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Notes on Transliteration

Throughout this work, I have rendered Thai words phonetically into English, following Mary Haas' *Thai-English Student's Dictionary* (Stanford University Press, 1964), with minor modifications, including "ai" instead of "aj" (pronounced as a long "i"), "j" instead of "c," and an ending "k" instead of an ending "g." For the sake of readability, I have eliminated tonal markings. Where Thai names or words have commonly used transliterations, I have followed those conventions, for example, *khru* instead of *khruu*.

A number of Buddhist references appear in scholarly literature in Pali or Sanskrit. This study uses the conventional Thai words, unless the Pali or Sanskrit words are widely known. I use *Jataka* instead of the Thai *chadok* to refer to the narratives of the Buddha's past lives. However, I employ the Thai names of the individual stories—Phra Wesandorn instead of Prince Vessantara. The glossary includes both.

In conventional usage, Thai people use their personal names, often with an honorific title (Khun, or Mr./Ms.; Ajarn, or Professor). Thai sources are cited in the text and listed in the bibliography by the author's personal name.

Preface

Entering Inside

"We have had the most terrible journey," an elderly English woman said, greeting me when I answered the doorbell of the main house at Wat Buddhapadipa one morning in 1995. She and her family—her one-month-old grandson, his Thai-Malay mother, and British father—had arrived at the Thai temple in Wimbledon, England for the baby's ceremonial hair cutting.[1] The family entered, and the middle-aged Thai woman who accompanied them, a good friend, went off to the kitchen to prepare an English breakfast. The baby's father, "Ian," and Ian's mum then sat at the dining room table to eat the fried eggs, ham, and toast prepared by their friend and to complain about the traffic from Finchley, the suburb where they lived.[2]

After breakfast, I walked with the family up the hill behind the main house to the Thai-style *ubosot* (chapel) to unlock it for them (Plate 1).[3] Ian called out, "It's a beautiful thing, isn't it? And right in the middle of England. Thais are really into ornate things. All this [gesturing to the window ornamentation] is woodcarving with glass inlays. Mum! Look at that tree, isn't it beautiful? Let's take a picture here [in front of the *bot*] and say we've been on holiday to Thailand." Mum retorted, laughing, "You snob." Ian insisted, "I'll go and get a camera."

Once inside the *bot,* Mum asked her daughter-in-law, "Noi," how many times one should prostrate oneself before the statues of the Buddha, set on an elaborately decorated altar facing the entrance (Plate 2). While Noi paid her respects by offering flowers and prostrating herself three times,[4] Mum and her son examined the murals covering the walls of the room. Suddenly Ian said, "There's 'Jaws' up there [referring to the shark from the movie *Jaws*]. Margaret Thatcher is here somewhere." I pointed out Mrs. Thatcher. Ian then continued, "Funnily enough, she looks like the queen." Looking at the distant monuments nearby, he said, "Oh yes, the Houses of Parliament. Or is it Westminster? I'm not sure if that is St. Paul's Cathedral or not." From across the room Mum said, "I had better come and see Mrs. Thatcher, hadn't I? She does look like the queen, with a nose like that." Looking around the room, she continued, "They're beautiful, aren't they? It's beautiful here."

Ian arranged his family in front of the Buddha images. He took dozens of photographs with

his professional portrait camera, rearranging the group several times. He then asked his mother, "Do you want one with Mrs. Thatcher?" to which she replied, "You're joking." Meanwhile, Noi twirled the rack of postcards that sits in a corner near the door. After one last photograph in front of the door between the enormous eyes of Mara, the family departed, returning to the shrine room in the main house for the hair-cutting ceremony and a Thai meal prepared by their friend.[5]

The encounter of this family—English, Thai, Malay, tourist, and worshiper in differing measures—with the murals at Wat Buddhapadipa was fairly typical, as I had observed over the preceding weeks while living at the temple. Few people could enter the *ubosot* without noticing, if not actively exploring, the brilliantly colored paintings covering all the walls. Despite the intense effects of the paintings, practicing Buddhists usually sit to *wai phra,* or pay respects to the Buddha, and look at the paintings afterward. Other visitors, less certain of proper temple behavior, walk along the murals as though in an art gallery. After an introductory lecture, local schoolchildren visiting the temple reproduce scenes from the murals in their copybooks. The range of visitors' responses to the murals and their diverse activities within that space suggest that the terms of this encounter between viewer and art ramify in multiple and sometimes surprising directions.

I had arrived at Wat Buddhapadipa for the first time three years before my encounter with Ian and his family. Before reaching the front door of the main house that afternoon in 1992, I met an artist dripping candle wax onto a canvas outside the small caretaker's cottage. The artist, Sompop Budtarad, and I chatted for three hours, mostly about the seven years he had lived and worked at the temple painting the murals.[6] Sompop then took me up the hill behind the main house to see the murals in the *ubosot,* a tiny, white, chapel-like building with red and gold decoration glittering in the sun. The walls of the shrine room inside pulsed with color and energy, covered with detailed scenes of a world I had never encountered. Yet looking closer I found familiar details, provocatively placed: a tiny can of Heineken's beer discarded by worshipers, Vincent Van Gogh falling off a ladder, Stonehenge placed on the shores of a sea. My casual viewing suddenly gave way to a moment of spatial dislocation as I examined a scene of the very building I had entered. Was I outside or inside? Questions began to form, of location, of artistic and narrative strategies, of merit and meaning, and of audiences. This book began at that moment, starting within this room but soon looking out the windows to its English setting and Thai worlds beyond. In researching the temple, its murals, and the different contexts of their production I visited Thailand and London numerous times between 1992 and 2000; my longest stay was 1994–1995, when I interviewed all of the mural artists living in Thailand, several of the sponsors, and numerous participants in the Bangkok art scene. I returned to Wimbledon afterward to live at the temple for a month, where I interviewed temple visitors, monks, and the artists who had remained in England.

Sites and Positions

One conceptual difficulty in writing about the Wat Buddhapadipa and its murals derives from a concept central to this ethnography—that of location. As is increasingly common in a world of travelers, the sponsors, artists, and many of their friends and supporters moved back and forth between Thailand, England, and the United States. To interview all of the artists, observe the workings of the Bangkok art world and daily life at Wat Buddhapadipa, and compare these murals with those in other Thai temples, I traveled back and forth as well in an expanded "field."[7] Further undermining singular localization in space and time, this ethnography interweaves three periods, alternating between Bangkok and London. The three periods comprise a reconstruction of the artists' lives and work at Wat Buddhapadipa when they painted the murals between 1984–1992, an ethnography of the Bangkok art world in which most of them now live and work (1994–2000), and activities at Wat Buddhapadipa itself, observed in the autumn of 1995, after the murals had been completed and on subsequent visits to London. I have constructed this book in this manner to account for the multiple, and changing, "art worlds" in which the murals are viewed and interpreted. The murals are located in England, yet in important ways their audience resides in Thailand. It is in the art world of Bangkok, I would argue, that many of their meanings unfold for Thais. There, the murals attain value over time, assessed by their impact upon the development of Thai art. The artists' participation in the mural project profoundly affected their subsequent life choices and artistic careers and has shaped their contributions to larger Thai debates about religion and society, spiritualism and materialism, and the past, present, and future of Thai art.

My position and identity throughout this research shifted from location to location, requiring continual renegotiation. At first a tourist in London, I became a researcher in Bangkok and in London on my subsequent trips there. The artists I interviewed in Thailand and England, as well as other Thais upon whom I depended, related to me largely as a *farang* (foreign) researcher. They, especially the art students at Silpakorn University, usually accorded me the respect given those senior in age and sometimes the affection of an older sister. The cooperation of many in the Bangkok art world may have been tempered by my expressed intention of writing a book, one that might bring further international attention to Thai contemporary art. Generally, however, I remained a *farang* in Bangkok and as such continually walked the terrain of difference and wariness accorded strangers. At one point, after a comment by the guard of the compound where I lived, I realized that the many interviews I conducted at my apartment had been noticed. In order to forestall further nervousness or gossip in the compound, I had to explain to my Sino-Thai landlady that the comings and goings of young Thai men were quite legitimate and proper research activities.

In speaking with the group of artists, themes and patterns emerged that illuminate both older, and emerging, paths people take in Thailand to become artists, the networks they utilize, the communities they forge, their travel, and their strategies for success. I interviewed each artist in Thai or English or both in an open-ended format with a set of similar questions.[8] I met them in Bangkok, in other towns of upcountry Thailand, in London, in Berkeley, and in Los

Angeles. We spoke formally in a variety of locations ranging from shopping mall food court to factory office, advertising agency conference room to artist's studio, my living room to their dining rooms. We chatted informally at exhibition openings, sitting at the picnic tables outside the Faculty of Painting at Silpakorn University (where several teach), or while at work on new projects. They shared with me their personal stories of being introduced to the larger world beyond their village origins, their growing awareness of "art," and their experiences in Bangkok and then in London. We discussed, and in many instances I observed, the lives they have made for themselves since the Wat Buddhapadipa mural project—as artists or art directors, as teachers, or as small businessmen.

While living at the temple, my status as an ethnographic researcher observing temple practices became increasingly difficult to sustain. In an attempt to understand *vipassana* meditation practice while in Bangkok—a central concern of several of my informants—I had begun to attend meditation sessions at Wat Mahathat.[9] I continued this instruction in meditation at sittings offered four times each week at Wat Buddhapadipa. In my attempts to fit in at Wat Buddhapadipa, to appear less obtrusive with my note taking, and to make a contribution to the community who generously allowed me in, I took part in temple life by washing dishes, shopping, and cleaning the grounds.[10] During the Loy Krathong festival that autumn, I helped roast and sell chestnuts (collected from the local golf course) to benefit temple activities. In these ways I gradually became a practitioner of Buddhism as well, learning by observation and instruction to behave as other lay members of the community, though with many missteps. To complete my fieldwork at the temple, I had accompanied supporters on a *tham bun* (merit making) bus tour sponsored by the Young Buddhists' Association to the three Thai temples in the English Midlands staffed by monks from Wat Buddhapadipa. At the last temple, in Wolverhampton, I stood in the doorway of the shrine room, weary from a long day and from the work of constant note taking and discussing events with visitors, watching the monks bless the visitors and receive their offerings for the third time. One of the senior monks—the same one who performed the hair-cutting ceremony with which I opened this preface—called out to me, "Sandra, come sit down, please, and do not stand in the doorway. If we stand in the doorway we are a spectator, not a member of the party." With that reminder, I entered inside to sit, becoming a member of the party.

In addition to interviews with each of the artists, I base the following chapters on supplementary materials gathered while living in Bangkok and London and during subsequent visits to both cities. In Thailand, I spoke with art collectors, gallery owners, art critics, art historians, and friends of the artists. In England, I interviewed monks and Thai and *farang* temple visitors. Voluminous clippings from newspaper and magazine articles in both Thai and English also document the Wat Buddhapadipa project and the artists' subsequent careers.

Acknowledgments

My own journeys to London, Bangkok, and back again were "most wonderful" and remain unforgettable. Along the way I incurred many debts—intellectual, material, and emotional—to

the many who made me welcome and gave me support and encouragement. Khun Sawet Piamphongsant shared with me not only memories of sponsoring the temple, but his abiding love of poetry and plants.[11] The artists who painted the murals at Wat Buddhapadipa gave generously of their time, their memories, and their observations about the art world of Thailand. Chalermchai Kositpipat, Panya Vijinthanasarn, and their assistants patiently responded to my incessant questions. The hours spent chatting at their studios, over delicious meals, at exhibition openings, and watching them work were among the most delightful and rewarding of my fieldwork. I thank Sompop Budtarad especially for his kindness and willingness to explore issues of art and Buddhism in depth. The spirit and humor of these artists touched me deeply and gave me new insights into the workings of merit-making in Thai life, as well as appreciation for their struggles and their art. From them I learned also the meanings of *tham hai sanuk,* Thai ideas of having fun.

These journeys began at the suggestion of Herbert Phillips, who introduced Wat Buddhapadipa to me by urging me to visit that summer I lived in London with my family. His own work on contemporary Thai art and literature inspired me to seek deeper cultural significance in the production of art. Alan Dundes taught me to truly value what the folk say—in words or paint—and how they say it. Nelson Graburn's engaging seminars stimulated much of the thinking that has shaped this book; he held the seminars with boundless enthusiasm and respect for his students' work. Joanna Williams' unflagging interest and curiosity opened a door for me to the challenges and rewards of interdisciplinary exploration. Archie Green, who first urged me into graduate school, remains an inspiration and a model of scholarly commitment and passion for the work we all do.

Many people, far more than named below, facilitated and enriched the process of doing research in two foreign places. I am grateful to the Fulbright Foundation, the Lowie-Olsen Fund, and the Center for Southeast Asian Studies at the University of California, Berkeley, for financial support. At the Thailand-United States Education Foundation, Dr. Patamaka Sukontamarn and Siriporn Sornsiri cheerfully assisted with bureaucratic and logistical matters. At Silpakorn University, Ajarn (Professor) Anuwit Chareonsupkul spent valuable hours introducing me to important issues in Thai art. Ajarns Prinya Tantisuk, Sakharin Kuer-On, and Thongchai Srisukprasert and their students at Silpakorn welcomed me on many of their field trips, which enhanced my education in Thai art. Alfred Pawlin of Visual Dhamma Gallery dispensed endless cups of Nescafé, engaging conversation, gossip, unique perspectives, and access to his extensive archives of articles and books on Thai art. Apinan Poshyananda, Somporn Rodboon, John Clark, Piriya Krairiksh, Thanom Chapakdee, Henry Ginsburg, Chatvichai Promadittavedi, Surachat Kittithana, John Hoskins, Annabel and Peera Ditbunjong, Phaptawan Suwannakudt, and numerous other scholars, artists, gallery owners, and collectors provided invaluable insights into Thai art and the workings of the Bangkok art world. Jennifer Gampell shared her interview transcripts with me, especially those pertinent to events that took place while I was not in Thailand. Mary and Jim Packard-Winkler, Jeffrey Capizzi, and Dan and Danielle Pruzin made the logistics of an unpredictable traffic-clogged Bangkok more tolerable and life with my young son in the compound a joy. My research assistant, Supecha Boughtip, gave me insightful

interpretation, keen interest, and humor along with her thorough transcriptions and lunch at Thammasat. Boonsopa Charoennibhonvanich and Jiraporn Budtarad translated during several key interviews. Methawee Ruenreang, Ketkanda Jaturongachoke, Christina Fink, and especially Susan Kepner helped generously with translations of Thai phrases. The final translations, however, are mine.

The monks, volunteers, and regular visitors to Wat Buddhapadipa allowed me to join this Buddhist community and to experience as well as observe the commitments of practice, day by day. The Venerable Phra Ravanakitkolsul and Phrakhru Vinayadhara Vong Silanando provided hours of discussions and practical lessons. Roy Brabant-Smith, Anant Hiewchaiyaphum, and Suphaporn gave me necessary access to the back stages of temple life. Khun Surapee Simpson of Wimbledon adopted me much as she had adopted the artists, sharing memories of her encounters with them and her astute analyses of temple life.

I am grateful to Eric Crystal and the Center for Southeast Asian Studies at the University of California, Berkeley, for opportunities to present my research. Hildred Geertz, Leedom Lefferts, Astri Wright, and Jill Forshee provided detailed, helpful criticisms and suggestions. Early versions of this book were shaped by the close readings and commentary of colleagues Cecilia Van Hollen, Ayfer Bartu, and Kathleen Erwin. Pamela Kelley and Ann Ludeman of the University of Hawai'i Press gave encouragement and abiding understanding for a long process of revision. Susan Biggs Corrado's skillful editing eased the final stages of producing the book.

Chalermchai and Sompop provided me with many of the photographs of the murals, initially taken by Andy Whale and donated to the temple. Kittisak Nuallak kindly supplied photographs of the artists at work. I thank Robert Gumpert also for photographing many mural details.

Without my family, life during this period of research, teaching, and writing would have been much impoverished. My deepest gratitude goes to my parents Betty and Sydney Cate for their love and support and to my husband Robert Gumpert and my son Sam Finn for joining me on these adventures.

chapter one

Finding a Place

"A reflexive universe of social action, simply put, is one where nobody is outside."—Anthony Giddens (1995)

The Thai Airways International airplane, sailing away into an open sky, strikes a discordant note in Panya's scene of the *Defeat of Mara* at Wat Buddhapadipa, the Thai temple in Wimbledon, England (Cover photo). It appears in a scene populated otherwise by demons and *yak*s (giants) who migrated with monks and storytellers into Siamese folklore from ancient Indian mythology centuries before.[1] One of the monks at Wat Buddhapadipa interpreted the airplane as a modern replacement for a boat, the symbolic vehicle that carries practitioners of the Dhamma toward nirvana.[2] To Thai worshipers and viewers unfamiliar with Thai temple murals and Buddhism, this tiny detail begs questions of time and location, both of the painted narratives and of the viewer in relation to them: Why an airplane? Where has it come from and where is it going? Who is traveling on it? When are these scenes supposedly happening? How are we to understand these images—we, the many viewers who come to this lovely temple out of neighborly curiosity, on a school field trip, to make merit, to eat Thai food, to learn Thai classical dance or language, to seek solace and community, to see "art"?

As the airplane suggests, the murals animate discussions about the "traditional" and the "modern," concepts that stubbornly linger in contemporary social discourse in Thailand and in Western assessments of contemporary Asian art.[3] For those familiar with Thai temple painting, juxtaposing images of late-twentieth-century technology with characters whose visual histories precede those of the Buddha himself might constitute a startling transgression of temple mural iconography. While continuing to work with the expressive line, intricate patterning, and idealized figures characteristic of Thai temple murals, the artists have also clearly abandoned strict adherence to the conventions they learned in the early years of art school. Here elements of abstraction, surrealism, photorealism, and expressionism provoke questions of artistic strategies

of disjunction, appropriation, and the relationships of these artists to their Thai past as well as to Western art movements and techniques.

Other strategies of localization and satire invoke continuity with Thai artistic traditions.[4] Thai muralists have characteristically depicted worlds "in which the everyday and the marvelous, reality and fiction constantly intermingle" (Boisselier 1976, 23). Scenes depicting the long-ago events of the lives of the Buddha contrast with scenes of daily life—customs, dress, material culture, social relations—to situate these stories in the here-and-now of their viewers.[5] Here in England, however, the localizing processes address multiple audiences, differently positioned as casual visitors, tourists and worshipers, Thai and Other. The muralists further dramatize an opposition between the "real" and the "imaginary" by scattering tiny snapshot-like portraits throughout scenes filled with deities and stylized ordinary people. By including details and modes of modern-day representation (such as the camera) or transportation (the airplane) that reference the expansive worlds of these murals' viewers, the artists implicate the one—the world of the murals—into the other worlds of their audience. And they do so in a playful manner, making in-group references, telling jokes, and commenting on Thai power politics, world leaders, Western art and culture, and their own experiences.[6]

A Thai Temple in Wimbledon

Wat Buddhapadipa is a short walk from Wimbledon Commons, a few blocks up the hill from the All England Lawn Tennis and Croquet Club, site of the annual Wimbledon tennis tournament.[7] Once known as the estate of Barrogill, the beautifully landscaped four-acre temple complex includes a stone estate house, a small caretaker's cottage, the Thai-style *ubosot,* garages, classrooms, restrooms to serve festival visitors, a lake, and a meditation garden. The main building comprises monks' living quarters and, on the ground floor, a shrine room (where monks receive visitors), the dining room, and a large patio where visitors congregate on the weekends. Set on the hill behind the main house and rose garden, the *ubosot* includes a shrine room and two wing rooms upstairs, and a basement area where meditation classes meet and worshipers sleep when on retreat. The *ubosot*'s shrine room and wings house the murals of Wat Buddhapadipa.

Wat Buddhapadipa enjoys considerable prestige, in part deriving from the royal patronage of King Bhumiphol Adulyadej of Thailand. Organized through the London Buddhist Temple Foundation, contributors to the building of the *ubosot* and the mural painting were, by and large, members of the Thai government and business elite who have traveled extensively in the world, who themselves have been educated in Europe or the United States, and who maintain international business connections through property, banking and finance, manufacturing, and tourism. Because Khun Sawet Piamphongsant and other prominent members of the London Buddhist Temple Foundation held important positions within the Thai government, the foundation was able to convince two prime ministers to contribute government monies to the temple and mural projects (Plate 4). While legally attached to the cultural section of the Thai em-

bassy to England, the Thai Religious Affairs Department and London Buddhist Temple Foundation also assume administrative and developmental responsibility for the temple.

Led by Panya Vijinthanasarn and Chalermchai Kositpipat, twenty-eight young Thai contemporary artists in revolving teams painted the murals at Wat Buddhapadipa during an eight-year period, completing them in 1992 (Plate 5).[8] While originating in provinces throughout Thailand, most of the artists were recent graduates of Silpakorn University (the fine arts university in Bangkok) or other art schools, or worked at the Fine Arts Department, an agency of the Thai government. Most were just beginning their art careers.

All but three of the assistants were male. In this regard, the mural project reflects and reproduces the heavily male-dominated structure of the Bangkok art world of the late 1970s and 1980s.[9] To the extent that painting has been historically temple based, women have been excluded from that practice, as they may not be ordained as monks in Theravada Buddhism.[10] *Mae chii,* or Buddhist nuns, do most of the daily chores at many Thai temples; some of the women on the mural project performed these chores also. At different stages of the project, the wife of one artist and the sister of another came to Wat Buddhapadipa specifically to clean, shop, and cook for the group, enabling the artists to concentrate exclusively on the mural painting.

On one of his trips back to Bangkok to recruit new assistants, Chalermchai deliberately sought women to work in London, as he felt they would improve relations between the artists. One he recruited had been his classmate at Silpakorn and now worked at the Fine Arts Department. Because she was older, she often mediated conflicts between the younger artists. She assumed responsibility for completing large sections of the murals—the only woman to be given such an assignment. Two younger women that had been trained at Poh Chang (Arts and Crafts School) arrived to paint but worked largely on floral borders and the patterning in mural details, remaining somewhat marginal. When the sister of one of the artists returned to Thailand, one of these Poh Chang artists assumed her responsibility for taking care of the twenty-two artists who were working. Two women were also girlfriends *(faen)* of other muralists; both couples later married.

The length of the artists' involvement with the mural project varied. Chalermchai and Panya stayed three years to oversee the murals in the main room of the *ubosot*. Some of their assistants stayed at Wat Buddhapadipa for a year, some for six months. Several returned to Wimbledon a second time, to help complete the murals in the two wing rooms. Sompop, one of the first recruited by Panya, stayed for seven years, as he became the co-coordinator of the mural painting in these two smaller rooms (Plate 6). However long their stay, the artists painted the murals "for free," donating their labor to the temple and to the Buddha. They received no commission for their work, but rather a small monthly allowance for modest living expenses that enabled them to spend days off seeing art in London. How they were recruited and their own intentions in going to London confirm the ongoing salience of Thai social relationships based on gender roles, educational cohorts, the master/apprentice model of art-making, notions of long-distance merit-making, and of *pai naawk*—"going out" of the country to have adventures, gain knowl-

edge, and make connections that can shift one's fortunes in the Thai social world upon return. This group of artists seeks a different place for themselves and their art, distinct from both past and contemporary mural painters in Thailand. Educated in the theories and practices of the international art world, they worked abroad with an agenda of transforming Thai mural painting into an art that speaks in the present tense.

The Wat Buddhapadipa murals hold a prominent place in Thai contemporary culture. They are the first Thai Buddhist murals ever painted outside the country, a point mentioned constantly in the extensive media coverage that accompanied their production. They represent one of the "most complete" sets of Thai Buddhist murals anywhere, as they include scenes of the historical Buddha's life, the *thosochat,* or his Ten Lives prior, and the *Traiphum,* or Three Worlds cosmology. King Bhumiphol Adulyadej of Thailand, an avid painter who regularly shows as a guest in the National Exhibitions of Art, reputedly proclaimed the murals to truly represent "the art of the Ninth Reign" (Chalermchai 1994). Three of the Wat Buddhapadipa muralists were chosen to illustrate the king's book, published on the fiftieth anniversary of his reign.[11] Art historian Apinan Poshyananda reproduced Panya's *The Defeat of Mara* (Plate 10) as the cover of his seminal survey of Thai modern art, not only just to sell the book, but "because it asks a lot of questions" (Apinan 1995b). Another Thai art historian considers these murals to be the "centerpiece" of Thai neotraditional art (Somporn 1995c).

On "Thainess"

The endorsements by the Thai king and involvement of the Thai government in sponsorship and governance reproduce at Wat Buddhapadipa an ideological triad long promulgated by the modern Thai state since the 1920s: religion, nation or people, and monarchy, or "the three pillars of Thai nationalism" (*chaat, satsanaa, phra mahakasat*).[12] In many aspects—the temple's fundamental mission to propagate Buddhism abroad, its administration through the Religious Affairs Department and the Thai embassy, its ritual calendar, architectural style, and mural program—the temple does project an official vision of Thai national culture consonant with Item 4.7 of "The National Culture Policy" issued by the government in 1987: "preservation of the good image, fame, dignity of Thai culture in the world community" (Office of the Prime Minister 1987, 9). Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, ongoing scandals involving prominent monks and temples eroded public respect for the institutions of Buddhism in Thailand. Daily revelations about the sexual adventures (or misadventures) of the charismatic monk Phra Yantra Ammarobhikku mesmerized the Thai public during my research in Bangkok, even attracting international media attention. Continuing coverage of Thailand's highly visible prostitution and sex tourism industries and Bangkok's bad traffic, pollution, and political corruption further tarnished the desired "good image" of Thailand. These international representations of Thai culture establish some of the background against which the Wat Buddhapadipa *ubosot* projects its elegant vision of Thai Buddhist culture in a posh setting in London. Various accommodations to its location in England, however, reveal the negotiability of elite conceptions of national culture within Thailand and when transported beyond national borders.

Observers agree that the murals at Wat Buddhapadipa in Wimbledon are "too radical" to have been painted in Bangkok, in ways discussed below. The artists claimed they wanted to revitalize the moribund practices of Thai temple painting and to make murals relevant to the contemporary world and a literate audience (Chalermchai et al. 1992). Why, then, did they believe they had to leave Thailand to accomplish this goal? Their perception of constraints on painting at temples in Thailand and the subsequent esteem accorded these murals abroad point toward competition for cultural authority within Thai society. This competition intensifies when placed within overlapping discourses on art and religion, art and society.

That the temple is situated in England establishes a transnational context for its art and its activities, contributing to emerging global "public culture."[13] One issue considered throughout this book is how that context materially and metaphorically shaped representations of both "Thainess" and Buddhism at Wat Buddhapadipa (especially in the murals), and how Thais themselves, as mobile artists and cultural actors, represent themselves and others in that arena. These artists arrived in England to tell their own stories and to comment on the West, reversing Orientalist processes that have constructed the Asian Other (Said 1979). This ethnography of art-making takes up these issues, debated also in analyses of contemporary art movements in other locales throughout the world, but set here at the intersection of identity, authority, and value. There, these Thai artists rework ideologies and practices of "modern art," reinterpret elite concepts of Buddhist narrative, unsettle hierarchies of sacred space, accumulate long-distance merit, and seek new grounds for constructing national and personal identities.

The categories of "traditional," "modern," and "neotraditional" continue to animate issues around Thai cultural identity, and in social action remain subject to ongoing negotiation and performance, rather than existing as external, objective categories. These categories are deployed by artists in a variety of social contexts: in self-presentation, at exhibition openings, in media interviews, in exhibition catalogs, and in teaching at Silpakorn University. In their theatricality, teaching styles, dress, and self-presentations, these artists draw upon and reconfigure culturally specific meanings of creativity, confrontation, spirituality, modernity, maleness, and power. Artists draw upon these diverse cultural notions to seek higher social status for themselves as "artists" within Thailand, as well as to claim value for their work in public arenas that extend beyond Thailand. It is these meanings that are absorbed into and reproduced by more general narrative histories about Thai contemporary art, as qualities of "Thainess" that elude totalizing Euro-American paradigms of modern art. "Traditional," "modern," or "neotraditional" are only a few of the categories the artists use to position themselves and their work.[14] These specific artists have also claimed other identities, including "Isaan" (Northeastern Thai) or "Lanna" (Northern Thai), "international," and "ecologically concerned." While working at Wat Buddhapadipa and in their subsequent careers, these artists have developed a range of strategies that highlight different social orientations: those looking inward to an evolving Thai social hierarchy and those concerned more with broad transnational linkages.

As discussed in this study, "Thainess" as a cultural concept lacks enduring substance and definition. As an analytical target, "Thainess" moves constantly from position to position. Continually invoked in diverse settings inside and outside Thailand, Thainess is subject to ongoing

invention and imagination as the outcome of social processes in various contexts. The adjective "Thai" must be understood similarly—not as a reference to a single set of attributes, but rather as a marker of contrast between identities and a means of asserting commonality.[15]

Competing Discourses: Art and Religion

As I began to explore the significance of the murals I first encountered in 1992, I visited an English member of the Wat Buddhapadipa community. At that time, "Anna" was involved extensively as a teacher of the Abidhamma, the commentaries on Buddha's teachings. She also cofounded the temple's Lay Buddhist Association. Anna lived in a small village outside London. Her own watercolors, serene and abstract, lined the living room walls; numerous art books (I noted one on David Hockney) sat on bookshelves. Her assessment of the murals at Wat Buddhapadipa as art was largely negative. She thought that the artists' portraits of recognizable individuals set within crowds of generic worshipers were "incompetent." This, she thought, represented the artists "breaking the rules of Western art [and Thai art as well], yet [they] don't have a reason to break them. [It's as if] you don't know where you are." In her view the huge eyes of Mara that dominate one wall (Plate 10) break the unified mode of narration through color, forms, and rhythm that she finds characteristic of murals in other Thai temples. She finds that the murals represent a distraction, for in the context of meditation the colors are "too bright." She also expressed her disapproval of the murals for attracting "too many tourists," thus requiring the temple to "make rules" to control the number of visitors. In her opinion temple murals that function too obviously as decoration enhancing a temple's overall "niceness" encourage "going off on the wrong track" in understanding the Buddha's teachings. Insight into the reality of things, the goal of the Buddhist *vipassana* meditation techniques, which she has taught, requires a suitable environment and a teacher. "You need a guide," she told me. "You don't need a *ubosot* hall. It is quite unnecessary: the temple, the nice place, paintings on the wall."[16]

Two years later, in Bangkok, I raised these same questions with Montien Boonma and Somsak Chowtadapong, two contemporary Thai artists. We sat at one of the picnic tables in front of the Faculty of Painting and Sculpture at Silpakorn University, Thailand's premier art university. On the issue of the "distraction" of the Wat Buddhapadipa murals, they replied:

> Somsak: You feel the strength of the color; it is too vivid. It is quite different from the old Thai chapels.[17]
>
> Montien: Don't you think this is an aspect of the new society?
>
> Somsak: Religion still has the same purpose. When we enter the chapel, we want to calm down. We want to have a peaceful mind. The atmosphere must teach people to be very still. How can you stand in front of the Buddha with walls like fire?

This exchange and Anna's criticism of the Wat Buddhapadipa murals set up two contexts for evaluating mural art consistently articulated by both Thai and English observers with whom I discussed these murals. They critiqued these murals as art, but also as an element in the con-

struction of Thai religious space. While "art," the murals are at the same time "religion" and "Buddhist story." These two interpretive frameworks articulate differing sets of assumptions about the functions of painting and reference different regimes of value.[18] Such regimes operate simultaneously—in London and Bangkok—and have sometimes been voiced by the same person, but in different contexts. Contemporary art in Thailand that addresses explicitly Buddhist themes, including the work of some Wat Buddhapadipa muralists, is caught between these competing regimes. At the time of my research, such art became increasingly controversial and coveted, revealing tensions within the Bangkok art world around cultural identity, the nature of religious art, and the politics of value.

Art and Anthropology

Mural painting in Thailand, a dynamic and evolving practice centered in the temple for at least six hundred years, has been filtered in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries through agencies of modernity. These agencies—governmental departments, educational institutions, and art historical criticism, among others—generated new discourses that have reconstituted murals as "Thai art," "Thai heritage," "Thai history," and "Thai identity." The significance of the places and practices of mural painting—including relationships between temple abbot, painter, the patron; modes of training; and artists' intentions—cannot be separated from the diverse public discourses that shape and interpret those practices.[19] That artworks do not have an inherent set of meanings apparent to the discriminating connoisseur and manifest in acts of solitary contemplation (a hallmark of Western modernism since the nineteenth century) has long been a central tenet of anthropologists of art, and one that has in the past separated the two disciplines of anthropology and art history (Marcus and Myers 1995, 3). The dialogue between the two disciplines has quickened, both now questioning the domain of "art," with both analyzing the modes in which artistic forms, their meanings, and the value they obtain from their audience are located in social contexts of time and place, in particular art worlds.[20]

Theoretical problems in the anthropology of art posed by this Thai temple in England are not those associated with the so-called "ethnographic artifacts" long studied by anthropologists, produced by so-called "small-scale" or "non-Western" societies, and appropriated by Western artists, collectors, or museum curators into Western regimes of value as "art." Wat Buddhapadipa challenges this entire frame of discussion, for a temple can hardly be termed an "ethnographic artifact," nor does it circulate in systems of exchange. Volunteer artists painted the murals in Wimbledon for "free," without commission or salary, and their work represents, from the Buddhist perspective of its artists and sponsors, acts of long-distance merit-making. The temple stands outside the international commoditized art market, although (I would argue) not very far, as reproductions of the Wat Buddhapadipa murals are sold as books and postcards. Its artists did (and continue to) participate in the art market, producing and selling easel paintings and obtaining new mural commissions. In addition, fund-raising practices that supported the mural project relied on the sale of paintings within the blossoming art world of Bangkok. However, a focus by anthropologists of art on the entanglements of local production

with an international art market excludes art forms that are not bought and sold and do not otherwise circulate in arenas such as museums, remote from their origins.

Further, the status of Thai temple mural painting as "art," insofar as Western or Thai scholars of art history have been concerned, has not been at issue. Indeed, one of the problems suggested by the foregoing encounters and commentaries is the murals' status as "art" among Buddhists, both among English and Thais, in that they seem to violate notions of appropriate place, as elements within sacred space. Here, perhaps, lies one of the boundaries of the "autonomy" of art. This disjunction between "art" and "place" suggests that the Thai "art world," while extending across national borders into transnational spaces, remains somewhat circumscribed—at least for many viewers. The disjunction also suggests that prior and different discourses about the significance of temple mural painting operate within the same social field.[21]

The discourses operating in this instance of the murals at Wat Buddhapadipa are both local and global, anthropological and art historical, but they do not represent disjunction between the producer of art and its interpreters, as in the case of Papunya (Australian aboriginal) acrylic painting analyzed by Myers (1995). Myers found a significant gap—a "spatial and cultural incongruity"—between "how the producers account for their paintings and what significance they are made to have in other venues." In the case of the Wat Buddhapadipa murals, their artists/producers have played a central role in the interpretation and reception of these murals, largely through their numerous magazine, newspaper, and television interviews in London and Bangkok, and as written in the catalog they produced. The discursive disjunction has its sources elsewhere, among the Thai and other Buddhist templegoers (Anna, discussed above, is representative) who respond to them with different standards of significance than those attached to "art."

A central tenet in our anthropological understanding of contemporary art worlds is that the cultural and/or monetary values of art works, and indeed their very status as "art," are constructed through "artwriting" and "arttalking."[22] Artists themselves, through their own writings and public representations, participate in creating the value of their work (Marcus and Myers 1995, 27). While the Wimbledon murals were painted principally as an act of devotion and do not circulate as objects for sale within an art market, "writing" and "talking" their cultural value was essential to the subsequent careers of the muralists. These discursive practices have translated into fame, stature, and the increased monetary worth of their art—as selling price or commission. The murals at Wat Buddhapadipa have been written prominently into the narratives of contemporary art of Thailand and of Southeast Asia. Thus the total significance of those murals cannot be understood without attending to the larger context of the Bangkok art world and without reference to the interpretive and evaluating practices that situate them there.

While many scholars set their problems in current writing about non-Western art at the level of interpretation by art writers—be they anthropologists, art historians, journalists, and so on—with this study I set the problem not only at the level of interpretation, but also as an issue of the agency of the artists in the moment of the creative act.[23] The categories and codes of interpretation applied to art wield, I believe, productive force. That is, artists as social actors

participating in the international circulation of representations of art work within or against such categories as they create art. In this way artists exercise strategies of position. The Wat Buddhapadipa muralists claimed a position that would mend the rupture in Thai painting between the traditional art of temple murals, the modern world the artists inhabited, and the modern art theories they had learned. Second, artists become art writers themselves, creating and reproducing these categories in catalogs, interviews, and written concept statements. Further, in creative acts of reflexivity, they play with these categories in their public self-presentations, as modern artists or, in the case of certain individual Thai artists, as *chaang,* or premodern Thai artisans.

One particular problem has emerged in the domain of contemporary art production and interpretation, a domain where non-Western artists quote freely from international art styles and techniques to produce work that confounds boundaries long held by both anthropologists and art historians between "art" and "art of the Other." As one art historian has observed of contemporary Asian art more generally,

> It is always challenging to understand art made in and for a culture that is different from one's own. But, curiously, it is even more difficult to do this when the work looks deceptively similar to the forms one knows best. In the case of urbanized contemporary art from Asia, this paradox is exacerbated by the fact that its forms often challenge long-held Western perceptions about what makes it "Asian." (Desai 1997, 13)

At Wat Buddhapadipa the artists, trained in both Western and Thai art theory and history, painted this set of "radical" temple murals, utilizing an array of styles and techniques from both contemporary international art movements and the temple paintings that constitute "Thai tradition." On the whole, as I observed the first time I visited the *bot,* the murals do not look "Western" in style or content. Yet upon close investigation their work can be most certainly characterized as hybrid, as postmodern pastiche that grabs ideas from sources as diverse as early Christian art and Japanese comic books. Further still, the murals remain within the long-established frameworks of Buddhist visual narrative, which claims universal application and stimulates reflection on one's own place in the world. This study investigates some of the purposefulness and effects of that hybridity, lifting it out of art historical discourse and setting it into social worlds of negotiated meanings and effects.

The Right Intention

Scholars of Thai painting (and Southeast Asian Hindu/Buddhist art more generally) have long articulated views of aesthetic production as acts of devotion. Proper ceremonies must be held to reassure divine spirits that painting the lives of the Buddha (narratives included in Thai temple mural programs since the 1700s) is neither to claim authorship of acts of creation nor to imitate divine activities by depicting them. The relationship of artist to activity is rather that of offering, of placing one's talents in the service of Buddhism. The underlying ethic involved in such aesthetic productions is thus one of giving, rather than of creating (cf. Lyons 1960, 173).

Many observers have applied this interpretation to Wat Buddhapadipa, relating its murals to an act of devotion. In public discussion, the muralists stressed their status at the Wimbledon temple as "volunteers," thus casting their work as a giving of service (acts of merit-making) rather than as work for hire. Many artists, including several who painted at Wat Buddhapadipa, expressed the opinion that this intention in painting murals, that is, murals as religion, should have absolute priority over that of murals as art. One of these artists, Sompop, explained to me that "[t]he main concept of the building and the temple . . . is the Buddha statue and everything around there has to serve to be pushing [attention] there."[24] He agrees that the intense palette of the murals fails to create a quiet atmosphere. Echoing the opinion of other Thai critics, he says, "Buddhapadipa is like a gallery. It is not much like a temple."

One of these critics, a man long involved with the Bangkok art scene as artist-mentor-patron, told me, "I do not really like it [the *bot*]. It's like a gallery, not like a temple. . . . [T]he temple is a place where you can go inside and make a prayer, and to be peaceful. So the painting should serve the atmosphere of the temple." I asked him if he thought the murals were too strong in color. He replied, "It is not that. . . . [I]t is the wrong . . . how do you call it . . . *phit thuuk prasong*. . . . [I]t means the wrong purpose."[25] In *Kinaree,* one of two Thai Airways International magazines (outlets for many articles on Thai culture and contemporary art), a 1992 profile of another prestigious mural project in Bangkok relates that their "true intention . . . is to keep the chapel as a place of worship, not as a gallery for art exhibitions. Therefore, after looking at the paintings, all eyes are invariably drawn to the principal Buddha image" (Kosint 1992, 104).[26] The author does not mention Wat Buddhapadipa by name, but rather makes the same distinction as these two artists between murals that command attention as "art" versus those that serve a subordinate function to direct attention to the presiding image, or to facilitate and enhance the experience of worship.

Chalermchai and Panya, the two major artists on this project, in public representations of their "intentions," spoke of revitalizing Thai temple mural painting, of making it relevant to today's world. They often spoke of their work as a "donation," explicitly evoking a context of Buddhist merit-making. Yet at the same time, they clearly claimed the status of "art" rather than (as well as) "religion" for their murals, both in their writing about Wat Buddhapadipa, in their numerous public and private interviews, and in their subsequent careers. It is this issue of intention, I would argue, that lies at the heart of the public controversies over mural art, controversies that pit artists like Panya and Chalermchai against critics and that become framed in terms of spiritualism versus materialism.

What makes the Wat Buddhapadipa murals "distracting" is their intense palette—deep reds, blues, purples, and greens. The coloring is so bright (by Thai mural standards) that another Thai academic, a literary historian, said that many people had called the murals "kitsch" and in Thai terms describe them as *jam luad jam naawng* (literally, "full of blood, full of pus," but referring to a perceived disharmony in the juxtaposition of colors).[27] Another description frequently encountered was *chuut chaad,* or "gaudy, flashy."[28] A Thai architectural historian responded that in the Thai aesthetic system, "the most important thing" is gold. Muralists apply gilding "on important elements, important figures." As for color disrupting meditation, he

noted that the space of the *ubosot* is not ordinarily used for meditation, for it serves primarily as the site of the most sacred ceremonies. When people visit the *ubosot,* after paying their respects to the presiding image they often meditate as a matter of course. Besides, noted Sompop (discussing this issue with me), meditation always involves resisting (or otherwise noting) the distractions of sensory stimuli of one's environment, be it the noise of a passing airplane, bright colors on the walls, or the buzzing of a fly.[29]

Multiple discourses of interpretation operate in the social context of mural production, not solely those of art criticism (cf. Myers 1994, 1995). Some of these discourses are the products of Western art historical scholarship, which have constructed the category of the "Thai classical" in opposition to "Western" art. Others are Thai reworkings of Western art discourse, defining key categories of "traditional," "modern," and "neotraditional" that establish new hierarchies of value, but located in Thai-Asian modernity. Other localized discourses barely reference "art" at all and instead rely on indigenous understandings of painting as a craft (like painting posters for movie theaters), or as an act of devotion, or as the production of stories with didactic value in the dissemination of Buddhist teachings. These pursuits do not refer to that privileged category, "art." Anthropologists have resisted attempts to define art as a "pure aesthetic experience walled off from other instrumental associations" (Marcus and Myers 1995, 3); Thai observers do not recognize this barrier either. In their discussions of the Wat Buddhapadipa murals and Thai murals in general, they cannot *not* consider the instrumentality of murals as an element in Thai religious space. The traces of these understandings of murals elude art historical discourse, largely still located within the temple and notions of the sacred, which have generated much of the negative assessments of the Wat Buddhapadipa murals and which encouraged the muralists to paint in England in the first place.

Increasingly, art scholars examining contemporary production of art in Asia are relativizing "modernity" both as a set of socioeconomic and political conditions and as specific changes in artistic production. The Australian art historian John Clark argues that "*modernity* in Asia, certainly in its art discourse, has involved the acceptance and *local* transformation of art forms which had originated as *modernist* in Euramerica" (1995, 5–6, emphasis in original). As Desai urges with contemporary Southeast Asian art more generally, this book investigates the "complex artistic realities" that now characterize the production of art in Thailand. Many of the debates about art in Thailand, while ostensibly about styles of the "traditional," the "modern," or the "international," are about the more fundamental, shifting relationships of art to religion, to society, and to power.

Murals as Social Portraiture

Thai temple murals are products of changing social, economic, and political relations. In Thailand, "modern art" as both a concept and as a set of internationalized institutions and practices—state patronage, formalized training, exhibitions, contests, museums, and criticism—was brought into Thailand in the late nineteenth century by monarchs concerned with modernization following Western (especially British) models and the propagation of a national culture.

The effect of these developments was to shift gradually the locus of artistic production from the temple and court toward the state and to add to indigenous aesthetic practices of temple painting, sculpture, and architecture new forms of "art" such as portraiture, easel paintings, and public monuments.[30] Additionally, mural themes expanded (or Buddhist stories have been reinterpreted) to include historical events, the daily life of ordinary Thai villagers, ceremonial and devotional activities, and cultural practices. In this sense murals constitute an evolving set of elite-sponsored portraits of Thai society.

Since the 1960s, as Thailand has promoted international and domestic tourism, with increasing attention to temples and temple murals as the special attractions of "Thai heritage," mural scenes appear as emblems of Thai identity to illustrate tourist brochures and tourist souvenirs. The artistic themes and styles of temple murals have been painted into other contexts besides temples—hotels, public cultural arenas, government buildings, banks, and even fast-food outlets. Painting murals has been a continuing practice throughout Thai history. What has changed in the past few decades is the institutional matrix in which mural painting has been embedded, the sites of its practice, and, of course, the frameworks by which it is interpreted.

Thai temple murals constitute a mode of "social portraiture" in multiple dimensions. Historians treat mural paintings as primary sources for the customs, knowledge, material culture, and social relations of regions and periods of Thai history. Historians have "read" mural themes as commentaries on historical events.[31] Murals materialize Thai engagements with others, from regions throughout Southeast Asia and from China, Europe, and the United States, evident in stylistic innovation, the introduction of new materials, novel technologies, and in scenes of those engagements. As murals have been reconfigured in different periods of the twentieth century as "art," "history," "heritage," "identity," and "commodity," their functions as cultural capital have been altered, generated by the state to assert a unified national identity to its citizenry and to an international audience for whom such capital measures degrees of advancement and "civilization." Murals became key elements in official Thai projects of having a culture and in claiming a past. They thus constitute a site, however minor, in which to view Thai cultural history and issues of changing sources of patronage, new concepts of viewing subjects, and the status of "art" within the state and to different generations of elites.

As social portraiture, murals paint a likeness or a description of Thai society. This does not necessarily claim transparency or literal reflection, a one-to-one correspondence between mural details and Thai social life. In thematic content—especially in scenes of the Buddhist cosmology or from the lives of the Buddha—murals largely represent idealized visions of a moral universe, visions of where and how humans ought to be as much as where and how they are. Portraiture always implies, however, a social relationship mediated by the skills and vision of the artist(s), attitudes of the subject, demands of the patron, audience reception, and other specifics of the historical context of their production. I examine murals as social portraits in this fuller sense of content and context.

Murals as Textual Practice

The anthropological approach to a temple and its art conceives of Buddhism as an evolving constellation of ethical beliefs, narratives, and practices centering around the Buddha and his teachings, not as a set of ancient doctrines enacted to varying degrees in monastic and lay practice.[32] As with other genres of the visual arts, or the retellings of legends and mythologies of the Buddha, temple murals do more than merely reflect processes of assimilation, accretion, or change in Theravada Buddhism as it has engaged with Hinduism, local animist beliefs, Chinese culture, or Western modernities. Visual and oral narratives have been active constituents of those changes, transforming the social understandings and praxis of Buddhism (though in Thailand perhaps not as much as King Mongkut's monastic reforms of the late nineteenth century, the twentieth-century philosophy of Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, or the emergence of numerous urban-based sects).[33] In the context of the temple and the Buddhist worldview, murals are performative in the double sense of constituting an act of devotion and of intending something to happen in their engagement with viewers (Swearer 1993; Mitchell 1996; Gell 1998). While authoritative texts exist in Theravada Buddhism, such texts come alive to serve particular purposes and attain new meanings through specific acts of translation, within contested structures of authority, and through particular modes of transmission or performance in social context. Here mural painting is a textual practice as much as a social one.[34]

While this book focuses largely on the murals and artists at Wat Buddhapadipa, the establishment of the temple in Wimbledon and the building of the *ubosot* precede the events of their painting. Merit-making suffuses the acts of the artists; it also suffuses the acts of the sponsors. In chapter 2's discussion of the sponsorship of Wat Buddhapadipa, I approach some fundamental issues of Thai modernity: connections between the Thai ruling elite and England, the activities of an expanding economy of merit (here constituted by the fund-raising activities for the temple), and the nature of elite constructions of Thai national identity.

The artists who painted the murals at Wat Buddhapadipa, most in their early forties at the time of this writing, have matured at a moment in history when the periodic crises of Thai identity and tradition—the growing pains of modernity—entered a new phase. One major factor in Thai concerns with national or cultural identity—often articulated by my informants in personal terms of their "place" as Thais in the world—relates to the boom in international tourism within Thailand, an outgrowth of other cultural and political changes set in motion by the Vietnam War.[35] Within the country the growth of the manufacturing, banking, and finance sectors created a new middle class in Bangkok by the 1980s. Young and newly wealthy Thais (identified as "yuppies" in the international media coverage of their political protests in 1992) became eager to accumulate cultural, as well as economic and political, capital. As with aspiring elites elsewhere in the world, collecting art constitutes such cultural capital, along with expensive designer clothing, watches, luxury automobiles, fine wine, golf, and international travel. Artists and art collectors are participating in the more general process of creating identities for the "modern Thai" and reshaping symbologies of power to further reference international, as

well as indigenous, systems of status and display.[36] The sponsorship of Wat Buddhapadipa indexes both systems of symbolic capital: merit-making through temple sponsorship as the accumulation of status within the Thai context, and the appreciation of modern art as the exercise of internationally recognized taste and distinction (Bourdieu 1984). However, many novice Thai collectors of art have, until the late 1990s, tended to purchase Thai art, rather than European, American, Japanese, or Chinese art. This suggests an initial comfort level with familiar themes, motifs, and aesthetic references that resonate with deeply held cultural values. Such references include stupas, Buddha images, and the highly elaborated surfaces of temple architecture and decor. The emphasis by Thai art collectors on "Thai" art also reflects one means of asserting a Thai identity while simultaneously participating in the international circuitry of display and status via other brand-name consumer goods. This assertion may not necessarily represent a self-conscious gesture of nationalism or chauvinism, but rather serves to anchor cultural identity to the familiar while still being fashionable.

In Thailand the context in which "art" is produced and seen has expanded beyond temples and palaces into universities, studios, homes of private collectors, galleries, museums, banks, and other public spaces. Interpretations of what "art" is and what it means have proliferated. Some of these interpretations challenge its historical place in Thai society as an expression of devotion and as the media of moral instruction. Chapter 3 examines mural painting and its derivatives as subject to both centrifugal and centripetal forces within contemporary Thai society. First, murals are a key site of visual representations where Thai artists paint and Thai viewers see themselves in the past and the present. Second, the style of temple mural painting becomes the anchor of the category of locally defined "neotraditional" art, which competes in the international art arena with other categories of contemporary art production. Just as multiple interpretive frameworks on art in Thailand have shaped (and continue to shape) how the murals at Wat Buddhapadipa are understood, they similarly have affected the education, artistic intentions, means of production, and subsequent careers of the artists who painted them. In turn, the work of these artists and their own public interpretations of their work contributes further to these constructs of art.

In chapter 4 I analyze the murals at Wat Buddhapadipa as visual tale-telling to culturally distinct audiences. I examine the artists' intentions and strategies in rendering Thai versions *in London* of Buddhist cosmology, teachings of the Dhamma, and legends of the Buddha's lives—the artists' narrative transformations, stylistic innovations, and apparent iconographic transgressions. To a degree, they compete for control of the stories with monks and with the authority of "tradition" as articulated by Thai templegoers. This competition represents the artists' attempts to retain artistic autonomy as they transform Buddhist narratives from "story" into "art" while seeking to communicate essential meanings of Buddhist narrative about morality and one's place in the world. The artists heightened the visual contrast between the "real" and the "imaginary" to render time, space, and location (of themselves and of the murals' viewers) in distinctive ways.

