had a wider field of techniques: bronze, stucco, wood, ivory and, to a lesser degree, stone and crystal were used to execute Buddha images.



*Fig. 22*  
**Sitthidet Saenghiran** “A dance drama” bronze, 1953

Of course, among the Eastern countries there are some such as India and Japan where contemporary art is supported and appreciated. Unfortunately, there are others where, with some praiseworthy exceptions, the sincere efforts of young artists meet with indifference and even hostility on the part of those who should be the first to encourage them.

This state of affairs must change. In the last decade we have noticed in Thailand an encouraging improvement. Particularly edifying is the fact that the new generation reacts favourably to modern art, a sign which gives us hope that in another decade the appreciation of contemporary expressions will be an accomplished fact.



*Fig. 23*  
**Khien Yimsiri** “Land of smile” bronze, 1950



*Fig. 24*  
**Chit Rienpracha**  
*"The Pipe Player" wood, 1959*

In present days Thai painters, besides tempera, use oil, water-colours and fresco. Accordingly, contemporary expressive medias are much wider than what was in the past.

Although between the 13<sup>th</sup> and the 15<sup>th</sup> century in Sukhothai and Sawankhalok, the Thai produced an excellent ceramic, in the following centuries this art was abandoned. It is just a short time ago that we revived interest in this fascinating branch of art which particularly we wish to use for mural decorations.

Contemporary sculpture follows the traditional techniques. The most important technique was that of bronze casting which since remote times had reached technical perfection in Thailand. Wood carving and terra cotta works are also largely used for sculptural works. No sculptures obtained with iron bars and sheet-welding have



*Fig. 25*  
**Prasong Padmânuja**  
*"Moonlight" tempera, 1959*

yet been made by our artists, the principal reason being that there is not yet a demand nor appreciation for such artistic expressions.

Engraving has been practiced only a few years ago. Artistically in this field of art the Thai have already reached a satisfactory achievement, but technically we are still far behind. The technique of modern engraving has reached such a high level that it plays one of the most important parts in the variety of expressions.

Of course, the limited knowledge in graphic techniques is a matter which will be overcome in a few years through Thai artists going abroad under the patronage of UNESCO and other similar organizations, or undertaking scholarships offered by various governments.



Fig. 26  
Prasong Padmânuja  
“The Lovers” tempera, 1959

## A FEW WORDS ON THE CHARACTER OF CONTEMPORARY THAI ART

As we have mentioned, in the beginning of the present century foreign architects and artists were engaged by Thai government to execute official works. The activity of the Thais who work in the traditional style was much reduced and, in the bargain, this style was no longer expressive.

In the twenties Thai architects who had studied abroad began gradually to replace the foreigners.

Because no young Thai had been sent to study art, we had neither painters nor sculptors working in a modern style until the Fine Arts Department established a School of Art in 1933, which was afterwards entitled the University of Fine Arts (Silpakorn University). The original idea was to have artists concerned with the work of the Fine Arts Department, but the number of students increased considerably, so this concern took on the character of a real centre of art training.

The most difficult problem to solve was the curriculum of the academy. From the stereotyped repetition of traditional art we could not revive a new movement. On the other hand it was not sound to go astray from the old spirit of Thai art. Therefore, it was decided to start afresh from nature and make active research from old art.