Chapters 5 and 6 focus on Chalermchai, Panya, and their assistants as key actors in the contemporary Thai art scene, examining their representations of themselves, their careers, and

their work. I approach their stories in two ways. In chapter 5, widening my focus to include all twenty-eight of the muralists, I construct an "ethnography-by-memory" of the painting of the murals at Wat Buddhapadipa. The life histories of these artists constitute a trajectory from small Thai villages to a major Western metropolis. I collected their individual stories and anecdotes as snapshots: arriving in London, first seeing the temple, working all day and into the night, sleeping on the scaffolding, playing *takraw,** buying winter clothes at the local Oxfam shop, visiting Stonehenge and the Canterbury Cathedral, eating turkey and Thai curry at Christmastime with Khun Surapee (a local Thai friend), wandering through the Tate Gallery, and buying art books at Zwemmers. In reconstructing their work and life at Wat Buddhapadipa, each vignette presents its own perspective, with different shadings and tones, most likely faded or recreated due to the passage of time. In originally conceiving this aspect of the research, I mentally pictured chapter 5 as a large assemblage of these snapshots, much like those of David Hockney.[37]

Chapter 5 looks at how these artists, as actors representing the contemporary Thai social order, negotiate between their village backgrounds, Western-inflected art education, experiences in London, and the international art scene. We see them "going out," traveling from the conceptual pole of *khon baan naawk* (countryperson) to *khon thii khuey pai muang naawk* (person who goes abroad).[38] Their travel responds to generalized Thai notions of a good citizen, to opportunities established for Thai artists to study abroad, and to the chance to "go outside" and work on a prestigious project.[39] In discussing their experience of going to paint in Wimbledon, the artists spoke of their desire to see England, to see what Western life is like. As artists, several spoke of their desire to see the "real thing," that is, famous paintings they had seen before only in books. But in a variety of contexts, these artists also spoke of this journey as a search to "find a place." As I came to understand, "finding a place" encompasses disparate activities, all integral to living as an artist in Thailand today. First, artists seek a place to live—Bangkok, upcountry, or abroad—where they can comfortably live and work, yet maintain connections essential to their careers. Second, through "going out" for experience and connections, they seek higher status in a social world that historically has placed painters in positions subservient to their patrons. Both endeavors involve travel, and their stories reenact Southeast Asian modes of travel (but through modern means, i.e., the airplane) as a means of amassing cultural and social capital as "men of prowess."[40] Equally important, and third, artists search for a "place" from which to paint, that is, the means of expressing a personal creative vision that gives individual character and depth to their art, making the traditions of Thai art fresh in the modern era, rather than a rote, repetitive, or superficial rendering of individual "styles." We see how their understanding of "art" evolved from (and incorporated) hand-painted movie posters in Thai villages, to Thai temple murals, to Vincent Van Gogh, to early Buddhist carvings of the Amaravati temple in India on display at the British Museum. In this sense I track some of the ideologies of "art" and styles of other art systems, as they are received and reworked in localized contexts, and then projected back into the international arena.

*A kind of Thai volleyball, played with the feet and a small rattan ball.

Chapter 6 returns to Bangkok, where I narrow my focus to Chalermchai and Panya, to consider in greater detail the ways in which they are finding a place for themselves in the fragmented, chaotic, and fluid world of contemporary Thailand. They represented themselves publicly as binary opposites—often as the "traditional" versus the "modern" painter. "Traditional" and "modern" are only two of many locations that people, these artists included, use to position themselves within multiple "geographies of identity," inside and outside of Thailand. In terms of these specific artists, other locations include the "authentically Thai," the "regional," and the "international."[41]

Both at Wat Buddhapadipa and in their subsequent careers, Chalermchai and Panya exhibit a range of strategies and concerns that highlight the centripetal and centrifugal social forces at play within Thailand and beyond. In his determination to make "public art," Panya seeks to reformulate the terms of contemporary artistic production and the "place" or location of art itself in the world of Bangkok, where the temple as the primary social space has been displaced by offices, banks, and shopping malls. Chalermchai, in his dramatic, contentious, public self-representations and in his role in producing exhibition openings as spectacles, continues a trend begun by Thai artists of a senior generation. These men are refashioning the public persona of "Thai artist" and, in so doing, play upon the traditional Thai concepts of painter as artisan *(chaang)* and a love of theatricality to create the artist as cultural hero. As such, they have become relatively wealthy and claim a new social position for artists alongside other members of the Thai elite.

In the concluding chapter 7, I revisit issues of painting in Thailand as a moral as well as aesthetic practice, along vectors of identity, authority, and value. That these Silpakorn-trained artists have been inculcated with values that, to some degree, express an ideology of the transcendence of art—without the supporting armature of religious intention or iconography—necessarily affected their work. Yet they continue to paint as Buddhists, utilizing Buddhist themes and stylistic and iconographic references, and defining their moral position in Buddhist terms. The mural painting at Wat Buddhapadipa offers an opportunity to explore this practical relationship between art and religion, in different regimes of value. This relationship plays out in a contemporary world, which for these artists extends beyond national boundaries and yet remains very much grounded in cultural particularities. There, we see how artists resolve tensions between their experiences and the knowledge they gain as they search to find their place and as they have imagined their world on the walls of Wat Buddhapadipa.

chapter two

Long-Distance Merit-Making

"Helping our artisans is helping our country
Because then our art will enhance our reputation
So we take our place without shame
Among the great nations of the world."
—King Vajiravudh (Rama VI), c. 1913[1]

Khun Sawet

Khun Sawet Piamphongsant and I were sitting at our usual meeting place, on the balcony of his house overlooking the Chao Phraya River, one morning in early December of 1994 when he explained to me about making merit *(tham bun)*. At our first meeting in 1992, we had sat in the formal dining room downstairs. Since then, when I visited him at his home I would walk through the kitchen, remove my shoes at the bottom of the highly polished stairs, climb to the second floor, pass the locked glass cases filled with his extensive collection of Thai and Chinese porcelain, and go through his office out onto the balcony. The balcony is a small but pleasant space, cooled by river breezes and lined with plants. It serves as a kind of outdoor kitchen and office—shelves with dishes and implements sit against the house, as does a small refrigerator. Khun Sawet works there in the early morning at the round marble table, answering correspondence, translating, and writing poetry. When we chatted, I would sit next to him, for the river traffic was loud: long-tailed boats filled with tourists ply the river, tugs towing strings of barges chug by, river taxis cross from Thonburi to Bangkok, stopping just below at the pier, Tha Phra Athit. Despite the noisy river, Khun Sawet never raised his voice. Tape-recording was impossible, so I kept my notebook close at hand. We nearly always spoke in English (his was excellent), with careful attention to the precise wording and meaning of what he intended to say. After a few hours of talk, we would eat a simple but wonderful meal—a fresh crab omelet, soup made with mushrooms brought from Chiang Rai—prepared by his cook and served to us on the balcony.

That December morning, I asked him if he had ever been ordained as a monk. Yes, he said, once for three months at Wat Mahathat, when he had been a young man of twenty-five or twenty-six years.[2] As a monk practicing the precepts, he had tried but failed to understand "the

essence of Buddhism." Years later, in 1945, he had entered Wat Mahathat for a month-long retreat to learn meditation under the tutelage of its abbot, Phra Phimolathan. There he experienced the breakthrough he had sought, attaining the deep inner peace that comes with finally understanding the greatness of the Buddha. He described learning to be "exactly in the present" and to acknowledge that which arises—the noise of a bird, tiredness, loud music, an itch—then passes away. He got up from the chair to show me the steps of walking meditation, one of the techniques of *vipassana* practice. "I am walking," he said as he deliberately, in slightly slow motion, raised his foot, placed it forward and down again, then shifted his weight forward and raised his other foot. He walked back and forth across the balcony several times. He then spoke of the people at the retreat crying, of he himself crying from the gratitude that came with understanding and the release of fear. "And," he said, "out of gratefulness, to the Lord Buddha, comes the desire to *tham bun*."

While slightly stooped and careful in his movements, Khun Sawet is usually in superb health. He is deeply religious. He meditates regularly and has long been committed to the propagation of *vipassana* meditation techniques.[3] He is chair of the Vipassana Foundation, established at Wat Mahathat, and as a result of his experiences there, the abbot asked him to write a book explaining *vipassana* meditation techniques, first published in 1960. Meditation and the insights he had reached through that practice would account, I assumed, for his aura of calm, happiness, and intense focus. He continued to maintain this aura through the long months of unremitting pain and restricted activity following a fall that resulted in a cracked tailbone.

At age eighty-five (in 1995, when I saw him most frequently), Khun Sawet was still a busy man. In his words, "I have no leisure. I have to work every day . . . for the people, for the art." He has many extensive and complicated projects to which he is deeply committed, including writing poetry, assisting in temple administration, promoting the works of Sunthorn Puu (one of Thailand's greatest poets), collecting ceramics, and gardening. In addition to his sponsorship and management of Wat Buddhapadipa through the London Buddhist Temple Foundation, Khun Sawet has long been the treasurer of Wat Mahathat, the largest temple in Bangkok. In this capacity he oversees the management of nearby commercial properties owned by the temple, reconciles temple accounts, and prepares Wat Mahathat's annual financial report to the Religious Affairs Department.

Khun Sawet's understanding of art arises in no small part out of his deep passion for Thai literature, stories that he enjoyed retelling on any occasion. When we visited Wat Phra Singh in Chiang Mai, he pointed to scenes in the newly cleaned murals while recounting the story of Phra Sangthong, Prince of the Golden Conch. When he received me one morning, I found him on the balcony writing poetry based upon the story of Phra Lau, a seventeenth-century romance, and he immediately told the tale to me at great length. But he spoke most frequently of his admiration for the poetry of Sunthorn Puu. Several times he explained the intricate structure and beautiful internal rhyming of the poet's stanzas. He often extolled the poet's greatness, once playfully describing Shakespeare as the "Sunthorn Puu of England." Khun Sawet was chair of the Sunthorn Puu Society, with the mission of spreading awareness of his work among Thai schoolchildren by distributing his works to local libraries and sponsoring

contests. Khun Sawet is himself a poet; he often referred to his "next project," a one-thousand-verse poem to honor his wife.[4]

The son of a Sino-Thai merchant in Rayong Province, Khun Sawet had been educated in both law and economics at Thammasat University in Bangkok. As an eight-time member of Parliament and as deputy prime minister and minister of finance, he has served in various Thai governments for thirty years—spanning regimes from the ultranationalist authoritarianism of Prime Minister Field Marshal Phibunsongkhram to the modern democratic idealism of Kukrit Pramoj. As have many members of the Thai elite, he has traveled extensively, both as an official representative of the Thai government and as a private citizen. On tour with his wife and other Thais, he has visited countries throughout Europe, North and South America, East Asia, Southeast Asia, Africa, and the Pacific. Through travel, Khun Sawet sought knowledge of the world and to "promote world peace."[5] He has hosted Peace Corps volunteers eight times. Several of his children were educated abroad; one currently resides in the United States.

Khun Sawet's travels fed another passion. He took keen delight in describing and exhibiting his various gardening projects, especially the grounds of his second home in Chiang Rai. There he has planted, literally, the fruits of his travels: trees and shrubs from all over the world—Nepal, China, the United States, and England. These plants include a magnolia and an apple seedling from Wat Buddhapadipa itself. At one of our last meetings he served me coffee made from beans he had grown in his Chiang Rai garden. He has also established a park near his hometown of Rayong as a memorial to his wife.

We traveled together, visiting numerous temples and museums. On these occasions, he compared both older and contemporary temple mural paintings to those he had sponsored at Wat Buddhapadipa. When introducing himself to temple abbots, museum personnel, or academics we encountered on our visits, he always mentioned the Wimbledon temple and his central role in its construction, as well as his long service as government minister. Although in this manner he sought and received public validation for his meritorious actions and his standing in Thai society—indeed, sponsoring a temple ranks at the top of merit-making activities—Khun Sawet presents a modest demeanor, devoid of ostentation in appearance or temperament.

Many people whom I interviewed agreed that Khun Sawet's unstinting efforts had propelled the financing of the *ubosot* construction and the mural painting. On his balcony early one morning, he described his role in the London Buddhist Temple Foundation, saying, "I write the letters, I am the typist, I fix the meetings. . . . I try to do everything for the foundation." "Then, you did all the work?" I asked. He chuckled, replying, "If I do not do it, I do not know who will." His fund-raising for Wat Buddhapadipa has continued since the completion of the murals, with long-range plans for permanent classrooms and a building to house those who attend meditation retreats.[6]

An Expanding Economy of Merit

Through his personal commitment to propagating *vipassana* meditation techniques and his activism as a layman at Wat Mahathat, Khun Sawet exemplifies the gradual laicization of Thai

Theravada Buddhism and other contemporary realignments within Thai society between the laity, the *sangha* (Buddhist community), and the state.[7] Despite serving in the Thai government at the time of his initial involvement with the temple in the early 1960s, the thrust of Khun Sawet's interests in Wat Buddhapadipa has been personal and primarily religious. He comprised only one of a large group of wealthy contributors to Wat Buddhapadipa, albeit the most pivotal one by his and others' reckoning.

In contrast, the involvement of another sponsor, Dr. Konthi Suphamongkhon, represents interests of the Thai state in continuing its historical position as protector of the Thai *sangha* and in promoting the national interests of Thailand abroad. Dr. Konthi became involved with Wat Buddhapadipa while serving as Thai ambassador to the United Kingdom from 1970–1976; his engagement was necessarily from his position as a government official. However, he also expressed intense personal motivation and religious commitment. The respective positions of the two men do not imply any theoretical opposition—far from it. The distinction points to multiple positions, an overlapping array of interests among these sponsors within an expanding Thai economy of merit.[8] Differing interests can give rise to competition and sometimes conflict between individuals and the institutions to which they are attached—emerging lay Buddhist groups, individual temples, the *sangha,* and the Thai state.[9]

Notably, Khun Sawet, Dr. Konthi, and their friends and associates belong to an older generation of Thai elites—in their late seventies and eighties at the time of my research—who gave or arranged large sums of money to build the *ubosot* and paint the murals at Wat Buddhapadipa.[10] Wat Buddhapadipa projects their elite vision of Thai national culture, one linked to their positions within the Thai social hierarchy, the social dynamics of the gift/donation, the history of Anglo-Thai relations, and notions of "Thainess" that have shaped its construction architecturally and as social space. National and monarchical pride suffused the fund-raising activities of this older generation of Thais. Following the example of King Chulalongkorn, who traveled throughout Europe and sent his son to England to be educated at Sandhurst and Oxford, many of Wat Buddhapadipa's sponsors had been educated in the United Kingdom, France, or Germany. Adopting a temple in London seemed not at all extraordinary, as they had become quite comfortable in Europe. As a former senior government official explained, "For many of my generation, London is our second home. We are so used to it, we know it so well."

However, the temple occupies a global economic and cultural space that has emerged since the 1970s, an arena where Thais circulate as investors, corporate functionaries, students, artists, and tourists, and one that shifts the grounds for the formation of "Thai" identity and the terms of cultural citizenship.[11] The mural painters Chalermchai, Panya, and their assistants represent a younger generation straining to attain elite status. The young professionals, bankers, and stockbrokers who contributed to their mural project by buying their art in fund-raising exhibitions also seek such status, historically reserved in Thailand for royalty, civil servants, and the military. This younger generation's involvement with Wat Buddhapadipa is structured by issues of investment, taste, and Thai identity as much as the merit attained through building temples. While the ethics of merit accumulation through public giving and the pursuit of individual sal-

vation remain important to many in this younger generation, the explicit ties of merit-making to nation building, a relationship articulated by the older sponsors, have attenuated.

Lavish merit-making by individuals that intersects with the expansion of business interests or entrenchment of political regimes characterizes other Southeast Asian modernities as well as Thailand (Schober 1995). The experiences of Thai urban elites abroad through education and travel, their globalized business, political, and social connections, and the ethic of long-distance merit-making at faraway temples like Wat Buddhapadipa in Wimbledon or Wat Thai in Los Angeles add a more ecumenical, pan-Buddhist cast to such activity. I do not (nor cannot) interpret the intentions of individual sponsors in their giving except as they have personally relayed such intentions to me; rather, I note the convergence of diverse interests in the discourse and practices of merit-making.

To a large degree, the construction and administration of Wat Buddhapadipa represents a transnational division of labor. While the mechanics of establishing the temple—finding a suitable location, negotiating with English authorities, obtaining necessary permits, and overseeing construction of the *ubosot*—took place in the Thai embassy and through Thais residing in London, the bulk of the fund-raising was accomplished in Bangkok. The London Buddhist Temple Foundation, governed by Khun Sawet, Dr. Konthi, and other members of its executive committee, directed the fund-raising activities, supplemented by a subcommittee of London residents. In a real sense, the executive committee was mobile, as individual members traveled back and forth between Bangkok and London quite frequently. During the years of constructing the *ubosot* and painting the murals, Khun Sawet estimated he traveled to London two or three times a year, totaling at least twenty visits. Other committee members traveled as diplomats and officials of the Thai government, others still on business, pleasure trips, or in combination with the annual *kathin* ceremony to donate robes to monks at the end of their annual retreat during the rainy season.

At the behest of his former professor, Dr. Konthi, Thai Prime Minister General Kriangsak Chomanan served as chair of the London Buddhist Temple Foundation.[12] General Kriangsak arranged for the Thai government to donate 10 million baht (about US$400,000) to the building of the *ubosot* by inserting an appropriation in the supporting budget of the Religious Affairs Department. General Kriangsak also raised money from personal friends and associates. The government of his successor, Prem Tinsulanonda, budgeted 6 million baht (US$240,000) for Wat Buddhapadipa. In addition, through connections between Khun Sawet and the then minister of finance, the Bureau of the National Lottery allotted 3 million baht (US$120,000).

Like Khun Sawet, some of these sponsors sought to promote Buddhism worldwide. Professor Sanya Dharmasakti, active in the World Buddhist Organization, had assisted in establishing the first Thai Buddhist temple in London in 1965. While prime minister in the early 1970s, he attempted to involve the Thai government in the Wat Buddhapadipa project.[13] In addition to having personal attachments to England, many key supporters had connections to the tourist industry as well, as developers and hotel builders. Major donors (those giving 1 million baht, or about US$40,000) included Khunying Somsri Charoen-Rajapark, a developer of upscale hotels

and shopping plazas—named in one magazine profile as "Thailand's Leading Businesswoman." Another sponsor with similar interests was Senglert Baiyok of the Baiyok family, which in 1995 in Bangkok was constructing the tallest hotel in the world, Baiyok Tower. Uthen Techaphaibul, owner of Bangkok's World Trade Center, also contributed one million baht.

A key—and some have argued *the* key—sector of the Thai economic elite is the Sino-Thai community of merchants and bankers. This sector has moved aggressively to sponsor important merit-making rituals such as the *kathin* ceremony throughout Thailand to enhance public legitimacy for their increasingly central role in the Thai political economy.[14] Seats on the London Buddhist Temple Foundation and its executive committee were reserved for those who held important positions within this community, such as the chair of the Thai-Chinese Chamber of Commerce or the chair of the Thai Bankers' Association. Members of prominent banking families, representing "the largest, wealthiest and most profitable enterprises in Thailand" (Hewison 1981, 397) show up frequently on the lists of the foundation's committee members who raised money for Wat Buddhapadipa. These individuals appear on the donor lists with individual gifts, along with contributions from the banks they control: Bangkok Bank (Sophonpanich family), Thai Farmers Bank (Lamsam family), and Bangkok Metro Bank, First Bangkok City Bank, and Bank of Asia (Techaphaibul family). Other contributing banks included the Bank of Ayutthaya, Siam Commercial Bank, Thai Military Bank, and the British-based Hong Kong and Shanghai Banking Corporation. Numerous corporations, financial firms, and private foundations contributed as well, along with hundreds of Thais and *farang*.

Vipassana in England

Khun Sawet explained to me the origins of the Wat Buddhapadipa temple with this clear statement: "We would like to promote Buddhism in England."[15]

Khun Sawet and his wife had been traveling in Europe. In his capacity as chair of the Vipassana Foundation committee at Wat Mahathat, he visited the Buddhist Association of Hamburg, West Germany, where twin monks of German origin had established a Buddhist center. In London Khun Sawet and his wife visited the Thai embassy. One of the embassy employees, a former Wat Mahathat monk who knew Khun Sawet, told him about the Buddhavihara in Hampstead, a lay meditation center for English Buddhists founded in 1956 by a Thai-ordained English monk. In the early 1960s local Thais attended a Singhalese temple, the only other Theravada Buddhist temple in London. Phra Ananthaphothii, the monk at the Buddhavihara, requested Khun Sawet's help in arranging for the abbot of Wat Mahathat, Phra Rajsidhimuni, to come and (in Khun Sawet's words) "teach English people . . . about practice." Phra Rajsidhimuni had studied *vipassana* meditation techniques in Burma and held the "highest meditation rank" in Thailand. Khun Sawet related to me his answer: "I told him okay. I will try. Phra Rajsidhimuni is my *khru,* my *ajarn*."[16]

In private and published interviews, Khun Sawet gave prominence to the promotion of *vipassana* meditation specifically, rather than Buddhism more generally, in his accounts of the establishment of Wat Buddhapadipa. In the context of that period and tensions within the Thai

sangha, his involvement and efforts to get Phra Rajsidhimuni to England had political as well as religious significance. These events occurred during a time when competition had intensified between two sects of Thai Buddhism—the Mahanikai and Thammayut (so-called "reform") orders—and when the Thai state sought to maintain tight political control of the population.[17] Thailand in the late 1960s and early 1970s experienced increasing political absolutism under the direction of army-backed and installed chiefs of state. Official policy under Prime Minister Field Marshall Sarit emphasized national development and political integration at the expense of the democratic ideals of the 1932 coup that had abolished the absolute monarchy in Siam.

Phra Rajsidhimuni's predecessor as abbot of Wat Mahathat in Bangkok (the largest temple in Thailand and of the Mahanikai order) was the charismatic and ambitious Phra Phimolathan.[18] He promoted *vipassana* meditation throughout Thailand by bringing abbots and monks from the provinces to Bangkok for training, involving nuns *(mae chii)* and numerous laypeople alike, and by encouraging the establishment of meditation centers.[19] This program posed a "political threat" to Sarit, since, as Tambiah has noted,

> *political* power was grounded theoretically in a monk's *spiritual* excellence and *religious* achievement. This source and basis of power were inaccessible to lay politicians and soldiers whose power rested on the control of physical force. . . . Insofar as there exist mechanisms within the sangha [such as *vipassana* centers] for generating collective support in society that can be claimed to be independent of and immune to naked political power, the political authority will seek to curb them. (1976, 260, emphasis in original)[20]

Sarit accused Phra Phimolathan of being a Communist (a major concern of the Thai military at that time) and of instigating attacks against his rival in the Thammayut order. On an inflated charge of violating the *vinaya,* or the precepts obeyed by monks, Phra Phimolathan was forcibly disrobed and thrown in jail. While the Supreme Court later cleared him of the charge, he lived out his days as an ordinary monk at Wat Mahathat.

As an active lay worshiper at Wat Mahathat, Khun Sawet himself felt threatened by Sarit's actions. "At that time," he told me one evening, "I waited for a knock at the door, because I was the man nearest the abbot, his disciple." He indicated that because of what had happened to his teacher, Phra Rajsidhimuni "dared not take action" in terms of the invitation to go to London. Khun Sawet himself wrote a letter to the Supreme Patriarch, the head of the Thai *sangha,* urging him to support the proposal and noting the strong requests by monks in Europe for a qualified teacher of *vipassana* meditation techniques. In his letter, which he recounted to the abbot of Wat Buddhapadipa, he argued further that the invitation extended to Phra Rajsidhimuni "was an important opportunity" and that the "core or heart of Buddhism" was to "teach people of other advanced nations [that Buddhism] is a good thing." His letter asserted that this "will be to promote Buddhism, spread it more extensively. What is important will be the enhancement of the Thai Sangha" (Phrakhru Palaat 1988, 8–9).

Khun Sawet's letter was passed through the Religious Affairs Department to the Supreme Patriarch, who granted Phra Rajsidhimuni and his secretary/interpreter permission to go to Lon-

don in 1964.[21] Upon their arrival at the Buddhavihara on Vishaka Bucha Day, an important day of offering that celebrates the birth, enlightenment, and death of the Buddha, they immediately held a meditation class.

A Proper Thai *Wat*

A small group of Thai nationals and students living in London met in 1964 to discuss the desirability of establishing an "office of its own," in the words of one man, for the Thai Buddhist mission now residing at the Hampstead Buddhavihara.[22] They intended the new temple—the first official Thai monastery abroad—to serve "all nationalities," not exclusively Thai (Konthi 1982, 26). To that end, the group formed the Committee for the Establishment of a Buddhist Temple in London, known also as the London Buddhist Temple Foundation. Khun Sawet chaired its executive committee. Phra Rajsidhimuni requested money from the Thai Religious Affairs Department for a new location for the temple, now called Wat Thai Buddhavihara. Through the active lobbying of the director-general of the department, the government of Prime Minister Thanom Kittikachorn granted the committee 1.8 million baht (US$72,000) to purchase a house in Richmond, another London suburb. As diasporic Buddhist communities frequently do when establishing temples in residential neighborhoods, the committee converted the house for religious use without substantial alterations: a large reception room on the ground floor became the shrine room, the upper floor monks' quarters. The committee, chaired by the then Thai deputy prime minister, himself of royal blood, applied for and was granted royal patronage for the temple. It was dedicated in August 1966 by the king and queen of Thailand as Wat Buddhapadipa, a name meaning "light of Buddhism" and one chosen by His Majesty.[23]

In 1970, Dr. Konthi Suphamongkhon, then ambassador to the United Kingdom, proposed converting the modest one-acre property in Richmond to a "real temple in the Thai conception" (personal communication). To be a proper Thai *wat,* buildings must serve the ceremonial needs of the Thai Theravada ritual calendar, including the ordination of monks, which takes place in the *ubosot* or chapel marked as sacred space. The foundation began to raise money for the construction of such an *ubosot*. To facilitate meditation, the monks in the Richmond temple had previously erected small kiosks *(kuti)* around the property in which individual meditators could sit. The local council of Richmond had declared these kiosks "substandard" and required their removal. After this incident, community members protested vociferously at a public hearing the proposed construction of the new chapel. One Thai member believed neighbors feared that a new chapel would encourage street activity and noise, apparently confusing Thai monks with members of the Hare Krishna sect, prominent on the streets of London in the early 1970s. The member of parliament representing the Richmond jurisdiction indicated that, given community opposition, he could not support the Thai plans to expand the temple.

The foundation began considering alternate sites for Wat Buddhapadipa. They became aware of the pending sale of the Barrogill estate in Wimbledon—in the words of one member, a "superb property." On four acres, Barrogill included an ornamental lake, landscaped gardens, and an expansive, elevated lawn behind the main house. The estate had been open to the public for

visits—a tourist attraction then and now. However, when the owner died, his widow put the property up for sale because of high taxes. The Thai embassy purchased Barrogill in 1975.[24] The foundation committee commissioned plans to construct the Thai-style *ubosot* on the grassy hill behind the main building. The embassy submitted the original building plans to the local council, which then passed them along to the Ministry of the Environment. The ministry held ultimate jurisdiction, since the permit request originated from a foreign government.

To introduce the idea of building a Thai *ubosot* in the middle of Wimbledon, the monks posted a sign at the temple and, as they walked through the village, invited their neighbors for Sunday tea and biscuits. For six months, people came every weekend—sometimes only one person, sometimes four or five, sometimes a family. According to one participant, the local residents and members of the foundation committee "would chat about this and that," but the committee members always brought the subject back to their plans for building an *ubosot*. As an example of a "Thai temple" they passed around a photograph of the Temple of the Emerald Buddha at the Grand Palace in Bangkok.[25] In addition, the head of the local council visited Thailand, where the Thai contractor hired by the foundation escorted him to the Grand Palace to view the real temples. The permit process required political intervention on the international level, as well as acquiescence to concerns at the local level. In the end, the British minister of the environment contacted the Thai ambassador, indicated that any public objections were "not serious," and offered his approval of the *ubosot* plans to the embassy as a Christmas gift. The local council did, however, stipulate that the landscaping of the grounds could not be altered without council permission—according to Khun Sawet, to even "cut a branch."

The attempts by this group of Thais to construct a "real" Thai temple in London reveal local tensions around what were perceived as "foreign" incursions into "English" neighborhoods.[26] Some expressed this literally as worries that "millions of Thai would be flocking in there every two or three days." These fears have eased considerably in recent years—one neighbor relayed to a Thai friend how he now believed the temple had brought tranquility to the area—although it receives a few complaints about parking and litter during festivals.[27]

Expanding the Nation

The London Buddhist Temple Foundation organized the fund-raising to build the *ubosot* and to paint the murals in multiple arenas. The foundation had requested that the British architect plan construction of the *ubosot* at Wat Buddhapadipa in stages, beginning with the underground portion, an assembly hall. The British firm warned of possibly escalating building costs and the conventions of building contracts; this pressured the foundation to pursue less conventional fund-raising strategies than individual and corporate donations. They approached the Thai government for sizable budgetary allocations.[28] Among the top echelons of the Thai economic elite, individuals, foundations, and corporations made donations in Bangkok. The general public also contributed through individual donations in Thailand and England, and Thais through merit-making excursions to London. The foundation raised money for the murals through art exhibitions, art sales, and festivals at the temple itself. The temple's total cost

was 46 million baht (approximately US$1.84 million), including the cost of purchasing the Barrogill estate. Of the building costs—not including the mural paintings—approximately 16 million baht (US$640,000) were given by the Thai government, 21 million baht (US$840,000) by private and individual donations. The murals cost an additional 9 million baht (US$360,000).

Fund-raising strategies to build the *ubosot* and paint the murals at Wat Buddhapadipa reveal the multilayered, overlapping interpretations of Thai conceptions of making merit. Merit-making enhances one's own current and future prospects, does good for the community, promotes Buddhism, honors the king, and furthers the interests of the Thai nation in an international arena, thereby expanding the Thai economy of merit. The Thai embassy in London linked Wat Buddhapadipa to the Thai nation by making it known to prospective donors that the temple "belonged to" the embassy as a cultural attachment. In discussions on this issue, some donors indicated that making merit by giving money to build a temple was comparable to Western forms of giving to charity.[29] Both actions contribute to a social good and enhance the status of the donor; Thai merit-making differs from Western charitable giving to the degree to which Thai politics, social interactions, and religion are entwined, rather than separated legally or by custom or practice. In the specific approaches foundation members made to potential donors, the elements of this ideological triad—monarchy, nation, and religion—were bundled and interchangeable.[30]

Khun Sawet raised money for the murals mostly among his network of political associates. When asked how these potential donors understood the nature and importance of the project, he answered that his own eminent position and status gave the project its particular character. "I was in politics for thirty years. I was a member of parliament eight times, and I used to be minister of finance," he said. "They [the donors] understood the murals' importance for Thailand and for Buddhism." When I asked him why people gave so generously—ten individuals donated 1 million baht (US$40,000) each—he explained to me,

> Thai people love to make contributions for the Buddha. The businessmen usually make a contribution when some politician asks them for [in the name of] the people, for the king. When some famous people ask for the king and the queen, they are pleased to make a contribution, because they love their king. The king is the protector of the religion.

His framing of donations to Wat Buddhapadipa as "a sacrifice for the king" rather than as money to build a temple structure adds important dimensions to the request. It implies that the merit accrued from this particular donation attaches to the king, further increasing the donor's status as a merit maker.[31] From a different angle, it becomes a subtle form of social control. As one informant noted, "You cannot refuse a request connecting to the king," especially when the request directly promotes Buddhism. As another component of the merit bundle, the Thai government—in the person of Khun Sawet, a former minister—represents a promoter and protector of Buddhism.

Merit-making represents more than a gift or donation by an individual to support Buddhism. As a profoundly social act, merit exchanges bear meanings that adhere in relations between individuals and the structures of the Thai social hierarchy.[32] As exemplified above, the nature of

the social relationship between the person making the request and the donor very much shapes the exchange. As one informant explained in the case of contributors to Wat Buddhapadipa, "They want to help the government." When I asked if a primary motivation here would be to make merit, he replied, "Not really. In Thai culture, if a person comes to you to ask for some help . . . if you are asked by the prime minister or somebody high-ranking, you say yes." He glossed this request with the Thai notion of *kraeng jai,* or reluctance to cause embarrassment or public distress to another person (also "consideration") by directly declining a request for help. Such a denial would cause the person asking to lose face.[33] In upper-class Thai society, prominent people have a social obligation to act as host *(chao phap)* for fund-raising activities for temples. In this context, the fund-raising exchange is balanced. How much the host gave in previous fund-raising efforts factors into how much the solicited will give; if peers, the amounts will be at least the same or a bit more.

One afternoon at his home office, a retired high-ranking official of Thai Airways International discussed with me the mechanics of Buddhist long-distance merit-making. He also distinguished between the two main occasions when Thais give money to support temples: *kathin* and *phaapaa* (literally, forest cloth).[34] *Kathin* refers to the ritualistic giving of monks' robes and other daily necessities at the end of the annual rainy-season retreat *(phansaa)* (Plate 7). Thais organize *phaapaa,* also ritual offerings to monks—frequently in the form of a "money tree" *(ton ngern)*—throughout the year rather than on a single occasion. Other than the timing, the two forms do not differ substantially. Both types of offerings are framed in terms of giving to temples for specific purposes. For example, the airline official explained, perhaps the abbot of a temple wished to build a new *ubosot*. Conceived as a long-term project, perhaps lasting over the lifetime of the abbot, the temple would set up a yearly campaign, with the donations from each year intended to fund a particular phase of the construction: setting the foundation or constructing the roof. Temples frame their fund-raising efforts also in terms of maintenance or annual budgets. The temple (or its major supporters) often publishes brochures, describing the temple or the specific construction project underway. Individual supporters distribute these brochures and small white envelopes among their friends and colleagues. In our conversation, the airline official described his own fund-raising efforts for the Wimbledon temple, emphasizing that those efforts did not require any kind of "formal approach." Rather, he would say,

> we are going to have a *thaawd phaapaa* in order to raise funds for the first project, say the roof or the foundation. The aim is ten years for the whole project. But this year we're going to have the merit-making—a *thaawd phaapaa* or a *thaawd kathin*—to go to London. And we try to spell out that the architect or some artists are going [to work in London] for nothing and that Thai Airways provides them with the tickets. People get quite interested. They want to join the *kathin* or the *phaapaa*. And we print pamphlets, thousands of them, in order to give to people on the streets. I might bring a hundred and give to all my friends and say "merit-making, fifty baht or one hundred baht, it doesn't matter." . . . People give according to their strength, and through the effort of many people, the cumulative sum gets very substantial.

Royal Status, Royal Markings

As a cultural production of the Thai state, other aspects of "official" Thai culture—those promulgated and controlled by agencies of the state—are equally relevant to the prestige of Wat Buddhapadipa. That the temple was granted royal patronage gave it special status as a project of the Thai nation and in the mind of the Thai public. At Wat Buddhapadipa the symbolic connections between the temple and Thai and British royalty underscore long-standing political, social, and commercial relationships between Thailand and England, adding royalist luster to the national image of Thailand in England. Temples under royal patronage *(wat luang)* are those founded by kings or, as in the case of Wat Buddhapadipa, founded by lay supporters and gifted to the king. They are administered directly by the Religious Affairs Department and in a broad sense represent the "bonding of the sangha to the polity via the ecclesiastical hierarchy" (Tambiah 1976, 353). Attaining the status of a *wat luang* endowed Wat Buddhapadipa and, I would argue, its sponsors with additional merit, for in a Thai worldview of the monarchy as *dhammaraja* (righteous king), persons, practices, or objects that are designated as royal *(luang)* possess qualities of perfection, virtue, and great merit (Gray 1991, 47).

Thai and English royalty—the king and queen of Thailand, the king's sister Princess Galayani Vadhana, and the English Princess Alexandra—have participated in various dedication ceremonies. Members of the Thai royal family routinely participate in Thai temple dedication ceremonies throughout the world; the attendance of English royalty certainly enhanced the status of this temple, both to local Thais in London and its Wimbledon neighbors. Members of the Thai royal family have sat as committee members of the London Buddhist Temple Foundation; Prince Narathip Pongpraphan served as the first chair of the foundation when it was established in 1965 until 1972. Offering a chance for the Thai public to make merit in the name of the king in the fund-raising for Wat Buddhapadipa, the boundary stones *(luuk nimit)* were gilded daily for one week in front of the Grand Palace during the Rattanakosin Bicentennial Celebration in 1982.[35] Photographs of members of the Thai royal family figure prominently in the books that document the history and murals of the temple. Dr. Konthi's history, *The Buddhapadipa Chapel,* for instance, even includes an excerpt from the king's address to the Grand Assembly of the Buddhist Association of Thailand on the responsibility and methods of propagating the Buddhist religion. The inclusion of this address further casts the establishment—and thus sponsorship—of Wat Buddhapadipa as a supreme act of Buddhist devotion (1982, 2).

Temples and Tourism

Of special interest to me was why donors gave so generously to a faraway temple that they might never see without long-distance travel. Dr. Konthi's family foundation, funded by his mother, offered one million baht to the foundation, thereby inaugurating the fund-raising efforts to build the *ubosot*.[36] On this issue Dr. Konthi identified important additional factors in

Thai forms of group merit-making—those of "having fun" (*tham hai sanuk)* and "going traveling" (*pai thiaw*). This was the case in his own family, as he reminisced to me one afternoon:

> My mother used to be very religious. She went to make merit at temples all over. Going by bus, very crowded with people. I used to tell her, "You can make merit here. Why go make merit so far?" She likes to do that; she has friends going with her, to see new places, have adventures. That is why, when she passed away, I feel she would not blame me if I gave her money to this temple in London.

Tham bun tours to visit charismatic monks in forest *wat* upcountry, organized through the workplace or temples or by enterprising individuals, have become enormously popular among Thais (cf. Taylor 1993). In response to my surmising that one factor in assessing merit accumulation might be the distance involved, a Thai friend studying in the United States confirmed: "The further away you go to make merit, the more merit you get." This friend lived near Phoenix; she observed that Thais from Los Angeles, or even from Bangkok, came to her temple in Phoenix to make merit, while she and her friends would travel to New Mexico.

The issue of long-distance merit-making and the sponsorship of Wat Buddhapadipa must be set in the context of a growing number of Thais involved in international affairs, the increasing participation by Thailand in a globalizing economy, and a burgeoning Thai elite sending their children abroad for education. Merit-making occasions that connect a mobile Bangkok elite to a temple abroad can occur frequently. Since Wat Buddhapadipa is an "official" temple, the itinerary of any official delegation from Thailand automatically includes a visit to Wat Buddhapadipa; such visits always include donations. The foundation and Thai Airways International organized *kathin* tours to the temple annually or biannually. These tours coupled merit-making through temple sponsorship with expanded arenas of travel in which, in the Thai point of view, "you can have a good time, enjoy your time there, and also do something good for charity." Finally, with Thai businesses establishing operations and making investments in England, the number of Thai personnel living there also increased the local source of support for the temple.

While the donations to the Wat Buddhapadipa projects were asked for and received in general terms of supporting Buddhism, the nation, and the Thai king, it is clear that a nexus of personal connections and national business interests undergirded the transactions. Thai Airways International's support provides one example of this nexus. Panya and Chalermchai asked Khun Sawet to sponsor additional artists to help in order to meet his deadline of the king's sixtieth anniversary two-and-a-half years hence. Khun Sawet went to a friend high up in the administration of Thai Airways International for assistance with their tickets. He noted that the foundation had chartered two Boeing 747s from Thai Airways International to carry 150 monks and 200 supporters to the opening dedication of the *ubosot* at a total cost of around 4.5 million baht (US$180,000). The chief of marketing and head of operations at Thai Airways International had already become involved in the temple through his friendship with Dr. Konthi, who had brought him into the project when it was clear that Thai officials, Khun Sawet, and the ar-

chitect Praves Limparangsri would need to travel to London several times to plan the design and construction of the *ubosot*. Khun Sawet and the airline official devised a long-term arrangement between the foundation and Thai Airways International whereby the airline would donate round-trip tickets for the artists and Khun Sawet.[37] As an additional source of revenue for the temple tied to the airline's expansion into the European market, the foundation would also organize annual *kathin* and periodic *phaapaa* merit-making tours for wealthy Bangkok supporters, lasting a week or ten days. It would charter flights from Thai Airways International; the supporters would pay their own "very low fares," which would generate enthusiasm for traveling abroad. While in Wimbledon participants would attend *kathin* ceremonies at the temple, where they presented their offerings. They often took special food from Thailand—*nam phrik,* Thai chili paste, or mangoes and sticky rice—for the meal following the ceremony. The remainder of their time abroad was spent on tour *(pai thiaw),* continuing on to other cities in Europe or visiting with their children studying abroad. This arrangement was quite successful, as several of these merit-making tours were organized each year. The tours benefited the temple enormously, as many individuals became regulars on these tours, making substantial, tax-deductible donations to Wat Buddhapadipa on each tour.

The involvement of Thai Airways International and the Royal Thai government meshed the private motivations of Khun Sawet and Bangkok merit makers with national diplomatic and commercial interests. The Thai government owns and operates Thai Airways International; the Wat Buddhapadipa project was begun just at the time when the airline was starting operations to London and promoting Europe as a major market for Thai tourists.[38] As Thai Airways International has grown as a national airline, it has frequently offered special deals to Thai nationals, a benefactor business that could be seen as "doing good" for Thailand.[39] According to the airline official, the people who participated in these tours were from well-to-do families who could afford overseas travel. The tours promoted merit-making—by offering potential donors an opportunity to "see what is actually being done there"—and tourism at the same time. As a national company, Thai Airways International was another agent that promoted the transformation of Thai nationals into worldwide travelers. By expanding Thai travel to London, the airline further justified the need to support a Thai temple there, for Thais often visit temples on their travels.

Templegoers in Transnational Space

Khun Sawet and the foundation, the Thai embassy, and various abbots and monks constitute multiple sources of authority, giving rise to occasions of confusion, if not tension, at the temple. To a degree, these multiple authorities represent those within Thai society generally—for example, the Mahanikai and Thammayut orders within the Buddhist *sangha.* Tensions may adhere also in relations between the center (Bangkok) and the periphery (Wimbledon). That the periphery in this instance is located outside of Thailand has added important dimensions to daily life at the temple and how it has evolved. Wat Buddhapadipa's location in England has

posed not only logistical challenges for its Thai sponsors, as with English building codes and winters, but social ones as well. It has changed the terms by which interpersonal disagreements could be resolved—an appeal to English law and custom rather than Thai, for example. More generally, Wat Buddhapadipa and other temples abroad expand the social arena in which Thais operate, giving additional latitude to interpersonal relations and modes of resolving conflict. This has been the case with conflicts between the artists, monks, and local Thais over mural content, style, and details, discussed in greater detail in chapter 5. The competition between authorities is further exacerbated by a different orientation toward its community of supporters. On the one hand, the temple serves a *farang* community, both Buddhist and non-Buddhist, with the mission of attracting attention to Buddhism, teaching the Dhamma, encouraging meditation practice, and sending monks to other Buddhist centers in Europe. On the other hand, as Thais have congregated in London, Thai socioreligious forms—the donation of food, merit-making on behalf of the dead, blessing ceremonies, and the like—have reasserted themselves in this new context.

That there *was* a Thai community of any size presented a relatively new situation for Thai diplomats serving overseas when the Wat Buddhapadipa project began. During an interview in Bangkok, one former diplomat noted that similar developments had taken place in other parts of the world during the late 1960s and early 1970s, when the numbers of Thais living abroad increased dramatically. "In the old days," he reminisced, "we didn't have to contend with our own people, since there were not many of them. In the 1970s, students went to America, to restaurants in Europe, workers to Saudi Arabia. The overseas community became part of our job, part of our care." The United Kingdom offered no exception; merit-making at Wat Buddhapadipa itself has become a mechanism through which the boundaries of the Thai social and national community expanded. In the early 1970s at Wat Buddhapadipa's first location in Richmond, members of the Young Buddhist Association, an international Buddhist support organization of Thais, numbered around seventy and comprised local Thai students and personnel from the embassy. As international tourism expanded, the growing London hotel industry recruited Thai workers in Bangkok. Thai businesses opened branches in London. Thai Airways International, the national airline, located its European headquarters there. In the 1980s, after a boom in tourism to Thailand and a new awareness by the English of things Thai, Thais emigrated to open restaurants on London high streets, becoming as familiar and ubiquitous as the "local Indian." By the 1990s, the Thai community had expanded to around twenty thousand, the second largest outside of Thailand after Los Angeles.

The sponsors recognized early on that the temple would serve multiple communities. A clear statement of this position appears in Dr. Konthi's *The Buddhapadipa Chapel,* written to celebrate the dedication of the *ubosot* at Wat Buddhapadipa:

> In recent time [*sic*], there was an increasing number of Thai nationals residing in the United Kingdom. Beside the students in search of knowledge, there appeared Thai firms, banks and other business concerns which set their branches in London. Also were Thai na-

tionals who came here in the pursuit of their vocation. On the other hand, more and more Britons adhere to Buddhism, its Dhamma and its practical applications, as may be seen from the weekend service attendance. (1982, 10)

One morning, over coffee at the Regent Hotel, an official who served at the embassy under two Thai ambassadors during the late 1970s described to me the dimensions and problems of this double mission:

> We began to organize festivities and festivals. Here the problems started . . . with our own trustees. A temple is not just a place of worship but a community center. . . . The Buddhist temple in Sheen [Wat Buddhapadipa's location on Sheen Road in Richmond] had become a popular meditation center . . . more a place of study and meditation, rather than a Thai temple as such. People began to say the monks had been "moved over." The temple is becoming a busy place; people come and go so much. I had to put my foot down. It must be a community center and spiritual home of the Thai community. From my point of view, it cannot turn down members of the community who go to visit the monks to make merit . . . ask them to read their palms . . . more "serious" members of the temple backed away."[40]

Another former diplomat to the United Kingdom during this period articulated the same view that the temple's mission was to serve the Thai community. As we discussed the nature of expatriate communities in general, he elaborated, "[T]he further you are away from home, the special need is even more. A Thai working in London . . . sometimes you feel lonely, you have some suffering, where do you go? At least you go to the temple; at least you talk to the abbot. At least you say 'I have bad luck, I lost in gambling.' The abbot pours some holy water, sprinkles it, and you feel better."

As well as affecting the design of the temple itself, these competing orientations set in motion social dynamics that affected the work of the artists on the murals and that animate temple life today. Thais arrive daily at Wat Buddhapadipa to make merit by bringing food. Monks perform the life-cycle ceremonies and blessings through which Thais seek relief from the anxieties and sorrows of daily life. On Sundays, Anglo-Thai children attend Sunday school to learn the Thai language and culture. Semiannual festivals celebrating Loy Krathong and Songkran, two popular Thai holidays, appeal to both Thai and British communities.[41] In addition to sitting and walking meditation sessions four days a week, the temple hosts week-long meditation retreats attended largely by British Buddhists. At such times meditators must contend with the holiday-like atmosphere of Sunday's regular activities. The *ubosot*'s distinctive appearance and murals have made it a local tourist attraction; visitors steadily arrive just to see them, sometimes disrupting daily temple activities.

Authenticity and Articulations of "Thai Culture"

Of the handful of Thai Buddhist temples built outside of Thailand, the *ubosot* at Wat Buddhapadipa was the first built to project a vision of "traditional" Thai architecture. Concerns for the

"Thainess" of this temple derive from its location in England as much as from the interests of its sponsors, especially those representing the Thai government.[42] Its setting in an upper-class English suburb sets up a cultural model of Thai civilization with a historical depth that can measure favorably against that of the English. The roots of Anglo-Thai relations sink deep into the nineteenth century, when France and England were consolidating their colonial interests in countries neighboring Siam. In 1855, King Mongkut signed the Anglo-Siamese (Bowring) Treaty granting the British extensive trade concessions. Beginning in the 1880s, the Thai elite's increasing exposure to Europeans through trade, travel, diplomacy, and participation in international expositions engendered a new discourse of *siwilai,* the Thai transliteration of the condition of "being civilized" or "civilization." Increasingly conscious of Siam's position in an international arena, Kings Mongkut (Rama IV, r.1851–1868) and Chulalongkorn (Rama V, r.1868–1910) began to institute religious, administrative, and social reforms, many along European models they believed represented *siwilai*.[43] King Mongkut's deep passion for the "modern" sciences of geography and astronomy contributed to a new "spatial discourse" that implicitly compared Siam with other powers, and the Bangkok elite with other people within the kingdom.[44] Echoes of this discourse resonate in the design of the *ubosot* at Wat Buddhapadipa, a style that recalls both the nineteenth century in basic design and ornamentation *and* is most recognized as "Thai traditional" architecture.[45]

Buddhist temples in the West established to serve overseas communities of refugees, expatriates, or students are usually housed initially in existing buildings, as both commercial structures and residences are easily converted to suit the needs of a Buddhist community. Lay populations constructing "purpose-built" temples to accommodate an expanding population of worshipers and monks usually utilize local materials and conform to local architectural styles. European examples include the Buddhavihara in Wolverhampton, England, which serves a local Indian community of Buddhists; the Thai temple near Bern, Switzerland; and the expansions at Amaravati, Ajarn Sumedho's main temple in England, which one man described to me as looking like a Waitrose, an English supermarket chain.

Sponsors of the *ubosot* at Wat Buddhapadipa were concerned that it appear clearly to *be* a temple, especially given its location on the old Barrogill estate. One former ambassador noted that he had been quite pleased to see the new *ubosot* when he returned to London, for the prior facilities in East Sheen had been completely Western. "We don't have any signs of Thai architecture or of Thai cultural elements there. Even the hall we use for ceremonies is still Western style. So one hardly knows that this is the Buddhist temple, because from the outside it is clearly an English building," he said.

For others more intimately involved with the sponsorship, however, the planning of the design reflected intentions extending beyond making local Thais feel more at home. According to Khun Sawet in one interview, the members of the London Buddhist Temple Foundation wanted to construct a temple, "to show our Thai art." Dr. Konthi saw the temple as "a good way to disseminate Thai culture and Thai religious activities, to make it known that this is available."[46] A Thai architect working in London at the firm eventually hired by the foundation to oversee the planning of the *ubosot,* as required by English building codes, had submitted a project "in

the English style," which Khun Sawet rejected. Sawet and the foundation then turned to the Fine Arts Department, seeking another architect.[47] That department recommended Praves Limparangsri, their chief architect and a National Artist of Thailand who had extensive experience building royal cremation pavilions.[48]

The complex factors that play in the notions of "Thainess" at Wat Buddhapadipa reveal the contingent and negotiated nature of concepts of authenticity.[49] The foundation convinced English authorities to allow the construction of an *ubosot* that *looked* Thai; however, problems developed when the foundation insisted that it *be* Thai in terms of materials and construction techniques. According to English law, the project had to include an English contractor, so the architect and foundation negotiated that, given the Thai particularities of its design, the construction project would be split. The English contractor would build the structure of the *ubosot*. Thai contractors would manufacture the elaborately carved ornamentation; Thai workers would apply these decorative details to the building. Yet in designing the actual plan of the *ubosot,* its architect adjusted in significant ways to its English setting, while retaining basic Thai conceptions of religious architecture.

At his studio outside Bangkok, Ajarn Praves Limparangsri, the architect, explained to me that since the proposal involved religious architecture—"not the architecture of a palace, not the architecture of business"—he needed to seek the advice of the Supreme Patriarch, who told him that the spread of Buddhism abroad is "not a little difficult." He recommended that the architect seek permission to build the *ubosot* in Thai religious style, in order to identify the building as a religious structure. However, Ajarn Praves believed that the temple, especially because it was Thai, should fit into its English setting. For this reason, he walked the streets of London to understand that city's historical architectural styles and visited prominent landmarks. St. Paul's Cathedral and Windsor Castle were two he mentioned as being particularly impressive. He attempted to comprehend the English atmosphere, the English climate, English light, and, of course, English construction standards. One of Ajarn Praves' major concerns for the *ubosot* was the amount of light. In Thailand the interiors of *bot* are kept quite dark, with shuttered window openings along the sides that are appropriate for the blistering sun of that country's climate. England, he observed, often had gray and overcast weather. Thus he incorporated many more windows into the design, but retained a classically Thai shape to the windows: the *wimaan* (paradise) that symbolically recalls the peak of Mt. Meru, the sacred center of Buddhist cosmology (Plate 1).[50]

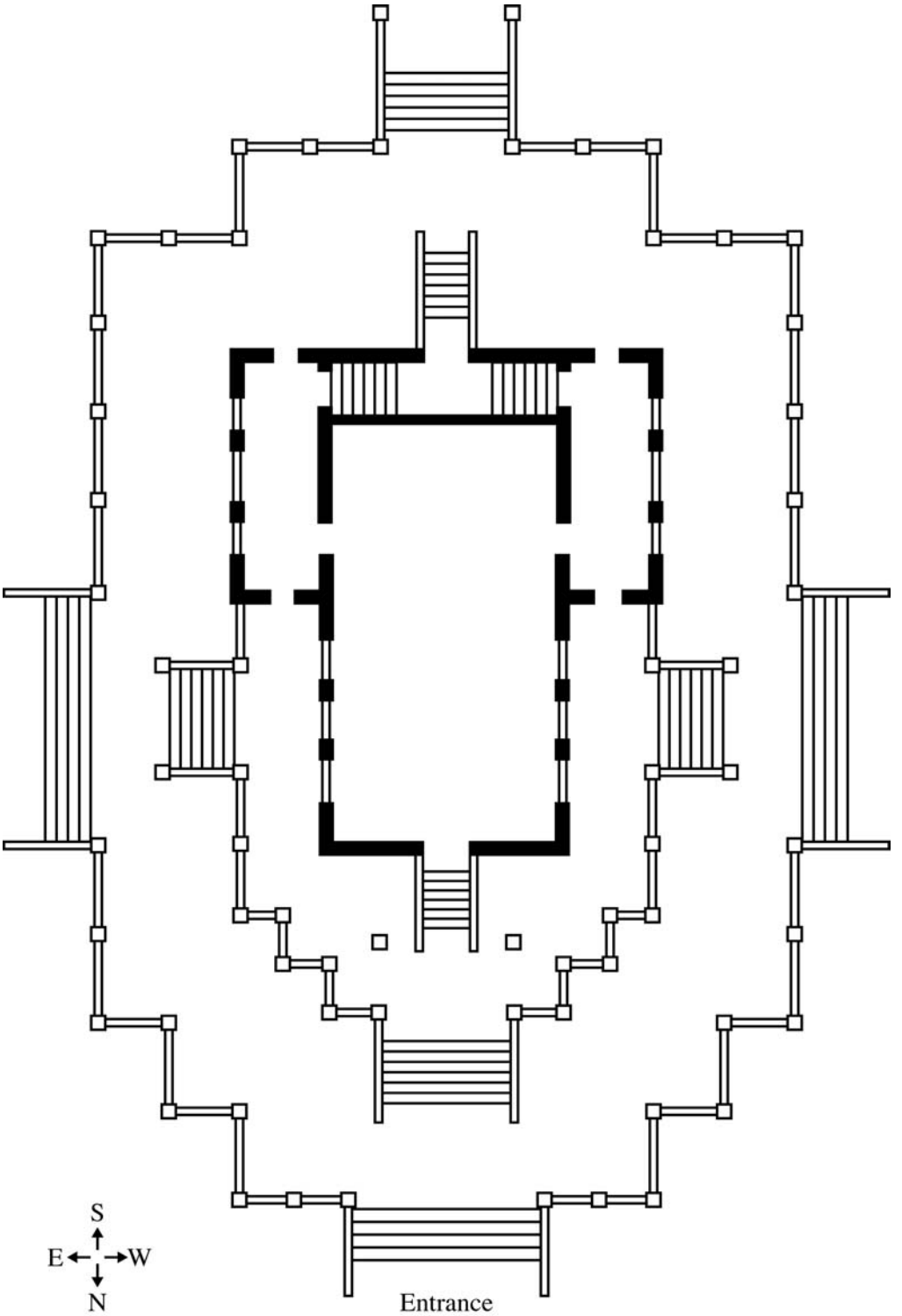
Ajarn Praves sought to establish some sort of harmony between a building "expressive of Thai philosophy" *(chai prachanaa thai)* but one transported to a foreign setting amid English architecture. For this reason, he remained at the Thai embassy in London, located behind Buckingham Palace, to prepare the plans while working in an office on the fourth floor overlooking imposing English institutions. One might speculate that this aerial view of the buildings below gave him the idea for his major adaptation of Thai religious architectural convention—that of adding two wings that transformed the roof of Wat Buddhapadipa into the shape of a cross, symbol of Jesus (Plate 8).[51] "If we look from the air," he told me, referring to the plan of Wat Buddhapadipa, "we will see a wooden cross against the yellow or orange earth." Another

consideration shaping this decision, he continued, was an uncertain future. Considering the London blitz of World War II, he feared that if hostilities or a war should ever break out between countries, religious structures had a better chance of remaining safe from bombs. "I thought about the safety of the architecture also," he said.

The roof tiles of the *ubosot* exemplify how the foundation defined the authentic, as well as the lengths to which they were prepared to go to attain authenticity. Khun Sawet and the committee of the foundation insisted that the roof tiles of the new *ubosot* in England be the same tiles used in Thailand for temple roofs. The British contractor hired by the foundation insisted that they use unglazed British tiles, but according to Khun Sawet, "I refused because it is not our custom to use these tiles. Our tiles must be painted [*khluab,* or glazed]." The local council granted the foundation a three-year reprieve from the building code to allow it time to find tiles that would meet British standards of stress resistance. In the meantime, the contractor installed Thai tiles on the roof. After the artists had begun to paint the murals in 1984, the Thai roof tiles began to break under the stress of the temperature extremes of the English climate. Water leaked inside the *bot,* ran down the walls, and ruined the preliminary work of the artists. Khun Sawet revealed that Chalermchai nearly quit the project at that point, claiming he had no time to "paint and paint again." Clearly, the foundation needed to replace all of the roof tiles with those made to British specifications. Khun Sawet made an extensive search for alternative tiles, even traveling to Berlin to examine a Chinese pagoda there with green tiles imported from China. He thought these might be suitable in terms of material and color, but they were twice the size of Thai temple tiles. According to him, "The roof of the temple must be beautiful. It must be the same as the roof in Thailand." He considered tiles produced by a French manufacturer, but they were the wrong size also, which would require changing the spacing of the tiles and the ornamentation. Khun Sawet then said, "I came back to Thailand. I told our contractor we have to change." A Bangkok tile manufacturer recast the roof tiles, requiring eight attempts and one year of experimentation before the tiles could meet the English building code standards.

In the end, the foundation spent 7.6 million baht (US$304,000) on architectural details. In addition to the roof tiles, the carved wooden temple gables inscribed with the royal insignia *(naa baan),* elaborately carved brackets *(kan tuay),* the distinctive horn-shaped finial, or "sky tassel" *(chao faa),* and, most important, the *bai sema,* or boundary markers, were manufactured in Thailand over a two-year period. These pieces were then shipped to England—the shipping costs a donation by the contractor—and installed by the Thai workmen who had flown to London. To prevent further problems, the Thai contractor used special materials on the ornamentation that would withstand the English climate—for example, a German preservative mixed with the cement used to cast some of the architectural details.

Figure 1: Ground plan, *ubosot* at Wat Buddhapadipa. Drawing by Joe Shoulak.



Commissioning the Murals

The *ubosot* at Wat Buddhapadipa was dedicated in October 1982. At the time of the dedication ceremony, the interior walls of the *bot* had been plastered and painted white. Ajarn Praves' original vision for the *ubosot* at Wat Buddhapadipa did not include murals. When he began to consider painting the inside of the *bot,* he thought of Wat Benchamabophit in Bangkok. Walls there are painted with an elegant wallpaper-like patterning incorporating the *kranok* (flame-like motif) and small *deva* (deities). However, when the *ubosot* was completed, the foundation had no money left to sponsor any elaborate interior painting.

Khun Sawet, who assumed the position of chair of the foundation's executive committee following General Kriangsak, remained the central sponsor concerned with the *bot*. "At first, I had no idea about having mural paintings, because the task of building the temple was very great," he told me one day in Bangkok. "My intention was to build this building." Yet, as he also noted, "I know very well about murals; I have gone many places to see mural paintings." He particularly admires the murals at Wat Suwannaram, the temple in Thonburi also favored by Panya and Chalermchai. When I asked him who had the idea to paint murals in the *bot* at Wat Buddhapadipa, he put his hand on his chest and said, simply, "Me." "In the first place," he said, "I never had an idea about murals, even though I had seen murals in temples. But then I think something is absent. Mine is a very big temple, why don't we have murals like in the Ayutthaya and Rattanakosin periods? Every great temple has them. But in some temples there are none, or they have only the Past Ten Lives."[52] He continued, "After opening day, I tried for two years to find out who could do this mural painting. I talked to artists—some would like to do but they could not find cosupporters." The issue, he concluded, was the lack of money for the immense time and effort required. Several people told me that at least one artist went to London to assess the situation but refused the commission largely on financial grounds. Khun Sawet was quite surprised when Chalermchai Kositpipat and Panya Vijinthanasarn, artists willing to tackle the project, came to him.

Chalermchai told me that he convinced Panya to visit Khun Sawet at his home on the river without an appointment.[53] Armed with résumés, portfolios, a copy of Hoskins' *Ten Contemporary Thai Artists* that featured their work, and preliminary sketches of their ideas, they rang at the gate. Khun Sawet himself answered, asking the pair whom they wanted to see. Chalermchai replied, "You." When he asked them why, they explained that they were artists and wanted to paint at the temple he had sponsored in London. "Come in," he responded.

"I did not know of them before. I asked them to draft the content of the work, especially the life of the Buddha," Khun Sawet told me. They agreed, returning in seven days with complete black-and-white sketches of the overall compositions of the four walls of the *ubosot's* main room (Plate 9). In a later conversation, Khun Sawet told me his reaction to the sketches Panya and Chalermchai had prepared: "When I saw this draft, I was stunned. I believed in them. The murals would be finished."[54]

Khun Sawet asked them what they would like to have in return for his permission. They replied that they needed no salaries; they would paint as volunteers, for free. They required only

the costs of living at the temple and money for materials. They mentioned that four people would go—themselves and two assistants. The artists did, however, place their own terms on the commission. According to Chalermchai, he and Panya asked Khun Sawet for his assurances that if they painted what the foundation wanted in terms of the mural program, the foundation would not "pressure them in any way." Noting his own work in poetry, Khun Sawet remembered his reply: "Okay, you are free to paint as you like, because I myself understand the mind of the artist. Artists must have freedom," he continued, "otherwise they will not be artistic."

When the two initially presented their sketches to Khun Sawet and the members of the foundation's executive committee, they prepared a budget for the project—estimating one year's work at a total cost of 1 million baht (US$40,000).[55] After they reached the agreement with Khun Sawet regarding terms for painting the Wat Buddhapadipa murals, Sawet continued fund-raising, as he had to build the *ubosot*. He organized *kathin* tours to Wimbledon and solicited donations from his friends and acquaintances in the government. A number of individuals who had given to the *bot* gave also to the murals, but as the project expanded to require a number of young assistants, that source of support was not sufficient. The artists themselves began to raise money through their own grass-roots efforts in London—selling food at the semiannual temple festivals, sketching portraits at Wimbledon fairs, accepting outside commissions to paint family portraits and at restaurants within the local Thai community. They also used their positions within the Thai art world to raise money from art sales. Periodically, both Chalermchai and Panya returned to Bangkok to organize fund-raising events, promote their work in the media—as many can attest, Chalermchai was a brilliant spokesperson for the mural project—and to recruit new artists to join them in Wimbledon. They put the original sketches for the murals on exhibit at the British Council in 1984, along with some of Chalermchai's earlier tempera paintings and prints Panya had produced while studying at the Slade School in London on a British Council scholarship. At a 1986 exhibition at the Bhirasri Institute of Modern Art, the artists sold easel paintings of the "Thai Art 80" group, which included Panya, Chalermchai, and several of their assistants in London. Since the mural project was a site-specific "installation," one of the fund-raising events relied on the display and sale of simulacra—large color photographs of mural scenes. An English photographer shot the murals; Kodak (Thailand) Ltd. donated the enlargements. To finance the completion of the two side rooms, the foundation sponsored a 1987 exhibition of these images at the River City Shopping Complex, a popular exhibition venue near major riverside hotels. In 1989, another exhibit at the Thailand Cultural Centre, in conjunction with the Religious Affairs Department and the Office of the National Culture Commission, reinforced the special, official status of the Wat Buddhapadipa project.

The participation of important political or religious persons mark the status and significance of a Thai public ritual, be it wedding, dedication ceremony, or exhibition opening. Just as the participation of Thai and English royalty in key dedication ceremonies enhanced the nationalist preeminence of Wat Buddhapadipa in both London and Bangkok, so did the participation of political and religious persons of prominence at art events accomplish the same for the murals. The Supreme Patriarch presided at two exhibition openings while Prime Minister Prem

Tinsulanonda presided at others, a symbology of power publicly aligning the art at Wat Buddhapadipa with state and *sangha*. The artists made certain these events received extensive coverage in Bangkok's Thai and English language press.

Promotional efforts for these events stressed Wat Buddhapadipa's significance as a religious institution—one pamphlet characterized the temple as "one of Europe's most important Buddhist training centres."[56] Media coverage always mentioned Chalermchai and Panya's intentions to work for free, thereby highlighting the meritorious aspects of their work. Equally as important, promotions and the media mentioned the role of "art" in modernizing Thai culture and the significance to Thailand's international image through Chalermchai and Panya's attempts to revive mural painting. The following excerpt from the brochure accompanying the British Council exhibit of the preliminary sketches indicates the tenor of such representations:

> There emerged a small group of artists who valued their own nationality and were determined to rekindle a fire that would give a bright light to the future of Thai paintings. They wished to show that Thai paintings can be used not only for religious purposes but can also be developed into contemporary art that will bring recognition and honour to the country. (British Council 1984)

Adding the dimension of "art" to the cultural patina of Wat Buddhapadipa attracted the attention of the Bangkok art world to Chalermchai and Panya, giving them a central place in what became known as "neotraditionalism" in Thai art. The terms by which the *ubosot* at Wat Buddhapadipa had been promoted by its sponsors, as a temple and field for donations and merit-making, thus expanded to encompass broad social discourses on art and art's role in Thai culture.

Chalermchai and Panya's involvement represented a radical departure from Ajarn Praves' intentions. Ironically, given their stated intentions, Ajarn Praves now sees the Wat Buddhapadipa murals as "old" in their conceptualization, not "modern," because of their reliance on narrative as the basis of their design. Further, in his opinion the murals do not "join together" (*prasaan*) harmoniously with the design of the building, which he considers "modern" (*samai mai*).

Another conflict at the temple around the issue of old versus new developed over the sculpture known as the Black Buddha (*luang phaw dam*), a 650–700-year-old bronze image from the Sukhothai era, donated in 1966 to the king for Wat Buddhapadipa by a wealthy Bangkok woman. Many temple staff and visitors told me of its magical powers, especially regarding fertility.[57] Ajarn Praves, on the other hand, insisted that an *ubosot* ought to house an image cast in the era and style of the building itself, in this case the Bangkok or Rattanakosin style of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Toward that end, and to celebrate the bicentennial of the Rattanakosin era in 1982, a new image named Buddhapadipa-Mongkol was cast in gold at Wat Thepsirin, Dr. Konthi's favorite Bangkok temple. Thai templegoers in London protested to the abbot over any attempts to remove the Black Buddha. At a meeting of the foundation's executive committee, a compromise was forged: both Buddha images would remain. The new golden image (*luang phaw thong*) was installed at Wat Buddhapadipa, placed to the front and lower than the Black Buddha.[58] More recently, Wat Buddhapadipa was given a replica of the Emerald

Buddha. Installed also at the altar in the *ubosot*, this preeminent symbol of the Thai polity further magnifies the nationalist splendor of the *bot*.

The long-distance merit-making accomplished by the sponsors of Wat Buddhapadipa reveals important facets of the contemporary Thai economy of merit. Connecting this temple to the king (Khun Sawet described Wat Buddhapadipa once to me as a "supertemple")—in contrast to those in Thailand that are now primarily constructed privately—endows Wat Buddhapadipa with some of the aura of the king. The Thai monarch almost by definition possesses the most righteous power, or *barami* (merit/virtue), in the country. In another discursive construction, Khun Sawet also has compared the building of this temple with those built in the days of Rama I and Rama V, both eras of extensive temple construction and restoration. In our conversation, the Thai Airways International executive interpreted the sponsorship of Wat Buddhapadipa as a "customary activity" of the Thai elite. That is, "We all believe that if we are successful in various areas of our life, then we should go on doing benefit for the community, whether it be a hospital or whatever . . . and a temple is one of them." In discussing the international outlooks of Wat Buddhapadipa's major sponsors, he emphatically concurred that to consider building a temple in England was not a farfetched idea for Khun Sawet and Dr. Konthi, since both had been there many times. During our conversation, this official further elaborated on a "Thai" view of the project:

> I don't think the temple in London, in its intention, is trying to encroach on the liberty of people, or trying to convert people, or expand Buddhist teachings into foreign lands. I think it is an affinity that a lot of Thai people have with England, through education, for the last few decades the involvement of the royalty, and so on. People like Khun Sawet and Khun Konthi, who have been educated, reached the pinnacle of their careers, holding high-ranking positions in the community, felt a certain affinity [with the idea]. In order to serve the Thai community which has increased . . . they had the ambition that there should be one [a temple] in London.

Endowing Wat Buddhapadipa with royal status, as discussed above, not only immeasurably increased the status of the temple itself in the eyes of Thai contributors and visitors, it further increases the *barami* of its sponsors, especially as they attended the annual *kathin* ceremonies as long-distance merit makers. By being visually placed within a ritual order, ceremonial participants attain higher placement within the larger social order—which at Wat Buddhapadipa encompasses both the Thai and Anglo-international orders. As noted by Gray, "Packed with awe-inspiring symbols of disinterest and detachment, royal rituals are potent devices for transforming the private, particular interests of participants into disinterested, collective and legitimate interests" (1991, 47). The array of those private, particular interests include Khun Sawet's promotion of *vipassana* and Dr. Konthi's honoring his mother and the maintenance of personal ties between them and those they asked to assist them in their sponsorship.

At the same time, donors articulated their involvement as a donation to the larger good—for their king or for their country. The sponsorship of this temple involved a number of prominent

people; the modesty of the principal organizers of the project (reference was made specifically to Khun Sawet and Dr. Konthi) has underscored the merit of the project as well. As one of the supporters observed, "I think it shows actually the whole thing was not just because one man has billions of baht and wants to build a monument to himself. . . . [I]t is an effort that started very humbly at the beginning. . . . [F]rom that day on people recognized that it is a special effort by a lot of people to make it possible." He believes that the volunteer nature of the project enhances the image of Thailand as well, "particularly in Wimbledon which is a very prime area, a beautiful location, a top-class residential area all around there. I think they [foreign observers] must have recognized that we are a country that needs to be reckoned with, with the kind of voluntary effort it took to build that."

From the point of view of the English or an international community of visitors and residents, Thailand's constructing such a temple stakes out a position of high visibility in a prestigious context, in London, an international center of finance, investment, and trade. The temple embodies the cultural values of the Thai community, in recent years becoming increasingly visible in London and throughout Europe. Further, by having the *ubosot* designed in "Thai traditional" style (despite architectural features that its architect intended to be modern), it asserts an officially sanctioned version of Thai identity, one promulgated by the government's Fine Arts Department. On its hill in Wimbledon, the *ubosot* communicates a sense of Thai particularity, but Thainess possessing historical depth and cultural sophistication. General Kriangsak Chamanan, former prime minister of Thailand and active member of the London Buddhist Temple Foundation, articulated this position in his letter of gratitude to Chalermchai:

> Your work there is important, and will help support the propagation of Buddhism, art and culture in the aspect of the murals. This is the identity of the Thai nation in the Western hemisphere. It is a fine example. (Kriangsak 1984)

The establishment of this prestigious temple in London was accomplished through the activation of a series of "influential personalized relationships" between monks and lay supporters, private citizens, corporate executives, and government officials (Taylor 1993, 268).[59] What is important here, I argue, is the not the conjunction of public and private interests, but rather the consideration of how individual Thais project those diverse and sometimes competing interests into the international arena. The individuals who worked most in the sponsorship of Wat Buddhapadipa enacted personal desires to make merit—one expressing gratitude for attaining new levels of awareness, another his love and sense of obligation toward his mother. They also worked to construct a temple that would represent the Thai nation in a manner that recalls the history of Anglo-Thai relations and that articulates an elite vision of "Thai tradition." Wat Buddhapadipa asserts both a Thai presence and its cultural "net worth" in the global arena.[60] It also extends the boundaries of the Thai imaginary beyond those of the nation itself. A detail in the murals addresses this point: outside the walls of the Deer Park, where the Buddha gave his First Sermon, Khun Sawet and his wife Sobha bow to the king of Thailand. Here the king, dressed as a tourist with a camera around his neck, is seen visiting the farthest reaches

of his kingdom (Plate 29). The king is accompanied by three men who, I was told by one of the artists, generically represent the military, businessmen, and the government civil servants (*kharatchakan*)—the modern configuration of the Thai ruling elite who helped to build this temple. While the painted landscape is ambiguous (although the *ubosot* itself appears in the middle distance behind His Majesty), the actual setting is in England.

chapter three

Thai Art and the Authority of the Past

"Artworks, in other words, come in families, lineages, tribes, whole populations, just like people."
—Alfred Gell

"The real thing is not post, it is just life."
—Sompop Budtarad, on postmodernism in Thai art

Scandal in the Bangkok Art World

Temple murals—primary sites of Thai painting for centuries—connect the past with the present in visually prominent and socially significant ways. The terms that measure the social value of mural painting beyond its continuation of familiar visual forms have proliferated as well, as Thai artists have engaged with stylistic currents moving from directions both East and West, as murals have expanded into new public spaces, and as artists have adapted mural painting styles to canvas paintings and graphic reproduction. Beginning in the late nineteenth century, emerging state institutions interpreted temple murals at different moments as relics of the "past," as "history," "heritage," and "Thai identity," against the backdrop of an emerging Thai modern art world. Since the completion of the Wat Buddhapadipa murals, writers on Thai art have positioned and repositioned them within the narratives of contemporary Thai art and debates within the art world—long rife with tensions between customs, beliefs, and practices considered to be "Thai" and "traditional"; those imported from the West, which are considered international, "modern," or "postmodern"; and the social value of the "neotraditional," which seeks to bridge past and present.[1] Rather than retracing the steps of art historians, however, this chapter highlights particular processes that have constructed these categories and positions, including changing forms of patronage, nationalism, the growth of art institutions, debates about Thai identity, commoditization, and collecting practices. As evident in the following controversy in the Bangkok art world, two issues consistently assert their relevance to categories and positions: the status of the past and Thai conceptions of authority, especially the authority deriving from the generational aspects of the master/apprentice or teacher/student relationship.

A photograph of the statue of Silpa Bhirasri appeared on the front page of the January 9–15, 1995, issue of the influential Thai-language *Phujatkan* (Manager weekly).[2] A sign pasted on the

statue's base announced "Sale 50%." Above, a two-line headline proclaimed, "The Path of Commercialism: The 'Golden' Age of Thai Art" (Figure 2).

The newspaper included six pages of articles on artists, dealers, and galleries; all were critical of the commercialism and inflated prices of the Bangkok art market.[3] One article attacked "Thai yuppie millionaires" who entered the art market primarily for investment purposes, driving up the value of older Thai "masters," especially those who had died. Another criticized well-known artist Thawan Duchanee for his involvement in the "Buy a Volvo and Receive a Free Thawan Painting" campaign. A third criticized Wat Buddhapadipa muralist Chalermchai for hiring assistants to produce massive quantities of paintings that he then sold under his own name at enormous profit.

The timing of the newspaper's publication was most sensitive: Sunday, January 15, was the birthday of Silpa Bhirasri; the next day, January 16, was "Teachers' Day"—when Thai students performed the annual *wai khru* ceremony, to pay homage to their teachers with offerings and performances.[4] Within hours of the newspaper's appearance on the streets, students at Silpakorn University hung posters along the green fence surrounding the campus, protesting *Phujatkan*'s desecration of their founder's statue. One such poster proclaimed, "My Father: Insulted and Scorned."

On Tuesday, January 17, the editor of *Phujatkan,* Vishnu Chotikul, appeared in the university's courtyard, where the statue of Silpa Bhirasri stands. There, he confronted hundreds of Silpakorn students and faculty. According to one newspaper account, Vishnu accepted full responsibility for his newspaper's choice of visual images, claiming that it was intended to represent "modern art." He defended his choice as "negative shock," meant to underscore the criticism of artists who were betraying Silpa Bhirasri's legacy for commercial gain.[5] He reiterated his newspaper's claims that "Some artists have sold their souls and have sold out!" (quoted in Phatarawadee 1995a).

The university community demanded the following of *Phujatkan,* to atone for its desecration of Silpa Bhirasri's image:

1) The owners of *Phujatkan*'s parent company and their staff prostrate themselves in front of the statue and beg for forgiveness[6]
2) For two weeks, run an apology in all of the company's publications
3) Explain all the reasons behind the use of the photograph to all representatives of the mass media and publish a formal apology
4) Never again publish any news or images of Silpa Bhirasri "under any circumstances"
5) Reveal the "real" culprit behind the running of the photo
6) Remove all copies of the issue from the newsstand and ask readers to destroy copies they had purchased.

Vishnu flatly rejected these demands. He instead purportedly invited the students to lodge a formal protest at the newspaper's offices, even "destroy our equipment, or burn our office. I will take responsibility for any damage (Chompoo 1995, 28)." The newspaper later retracted this invitation, claiming they had "incorrectly quoted" Vishnu ("correction," *Bangkok Post,* Jan. 26, 1995, 42).

Figure 2: Cover of *Phujatkan,* with altered photograph of Silpa Bhirasri statue. Courtesy *Phujatkan.*

The dean of the Faculty of Painting and Sculpture at Silpakorn sent a letter to Thai art institutions, artists, and collectors explaining the offensive nature of the treatment of the statue's photograph. By Wednesday, the students had hung huge banners and signs along buildings surrounding the courtyard at the university and had filled the courtyard with installations protesting the article and desecration. That evening, they burned an effigy of Vishnu and called for a boycott of *Phujatkan*. Students, faculty, and supporters marched to the government house for more rallies and held a vigil along the sidewalks in front of the Grand Palace.[7] They declared Friday, January 20, "The Day for Regaining Professor Silpa's Dignity."

This finale to the two weeks of protest was held in the courtyard of Silpakorn, transformed from parking lot to protest site. After two hours in rush-hour traffic, I arrived at the university

around six in the evening with two Silpakorn graduates—Sompop Budtarad, the Wat Buddhapadipa muralist who had just returned from London, and Mitr Jai-In, himself a recent subject of controversy in the Bangkok art world. As people wandered into the courtyard, students set up tables selling posters, buttons, cloth, headbands, and armbands. Others stacked cases of beer in front of the building that housed the Faculty of Painting and Sculpture. Near one entrance, funereal wreaths and sheaves of flowers lay in homage to Silpa Bhirasri, who had died in 1962. A photographic exhibit set up on panels commemorated his life, art, and tenure at Silpakorn. To stress the public significance of the protest, other panels bore photographs and news clippings of the previous days' activities—the burning of Vishnu's effigy, the march to Government House, and the vigil at the Grand Palace.

Students, faculty, and Silpakorn alumni thronged the courtyard, chatting, laughing, drinking beer, and *wai*'ing each other.[8] Sompop greeted old friends he had not seen in years because of his long stint in London. When I asked him if this place felt like home, he nodded yes. He had actually lived here, sleeping in the classrooms, as do many of the art students. "Good feelings," he said. Almost all the artists I had met and interviewed in the past months were there, including Panya and Chalermchai.

As the evening's performances began, the crowd's attention slowly shifted toward the stage. Speakers recounted Professor Silpa's life and love for Thailand. A violinist played "Santa Lucia," the professor's favorite song.[9] Two women danced. After more speakers and more singers, the emcee announced the finale. As the lights dimmed, students moved chairs in the center of the courtyard to create an open area. To a taped reprise of "Santa Lucia," ten brown-painted nude males emerged suddenly from the nearby building to huddle in the open area, symbolizing the unworked clay of "Art." White-painted nudes moved in from the perimeters, placing lit candles in several circles. In dance movements, the white figures "carried" the brown ones to the candle circles, where they symbolically "sculpted" them. From above, an enormous sheet—"the newspaper"—floated down to engulf all the figures, as if to stifle the creative activity. Beneath the sheet they writhed until, in a sudden explosion, the brown figures burst through the newspaper, arranging themselves in a complicated sculptural tableau. "Art" had triumphed over "Commerce."

In explaining why the Silpakorn community treated *Phujatkan*'s visual gimmick as the gravest of insults, a professor told me, "They [*Phujatkan*] use this monument, they cut and paste, so they can sell many, many newspapers. They think only of profit." He continued, "In Thai culture, we do not do this. I don't know about in the West. Here we respect adults, especially teachers." Another artist confirmed, "The point for us is the relationship between the student and the teacher. The teacher is the second step from the family."[10] When I asked why the reaction had been so strong against *Phujatkan*'s use of an "image of an image," that is, a photograph of the statue rather than a photograph of the man himself, Panya also characterized the protests as the preservation of long-standing cultural values:

> Not only to protect Silpa Bhirasri. Some people see that he passed away and this [the statue] is the only material thing [left of him]. We think he is the symbol of the "good person" in so-

ciety. We want to protect our old culture. The point is his spirit. Even though he has passed away we try to follow his spirit. If we follow [his spirit], we can create a better society. We believe that he is still alive; his good spirit is still alive.[11]

As for *Phujatkan*'s action, Panya told me he evaluated the editor's action by his intention:

In this case the editor misunderstands. He thinks [the graphic] is also art. But it is different. The most important thing is the purpose. This is negative. That is why it is different from art. Art is positive for society—*mahadsajan, adsajan* [marvelous, wonderful].

In numerous discussions with other Thai artists regarding this controversy, all believed that the newspaper was wrong to use Professor Silpa's image as it had, especially with no caption of explanation—a clear intention to "shock" their readers. At the same time, many also agreed with the substance of the newspaper's critique of the Thai art world, that is, that artists increasingly care about money more than art. A common complaint among older artists was an obvious tendency of students to concern themselves with marketable styles and pricing.[12] Indeed, in the mid-1990s, prior to the 1997 Asian financial crisis that began in Thailand, art students often priced their art at 25,000 baht or more (US$1,000).[13] One recent graduate of Silpakorn, who won one of the 1994 prestigious bank-sponsored art competitions, sold his winning painting to a museum in Singapore for a reputed 5 million baht (US$200,000). Few begrudged him (or others who were successful) the money; all acknowledged the fact that artists in Thailand have to struggle to support themselves, their work, and their families. Instead, they criticized these developments as a "devaluing" of art, when art is cast only in terms of investment and commodity and as a tendency toward elite control of the art world by a few famous artists and collectors willing and able to pay high prices. As one artist stated in a newspaper interview, "[T]he new generation of artists believe that high prices are synonymous with high artistic value. But that is misleading. Also the public has been led to believe that art caters only to the rich, which is not true" (Kanjariya 1995, 29).[14]

Nonetheless, many felt that the image in question reproduced the very problem the newspaper claimed to decry—the commercialization of art. For many, the protest stood for "tradition" and Thai culture against the obsession with making money characteristic of (what many deemed) Western-style capitalism. That Silpa Bhirasri, formerly Corrado Feroci, was himself Italian and a conduit for the ideas and practices of Western modern art may be ironic but does not trouble most Thai artists.

The Status of the Past

The protest at Silpakorn University—Bangkok's premier art university—came to signify for me the particularities of how Thais articulate significant issues in the contemporary art world of Bangkok. Artists were clearly concerned with the status of the "past" in Bangkok in the 1990s, a past that adheres to both the image of Silpa Bhirasri and to the culture and curriculum of Silpakorn University itself. In this incident, the "past" evoked issues of authority, particu-

larly those of teachers over students, but an authority articulated in the idiom of fatherhood and family. In the university's response to the *Phujatkan* cover, the relationship of Silpa Bhirasri to the university community was constructed not merely as one of teacher to students—a position entailing reverence and ceremonial recognition—but also on a deeper level, as one of father to children, thereby invoking the positional superiority of age that pervades the Thai social hierarchy.

The issues around the *Phujatkan* cover also animate competitions for authority and power within the Bangkok art world. In their curricula, writings, and institutional practices, Silpa Bhirasri and his successors at Silpakorn University have determined, in large part, what and how Thai students who seek to make their careers as artists learn about "art." Beginning in the 1980s, Chulalongkorn, Chiang Mai, and other universities have developed fine arts programs that diversify the production of knowledge about art, but Silpakorn—where Chalermchai, Panya, and most of their assistants trained—remains the most powerful.[15] In the Bangkok art world, controversies swirl around the dominance of Silpakorn. Many observers openly discussed their perception of the attack on the university founder's image as an attack on the university itself. The Silpakorn "Mafia" (the English term frequently heard) has been criticized on a number of occasions for its tight control of the judging of prestigious art competitions, where Silpakorn faculty award the preponderance of prizes to their own students.[16] Silpakorn faculty command access to lucrative mural and public art commissions by banks, corporations, and the government. Silpakorn represents the "academy" in the Thai art world, and its faculty and graduates are those most often accused of practices that commercialize art. These issues surrounding the university establish the fault lines of tensions that have affected evaluations of the Wat Buddhapadipa murals and the formation of categories by which contemporary art is positioned. They also set in motion tensions oscillating between officially sanctioned notions of the past, the "traditional" and the "Thai" and power competitions in the present (which construct the "modern"), and the "neotraditional" and "Western" (or international). They also affect the status of art, and artists, within society.

Murals as Art: Constructing "Tradition"

Numerous art scholars have elaborated at great length and with eloquence on the visual conventions that distinguish traditional Thai mural painting: linearity, two-dimensionality, and a decorative surface.[17] In Thai painting, line defines form. Boisselier wrote, "The search for beauty of form and quality of line comes before all other considerations" (1976, 41).[18] Flowing, curving lines and flat coloring create the bodies of deities, monks, and nobles alike; all appear to transcend the material reality of muscle and weight. Figures appear in unnatural postures. The absence of light and shadow frees them from any specific location in diurnal time (Krug 1979), thereby increasing their otherworldly, transcendent nature. In this way, artists paint Thai figures—and important animals such as the elephant—as idealized, atemporal beings. These stylistic qualities contribute to a conceptual (rather than perceptual) basis for such painting, in

which artists paint an imagined, symbolic universe of beings and landscapes rather than the "natural" world apprehended through the senses.[19]

The two-dimensionality of mural space creates a flat narrative surface, which sustains the viewer's attention upon familiar characters enacting oft-told events in tableau-like settings. Artists locate these events in imaginary landscapes, generic settings such as "palace," "temple," or "forest." Exceptions are those scenes from the lives of the Buddha that possess identifiable features. A herd of deer, for example, identifies the park at Sarnath where the Buddha delivered his first sermon. Artists render scenes multiperspectively: from a "bird's-eye" perspective or a parallel one, with walls and figures overlapped to indicate varied placement within the scene. Mural surfaces are further flattened through lavish decorative patterning, sometimes of the background but especially in dress and architectural ornamentation. Linearity, multiple perspectives, and decorative elements work to negate a space that extends beyond the surface. All that is important exists on a single, highly elaborated plane.

These stylistic conventions that define Thai painting tradition reach their apogee in the "classical" period of Thai art, considered by art historians to range from the late eighteenth to the mid-nineteenth centuries. The dating of this period coincides with the Rattanakosin (or Bangkok) era, inaugurated by the establishment of the Chakri monarchy in 1782. Thai painting flourished as the first of the Chakri kings, Rama I, embarked upon ambitious temple building and restoration projects.[20] This classical period actually encompasses numerous stylistic and iconographic changes, but narratives of Thai art history end the period abruptly with the introduction of overtly Western artistic forms around 1850. Wenk, for example, describes this trajectory:

> The depiction of traditional themes had, through a number of intermediate stages, gradually developed in such a way as to constitute a national school of painting in which these themes had at last found their most perfect expression in accord with the artistic talents of the Thai people. Then came the age of the copyists, who were no longer able to fill the old forms with life. (1975, lxi)

Focusing on changing relations in Thai society yields greater dynamism in Thai mural painting practices. From its inception, Thai Buddhist mural painting exhibits an ongoing appropriation of "foreign" artistic styles, materials, and technologies. Indeed, Buddhism itself, as well as the many stylistic and iconographic conventions in art that developed in Buddhist India, could be characterized as a "foreign import." Changing temple spatial practices that engender new social meanings for murals in public spaces suggest another source for iconographic innovations. Any or all of these loci of change index expanding and shifting social relations between Thais and others, and between patrons, artists, and their audiences. For example, as artists have obtained access through trade or travel to new pigments—chemically produced dyes from China or acrylics from the West—the palette in Thai temple murals has widened and brightened from the relatively muted tones obtained from the earth and plant-based pigments available in the Ayutthaya era. As scholars have discussed in other arenas of Thai cul-

ture, appropriation itself has been characteristic of Thai cultural processes. This has been generally characterized as a Thai reworking of foreign elements in which Thais incorporate such elements into distinctive and preexisting "Thai" contexts and, through some magico-alchemic transformation, render these foreign elements "Thai."[21] This is not to claim that such transformations occur without contest; negative assessments of the intensely colored acrylic-based palette used at Wat Buddhapadipa suggest otherwise.[22]

During the late seventeenth century, Ayutthayan-era mural painters became aware of Persian styles of decoration through a burgeoning trade with that region and began to incorporate Persian-style delicate floral motifs into the backgrounds of mural scenes. In the early 1800s extensive interactions with China through political and cultural missions and immigration resulted in the flourishing of Sinic elements within Thai art. Artisans utilized Chinese mosaic techniques with tile and porcelain fragments and adopted Chinese stone guardian figures and Chinese motifs in masonry and wood decorations for temple roofs, pillars, and windows. Muralists—many probably Chinese artisans themselves—reworked landscapes with Chinese elements: highly stylized rocks, cockleshell waves, and gnarled flowering trees. Chinese floral arrangements appear as mural motifs or as individually framed paintings hung around the perimeter of many temples that sometimes obscure the mural scenes behind them.[23] Scholars such as Boisselier absorbed such innovations into their basic tenets of classical or traditional Thai painting; such appropriations themselves are seen to become Thai in their enhancement of a two-dimensional decorative mural surface. However, only with the introduction of artistic elements considered to be "Western"—naturalistic landscapes, realistic figural representation, and linear perspective that threaten the integrity of the decorative surface—do scholars call into question the "Thainess" of mural painting.

Spatial Practices

From the fourteenth century onward, murals gradually shift in location from private devotional spaces to public instructional ones, from inaccessible crypts in *stupa* or *chedi* to *viharn* and *ubosot*—the buildings where monk and laypersons interact.[24] These shifts in location change the position of murals vis-à-vis other architectural and sculptural elements in religious space. Once positioned for public viewing and instruction, murals mediate in new ways the relationship between the patron and/or artists and their audience. Using the location *of* murals themselves as primary evidence, set within particular historical contexts of change in Thailand, one might argue that the social functions of murals have not changed so much as multiplied to accommodate new historical subjectivities experienced by Thai monarchs and citizens. The painting of space *in* murals follows the political, economic, and social engagements of the kingdom with a wider world of other state powers, instituting new visual dialogues between ruler-as-mural-patron and viewers-as-citizen subjects.

In assessing the signification of the shift in location of murals to public spaces, we might consider Wyatt's analysis of the rise of Ayutthaya in the fourteenth century as constituting a "fundamental change in international outlook" (1984, 62). The rulers of this kingdom looked

to more expansive horizons, beyond the kingdoms of regional rulers, to acknowledge an "international community of states." Ayutthayan rulers sought to consolidate their power through military engagements and heightened diplomacy, the expansion and control of international trade, especially with East Asia, and the spread of an invigorated Theravada Buddhism out of Sri Lanka. This new worldview entailed both new identities and the transformation of consciousness on the part of the diverse peoples who lived and traded in the kingdom (Wyatt 1984).

The murals at Wat Ratchaburana in Ayutthaya, the earliest extant murals in Thailand, are located deep within previously sealed crypts. That the crypts also contained numerous votive tablets suggests that the murals were probably painted as devotional offerings *(tawai buchaa)*[25] or to make the Buddha manifest, rather than as decoration or pedagogy—the two functions often attributed by scholars to Thai temple murals.[26] Ayutthayan-era kings instituted *sangha* reforms that invalidated other religious traditions and brought the *sangha* under direct state control.[27] They transformed religious festivals and annual pilgrimages—the pilgrimage to the Buddha's Footprint (Phra Phutthabat) in Saraburi provides one example—into celebrations of kingship. All of these activities are painted into temple murals, which by the end of the seventeenth century appear in buildings designed for public interaction between illiterate lay worshipers and monks (Plate 15). Paintings in the daily spaces of monastic life provide not only evidence of a "new type of political order" in the kingdom of Ayutthaya, but, in a performative sense, contribute to the construction of that order. In murals, the Thai see themselves both as Buddhist subjects and as historical ones.

Into the middle of the sixteenth century, historical research and extant murals suggest that early temple paintings, including those at Wat Ratchaburana, consisted largely of rows of seated figures of previous Buddhas (Pacceka Buddhas) and disciples, and, infrequently, the Buddha himself. Symbols often separate these figures—a tiered parasol, a *chedi,* or a bodhi tree—that in early Buddhist art substituted for iconic representations of the Buddha in human form.[28] By the middle of the seventeenth century, mural painters were filling the walls of public *wat* buildings with a more complex program. They placed registers of deities known as the celestial assembly *(thepchumnum)* (Plate 16) high above windows, clearly demarcated by the zigzag lines *(sen phlaeng)* that become conventional in Thai murals. Painted in poses of worship and respect as their eyes turn toward the presiding Buddha image installed at the back of the space, the celestial assembly encourages mimetic response on the part of the viewers below.[29]

Another shift toward the modeling of bodily practices in murals occurs during the reign of King Mongkut in the mid-nineteenth century, another period of radical monastic reform resulting in the establishment of the Thammayut sect. During Mongkut's reign, temple murals become more didactic, to include scenes depicting modes of religious worship and practices central to the monastic life, and to provide visual instruction in *vinaya* discipline for both monks and laypersons.[30] At Wat Maha Phruttharam in Bangkok, for example, murals depict the thirteen *dhuthong,* the ascetic practices required of a monk while on religious pilgrimage (Plate 17). Similarly, at Wat Kanmatuyaram the doors of the *bot* are painted with the foods both tabooed and allowed to monks.

As murals "go public," painters include scenes from the historical life of the Buddha and from the Jataka tales (his past lives) below the celestial assembly, between windows, and on the walls behind and opposite the presiding Buddha image at eye level of the templegoers. These visual narratives, which detail the Buddha's perfection of moral virtues on his path toward enlightenment, aid monks as visual prompts and illustrations in teaching the Dhamma to illiterate laypersons.[31] As well as instructing monks, specific mural images encourage mimesis by templegoers. In murals in a sacred setting, the depiction of calendrical festivals, especially local ones, encourages laypersons to interpret their own participation in such festivals as merit-making, thereby reinforcing that particular Buddhist worldview. Renditions of the Phra Wessandorn Jataka *(mahachat)* on contemporary temple walls serve a similar purpose—they stress meritorious aspects of giving, especially by laypeople to the *sangha* and the *wat* itself.[32] In Thai temples, the presiding image often portrays the moment of "calling the earth to witness." This style of Buddha, known as the Buddha Maravijaya, recalls the night of his enlightenment as he recounts his many meritorious acts in order to defeat the demon Mara. Murals depicting the defeat of Mara and the enlightenment of the Buddha on the wall opposite the presiding image establish the context for this gesture—Buddha's final battle with Mara, who represents all material temptations. These visual enactments of key moments in the Buddha's biography construct a frame in which viewers might consider their own struggles, sufferings, and attachments to the material world.

Murals and the State

Just as murals foster particular state-sanctioned forms of worship and religious practice, and serve as visual reminders of the *bun,* or merit, of the rulers who sponsored them, they also legitimize certain visions of the state. The dialogic relationship between ruler and subject, depicted in and mediated through temple murals, assumes greater importance in the early Chakri dynasty. As well as consolidating and extending their political control over surrounding principalities and sultanates, the Chakri kings attempted to reinvigorate Siamese public life with the ideals of the Buddha through temple restorations, new construction, rewriting of important Buddhist texts, and vast new literary productions.[33] During the reign of Rama I in the late 1700s—a period of restoration of the Siamese kingdom following the sacking of Ayutthaya in 1767—temple muralists began to paint the *Traiphum* (Three Worlds), or the Buddhist cosmology, on the wall behind the presiding Buddha image.[34] In the context of royally commissioned public space, the painted *Traiphum* asserts congruence between the Buddhist cosmos and the sociopolitical order, an assertion characteristic in the architecture and administrative organization of many premodern kingdoms in Southeast Asia and believed to ensure harmony and prosperity (Heine-Geldern 1942). According to many Thai scholars, the *Traiphum* symbolically represents the social order visually and textually—although they have never agreed whether this order is primarily a hierarchy of spiritual attainment or a justification of social difference. In the arena of popular consciousness and political ideology, the text of the *Traiphum* has been interpreted as setting forth implicit relationships between "merit and power."[35] The many lev-

els of the cosmology have been seen to mark (and, some claim, justify) inequities of social position due to material wealth, power, and status, since these attributes are thought to reflect accumulated merit. Thus to the extent temple murals functioned didactically, "It was by means of these visual portrayals, as well as the teachings of monks, that most Siamese learned how they fitted into the Buddhist cosmos" (C. Reynolds 1976, 211).

As visually organized on temple walls, the *Traiphum* constitutes one primary indigenous vision of human and divine space.[36] The *Traiphum* cosmos and its levels read as a vertical hierarchy, from bottom (the nether regions of hell) to top (the *arupa loka,* or world without form). This strong verticality holds in the visual organization of individual scenes as well, and not just in the *Traiphum*. Throughout Thai murals, verticality organizes individual scenes and the placement of beings.[37] *Theweda* (angels) and deities, celestial attendants, and nobles appear in the upper registers of mural plans. In individual scenes of temples and court, they are positioned higher than servants and ordinary humans (Plate 18). Stylistic rendition further reinforces moral distinctions: divine beings are idealized, linear forms free from the constraints of material embodiment. Their impassive facial expressions and formal posture and gestures indicate their emotional detachment. Scenes of daily life appear in the margins of Thai murals: toward the bottom, or outside palace or temple walls. There, ordinary humans, rendered freely and with a wide range of facial types and bodily expression, engage in fighting, loving, trading, playing, gossiping, eating, and drinking. The lesser position of humans is voiced linguistically as well—Thai scholars call these regions *phaap kaak*, meaning "the dregs."[38]

In the Ayutthayan era of the early to mid 1700s, *farang,* or Western foreigners, appearing for the first time in Thai murals, on lacquer cabinets, and carved onto temple gables were often represented in the guise of *deva* (gods), *theweda* (angels), or as fantastic creatures like the half-human, half-bird *kinnaree*. Temple mural painters customarily included different types of *farang* soldiers—the *sipsong phasaa* (literally, twelve languages) who fight in Mara's army (Plate 19).[39] In later murals, depictions of Christian missionaries or showily dressed soldiers carrying big guns represent potential invasion, or a threat or disturbance to a Siamese way of life. Other *farang* (French engineers, for example), arriving in steamships, offer new technologies and opportunities for trade, wealth, and display. Thai soldiers dressed in American Civil War-era military clothing anticipate a later mass adoption of Western styles of dress by the Thai populace.[40] The Siamese ambivalence toward the presence of these Westerners and others is indicated to some degree by their positioning within the murals—in earlier eras as *theweda* or even monks, then as soldiers in Mara's army tempting the Buddha, and in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as tourists or sinners in hell.[41] Portrayals of theatrical entertainments, military formations, or commerce suggest the range of cultural influences brought into Thailand by foreigners, their status and roles in various constellations of power within Thai society, and the nature of engagements of the Thai state with foreign powers (Plate 20).

Mural programs diversify in the late eighteenth to mid-nineteenth centuries to include themes drawn from literature, other domains of everyday knowledge, and history.[42] At Wat Buddhaisawan in Ayutthaya the artists painted scenes of recent history, most notably the voyage of the Somdet Phra Buddhakhosachan, the spiritual mentor of King Phetracha, to Sri Lanka

to obtain important Buddhist knowledge. Scenes of this journey further associate the patron of the murals with a revitalization of Buddhism from Sri Lanka and depict a new temporality—not Buddhist history, but royal history—a history shared by and perhaps participated in by viewers of these very paintings. These scenes were contemporary, as they depict architectural styles of that period, boats with cannons, and new technologies of state power.[43] For rulers seeking a moral legitimacy as righteous kings *(dhammaraja),* temple murals communicate authoritative visions of the known world as much as an imagined moral universe.

Mural painting became a powerful site where ruling powers could assert an independent and modern Siamese identity to visiting foreigners, as well as to their own subjects. Mural painters increasingly portray a "historicized" reality tied to the present moment: royal processions, important military campaigns, and travels by dignitaries.[44] In addition to the depiction of contemporary life and political events in murals, patrons also commissioned the painting of "history" in Thai murals, in a period when "having a history" meant "having a culture"—both preconditions for the attainment of *siwilai*.[45] Murals that had concerned the past of the Buddha gradually included both the present of the viewers and their history as well, an accretion of temporal references.

The Real and the Imaginary

> What dramatic effects ensue when people stop imagining space in terms of orderly relations of sacred entities and start conceiving it with a whole new set of signs and rules? (Thongchai 1994, 36)

Beginning in the mid-nineteenth century, King Mongkut embarked upon a mission to fully "civilize" the Siamese populace, in part by fostering a worldview that incorporated Western ideas of rationality and science—especially astronomy and geography. However, Mongkut drew sharp distinctions between worldly matters and spiritual affairs. In 1867 his minister of foreign affairs published the *Kitchanukit* ("a book explaining various things"), which argued that while Western knowledge of geography and astronomy represented the "true knowledge of the natural world," Buddha's teachings remained the sole source of moral and ethical truth.[46] This distinction found visual expression in murals painted during his reign, especially those painted by Khrua In Khong. Perhaps inspired by European and American prints circulating in Siam at this time of expanding interaction with Western powers, Khrua In Khong introduced three-dimensionality into Thai painting. At Wat Boromniwat, he transposed Dhamma allegories into Westernized settings with peoples in Western styles of dress (Plate 21). These murals—where the buildings are European in style and perspective, but where Siamese angels fly in the skies—constitute a radical gesture toward the ideas of mid-nineteenth-century *siwilai,* exploring new, modern positions of Siamese subjects among the peoples of the world. At Wat Benchamabophit (painted c.1900–1905) another muralist recorded the king's interest in astronomy by including a cameo portrait of Mongkut viewing an eclipse at Nakhon Khiri (Plate 22).

Historians of Thai painting consider the introduction of single-point perspective and forms of painterly "realism" by Khrua In Khong and others to have shattered the unity of flat narrative space, thereby ending the classical era. Boisselier, for example, writes, "This period is marked by the appearance in Thai painting of ideas peculiar to Western art and the hopeless attempt to synthesize two diametrically opposed conceptions" (1976, 119). The vertical and two-dimensional moral hierarchy that dominated Thai murals gives way to horizontal expanses that suggest geographical ("true") space and physical location.[47] At first these far-off distances appear as Thai, or nonspecific. Gradually, muralists began to reference the actual spaces of the other: Western paddleboats and Chinese trading junks enter Thai waters, arriving from far-off lands (Plate 17). These new elements parallel developments in map-making representing material spaces of the earth.[48] Such maps implicitly recognized macrospaces—larger regions of which the particular map represented only a part.

Pictorial realism in the painting of people and space describes another dimension in the shifting social worlds of these Thai artists.[49] Thai muralists have long painted small animals of the forest naturalistically, a style appropriate to the creatures that inhabit lower levels of the moral universe.[50] People appear in degrees of naturalism, from the extreme stylization and idealization of deities and royalty, discussed above, to the more expressive, individualistic features of the ordinary village folk. Silpa Bhirasri noted that in older Thai murals, common people engaged in quotidian activities of fishing, selling, fighting, playing, and loving accurately reflect how the viewers themselves lived in those times; but he also said that this style of realism is "proper to Thai art, it is not Western style realism," as it remains two-dimensional (Silpa Bhirasri 1959, 18).[51]

Throughout the classical period of Thai temple paintings, artists created a uniquely Thai space inhabited by Thai conceptions of divine beings and common people, and Thai renderings of fantastic creatures—the dragon-like *naga,* the *yaks,* or giants, the *singha,* or lion-like creature, or the half-human, half-bird *kinnaree* (Wenk 1975; Boisselier 1976). The painters may have depicted scenes of the historical Buddha's life in ancient India, but these renderings appear in localized imaginary landscapes with indigenous architecture, trees, flowers, and animals. The entertaining scenes of daily life take place in traditional Thai houses, on Thai piers, in Thai boats. The expansive distances painted toward the top of mural scenes—framed by forests, rock formations, mountain ranges, the sea—are vague, indeterminate, and universal.[52]

The transformation of the "imaginary" into the "real" first takes place in the depictions of space. Elements of landscape and setting evolve gradually from the purely decorative devices *(sen phlaeng)* that organize compositional space toward the naturalistic depiction of a place. Stylized trees—often painted in Chinese style with small twisted trunks and branches laden with blossoms—and the distortions and exaggerations of mountains and rocks, characteristic of Thai painting in the early Bangkok period, become more lifelike in scale and rendering by the mid-nineteenth century. Flowers that decorate background spaces in early murals gradually give way to naturalistic clouds, sky, the hint of changing light, and the specific visual effects of time. The introduction by Khrua In Khong and other mid-nineteenth-century mural-

ists of single-point perspective applied to both landscape and architectural structures further creates naturalized places, as does the introduction of a horizon and figures painted on a diminishing scale to create depth.

An important function of perspective in painting—beyond rationalizing the representation of objects and peoples in space—is its manipulation of the perceptual faculties of the viewer to achieve important effects of illusion, of narrative or structural focus, of a heightened spirituality.[53] Perspective, by organizing a "point of view," explicitly acknowledges the viewer, making him or her an active participant in the art process. While nineteenth-century Thai muralists—whose interests were never really those of scientific principles of representation—may have applied perspective awkwardly and inconsistently, their use of it did apply a "modern" and "Western" look to Thai temple murals. They create an aura of "civilization" around Thai Buddhist activities and bring others—viewers and foreigners—into Thai mural space. These transformations alter the nature and reading of visually depicted space in murals. Shaped by Thai Buddhist cosmological conceptions of levels of beings, characters of different moral status in the same scene in older Thai murals inhabit a visual hierarchy of personage and place. In the horizontal dimension, beings of different karmic realms co-inhabit the same spaces, although deities remain distinct from lesser beings by their larger size. The visual hierarchy that dominates premodern murals breaks down where linear perspective is consistent, as figures tend to be read according to their placement in space rather than their moral status. *Traiphum* space becomes geopolitical space, evidence of changing Thai subjectivities.