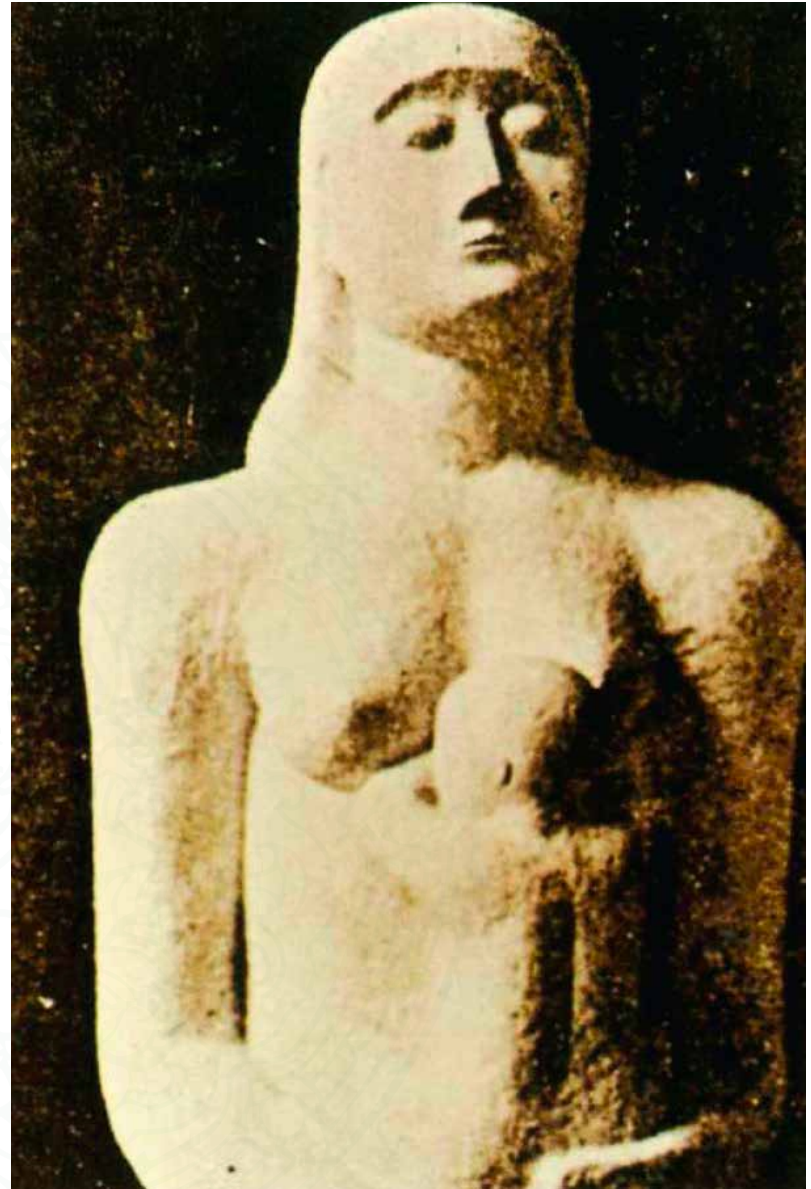
Traditional statuary was confined to creating images of the Buddha, and in this art the Thai of Sukhothai, the nation’s first capital, created magnificent statues from the 13<sup>th</sup> to the 15<sup>th</sup> century. Thus, from traditional sculpture, our modern sculptors could transmit in their new works the principal characteristics of the old which exemplified understanding of simplified, synthesised human forms in a harmonious delicate outline.

Traditional painting developed in Ayudhya, the second capital of the Thai (1350-1767), in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Aside from the classical style where lines, colours and details are as fine as in miniatures, painting presented a rich variety of subjects including the peculiar Thai realistic style representing all sides of common daily life. These scenes are very interesting, having been inspired by subjects from which many modern painters and engravers receive their inspiration today.

## MODERN CENTRES

The uniformity of many modern cities does not present any peculiar source of inspiration to our artists. Were it not for the beautiful temples which randomly give a town an Eastern note, one would not be able to distinguish any Eastern surroundings. Fortunately, some kilometres outside these modern centres is to be found a life almost as refreshing as in the past. It is true that Thai male and female alike dress in Western fashion, but on the whole here we enjoy the serenity of a pure life: a life spent cultivating rice, our main nourishment; or the luxurious enjoyment of groves of fruit-trees; or fishing in the innumerable small and large canals where all manner of crafts bring smiling people to market to sell or buy merchandise. On the Buddhist holy days the same people will go to the temple to take food to the monks who ordinarily would come by boat to have their daily food offered to them by the devotees. The temple is the gathering place of the Thai to perform their colourful ceremonies. Such is the life which mainly inspires our painters and engravers; they are still the sons of the blessed soil where their forefathers toiled for centuries. From such surroundings artists such as Chalood Nimsamer represents, in his engravings and painting a world of innocent girls in their daily work or pastime, fig. 19. Manit Poo-aree who most often depicts scenes of peasant's life, see fig. 14, is among many artist who express an art simply and sincerely Thai.