Emerging Modernism[54]

Although they differ in emphasis, most historians of Thai art frame the emergence of modern art in Thailand by state building and the quest for *siwilai* that would place Siam among the modern nations of the world.[55] Some art historians of this period stress a functionalist shift from art serving religious ends to art serving nationalist ones (especially in the 1920s, during the reign of King Vajiravudh, Rama VI); others find modern art evolving gradually, beginning with King Mongkut's quickening interest in things European.[56] King Mongkut encouraged the introduction of Western architectural forms and the look of Western painting styles of naturalism and realism, evident in the work of muralist monk Khrua In Khong, who radically shifted the point of view in temple murals from a Thai to an international one by transforming familiar stories into allegories set in Western landscapes, with Western-style architecture and figures in Western clothes.[57]

Mongkut's successor, King Chulalongkorn, shifted state revenues from temple building to infrastructure projects—roads, hospitals, schools, and railways. At the same time, the king's travels through Europe stimulated artistic exchanges; increasing numbers of Western artists and architects were hired to work in Siam. With increasing Siamese participation in international expositions and world fairs—an international circuitry of national symbolism—Western modes of artistic naturalism and representation became the "Royal Preferred Style" (Apinan

1992, 5), applied to new genres such as public monuments, equestrian statues, photography, portraiture, and easel paintings of historical events.[58] However, these new genres and styles—often hybrid combinations with Thai forms—represented more an adaptation of Western forms than of their substance, the perception of an alignment with international cultural and artistic trends rather than a fundamental shift in the status of art, or of the artist, in society. These more unsettling changes derive from the establishment in the early twentieth century of the modern art institutions that still mediate artistic production today.

During the early 1900s, King Vajiravudh (Rama VI, r.1910–1925) attempted to counter a perceived dominance of Western artistic influences in Thailand, which he attributed to those who "ape European manners and European ways in outward things" (cited in Apinan 1993b, 94). Vajiravudh promoted forms of traditional Thai art at annual arts and crafts fairs and founded the Arts and Crafts School (Poh Chang) in 1913 to teach the techniques of the *chaang sip muu,* the royal bureau of artisans that included painters. He also established the Fine Arts Department in 1912 to command the design and construction of private and public buildings that combined Thai architecture with Western styles and engineering techniques. The Fine Arts Department commissioned artists (both European imports and native Siamese) to produce statues, monuments, medals, and portraits—art works that promoted visions of the modern nation and its rulers.

Modernizing processes in Thailand have changed the position of artists as well as their work, although not until the 1960s and the emergence of a sizable art market were artists in Thailand able to make a living independent of religious or governmental patrons. Established modes of authority adhering in the master/apprentice relationship of the classical era have partially given way to "modern" ethics of originality and independence of artistic vision supported by collecting practices prevalent in the West. Earlier social forms endure, however, in contemporary versions of master/apprentice workshops (*sakun chaang,* or schools of artisans) that subvert notions of art as individual production, and in modes of teaching art that rely on copying and the replication of past forms and styles.[59]

Alongside modern art institutions, an expanded category of "art" *(sinlapa)* developed in the early twentieth century, and with it social distinctions between *chaang* (artisan) and *sinlapin* (artist).[60] In its early usage *sinlapa* designated the skillful production of objects considered "beautiful" and a "realm of spiritual and emotional emanation" comprising five categories of activities—architecture, sculpture, painting, music, and literature. Ambivalence toward such distinctions was expressed by painters such as Prince Naris, who in the 1920s rejected many contemporary, Western-derived forms of painting (nudes, for example) and noted his preference for *chaang.* The prince believed that the finest *chaang* were those who used their imagination—who worked on the basis of their own experience rather than exclusively on prior visual models. The distinction between crafts and fine arts was furthered in the writings of M. C. Ithithepsan Kritdakorn, an architect and advocate of modernism in Thailand who emphasized the origin of fine arts in individual inspiration and creativity (Apinan 1992, 22). Because *sinlapin* applies equally to diverse artistic activities, many contemporary Thai painters do not identity themselves as *sinlapin,* but rather as *nak khian* or *nak waat* (a person who paints

and/or draws), thus evading the status distinctions implied by both *chaang* and *sinlapin*. Some major Thai artists refer to themselves as *naay chaang* (master craftsman), self-consciously identifying themselves with the indigenous category of the past.

With Thai painters consumed by Western-inspired genres of easel painting, and without sustained royal or state patronage, mural painting in temples languished in the early and middle years of the twentieth century. Waning production, as much as Western-influenced (rather than Indian, Persian, or Sinic) changes in style, perspective, and narrative surface, caused the perceived rupture of the classical from the modern in Thai mural painting. In Thai art discourse, rhetorical oppositions that set "Western" against "Thai" and "modern" against "traditional" sharpen perceptions that temple murals represent the Thai and the traditional categories of artistic activity. As one art historian flatly asserts, "Traditional Thai art [meaning temple mural painting] began to lose its cultural significance as a result of the Kingdom's continued acceptance of Western influences."[61]

Silpa Bhirasri, Copying, and Creativity

In writings on classical Thai painting, issues of reception, that is, how these murals would be "read" by monks or lay worshipers and the conservative iconography such readings might require, tend to ignore instances of innovation or invention on the part of the mural painters. Scholars of Thai mural painting, and of modern Thai art as well, emphasize the rote nature of the pedagogy of mural painting technique and the inherent iconographic restrictions in temple murals, given their function as visual narratives.[62] Issues less discussed but worthy of consideration in this regard include those of intention (Buddhist offering) and of patronage and control. In the context of premodern artistic production indicated by the *chaang sip muu,* we assume that muralists worked under the instruction of royal or wealthy patrons and that values did not favor radical innovation, given both the "presumptuousness" of "originality" and the social meaning of painting as devotional offering. The historical popularity of individual mural painters such as Phra Acharn Nak or Khrua In Khong indicated that their skills, both as painters and as interpreters of narrative, were highly valued.[63] Creativity as an outgrowth of individual expression has had little moral force in Thai aesthetic production until it received emphasis in the Silpakorn University curriculum and in the writings of Silpa Bhirasri.

In this regard, Boisselier is worth citing at some length:

> It must be acknowledged that while Thai artists have succeeded in making themselves fully understood by their public they have had to pay for their success in self-denials that have not entered the heads of European masters since the end of the Middle Ages. For they have submitted themselves wholly to the subject, have *effaced their personalities and have accepted a rigorous limitation of their opportunities for invention.* If art was to be subjected to these strict principles and if the desire to be intelligible was the artists' first concern, it was bound to become stereotyped and to leave artists with no scope for creating original works except by drawing on those external sources that we have mentioned. (1976, 216, emphasis added)

According to scholars, not all of the "external sources" explored by mural painters have had equal effects upon the classical tradition. Art writers have assessed Sino- or Persian-inspired elements as compatible with Thai mural painting. In contrast, those elements appropriated from Western art—naturalism, chiaroscuro, single-point perspective—failed to sustain the "Thainess" of Thai art. Silpa Bhirasri says as much when he claimed that "our painting lost its very peculiarity, becoming a hybrid mixture of western and eastern characteristics" (1959, 23).[64]

This, I believe, reflects more an Orientalist perspective on the part of art writers than on what was happening on temple walls and how those changes were perceived and received by templegoers. Participating themselves in processes of modernization, templegoers were also experimenting with new lifeways, customs, dress, food, and so on.[65] We have no published evidence (to my knowledge) that Thai templegoers found Khrua In Khong's Dhamma allegories in Western settings bizarre or "un-Thai." Evidence of Thai viewers resisting some of Panya and Chalermchai's innovations in the murals at Wat Buddhapadipa suggests, as does Baxandall in terms of fifteenth-century Italian painting, that reception itself must be historically contextualized as the "period eye" in the visual culture of its day (Baxandall 1988 [1972]).

While scholars emphasize different factors and motivations in the emergence of modern art in Thailand, no scholar denies Silpa Bhirasri his popular status as "Father of Thai Modern Art." While his own artwork—most notably designs for Bangkok's Constitutional Monument (1939) and Victory Monument (1941)—has been described as "academic" and "unimaginative," his zealous commitment to his students and to promoting the values of modern art remains unquestioned (Piriya 1982). His presence endures in the symbolic domain—his statue at Silpakorn University is but one example—and permeates the institutions that he built in the Thai art world and in Thai art theory and pedagogy.

While establishing the curriculum for Silpakorn University along European lines, Silpa Bhirasri promoted "Thai" art and "traditional" artistic values as well, responding to King Vajiravudh's concerns for the cultural integrity of Thailand (Michaelsen 1993; Phillips 1992). In addition to courses in aesthetics, art history, and techniques of realism and impressionism, Silpa Bhirasri's curriculum for Silpakorn University required students to conduct research "in antiquities" for at least three hours a week.[66] Within the field of modern art production, he argued that such training in traditional techniques provided a means of retaining qualities that could be seen as Thai.[67] "We are perfectly conscious of the importance of old art in conceiving modern expression," he wrote. "If a student is really gifted, by and by he will absorb the very *spirit of the past* which will be transmitted to contemporary expressions" (1960, 15, emphasis added).

These concerns with the role of "tradition" and the art of the past remained minor set against the main thrust of the university's program—to teach Thai artists the techniques and values of "modern" art. Silpa Bhirasri rejected the older practices of learning through imitation when he wrote, "Our opinion is that through copying one become only an imitator, who may seldom and only occasionally reach the high standards of the old masters."[68] His approach stressed the "study from Nature," a radical reordering of the basis of "art." He acknowledged that that basis of Thai mural painting was conceptual—Buddhist doctrine rendered through the imagination of the artist, but with "old" techniques of arduous repetition and the mastery of conventional

forms. Reflecting his own European worldview oriented toward the future and newness, Silpa Bhirasri's teachings emphasized perceptual approaches that apprehend a reality—"Nature" outside the self, the "new," and the creative forces of the individual (cf. Dundes 1980).

These creative ethics of modern art challenged established relations in Thai society between teachers and their students, as well as modes of production based upon copying. Acknowledging these contradictions, Silpa Bhirasri wrote, "Once the young student has finished his art training, he may express himself better in whatever style he likes, because it becomes a personal matter and each artist has the right to express himself individually" (1959, 14–15). Students were thus expected to become masters themselves, although always publicly acknowledging the authority of their teachers. The relationship would remain a close one, for as one scholar has noted, "Students deal with their instructors with unwavering respect, obedience, and even an attitude of awe, while teachers—at least proper ones—reciprocate with a spirit of unconditional patronage" (Phillips 1992, 36).

The authority of the past adheres in this relationship to the master; it translates in students' work as a form of "copying" or imitation of the master's style.[69] Silpa Bhirasri's first students who worked in sculpture, for example, produced work exactly like his own (Apinan 1992). Marking tensions between the "Thai" and the "Western," the influential editor (and later prime minister) M. R. Kukrit Pramoj accused Thai artists exhibiting their work in the 1950 National Exhibition of being imitative and of producing work that "loudly screamed at the visitors 'Gauguin, Van Gogh or Salvador Dali'" (quoted in Piriya 1982, 68). Thai art students today less frequently imitate Western "masters," but they often produce work strikingly similar to their major advisor, a practice reinforced by art competition judging panels comprised almost exclusively of Silpakorn University faculty.[70]

Murals as Heritage: Valorization and Contestation

Once the development of public education outside the temple began in the late nineteenth century, the didactic function of temple murals to teach Buddhist doctrine to illiterate laypeople waned as much as mural production itself. Printed books replaced murals as primary sources of Buddhist narrative. Through the activities of new state institutions, the social value of murals became redirected to their status as Thai cultural "heritage."

To the extent that Thai government officials were concerned with temple murals—deteriorating badly due to climatic and social factors discussed below—attention shifted from painting new murals to conserving and restoring old ones. Siamese monarchs had regularly built and restored temples and repainted murals. By the reign of King Vajiravudh, these projects took place within specific discourses of exhibiting "Thai heritage" and through modern institutions, such as the conservation section of the Fine Arts Department.[71] These discourses have relied heavily upon the rhetoric of loss and "Thai heritage" as endangered or dying, which reflects poorly on the image of the nation in the present. In a book published to promote an awareness and appreciation of local culture—in this instance murals of the Lanna (northern Thai) school—the author states,

> There is concern that soon nothing will remain for future generations to be proud of and that they can take pride in showing the world that they have cultural roots stretching far back into the distant past, and have not come from a society which was built on an inferior cultural foundation, so weak, so careless and slovenly, as it appears to be at present. (Vithi Phanichphant 1992)

In his development of the Silpakorn University curriculum, Silpa Bhirasri's insistence on continuing training in Thai traditional art techniques remained "an important factor for the work of repairing and restoration of old monuments," rather than producing new pieces of art (1960, 15). Perspectives representing "local history" gained popularity in Thai historiography in the late 1970s; temple murals were recognized as important visual sources for this history and as the constituent elements of national heritage and Thai identity.[72] Academic interest in Thai mural painting blossomed in the mid-1970s with the publication of Boisselier's *Thai Painting* and Wenk's *Mural Painting in Thailand* (an ambitious compendium of endangered murals throughout Thailand, with original photographs "tipped," or pasted in). Muang Boran Publishing began issuing volumes on individual temple murals "to document these invaluable works of art, to promote their study and to preserve a record of them for future generations" (Muang Boran 1979). As part of his effort to disseminate a pluralistic, diverse vision of the past, the historian Srisak Vallibhotama founded the *Muang Boran Journal* in 1974. This journal regularly publishes articles on mural paintings at specific temples. Srisak was one of the first historians to "incorporate travels and tours as a way of learning, before tourism based on historical sites became a successful business" (Thongchai 1995, 109). He also influenced the editorial direction of the popular Thai journal *Sinlapa wattanatham* (Art and culture), first appearing in 1979 as a magazine for popular consumption dedicated in part to opening up official or state control of the Thai past (Hong Lysa 1996).

Official interest in the preservation and conservation of Thai murals also grew in the 1960s and 1970s. In 1959, the Fine Arts Department undertook the first inventory of extant murals. In the early 1960s, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) sent an advisory mission to Thailand to teach conservation techniques. With the support of the Asia Foundation in Thailand and UNESCO, the Fine Arts Department installed glass in front of the murals at Wat Suwannaram. This early effort to protect the murals was discontinued in 1979 because the glass was found to create additional problems with moisture (Muang Boran 1982).[73] The Ford Foundation supported exchanges with international arts agencies (especially the International Centre for Conservation in Rome), facilitating the training of a few Thais in advanced conservation skills, both in Thailand (by Italian and Indian experts) and Europe. Other organizations undertook specific restoration and education projects. The Association of Siamese Architects organized an art conservation committee in 1968 and began the task of restoring the murals at Wat Rakang in 1970. To commemorate Bangkok's bicentennial in 1982, the German government sponsored the restoration of the murals at Wat Suthat, also in Bangkok. In 1995, extending banks' involvement with art into mural preservation efforts, the Thai Farmers' Bank initiated a conservation project at four temples. Since the

1980s, the Thai government has invested heavily in promoting tourism based on "cultural heritage"; this promotional effort has been directed toward a domestic market as much as an international one.

Not all hold the views of academics and government agents that murals must be protected at all costs. Mural preservation and restoration efforts inevitably involve local temple abbots, monks, and lay worshipers who may not share the priorities of central government agencies. Murals are painted in temple edifices intended for ritual use, including burning incense and lighting candles as offerings to the presiding Buddha. Soot from the smoke accumulates on the paintings, darkening them noticeably over time.[74] Furniture placed up against walls of *viharn* and *ubosot* often chip the murals. Many *wat* abbots have replaced wooden floors in temple structures with marble tiling, a more prestigious material. Such tiling encourages water condensation, causing more rapid deterioration of the murals from the floor upward. In these ways, devotional and other practices of daily use contribute to the deterioration of murals.

In an important doctrinal sense, this is not a problem. Indeed, the Buddhist doctrine of mutability denies any permanent materiality to phenomena, organic or otherwise. For murals to decay is inevitable and consonant with (and visibly demonstrates) a Buddhist understanding of phenomena in time. As one scholar noted, "In the past there was no great need to think about preservation and durability of artistic concepts or styles *because everything gradually came into being and everything gradually passed away*" (Vithi 1992, introduction, emphasis added). The Siamese government adopted values of preservation and conservation from foreign sources; such values would seem to contradict indigenous sensibilities regarding the natural life span of materials in a tropical climate as well.

For these reasons, some abbots invest less interest in the disappearance of old murals than in painting new ones or in repainting decaying murals to look like new. Others educated in the contemporary discourse of heritage express impatience with the central bureaucracy: "Sometimes we cannot wait for the department and we have to repair things by ourselves," said the abbot of one old Bangkok temple in a newspaper interview. "We live in the temple, and the government officials don't. They can afford to wait" (Phatarawadee 1994). Abbots must also cope with meager resources to restore or preserve murals, a lack of knowledge and training among temple personnel, and the pressures of wealthy patrons who may prefer to donate money for new, flashy *ubosot* or *viharn* rather than the repair of older, crumbling ones. Certain values of the "past," in other words, are not equally accepted or even acknowledged by all interested parties.[75]

Characterizing early relationships between the Fine Arts Department and temple abbots as "really difficult," Wannipa Na Songkhla, chief conservator at the department who worked with murals for over thirty years, offered an example. At one temple the murals had deteriorated badly, flaking off and leaving patches of raw plaster. The temple abbot expressed his strong belief that the murals should be "complete" for those who came to the temple for meditation, without regard for possible mistakes or deficient artistic skills in restoration.[76] Believing that the abbot would hire some local person to paint without necessarily relating new work to old scenes, Wannipa rearranged priorities at the department to assign her own staff to work there.

Despite Thai law assigning responsibility for the care, control, and protection of temple murals to the Fine Arts Department, Wannipa believed the government and the temple abbots are effectively "co-owners" of temple murals. In the early 1980s, Wannipa's office began an education program for monks throughout the country, bringing them to Bangkok for conferences and offering ongoing training courses in the care and preservation of murals.

The belief that Thai murals constitute irreplaceable cultural knowledge runs deeply in people such as Wannipa, who have committed their lives to documenting and preserving them. If Thai murals were to deteriorate totally, she told me, "We could not say how much we would lose." Her concern was so acute that during the restoration project at Wat Suthat, she lined the floor beneath the scaffolding with plastic so that she and her staff could hear if even one flake of paint from the murals fell to the ground.

Tan Kudt, Modern Mural Painter

As with projects of restoration and conservation, the painting of new murals in Bangkok has continued as well, in new public and often corporate contexts shaped as much by concerns with national heritage and cultural identity as with religious devotion.[77] Paiboon Suwannakudt (1925–1982), known as Tan Kudt, represents an older generation of artists who continued painting murals, influencing a younger generation in technique and in living the "artist's life." The son of an Isaan silver worker and a weaver, Tan Kudt studied art at both Poh Chang and Silpakorn University. A student of Silpa Bhirasri, he wanted to become a sculptor but was persuaded by his master to paint murals in order to keep traditional Thai art alive. Tan Kudt obtained commissions to paint in palace buildings, at the Sanphet Prasat at the Muang Boran (Ancient City, opened 1972), and in many of Bangkok's exclusive hotels, including the Dusit Thani, the Montien, and the Regent. He also painted in temples, where he lived with his seven children, working with groups of apprentices. He taught both his own children and his apprentices the basic skills of Thai mural painting techniques through the arduous and continual practice of drawing individual motifs in sketchbooks. Tan Kudt's apprentices—three of his own children as well as Panya—claim the inspiration of his spirit as well as his method. Tan Kudt called his approach the "power of visualization"; it anticipates Panya's own pedagogical approach. In an incident recalled by his daughter Phaptawan, Tan Kudt asked her to paint an elephant. "But how do you want the hide?" she asked him. "Like elephant hide," he replied, forcing her to rely on her own memory and imagination (Gampell 1995, 46).

According to one artist who worked with him, Tan Kudt would sketch his designs for the murals, but his apprentices would paint them. "He said he was the conductor and all the people are musicians. The conductor does not paint, but he controls," this former apprentice told me. When Tan Kudt asked him what he would like to paint, the young man replied, "Birds." Tan Kudt then began to indicate perches for birds everywhere in his trees and asked this assistant to paint the birds in. He left his position with Tan Kudt after two years because he believed he was being required to "play one instrument."[78]

Unlike other artists of his generation who had taken up easel painting, Tan Kudt worked ex-

clusively as a mural painter. Several of his children have continued his work in temples, offices, and hotels. They also have established mural-painting teams and received numerous commissions as mural painting proliferated in the 1980s and early 1990s, a period of economic prosperity. In addition to Chalermchai and Panya, other prominent Thai artists known primarily for drawings or easel paintings have accepted prestigious mural commissions, including Chakrabhand Posayakrit (famous for his heavily romanticized portraits of beautiful women), Angkarn Kalayanapongse, and Preecha Thaothong.[79] Their murals appear in spaces ranging from temple *ubosot* and *viharn* to cultural centers, memorial buildings, corporate headquarters, and banks—locales that expand Thai notions of social space and now compete with the centrality of the *wat* as the primary public space in Thai daily life. These murals have engendered some of the discourse featured in *Phujatkan* on the secularization and commoditization of religious art.

Neotraditional Thai Art

As in countries throughout the world, the emergence of a "neotraditional" art category in Thailand must be tied to specific historical contexts that encourage the self-conscious evaluation of cultural identity in art and in artistic modes of production.[80] At issue here is how the art and individual artists deemed neotraditional—the locally defined category made prominent by the work of Panya and Chalermchai at Wat Buddhapadipa—came to dominate the Bangkok art scene in the early 1990s. While critical reception of much of this art ranges from lukewarm to ice-cold, during the white-hot art market of the late 1990s, neotraditional art was among that most eagerly sought by Thai buyers. Why?

The massive presence of Americans in Thailand during the Indochina War, the dominance of Japanese investment, and booming international tourism in the 1960s and 1970s fueled new discourses on "Thainess" and a backlash against abstract international styles seemingly devoid of specifically Thai cultural content.[81] Artistic trends of this period that sought to reorient contemporary art range from the "Floating Market" school—referring to tempera renditions of floating markets, festivals, and folk games—to the art that engaged with issues of political repression and social injustice during the political crisis of 1973–1976, loosely clustered as "Art for Life."[82] Major artists such as Thawan Duchanee, Pratuang Emcharoen, Angkarn Kalayanapongse, and Pichai Nirand turned toward Buddhist themes and motifs in a deliberate "break with the Thai abstractionists' endeavors to create and preserve the autonomy of pure and high art."[83] The artistic concerns of this group serve as the immediate antecedents of the neotraditionalism of Panya and Chalermchai that sought to bridge the past of Thai art with the present of international modern art.

For these artists, a "return to the past" meant exploring Buddhism as the basis for critiquing contemporary conditions of Thai modernity, as well as claiming a nativist position for their work.[84] Thawan, noted for his muscular style and use of animal imagery, painted monks as gorillas, commenting upon perceptions of an increasingly corrupt *sangha*. In his *Thosochat* series (1974–1976), Thawan gave Buddha's battle with Mara updated relevance as an attack on the val-

ues of Western popular culture in which the Buddha defeats Rambo, Conan, Superman, Batman, Lone Wolf, Clint Eastwood, and Arnold Schwarzenegger, all Western "good guys" (Apinan 1993b, 227). Other artists returned to the temple itself—abstracted into pure architectural form (in the work of Preecha Thaothong, for example) or as site of contemplation and tranquility (in the paintings of Surasit Saokhong). The cumulative impact of these and other similar artists—still holding central positions in the contemporary Thai art world—is the reconstruction of "Thai art" as Buddhist art. This achieved dual cultural objectives: artists could "be Thai" while utilizing abstract, expressionist, and other "non-Thai" painting styles. They could also adopt an implicit or explicit stance of critique by invoking the authority of an ultimate Thai master teacher, the Buddha himself.

These moves toward an artistic redefinition of "Thainess" found increasing commercial success with an expanding domestic art market, the proliferation of new venues for exhibition and sales, and media coverage of art and art events. Beginning in the 1960s, artists felt encouraged pursuing careers as painters.[85] Annual art competitions, such as the Bangkok Bank's Bua Luang, promoted artists' concerns with "Thai" art by establishing separate categories for "Thai traditional" art (*thai praphenii*, or Thai customs, or *sinlapa thai,* Thai art) and modern art *(sinlapa ruam samai)*. The administration of Silpakorn University also responded by establishing the "Thai Art" curriculum at the university in 1978, institutionalizing the "process of instilling the concept of cultural identity into one's thinking as an important aspect necessary for creating works of art regardless of time and place" (Somporn 1995a).[86]

The muralists who painted Wat Buddhapadipa were among the earliest graduates of this new "Thai art" curriculum at Silpakorn University. Chalermchai was one of two students in the first graduating class, Panya one of four in the second graduating class. In an unpublished interview that illuminates his specific views of the past, Chalermchai explains the divisions in the Thai art world during the late 1970s:

> I thought it was important to know about *farang* art, but I thought it was important for Thai people to know Thai art too. But Damrong's group tended to pay a lot of attention to *farang* art; they never paid attention to Thai art. *It seems like they look down on their own ancestors' spirits.* It isn't right. It made me promise myself that one day I would make them realize this.
>
> I am the one who is strong enough to encourage artists to do Thai style and encourage people to realize the value of Thai art. I want artists to think in a new way; to create a new contemporary Thai style based on our own traditions. It will narrow the gap between Silpakorn graduates who follow *farang* art and traditional art. We will be in the middle. (Phillips 1987b, emphasis added)[87]

Chalermchai and Panya organized the "Thai Art 80" art group and exhibition in 1980 at the Bhirasri Institute of Modern Art. Media coverage of that event heralded it as the beginning of the neotraditional art movement in Bangkok.[88] At Visual Dhamma Gallery run by Alfred Pawlin, an expatriate Austrian committed to showing contemporary art that communicated Buddhist teachings, the 1984 exhibition "Visual Dhamma" bridged the two generations of artists.

Thawan, Pratuang, and Pichai, artists of the older generation, worked in both abstract and representational styles but did not refer directly to classical mural painting styles. Panya and Chalermchai represented the emerging neotraditional group. Chalermchai worked in tempera, utilizing the two-dimensional flatness of mural painting in scenes of lay templegoers. Panya, who had trained with Tan Kudt, experimented with printmaking and acrylics but often quoted mural scenes. In large part because of the Wat Buddhapadipa project that immediately followed the "Visual Dhamma" exhibition, neotraditionalists in Thailand became associated with art derived from mural painting, although many of the artists so labeled, including some in the original "Thai Art 80" show, had never worked on murals. In the artwriting about Chalermchai and Panya in the mid-1980s, a distinguishing characteristic of their work was seen to be the "fresh application of the mural style," one which would "help counter a rampant Western modernism that was threatening the best of the old in Thai art."[89]

The neotraditional category of art emerges from an intellectual space where artistic production is interpreted and given value. In that space, art historians claim that Western elements (Western dress, architecture, linear perspective, and naturalism) have "contaminated" the classical qualities of temple murals. Cultural discourse maps "modern" art as "Western," while the "Thai" qualities of art are seen to adhere in either depictions of village life or in Buddhist themes, content, and style. Thus as a linguistic construction, the neotraditional mediates between classic/modern and Western/Thai. However, Thai artists and writers resist the notion that "being in the middle" between Thai and Western, traditional and modern, is merely syncretic blending. Somporn Rodboon, a Thai art historian and curator at Silpakorn University, argues that neotraditional represents the "cultivation of aspects of traditional art that were previously left under-developed. Artists who work in this style attempt to represent a modern form through the aesthetic values of the past in a way that is suited to modern conditions" (1995a, 15). Others give primacy to the claims made by the neotraditional for authority over the past. John Clark, an Australian art historian who studies the contemporary art of Asia, argues that the rhetorical intent of the neotraditional category attempts "to re-invent the context from which that legitimacy [of past forms and techniques] is drawn," a legitimacy presumably "unspoken and unified," set within court and temple (1995). In Thailand, that context is Buddhist, animating a morality and sense of truth beyond the reach of Western science and modernity, the distinction made by King Mongkut.

Thainess: Identity and Commodity

Murals or easel paintings done in mural styles now constitute an important element in Thai interior design schemes.[90] Builders of large hotels in Bangkok design and furnish them in the bland, international corporate styles familiar to travelers the world over. Mural-style painting—on ballroom ceilings, on the walls lining the lobby's grand staircase, or mounted on carved panels standing in the reception area—serves to situate these otherwise anonymous public spaces in Thailand. Mounted and framed canvas panels of Thai mural-style painting

grace the lobbies of hospitals, restaurants, and office buildings. According to one scholar, traditional painting styles in these commercial settings serve as a "sign, not a symbol" of Thai identity, signs that function "just to attract customers." In her view, a fully "Thai" space emerges out of a combination of light, architecture, and use of space. Mural panels placed in the lobby are insufficient.[91]

Even multinational fast-food chains, with distinctive corporate identities defined by logos, graphics, color schemes, spatial layouts, and server uniforms, have appropriated Thai mural-style painting. At the McDonald's at Bangkok's World Trade Center, Ronald McDonald cavorts with Thai *theweda* in murals above the counters and on the walls between tables. This process of differentiation, while seemingly culture-specific, remains contained within the imperatives of consumerism. "Culture" (in this case Thai murals) serves as commodity packaging, wrapping a product in local colors and designs.[92]

In the context of international tourism, designers feature mural-style painting in brochures and tourist guides.[93] While temples and murals themselves have become primary tourist attractions in Thailand, mural paintings have also been transformed into commodities in service to the tourist industry, as souvenir refrigerator magnets, or to create distinctively Thai packaging—as that used by the Jim Thompson Silk Company.[94] Scenes from Thai murals have entered the stream of globalized commodities as well—in one case to substantiate the "Cultural Richness of Asia" on boxes of Kleenex facial tissues.

In lightly stamping a public space (or corporate commodity) as "Thai" with replicas of mural painting, this style of art mediates between the global and the local. Such art renders the forms of global capitalism (the McDonald's restaurant) "culture friendly," making imported forms welcome to a local public. The corporate appropriation of (or institutional support for) art forms is one mode by which they claim cultural legitimacy; sponsoring key Buddhist rituals is another.[95] In addition to sponsoring juried contests and amassing important collections, the direct commissioning of such art for corporate or bank headquarters was an obvious next step, such as the murals painted by Panya at the Siam Commercial Bank, completed in 1995.

When compressed into the visual conventions of, say, the Third Reign temples represented by Wat Suthat or Wat Suwannaram, or the Lanna-style figures of Wat Phumin, Thai mural painting does constitute a distinctive artistic style. The more frequently reproduced, the more immediately identifiable as "Thai" this style becomes in international visual culture. Similarly, the bold graphic designs of Sumbanese *ikat* fabric have become one shorthand visual symbol of Indonesian identity, and the kilim rug designs symbolic of Turkey.[96] As a recognizable artistic style that relies on a distinctive use of line to create form and on themes of religious worship, royal splendor, local temple festivals, and romanticized village life, Thai mural painting remains obstinately not-Western and not-modern. That this distinction establishes a basis for claiming such representations of Thai cultural forms to be Orientalist (whether imposed from without or as a kind of self-Orientalizing) is arguable, but not really my point here. In international visual culture, Thai art is marked as "Other," as unique, and as worthy as cultural currency in the marketplace of images and goods.

The "classical," "modern," "Thai art," "traditional," and "neotraditional" categories largely relate to art production at the center in Bangkok, or by the monarchy and elite. They do not adequately account for the mural painting that has continued in up-country temples, or in Bangkok in new public spaces, or with the introduction of ideas of conservation and restoration. The artists at Wat Buddhapadipa did not pick up a form of production known to them only in history books or remaining in decaying traces on temple walls. They emerge from a continuity of practice lying somewhere outside the preferred categories of modern art production.[97] Most of the artists who worked at Wat Buddhapadipa had exposure to the materials, techniques, and approaches of mural painting at Poh Chang and the other vocational schools they attended before entering Silpakorn. In addition, as one of their leaders, Panya had worked on mural conservation projects and as an apprentice of Tan Kudt. These experiences, as much as the ideologies of creativity and experimentation, have shaped his views of "art" as product and as praxis.[98]

Despite the essentializing and compressive force of the word "traditional" and its derivative, "neotraditional," the practice of Thai mural painting has been a dynamic one. Yet while mural painting continued (in part at the urging of Silpa Bhirasri that Thais not abandon their artistic past), it did so in the margins of dominant art discourse in Thailand. Extant temple murals became subject to new discourses. Filtered through agencies of the state and other institutions of modernity, such as banks and international arts agencies, they have been repositioned in official narratives of Thai "art," "history," "identity," and "heritage." At the level of state institutions, concerns shifted from the production of temple murals to their documentation, conservation, and restoration—activities that further maintain a disjuncture between the "past" and the "modern." Along with major architectural monuments and the ceramics produced at Ban Chiang, temple murals have become visible tokens of the Thai past and currency in the cultural politics of the present. The representational nature of murals as well as their ubiquity, I would argue, has given them a special place in the public construction of Thai identity, both to the Thais themselves and in projections of a Thai identity globally. The changes visible in both theme and style on temple walls mirror changing relations within Thai society and between Thailand and the world. In certain other respects they do not merely reflect change, but as the outcome of productive activities that mobilize technologies, ideas, and social relations, they comprise some of the substance of those transformations.

The recontextualization of Thai architecture, sculpture, and painting—from temple to heritage park and tourist attraction, from religious space to museum vitrine, from temple wall to coffee-table book and tourist trinket—has extended into the realm of commodity exchange and corporate culture. Whether projects of heritage and commoditization desanctify explicitly religious imagery and/or attenuate specific kinds of power adhering in revered images remains an open question.[99] The alterations to an image of an image—the photograph of the statue of Silpa Bhirasri—and the protests at Silpakorn University it provoked animated tensions and ambiguities toward commoditization, the position of the individual artist within Thai society,

and the authority of the "past" specifically articulated in the father-like master/student relationships. The articles in the *Phujatkan* issue attacked the commoditization of art by artists and collectors, a turning away from the social ideals of Silpa Bhirasri. *Phujatkan* was itself attacked for violating the sanctity of the master for commercial gain, for subverting his authority.

Other categories for "Thai art"—"heritage" and "identity"—articulate new social values in a changing Thai society. The Wat Buddhapadipa murals further recontextualize temple painting, from Buddhist narratives to modern art, from Thailand to England. How have the messages and meanings of Thai art—the Buddha himself, stories of his lives and teachings—been transformed, if at all, in these new contexts? What new meanings have emerged? These questions establish the ground against which the next chapter examines the Wat Buddhapadipa murals.

chapter four

From Buddhist Stories to Modern Art

"In such a place I was so and so by name, and from thence I passed and came hither."—Buddha, recounting his previous lives throughout the night he attained enlightenment[1]

Multiple Audiences

During one of my visits to Wat Buddhapadipa, three young English visitors seemed anxious to understand the "position" of Margaret Thatcher in the temple's murals. They believed her location in Chalermchai's scene of the Three Worlds to be a bit high.[2] I noted that Thatcher was, after all, prime minister at the time the murals were painted, from 1984–1992. Sitting in front of a cottage, she serenely overlooks "hell" (Plate 31). One fellow immediately responded with a question, "Why had the artists not painted Thatcher *in* hell?" Another Englishman, a longtime temple supporter and devout Buddhist who stood with us, replied that we are not to judge but instead to observe and reflect upon these issues of position.

The conversation ended before we could pursue the complex relations of patronage and artistic choice, realpolitik, and the imagined moral universe painted on these walls. This incident does, however, illustrate the play in these murals between story and "art" and between the "real" and the "imaginary." It also points to strategies used by the muralists to engage multiple audiences in a transnational setting where the painted narratives might not be familiar.

The Wat Buddhapadipa muralists sought to communicate with their audiences on the level of art, rather than narrative. They clearly stated their intentions to make the visual aspects of their murals dominant, as they wrote in their catalog of the murals:

> The main distinction are that ancient murals aim to teach Buddhism by means of images and their artistic aspects are of secondary importance, whereas in the murals of Wat Buddhapadipa *art is in the foreground.* Their artists felt that at a time when people already have attained a certain level of education, art should take the first place, and teaching through images is of secondary importance. Hence, in the murals of Wat Buddhapadipa the teaching of the Buddha's Life through images is not emphasized, but rather the stories of His Life are

used to present *art for art's sake,* stressing the moods of the paintings. (Chalermchai et al. 1992, 25, emphasis added)[3]

Their verbal statements and writings express an intention that the murals stand on their own as art, without requiring the mediation of monks' interpretations or oral instruction. Nonetheless, several of the muralists told me they had spent much time discussing these stories with the monks, especially with temple secretary Phra Maha Term, in order to get the meanings right. The artists' choice of traditional Buddhist narratives (which presumably would be unfamiliar to many viewers in London) would seem to contradict their stated goal of painting "art for art's sake." However, in the setting of a temple, their claims inevitably extend beyond the formal, disinterested terms attributed to "art for art's sake." Their artistic strategies of intense color, expansive and ambiguous space, iconographic transgressions, commentary, and visual jokes intended to evoke emotional responses and understandings beyond levels of narrated story and painted surface—meanings contained within a Buddhist universe.

The mural painters' experiments with new techniques and iconography do not detract from their central purpose to communicate Buddhist notions of who we are, who we have been, and who we might become. Essential to the realization of this purpose were concerns with audience and position. The muralists acknowledge the positioning of human and divine beings according to karmic attainment; they paint spaces that call into question the position of the viewer: outside or inside? Present or past? Merit maker or sinner? Set within the history of Thai mural painting, a dynamic interplay between artistic styles and changing notions of Siamese/Thai subjectivities, these murals project a global vision of Buddhist morality in a transcultural space where travelers and worshipers of all nations commingle.

The artists made explicit statements that conceptualize differences among their many publics. They described their Thai public as literate and long-schooled in Buddhist narratives. They spoke also of a Western public unfamiliar with Buddhist stories but familiar with "art." These assumptions about their viewers justified their revisions of the "functions" of temple murals in the present day, as Panya states in an interview in one of Thai Airways International's magazines:

> In the old days, the murals were needed to tell the story because few people could actually read the scriptures. But now that that's no longer a necessary role, we [Chalermchai and I] felt we wanted to emphasize the emotional and artistic aspects of the murals. It's important that visitors who come here who may not know the story of Buddha or understand the Buddhist symbols can still appreciate the art and feel its emotion. (Wilkinson 1986, 44)

Their determination also justified iconographic changes that became controversial for some Thai viewers but established their autonomy as artists. In his explanation for why he painted the Buddha in one scene with one lotus instead of the customary seven, Chalermchai raised this issue of artistic license when he told me: "I say no . . . I want just only one lotus, because he is more beautiful then. The story is not important. I follow the story, but not all of it. Sometimes, I cut the story."

Although the artists have deemphasized the content and function of their paintings as narratives, for many Thai and non-Thai Buddhist viewers their identification of the murals as teachings of the Dhamma remains inevitable. For *farang* and non-Buddhist viewers, the artists have devised other ways to draw them into questioning the meanings of the scenes. In this regard, the murals constitute story-telling performances; various visual devices make the performative aspects of this art evident. Signatures and portraits of the artists in the murals draw attention to the artists as authors or storytellers. Spatial ambiguity and collapsing geographies challenge boundaries between audience and art, drawing viewers into the painted scenes and engendering concern with spatial position. The distance between artist and audience shrinks further as details referencing global popular culture and politics index mutually shared experiences. Visual quotations of the world's art icons attract multiple audiences on the basis of globalized aesthetic knowledge.[4]

One Thai art historian has argued that at Wat Buddhapadipa these devices create allegories, contemporary narratives overlaying historical ones. This type of allegory—deliberately ironic, nostalgic, and incongruous—thus indicates their postmodern character (Apinan 1993a, 8).[5] One might just as well respond, "If these murals are so postmodern, why do they look so 'Buddhist'?" As "pastiche," with their mixing of artistic styles, layering of historical reference, and intertextual citing of other murals, they utilize devices popular in Thai mural painting for at least a century. Further, even though technically innovative and stylistically hybrid, the murals reproduce the structure of much of Buddhist narrative. In the written Jatakas, for example, the Buddha narrates each tale to his followers.[6] He opens with a "story of the present," a situation encountered by the Buddha or one of his followers that has prompted the telling of the tale as an "anecdote or parable" of his teachings. The Buddha then tells the story and finally elucidates its moral and notes the congruence of its characters, present with past. Thus within the structure of the tale, the Buddha as narrator links the events of his past life with the event of narration in the present. In Thai mural painting—visual story-telling—the narrator/painter reproduces this structure in the localizing strategies of time (painting historical events as well as scenes of daily life) and place. In Thai religious spaces, the presence of the narrator is underscored by the presiding Buddha image.[7] His past lives are told in stories that line the temple walls, unifying the narrated event with an event of narration.[8] In this way, the teachings of Buddhism orient the viewer/receiver toward the present moment, as they focus on intentionality and moral action with implications extending out of the past and into the future. The past (stories of the lives of the Buddha) provides the moral context for the present viewing, just as the workings of karma link a past deed to its consequences in the present.[9]

Learning Stories: Notes on Texts and Sources

An extensive comparison of the muralists' visual "texts" with the written ones from which they derive is beyond the scope of this book. Nevertheless, a brief discussion of the stories themselves and the written and visual sources from which they are drawn establishes the broad ground of "Thai tradition" against which these artists' choices bring to the fore issues of audi-

ence and artistic achievement. They wanted to communicate the "right" meanings and so consulted with monks about their choices. While the artists' concerns lay more with the visual impact of scenes than with their narrative coherence or even comprehensibility *as* texts, issues of "text" remain relevant because of the stories' familiarity to a Thai and/or Buddhist audience.

In Thailand, the most widely disseminated written text of the stories of the Buddha's life is the *Pathama Samabodhi,* the Thai version of the *Nidanakatha*.[10] This text constitutes the first narrative biography of Prince Siddharta Gotama, the historical Buddha born in India around the sixth century B.C., and ends prior to the Buddha's final attainment of nirvana. In this account, as the bodhisattva decides to be reborn one final time as a Buddha, he investigates the "contributory conditions" to enlightenment, or the ten virtues or perfections (Pali: *paramitas*). He attains one of these ten perfections at the culmination of each of his final ten lives before his birth as the Buddha-to-be (Prince Siddharta Gotama). In the Buddha's penultimate incarnation as Prince Vessantara (Thai: Phra Wesandorn), he perfects the virtue of generosity. Thai painters have long rendered these ten lives—the *thosochat* or *sip chat* (ten lives)—on the walls of temples along with events from the life of Prince Siddharta.[11]

The Wat Buddhapadipa muralists painted largely from visual memories rather than from textual sources. When asked about their sources for character and incident in "telling" these stories, Chalermchai, Panya, Sompop, and their assistants usually answered that they "already knew them."[12] Several indicated to me that old temple murals constituted major elements of their visual culture during childhood. In the formative stages of their art training, Thai art students learn directly from temple murals or the reproductions of mural paintings that pervade Thai popular culture. Several of the artists discussed studying the Muang Boran series on murals as well. Other visual analogues of mural painting—manuscript illustration, banner painting, cabinet lacquer work, and theatrical performances—contribute to the rich and varied visual culture in Thailand from which artists might draw.[13] While thematic emphases and conventions of depiction vary according to medium, all genres draw upon the same characters, settings, plots, and morals as temple murals. Some manuscripts of Pali texts contain illustrations with accompanying annotations on proportions and drawing techniques, indicating their probable use as "study manuals" for artists (Ginsburg 1989, 43). The two extant versions of the Buddhist cosmology, the *Traiphum* (or Three Worlds), in illustrated manuscript form may have provided early models for the many temple murals on this theme (Silpa Bhirasri 1959a; Ginsburg 1989).[14] Scholars have long considered Thai shadow play *(nang),* classical dance *(ram phlaeng),* and masked plays (*khon)* as models for the costumes and poses of temple mural figures.[15] The precise directions of visual influence and relationship to textual sources of the murals' narratives are less important to my argument than the fact that stories of the Buddha permeate Thai culture in multiple modes of performance. These stories have been enacted at all levels of Thai society: as formal court dance, as raucous traveling theater, as shadow play, as sacred ceremonies, on television, in textbooks, in parades at provincial fairs, and on temple walls.[16] The characters and situations are familiar, living on in the popular visual culture of an increasingly urbanized and educated populace and still holding a central place in the moral imagination of many Thais.

Through repeated depiction in conventionalized manner (often as particular characters arrayed in a tableau-like setting), numerous episodes from these tales have become iconic to Thai viewers. Most would recognize a woman dressed in animal skins confronting tigers and *singha* (stylized lions) in a forest as Princess Madsi, the wife in the Phra Wesandorn tale (Plate 23). Many of these iconic episodes appear in the Wat Buddhapadipa murals, for the artists (in Sompop's words) "followed the tradition, like most artists before." In the five Jatakas he painted, Sompop first considered the "most important part" or the central moral of the tale, then the artistic strategies by which he could communicate this moral to viewers unfamiliar with the tale, as in his scene from Phra Nemiraj emphasizing charity, discussed below.

The Mural Program: The Life of the Buddha

Chalermchai and Panya's mural program underscores their intention to communicate fundamental aspects of Buddhist doctrine to a foreign audience. While Thai cultural practice and history appear in the murals (indeed, they pervade the murals), as do references to a globalized popular culture and sociopolitical events of the time, the overarching emphasis in this *ubosot* remains on the Buddha himself as exemplary teacher and on the moral teachings derived from his life experiences (Figure 3).[17] With these choices, the artists align themselves with the classical period, when scenes from the historical and past lives of the Buddha and the *Traiphum* dominate as mural themes, especially in *ubosot*.[18] The mural program popularized during the reign of Rama III in the early 1800s—exemplified by Wat Suthat and Wat Suwannaram—comprises the celestial assembly in registers above the side windows, the *thosochat* in bays between the windows, *The Defeat of Mara* and *The Enlightenment* on the wall opposite the presiding image, and the *Traiphum* depicting the Buddhist cosmology behind the presiding image. The congruence of the Wat Buddhapadipa mural program with those considered to be the zenith of the Thai painting tradition establishes the foundation necessary to support the artists' subsequent departures in style and iconography, the aspects of their murals they claim to be most "modern." Their decision to limit scenes in the main room to the historical life of the Buddha meant they could include scenes never before depicted in Thai temple murals, such as Panya's *Buddha's Five Revelations* (Plate 24). This choice enhances the perception of innovation (at least for Thai viewers), but remains firmly set within canonical teachings of the Buddha.

Chalermchai and Panya divided the mural program in the main room; each took responsibility for two walls. Specific scenes play in opposition to one another: the violent action of Panya's *Mara* scenes counters the celestial composure of Chalermchai's *Traiphum*. However, the compositional and narrative symmetry on the two side walls mediates these oppositions and contributes to an overall unity despite the disparate styles of the two major artists. Panya's *Birth of the Buddha* dominates the right wall, opposite Chalermchai's *Parinirvana* (Plate 25), the moment when the Buddha approaches his death. Scenes of *The Renunciation and Great Departure*, the events that signal Prince Siddharta's decision to forego a life of pleasure in the material world to seek enlightenment, appear opposite those episodes that end the Buddha's sentient existence, *The Last Meal and the Invitation to Nirvana*. Panya's rendition of *The First*

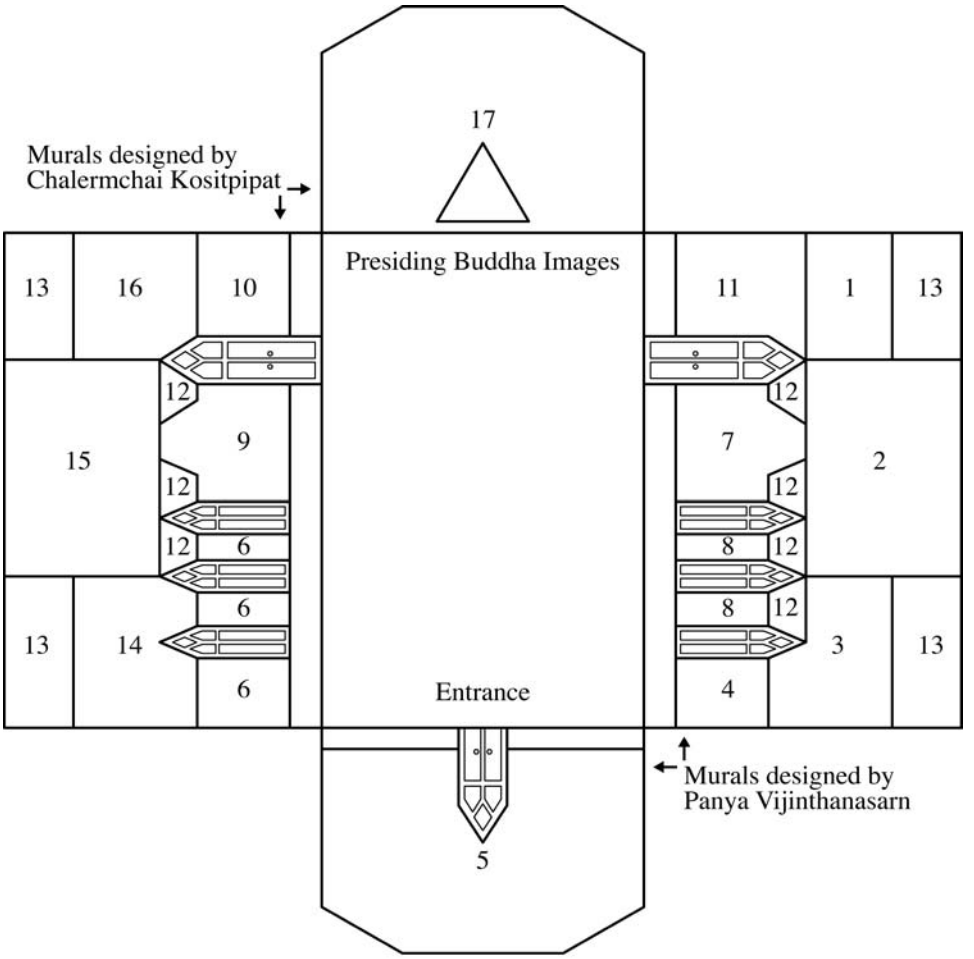


Figure 3: Mural plan, life of the Buddha, main room of *ubosot* at Wat Buddhapadipa. Drawing by Joe Shoulak.

1. *Invitation to Descend from Tavatimsa Heaven* and *Dream of Queen Siri Mahamaya*
2. *Birth of the Buddha*
3. *The Great Renunciation* and *The Five Revelations*
4. *Casting the Tray*
5. *Defeat of Mara* and *The Enlightenment*
6. *The Four Categories of Lotus*
7. *The First Sermon*
8. *The Dhammachakra Kapawatana Sutra*
9. *Buddha Preaching to His Mother* and *Descent from Tavatimsa Heaven*
10. *The Twin Miracle*
11. *The Eight Miracles*
12. *Buddha's Eight Postures*
13. *Celestial Assembly*
14. *The Last Meal* and *Invitation to Nirvana*
15. *Parinirvana*
16. *The Cremation* and *The Division of Relics*
17. *Traiphum*

Sermon (Plate 26) appears opposite Chalermchai's scene of another sermon, *Buddha Preaching to His Mother* and *The Descent from Tavatimsa Heaven* (Plate 30). Chalermchai's scene of *The Twin Miracles* is painted across from Panya's *The Eight Miracles*. Similarly, episodes that precede the Buddha's birth, *The Invitation to Descend* and *The Dream of Queen Siri Mahamaya,* are painted across from incidents following his death, *The Cremation* and *The Division of the Relics*. The dramatic highlights of the Buddha's biography are thus positioned visually to heighten their significance to those who know the stories.[19] The artists furthered this symmetry by rendering opposing scenes in a similar scale. Each of the two *Miracle* scenes are complexly detailed and contain relatively small figures in continuous narration.[20] They give the *Birth* and the *Parinirvana* more importance by placing them in the dominant position on the lateral walls and by painting them as single scenes with relatively large-scale figures.

Chalermchai and Panya faced particular compositional challenges at Wat Buddhapadipa, given the *bot*'s interior arrangement of windows. The architect's addition of the wing rooms replaced evenly sized and spaced window bays along the side walls (a characteristic feature of

Thai *bot* since Ayutthayan times) with wall spaces of unequal sizes. The three-paned *wimaan* shape of the windows and doors created inverted triangular sections. In these spaces between the windows and doors, the two artists depicted the Buddha in seven different postures (Plate 25).[21] In the narrow spaces between the windows on Chalermchai's wall, his assistants painted aspects of doctrine rarely seen: the *Four Categories of Lotus,* which symbolize the different levels of understanding followers have of Buddha's teachings (Plate 36). On Panya's side, those two spaces contain figures representing the *Dhammacakra Kapawatana Sutra,* teachings from the Buddha's first sermon (Plate 37). The artists used similar framing devices *(sen phlaeng),* although in different decorative styles, that parallel each other: linear borders set off the *Birth* and *Parinirvana* scenes; the scenes themselves take place in arched frames formed by gracefully bending tree branches. Undulating ribbons of color establish the upper registers containing the *Celestial Assembly*. To further establish lateral symmetry and relate the two artists' walls to each other, on the upper registers the artists painted deity figures in postures of devotion—the celestial assembly—with heads turned toward the presiding images (Plate 38).

Due to the unconventional ground plan of this *bot* (Figure 1), the *thosochat* in the wing rooms commands less attention than the main room, because these rooms serve no ritual purpose. The doors to the side rooms remain closed during the week; many visitors are unaware of these murals unless they have peeked in the windows from outside the *bot*. The temple's "tour guides"—monks or lay supporters—do not always mention their existence.[22] On the weekends, however, the main room is filled with worshipers and/or meditators. Since moving around this space becomes difficult and distracting from activities of worship, *farang* visitors interested primarily in the murals find it easier to spend more time looking at the *thosochat,* out of the way.

Sompop designed the five narratives painted in the room on the left (if one enters by the front door) (Figure 4). The room on the right contains five stories designed by Pang Chinasai and Kittisak Nuallak, including the *mahachat,* or Phra Wesandorn tale (Figure 5). The styles of the two rooms are distinctively different: Pang and Kittisak paint exclusively in linear, decorative, two-dimensional "Thai style" without reference to the contemporary world. Sompop and his assistants worked more eclectically, with the linear flat space of Thai style, but with abstract, expressionist, and realist styles as well.[23] Sompop placed the story of Phra Nemiraj (a prince who visits hell) most prominently; hell itself covers the expansive interior wall between the two doors (Plate 39). In Pang and Kittisak's wing room, this space on the interior wall contains the *mahachat* (Plate 42). In their placement, then, two opposing themes that have often dominated Thai temple walls—hell and the supreme virtue of generosity—retain pride of place.

Color and the Painting of Emotion

In interviews on the Wat Buddhapadipa murals and in their catalog, the artists emphasized color as their primary departure from the "traditions" of Thai temple painting. By using acrylics and a much brighter and varied palette, they could, they believed, communicate the emo-

Figure 4: Mural Plan, *Thosochat* (Ten Lives), East wing, *ubosot* at Wat Buddhapadipa. Drawing by Joe Shoulak.

East Wing

1. *Phra Temiyaraj Jataka*
2. *Phra Mahajanaka Jataka*
3. *Suwannasam Jataka*
4. *Phra Nemiraj Jataka*
5. *Mahosot Jataka*
6. Dhamma Riddles: *Power of Time,*

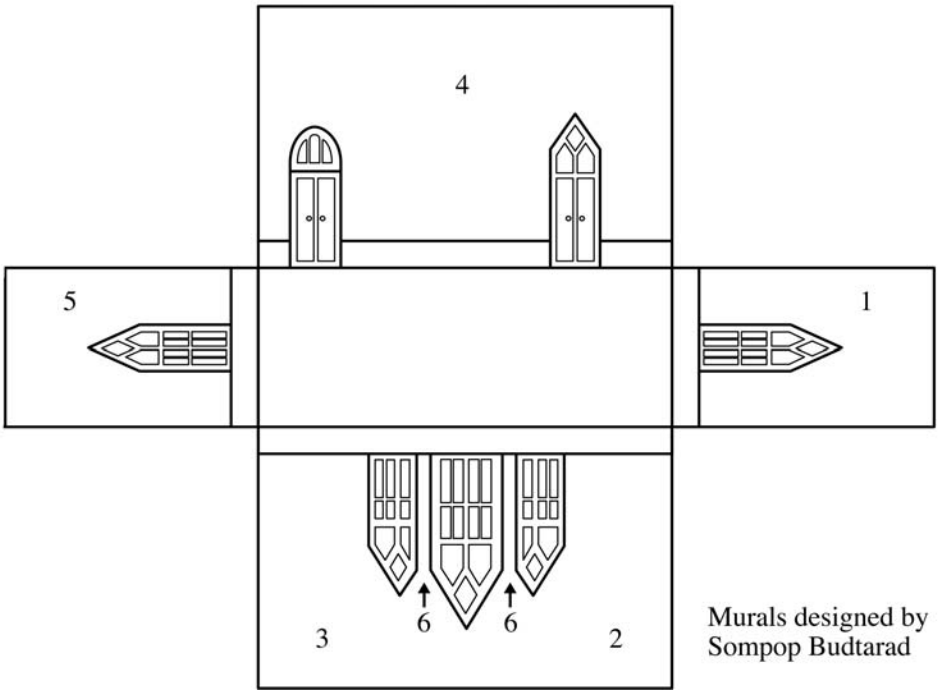
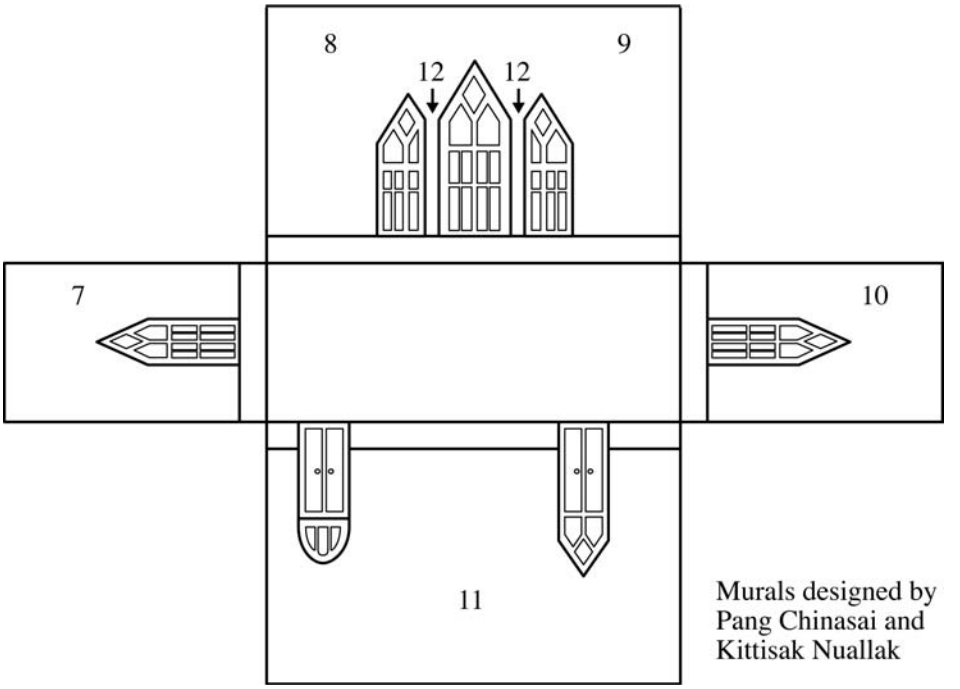


Figure 5: Mural Plan, *Thosochat* (Ten Lives), West wing, *ubosot* at Wat Buddhapadipa. Drawing by Joe Shoulak.

West Wing

7. *Phra Puritat Jataka*
8. *Phra Chanthakumarn Jataka*
9. *Phra Brahmanarada Jataka*
10. *Vidhurapanthit Jataka*
11. *Phra Wesandorn Jataka*
12. Dhamma Riddles: *Bodhisattva in Meditation, Sensual Pleasures*



tional meanings of the stories—and to these artists emotion transformed stories into "art." Color and its emotive properties made art truly individual as well. As Chalermchai explained his own artistic awakening:

> I saw abstract art in my friend's book. Van Gogh, Impressionists. I said, "Oh, this is art!" I felt confused. I could copy, but I didn't know how I could create things like that. I didn't know how to translate that into my work. I knew only how to copy colors. Gauguin did the sky red. I said, "but it's not like that!" I liked things that look real and are detailed. I had to learn how to put emotion into my work. It took five years to learn that. (Phillips 1987b)

Discussing his and Panya's planning of the Wat Buddhapadipa murals, Chalermchai said, "The paintings tell the story. For me the story is not important. Emotion comes first. Art for art's sake. All mural painting in Bangkok is monochrome. For us, there is a big difference."[24] The brightness, range, modulation, and intensity of these acrylic colors differ dramatically from the more subdued natural pigments of the late-eighteenth-century Thai murals, or the dark, monochromatic palettes of the classical-era nineteenth-century murals. In their respective color choices, they attempted symmetry as well: Chalermchai's brilliant reds behind the presiding Buddha statues balance Panya's equally intense blues, mauves, and pinks on the opposite wall. While individual scenes contain details and expansive spaces rendered in pale, delicate tones, most scenes are brightly hued. This profusion of colors has sparked many of the negative comments by other Thais, marking the singular quality that makes these murals disturbing, even strange.

Despite these symmetries in scale, scenic placement, framing, color, and technique—designed to establish overall unity—the radically disparate styles of Panya and Chalermchai and their respective team members remain evident in artistic process and compositional dynamics in the stories and scenes discussed below. Their stylistic eclecticism foregrounds purposeful choice, individual artistic style, and expressive vision, rather than the kind of "tradition" based on formulaic repainting of familiar themes by anonymous artisans, or *chaang*.

Outside or Inside? *The Defeat of Mara* and *The Enlightenment*

Much of Panya's early work concerns "intense conflict and the posed question of its resolution."[25] The drama of the Buddha's life culminates in intense conflict—the confrontation between the Buddha and the archdemon Mara and his army, who embody all the temptations and evils of the material world. This scene more than any other at the temple exemplifies the process by which these artists moved from narrative to "art" as the vehicle for emotion and visual experience.[26] In the scenes' bold composition, spatial ambiguities, and iconographic play—deviations from the original sketch approved by the temple's sponsors and the Supreme Patriarch of the Thai Buddhist *sangha* (Plate 9)—we see also the scope of artistic freedom and innovation claimed by Panya and his team members, a freedom probably unattainable had they painted these murals in Thailand.

To resist the temptations posed by Mara, Buddha calls for a witness to testify to the accumulated merit from his many past lives. The earth goddess Nang Thorani responds to the Buddha's request by wringing her long hair, releasing a torrent of water that floods and defeats Mara's army. Panya organized the basic flow of narration similarly to numerous other versions of this scene: Mara's army attacks the Buddha on the right, Buddha sits in meditation high above the door (Plate 10). Below him Nang Thorani releases the water from her hair, flooding the army, which is shown in defeat on the left (Plate 11).[27] The vertical positioning and architectural framing of the meditating Buddha, set above Nang Thorani, establish the central axis of the composition that divides the attack on the right from the defeat on the left. The preliminary sketch depicting all the chaos of the attack and subsequent defeat of the demon lacks the visual drama, humor, and sheer artistic inventiveness of the final complex composition. The final version incorporates a gigantic visage of Mara—his eyes, teeth, and mouth—around the door of the *bot*. Its energies derive from Panya encouraging his assistants to use their ideas and skills creatively in working out small scenes within the larger one, while he maintained overall control of composition, coloring, and aesthetic vision.

Boonkhwang especially remembered Panya's discussing the structure of this scene as the contrast between the tension of the attack on the left and the release of the defeat on the right. As in numerous other renderings of this scene, Mara's attacking army comprises diverse soldiers, animals, and actions. Panya has often symbolized the destructive force of materialism by "technology"; here, modern technology in the attack consists of grenade launchers, missiles, and machine guns. In the defeat, they are transformed into flowing currents of flooding waters and softly colored flowers drifting down from the sky.[28] With this symbolic play, Panya encourages a reading of his scenes on two levels of conflict: as a social critique of modernity and as a personal battle with the suffering caused by desire. Boonkhwang interpreted this scene for me in terms of both individual emotion and world affairs:

> This means . . . like if you are angry, you ask how can you stop it, how can you make it stop? You think about Buddha. Or you have a temptation; you let it go. . . . Like if people are angry and an army goes to attack other people, kill people, you lose. Like you are a soldier and you kill other people in Bosnia. You think you win, but really you lose.

The contrast between tension and release deepens in the compositional dynamics between triangle and circle. The overall composition is strongly triangular—anchored at the base by the wide mouth of Mara, then his eyes, and at the apex, the Buddha contained within a golden nimbus. The *wimaan* shape of the windows above the door reinforces this triangle, as does the coloring of the scene. The intense palette of blues, purples, and pinks lighten to move the viewers' eyes upward to the Buddha. This triangle, as Chalermchai and Panya have written, reinforces a "visual sense of stability . . . [and] the profound spiritual preparedness of the Buddha found in his virtue, meditation process, intuition and the long accumulation of merits throughout his numerous existences." The apex of the triangle also suggests the cessation of being, nirvana (Chalermchai et al. 1992, 82). Yet the sweeping circular movement of the scene (heightened with swirling colors and sinuous forms) indicates that those on both sides of the conflict

are contained within the circle of life. "Only Buddha is outside of the circle," Panya explained to me, referring to Buddha's ultimate release from the endless cycle of birth and rebirth.

While adhering to a narrative sequence and iconography familiar to many Thai templegoers, Panya and his assistants have, in the end, painted this scene in an entirely original way, as a manipulation of space that subverts the boundaries between inside and outside, between the world in the murals and that of the viewer.[29] On either side of the entrance door, Panya's team painted two enormous eyes (on the right, one angry and defiant, with swirls of color, and on the left, the other one, softer and subdued). The demon's lips and teeth extend in both directions from the doorway, making the door itself the mouth of the demon. Thus the threshold of the door by which one enters the *ubosot,* always charged with magical potency (one must step over, never on, the raised threshold when entering a Thai temple) gains even more symbolic weight as one leaves the temple. By leaving, one enters Mara, to be consumed by a world controlled by temptations, attachments, and sensual desires. Standing inside this space, one remains in the aura of the triumphant Buddha; to leave the *bot* is to be swallowed up by Mara's world. This confusion between inside/outside subtly reinforces the Buddhist significance of individual agency—the viewer's own physical movement places one in relationship to these opposing worlds or states of mind.

The spatial ambiguity is heightened by the numerous details that "break the frame"—Mara's eyes overlap the gold border surrounding the door; Nang Thorani's arm and hair overlap her gilded frame. Figures jump outward and action spills forward to further destabilize the boundary between the viewer and murals and to add visual urgency to the scenes. With this technique Panya explained to me that he wanted

> people to take painting out of the frame into their own life, into their own idea, their own experience. Everyone can look at the paintings differently, because Buddha says that after his enlightenment he cannot teach everybody to be enlightened. He cannot take everybody to enlightenment. He can only teach and tell. It then depends on them.[30]

Examined closely, this wall contains an enormous number of references to the past and the present, eroding boundaries of time. Ronald Reagan and Muammar al Qaddafi, commanders of opposing armies in the "real" world, here appear bound together fighting in Mara's army alongside ancient demons and *yak*s, or giants. A late seventeenth-century *farang* soldier with map in hand (a reference to European colonial expansion in Asia) grapples with a Japanese samurai and the shark from the movie *Jaws* (Plate 12).[31] A giant *naga*—a supernatural or semidivine being in serpentine form—entwines a NASA space shuttle (Plate 13). One *yak* sports a mohawk haircut and multiple ear piercings. Just below him, Vincent Van Gogh tumbles from a ladder, suggesting the precarious status of the artist (or perhaps of Western art) in the modern world. Nearby, a horse reminiscent of Picasso's *Guernica* reminds the viewer of other conflicts and the art they have inspired.

Just as strict distinctions of space and time collapse in this scene, so do artistic styles. *Deva* and *yak*s alike retain a characteristically Thai emphasis on line and pattern. Facial types, bodily posture and proportions, dress, and ornamentation of many figures remain familiar to Thai

templegoers. Yet Mara's elephant mounts are painted realistically, not in the distinctive stylized manner of Thai mural elephants.[32] Other realistically rendered details break apart into abstraction or into expressionistic brush strokes at their edges. Large figures contain smaller ones, some quoted directly from paintings by Michelangelo, Picasso, or Blake, others rendered in a style reminiscent of fantastic realism, a mid-twentieth-century Austrian school of spiritualistic painting that many of the artists admired.[33]

The *Traiphum*: Space and Social Position

The *Mara* scenes call into question the moral position of the viewer—inside or outside. The *Traiphum* scenes painted by Chalermchai and his team members play with spatial location as social positioning. This is appropriate, as both textual and visual forms of the *Traiphum* remain central to Thai Buddhist notions of rebirth and to competing conceptualizations of the Thai social and political order.[34] While the *Traiphum* may have lost some of its all-encompassing explanatory authority in the nineteenth century, it has remained the wellspring of competing political and social ideologies concerning Thai national identity, state institutions, the monarchy, and democratic reform movements (C. Reynolds 1976; Jackson 1993). The conservative position in debates about the meanings of the *Traiphum,* revived in recent decades to address the political turbulence of the early 1970s, argued for an authoritarian, or "Ayutthayan," notion of kingship derived from Hindu-Khmer conceptions of the *devaraja,* or semidivine monarch. Competing interpretations seeking to shift the Buddhist symbolism to support democratic ideals relate the *Traiphum* to idealized visions of the Sukhothai monarchs who emphasized the righteousness and merit of Buddhist monarchs (Jackson 1993, 81–86). The latter position sees *Traiphum* levels as metaphors for the fluidity of merit and karmic debt, rather than fixed notions of social difference. In discussing his understanding of the meanings of the *Traiphum* with me one day in his studio, Panya set this dualism in historical terms of power relations:

> In Indian society they have castes, levels. You are born there and that is it, you stay there. But not so in the Thai way of thinking: you can move up, you can move down. So . . . when the Buddha teaches enlightenment to the people, he teaches them that there is no fixed level, you see. So I think after him, the kings grew more powerful and began to use the idea of levels again. The one who is born to the higher level has more power to control people.[35]

Panya insisted, however, that in Thailand,

> the *Traiphum* usually represents the levels of the mind, of the human beings who create their [own] minds. These steps—of the heavenly beings or of hell . . . even if we are heavenly beings and finish life with good minds, maybe we have to return to being human beings or go to the hell. Or, if we are here [he points to the level of earth], we also meditate to create the mind which will be enlightened, which will take us out of the circle.

Summarizing this aspect of position, Panya told me, "On Earth, people create their own place."

Chalermchai's conception of the primary *Traiphum* scene behind the altar retains levels and vertical hierarchy. He rendered most of the karmic "worlds" as horizontal bands of color, each one fading into a distant horizon (Plate 2). The painted light of the human world shifts from the brightness of early dawn at the horizon to the deep darkness of night, where this world meets the next realm of the heavens—evoking a sense of earthly temporality. Four religious structures reminiscent of northern Thai temple architecture appear in silhouette, set against the horizon of the human world painted a strikingly strong yellow.[36] The artists' modulations of color in the other levels appear otherworldly and ethereal, in contrast.

Hell occupies a minor portion of the wall at the bottom, inaccessible to viewers since much of it resides behind the altar furnishings.[37] Additional levels of the human world that appear on the two columns flanking this wall depict merit-making activities—of lay devotees on the left and meditating monks on the right.[38] Far more visually dominant than these scenes are the six *thephanom,* or worshiping disciples of the Buddha, painted on either side of the Buddha statues. Painted niches that frame these *thephanom* and the Black Buddha positioned closest to the wall provided Chalermchai and his assistants with ample opportunity to exercise their formidable decorative skills.

Chalermchai and his assistants painted another, popular version of the Three Worlds in the scene of Buddha's *Descent from Tavatimsa Heaven* (Plate 30).[39] As the Buddha descends from this heaven (Thai: Daowading) where he preached to his mother, he performs the miracle of opening up the "three worlds" of heaven, earth, and hell simultaneously. This action provides humans with knowledge of their possible destinations after death to await rebirth, and the consequences of their karmic balance of good and bad deeds on a continuum from suffering to delight. Looking at a reproduction of the scene in the artists' catalog, Panya emphasized to me the artists' intention that they represent the consequences of individual action rather than social hierarchy:

> [A]fter the Buddha taught his Mother, he came down to the earth and he opened the three worlds. The human beings and the hell beings and the heavenly beings could see each other. He wants to prove this is real, this is really happening. Because of peoples' minds, it means we have to be reborn again and again if we haven't been enlightened yet. So, as for the *Traiphum,* I believe it is the state of the mind. People know this story. They try to practice [to free] their mind. After that they can have a better life, from any position they are as human beings. So we have to practice, we have to believe the spirit. After that we can go up to the heavens. We can be reborn as a heavenly being. At least we can be reborn as a human being again. At least we try to stay away from rebirth in hell.

In his scene of hell Chalermchai painted the graphic tortures so popular in both Thai murals and in sculptures on temple grounds. In addition to the tree of thorns that punishes adulterers—specifically mentioned in the *Traiphum* and a staple in Thai versions of hell—the assistant who painted this scene included Christian-style devils with horns (Plate 32).[40]

Compared to other Thai temple murals, painted spaces at Wat Buddhapadipa seem to recede forever, with distant landforms rendered indistinct, barely suggested. Using the airbrush, the

artists modulate colors to suggest an otherworldly light. Their skies appear more vast and often more dramatic in a manner perhaps suggested to these artists by their visits to the Turner and Constable paintings at the Tate Gallery. The artists juxtapose the deep, open vistas with close-ups of narrative action in the foreground. Middle distances, when suggested, appear as hazy, indistinct landscapes. This spatial strategy maintains visual emphasis on the here and now action of the painted stories, but in settings that always reference the universal and the never ending. In the Three Worlds scene, the artists have rendered the "universal" as the contemporary world of tourist travel, marked by national landmarks and as geographies familiar to well-traveled templegoers. Suraphol—who painted these landmarks from tourist brochures supplied by Chalermchai—placed architectural monuments of Buddhist Asia on the left and those of the West on the right. Thai viewers (and tourists who have visited Thailand) might recognize temple complexes from all regions of Thailand and other countries of Southeast Asia: the Grand Palace, Doi Suthep, Wat Phra Keow, Wat Arun, Wat Benchamabophit, the Phra Pathom Chedi, Wat Suthat, the Pagan in Burma, and Cambodia's Angkor Wat. Westerners (and Thai tourists who have visited India and the West) might recognize the Taj Majal, the Eiffel Tower, the Houses of Parliament, and the onion-shaped domes of the Kremlin. One of the artists told me that these are the "landmarks for human beings," honoring the ordinary people who, through their construction of these magnificent monuments, "do a good thing for society." The inclusion of these monuments localize this episode from the life of the Buddha to "this time," but expand "this place" to include a good deal of the earth familiar to the scene's diverse audiences. Suraphol included among these monuments Wat Buddhapadipa itself, another symbol of people "doing a good thing," and one that furthers the inside/outside ambiguity of the viewer's own spatial location (Plate 33).

The artists translated this urgency about reality—what is happening here and now—and the possibilities of rebirth in other worlds into sharpened juxtapositions between the "real" and the "imaginary." Just as they painted real places set into vast, imaginary landscapes of the Three Worlds, they painted real people—tiny photorealist portraits of known individuals, set within crowds of generically rendered worshipers. Just below the descending Buddha, a group of monks sit on the left opposite a group of *theweda* on the right. Toward the end of the project one of the monks was repainted with the face of the first abbot of Wat Buddhapadipa. Thongchai, who painted this scene, included many of the artists themselves, family members, and friends among the group overlooking hell. On the left below the monks, a group of mostly Thai figures revel at a picnic, leaving Heineken beer cans strewn on the ground (Plate 34). The picnicking worshipers include Chalermchai's assistants Uthai, Alongkorn, and Nopadol. Surasit Saokhong, a close friend of Chalermchai's and one of Thongchai's teachers, also sits among the crowd, along with an English photographer who often visited the artists. Artists Sanan and Prasat, also members of Chalermchai's team, sit positioned slightly above the picnic. Prasat presents a *krathong,* or offering, made of elaborately folded banana leaves and flowers to the descending Buddha. Thongchai himself sits on the edges of hell near Kanokwan, Chalermchai's girlfriend (later his wife).

Directly across the chasm of hell from his girlfriend, Chalermchai sits with his mother and

daughter (Plate 35), a comment perhaps on the distress this project caused in the personal lives of its artists. A sketchbook with a drawing of this very scene leans against his leg. The earthly denizens below Chalermchai comprise a diverse group: more generic Thai worshipers, Charlie Chaplin, a punk from the streets of London, several of the temple's English supporters, a small group of Renaissance-era Christians, a Spanish conquistador. Below these figures, Alongkorn painted a group of English old-age pensioners clustered on the edge of hell (Plate 31). Two slump on a park bench, one in a wheelchair, positioned in attitudes that emphasize infirmity and isolation. On his tours of London Alongkorn had been struck and then saddened by what he perceived as the loneliness of the English elderly—"with no one to take care of them"—contrasting their situation with the elderly Thai who lived in extended families.[41] Above the ordinary humans, and farther off to the right, the first shah of Persia sits with three attendants, figures quoted directly from an important Safaved manuscript.[42] To their right, in front of a thatched-roof English cottage, Margaret Thatcher gazes serenely over the scenes of hell before her.[43] A BBC film crew who produced a documentary on Wat Buddhapadipa left the film clapper that leans against the cottage.

Viewers might read these tiny self-portraits as artists' signatures asserting their individual identity against a history of the status of painters as largely anonymous *chaang*.[44] Significantly, the artists portray themselves as active participants—as worshipers, artists, and witnesses—in these stories of the Buddha. They play with spiritual/social place in their visual positioning of each other, family members, friends, and other recognizable individuals in this Three Worlds scene, imagining a globalized, Buddhist vision of human society. Here the artists push beyond the bounds of convention to map that Buddhist universe as both East and West, punctuated by portraits of individuals, generic peoples, and markers of place meant to include all peoples of the world, past and present.

Phra Nemiraj

Scenes from the Buddha's previous incarnation as Phra Nemiraj dominate the small room painted by Sompop and his assistants. In this story illustrating the virtue of resolution, the bodhisattva, reborn as Phra Nemiraj (Prince Nemi), struggles with the decision between remaining a monarch who gives alms and preaches to his people, or renouncing his position to devote himself to the holy life.[45] To aid him in making this decision, Indra, king of heaven, sends a chariot to take Phra Nemiraj on a tour of heaven and hell (Plate 39). Sompop has divided heaven from hell with a painted band of blocks, each symbolizing the different sufferings of hell. Above this scene divider, Phra Nemiraj preaches on the virtues of righteousness to his subjects, portrayed in elegant court scenes filled with crowds of worshipful nobles and deities. A bevy of celestial beings, lightly airborne, hovers above, witnessing these scenes. At the viewer's eye level, Sompop painted an enlarged hell, which Phra Nemiraj visits before his final act of renunciation, identifiable to Thai viewers as the prince riding in a golden chariot driven by the assistant to Indra.

Two written texts of the *Traiphum,* those produced by King Lüthai and Rama I, describe

eight levels of hell, "boxlike in form, the walls, ceilings, and floors of which are fiery hot iron" (Brereton 1991, 44). At various levels of hell sinners endure punishments specific to their sins, including the convention of impaling adulterers on the tree of thorns. At Wat Dusidaram, painted circa 1830s, scenes of various torments surround stacked cubes, creating window-like views of the suffering beings within (Plate 41). In these murals, Sompop retains compartments, but they recede into infinity on a horizontal plane. One observer compared Sompop's hell boxes with contemporary office cubicles, filled with Thai conceptions of hell beings, demons and hungry ghosts with fat bellies and tiny mouths.[46] Overlaying the boxes, an enormous, gilt-edged triangle contains abstracted anthropomorphic, entrails-like forms. To the right of the triangle other creatures writhe and twist, attacking and consuming themselves and each other. This surreal imagery of the horrific, in deep blues, purples, and hot orange creates a suffocating, anxious mood. For those who cannot "read" this scene so readily, one detail associates modern human behavior with its reward: rat-like creatures devour a human pinned to a clock, suffering for his slavery to time (Plate 40).

This detail roughly quotes Hieronymous Bosch's *The Garden of Earthly Delights,* where rodents devour a soldier, spread-eagled on a disk. On a more subtle, stylistic level, the entrails imagery recalls the gross materiality of human desires, a thematic favorite with other Western painters of hell—Bosch and Pieter Breughel. Sompop's painting of creatures of hybrid origin localizes the story to a non-Buddhist or non-Thai audience in Wimbledon and acknowledges its diverse religious traditions. However, by appropriating Christian versions of damnation (those of Bosch, for example), reworking them, and placing them in the hell visited by Phra Nemiraj, Sompop asserts the primacy of a Thai Buddhist worldview.[47] Local forms assert their global relevance; the Buddhist story is universalized, expanded in conception to encompass other visions of hell.

Similar strategies of localizing/globalizing appear in Sompop's use of portraiture in another episode of this story, where Phra Nemiraj observes *sila* (the precepts of the Buddha's teachings) and gives alms to his people. The narrative space of this episode is defined by walls and is dominated by the prince seated within a temple structure, or *prasat* (Plate 44). Diverse peoples inhabit this space. Worshipers accepting the prince's blessings are idealized types, in Thai style. To amplify the moral meanings of the scene, the artists have also included more realistically portrayed figures that symbolize charity *(kaan chuay lua),* familiar to their diverse audiences. Sirikit, the Thai queen, enters top left and is greeted by kneeling subjects waving tiny Thai flags. In the lower left, three women (the Mien woman from northern Thailand wears her distinctive turban and red-ruffed jacket) signify ethnic groups for whom the queen has sponsored development and crafts projects.[48] A Thai woman spinning silk also refers to this development work. In the lower left, a gaunt, hungry woman cradles her baby as another child holds an empty plate, a scene familiar from news photos of the 1980s Ethiopian famine. For those viewers who might not recognize Queen Sirikit and the references to Thai development projects, Sompop included Mother Teresa ministering to a disabled child (Plate 45). At front center, birds, squirrels, and a duck eat around a birdbath—a detail of giving in daily life at Wat Buddhapadipa, where monks place uneaten rice to feed the creatures of the temple grounds. On

the upper right, Sompop himself observes this scene. A camera hangs from his neck, marking him as traveling tourist as well as artist.

Phra Wesandorn

The *mahachat* tells the story of a great prince, Phra Wesandorn (Prince Vessantara), who gives away that which is most valuable to him—the white elephant that assures rainfall for his people and symbolizes his rule, his personal wealth, his children, and finally his wife—as he strives to perfect the virtue of generosity in his search for enlightenment. Of the Theravada Buddhist ethics articulated in the *thosochat,* the virtue of giving is the greatest of moral goods. To give freely without calculation of return enacts the ideals of detachment from desires for possession, of attachment to the things and beings of this world.[49] In his final confrontation with Mara, the Buddha's "recollection of this generosity *as Vessantara* is what assures Siddhattha's victory over the forces of evil at the crucial moment and enables him . . . to realize the Truth and obtain Enlightenment" (Cone and Gombrich 1977, xix).[50] This ethic underpins the institutional aspect of Buddhism, the monkhood, or *sangha,* supported through the charitable acts of giving by laypeople. Pervasive throughout Thai popular discourse, the story provides an "existential framework for being Thai Buddhist" (Suwanna 1996). The character of Phra Wesandorn provides a general model of the ideal moral person, emulated by Thais from monarchs throughout Siamese history seeking to enhance the righteous character of their reign (F. Reynolds 1978a; McGill 1993, 1997) to charismatic peasant leaders (Cohen 1983). Similarly, Princess Madsi establishes a powerful, although contested, cultural model for Thai wives and mothers (Keyes 1984; Kirsch 1985; Suwanna 1996). Comments on personal behavior or even the nature of urban life are cast in terms of the characters of this story. One of the artists compared Jujok—the beggar who asks Phra Wesandorn for his children, "[a]ll the time thinking about buying and eating"—to the residents of Bangkok and the city itself, greedily expanding and absorbing surrounding communities. Tensions between (selfishly) renouncing the world to seek one's own enlightenment and remaining responsible for family and community are invoked by this tale, as are continuing debates among intellectuals on its moral relevance for Thai society.

At Wat Buddhapadipa, the artists painted the story as a continuous narrative, including eight of the thirteen scenes over two walls. To choose the scenes to paint from this and other stories, Pang reread them and meditated "until I really get an impression, to get their depth. . . . I try to get the distinction of each story, try to get its beauty." His favorite image from Phra Wesandorn is its description of the scenery in the forest. "Ah," he remembered, "so beautiful. In my painting I concentrate on the leaves and flowers."[51] Kittisak thought Pang's initial drawings lacked connection "to the meanings of the story" and merely reproduced "tradition," so he redrew the composition. Kittisak decided that the triumphal scene at the end of the tale—the procession of the great prince returning to his kingdom of Sipi and the reunion of the royal family with their children—should dominate the large wall in this tiny room (Plate 42). In a telling detail of his own devising, which underlines the prince's motivations rather than the action of the tale, Kittisak added a bouquet of lotus buds held high by the trunk of the elephant carrying

Phra Wesandorn. As he explained to me, the lotus buds symbolize the "prince's intention to go to nirvana, the reason he gave everything away."

Pang, Kittisak, and their assistants chose to work in "Thai style" in this room, emphasizing a rich narrative surface enlivened by decorative detail. They render almost all figures with even tones, without shading that creates weight and volume. The elephants in this room are imaginary Thai elephants, unlike the elephants in the *Mara* scenes. The deep landscape spaces evident elsewhere in the murals are minimized here, where the viewer's attention attends to narrative action and surface. Clothing, walls, floors, and other architectural elements are rich with intricate patterns and colors. Elaborate floral borders frame the windows. Zigzagging dividing lines, pronounced curvilinear rock formations, and palace walls frame the spaces of the various episodes; the whole is unified with trees rendered in great detail. Even clouds or currents of air swell and curl, wave-like, laboriously rendered.

Contrasted with the murals in the other rooms that comment on the modern world, this room appears strikingly nostalgic to Thai or *farang* viewers familiar with the urban problems of modern Bangkok.[52] Episodes of the Phra Wesandorn tale are set in idealized premodern Thai villages of decades ago (Plate 43), with no details indexing the current day. Unlike Panya's *Mara* scenes or Chalermchai's *Traiphum,* these stories directly recall earlier Thai temple murals and the imaginary landscapes so prevalent in "Thai traditional" easel paintings and murals in commercial spaces. Kittisak added scenes from his own imagination and noniconographic details like the lotus bud that he believed would heighten the meanings of the stories, but conceptually and stylistically the room conveys a strongly conservative statement of artistic "Thainess." Pang did paint one tiny note of modernity after Kittisak returned to Bangkok: in the Phra Wesandorn scene, above the gate entering the palace grounds, he added a panel with the dates and names of the four painters who had worked in this room. This sign constitutes the only literal "signatures" in the entire *ubosot*.

Art, Politics, and Daily Life

Although they painted in England, these muralists immortalized their historical moment in Thailand (as did their Rattanakosin-era predecessors), referring to the travels and charitable activities of Thai monarchs, Thailand's environmental problems, and the loss of the subsistence livelihoods of farming and fishing to industrialization. But on these walls, their "imagined world" expands beyond Thailand to include recognizable leaders of other nations and global current events.[53] As markers of time, the muralists included commercial icons of late-twentieth-century popular culture: Heineken beer, Coca-Cola, Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle action figures, and decks of playing cards. These details situate the stories in the contemporary era, envisioning a present simultaneous with the past. They also comment on technology, capitalist development, consumerism, world politics, and war. In their particular representations, we see the artists positioning themselves and, by extension, Thailand or even Asia (certainly the Buddhist world) against consumer culture (including art) and a world system dominated by the capitalist values of market expansion and profit. Scholars have long presumed that other Thai

temple murals that read as sociopolitical commentaries reflect the agendas of their kingly or wealthy sponsors.[54] These commentaries at Wat Buddhapadipa are the artists' own, since they had the explicit freedom to paint what and as they wished.

Confrontation in the Middle East appears in the visages of Ronald Reagan and Muammar al Qaddafi, two heads of a bionic horseman in Mara's army riding to attack, painted by Panya's team. Together, they symbolize (according to one of the artists) the "computer people in the future." Sompop also discussed the tensions between the United States and Libya that these two figures embody as one modern-day incident in the centuries-old conflict between Christianity and Islam. "People are stuck in the custom of [believing in] a god," he told me, "Christian and Muslim, just fighting each other."[55]

In the *Mahosot* Jataka, which illustrates the virtue of wisdom, the army attacking the kingdom of Mithila includes Saddam Hussein, with an enormous machine-gun phallus, fighting alongside George Bush, who has a giant hamburger strapped to his back (Plate 46).[56] Evoking the Gulf War of 1991, Sompop contrasts equally threatening modes of domination: by force of arms or by a fast-food consumer culture. In the same scene, a Rambo-type figure scales the walls of Mithila, to be repelled by a Vietnamese peasant branding him with a peace sign, a tiny but telling comment on the presence (and its outcome) of the modern Western military in Southeast Asia.

While the murals at Wat Buddhapadipa, a centerpiece of Thai cultural representation abroad, uncritically reproduce much of official ideology—the triad of nation, religion, and king most of all—knowledgeable viewers can read other scenes as critiques of social change in Thailand. One artist explained his understanding of several details in the story of Phra Temiyaraj in Sompop's wing room: a wealthy golfer tees off, an act that symbolizes the environmental problems caused by the construction of golf courses in ecologically fragile areas. Such construction diverts precious water for the amusement of the rich, causing erosion nearby. A gold halo surrounds the golfer's head, indicating (with no small bit of irony) his *bun,* or merit (Plate 47). Above, four men stand as the contemporary power elite in Thailand: the military, the police, the government minister, and the businessman. Nearby, three Thai women are judged as sexual objects in a beauty contest. In a scene below, farmers and fishermen are leaving their homes and traditional livelihoods to seek wage labor. The artist placed this particular scene high above the windows, out of visual range for most casual viewers, suggesting he wanted them to be inconspicuous.

In their painting of current events and aspects of Thai modernity, the artists position themselves as participants and commentators. In more complex and subtle ways, these artists engage with world art movements, claiming a place for Thai traditional art and for their individual conceptual and stylistic interpretations of that art. As jokes, and to indicate their facility with Western art history, they placed icons of Western art and architecture into key mural scenes. In Panya's *Defeat of Mara* scene, Vincent Van Gogh falls off a ladder, Leonardo daVinci's *Mona Lisa* (Plate 14) cracks and crumbles, a horse from Picasso's *Guernica* screams, and Michelangelo's *The Dying Slave* sinks into the flooding waters. A Henry Moore sculpture sits in Deer Park, where the Buddha gives his first sermon (Plate 27). As a "signature" portrait, Panya

himself appears outside the walls of Deer Park (Plate 28), watching the English modernist David Hockney paint. A young woman, Panya's girlfriend at the time of the mural project, sits beneath the tree in the background, waiting (as I was told she often did) for Panya to finish his work. This scene, "realistic" to the extent that the figures are naturally rendered and refer to Panya's personal life at the temple, is at the same time a fantasy that effects another sort of mimetic realism: Panya has repainted a section of Hockney's *Model with Unfinished Self-Portrait.* These references delight the casual viewers who recognize the quotations, but they also serve as commentary on the sacralization of art in contemporary society. Such positionings deflate the aura of Western artists (Van Gogh falling off a ladder) and their masterpieces (the *Mona Lisa* disintegrating, ultimately just a canvas with paint). Western art, a continuing source of ideas and inspiration for Thai mural painters, here becomes a topic for Buddhist commentary, propositions in a metanarrative not only about the conditions of contemporary life—whether Western, Thai, or Asian—but about the transience of all material life, a central tenet of Buddhist philosophy.

In their deliberate play with conceptions of Thai traditional art and the art of the Other, these artists express a modernist (some have claimed postmodernist) sensibility. They largely maintain the formal poses, gestures, costumes, and positions of divine and mortal beings in the Thai cosmic hierarchy, as muralists have painted for centuries. Yet in myriad scenes and details, these conventions of figurative representations in the linear, two-dimensional style break apart into abstraction. Sompop uses surrealism and fantastic realism to bring his hell into the contemporary era. Other passages in other scenes quote European Renaissance painting or Persian miniatures or Japanese comic books. Panya painted scenes on the narrow spaces between windows, overlaid with expressionist brush strokes (Plate 37). These brushstrokes, Sompop explained to me, are intended to express confusion, suffering, a process of disintegration and decay—Buddha's teachings on the nature of being.

Real and Imaginary, Redux

The heightened play between the "real" and the "imaginary," between the social portraits of the here and now contrasted with the eternal truths of the teachings of the Buddha, animates these murals in distinctive ways. One might argue that in Thai art the "real" does not oppose the "ideal," but rather acts (performatively) through the viewer's recognition of his or her own world to attach the ideal (morality) to the consciousness of the viewer.[57] Nineteenth-century muralists complicated imagined spaces organized vertically according to moral hierarchies by adding geopolitical spaces of Thai and Others organized by horizontal principles of perspective; the Wat Buddhapadipa muralists project these disparate perspectives into transnational space. While largely familiar to a Thai audience in terms of character and event, scenes in those murals have become ambiguous or clearly Other in their location. Some scenes take place in Thai settings: Chalermchai's *Twin Miracles* includes domestic scenes set in the old teak houses of rural Thailand, reversing exoticisms for English viewers. Other scenes are localized to the temple itself. In Panya's *First Sermon,* the middle distance is English, marked as such by Stone-

henge on the left and Wat Buddhapadipa on the right. In Chalermchai's *The Descent from Tavatimsa Heaven* scene, the countryside in the middle distance is an imaginary English one comprising quaint villages and the Tower Bridge crossing the River Thames. In the same scene, the landmark monuments explicitly acknowledge the existence of other nations; they are the sacred places of the Other.

This spatial strategy has a disorienting effect on the viewers' reading of space, at once familiar in its local references to England (or Thailand) yet also deterritorialized and globalized. The iconic monuments of other nations, including religious structures, have been moved into Buddhist territory. As the artists and the Buddha himself intended, the inclusion of these foreign places globalizes the teachings of the Dhamma, expanding their geographical reach and making them accessible to all humans, an idea reinforced in the crowd scenes of the *The Descent,* where contemporary and symbolic figures of the past intermingle—early Christians, Persian noblemen, English old-age pensioners, London street punks, Thai villagers, and identifiable Thai and *farang* individuals. The artists have transformed indigenous imaginary landscapes into hybrid spaces that index expanded social arenas and real foreign places—visual analogues of their own travels and those of many contemporary Thais.

At Wat Buddhapadipa, the artists' numerous, tiny pop art-inflected "photorealist" portraits stretch to new extremes Boisselier's characterization of the world in Thai murals where "the everyday and the marvelous, reality and fiction constantly intermingle."[58] Because so many different artists painted these details, theirs is a complex mixture of realism/fantasy, drawn from numerous sources and integrated into scenes in various ways. Some individuals are painted much like surrounding generic crowd figures, but with enough distinctive facial features to make them recognizable. The artists who painted the Three Worlds scene rendered even their imaginary beings in diverse styles, achieving the mimetic realism of figures from early Christian art, English modernism, or Persian miniatures. These figures are not rendered "realistically," but they are not stylistically "Thai" either. These tiny details display the skills of Thai artists as "copyists" in reproducing the works of prior masters, commenting perhaps upon the long-standing issue in Thai art discourse on copying.

Some of the Wat Buddhapadipa mural painters incorporated techniques of realism but without totally discarding Thai conventions of figural representation. Sakya, one of the artists on leave from the Fine Arts Department, had become enthralled with the emotional depth and liveliness of Rembrandt's self-portraits. He drew many of the figures in key scenes—Nang Thorani in Panya's *The Defeat of Mara* scene, for example. Sakya told me, "Actually I wanted to come paint in the style of 'portraits.' I wanted to paint Thai people with the 'feeling' of being Thai, as real as how Rembrandt painted Europeans." He refigured the conventional proportions of the many divine beings that he painted at the temple, aiming to "bring them to life" in the manner of Rembrandt portraits by giving them both more naturalistic facial dimensions and by painting eyes with pupils positioned to engage viewers directly.

The images of a few individuals appear almost photographic in their likenesses, commanding attention as they sit or stand among other generic figures. Their photorealist self-portraits served as both playful signatures and as emplacement in a sociospatial hierarchy, as discussed

above. Portraits of others honor specific relationships—such as that with their family, their friends, their patron Khun Sawet, or with the abbot of the *wat*. Their portraits of famous people, both real (Charlie Chaplin) and imaginary (Superman), Western and Thai, implicitly acknowledge a relationship with the diverse audience they invite to participate in the narrative action. The conceptual, moral universe depicted in older Thai murals gives way here to a world recognizable to diverse viewers as their own.

Thai and Others

To a degree, these realist techniques reconfigure relationships between Thai and Others, acknowledging their wider audience.[59] As in murals of the classical period, *farang* continue to fight in Mara's army, and weapons of modern technology arm the attackers. Historic imbalances in *farang*-Thai positions do appear in two details in the *Puritat* Jataka in one of the wing rooms; one of the details reworks an Ayutthayan-era door panel at Wat Bangkhun in Thonburi. On the left, a Thai woman holds a blond, curly-haired child. His presumed, blond father appears in the scene as a seventeenth-century Dutchman. The position of the Thai woman is ambiguous; she could be a servant, a lover, or a wife—all subject positions Thai women have held with male *farang*. One artist noted to me that the *farang* man with the Thai woman was a scene "just like in England."[60] On the other side of the scene, two Thai men offer a rose to a blond *farang* woman dressed in a ball gown of another era and carrying a parasol. The position of the men is also ambiguous but suggests subservience. However, shifting focus to their own experiences in London, the muralists also included portraits of individual *farang* friends and supporters, regular visitors who hung out with the artists in the *bot,* drove them on outings to the countryside, or donated money and materials. In the Wat Buddhapadipa murals, relations between Thai and Other cover a larger range of possibility than those envisioned in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.[61] While such scenes make references to power relations in both national and domestic arenas, they also portray the interactions of coequals, sharing experiences, and together confronting the moral dilemmas posed by the stories in which they appear.

One scene in the *Temiyaraj* Jataka, a pastoral scene outside palace walls, exemplifies the social spaces envisioned by these artists (Plate 48). A woman and child painted in traditional Thai style peek out of the palace doors onto a more naturalistically rendered crowd of diverse peoples, conceived differently than those highly stylized beings behind palace walls. The new subjects include strolling *farang* or Thai/*farang* couples, a kilted Scottish piper, a young Thai woman in a *phaa sin* (sarong), and a group of Thai musicians playing traditional instruments. In the water, merchants similar to those on Thailand's *khlong* (canal) floating markets ply their goods. Across an arched bridge, a young girl dragging a teddy bear watches the mural assistant Phusit sketching a portrait (as he did at local Wimbledon fairs for extra income). Although indeterminate, this space resembles the grounds of Wat Buddhapadipa itself, as if this group is visiting the temple on a weekend or during a fair. At such time, peoples of diverse national origins mingle, exchanging cultural performances and mixing practices and identities marked as "tradi-

tional" (Scottish bagpipes, the Thai *ranaad,* or xylophone*)* with those more "modern" (easel painting, sunbathing).

The murals' hybridized spaces, encounters of Thai and *farang,* famous or familiar faces, and art or architectural icons highlight performative aspects of the artists' work—the narrative and artistic strategies by which they call viewers' attention to themselves as artists, to the Buddhist stories as art, to their diverse audiences, and to the moment and location of the performance itself. With the passage of time, many details of this everyday world look dated—Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle action figures popular in the early 1990s have largely faded away, for example—and thus allow the viewer to maintain a temporal distance from the paintings. Other details and scenes—the Henry Moore sculpture in Deer Park, perhaps—have a more enduring presence. In complexly rendered layering and interpenetration of artistic styles and motifs, painted from multiple and individual visions, the artists have painted the past in the present. Theirs is a Thai Buddhist past, stories in murals taught to them as "traditional." Their present is expansive, inclusive, acknowledging the many global political, social, and cultural forces and movements of peoples that shape it. In sly and clever ways, they acknowledge the categories (traditional, modern, national, spiritual, material, among others) by which we organize our discussions of this present and into which we position others and ourselves.

As travelers to England, these artists occupy and have painted a transcultural but "real" space. In many of the scenes discussed above, mural figures are diverse peoples accompanied by obvious elements of their national histories, indicated by artistic styles, dress, or references to business, politics, conquest, travel, or suffering. In these mural spaces they encounter each other, to participate as modern-day time travelers in the events that moved the Buddha along his path toward enlightenment and the attainment of nirvana. No longer a vertical hierarchy of figures, the expansive space at Wat Buddhapadipa remains ambiguous in its resistance to being mapped as exclusively Thai, or Western, or Asian. Nor, however, are those place identifiers irrelevant, for it is with the recognition of monuments and famous individuals belonging to nations that viewers enter into the landscapes of the Buddha's lives and the consciousness of his teachings. These artistic representations find analogues in the social and religious life of the temple as well, as it serves a globalized population of worshipers and travelers. We now turn to the artists themselves and their experiences "going outside" to London, to examine how this faraway place and unusual endeavor gave new scope and transformation to Thai social relations.

chapter five

"Going Outside" and the Experience of Modernity

"On Earth, people create their own place."—Panya Vijinthanasarn

Processes of Production

When he finished painting the murals at Wat Buddhapadipa, in 1987, Chalermchai returned to Bangkok to find people demanding,

> Why did you do that for all the *farang?* Why didn't you do it in Thailand? I said, "If I do it in Thailand I can do nothing. I can't finish the mural painting in Bangkok, because [too many people] criticize, many conservative people, many monks. [There are] many, many problems. That is a hard, very hard, hard, hard life."

While mentioning forces in Thailand that might have posed insurmountable obstacles to the type of temple murals they envisioned as "modern," Chalermchai also hints at a vision of London as Bangkok's opposite, as an environment open to artistic exploration, with fewer social constraints in terms of accomplishing their goals. The following retrospective ethnography explores aspects of these contrastive understandings of place, critical to these Thai artists' "culture of travel" (Clifford 1997), and the trajectories of their lives from Thai village to European metropolis. Most of the Wat Buddhapadipa artists—including Chalermchai and Panya—were raised in the villages and provincial towns of Thailand, ranging from those deep in the south near Nakhon Si Thammarat to the far northern province of Chiang Rai. Three artists grew up in Bangkok. They are, with two exceptions, the sons (and daughters) of farmers, shopkeepers, teachers, and street or market vendors.[1] For most of the artists, going to London was their first experience leaving Thailand, which begs the question of their motivations as well as the logistics of their journeys. These artists' biographies largely conform to those patterns of the lives of Thai modern artists generally. Phillips (1992) characterizes the artistic development of the contemporary artist in Thailand as a "long and complex social process" comprising a web of social

relationships, education at art school and university, and often a period of study abroad. The influence and power of foreign-trained artists and teachers—including several Thai artists who still live and work outside Thailand—is indisputable.[2] For Panya and Chalermchai's younger assistants, the experience of painting at Wat Buddhapadipa itself constituted education "outside," but it stands apart from other ways of learning art. The Wimbledon project reconstructed earlier modes of Thai artistic production, reproduced current social relations, and yet transformed both as the artists negotiated issues of individuality and creativity in a temple context where notions of "Thai tradition" weighed hard. Parallels exist also between the lives of these artists and the monks. Both groups were living out similar trajectories of experience, moving from small villages to Bangkok, then to London or Europe. Both are transnational variants of (largely) male patterns of mobility.[3]

Ironically, many of the artists, including Chalermchai, later remembered their lives in Wimbledon as "hard." The combination of pressures and problems—cracked walls and broken roof tiles, the commitment to paint in painstaking, minute detail, lack of money, displacement from home and family, and looming deadlines—created a working atmosphere one artist characterized in Thai as *kliat* (tense) and in English as "serious." This mural project represented an anomalous mode of organization for most Thais—two bosses *(hua naa)* of equal rank in charge.[4] Further, the London Buddhist Temple Foundation could not pay the artists; Panya and Chalermchai could not offer their assistants compensation beyond room and board.[5] These factors suggest the following practical questions: Where and how did Chalermchai and Panya recruit assistants? What were the criteria they used in selecting them? How did Panya and Chalermchai structure the work at the temple? How did they negotiate day-to-day issues of living and working? How did they resolve problems, technical and personal, that arose during the project?

Analyzing the processes of production at Wat Buddhapadipa requires attention to the relevant social groupings in Thailand and the Bangkok art world—the networks established by Panya and Chalermchai that they used to recruit their assistants. These processes also reveal the complex manner in which hierarchical categories in Thai thinking—especially those of *phii/naawng* (older/younger sibling) and *khru/luuk sit* (master/student)—structured lines of authority at Wat Buddhapadipa between the artists.[6] Values instilled in artists in their university training—those of modernist art, which give primacy to the ideas and creative expression of the individual—conflict with their social positioning as assistants and as members of an artistic collective. We see the strategies by which Panya and Chalermchai, with varying degrees of success, confronted these contradictions and attempted to resolve them. We also see where their assistants resisted this social positioning and the consequences.

The extra social latitude obtained by working "outside" in England highlights, if anything, the social and political constraints the artists faced in Thailand that encouraged them to work abroad in the first place. But as these murals were painted in sacred space, the artists also confronted long-standing Thai notions of religious space and Buddhist narrative. The artistic challenges these artists made to the conventions of Thai temple mural painting touches one of the most important of Thai social relationships, that between monk and layperson, between *sangha* and society. This group of artists, claiming status for their paintings as "art," not merely as vi-

sual stories, challenges the long-standing Thai social positioning of painters as *chaang,* as artisans in the employ of others. This became evident in the minutiae of social interaction in everyday life and in the conflicts between the artists and the other social groups active at Wat Buddhapadipa—sponsors, monks, local Thais, and *farang.*

Murals in the Present Time

As two of the earliest graduates of Silpakorn University's new curriculum in traditional Thai art in 1978–1979, Panya and Chalermchai became close friends, always appearing together on the art scene. One Bangkok art writer showed me an old photograph of the two before the Wat Buddhapadipa project in which they even dressed alike. In the early 1980s, both were becoming well known in the contemporary Thai art world, emerging stars in the neotraditional Thai art movement. One Bangkok art writer characterized them both as "firmly established among the country's most promising younger talents" and included them with senior painters in his survey of ten contemporary Thai artists (Hoskins 1984, 23).