Contrary to the majority, some artists attempt philosophical subjects as is in the case of Pichai Nirand with his composition "The End", fig. 28, where human beings seem to vanish painfully into a void world. This more intellectual trend is due both to western influence and to the artist's education which currently is more extensive than that of past generations. In general, works treating such subjects show immaturity, but nevertheless it is edifying to notice the variety of conceptions which, if no yet completely satisfactory, are an indispensable factor for the future development of our art.



*Fig. 27*  
**Sompot Upa-in**  
*"Mother" plaster, 1959*



**Sawat Tantisuk**  
*"Rainy Day in Bracchano"*  
oil, 1959



*Fig. 28*  
**Pichai Nirand**  
*"The End" oil, 1959*

Following their natural temperaments, there are painters who prefer to express themselves through a realistic style as can be noticed from the fine "Flowers" by Sawat Tantisuk, fig. 7, or from the impressionistic portrait by Fua Haripitak, fig. 9, or again from another portrait by Chamras Kietkong, fig. 12. The same realism may be seen also in the vigorous landscape by Tawee Nandakwang illustrated in fig. 11. Of course, considering the character of our traditional art, realism is a western influence, or more exactly it is from Western examples that Thai artists began to work in a realistic style. Such influence is particularly noticeable in portraiture and landscape for the reason that, in the past, traditional art never treated portraiture while landscape was conventional and served as a rather dark background for human, animal and architectural figures. Certainly through experience and research, such as some artists do at present, a more individual expression in landscape will emerge in the near future as shown by the particular style of Damrong Wong-uparas, fig. 18.

The works of some contemporary sculptors still retain the principal characteristics of the old statuary, namely, simplification of the human forms into essential volumes and the flowing harmonious sense of the outlines. One of the best sculptors retaining the aforementioned characteristics, although quite individual and modern, is Khien Yimsiri. His statuette illustrated with fig. 4 gives a clear idea of this Thai style. Sculptures by other artists such as the charming animals by Paitun Muangsomboon, fig. 13, the "Pipe - Player" by Chit Rienpracha, fig. 24, and many others are rendered realistically. There are few sculptors who are "under the spell" of western modern art, as may be seen from fig. 27. In such cases we are embarrassed to speculate whether they should have followed this Western trend or might have tried a different, more Eastern style. But, on principle, none has the right to interfere with the artist's conception and its plastic realisation; in addition, we must take into consideration the fact that there are Eastern artists who feel most sincere when they express their art like Westerners and accordingly we must judge their works objectively according to the real artistic values which refer to the "essence", not to the appearance.



*Fig. 29*  
**Khien Yimsiri**  
*"Prof. Silpa Bhirasri" bronze, 1945*



**Chalood Nimsamer**  
*“Old Temple” oil, 1960*

Therefore, Thai artists express themselves in different ways corresponding to their natural temperament. Some, as we have said, are inspired and represent the daily life of the Thai, as the old painters did. Others attempt to modernise traditional painting by changing the miniature-like character into an ampler vision of the subject, fig. 25. There are painters whose ambition is to float in philosophical spheres, while others, on the contrary, are realistic or impressionistic. Some sculptors whose works have the same fundamental characteristics as the old statuary are quite individual in either their subjects or renderings, while other sculptors are realistic when treating both human and animal representations.

Such a variety of expressions is the sure sign of a sound revival of Thai art: our artists have already begun to face the difficult task of finding their individuality. We only hope that very soon a new era in the understanding of the importance of contemporary art may commence in Thailand and, arising from this indispensable factor, our artists may reach their professional maturity. Up to the present day it is only the young artists, stimulated by their enthusiasm, who produce art. Unfortunately, because of the lack of artistic demand, they are eventually obliged, one by one, to yield to the necessities of material life, abandoning their ambitions in the field of art.

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