In their early careers, both pursued established avenues for artistic recognition fostered by Silpa Bhirasri at Silpakorn University: travel, foreign exhibitions, and art competitions. Chalermchai published his first book, twenty-five black-and-white drawings, titled *Dhamma.* He based these drawings on his meditation experiences at a *wat* in Chiang Mai, where he had gone "to take refuge with nature to calm down my mind" after a trip to Europe.[7] He exhibited in Germany and, at age twenty-three, won first prize in the Third Annual Bua Luang Art Exhibition sponsored by the Bangkok Bank. During this period, Panya exhibited in Japan, Indonesia, Australia, and the United States. He won first prize at the Fourth Annual Bua Luang Art Exhibition in 1980 and second prize in the Twenty-sixth National Art Exhibition, both times in the "Traditional Thai Art" category. One 1982 newspaper profile noted, "Even now Panya is already being idolized by many younger artists."

The pair also sought connections with historic forms of Thai art practice. Both claimed to have had ambitions to paint temple murals, but in a "new" way. In a magazine interview, Chalermchai was asked why he was so determined to paint in a temple at least once in his life. Articulating the contemporary view of the cultural significance of murals, he replied,

> Because murals have deteriorated a lot. Since the end of the era of Khrua In Khong, they have really declined. Because of this, when I studied Thai art at the Faculty of Painting [at Silpakorn] I asked to dedicate my life to painting in a *bot* at least once, in order to create something which is representative of my identity and is characteristic of art in this era—which is both modern and expresses the character of the people, and *which is not a repetition or a copy of anywhere else.* (Phiang n.d., 135, emphasis added)

In addition to his easel paintings, Panya had worked with Tan Kudt at Muang Boran and on mural restoration projects with the Fine Arts Department, and so had seen firsthand the rate and process of mural decay. He told me he thought the old mural paintings would almost totally deteriorate in the near future. He stated his belief that murals must be painted dif-

ferently, since the old styles could not be surpassed, and observed that some muralists continue to replicate the "old traditional way," but "just for commission. . . . It's a different time," he emphasized.

When Panya returned to Bangkok in 1980 after a year in Australia, he saw a television show on life for Thais abroad. One segment included Wat Buddhapadipa in Wimbledon. As he related in a Thai newspaper interview,

> I saw a Thai temple being built. I was quite astonished *(pratap jai)*. It is strange to see architecture with Thai characteristics so prominent in Europe, in such a different atmosphere and environment. The *bot* is set in the middle of stark white snow, instead of a place full of color like Thailand. I felt that we ought to have a part in making the building in back there [the *bot*] look better *(duu dii khun)*, by painting murals. (Phiang n.d.)

Subsequently, he won an eighteen-month scholarship from the British Council in Bangkok to study printmaking at the Slade School in London from late 1982 to early 1984.[8] While visiting Wat Buddhapadipa, he met Pang Chinasai, a Silpakorn-trained artist living in London who suggested that they paint murals inside the *ubosot*. He remembered being excited, but intimidated, by the scale of the project. When he returned to Bangkok, Panya recruited Chalermchai, who had also visited Wat Buddhapadipa in 1981 while exploring the London art scene on a one-month sponsorship by the British Council. While Khun Sawet and others involved with the building of the *ubosot* at Wat Buddhapadipa were seeking an artist to take on the project of painting murals there, Panya, Chalermchai, and the London-based Pang had developed an interest in doing just that. In England, the temple's abbot told the artists they must contact Khun Sawet. Upon Panya's return to Bangkok in 1984, they did.

The proceedings of the meeting between the two artists and Khun Sawet have been replayed many times in private interviews and public profiles.[9] These accounts partially construct the interpretive framework within which the Wat Buddhapadipa mural project has attained prominence and upon which the artists have built their subsequent careers. While all participants are in accord as to the results of that meeting, the shifting emphases over time hint at various strategies of self-representation to a *farang* as well as Thai public. Observers close to these artists but not directly involved with the mural project told me that Chalermchai feared the project would take too long and was reluctant to go to Wimbledon.[10] At our first meeting, Chalermchai remembered his reservations but expressed them in terms of his family situation. In contrast, he publicly portrayed the opportunity to paint inside the *ubosot* as irresistible. When he saw the *bot* there, Chalermchai remembered exclaiming, "I will go. I have seen it already. I am really thrilled because it is the kind of *bot* that I was dreaming of" (Phiang n.d., 135). In another magazine interview, Panya explained:

> Both of us had always wanted to do a complete temple mural, but in Thailand we were never able to find the right place. We knew there that we would have to follow very traditional concepts of mural painting and we didn't want to do that. We were interested in using new tech-

niques, new styles. These wouldn't be acceptable for a mural in a temple in Thailand but here, in Wimbledon, we were given the opportunity to do exactly as we wanted. (Wilkinson 1986, 30)[11]

In various accounts, Panya and Chalermchai have also shaded differently their stance in the initial meeting with Khun Sawet. For example, in 1987, Chalermchai described this meeting to Herbert Phillips: "I told the foundation I want to paint the murals. Give me money for food first and second, buy me paint and materials and third, don't tell me what to do. The monks must not say anything, either. You have to give me freedom to paint. I paint; you pay" (Phillips 1987b). Five years later, his account to me of this meeting shifted from stressing the artists' demands to motives of making merit: "Khun Sawet was shocked when I told him, 'I don't want to get money. I want to give my work to my Buddha. I want to make pure art, not art for money. I want to give my painting to the king, to the Thai people, to the people of the earth.' "[12] Whatever their precise motivations, for both Chalermchai and Panya the mural project in Wimbledon afforded them an opportunity to go outside Thailand and to exhibit their artistic skills in a prestigious temple abroad.

Movies, Matchboxes, and Art: From Village to Bangkok

Large billboards stand alongside roads entering many of the small provincial towns of Thailand. Some advertise local temple fairs; others hand-painted with huge figures of movie stars promote local cinema showings. Hand-painted posters hang from the movie theaters as well to attract passersby. For the children of Thai villages and small towns, and for the most of the artists who painted in London, these movie posters represent some of their first encounters with "painting" and "art." Children fall in love with the posters, with the idea of painting, grand public displays of their work, and perhaps even fame.[13] Piak Poster, the movie-poster painter who in the 1970s and 1980s became one of Thailand's most popular film directors, was a childhood hero of several of the artists.[14] Panya had such ambitions, as he told one interviewer: "When I was young I didn't know about art. I wanted to go to Poh Chang to be a movie poster painter. I thought they were craftsmen" (Phillips 1987c). As a teenager, Chalermchai hung out with the local poster painters in Chiang Rai, remembering, "All I wanted to be was a good poster painter. I didn't know anything else about art" (Hoskins 1984, 145). This popular graphic form—still practiced throughout Thailand—remained a benchmark for Chalermchai and his ideas of art, and a basis for his critique of the lack of creativity in much of contemporary mural painting in Thailand. He noted in one newspaper interview on the Wimbledon project: "At present, what newly-built temples have for mural paintings are wholesale copies done with the quality of a movie cut-out. That is sad for anyone concerned with religious art."[15]

Since the late 1970s art has been taught to children at the primary school level throughout Thailand, but art instruction was scarce or unavailable to most of these artists as small children in villages. They received no exposure to "Western" techniques of drawing and painting and

had no access to art materials. To the extent that Western magazines and a few Thai television programs (broadcast between 1960 and 1980) were available, they taught children drawing and painting.[16] Museums, galleries, and shops that exhibit easel paintings, prints, or drawings are relatively scarce outside of Bangkok, Chiang Mai, or popular international tourist resorts. Upcountry provincial museums exhibit collections of historical artifacts—mainly statuary, carving, and furniture—or the local specialties in basketry, fine silk, and cotton weaving. For the generation of Thai children represented by these artists, ideas of painting, sculpture, wood carving, and other creative endeavors derive largely from a commercial context, as movie posters, or were associated with religious, ritual, or everyday use.[17]

On the other hand, mural paintings inside temple *viharn* and *bot* are ubiquitous for Thai villagers. Monks teach Buddhist stories to children attending temple schools, using the murals as visual aids. With increasing reliance on books for instruction in the Dhamma, children learn the stories and teachings of the Buddha primarily in written form, but from frequent attendance at Buddhist rituals and temple fairs and as *dek wat* (temple boys who assist the monks with chores), they recognize these same stories on the walls, or on the banners and scrolls produced for Buddhist festivals. Some of the Wat Buddhapadipa muralists cited temples and their murals as formative influences in their desire to learn to paint.

Chalermchai and Panya's experiences as children were fairly typical of this group. Chalermchai, before he apprenticed himself at age fourteen at his local movie-poster house, had been inspired by the drawings of *naga* on matchboxes sold in his father's grocery store near Chiang Rai. "I wanted to draw so I started copying all the pictures on the matchboxes. Then I moved up to the detergent boxes on the shelves. Then the bank notes. And then just everything in sight" (Sanitsuda 1983, 13). Chalermchai's grandmother took him along with her to the temple. "And what I saw in the temple became the first theme of my paintings," he explained, referring to his early tempera paintings of scenes of temple life. Panya's childhood experiences in Prachuab Khiri Khan were similar: "No one saw my work when I was a child, no one encouraged me to become an artist. I had no art teacher. I got no support. We copied drawings and movie posters" (Phillips 1987c).[18] As quoted in another profile, he said, "I drew everyday, using charcoal from the cooking fire and, for my canvas, the walls and floors of our house" (Hoskins 1984, 164).

Other artists told similar stories of copying from whatever was at hand. From the age of seven Roengsak, from Sinburi, copied cartoons and portraits from newspapers. In primary school he received one hour's instruction each week in drawing; by the time he graduated from high school he drew all the time, but according to him, "I never knew what art was, I just did drawing. I wanted to do good work but I didn't know what good work was." Another of the artists, the son of a street vendor, grew up in Bangkok and played in the streets as a child. "When I was four years old," he reminisced, "when I woke up I remember my father doing something like sculpture. It impressed me. I went to play in the mud, to try to make 'sculpture.'" Later, he told me, when he went to school, "I started to do drawing, nothing special, just copying from my friend." His mother took him to the National Museum and to Wat Phra Keow (the temple of the Emerald Buddha at the Grand Palace), where murals based on the *Ramakien*

line the surrounding gallery. There, with other Thais and foreign tourists, he first learned about Thai murals.[19]

Learning "Thainess"

From their modest beginnings in villages and provincial towns, the artists of this group were encouraged by teachers, older siblings, or friends at the secondary school level to continue their art education in Bangkok. Many attended Poh Chang (Arts and Crafts School) at first, where their art teachers outside of Bangkok had been trained. Some attended provincial vocational schools, where art instructors emphasized technique and production over theory or expression.[20] At Poh Chang, instructors discuss painting as illustration and as the visual representation of religious teachings, literature, or history. Artists learn the basic skills and fundamental motifs of Thai art: *laai thai* (Thai line), the *kranok* (the flame or leaf-shaped ornament that forms the basis of much Thai design and patterning), and the conventions of character—the Thai elephant, the male and female deities, and so on. Chalermchai found little support at Poh Chang for his realistic, "poster-style" painting. He told one researcher, "I didn't know anything. I was just a copy man from the mountains. Everything I did was realistic, but with no feeling. I didn't get good grades." At Poh Chang, he explained, "I did landscapes and figures. I had to go to Silpakorn to learn emotion" (Phillips 1987b).

At Poh Chang, Panya was taught by Tan Kudt, one of the few Silpakorn-trained artists who continued to paint murals while his peers turned to the genres of international art. Tan Kudt encouraged Panya in his drawing and took him on as an apprentice to his mural projects at Muang Boran (Ancient City). Panya learned from Tan Kudt not only about mural techniques, but about the "artist's life," as Panya describes it—the organization and practices of art making to which he became deeply committed, which he implemented in London with his own apprentices and continued afterward on mural projects in Bangkok.

Once in Bangkok, Chalermchai, Panya, and the other young artists were introduced to international art movements and new paradigms of "art" through classes, visits to galleries, exhibitions, and newspaper articles. In Panya's second year at Poh Chang, he learned about Silpakorn University and began to attend local art exhibitions—an opportunity he did not have in Prachuab Khiri Khan in southern Thailand. Inspired by surrealism (as Thai artists of an earlier generation had been), Panya's own artistic ambitions expanded.[21] "From then on, I no longer wanted to be just a good poster painter. I wanted much more."

Although Silpakorn is the major art university in Thailand, many of the students there—like the group discussed here—come from modest village circumstances. Many sleep in the studios on the third floor of the Fine Arts building. To earn money, they assist interior designers or more established artists or seek portrait commissions.[22] Like students everywhere, they also work menial night jobs to earn money for fees. Clearly, Silpakorn students do not represent the elite of Bangkok; indeed, most struggle to make a living. Beginning with the all-important relationships they establish with their teachers, they build their subsequent careers through personal

networks—especially the mutual support groups *(klum)* who exhibit together—and relations of reciprocity.[23] Artists everywhere face similar challenges. In countries like Thailand, which lacks an extensive arts infrastructure of grant-giving governmental agencies or large networks of public museums and private collectors that buy art, young artists must employ other strategies in making a name for themselves and in supporting themselves and their families.

At Silpakorn University, a large part of students' second and third years are devoted to learning about and working from Thai art of the past—a requirement consonant with Silpa Bhirasri's philosophy. In addition to classroom theory and studio practice, instructors accompany small groups of students on weekly field trips to temples, museums, palaces, and monuments. These field trips not only introduce art students to selected representations of aesthetic "Thainess," they cement the bonds of students to their class and to each other. One field trip involves spending a long day on the *khlong* (canals) of Bangkok, imagining—and experiencing—modes of travel through the city before roads were built, canals were paved over, and traffic jams became the norm. Student cohorts also take week-long journeys to more distant heritage sites in the country, such as Sukhothai, Phitsanulok, Ban Chiang, Phimai, and Phanom Ruang. To view Thai monuments located in provinces they cannot visit, they visit Muang Boran. Similar to other Asian countries in miniature, this Ancient City, located in an enormous park outside Bangkok, contains two-thirds-scale replicas of monuments from throughout the country, examples of vernacular architecture (where Muang Boran personnel live), and a reconstructed nineteenth-century Thai village.

I accompanied Silpakorn students on several of these field trips. As the students (including one exchange student from Japan) explained to me, the essential point of such visits was to soak up "Thainess."[24] One student did so literally, as he carried clay with which he made impressions of carved ornamentation on architecture and furniture in order to create plaster castings for personal reference to Thai motifs. In this context "Thainess" translates as a purposefully elusive concept relating to general aesthetic values, specific motifs and techniques, and an ineffable atmosphere created by the interaction of nature and human artifact. Some students described it to me as the "spirit of the past." At the Lacquer Pavilion at the Suan Pakkard Palace in Bangkok, for example, the students observed (and some sketched) the brilliant green leaves outside the pavilion windows contrasting with the sumptuous black-and-gold lacquered walls within, covered with literary and religious narratives also found in temple murals. The students often responded to what they saw—and the Lacquer Pavilion was no exception—with *"suay,"* an important, often-used word that describes what is pretty or beautiful.

Going Outside to London

The London Buddhist Temple Foundation wanted the murals to be finished in time for the king's sixtieth birthday, in the autumn of 1987.[25] In order to concentrate on the painting, Chalermchai convinced Khun Sawet to allow him to take along two of his "assistants," Uthai and Suwan, to take care of other duties. Suwan, needing a job to support his wife and two sons, had approached Chalermchai to work on the project; they had known each other at Silpakorn

and became friends when Suwan hung Chalermchai's show at the Bhirasri Institute. Although Suwan had not been trained much in Thai art techniques, he had experience preparing canvases and laying down color. He had been in the same Silpakorn class as Panya and thus knew him as well. Uthai was a client (bodyguard, or *muu phuun*—gun hand, according to one local Thai) of Chalermchai's who lived at his house in Bangkok and performed odd jobs for him but was not trained as an artist. Uthai would cook for the group and perform other tasks related to the project. According to Panya, Pang (the artist already living in London) initially helped them as well.

A series of problems confronted Panya and Chalermchai at the *ubosot* when they arrived in July 1984. The walls were already cracking in places, as the plaster had been shoddily and unevenly applied. The walls had also been coated with latex paint, which sometimes peeled off in sheets where the cracks appeared. Panya had not checked the condition of the walls closely before making the proposal to the foundation. In one interview he was quoted as saying, "When I saw the condition I wanted to return home" (Phiang n.d., 138). The artists had to replaster and apply a solution to block dampness, then finally a primer, all of which took over a month. To satisfy local building codes, the contractor had added corner pillars to accommodate water gutter pipes, so the actual dimensions of the *bot*'s walls were not in accordance with the architect's plans that the artists used to make their sketches. They had to rework their drawings, which took an additional two months.[26] Since the foundation could not afford platforms that would allow the artists to work efficiently, they had to make do with rickety bamboo scaffolding until an Englishman, impressed with their voluntary efforts, donated the cost of aluminum ones. As the *ubosot* had no heat, the artists were effectively unable to work at the *bot* during their first English winter, thereby losing another three months of work time. During that winter they helped with temple tasks and went to galleries.

In one year, the artists had just finished preparing the walls and their sketches. When they began the actual painting, the roof tiles began to break under the stress of the temperature extremes of the English climate. Water leaked inside the *bot* and ran down the walls. Seeing his work ruined, Chalermchai admits he nearly quit the project at that point, as discussed above. The roof tiles were finally replaced.

After nearly a year and very little progress on the murals themselves, it was clear that Panya and Chalermchai needed more help than Pang, Uthai, and Suwan could provide. With the support of the foundation and free tickets from Thai Airways International, they recruited friends and students from Silpakorn to help at the temple. Visa requirements allowed their assistants to stay in London for one-year stints. Due to personal or family problems, a few were unable to stay an entire year; others stayed beyond a year on visa extensions. Three have remained in London more or less permanently. Four artists returned a second time for an additional year to help Sompop in the wing rooms they called *hong lek* (little rooms). With the exception of Panya, Chalermchai, Sompop, and, to a lesser extent, Pang, the teams working at the temple comprised a changing personnel. By the final months of 1987, when they were finishing the main room, sixteen artists were living and working in the *bot,* day and night.[27]

As in the cases of Uthai and Suwan discussed above, Panya and Chalermchai recruited most

of their assistants from their personal networks. Most were graduates of Silpakorn University's Faculty of Painting, Sculpture, and Graphic Arts, many of the Thai art curriculum.[28] Each year's class at Silpakorn is small, and the students form close ties for the first years before choosing their majors in the fourth year.[29] All of the recruits had known Panya and Chalermchai personally or by reputation; some were members of the "Thai Art 80" group, the *klum* organized by Chalermchai.[30] Two artists that had graduated at the same time as Chalermchai and Panya were already working in the Fine Arts Department (painting section). The department assigned them to Wat Buddhapadipa for a year, continuing to pay their salaries while the foundation covered their living expenses. The wife of one employee went along to cook for the group. Both employees later returned for a second year, to work with Sompop in finishing the two wing rooms.[31] Three of the younger assistants had been Chalermchai's students when he taught for a year at the Fine Arts College (Achiiwa Sin). Some recruits represented other networks outside the art world: Sanan was recruited by a friend of Panya's who, like Panya, was a follower of Rusii Lingdam, a famous monk in Uthai Thani. Most of the artists asked to participate were recent graduates of Silpakorn; two were in their final year, from which they took leave, and as they did not yet need to support a family, they had more mobility than older artists. Just out of school, many had not found permanent jobs and were uncertain about their futures. Those who were working took a leave of absence from their employers. The opportunity to work with relatively established artists on a prestigious project abroad was a powerful incentive to most of the assistants.[32]

In their search for assistants, Panya and Chalermchai sought out friends and younger students whose artistic skills and talents they respected. They chose some artists for their particular strengths in technique. For example, Pichit, a trusted friend of Panya's, recommended Sompop as an assistant. He liked Sompop's early temple scenes, which exhibited both strong skills in realism and a control of color (at that time, Sompop was painting naturalistic portraits of templegoers). Sompop, who majored in painting rather than Thai art at Silpakorn, admits that he was not very skillful in *kranok* or *laay thai,* the techniques of Thai traditional art. "I do not paint in Thai traditional style," he explained to me one afternoon. "What concerns me is Buddhism." As the ability to paint realistically was something Panya sought, Sompop's skills, orientation, and disposition (nearly all who know him describe him as *jai dii*— good-hearted) gave him a prominent place on Panya's team.

While Panya wanted to see samples of prospective assistants' work to judge if they could work with him in terms of their concepts of art, Chalermchai emphasized skill in Thai traditional painting. In several instances, artists had to prove their skills to Chalermchai before being given major scenes. Suraphol had been recommended to Chalermchai for his mastery of acrylic colors, but Chalermchai did not know him. At the temple, Chalermchai had him paint tiny birds and animals as details until he was convinced of his talents. Kittisak was initially accepted by Chalermchai to work with Pang in the side rooms, but he replaced another member of Chalermchai's team after frictions developed in the main room. There, Kittisak was assigned to finish work others had started, or scenes no one else wanted. Referring to the scenes of his initial assignment, Kittisak said, "I have to go to hell first" before Chalermchai allowed him to

paint scenes by himself. After friction between some members of the group escalated into fights and increased tensions, Panya began to search for artists who would be easy to work with, "one who is a good person, with no problems about living together." Their artistic skills became secondary because Panya figured that he would have to train them anyway during the painting process, since as recent Silpakorn graduates most had had little practical experience.

In recruiting his assistants, Chalermchai often asked simply if they wanted to help him, referring to himself as *phii,* or big brother. Once, when Chalermchai returned to Bangkok, he met with Prasat and his classmates Kittisak, Pichai, and Roengsak to invite them to exhibit with him in the "Thai Art 80" group. Chalermchai also invited Prasat to go to London when Prasat finished his masters' thesis at Silpakorn, saying, "*Pai khian ruup kap phii mai?*" (Will you go help big brother paint?). In his recruitment Chalermchai constantly played on the ties of family in an informal way, casting the project in terms of personal relations.[33] These actions—invitations to work at Wat Buddhapadipa, to exhibit in the "Thai Art 80" group—expanded Chalermchai's and Panya's personal "entourages," members of which continued to work with them in various capacities long after the London murals were completed.[34]

While Panya and Chalermchai framed their requests to potential assistants simply as a need for help from a "little brother" or as admiration for certain skills that would enhance the murals, the artists have discussed their motivations for going in widely varying terms. These motivations reveal a range of attitudes of Thai artists toward new experiences, their positions as contemporary artists in a country lacking much of the art institutional infrastructure of the West, and cultural values attached by Thais to *pai naawk,* or "going abroad." Sakya, for example, had been a member of Panya's class at Silpakorn. Although he had not majored in Thai art, he became interested and skilled in that style through his work at the Fine Arts Department. He understood Panya's search for assistants solely in terms of seeking artistic skills, and when Panya "saw that I could do it, he asked me to help." Panya offered him an opportunity to paint as he wanted, even to design some sections himself—a privilege not easily exercised as a government employee assigned to paint "official" portraits or "Thai style" paintings for government offices. Because of this opportunity and because his wife would be able to accompany him, Sakya agreed to go. He added that London would also give him the chance to see "the real thing"—the art he had only seen in books.

Speaking for the group, another younger artist explained that motives were "an individual thing. Some were not thinking much of anything . . . maybe just about going to see London . . . as an opportunity to go out." An artist who now manages a small factory outside of Bangkok mentioned his desire to go and "look for experience . . . to encounter new things." Several others also glossed "experience" as learning about another place. They mentioned the significance of learning through working together, and the opportunity to exhibit their skill in an important temple abroad. Roengsak told me (in English), "I just wanted to learn something. It was a good chance for me to go away, to go outside." He attributed this motive to the model established by King Chulalongkorn, who after traveling extensively through Europe imported a number of European artists to work in Thailand to build monuments, design buildings, and paint frescoes and royal portraits. Roengsak said, "Rama V went outside and brought the

[Western] culture in." He explained further that the reign of Rama V (King Chulalongkorn) was "the highest point" of Thai history and that all government servants since have wanted to emulate him as a cultural model. Now, as he observes Thais traveling to work in Singapore, where he lives, he thinks this model "is getting deeper and deeper in the Thai mind. People want to do what the king and the rich people do if they have the chance. If they speak English, and have a bit of money, they go."[35]

While resonating deeply with cultural and even religious ideals, the meanings of travel remain specific to Thai social location.[36] Roengsak, as did other artists with whom I discussed this issue, made status distinctions between several streams of Thais who go abroad. On the one hand are the laborers who go on contract to countries such as Singapore or Saudi Arabia to earn money to buy land when they return to Thailand. On the other hand are the Thai elite who go to Europe or America (and now even Japan) to gain education and credentials in order to obtain good jobs with international connections. They need to (in Roengsak's words) "think like *farang* so they can deal with them." He noted that the elite also now travel abroad "to spend money."[37] While distinctions are made between purely economic capital (earning money) and the sorts of symbolic or cultural capital that convert to economic capital when operating within globalized structures of power and wealth,[38] clearly the destination itself heightens the status of the travel. England remains at the top of the list.

The request to help more established artists paint murals on a prestigious project in a city long believed to be the center of Western civilization represented an invaluable personal and professional opportunity. Few of the artists expected to make any money. Instead, they viewed it as a chance to gain skills through working with Chalermchai and Panya and to be able to see the "real things"—view famous paintings as paintings rather than as photographs in art books or slides in lectures, explore new ideas, encounter different thinking about art, and visit the art museums and galleries that Bangkok lacks. Sitting in his studio, Panya summarized this impulse: "They were willing to go because I think they hoped to have a very good experience. They wanted to work there, and to see the contemporary art in Europe." While studying in London, he himself had "discovered" cubism, the visionary William Blake, the experimentation of young British sculptors, and printmaking techniques not known in Bangkok.

While the artists were made aware of the close living situation and meager financial support they would receive while working on the mural project, the issues did not seem to be significant factors for most of them in deciding to go. Preeda, an early 1984 Chalermchai recruit, had just graduated from Silpakorn in Thai art and understood from Chalermchai that their work would be a donation *(borijaak)* and that they would be volunteers. In an interview, Preeda told me that Chalermchai had said he would receive one hundred pounds each month and then outlined the situation to him:

> We will have a place to stay. There is a cottage. There will be food, three meals a day. There are people to make food for us. As for Thai food, there isn't authentic Thai food *(mai chai thai thae),* but it is food you can eat. Or if someone wants to eat Thai food, he can make it for himself. . . . Staying there can be easy. We will work from 8 A.M. to 5 P.M. We have agreed with

each other that there will be one day off. It might be Sunday or some other day. We will go see museums.

Suraphol, who had just graduated from Silpakorn at the time, told me he was just a kid from the provinces then. His living situation at Silpakorn was not satisfactory; the living situation at the Wimbledon temple thus would present no difficulty for him. He was interested in experience, not the matters of survival. Roengsak recruited him, telling him that while he would receive one hundred pounds per month for expenses, it would not go far in London. For example, even in a cheap London restaurant, each dish might cost three pounds. Nonetheless, by Thai standards one hundred pounds a month represented real income for these artists; several sent sixty to eighty pounds every month to Thailand to help their families.

A few of the artists discussed the merit-making aspects of the project, but not in terms of motivation. One told me that in addition to having experiences and a chance to "do something historical," going meant "making merit for myself and for the Buddha" *(tham bun hai tua eng lae phraphuttachao)*. But the merit he might accrue did not figure large in his plans. As he explained (and many others I spoke with about this issue confirmed), "The more you are thinking about what you are getting, the less merit you get."

In summary, "going outside" to London would mean first of all gaining "experience," which for young people raised largely in small Thai villages meant discovering new ways of life, different foods, and encountering *farang* in a context that might allow more sustained interaction than in Thailand. Going outside to London was one means by which their status inside Thailand could be enhanced. For this group of people, as artists, experience involved a chance to see the "real things" of an art world they had known only in reproductions. The two types of experience are not conceptually separated, since at Silpakorn their instructors emphasized the necessity of learning to make art from one's own experience, using one's own ideas. Further, "going outside" to study and work had been long mandated in the Bangkok art world—an ideal of artistic development promulgated by Silpa Bhirasri and his followers. In the larger social context, such travel fulfills the Thai cultural model of a good citizen.

Exporting Social Relations

The factors discussed above conditioned the relationships between Panya, Chalermchai, and the other artists working with them. First and foremost, Panya and Chalermchai knew and were older than most of their assistants. On that basis they established (or already had) a familial *phii-naawng,* or older/younger sibling relationship. The artists I interviewed still refer to the two as Phii Panya or Phii Lerm, titles of brotherly respect and affection. Second, the group's shared university experiences as artists animated master–student relations. In Thai social terms, both types of relationships establish a hierarchy and structure of authority based on age and social position. In going out to England, these Thai social relations were exported abroad, but not without the tensions and ruptures that characterize those (and any) relationships. The tensions were clearly exacerbated by the distance of the artists from "home" and the pressures and

closeness of life at the temple. On the other hand, this expanded social arena offered new possibilities and alternative actions in resolving conflicts. Many of the artists described their experiences in England as having been shaped not only by their intense work at the temple, but by the *farang* with whom they became friends and the aspects of the social life they observed in London.

The early involvement of Pang (several years older and thus senior to the two) presented an additional complication in terms of his social position and authority on the project. When Panya and Chalermchai arrived in London to begin work, it was clear that Pang—who lived in Knightsbridge, a considerable distance from the temple—would not be able to work on the same schedule as those living at Wat Buddhapadipa. In addition (according to many artists I interviewed), the two did not respect Pang's artistic skills. An obvious solution presented itself. In the beginning, Panya and Chalermchai had presented Khun Sawet with sketches for the four walls of the main room only; they had not designed murals for the two side wing rooms. To solve the problem of Pang, they came up with the idea of painting the entire *thosochat* in the side rooms and convinced Pang (via a letter from Khun Sawet) to accept responsibility for those rooms. As other problems developed with and between artists in the main room, they were shuttled off to work with Pang on the peripheries. Since his work progressed very slowly, when the main room was completed in 1987, Sompop and Kittisak became involved to speed up the work, with Sompop assuming final responsibility for completing the side rooms.

Although initially Panya had thought he and Chalermchai would paint together, once in London they divided the work in the main room as they had conceived of the project: two walls each. As more artists came, two "teams" (the English word always used by the artists themselves) were established, with different working styles and modes of organization. Panya was not satisfied with simply enlarging his original sketches onto the walls and filling in details and patterning. Instead, he worked on his scenes (in the words of Boonkhwang) "step by step, and we are changing all the time . . . creating our ideas while we are working." A process evolved whereby Panya actively encouraged his assistants to explore their own ideas. Panya had chosen Boonkhwang largely for his imagination. Over dinner one evening, Boonkhwang told me he thought Panya must have been joking when he asked him to go to London. When I asked why, he replied,

> Because I hate Thai painting, because I don't like to [moving his hand in small, graceful movements] . . . make the line, like Thai dance. And I said, "Are you sure you want me to go there?" "Yes," he [Panya] said, "yes." Then I say okay. Because in my dreams I want to go overseas.
>
> [He continues, describing his first days at the temple.] It was not easy to start. . . . I am not keen on Thai painting. I asked myself why did Phii Panya bring me here? So I find a corner, go very close. Very deep and very close. I paint that part about one week. After that Phii Panya came to me and looked that over. He complained to me, "Why are you painting like this?" "I feel very bad," I said. "I can't paint like this [Thai traditional style]." "You know why I brought you here?" he asked me. I said, "I don't know." And he said, "Because you are keen

in contemporary art." He wanted me to mix my style with his . . . something realistic or whatever ideas I have. So I moved myself from the corner to this wall and I paint these [the *yak*s].[39]

These characters are the favorite scenes of many artists; the *yak* face he painted on the light switchplate never fails to delight visiting schoolchildren (Plate 12). Boonkhwang was also responsible for many of the overtly political or humorous details in the murals, including the only one that Khun Sawet ever asked to be changed—a *yak* pointing at the erect phallus protruding from the open pants of a fellow giant in a scene from *The Defeat of Mara*. Khun Sawet thought it was "too aggressive." Boonkhwang repainted the member as limp, as though spent from passion.

Panya sketched out the large forms of the composition, but he relied on the assistants to execute smaller figures, patterns, and details within the larger scenes. He would review the day's work in the late afternoon, often requiring his assistants to remove the scaffolding. He frequently asked for changes. At the bottom area of *The Defeat of Mara*, for example, he thought the artists had put in too much texture, too much abstraction, and a too-intense coloring, which stopped the viewer's eye from moving upward through the scene to the Buddha as he sits resisting the temptations represented by Mara's army. Panya had the artists rework the area until their renderings of his overall idea unified the scene. His was a fluid, improvisational process, and from the assistants' point of view perhaps more pleasant, as it allowed more room for individual expression and play of artistic personality. But in terms of effort and time, the process was no less demanding than Chalermchai's way of working with his team.

Chalermchai admits that he worked with his assistants in a more authoritarian manner. He retained the composition of his original sketches almost exactly, adjusting only for the actual dimensions of the walls. He controlled much more rigorously the details of his scenes, requiring his assistants to execute exactly the patterning and decoration that he envisioned in the colors he had chosen. One artist told of an incident in this regard: he had been painting the celestial beings that inhabit the Sutthawat heaven (one of the levels in the *Traiphum* scene). After painting nine extremely detailed identical figures, the artist, having become bored, painted the tenth with his own portrait. Chalermchai objected and told him he must change the face. In his dream, he told the assistant, a big black ghost came, stepped on his chest, and told him to tell the artist to change the face. Several times Chalermchai claimed to have had this dream until, three weeks later, the artist made the changes.[40] In both style and content, there was far less room on Chalermchai's team for individuality, although a few artists such as Kittisak gained his trust and were able to redesign and execute scenes on their own.

The two main artists demanded discipline, skill, and enormous effort on the part of their assistants, and they were concerned always that their art maintain the highest standards of Thai traditional art, and some standards even more rigorous than would have been required for murals in the nineteenth century. A number of scenes were finished or repainted by assistants who replaced the artists who began them, layering talents and skills and effacing individual authorship. The amount of detail in architectural decoration and clothing became one standard

of excellence. Chalermchai told me that since photographers would now be able to photograph all sections of the murals, he believed that every scene, even those high above the heads of viewers, had to be minutely patterned. To accomplish this, the artists painted some of the detail work using magnifying glasses. Frequently in older Thai temples, figures above eye level are larger, or the scenes more expansive, such as those at Wat Ratchadaram in Bangkok, where the upper levels of the murals are painted as sky with clouds and *theweda* flying through.[41] At many contemporary Thai temples where artists receive commissions for their work and/or face tight deadlines, to eliminate the need for such laborious fine rendering of clothing patterns or architectural details, artists also paint scenes toward the top, less accessible to the eyes of the viewer, on a much larger scale. Or they simplify the rendering.

At Work in the Temple, at Play in London

At first Panya, Chalermchai, and their assistants lived in the small four-room caretaker's cottage in front of the main estate house. As the number of working artists increased, the male artists moved to sleep in the *bot*. Panya and Chalermchai each retained one room in the cottage; the women who joined the project later lived in the third room. The fourth served as a common area where the artists ate their meals. The cottage had one bathroom and a tiny kitchen. By mid-1987, upwards of sixteen artists lived in the *bot,* sleeping and hanging clothes on the scaffolding or in the basement. One of the artists described how he would move his sleeping bag around the *bot* in order to sleep right at the scene where he was working. When he got sleepy he would take a nap; when he woke up he would go "right to painting."

That the artists managed so well in such a small space with minimal facilities surprised many non-Thai observers, even those familiar with the modest housing of many Thai families.[42] Outside the *bot,* the temple grounds are spacious and beautifully landscaped, and the artists often walked on the nearby Wimbledon Commons, with its acres of field and forest. However, Wat Buddhapadipa is situated several kilometers from the shops and pubs of Wimbledon village, creating a sense of social isolation from the larger world.

Issues of authority that emerged during the painting process derived from contradictions between a context where the Thai artist's sense of "self" is largely shaped by social position, and training in values of creativity, self-expression, and—most important—individuality. While they described their working group as friends *(pen phuan kan),* the artists also relied upon *phii-naawng* and *khru/luuk sit* structures. Sakya, one of the artists on leave from the Fine Arts Department, explained that most of the artists who went to London were younger than Panya and Chalermchai and acknowledged their seniority. He himself was the same age as Panya, but he always deferred to him because Panya had responsibility for the project. Sakya told me, "We have to think always that we came to help. We are not the directors."[43]

Despite Thai customs regarding authority in this situation, not all the artists found it pleasant or even possible to work under these conditions. One of the younger ones, who had just graduated from Silpakorn before going to London, responded to my questions about working in the following exchange during one interview:

Sandra Cate: How was it helping Chalermchai?
Artist: Very difficult.
SC: Why?
A: Because Chalermchai puts in a lot of detail. Another thing, we have to paint in the way that I told you. Here we have to paint like him. . . . Chalermchai's painting is so detailed *(pen ai la iat)* . . . we have to do it the same way.
SC: So you have to do just like he wants?
A: Maybe I can't do it. I can't do like he does. Because Chalermchai's feelings are one way . . . my feelings are another way. Because this is art. We see the same; various Thai art works are the same. But we are not the same, because inside each person is not the same at all. Choosing details is not the same. Some people might see something and think it is beautiful. Some people might not think so. They might see something else . . . and think *that* is beautiful. Right?
SC: Did he want you to change a lot?
A: Change? I didn't want to change like he wanted. Sometimes I painted according to what he wanted, but not one hundred percent. Sometimes I completed something, but it wasn't all right *(tae khaow mai chai)*. I have to fill it in again. I felt that I could not work well. I could work, but not in the way I needed to help them. That's what I thought. Afterwards I went to help Khun Pang. Then I felt freer. It is the artwork of artists painting together. . . . I only know that it tended to be difficult because each person has feelings of his own.

With so much pressure to finish and such intense work in small quarters, arguments and disagreements between the artists were inevitable. Some of the issues involved discipline, others involved money, artistic competition, personality clashes. Because he wanted so desperately to finish the murals, Chalermchai admitted to me that, "I was like a Nazi," barking commands to his team and to the younger artists generally to get to work, do this, change that, and so on. Many of the artists confirmed that Chalermchai, feeling a lot of pressure, then pressured others. One artist described it as "hurry up and finish." In contrast, those who worked with Panya found him always pleasant and even tempered, but his slow, deliberate, and fluid mode of working caused further problems. Kittisak remembered how the artists became irritated at having to remove all the scaffolding frequently so that Panya could evaluate the progress of his compositions. Tensions developed into schisms, some of which have never completely healed.[44] When problems could not be worked out, assistants simply left. A few remained in London outside the temple and a few returned to Thailand. Others left the main room of the *bot* to work in the side rooms. Often problems were solved through the mediation of other artists, friends, or the frequent visits of Khun Sawet and his wife Sobha. The artists called Khun Sawet and his wife Khun Phau and Khun Mae, respectfully naming them honorary parents. Many artists described these tensions as entirely normal family quarrels. Publicly, the two lead artists spoke of the group as a "team," emphasizing the group's mutual commitment, productivity, creativity, and even social equality. In the words of one artist, "Everybody stayed together and everybody was very poor."

Panya and Chalermchai expected the artists to work at least eight hours a day—from about 9:00 A.M. until 6:00 P.M., Tuesdays through Sundays. The atmosphere inside the *bot* varied according to the personalities working during any given period. Often it was quiet and serious while each artist worked on his or her section. At other times they joked around or filled the *bot* with *luuk tung*—a kind of Thai country music from Isaan—and Thai popular music from cassette players. In the evenings they played football or the Thai rattan-ball-kicking game of *takraw,* wrote letters, did laundry, or visited local pubs. Early on, several of the artists took English lessons at schools in the area. Others worked on their own art or on commissions. As the pressure to finish intensified, many returned to the *bot* to paint after dinner. They would sleep for a while, then work again late into the night.

Both Thais and *farang* came regularly to Wat Buddhapadipa to visit the artists. Friends from Thailand came for a few days or a few weeks, staying in the cottage or the *bot,* sharing their lives, keeping them company while they painted. English friends dropped by to watch the painting and chat. One Thai woman who resided nearby in Wimbledon observed the isolation of the artists in the early days. She cooked holiday dinners for them at her house and took them on outings and to doctors. She also became a regular driver for the artists to and from London airports and a defender of the project against those who criticized it. Some artists stressed the pleasure of these visits and outings; others remembered a chronic homesickness that drove them to return to Thailand. Even though their work on the murals occupied most of their time, many became part of life in Wimbledon—as familiar faces at the local pubs, as students in local English classes, as portraitists at local fairs where they sketched likenesses of the suburban villagers to earn a bit of extra money. A scene of Phusit painting one of these portraits appears in the *Phra Temiyaraj* Jataka in the murals (Plate 48), one of several scenes that commemorate their individual experiences and impressions of London.

The London Buddhist Temple Foundation provided the artists with room, board, and a minimal six pounds a day, later reduced to one hundred pounds a month as the painting continued in the side rooms. The artists devised ways to earn extra money for art books, for eating out, or to send home to their families in Thailand. A few of the artists used evenings and days off to take on outside work. In addition to seeking commissions for family portraits, they painted in restaurants, did Thai-style carvings, cleaned houses, taught, or did carpentry work obtained through contacts with local Thais.

All the artists took Monday off, when London galleries and museums are usually deserted and free of admission charges. As a frequent finale to their Monday outings, they visited Zwemmers in Charing Cross, purveyor of art books, where they enjoyed a standing discount due to the large quantity of books they bought. On returning to the temple, they usually stopped for Chinese food in Soho or fast food at McDonald's. Paralleling the study journeys they took as students at Silpakorn, the artists also accompanied their English and local Thai friends on visits to notable monuments and historical sites in England: notably Winchester Cathedral, Cambridge and Oxford, Stonehenge, and Canterbury Cathedral.

Viewing art in England inspired these artists in myriad ways. It gave them ideas about color, landscape, naturalism, and emotion that they then painted directly into the murals. Some of

the art entered the Wat Buddhapadipa murals as specific details or as "atmosphere"—such as the Turner skies on display in the Tate Gallery—because, according to one of the artists, "[W]e thought in the mural painting we would like more international or contemporary art, not just Buddha's story or scriptures." As noted above, Sakya was particularly engaged by Rembrandt's portraits, which he saw for the first time in London. Apichai Piromrak became enchanted with the glowing colors of Austrian painter Fritz Hunderttwasser, so he used a similar palette of sumptuous greens and gold in his rendering of *The Miracle of Casting the Tray*.[45]

Seeing "the real things" also generated in the artists a reflexivity upon their own skills specifically and Thai art generally. The inevitable comparisons they made between Thai and *farang* art and between other artists and themselves generated a deep sense of distinction and, to a degree, positional superiority. When asked which art in London they found particularly impressive, several mentioned being awestruck by the second-century Amaravati temple carvings at the British Museum. Others spoke of the cutting-edge exhibits at the Hayward Gallery across the Thames. Many discussed the impact of these comparisons on their view of Thai art. One artist discussed how he saw European painting as "perfect" because, he explained, of its longer period of development. One day in Panya's studio he told me,

> The foreign art from earlier eras is good — I had only seen it before in books. It is [the] real work that impressed me a lot, when I saw the real thing so large. I liked the atmosphere in the paintings from the Romantic age. Compared with skill of Thai artists, those paintings are "perfect" *(sombun maak)*. But Thai artists have their own style, their own line.

Canterbury Cathedral provided them with their first exposure to the Christian equivalent of a Thai Buddhist temple. Although the architecture and scale were different, and the medium of narration glass, Chalermchai saw the aim or intention *(jut mung maay)* of the stained glass panels as the same as his own work. Others remembered gaining self-confidence in terms of their own artistic endeavors. During one conversation, Alongkorn explained to me:

> As for European style, I cannot compare my own to it. When I returned here, I think, "Okay. Thai style is good." I returned from England, and I paint in Thai style. I do not paint realistically. I cannot compare myself to them—to European style, or Indian style, or Persian style. After returning [to Bangkok], I am confident *(man jai)*, confident that I can paint in Thai style.[46]

Competing Authorities

The artists characterized their relations with other Thais at the temple as both strained and friendly. Tensions arose at various times between the artists who worked—and lived—at the temple for years and the monks who also resided there. Tensions also arose in their relations with other Thais living in London. The following accounts do not intend to recreate situations in the manner of repeating rumors or innuendo (although sometimes information was solicited and received in that manner), but rather to illuminate issues of secular versus religious authority in the foreign location of London. In the context of temples—perhaps cathedrals and

churches as well—these issues are not well discussed, but they are as relevant as art world relations between artist, patron, and public. They constitute major aspects of the social reality in which art is made and seen. At Wat Buddhapadipa, some of these tensions arose from iconographic decisions made by the artists; others derived from the anomaly of a group of lay artists living and working for years in a religious community.

Before going to London, Khun Sawet arranged for Panya and Chalermchai to show their mural sketches to the Supreme Patriarch, the head of the Thai *sangha*. According to Chalermchai, "He liked them [the sketches]. He suggested that we don't forget to paint 'jokes,'" referring to the amusing details of daily life that Thai artists place in the margins of their mural scenes. Panya also showed his sketches to one of his mentors, the Venerable Prayudh Payutto.[47] He also gave his approval, but he warned Panya to be cautious: "You cannot change the Buddhist Dhamma. It is very bad, if you make people misunderstand." Thus the artists went to London with tacit endorsements for their project from important representatives of the Thai religious community.

However, once at Wat Buddhapadipa, relationships between the artists and the local monks became problematic on several accounts. First, the foundation sent the artists from Thailand without informing the abbot or monks in England of the decision, claiming long-distance authority at the temple. Second, the artists and the monks at the temple represented two distinct groups living for several years within the temple grounds. Social relations in Thailand between laypeople and monks are prescribed formally by the *vinaya* precepts and informally by Thai social customs of reciprocal exchange. Monks establish fields of merit for lay Buddhists to accrue through their support of the monks. Such relations are, of course, subject to continual renegotiation in new contexts; Wat Buddhapadipa during the mural painting represents such a context. The artists, painting as volunteers and requiring support for their own expenses, created a social grouping both parallel to and in competition with the monks.[48] Lay worshipers at Thai temples appear regularly during the day to serve the monks (and thus earn merit) by making lunch, cleaning, gardening, and performing administrative and maintenance tasks. In Thailand, temple monks look to the surrounding community or, in Bangkok, a geographically more diffuse network of templegoers and contributors for food and material support. The Wat Buddhapadipa monks do not walk through the streets of Wimbledon on morning alms rounds; given the difficulties of establishing a Thai *wat* in an upper-middle-class English neighborhood and the lack of a surrounding Buddhist community, such an activity would be inappropriate.[49] In terms of daily temple life, the artists frequently performed many temple duties: as guards, janitors, "temple boys" *(dek wat),* and sometimes cooks. But as the project progressed and deadlines neared, the artists worked constantly at the *bot* and did not always rush to help the monks with temple work, causing some tension. In the evenings they often drank and laughed late into the night at the cottage, activities that (according to observers at the time) some monks felt were inappropriate.

Minor tensions arose over the length of the project. The artists were painting in the space where monks perform many of their most important calendrical ceremonies. As the painting in the *bot* entered its third year, some monks and local Thais began to grumble. Observers attrib-

ute this to their failure to appreciate the amount of detail and care the artists put into their work, explaining that monks do not generally receive education in art except at the highest levels of university. Monks continue to position artists at the social level historically held by mural painters in Thailand—as fellow monks bound by the *vinaya* code or as *chaang.*

When the artists painted scenes from the life of the Buddha that deviated from customary iconography, more serious conflicts developed between individual monks and the artists. In a major scene of *The Defeat of Mara,* Panya painted the Buddha just *after* his moment of enlightenment, when divine beings gathered around to rejoice, rather than the usual moment just *before,* when they fly away in fear. Panya wanted the emotional tenor of this passage to intensify the larger meaning of the entire scene—the Buddha's triumph over the temptations of materiality represented by Mara and his army. Chalermchai also made changes. In the scene of the Buddha descending from Daowading heaven (Pali: Tavatimsa) after preaching to his mother, Chalermchai painted the Buddha on a single ladder rather than three ladders, claiming that this change visually "concentrated" the Buddha's power. In the *Traiphum* scene behind the presiding Buddha image, Chalermchai chose to depict the Buddha, after his death, reclining on a lotus leaf rather than in the state of nirvana symbolized by an empty leaf (Plate 3).[50] Some monks and many local Thais found these innovations disturbing, charging that the artists were attempting to gain control of the stories (which, in the artistic sense, they were). Referring to Thai conventions regarding this scene, Chalermchai said, "I told the monks I didn't want to be locked in." Elaborating on his decision, he said, "How can you show nirvana? Nirvana is nothing. I did it [painted the form of the Buddha] to show Westerners. This mural is for Western people." The monk wanted him to rub out *(lob aawk)* the figure of the Buddha; Chalermchai refused, insisting that the artists must paint as they thought best and claiming that since he was the artist, no one could control him. The argument was quelled when Khun Sawet met with Chalermchai and the monk to explain why the artists could (and should be allowed to) paint in this manner.

In a gesture of formal protest, one monk wrote a letter to the abbot of Wat Buddhapadipa and to Khun Sawet, arguing that the artists were painting what they wanted and that the foundation "didn't know anything."[51] He complained that Panya's interpretation was "quite different" from the old murals, that the angels must flee in the enlightenment scene. He also wrote that there were "foreign people" in the murals, "many types of foreign people," including Margaret Thatcher. Khun Sawet, fearing that this letter had been sent to the Supreme Patriarch of the Thai *sangha,* composed an answer defending the decisions of the artists on both doctrinal and artistic grounds. As for the story of the Buddha's enlightenment, he pointed out that the angels gathering around the Buddha to rejoice *is* in the scriptures. Khun Sawet also noted that the Supreme Patriarch had approved the initial sketches for Wat Buddhapadipa. And finally, according to the "morals" of free expression, the artist must do what he wants. Khun Sawet sent his reply to the monk and a copy to the Supreme Patriarch. The monk's protest did not generate any further communications, and the artists proceeded as they wished.

A few artists developed special relationships with monks. While on the whole Chalermchai thought the monks did not understand their work, he made an exception for Phra Maha Term,

secretary of the *wat* at the time the artists worked there. He became their technical advisor; with a master's degree in philosophy, Phra Maha Term thought himself fully qualified to interpret Dhamma for the artists. He told me, "I know history. I know what story they are going to work on. I keep an eye on them. I give them ideas." Chalermchai confirmed that Phra Maha Term had been helpful: "He said good things, which was better than money."[52]

These incidents and relationships punctuated what many of the artists described as a situation of separation, of not having much interaction with the monks. When I asked them about their relationships, several answered, *"Mai mii arai,"* an ambiguous answer that could mean both "we didn't have any" and "no problem." The artists usually kept to themselves, working in the *bot* day and night, eating and sleeping in the cottage. Sompop and the other artists from Isaan (Northeast Thailand) did establish bonds with the monks from Isaan. This bond, expressed in dialect and food preferences, enabled the artists to act as mediators between the rest of the group and the monks, get extra food when supplies were low, or smooth over other problems. The artists thus drew new social boundaries, establishing a lay presence at Wat Buddhapadipa that functioned outside the usual context of Thai lay/monk relations.

Many Thais who came to the temple gossiped and complained about the artists—a function perhaps of social class, of not understanding the artistic process, or of viewing their presence on temple grounds as competition for the monks. Controversies over the scenes described above fueled sentiments among local Thais that the artists were not only taking liberties with traditional iconography, but were also undermining the authority of the monks. Other suspicions surrounding the artists touched on popular Thai views of travel, or *pai thiaw*. Chalermchai stated that some Thais might have thought these artists came as a group to have a good time, to use the painting as an excuse for a holiday, or to live off the temple.[53] At times tensions became overt, according to one observer who described an incident preceding one of the holiday festivals held at Wat Buddhapadipa. At these festivals celebrating Loy Krathong and the Thai New Year, temple supporters set up booths and concessions to raise money for the temple. One year the artists wanted to sell northern-style noodles *(khao soi),* but the temple committee refused, claiming that it would draw income for themselves and the mural project rather than contribute to their efforts to raise money for the *wat* as a whole. A Thai woman, herself having experienced the dislocations of living abroad several times, defended the artists when she saw other Thais at Wat Buddhapadipa "gang up" on them in the first months after their arrival. She attributed this cold reception to a general lack of art education in Thailand. "They are just common people. They ask why you spend all this money," she told me. "They don't know art for art's sake." When this woman showed the murals to a group of American friends in the early days of the project, a Thai woman visiting the temple that day told them, "Oh, you should see the murals in Bangkok, they are much better."

Chalermchai also analyzed the problems with local Thais as an issue of social class; he claimed that educated Thais less deferential to monks understood their work. He referred by name to the Thai ambassador to the United Kingdom at that time. "Thai government officers and students in London were very helpful," he noted. He characterized those who opposed the artists as "poor people from Isaan" who "don't know art, just work. They don't like the mu-

rals—they believe the monks. Students, 'officemen' [professionals], government persons—they don't believe the monks." Panya believed local Thais did understand their fundamental intention, however, stating, "I think people didn't much understand the art. People appreciated more our patience and our willingness to work voluntarily for the religion. People respect this, I think, more than the art." One Thai woman living in London offered an additional interpretation of the tensions between the local Thais and the artists: even though the artists didn't earn money, they did get to come to England. "They [local Thais] don't want to see people better than them, they want the status of living abroad all for themselves." Many Thais who immigrate to London work in restaurants or hotels and, in the words of one Thai, "do not live as first-class citizens." The immigrants' situation in London contrasted with those of the wealthy contributors who flew in from Bangkok to make merit at *kathin*. Local templegoers recognized that Bangkok money was essential to building and maintaining the temple; social resentments over that fact may have fueled their negative reception of Khun Sawet and the artists, whom they regarded as agents of Bangkok money.

The ground on which the artists met local English and other *farang* was contoured differently than by Thai social relations. The artists made friends through English classes outside the temple or with the *farang* templegoers. A number of *farang* visitors came because they enjoyed the company of the artists and liked the art they were making. A few became regulars—coming two or three times a week—and were painted into the murals. Their encounters with the artists sparked a deeper interest in Buddhism and the intentions of the project, leading to their own involvement as supporters and friends. In one artist's words, "They got close to the artists, and they brought food." They frequently ate with the artists, took them on outings, and even visited them later in Bangkok, where the artists reciprocated. As the artists continued laboring on the murals, many *farang* expressed admiration for the scale of the project and the artists' commitments as volunteers. The Englishman who came to advise the artists on the cracking plaster and peeling paint began to seek their advice about Buddhism. He returned regularly both to teach and learn from them. Chalermchai said, "We gained a lot of knowledge when he came." Others also expressed their appreciation for the artists' dedication by donating aluminum scaffolding, or the photography for the mural catalogue and for fund-raising events in Bangkok. These encounters became central to the artists' assessments of the significance of the London experience. Both in discussing their motivations for going and their experiences there, they portrayed their opportunity to paint at Wat Buddhapadipa as expanding their knowledge of the West and of the people there. One artist saw the temple as a site of transcultural encounter with Europeans, where "they come, talk about ideas. We can't get to know *farang* in Thailand."

Sompop sees this issue of knowledge as critical for living in the world today, explaining, "[A]t the moment, all around the world, everybody has to know each other, what they are doing, what their culture is." He believes that while people identify themselves as national subjects—"I am Thai, I am American, I am English, I am German"—national identification is less important than a sense of place and habitus.[54] In his view, "we just want to know where we come from so we can understand." He continued, "The place where we learn, the experiences

we have, those are important too. We need to understand ourselves here, ourselves and other people. Sometimes Thais speak too much against the Europeans. . . . Thai people, they say they are against any culture, they say Thai is better."

Reactions by the English toward the murals differed from that of the local Thais and helped to change Thai views. The latter's suspicion and mistrust of the artists and their work began to dissipate as the project became well known. The airing of a BBC television documentary on the murals titled "Handmade" gave the murals an all-important English validation that local Thais saw as reflecting favorably upon "Thailand" and "things Thai." In discussing Thai attitudes after the BBC documentary, Chalermchai indicated how the same people who had grumbled about the murals subsequently gave the thumbs-up sign, saying, "Thailand is good, Thailand is the best." As the murals received wider publicity in London through television coverage and occasional newspaper articles, more visitors came just to see the murals as they were being completed—a process of aesthetic and cultural feedback that continues into the present.

In interviews in the Thai press Chalermchai and Panya stressed English acclaim for their project, thereby giving it deeper legitimacy in the Thai context. They also interpreted the English response as spreading Buddhism—a powerfully positive act and one articulated as the essential mission of the temple. According to Chalermchai in a 1987 Thai English-language newspaper interview, "Foreigners were the people who encouraged us to go ahead. At first they thought we were crazy to do the difficult task for free. But when they learnt that this is the way Buddhism taught us to dedicate ourselves to society, they became interested in our religion" (Mayuree 1987).

The Artist as Transnational Subject

The experiences of painting the murals at Wat Buddhapadipa changed the course of many of these young artists' lives. The trajectory of opportunity, patronage, knowledge, and adventure, which carried them from Thai villages to London, carried most of them back to Bangkok or their provincial homes. Several of the artists, however, remain scattered across the globe and continue to travel back and forth between other places and Thailand. The majority of the Wat Buddhapadipa muralists—seventeen of the twenty-nine—returned to Bangkok to live and work. Four returned to their home provinces, thus ending their travels where they began. Two, believing that they could not support themselves and their families through painting, started businesses that utilize some of their artistic skills. The two employees of the Fine Arts Department returned to their jobs there. Five of the muralists work as graphic designers or art directors for advertising firms. Four, including Panya, teach art; three teach at Silpakorn University. Eleven continue to work as freelance artists, with varying degrees of success.

Those artists who returned to their homes in the provinces have very little contact with their fellow artists from Wat Buddhapadipa. A group who are now in Bangkok have maintained working relationships with Panya and Chalermchai, although on different terms. Suraphol, the Silpakorn graduate who painted tiny animals and birds at Wat Buddhapadipa to prove himself, has worked for several years as Chalermchai's *luuk muu* (helping hand, or assistant). His skills

are well regarded; several artists told me that Chalermchai "learned" acrylics from Suraphol, since the former had painted only in tempera prior to the temple murals. Suraphol executes Chalermchai's ideas for paintings, receiving a set fee; Chalermchai signs his name and sells the painting for more than twice that amount[55]—a practice long known in European masters' ateliers. Sompop, Prasat, Pichai, and Alongkorn, who have been moderately successful in exhibiting and selling their own paintings, continue working as regular members of Panya's mural team. Many of the Wat Buddhapadipa group reassembled for Panya's Siam Commercial Bank project, discussed in chapter 6. Several of those actively painting have exhibited together in the late 1990s; one exhibition was titled "East Meets West: Thai Painting."

Four of the artists— Sanan, Kittisak, Areeporn (married to Kittisak), and Suwan—remained in London. The first three remained because they preferred the parks and "more peaceful" atmosphere of London over Bangkok.[56] Kittisak and Areeporn believed London was healthier and would provide better schooling than Bangkok for their daughter. With the 1980s boom in Thai restaurants along London's high streets, they have found an easy means of support as cooks or waiters while continuing to paint in "Thai style." In order to send money to his family in Bangkok, Suwan became a contractor, earning much higher wages than he could earn in Thailand. He made friends with an English carpenter who brought his Anglo-Thai child to the temple for Thai lessons; the two have worked as partners ever since and continue to do much of the construction and maintenance work for Wat Buddhapadipa. All but one of these artists travel to Thailand regularly; all plan to return permanently someday.

Three of the Wat Buddhapadipa muralists, gaining both artistic experience and cultural self-confidence, continued their art while living outside Thailand for a time. Apichai went to Germany for three years and returned to Bangkok in 1995 to become a lecturer at Silpakorn University. Roengsak, now settled in Singapore and having attained some recognition regionally for his fantastic renderings of animals, has recently begun to paint realistic portraits of Balinese temple dancers that sell at Christie's auctions for between Sing$10,000–15,000, catering to the still active trade in Orientalist images of the "Far East."

Sompop also stayed on at Wat Buddhapadipa after finishing his murals in 1992, when I first met him. He began to place installations and create site-specific art in the temple meditation garden alongside the small lake, in addition to working at odd jobs around the temple. He, his wife, and baby daughter lived in the cottage. Later, they moved out to live with friends elsewhere in London as he sought entrée into the London art scene, with some successes at juried contests and in gallery representation. From 1992 to about 1996, he moved back and forth between London and Bangkok, joining a larger community of Thai artists (and other Thais from all walks of life) who move between Thailand and other nations as transnational sojourners. They study, live, and work abroad but return to Bangkok regularly to exhibit, sell work, visit family and friends, and even live for a time.[57] After living and working at Wat Buddhapadipa for seven years, Sompop developed a critical reflexivity about being Thai. He told me, "If we just learn to think about what is different, about the concepts of the different places, we cannot compare them. They are just different. Many [Thai] people who are critical [of the country] go out. They think that Thailand is terrible, but they don't think why it [life] is like that here [in

England]." His moving back and forth has encouraged him to think about differences between societies and cultures. "Going out" for Sompop became the means for understanding the nature of modern life. In his words, travel helps him "to understand myself and other people. . . . [It is] the way to learn."

When Sompop returned to Thailand from London, he sought to renew the deep sense of place from which he paints, the folk culture of Isaan in Thailand's northeast. Both Buddhist and animist practices have long thrived there in a landscape of aridity and poverty. Themes of rain—the lifeblood of the region—and the cycle of nature expressed in Buddhist terms of endless transformation remain constant in his art; such themes often abstracted into cracked earthen landscapes, or as drops of fire burned into his canvas. Although he has now settled in the Bangkok suburbs—having decided that survival is easier for his family there—his exploration of national/regional artistic identity has continued, more recently in paintings that address the impact of modernity in Isaan.

In Thailand, village children who gravitate toward drawing or painting do so with commercial models and without a highly developed infrastructure of art institutions (art classes, museum programs, or government granting agencies) to support them at the local level. As they find their way to Bangkok and Poh Chang or other vocational institutes, they receive instruction in the techniques and iconography of Thai painting, historically set within the temple or palace and paralleled in Thai theater and dance. Ideologies of "modern art" are taught only at university level, and then only at Silpakorn, Chulalongkorn, Chiang Mai, and a few other universities that have established faculties or departments of "fine arts." Moving from village to Bangkok, artists experience a layering of epistemologies of art as well as methodologies of production, especially and primarily revolving around copying from a master or masterpiece versus self-expression and the development of individual creative ideas. Tensions deriving from the incomplete integration of these epistemologies pervade the Bangkok art world and shape the interpretations of the artistic worth and cultural significance of the murals at Wat Buddhapadipa.

Whatever the individual artist may have expressed as his or her motivation and reasons for going to work in Wimbledon, it remains that to have done so represented additional prestige in Thai social arenas, whether in Thailand or in Thai communities abroad. As one monk explained, the artists "don't earn money, *but* they get to come to *England*." However the artists responded to the initial requests of Panya or Chalermchai, however they understood that act of assent—as helping an older brother, as getting a prized opportunity to go abroad—from a Thai perspective it was significant that they went as volunteers. Most of those asked to go did not consider the mural-painting project as a salaried job. They were told that any money they received would cover minimal living expenses, but their labor would be donated to the temple. In a Thai Buddhist understanding of this arrangement, they would accrue substantial merit for their actions. This merit would be amplified by the dedication of their artistic talent to spreading the teachings of the Buddha through painting the stories of his lives, and by the long distances involved.

The fundamental conditions of this mural project—an anomalous organizational structure,

the painting of exquisitely, laboriously detailed murals under severe time pressure and financial constraints, and a setting far from home—obviously conditioned the process of working and living in ways atypical for other collective art projects. If anything, I would argue, these contextual factors throw the stuff of Thai social interactions into high relief. The habitus these artists carried with them to England and put into play at the temple more clearly delineates fissures, tensions, and mediating forces among the various Thai social groups.

The one arena perhaps most clearly transformed by their working in England instead of Thailand is that of authority. At this temple abroad, decision-making powers that would rest ordinarily with the temple abbot—discussed previously with regard to restoration projects—shifted in London to the primary fund-raiser and chair of the London Buddhist Temple Foundation, Khun Sawet. Wat Buddhapadipa is "owned" and administered formally by the Thai embassy; the monks who serve there fall under the authority of the Thai *sangha*. Yet Khun Sawet regularly oversaw the direction of the *wat*'s expansion, managed the financing for the *ubosot* and murals, settled arguments between various factions, and intervened on behalf of the artists with monks and local Thais who lodged protests against them and their art. Wat Buddhapadipa may be said to represent a mobile social order, but it is one that was (and continues to be) reordered by its transnational setting.

"Freedom" has been a key concept for young Thai artists, especially those who attend fine arts programs at the upper levels of university. Despite the master/student relationship based on copying that remains strong in Thai educational pedagogy—embodied still in the annual *wai khru* ceremony—aspiring artists are taught to "freely" express their own ideas and their own emotions. Silpa Bhirasri, the most influential of Western artists to engage with Thai artistic practice, sought to instill individual creativity, very much a value of Western art, in his students at Silpakorn. His thinking remains prominent at that institution; his essays are often reproduced in university publications. Further, until the 1980s very few artists were able to support themselves and their families on income derived exclusively from their art. Teaching art remains a key source of income for artists. At public universities in Thailand teachers remain in the social category of civil servants, as *kharatchakan* (literally, slave of the state). Conceptually, then, *kharatchakan* artists contrast with those who are *frii* (or freelance). Thus being "free" in the art world has a doubly charged meaning. An artist can be free from social constraints—master/student *or* government service. "Free" means also free to assert one's own artistic vision, to be a master oneself. In the context of painting murals in a temple, where key relationships triangulate between artists, sponsor, and monks, Chalermchai and Panya positioned themselves as equals, not as superior to the sponsor or monks or as free to paint whatever they wanted. In earlier times, muralists, as *chaang,* executed the artistic designs of their sponsor or, as monks, painted as the abbot wished. In either case, the status implications are that "free" is higher for the artist, a position elevated socially and economically above that of *chaang*. For the artists, to gain freedom also meant a higher position for their notions of art. Throughout Thai history, temples have been the primary sites of "art," whether architecture, sculpture and carving, or painting. At Wat Buddhapadipa, these artists attempted to update that association and

at the same time introduce modern ideas of "art" to the mural viewer. They sought to free Thai murals from the predictability and repetition of familiar styles and iconographic conventions, to introduce the "creative" and the "individual idea" to temple walls.

These experiences of "going outside" transformed the "inside," evident in personal transformations resulting from the artists' experiences in London, the impact of their work upon their subsequent careers, and in innovations in their art. The art they encountered in England entered into their visions of Thai traditional art and changed them as well. They were eager to travel to England, the country held by the elite classes in Thailand to most represent *siwilai*. For artists training at Silpakorn or other universities, "going outside" may also mean Germany or Australia or Japan or the United States. Going outside also represents a time-honored means of advancement through the Thai social hierarchy—for that hierarchy remains ordered in spatial terms and validated by the king. Going outside enacts a personal journey, a national endeavor, and an artistic one as well.

chapter six

Art, Identity, and Performance

"Art in the present day is always a question. In the past, art was always an answer."—Panya Vijinthanasarn

Oppositions and Positions

In mass media interviews and fund-raising publicity about the mural-painting project at Wat Buddhapadipa, Panya and Chalermchai frequently represented themselves to the Thai public as the reincarnations of two nineteenth-century muralists and monks, Khru Khongpae and Khru Thongyu.[1] In the catalog essay accompanying the British Council exhibition of their initial mural sketches, Panya is quoted as saying, "Chalermchai will paint as Tong Yoo [*sic*], the universe and heavens behind the Buddha. I will paint as Kong Paat [*sic*], with strength and emotion in front of the Buddha, His battle with Mara (Evil) before he reached enlightenment" (Mead 1984). Claiming this lineage was a grand move on their part, for the two monks had painted murals that many scholars consider to be the among the masterpieces of the Rattanakosin era of Thai art: the murals at the Wat Suwannaram *ubosot* in Thonburi, across the Chao Phraya River from Bangkok.[2]

The comparisons were apt. The earlier muralists had led schools of followers and students "in competition" with each other for mural commissions. They had also worked alongside each other at Wat Arun (the Temple of Dawn) and Wat Bangyikhan (No Na Paknam 1987a). While both exemplified the Thai style of painting with an expressive, delicate line executed with extremely fine brushes—mouse whiskers, it is said—the striking conceptual and stylistic differences between the two belie easy assertions of the static, repetitive nature of either Thai mural painting or Thai artistic "traditions." Panya has admired the sweeping dynamism of Khru Khongpae's compositions of battle scenes, Chalermchai the formally elegant, hierarchical organization of Khru Thongyu's court scenes. Extending the comparison, Panya acknowledged to me that he and Chalermchai indeed were seen to be "in confrontation" with each other at Wat Buddhapadipa, underscoring their artistic differences rather than their similarities.

As did the two who inspired them, these two contemporary artists based their division of the mural plan at Wat Buddhapadipa on themes close to their personal artistic concerns (Figure 3). In Chalermchai's words, "We chose the stories which were justified according to our character *(nidsai)*." Both selected subjects and compositional approaches that have figured prominently in their art both before and after their work at Wat Buddhapadipa. Panya chose the scenes from the life of the Buddha that most dramatically represent the struggles and conflicts of humans with their attachments to the material world. The active, circular movement in Khru Khongpae's composition of his battle scenes in the *Mahosot* Jataka at Wat Suwannaram inspired Panya's depiction of the Buddha's confrontation with Mara at Wat Buddhapadipa. Details and compositions reminiscent of Khru Khongpae's work have also appeared in many of Panya's easel paintings (see, for example, *Crisis of Civilization II* in Phillips [1992]), other murals, and in illustrations for the king's rendition of the *Mahachanuk* Jataka.[3]

At Wat Suwannaram, Khru Thongyu has been most admired for his scene portraying Prince Nemiraj, one of the Buddha's earlier incarnations, enthroned in an elaborate pavilion, surrounded by courtiers. Khru Thongyu has been called a "true traditionalist" for his fine patterning of clothing, architectural elements, and the precise rendering of each individual leaf on his trees (No Na Paknam 1987a, 22). At Wat Buddhapadipa, Chalermchai's compositions similarly focused on central characters in tableau-like scenes that emphasize Buddhist practice—merit-making, meditation, and worship—and the peace and serenity of enlightened figures. Chalermchai also chose to paint the *Traiphum* scene that frames the presiding Buddha statues. Much of his painting prior to going to England, and most of his art since returning to Bangkok, has concerned meditation visions in a manner that emphasizes decorative detailing.[4]

These different approaches have engendered numerous other contrasts between the two, often posed as oppositions. One of the artists who worked with them described Chalermchai's palette as "soft and smooth," while Panya chose "strong and tough" colors. Chalermchai, the artist explained, leaned toward the cool spectrum of greens and blues, Panya toward the warm with purples, reds, and pinks. As for their subjects and use of Buddhist symbolism, one observer said that Chalermchai has portrayed "inner peace" and "transcendence," setting the example of the "practising monk," while Panya, as the "teaching monk," portrays the eternal conflict between good and evil and worldly suffering (Hoskins 1984, 163).[5]

The personalities of the two artists have also been cast in oppositional terms, but inversely to their art. Chalermchai has often been characterized as *jai raawn* (literally, hot-hearted), or impatient, temperamental, exuberant, and outgoing. In contrast, those who know Panya describe him as *jai yen* (cool-hearted), or calm, contemplative, and reserved.[6] A Thai woman living in London posed this opposition in a British idiom, describing the pair as "cheese and chalk." "What Chalermchai was," she continued, "Panya wasn't." These temperamental differences translated into different managerial styles that shaped the social process of painting the murals. Their personalities also affected the murals' style and content, to the varying degrees that the two allowed or encouraged their assistants to execute their own ideas on the walls.

In the context of the artists' public assertions of Wat Buddhapadipa's significance for Thai art, several aspects of this contrast reveal their appeals to the authority of the past. First, they

chose acknowledged past masters as their artistic models, thereby claiming importance for their own mural project as well as their continuity with the best of Thai traditional painting. To do so publicly was to place themselves squarely within the pantheon of "indigenous" Thai artists—specifically monks who painted Thai temple murals—rather than in the company of "modern" Thai artists (some of whom were their teachers at Silpakorn) who have attained renown for work in abstract or other international styles.[7] Set against the backdrop of the ongoing debates within Thai art circles at that time about the "Thainess" of contemporary art production, their claims staked the nativist position.

Second, comparisons with the Wat Suwannaram masters framed the Wat Buddhapadipa mural painting in a way that transformed its anomalous organization—two artists of equal stature and responsibility—into a project with important historical precedent. One could speculate that such positioning might subvert the inevitable and perhaps unfavorable comparisons of their work. One eminent historian of Thai temple murals, for example, describes the achievements of the muralists at Wat Suwannaram thus:

> These two walls, in such close proximity and in two distinctive styles, are evidence of the fact that the works done by these two masters of the same period were equally great. It is impossible to judge which is the better work, for each mural deserves our utmost admiration. (No Na Paknam 1987a, 17)

Further, Khru Khongpae and Khru Thongyu were monks. For Chalermchai and Panya to represent themselves in these terms emphasizes the devotional, rather than career, aspects of their actions, as does the underlying reincarnation scenario they describe for themselves and for their mural painting. "I am doing this for my country and for my religion," said Chalermchai in one interview. "We are working on the murals for spiritual, not financial reasons" (Wilkinson 1986, 31). In another interview conducted just before he left for London, Chalermchai is quoted as saying, "My childhood dream has finally come true. I've had a life-long intention to be a mural painter. . . . I am going to leave to Wat Buddhapatheep [*sic*] in London for a year; to work and live in a temple like monk artists in the old days; and make these sketches come alive on the Ubosot wall" (Sanitsuda 1984).

Dramas of Personhood

In the trajectories of their lives since returning to Bangkok from London in 1987, several of the artists—Panya and Chalermchai above all—have become and are becoming highly visible actors in the Bangkok art world.[8] Although Chalermchai became the artist most publicly associated with Wat Buddhapadipa in the general public's mind, among those who "have followed these artists seriously" (the phrasing of one of Thailand's leading art critics), Panya has in fact been given considerably more credit for the artistry of the murals.[9] The artists themselves work and rework the oppositional categories popular in Thai cultural discourse to reposition themselves *as artists* socially and to claim value for their art in the fragmented Thai art world. In part this process has involved modes of theatricality integral to assuming a public persona and to

marking distinction in the public culture of contemporary Thailand.[10] As discussed in chapter 3, in the 1970s and 1980s art writers established Thai mural painting as the stylistic and thematic norm of the classical or traditional against which other Thai artists, art critics, and art historians write and paint. At Wat Buddhapadipa, Panya and Chalermchai sought to bridge the gap *in the mind of their Thai public* between differing epistemologies of art: murals as Buddhist narratives and as "modern art," ever-changing contemporary international art movements. Whether labeled "neotraditional" or, more recently, "neo-Buddhist," their art constitutes one of the main genres of contemporary artistic production within Thailand, one that wealthy Thai collectors seek, and that most substantiates their preferred qualities of "Thainess."[11]

The Thai public arena is highly theatricalized, where ambitious individuals—politicians, military personnel, writers, movie actors, bankers, industrialists, artists, and even monks—relentlessly cultivate distinctive and often controversial public personae as a means of garnering money, status, followers, customers, and even historical stature.[12] Through his dramatic, sometimes melodramatic, self-representations, combative interviews, and role in producing exhibition openings as spectacles, Chalermchai commands such attention as a "public personality." A genius at self-promotion, he has arguably become one of Bangkok's best-known artists. His home has been featured in Thai interior design magazines; his biography was dramatized in the popular television series *Lakorn haeng chiiwit* (theater of life). Throughout his career he has explicitly rejected contemporary or Western influences in his art, yet he has become adept at exploiting international business practices of marketing his paintings through exhibitions, art debates, books of his work, galleries, and nurturing relationships with collectors. His anti-Westernism is selective, for he has driven both a Harley-Davidson and a Mercedes Benz. He usually appears publicly in exquisitely tailored silk versions of northern Thai farmers' dress, simultaneously identifying with, but elevating himself above, the Thai peasantry in a manner appealing to his sponsors. In so doing he manipulates and even inverts both older and newer Thai hierarchies of taste and status: displaying the brand names that attain status among the new Bangkok elite, but maintaining a fashionable quality of being "authentically" Thai.[13] Chalermchai has become a central figure in that large segment of the Bangkok art market that centers on "Thai" (as opposed to international) art and trades in commoditized expressions of Thai "tradition"—paintings with iconic references to Buddhism and temple murals, executed in a style familiar and pleasing to a wide Thai public.

In his determination to make "public art" rather than promoting the "artist," Panya has chosen a different career path than that of Chalermchai. Panya has sought to reformulate the terms of contemporary artistic production and the "place" or location of art itself (or rather mural painting, a genre quite familiar to Thais) in the world of Bangkok, where the primary social space of the temple has been displaced by offices, banks, and shopping malls. He has won numerous corporate mural commissions through which he attempts to engage middle-class Thai office workers with contemporary social and political issues. In accepting a teaching position (and, for several years, a high-level administrative position in international affairs) at Silpakorn University, he has expressed his determination to change the bureaucratized and hierarchical mode of teaching Thai students "art."[14] Less flamboyant and publicity-seeking than Chalerm-

chai, Panya is rather quiet and unassuming, dressing stylishly in Western clothes.[15] At ease speaking English and in dealing with foreign academics and art administrators, he has also become a broker for Thai art in the international arena, acting as consultant, advisor, and key contact (or informant) for those outsiders seeking access to the contemporary art world of Bangkok. While vice president for international affairs at Silpakorn University, he was instrumental in organizing several major projects involving artists representing the European Union and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

Chalermchai and Panya can be seen to represent the centripetal and centrifugal forces in the contemporary art world of Bangkok. Chalermchai is oriented inward to the political and economic elite of Thailand concerned with Thai "traditions" and their expression in contemporary art as a means of amassing cultural capital. Panya frequently turns outward, nurturing relationships with foreign collectors, museum personnel, curators, and academics to represent and facilitate Thai participation in regional and international art scenes. Along with other established and emerging artists in Thailand, both are refashioning the public persona of the Thai artist. They play upon the traditional Thai concepts of painter as artisan *(chaang),* craftsman as teacher, and love of drama to recreate the artist as cultural hero. As such, they have raised the social position of artists, enabling the most successful to stand alongside other members of the Thai elite—the wealthy and politically well connected.

Chalermchai and the "Most Notorious Event"

In December 1994, Chalermchai organized the opening of the Haa Sala Lanna (Five northern artists) art exhibition—an event that was later dubbed the "most notorious event" of the year by one full-page newspaper account (Khetsirin 1994). Along with the demonstrations at Silpakorn University protesting the symbolic desecration of the statue of Silpa Bhirasri, this opening warranted enough public attention to rate mention in Thai-language newspapers and full-page reflective articles on the meaning of art in Thailand in both Bangkok English-language dailies.

Held at Oriental Place, a luxurious shopping plaza adjacent to the Oriental Hotel, the opening was intended to be a gala event for the elite of Bangkok and Chiang Mai society, a celebration of northern Thai (Lanna) identity, and a charity auction for the Northern Women's Development Fund.[16] Chalermchai's own cultural roots are in the neighboring northern province of Chiang Rai. Many of the invited guests wore chic interpretations of northern Thai "ethnic" clothing. Chalermchai, as usual, appeared in a tailored navy blue silk version of northern Thai *mor hom;* his wife Kanokwan and baby boy were also dressed, head to toe, in navy blue.[17]

A spectacular northern Thai lantern parade preceded the exhibition opening, winding its way through the narrow streets of old Bangkok surrounding the shopping plaza. Hundreds of candlelit lanterns, made of handmade *saa* paper and trimmed in gold, punctuated the darkness. Platoons of elaborately costumed marchers held aloft the lanterns and characters from Lanna folktales and legends—fantastic *kinnaree* (half-bird, half-human) and *theweda*—seated on high thrones. Musicians beat gongs, reeds, and drums, filling the Bangkok night with northern Thai rhythms.

Throngs of art lovers crowded the narrow streets to watch the spectacle as local residents—many of them children—peeped over the rusty corrugated fences surrounding the narrow lanes of the neighborhood. According to one woman giving me a running commentary on the event, rain would indicate good luck. Just as the parade arrived back at Oriental Place, a light drizzle began to fall.

Following the parade, invitees climbed the wide, carpeted stairway of the shopping plaza to the art gallery above, to eat from the elaborate buffet set out on the balcony. Many others crowded below at the entrance to await the arrival of Chuan Leek Pai, then prime minister of Thailand, who had agreed to formally open the exhibit. A *theweda* who had been carried aloft by a band of eighteen male "slaves" descended to dance, delighting the crowd. In the words of one observer, "After having an angel come down to earth, what more could you ask?" Women danced with lit candles and men with swords. The exhibition artists lined up for publicity photographs with important patrons and clients. At the entrance to Oriental Place, the drizzle continued and still the prime minister did not arrive. His tardiness was not surprising, since the day before a major political party had deserted his coalition, throwing his government into crisis.

The smooth, scripted surface of this elegant event was broken when a young Chiang Mai artist, Mitr Jai-In, standing next to me on the fringes of the entrance plaza, opened a manila envelope and began to quietly distribute leaflets. One newspaper account described his actions as instigating a "torrent of abuse." He hesitated, but then gave me a leaflet when I told him I could read Thai. As he continued moving through the crowd, a buzz grew. His leaflet attacked Thawan Duchanee, one of Thailand's best-known artists and one of those exhibiting works at this opening, for exploiting charity and for corrupting art, in part because of his involvement in a car dealer's promotional campaign ("Buy a Volvo, get a Thawan"). A brief confrontation ensued between Mitr, Chalermchai, and Thawan himself. Later Thawan was quoted as having said to him, "Why didn't you confront me directly? You're not a real man. If you were, you would talk to me personally in a suitable place. But you want to condemn me in public."[18] A few minutes later, policemen appeared, demanding that Mitr produce identification. With little commotion, they put him into a car and took him to a local police station.

The prime minister eventually arrived much later, long after Mitr had been whisked away by the police. The ceremony proceeded, almost as an anticlimax. Prime Minister Chuan formally inaugurated the exhibition by whacking a long banana stalk in half with a large sword (Chalermchai thought that the more conventional ribbon cutting was "too boring"). After being guided through the show by Chalermchai, the prime minister sat in a special chair next to one of Chalermchai's paintings as dignitaries gave speeches. Of the artists, only Chalermchai spoke, regaling the crowd with jokes in northern Thai dialect. The auction of paintings proceeded to raise over 600,000 baht (about US$24,000).

Exhibition openings are rituals in the Bangkok art world that publicly connect artists, collectors, gallery owners, and art lovers to the institutions of power in Thai society: banks, corporations, the state, and the monarchy.[19] The king himself has legitimized the domain of modern art through his own painting and his unannounced attendance at art exhibitions. Prime

ministers provide a new democratic gloss to these ritualized events, while their participation retains the legitimizing aura of central state power. Many observers of the Thai art world agree (even those that dislike his art) that Chalermchai is a master organizer of such rituals. In this new symbology of power, Chalermchai claims center stage, managing his public self to promote the artist as a "northern Thai" culture hero. This public presentation, echoed in the ethnic dress of many of those present, merged the concepts of painter as *chaang* (artisan of ancient Siam) and painter as *sinlapin* (creative artist of the modern world). The setting amplified these merging identities as a spectacle celebrating selected aspects of Thai folk and court culture, but one located in and around an exclusive shopping plaza. The disruption staged by Mitr reminded many participants, however, that others contest this constellation of the wealthy and powerful that welds art and "Thainess" to commerce.[20]

A few months later, Chalermchai and I went together to visit Khun Sawet, bedridden with his cracked tailbone. I asked Chalermchai about Mitr, the artist who disrupted his opening. "Mitr," he said, "wants to be well-known," implying that Mitr is jealous of Thawan, whom he had attacked in this leaflet. His actions, Chalermchai thought, were "very bad." He said that if Mitr had a problem with Thawan, he ought to have discussed it with him. Chalermchai defended Thawan against Mitr's accusations of selling out to commercial interests, noting Thawan's generous donations to universities and foundations and his efforts to preserve northern Thai architecture. He then attacked the art critics as failed artists, as persons who "fail in their life," and who envy those who succeed.

Ironically, Chalermchai himself attained a reputation for outrageous contentiousness for publicly denouncing the cult of Silpa Bhirasri at Silpakorn University. At one of the annual Silpakorn celebrations of Silpa Bhirasri's birth, held at the Goethe Institute, Chalermchai told the crowd that when he first came to the university he never saw Silpa Bhirasri (who had passed away by then), only his statue. He berated the other artists there for their shallow reverence of Silpa Bhirasri, especially those who never worked with him. "My teacher is Chalood Nimsamer," he recalled telling the crowd. "I respect Silpa Bhirasri because Silpa Bhirasri built up the university. But Silpa Bhirasri was not my teacher." Attacking some of the senior faculty members at Silpakorn for putting on airs, he continued, "Like the younger generation, they make a show of praising him, but then they go get drunk as dogs and bash their heads against the base of the monument until their blood flows *(luad uad)*. They call upon Silpa Bhirasri to give them the 'artist's gift' *(khwaam pen sinlapin)*" (*Hi-Class* 1994, 47).[21]

Because of such public statements, other Thai artists have attacked Chalermchai in the press, and he continues a long adversarial relationship with certain individuals in the art world. When questioned about his public confrontations with the Bangkok art establishment, Chalermchai has insisted, "You must have an ego *(attaa)*. If you do not have an ego you cannot create something more unusual *(plaek)* than what others do." Vincent Van Gogh and Francis Bacon are two he offered as examples, as artists who did not curry favor with the established powers in the art world, either as personalities or in their work (*Hi-Class* 1994, 48). He attributes his "ego" to having been made to feel inferior throughout his life, especially by the wealthy. Chalermchai aggressively challenges those who criticize him for his wealth or accuse

him of being just a businessman, especially when others—art brokers, or collectors seeking to resell artwork—could profit handsomely from his work:

> I do not accept the price that he [an art buyer] sets only for his own benefit. Why do I have to sell to them at a cheap price, and then they sell it so expensively? Why do I have to accept what he gives me, and then he sells it for a high price, but I am still poor? And I am being called the artist? I do not want to suffer. He sells it at a high price, so I have to demand a high price. I am not saying that because my picture is expensive, I am the best. I am not selling my spirit, but my painting. (*Hi-Class* 1994, 49)[22]

In dress, association, and publicity, Chalermchai has positioned himself as a junior member of a small group of Thai painters recognized as contemporary masters: Angkarn Kalayanapongse, Pratuang Emcharoen, and Thawan Duchanee. Like Chalermchai, they dress as *chaang* despite their association with the elite. Although working in disparate styles, these three artists also address Buddhist doctrine in their abstracted renderings of the elemental forces of nature, cycles of life and rebirth, struggle, suffering, and the temptations of material and carnal desire. More important, they work "independently," outside the Silpakorn nexus. Pratuang and Thawan have attained wealth and status. Angkarn has become known for outrageous public behavior. Chalermchai has claimed a position in their lineage, largely by association through exhibitions and his long-term friendship with his Chiang Rai neighbor Thawan. In the catalog of a 1991 art show that he organized to coincide with a World Bank International Monetary Fund (IMF) Conference Chalermchai wrote, "At his age, Chalermchai is the only under-forty [person] who proudly joins the rank of few leading contemporary Thai artists working independently."

Throughout the Wat Buddhapadipa project, Chalermchai assumed the role of public promoter and, in so doing, developed a public persona widely recognized as controversial, colorful, and self-serving. His participation in painting the Wat Buddhapadipa murals and his unrelenting self-promotion as *the* artist who painted the Wimbledon murals became a springboard from which his career and personal wealth have soared, along with the prices of his work.[23] To compare: at the 1984 British Council exhibit of the Wat Buddhapadipa sketches, his drawings were priced in the 6,000–7,000 baht range (about US$250); the one painting available for sale at the Lanna opening ten years later was priced at 500,000 baht (US$20,000). His critics charge that Chalermchai, as much as any contemporary Thai artist, embodies the total commoditization of Thai art, that is, the exploitation of romanticized versions of Thai traditional art for profit and an unabashed materialism based on spiritual imagery.

Despite these criticisms, Chalermchai has become one of the most recognized Thai artists, something of a folk hero/villain with complex and seemingly contradictory characteristics. Like many public persons in Thailand, he draws from a large stock of culturally valued models of Thai masculinity, including the *nakleng* and the monk.[24] *Nakleng* refers to a Thai male who "in whatever he does, does it to excess" and is controlled by his passions (cited in Wijeyewardene 1986, 52). He is "a person who is not afraid to take risks, a person who 'lives dangerously,' kind to his friends but cruel to his enemies, a compassionate person, a gambler, a heavy drinker, and a lady-killer" (Thak, cited in Keyes 1985, 87). Primary features of the *nakleng* also include out-

spokenness and the ability to command the loyalty and support of a group of *luuk naawng* (little brothers) over a period of time.[25] The *nakleng* figure resonates with a love of theatricality, for, as noted by Phillips, Thais know that "irrespective of underlying substance or even truth, a good performance defines one's talent and social character, one's capacity to influence others, and can in the acting out even fulfill one's richest fantasy or noblest image of oneself" (1987a, 143).

Another facet of Chalermchai's complex public image is that of a deeply devout Buddhist. A number of photographs in his two retrospective catalogs document his ordination as a monk in the late 1980s. As many Thai men are ordained as Buddhist monks one or more times during their lifetimes, the status of *nakleng* and monk are not mutually exclusive: a *nakleng* may be or have been a monk at one time or may be ordained as one again, or he may be both simultaneously. The following anecdote indicates Chalermchai's willingness to forego purely material considerations in his actions. In one of our early interviews, he said that when he returned to Bangkok in 1987 he was besieged with requests to paint temple murals. Despite temple abbots offering him money—three million or four million baht—he always turned them down, explaining to me in English his refusal to be manipulated:

> I do not do the Buddhist painting for money. I never [say yes], because if I do mural painting, I have to do it free of charge. Many monks want me to do mural painting because they know if I do the mural painting somewhere, that temple will get well known. But I know that. That is why I do not do it.[26]

One monk at Wat Laksi (a large temple near Don Muang, the Bangkok international airport) knew about Chalermchai from magazines, television, and greeting cards made from his work. With some persuasion by his (Chalermchai's) mother and her friend, who was a patron of Wat Laksi, Chalermchai reluctantly agreed to talk to the monk by phone. He was impressed by the difference between this monk's voice and those of the others who had approached him. In describing this difference, Chalermchai explained, "This monk is not polite. [If they talk] politely, I get very scared because I do not know what is inside. I like to talk with people who are open." The monk convinced him to see the "pagoda" at the temple: "You come and see. If you like it and if you want to do something about art, you can do. . . . I give those four walls for you to do anything that you want . . . and I tell you I haven't got the money."[27] Like Khun Sawet, this monk gave Chalermchai total freedom to paint as he wished. Chalermchai was intrigued by the *chedi*'s eclectic design. To gain inspiration and ideas, he was ordained as a monk at Wat Laksi, where he meditated for days in the *chedi* and produced sketches for its walls. During this period, he left Wat Laksi to travel on a pilgrimage to Doi Tung in Chiang Rai Province, a site containing sacred relics. There he also meditated and stayed overnight in the forest.

According to the text of one of his catalogs, written in the hyperbolic style characteristic of most Thai art catalogs, his time at Wat Buddhapadipa was a time of "soul-searching." Since his return to Bangkok, according to the catalog, he has become "completely liberated. All personal concerns and sufferings evaporated, as his mind was lifted above worldly matters." His artistic goals have simplified into one: "to give his life to art in the service of Buddhism. Fame or acclaim became insignificant" (Amporn 1992, 26). Fulfilling a vow he made to himself upon his

return from London, Chalermchai began to raise money in the late 1990s to sponsor the construction of an *ubosot* at Wat Rawng Kun in Chiang Rai Province—the ultimate merit-making act of a devout Buddhist. The design of the *ubosot* materializes in three dimensions the distinctive and elaborate detailing that most characterizes his work.

Art and Commerce

In his art, whether in small watercolors or large acrylic canvases, Chalermchai has shifted his thematic concerns from temple scenes to symbol-laden representations of meditation experiences. Dominant imagery includes solitary meditating or worshiping figures, winged fish, lotus buds, religious architecture (with northern Thai decorative features), and frothy, undulating waves of water, all executed with elaborate and minute detail.[28] These motifs address themes of spiritual struggle and liberation (the seeking of enlightenment), but his emphasis remains on the individual human. His images are devoid of social referents, with the exception of urban architecture or dense renderings of industrial machinery that symbolize the "material" world from which his figures seek spiritual release.

Chalermchai paints little in the middle space of his canvases (or on the walls at Wat Buddhapadipa), yet he marks a distant horizon with vague mountain or city shapes and lines of bright light, as at dawn, to create a sense of receding and limitless space. His paintings are imaginary landscapes, inner visions rather than perceived realities. However, these visions are happy ones, infused with brightly hued pastel colors and ornamented with highly decorative forms. Landscape formations recall devices of Chinese landscape painting first adopted by Thai temple muralists in the early nineteenth century—overscaled tree-dotted rock formations that drop precipitously to water. However, his formations remain in the foreground as frames for pavilions or meditating figures. Compositions remain simple, straightforward, and static. Landscape elements, cityscapes, or machinery lack visual or intellectual tension, remaining as foils to the imaginary creatures, spiritual beings, and worshiping figures that dominate his compositions.

As distinct from the subdued, darker tones of his earlier tempera works, Chalermchai now works mainly in brightly hued acrylics, using airbrush techniques he first learned at Wat Buddhapadipa. Carefully modulated blues, violets, and purples dominate, as he often seeks to create an ethereal sense of moonlight that bathes his otherworldly landscapes. He renders his figures in the classical flat, two-dimensional mode of mural painting as idealized and symbolic figures, rather than as persons with individual features and bodily volume. His elaboration of the bubbles of breaking waves and the *kranok* in his architectural ornamentation, leaves, and the anatomical detail of his fantastic creatures offers Chalermchai's work as examples of a Thai propensity for "aesthetic involution."[29] The artist dedicates so much attention to decorative detail that it nearly obscures the underlying concept. In describing Chalermchai's work, one collector noted that "the coloring is delicate, the overall effect is delightful, but definitely towards the sugary." He makes different claims in his own catalog, where his work is described as that of a "consummate artist in the Buddhist tradition and style, with certain supernatural or un-

worldly elements depicted" (Amporn 1992, 27). One might consider his paintings more suitable as meditation objects than as representations of meditating subjects.

According to Chatvichai Promadittavedi, an influential curator who fostered the neotraditional art movement in Bangkok, Chalermchai seized upon an opportunity emergent in the late 1970s. At that time, when most Thai painters were working with abstraction, Chalermchai oriented his art to paint in a way that "Thais would understand," rather than in international styles unfamiliar to the larger Thai public. With his own art and that of his coexhibitors in the "Thai Art 80" group, he went (in Chatvichai's words) "[r]ight through the channel of Thai tradition." He credits Chalermchai's success to a combination of his talents at self-promotion (via talk shows, magazine interviews, public lectures, and gatherings), his artistic appeal to an emerging middle class with concerns and anxieties about "Thai identity," and the boom in the stock market, which fueled art buying and inflated prices.

Chalermchai claims a kind of cultural validity for himself and his art within Thailand, rather than competing in the international art world arena for sales, exhibitions, and recognition of artistic merit. While he has exhibited abroad—in Germany, the United States, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka—he does not actively promote himself in international art circles. In the Thai art world, he attacks publicly the art establishment most identified with international styles of art—the "Silpakorn *phuak*" ("group," sometimes called the Silpakorn Mafia by English-speaking observers). At the same time, he privately cultivates relationships with powerful established art collectors and nurtures a new generation of middle-class Thais with new money to spend, many of them financial wizards acutely tuned to issues of "value" and "investment quality." Educated abroad, many in this social group remain socially conservative in a Buddhist sense and sensitive to perceptions of their identity as "Thai," no doubt in part due to their Chinese ancestry. For many, art represents cultural capital, and they have the economic means to attain it.[30] This exchange further opens a cultural space for the dramatic public performances of artists like Chalermchai.

The work of Chalermchai exemplifies the genre of painting that appeals most to this new elite. He and other contemporary Thai artists who have largely rejected Western styles of painting do not replicate mural scenes, but rather make explicit visual references to them, achieving an almost iconic Thainess with direct references to Buddha images, sinuous lines (prominent in Thai sculpture and painting since the Sukhothai era), and a soft, bright, and harmonious palette. According to another young Thai art collector, this art is "easy to digest" for Thais because it is polished and decorative. In the estimation of one Thai art observer (wishing to remain anonymous), such work is "empty of intellectual content" but "appreciated by those who love Thai tradition."[31]

Many collectors—newly wealthy stockbrokers as well as bankers who have long participated in the Thai art world—acknowledge the financial (and thus investment) worth of Chalermchai's art, attained through its wide appeal but relative scarcity. Despite having become so publicly well known, Chalermchai has carefully avoided overproducing his paintings (as some collectors suggested that other artists have). While he does work with an assistant (one

of the young muralists who worked with him in Wimbledon), he cultivates the reputation of his work as desired by the elite of Bangkok and of being difficult to obtain, playing classic market forces of supply and demand. At the Oriental Place exhibition recounted in this chapter, only one of Chalermchai's works on display was for sale, which he had executed especially for the exhibit. It addressed the theme of the charity opening—a young northern Thai girl, soon to face the twin pulls of village and big-city life. The remainder of Chalermchai's paintings on display featured the names of the prominent owners on the exhibit labels, as though to underscore his connections.

This association of artists with the rich and powerful, and the perception of scarcity, provides mutual benefits. Chalermchai's work is now seen as valuable, rare, "one-offs on a special basis to special people" in the words of one collector, referring to exclusive, one-of-a-kind commissions. My visit to the home of a young couple confirmed this perception—one of their prized paintings hung over their bed, commissioned from Chalermchai especially for that space. What the collector particularly noted, however, was how many patrons had since pressured Chalermchai to paint one for them, "just like this." He was pleased that Chalermchai had steadfastly refused. Agreeing that seeking status is a mutually reinforcing process between artist and collector/buyer, one prominent academic in Thai art observed of Chalermchai that it was "good to have this kind of person in high society. But," she continued, "I wonder if he teaches them anything. They [just] like to associate with artists."

Several factors, beyond those involving jealousy *(idchaa)* or intra-elite status seeking, can explain Chalermchai's popularity with Thai collectors but his hostile reception by art critics. First, art collecting in Thailand by Thais themselves is a quite recent phenomenon, beginning in the 1970s but really exploding after the mid-1980s.[32] Many Thais are as yet unfamiliar with and thus lack understanding or appreciation of international genres of art, including conceptual, installation, or performance art, especially when such forms transgress standards of decorum. A 1997 newspaper article on performance art raises these issues in the questions it poses: "Do Thai audiences understand it? Will this deeply Buddhist society be receptive to an artist who strips in public, and carries on in what would normally be considered a scandalous manner? Is anyone outside the art community likely to seriously consider this a meaningful form of creativity?" (Phatarawadee 1997).

Second, many Thais show a cultural preference for maintaining a smooth and/or decorative surface in the material as well as social aspects of daily life—focusing on that which is pleasant and beautiful rather than that which is ugly, disturbing, confusing, provocative, unknown, and possibly violent. One Thai artist, who divides his time between North America and Thailand, surmises that

> [p]erhaps the reason for this lack of popularity is that these art styles are clearly derived from external sources and this may make most Thais feel alienated from them. For many Thais, such forms of art compare unfavorably with the more traditional Thai forms of happening or installation art, such as a funeral ceremony with all of its elaborate ritual and artistic labor used to produce a beautiful *prasat* for the cremation. Most Thais see greater artistic merit in

the burning of the *prasat* than burning a few rags in a contemporary work of happening art. (Wattana 1996, 586–587)[33]

In contrast, there are many Thai contemporary artists and art writers who have been educated or have worked abroad in settings where "art" is valued as an arena for social criticism. They seek to broaden public comprehension of art forms closer to (and critical of) social realities in contemporary Bangkok and Thailand with efforts that counter the involvement of powerful institutions—state agencies, corporations, and banks—that have fostered artistic visions of "Thainess" rooted in Buddhist temples, sculptures, or tranquil village settings. Apinan has characterized Chalermchai's work as providing an "escape route" for supporters of neotraditionalism and for Thais who prefer to live in a "false world." His direct or thinly disguised criticism of Chalermchai and those who produce similar work centers on their construction and romanticization of that false world (1993a; 1996a, 105).

Much of the criticism directed against Chalermchai manifests deeper currents of protest against the perceived commoditization of Thai art and, more generally, the materialism of contemporary Bangkok—the same issues animating the Silpa Bhirasri/*Phujatkan* scandal. Angkarn Kalayanapongse, proclaimed a national artist for his poetry (rather than his paintings and drawings), has been outspoken on these trends. Indeed, he publicly criticized the *Four Rattanakosin Artists* exhibit, of which he was one, for its crass commercialism timed to coincide with a World Bank/IMF conference. Angkarn called Thai artists "prostitutes who[se] flesh trembles with joy when they see the arrival of foreigners and tourists at Pattaya Beach," and said the show should have been entitled *Four Chuchoks,* after the character in the *Phra Wesandorn* Jataka, an oft-cited Thai symbol of greed.[34] Chalermchai publicly and vociferously challenges this comparison, as in this magazine interview:

I am saying that this picture of mine is not about money, but is work that is created from the feelings of my heart and mind. Therefore people praise my work as worthy and see me walking for many days [referring to his ascetic practices while a monk in the north]. If you are going to buy it, you have to bring money—4,500 [baht]—but if you do not have 4,500 I will give you this painting for free. (*Bukkhon wan nii* 1987, 66)[35]

Others, especially artists and even some of these same critics, begrudgingly admire Chalermchai for having made the Thai art world work for him without having to teach at Silpakorn and in having successfully nurtured collectors and politicians. In part, these criticisms also reflect prior social positioning of painters. Boonkhwang, another Wat Buddhapadipa muralist, recounted to me an evening in Wimbledon drinking beer with Chalermchai at the temple:

He told me about when he was a young artist and he had nothing, no money. He was brave about talking; he talked to people in high society. He would ask, "Would you like to see my painting? Go to my studio?" [And he had] an empty pocket. After being in high society, he would take a bus back to his house. Now he has a Mercedes.

I think it is all right. It is natural. Like if you have a business. First, you earn a little bit of

money. Your business becomes successful. And after, you buy a car and a house. That is very natural. But Thai people are thinking about artists like they are monks . . . or like people with no education. So Chalermchai, for this reason, has a big problem. The magazines complain about him, other artists complain about him.[36]

One of Panya's assistants at Wat Buddhapadipa set Chalermchai's flamboyant self-presentation—his "acting"—in the context of artists in general: "Everyone talks about him as a man who sets himself up as a superstar . . . against other people. But I understand. I think he believes that artists have to act. If you are an artist in Thailand and you are not acting, people do not believe you. That is true. Acting, not like in a drama, but in how you present your work, the artist's attitude. [Acting makes] people interested in your work."

Panya: Teaching at Wat Suwannaram

Panya has sought and achieved success and social status in arenas different from those of Chalermchai. Much less of a public figure than Chalermchai, Panya's work—mural commissions, teaching, and a role in brokering public art— figures more prominently in this process than his personality. His philosophy of making and living art inform his teaching, as I witnessed one day in November 1994 on a visit to Wat Suwannaram. Panya had offered me an opportunity of accompanying him and six of the Silpakorn third-year students to that famous temple, one of their many field trips to temples, museums, and monuments.

We left Silpakorn in one of the university vans. I sat in the second row with a student with whom I had become friendly (unlike on earlier outings, when I had been placed in the front row with the driver, in recognition of my status in terms of age or as a *farang* researcher). Wat Suwannaram is located in Thonburi, just across the Phra Pinklao Bridge from Bangkok, about a fifteen-minute trip from Silpakorn. When we arrived, Panya went to find the *luuk sit wat* (literally, student of the temple, temple caretaker) to unlock the *bot*. After we entered the darkened *bot,* some of the students opened windows to let in light, and all knelt to pay respect to the Buddha. We then arrayed ourselves around the red-carpeted altar platform where Panya began his lecture.

Many Thais had described to me the ideals of temple space: to create an atmosphere of harmony, peace, and release from the tensions and frenetic activity of the world outside. In the *bot* at Wat Suwannaram, one of many constructed during the reign of Rama III, those ideals had been attained. The wooden ceiling, decorated in red and gold, harmonizes with the walls covered in murals of muted and dark-toned greens, blues, reds, and gold.[37] The presiding Buddha image—imposing and gold—completely dominates the space. Proportions between the space and the objects contained within it balance gracefully. At this temple I, too, would behave as many had told me templegoers should behave. All the divine beings painted in registers above the windows look toward the Buddha image; they drew my eyes in that direction. The altar was laden with offerings of fresh flowers, candles, and lotus-bud-shaped arrangements of dried

flowers, all set upon elaborately carved small platforms. This ordered profusion of devotional offerings clearly set forth the purposes of this space.

Along the back wall, a long cabinet stood against, but did not touch, the murals behind it. Glasses and cups, tea canisters, nondairy creamer, boxes of matches, and dishwashing soap sat in a neat line. The simple arrangement rendered this *bot* as a lived-in space, one in which Buddhist worshipers perform quotidian activities. Wat Suwannaram is neither an art gallery nor a tourist space, although it accepts persons engaged in those activities; it is a religious space.

I went outside to photograph the *ubosot*. The carved main door of the *bot* looked to me just like a door painted in the murals within. In a tiny note of spatial collapse, the murals inside reproduced the outside. Beyond architectural elements, the temporal dimensions of inside and outside did not match, of course: the activities, dress, and manners of everyday Thai life have changed from the mid-eighteenth century. But this morning at Wat Suwannaram, with the windows open to a slight breeze and Thai music wafting in from the school next door, the unity of the past and present seemed briefly restored. These sensations were maintained by our visiting when the *bot* is not in use; often such temple buildings are busy places, filled with the comings and going of worshipers and tourists, noisy with the wooden clicking of fortune-telling sticks, the snapping of camera shutters, and the chattering of young children.[38]

Panya escorted me to Khru Khongpae's rendition of the *Mahosot* Jataka, his favorite scene. There we discussed the restoration of these murals. In accordance with then current Fine Arts Department dicta on restoration, the later interpolations are made evident and, unlike at Wat Phra Keow, were more skillfully accomplished. In these murals at Wat Suwannaram, heavier lines reestablish architectural elements in the murals, but the original delicate, expressive brushwork of the figures is left untouched, even where incomplete.[39]

We also discussed Panya's appropriation of both overall compositions and individual figures, which appear and reappear, at Wat Buddhapadipa in the *Defeat of Mara* scene, in his easel paintings, and in the illustrations he was producing for the king's book. As we walk along the base of the walls, our conversation wandered, as it usually did, from issues of Thai art to Buddhist doctrine, to ghost stories, to the problems of making a living as an artist, and to problems of the art world, specifically competition between Chulalongkorn and Silpakorn Universities, the paucity of major exhibition spaces, and gate-keeping through contests. At the back wall, behind the presiding image, he told me about the Tavatimsa heaven, where the Buddha preaches to his mother. After the sermon, the Lord Buddha descends a ladder from this heaven and opens the three worlds so all the beings can see each other. "This is the reality of life," Panya explains to me. "When we do bad we go to hell; when we do good we can go to heaven. On earth, people create their own place." I observe that here, on these walls, hell is actually a very small place.

As was usual on such field trips, we spent two or three hours in the *ubosot*. The students had been assigned to produce sketches, which would be both graded as an assignment and serve as the basis for later work. Some students sat, diligently copying scenes from the walls. Others wandered, gazing intensely at the murals. Still others chatted or slept. After our conversa-

tion in English, Panya called the students together to discuss the goals of this visit, in Thai. His "lesson plan" dictated that the students were to create a work based on Wat Suwannaram, but he told them it was not necessary to stick to the plan. He encouraged them to look at the architecture, to search for data or anything of interest that would help them create work of their own.

Panya first asked "Viravan" and then "Chana," two of the students, if they liked what they have done in their recent work. Viravan replied that he did not like his last piece. It was not what he intended, perhaps because of the media he used. Panya urged them to be clear about their own intentions, not to just use images, or media, or techniques because they like them. Referring to a piece Chana had painted, which mixed realistic portraiture with idealized figures, Panya commented, "I think it looked harmonious . . . but the idea is still not clear. . . . It was like you just put yourself inside the painting with no particular purpose." He continued,

> It is quite difficult to give advice, other than letting you do it by yourself and then seeing your idea. . . . I do not know how to start [to paint] from knowing nothing. So you try to look for what you are interested in at this temple. If you do not want to do this research you do not have to, but you should know what you really want to do. If you still do not know, well, go back and do the research. At least, you can base [your painting] on the traditional story and create your own story from it. You may paint in the traditional style but you create your own story.[40]

A bit later, Panya explained to me that the reason he has difficulties in teaching these students is that they come to class without any ideas. They do not want to copy from mural paintings, but they do not have any new ideas of their own. He thinks the problem for Thai students relates to fundamental contradictions in the Thai art pedagogy deriving from social pressures to follow the "senior" person all the time. "We have to wait and follow," he complained, "wait for someone to tell us what to do." I then asked him how it was that he himself had had such strong ideas of his own. He replied, "I studied on my own, I learned by myself." Stressing his own inclinations toward a conceptual, rather than perceptual, approach to art, he believes that art students in Thailand are taught to "learn art by the eyes." "They look at the formal style."[41]

Following his lecture, the students sat, sketched, and painted. Panya himself returned to Khru Khongpae's wall to sketch. He drew a chair and then colored it with watercolors. After a while he gathered the students together again to continue his lecture on the difference between the conceptual (Thai) and the perceptual (Western) approaches. He told them, "Thai traditional art is the reality that derives from the 'sense' that arises in the mind, the 'sense' in inner feelings."[42] He gave the example of Western conventions of vanishing, single-point perspective:

> The truth that arises from "sense" in inner feelings is the thing that we see in two dimensions. It is common to believe that poles are all of equal size, no matter if near or far. Your feeling is that they must be equal because they are poles of only one size. . . . [W]e do not have the same feelings as Westerners. People of the West believe what their eyes tell them. But we also see feelings, which are inside, and which come out [in our work]. If we look at

our inner feelings, we see two or three dimensions. We can create three-dimensional work. That is my idea.

Panya then showed the students his sketch of the chair. He asked them to imagine a chair they could not sit on, because of the sloping seat, exactly as he had drawn it. But he pointed out that if they saw this same chair in a painting, although it is two-dimensional *as a drawing on a wall,* they would probably see it as a three-dimensional chair.[43] To illustrate this, Panya explained his idea of turning his two-dimensional drawing into a chair sculpture. However, he envisioned his sculpted chair as an object that reproduces the lines of the chair as drawn in two dimensions, with a seat at a skewed angle and back legs shorter than the front ones. This, he claimed, would represent the conceptualizations of *Thai* art. "You may ask how is it Thai art?" He answered his own rhetorical question: "It may not be Thai in subject but the system of thought or the inspiration or the idea that drove me to work is Thai."

Then he reminded them of a previous field trip, when they observed that particular views of landscapes sometimes lack spatial depth and appear as two-dimensional:

> Like when we went to Khao Wang last week. Maybe you did not notice, but if we stand at the point where you see Wat Phra Keo Noi . . . it has the characteristics of a building in two dimensions. It is not the vision of the architect or the style of Westerners. From that direction, [the architectural forms of] the temple looked all crowded together . . . like what you see in the mural paintings where you [as the artist] arrange it. This is a composition from inner feeling, not from your eyes . . . it looks like the overlapping dimensions of mural paintings. If you can see it, "Chana," you might take this idea to create your new work. You do not have to do the same story. I think that to the extent you look at the form you get ideas. You may not know the story but you see the form and you get an idea for your own work, that is enough.[44]

The "Life of the Artist"

Panya's demands that his students paint from their own ideas derive from his commitment to "the life of the artist," which he learned from working with Paiboon Suwannakudt, or Tan Kudt.[45] While perhaps a romanticized ideal, it holds some force within the minds of those who seek it. Tan Kudt's model of the life of the artist entails a commitment to making art, as opposed to viewing art as a commodity that can earn money or fame. It means the discipline of continually honing skills and working long hours on projects at hand. Panya resisted this discipline in his early art education. He has said, "At Poh Chang, they tried to make you draw a nice neat line but I didn't like the discipline and control required. Then when I worked with Kru [*sic*] Paiboon he taught me about the artist's life. Through his example I came to appreciate the necessity of line and discipline" (Hoskins 1984, 165). Tan Kudt's example taught Panya that life itself is the inspiration for art and that art practice requires seeking to understand and appreciate the art of others—old and new—by constantly reading about art, looking at art,

and discussing art. In Panya's interpretation, artistic ideas must flow from "real experience, from life. And the artists must have inspiration from the life outside the studio." Thus students learn by doing, by working on murals or collective projects that will be viewed in public. "The work is not just work for the [art] class. The work is work for the public, for society. This is the real life of being an artist," Panya once told me. Initially hesitant to accept a position at Silpakorn because of its "teaching system," Panya has decided to work there in an attempt to move students from studio work to apprenticeship-like experiences. As Panya himself learned from his work with Tan Kudt at Muang Boran, so he taught the young artists at Wat Buddhapadipa and has continued to teach other students with other mural commissions and public art projects. When he returned to Bangkok in 1987, Panya was invited to produce the exterior murals for the Thai Pavilion at World Expo '88 in Brisbane, Australia, and again at World Expo '92 in Seville, Spain. The first of his Bangkok corporate commissions were murals at the large and prestigious McDonald's at the World Trade Center in 1992. He has also painted murals for the corporate offices of the Rolex Corporation. He has continued to produce a small number of easel paintings and mixed-media constructions, largely for exhibition (he exhibits annually with the White Group), but he has focused mostly on murals and other public art projects—such as the Bangkok Art Project in 1999.[46]

While I was in Bangkok in 1995, Panya undertook a major mural commission at the Siam Commercial Bank's headquarters, a futuristic turquoise and gold complex in the suburbs of Bangkok designed by the American architect Robert Boughey. This project paralleled the painting of the Wat Buddhapadipa murals as a collective process. Panya's assistants, many of whom had families, initially spent their days together at his studio. Those who were single lived there during the project. To visit his studio at that time was to drop in on art as daily life, not art lived as an activity separated from other aspects of one's existence by boundaries of space or time. While some artists sketched, others ate, slept, watched television, and pored over art books. Although they did not sleep on site, the atmosphere at the bank itself, when they finally began painting after long delays due to air-conditioning and dust problems, was similar to that described to me at Wat Buddhapadipa. When I visited day or night, artists arranged themselves at various spots along the walls, on different levels of scaffolding. Each worked intently on his or her section of the larger scenes, with minimal interaction between artists. Music played. Enormous bags of fruit, carafes of coffee, and bottles of water littered a large table. On breaks, they ate, laughed, joked, and teased each other.

The Siam Commercial Bank murals are painted onto a ten-meter by seventy-meter curved wall in the lobby of the main building. In conception, they depict an innovative cosmology of the Thai universe. Panya retains the concept of three worlds, frequently rendered in Thai temples as the *Traiphum*. Here, however, Panya shifts the idea of "worlds" from moral location relating to karma to conceptual worlds that embrace history, science, and technology as well as Buddhist philosophy. Titled *Anujakrawan* (Universe), the mural's three worlds include one of human activity on the left, a spiritual world represented as the Daowading heaven (where the Buddha preached to his mother) in the center, and the natural world rendered as the Himaphan Forest on the right. The first, or human, world contrasts the "past" era of Thailand's emerging

modernity with the "present" time of the mural painting. Thailand in the early modern era of King Mongkut (Rama IV) in the first quarter of the nineteenth century includes the first Siam Commercial Bank headquarters and clipper ships representing Thailand's integration into a global trading system. Painted keno cards (which Panya discovered in Las Vegas and often uses in his collages) symbolize the materialism of the contemporary era. The murals also refer to events of the time of their painting: the French government's seizure of the Greenpeace ship *Rainbow Warrior,* the tragic collapse of a pier on the Chao Phraya River due to crowds seeking to avoid Bangkok traffic, and a controversial satellite purchase by the Thai government. Astronomical motifs of eclipses and telescopes connect past to present, a recurrent strategy of Thai murals. The beginning of Thai modernity under King Mongkut, symbolized by motifs of astronomy, the king's personal hobby, echo in the moment of painting the murals themselves during the 1995 solar eclipse. The maximum visibility of this eclipse occurred in southern Thailand in October, just as the muralists completed their work—which amplified these auspicious connections between past and present.[47]

Painting and Place

One of Panya's deepest concerns, perhaps tempered by his deeply held beliefs in the nature of the world, both social and natural, is with this sense of place. He articulates the theme of place in its double sense of physical location and the Buddhist notion of spiritual condition. One afternoon at his studio, he told me he was attracted to the work of William Blake and John Martin, British artists with whom he became familiar in London, because they

> have a greater vision and sensitivity to our place in the world than the average person. In the same way, I believe that Buddhism has a scientific law to it. The world is so small compared to the universe. I do not have to worry about the troubles in the world today because Buddhism gives me strength to overcome these problems.

In answering criticisms of his acceptance of these governmental and corporate commissions, Panya argues that such commissions offer him the opportunity to accomplish two of his artistic goals: first, to teach students Thai art in the methods he learned from Tan Kudt—that is, to teach art through the doing of art, rather than in the artificial setting of the classroom or studio. Second, they further his commitment to public art, his way of maintaining the connection between art and people that in earlier times was concentrated in the temple, the primary social space of Thai daily life.[48] In the current time, Panya notes that monks do not learn about "art and culture" (the conservation and restoration work of the Fine Arts Department notwithstanding), thus they do not recognize the necessity of preserving murals in their temples. Nor do people go to the temples as often. Speaking of contemporary Bangkok, Panya believes that "this culture should be in the new place. This is where people spend time." Acknowledging the weak infrastructure of the Thai art world, he noted that "[i]n Bangkok there are no museums, and people have no time, so we have to bring art to them."[49] He argues also that peoples' understanding of art must be broadened, as their primary context for encountering art—the tem-

ple—has changed and as the styles, subjects, and social meanings of art have proliferated. He resists a critique of corporate commissions per se, emphasizing that art challenges its audience, no matter where encountered. He told me in an interview that

> now, today, people have to learn art and culture at their own offices. Art must be a part of office life, so that people stay living in art. . . . There are big gaps between art in the present day and the people. Not like in the past, when art was for religion, for society, and for the king. There is more freedom now. Some art wants to shock people. Art in the present day is always a question. In the past, art was always an answer.

Panya works from the same internal place, whether he is painting his "personal" work (as he calls it), temple murals, corporate murals, or illustrations for the king's book. In general terms, the distinctions that he makes between his personal work and commissions rest on a freedom to choose themes and media and to experiment stylistically. He acknowledges that his relationship with a patron and the intended audience for his work affects his choice of subjects and the collective art process, as it did at Wat Buddhapadipa. However, he always approaches his work with the belief that art is not (nor should be) mere entertainment, something to "give happiness." Rather, it is something that makes us truly human. "Art has worth and meaning, more than money," Panya told me. "Art might mean something profound—as much so as religion. Art is capable of touching the spirit of the mind." For Panya, art serves a different purpose than religion. Art now is not Buddhism in the sense of teaching doctrine. As he explained to me one afternoon in his studio, "Art is not the enlightenment, as Buddhism is, you see, because we are still searching all the time. We can find the answer and at the same time still ask questions in [our] art. If we can get to the answer, then we never ask any questions." He compares this process of humans seeking to overcome temptations, hostile aggressions, and material obsessions to the struggle of Buddha with Mara: "where everyone has this feeling in their life . . . that there are so many problems. We have to stand firm, we have to attack the troubles or the problems in our lives."

What I believe is at issue for Panya is art that a broad Thai public finds accessible and meaningful, but that generates social and personal reflection. "I would like to educate the people, but not in Buddhist cosmology or stories. I would like to educate them to understand their society." As a teacher and an artist, he believes his obligations lie beyond providing easy visual pleasures, as he explains in one magazine interview:

> Artists in Thailand just try to do something like art. They must be more serious. Most Thai artists think it is sufficient to be good in Thailand; that's not enough. We are international. I know I'm not as good as other artists outside; I have to try harder. The artist has to lead society, be *beyond* it, not working within it. (Hoskins 1992, 20)

To attain this accessibility, Panya continues to use many of the iconographic and stylistic conventions of Thai mural painting. Recalling his own spiritual master, Khru Khongpae, he paints Buddha figures and foreign soldiers with a controlled, sinuous, and delicate line, in stylized gestures and postures. Panya peoples his mural scenes with familiar deities, *theweda,*

demons, and villagers and with symbolic imagery deriving from Buddhist doctrine. He has also experimented with both collage and multimedia techniques. In the early 1990s, he worked with keno cards (sent by a friend from Las Vegas) to represent a rampant materialism that threatens the fundaments of Thai society. When pressed to specify this materialism, he mentions a middle-class quest to acquire status symbols (be they rare amulets or Rolex watches), the depletion of natural resources, pollution, aggressive and dangerous driving (the "attack" society, in his words), and shopping malls that replace temples.

Whether he works with bronze crabs (symbolizing the spiritual connection between people and the water), Las Vegas gambling cards, familiar mural figures, or the large Buddha heads of more recent paintings, Panya asserts a Thai Buddhist interpretation of the modern world. In his easel painting, and unlike Chalermchai, Panya does not offer visual "answers" to the problems of modern individuals through meditation, merit-making, or other forms of Buddhist practice. Rather, he invites viewer reflection on the political and social conditions of reality.[50] He often speaks of this reality as a "crisis of civilization" (as he has titled several paintings), especially in Thailand, which has so eagerly sought to prosper materially, often at the expense of the environment and a "rural way of living where one cares for another." Panya focused this theme more closely on the economic crisis of 1997, which began in Thailand, in his painting *Economic Crisis in Land of Dhamma,* shown in the Forty-fourth National Exhibition of Art in 1998.

His visual references to the imagery of Thai temple murals do not invoke nostalgia, the yearning for an idyllic past that the forces of modernity have destroyed. Nor does he offer the pretty or the merely decorative. Panya's mural figures—often direct references to those at Wat Suwannaram—compete with abstract imagery, much reminiscent of advanced technologies. The contrast and the engagement are full of tensions, clashes, and dissonance. Through the 1980s and 1990s his work depicted explicit confrontations (as in *Crisis of Civilization II,* reproduced in Phillips 1992, 119) and the more generalized confusion and conflict emerging from a profusion of energetic, sharp-edged forms, sweeping compositions, and intense palette. His work does not confront Thai society (and his largely Thai viewers) with imagery deliberately shocking or transgressive of Thai values, as do other contemporary artists (see, for example, those represented in the *Traditions/Tensions* exhibit, Asia Society 1996). Rather, Panya extends and exploits the visual possibilities of the mural genre familiar to a broad Thai public. By combining such imagery with some of the ideas underpinning modern art movements, he seeks to engage his Thai audience on new grounds, to challenge them to reflect upon their world from their own experiences.

While remaining in Bangkok and working for a Thai audience (as does Chalermchai), Panya has followed a very different road artistically. Less phobic toward Western art than Chalermchai, he freely explores new ideas and techniques. He struggles to continue the project they began at Wat Buddhapadipa: to revive Thai mural painting with a modern spirit, to make it relevant to the time and to a new, literate (but still Buddhist) audience. His insistence in his teaching on an "idea" and "concept" recalls the intellectual interventions of conceptualism, the American art movement popular in the 1960s and 1970s. At the same time, Thai artists learn and teach that it is the "concept" that distinguishes Thai mural (here read "traditional") painting

from Western art, which Thai art students are taught is perceptual in genesis. That is, the visual attributes of Thai modes of representation—two-dimensional space, for example—arise in the painter's mind, rather than through strictly visual observation. This particular construction of difference between Thai and Western art is one of "modern" artwriting itself, of art theory learned and repeated by these artists in their schooling at Poh Chang and Silpakorn University. In this specific sense, Panya's interpretation of the traditional two-dimensionality of Thai mural painting is itself modern, a product of writing about art. His aims in emphasizing concept are also modern: to encourage his students to engage in serious reflection, to develop artistic ideas that buttress their work, and to overcome what he sees as a Thai propensity for copying, imitation, and sterile repetition, and an obsession with style over content.[51] He himself "copies" from Thai murals as a means of explicitly contrasting "the past" or "Thai values" with "modernity" in the execution of his own concepts.

Panya has continued the traditional mode of Thai art practice, that of apprenticeship and collective projects. In contrast, Chalermchai, after one unfinished effort at temple mural painting at Wat Laksi, has turned almost exclusively to easel paintings. Yet his sponsorship of the construction of an *ubosot* fulfills the utmost act of merit-making. In its applied architectural detail, this *ubosot* extends and concretizes his decorative aesthetic into a third dimension.

Panya and Chalermchai offer endless possibilities for symbolic contrast, especially in the context of their strong early friendship, their prominent place in the Thai art world, and the prominence of this mural project at Wat Buddhapadipa. The myriad ways in which those who know them cast them as binary opposites suggest that these two artists easily transform into idealized types on which the speaker can set his or her own ideas of difference, importance, and social value. These oppositions illuminate much contemporary discourse in Thailand regarding change, modernity, and Thai identity generally and Thai art specifically. One informant cast Chalermchai as the "businessman," referring to Chalermchai's oft-discussed efforts to sell his work at high prices and to become as collectible as his seniors and role models, Pratuang Emcharoen and Thawan Duchanee. The same informant characterized Panya as "the artist," less concerned with sales of his own work than with education and collective art practice. Implicit here are perspectives that separate art as commodity from art as art and that question, often in moral terms, the relationship between the artist, art, and society. These perspectives resonate with public discussions of materialism versus spiritualism, prominent during my year in Bangkok as the economy boomed, shopping malls sprouted up with dizzying speed, and charismatic monks embroiled themselves in major scandals of sexuality and commercialism.

In their representations of themselves and this project, Chalermchai and Panya draw upon familiar Thai cultural models *(nakleng, khru, phra)*. They act in culturally recognizable forums for theatricality and summon up categories (of *bun,* or merit, the past, the modern, spirituality, the *sangha,* the village, nature, the West), which are actively discussed in Bangkok today. In so doing they give these categories new meaning in the ongoing debates of cultural relevancy. In a changing social hierarchy, they claim a new position (one not yet fully established) for the artist and for their art that enhances its marketability (in direct terms of sales for Chalermchai and in indirect terms of attaining commissions for Panya). They elevate to the status of mod-

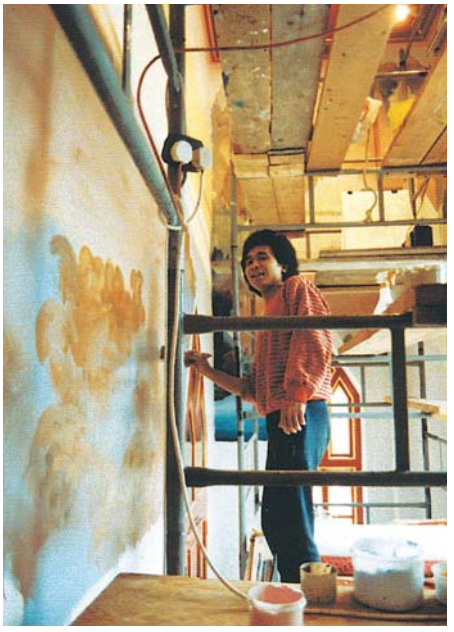
ern art previously undervalued categories of artistic production—temple murals—but without detaching them totally from the contexts of religious devotion in which these categories historically attained their greatest value. Making merit is an activity that many, if not most, Thais value, a signifying practice by which individual achievements attain prominence within the Thai social collective. As with other conceptual pairings discussed here, "art" and "religion" weigh heavily in the contemporary possibilities for Thai identity.

1. The *ubosot* at Wat Buddhapadipa, Wimbledon, England. Photo by author.

2. *Traiphum* (Chalermchai). Photo by Andy Whale.

Above: 3. Detail, *Traiphum:* Buddha on lotus leaf, Brahmas in the Brahma heavens, *loka phumi* (Chalermchai). Photo by Andy Whale.

Left: 4. L-r: Chalermchai Kositpipat, Sawet Piamphongsant, Sobha Piamphongsant, Panya Vijinthanasarn. Photo courtesy Kittisak Nuallak.



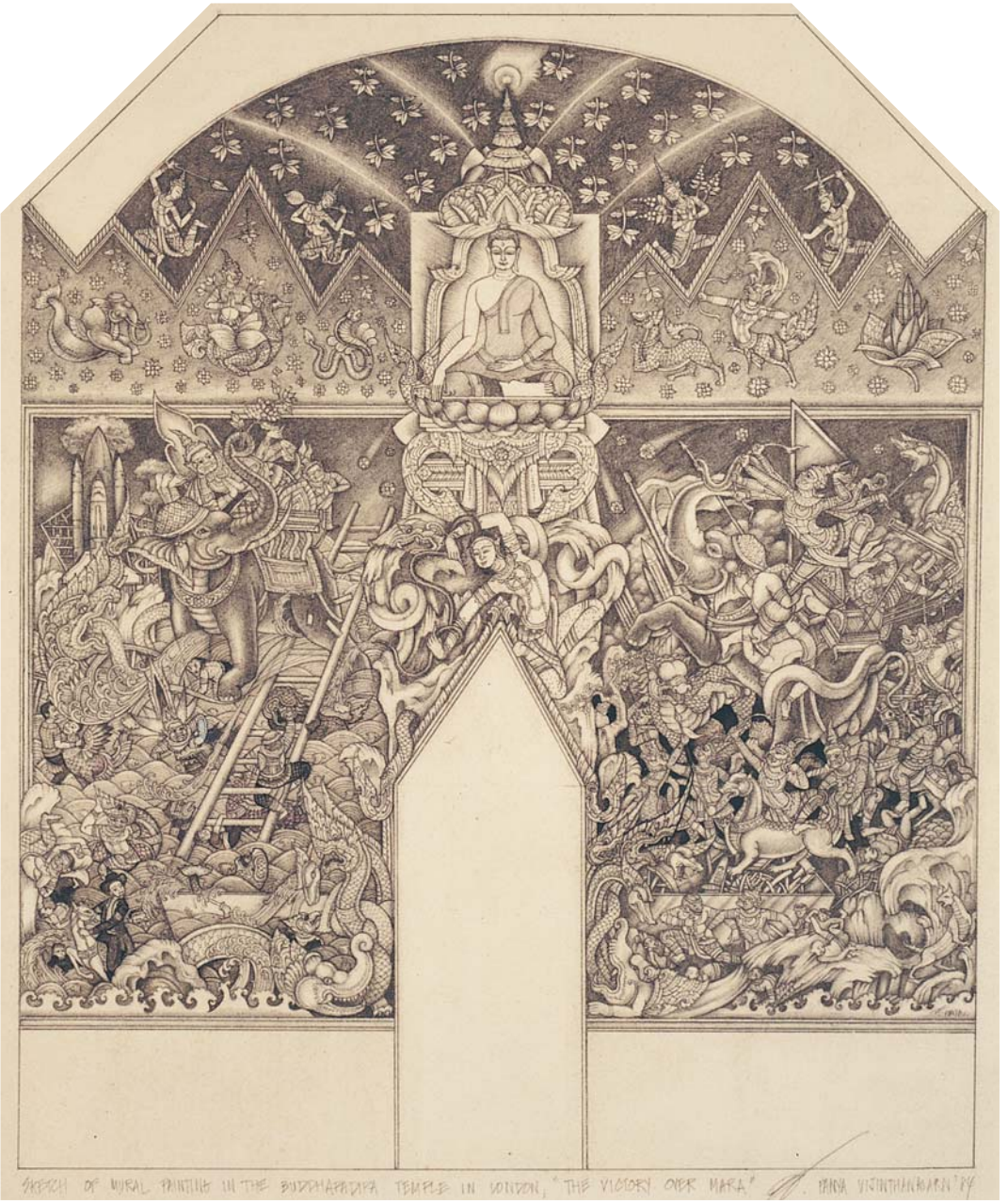
Above: 5. Muralists, Wat Buddhapadipa, 1987. Front row (l-r): Alongkorn Lauwattana, Nopadol Itthipongsakul, Chalermchai Kositpipat, Panya Vijinthanasarn, Sanan Sinchalaem, Thongchai Srisukprasert. Middle row (l-r): Teerawat Kanama, Sukanya Budtarad, Kanokwan Nakaapi, Niramon Ruangsom, Prasat Chandrasupa. Top row (l-r): Boonkwang Noncharoen, Apichai Piromrak, Suraphol Chinarat, Kittisak Nuallak, Paisan Paovises, Sompop Budtarad, Sittichoke Kornnark. Photo by Andy Whale.

Left: 6. Sompop Budtarad painting in wing room, Wat Buddhapadipa. Photo courtesy Kittisak Nuallak.

7. *Kathin* ceremony, 1995, Wat Buddhapadipa. Photo by author.

8. Aerial view, *ubosot* at Wat Buddhapadipa. Photo courtesy Wat Buddhapadipa.

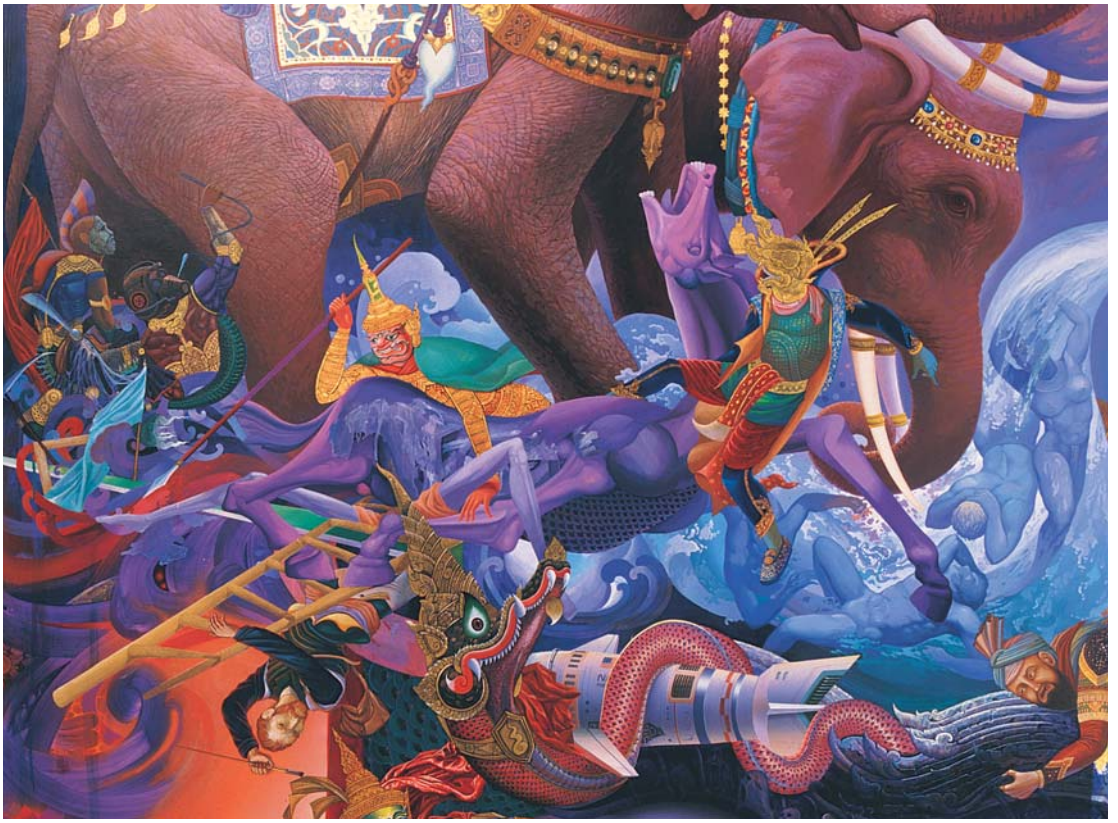
9. Panya's sketch for *The Defeat of Mara* and *The Enlightenment*. Photo courtesy John Hoskins.



10. *The Defeat of Mara* and *The Enlightenment* (Panya). Photo by Andy Whale.

11. Detail, *The Defeat of Mara:* Nang Thorani (Panya). Photo by Andy Whale.

12. Detail, *The Defeat of Mara: farang* soldier, Japanese samurai, *Jaws* shark (Panya). Photo by Robert Gumpert.

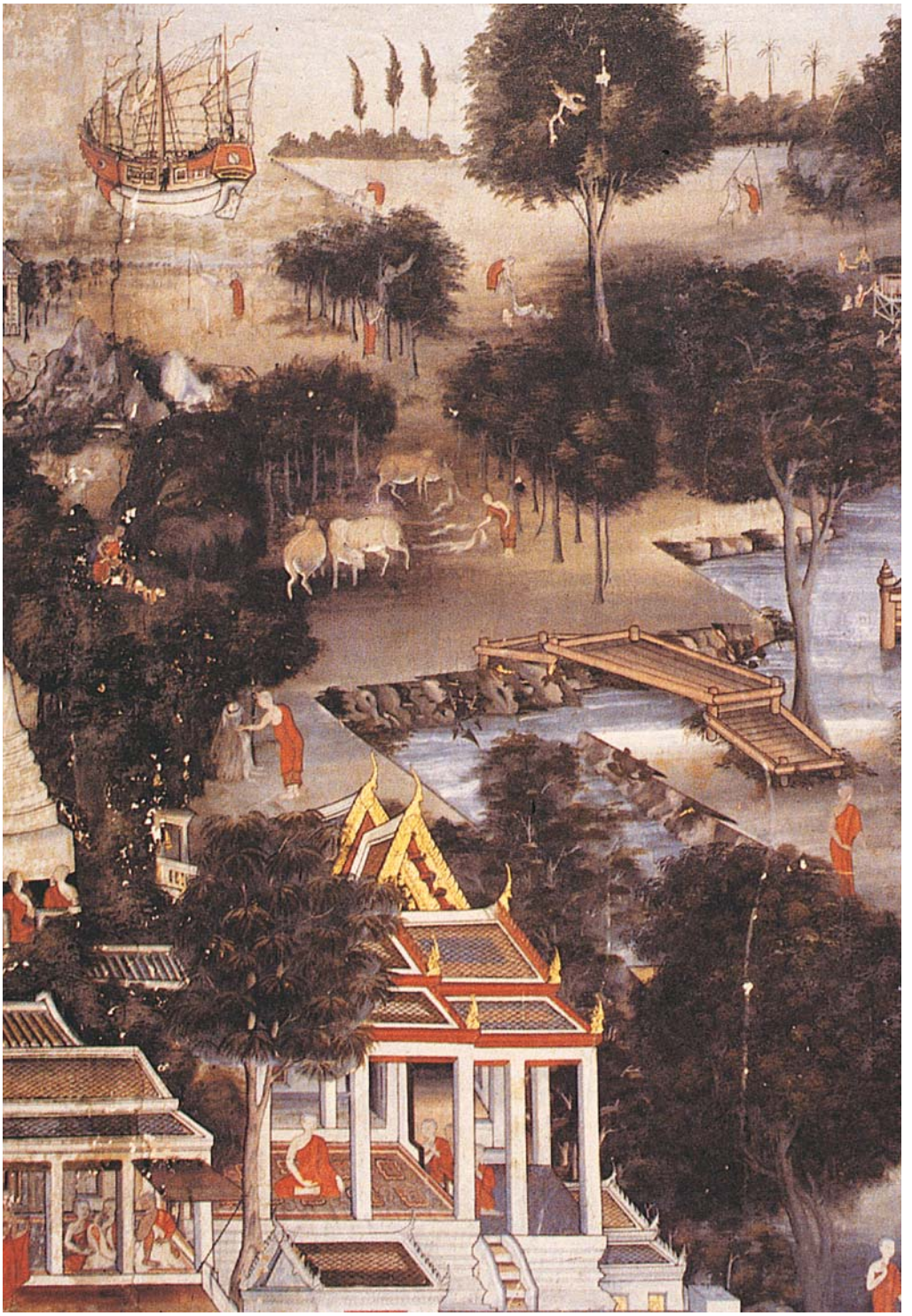


13. Detail, *The Defeat of Mara:* Vincent Van Gogh (lower left), NASA space shuttle (bottom right), *Guernica* horse (center) (Panya). Photo by Andy Whale.

14. Detail, *The Defeat of Mara:* Mona Lisa (Panya). Photo by Robert Gumpert.

Above: 15. *The Annual Festival at Phra Phutthabat, Saraburi,* Wat Mahasamanaram, Petchaburi, mid-nineteenth century (Phra Ajarn Rit, student of Khrua In Khong). Photo courtesy Muang Boran.

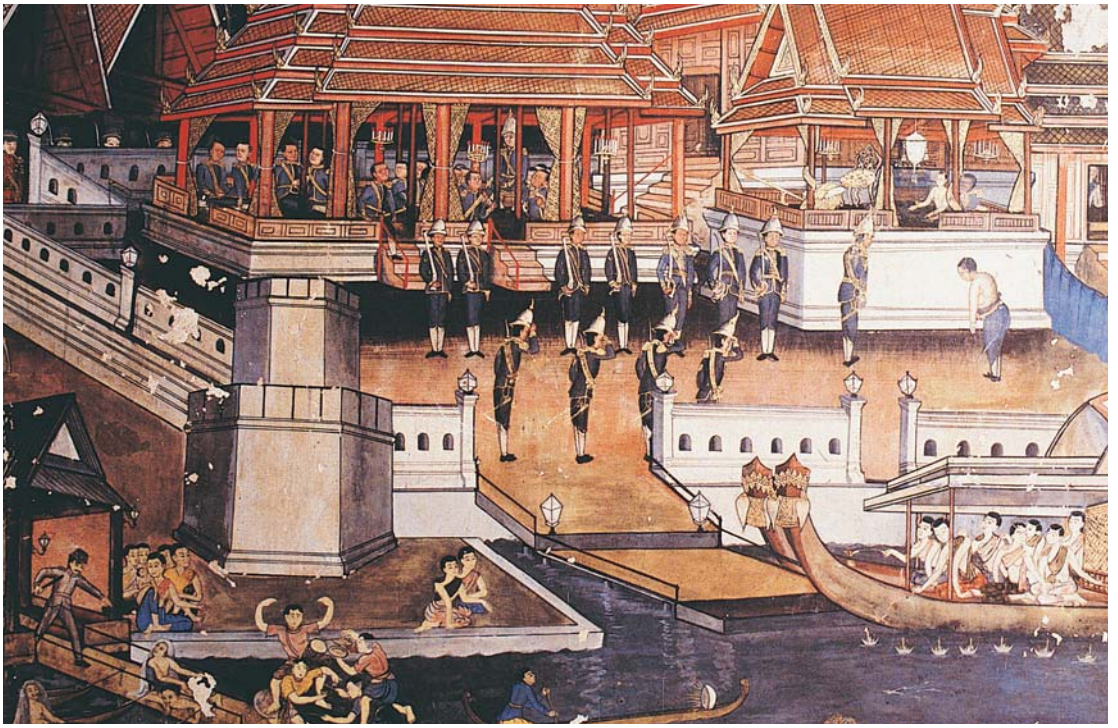
Right: 16. *Celestial Assembly,* Wat Suwannaram, Thonburi, c.1830. Photo by author.



17. *Dhuthong No. 1,* Wat Maha Phrut-taram, Bangkok, mid-nineteenth century. Photo courtesy Muang Boran.

Right: 18. *Six Reunited* (*Phra Wesandorn* Jataka), Wat Suwannaram, Thonburi, c.1830. Photo courtesy Muang Boran.

Below: 19. *The Defeat of Mara* and *The Enlightenment*. Wat Dusidaram, Thonburi, late eighteenth century. Photo courtesy Muang Boran.

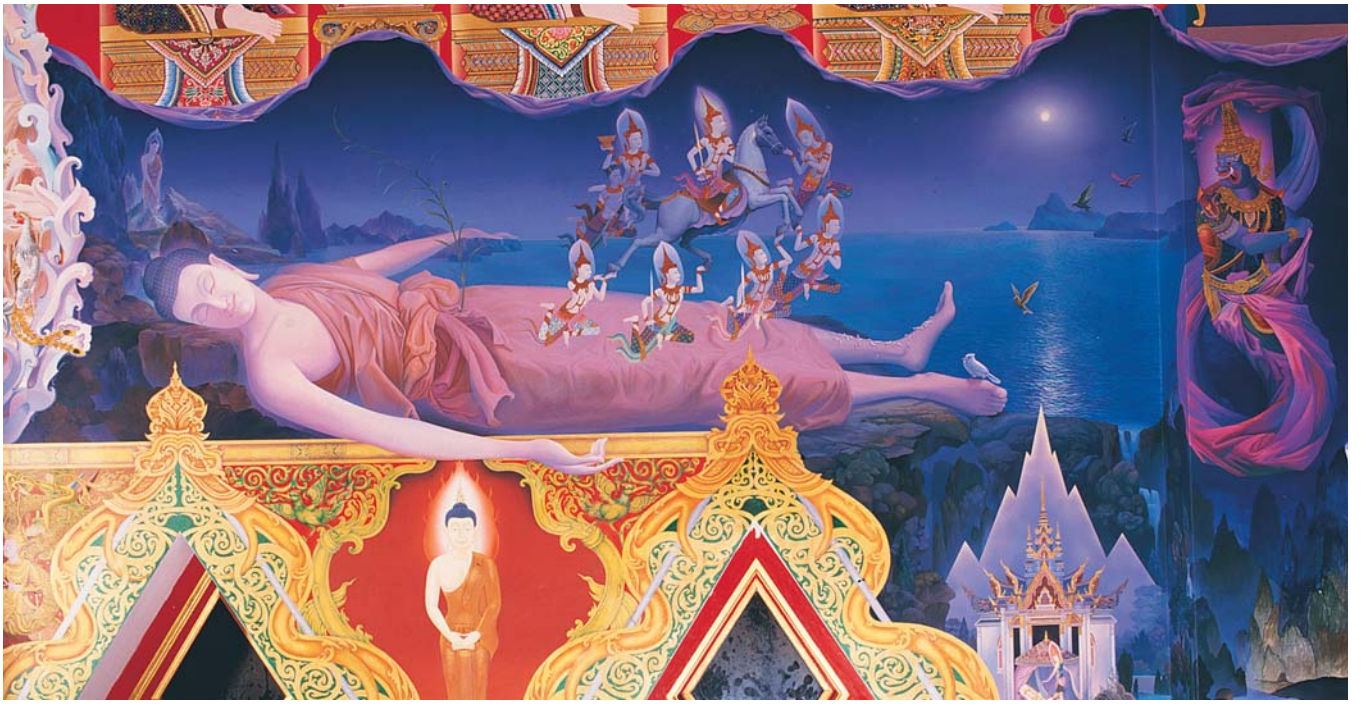


20. *Loy Krathong, Ratchaworadit Landing,* Wat Senasanaram, Ayutthaya, mid-nineteenth century. Photo courtesy Muang Boran.

21. *Buddha as Lotus,* Wat Boromniwat, Bangkok, mid-nineteenth century (Khrua In Khong). Photo courtesy Muang Boran.

22. *King Mongkut (Rama IV) Watching Solar Eclipse,* Wat Benchamabophit, Bangkok, c. 1900–1905. Photo courtesy Muang Boran.

23. Bun Prawet parade, 1995, Roi Et, Thailand: contingent of Princess Madsi with children, Phra Wesandorn Jataka. Photo by author.



Above: 24. *The Great Renunciation* (small figures in center) and *The Five Revelations* (Panya). Photo by Andy Whale.

Left: 25. Top: *Parinirvana;* below: detail, *Buddha's Seven Postures* (Chalermchai). Photo by Andy Whale.

26. *The First Sermon* (Panya). Photo by Andy Whale.

27. Detail, *The First Sermon:* sculpture by Henry Moore in Deer Park (Panya). Photo by author.

28. Detail, *The First Sermon:* Panya watching David Hockney (Panya). Photo by author.

29. Detail, *The First Sermon:* Khun Sawet, with wife Sobha, paying respects to King Bhumiphol Adulyadej (Panya). Photo by Robert Gumpert.

30. *Buddha Preaching to His Mother* and *The Descent from Tavatimsa Heaven,* Three Worlds (Chalermchai). Photo by Andy Whale.

31. Detail, Three Worlds: Margaret Thatcher (far right), Persian nobles, Christian angel (top right), English elderly (bottom right) (Chalermchai). Photo by Robert Gumpert.

32. Detail, Three Worlds: hell (Chalermchai). Photo by Robert Gumpert.

33. Detail, Three Worlds: Taj Majal (left), Wat Buddhapadipa (center), Eiffel Tower (top right), Houses of Parliament (right center) (Chalermchai). Photo by Robert Gumpert.

34. Detail, Three Worlds: picnic with Heineken beer cans. Portraits include Jonathan (left, standing), Surasit Saokhong (top left, seated), artist Nopadol (seated on right, in green shirt), and artist Alongkorn (top center) (Chalermchai). Photo by Robert Gumpert.

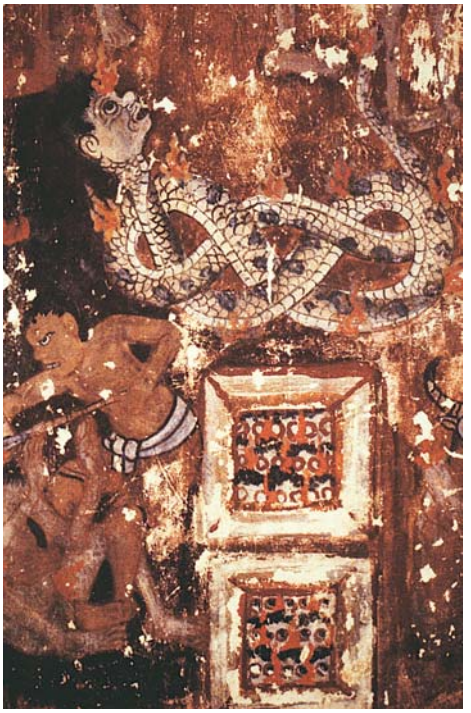
35. Detail, Three Worlds: Chalermchai with daughter and mother (Chalermchai). Photo by author.

Left: 36. Detail, *Four Categories of Lotus* (Chalermchai, painted by Kittisak Nuallak). Photo by Andy Whale.

Right: 37. Detail, *Dhammacakra Kapawatana Sutra* (Panya). Photo by Andy Whale.

Right: 38. Detail, *Celestial Assembly* (Chalermchai). Photo by Andy Whale.

Below: 39. Detail, *Phra Nemiraj* Jataka: Phra Nemiraj visits hell. Hell boxes on left (Sompop Budtarad). Photo by Andy Whale.



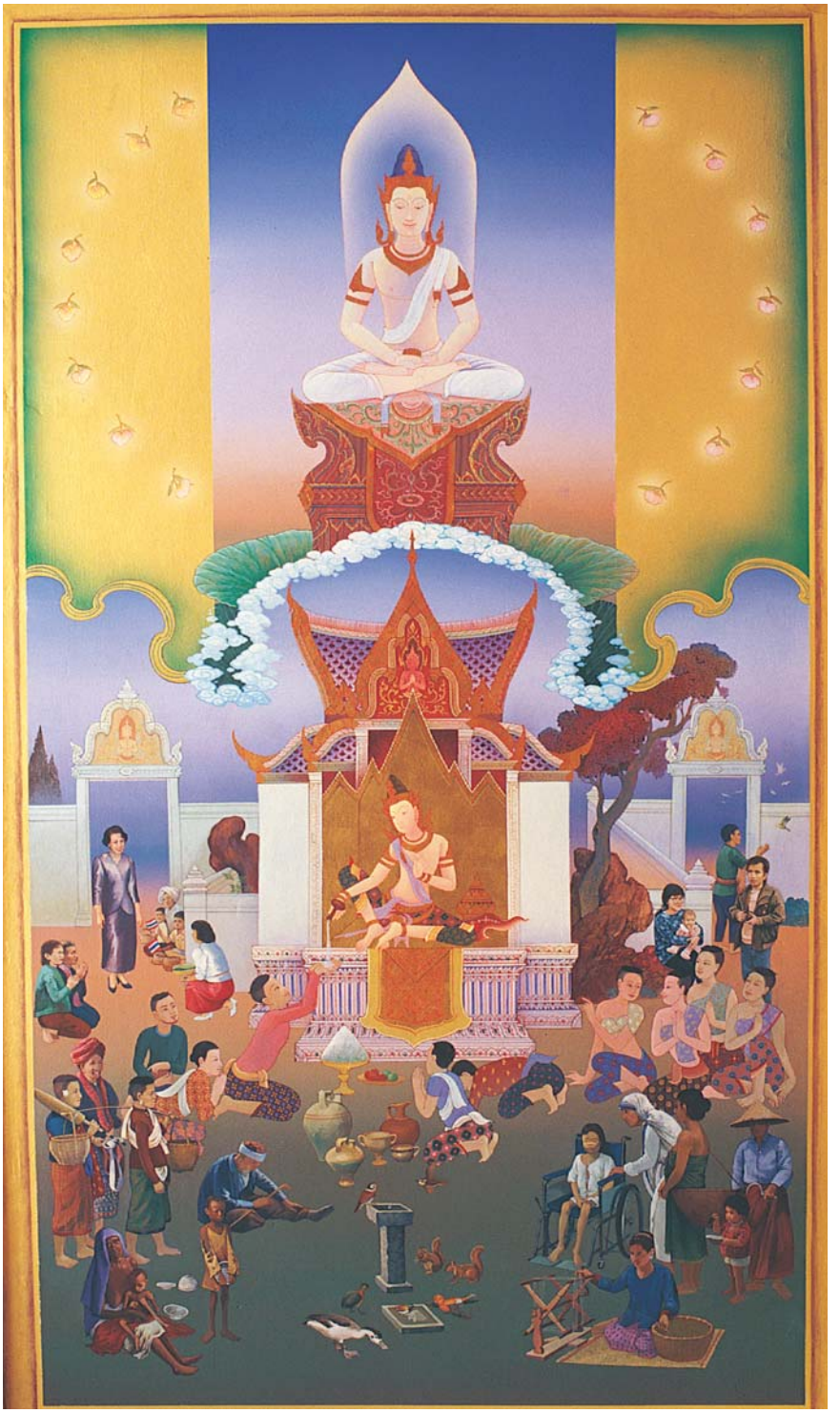
Above: 40. Detail, *Phra Nemiraj* Jataka: creature being eaten by Time (Sompop Budtarad). Photo by author.

Left: 41. Detail, hell boxes, Wat Dusidaram, Bangkok, early nineteenth century. Photo courtesy Muang Boran.

42. Detail, *Phra Wesandorn* Jataka, *Phra Wesandorn Moves Troops Back to Sipi* (Pang Chinasai, painted by Kittisak Nuallak). Photo by Robert Gumpert.

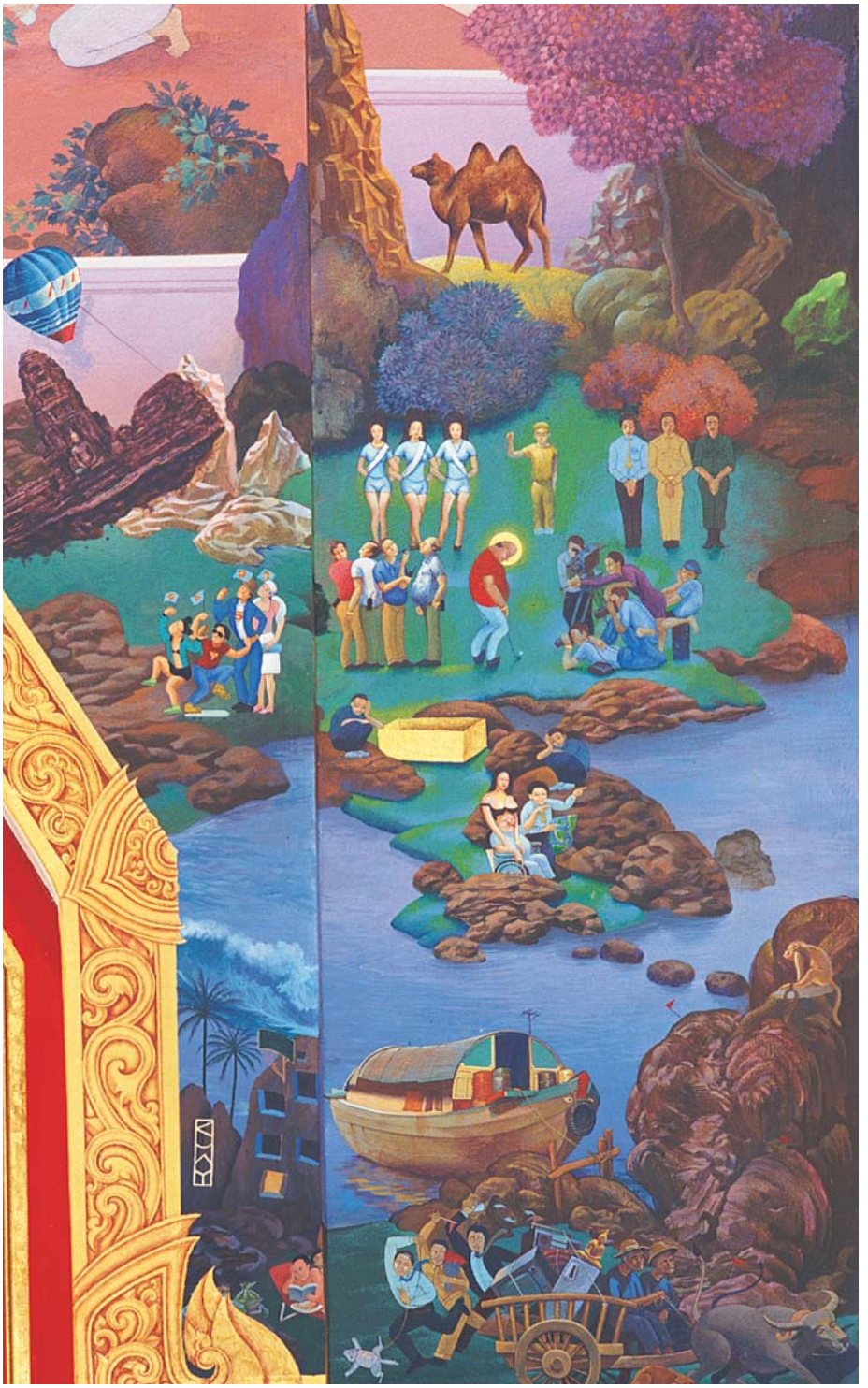
43. Detail, *Phra Wesandorn* Jataka (Pang Chinasai). Photo by Robert Gumpert.

44. *Phra Nemiraj Observes Sila* (Sompop Budtarad). Photo by Andy Whale.



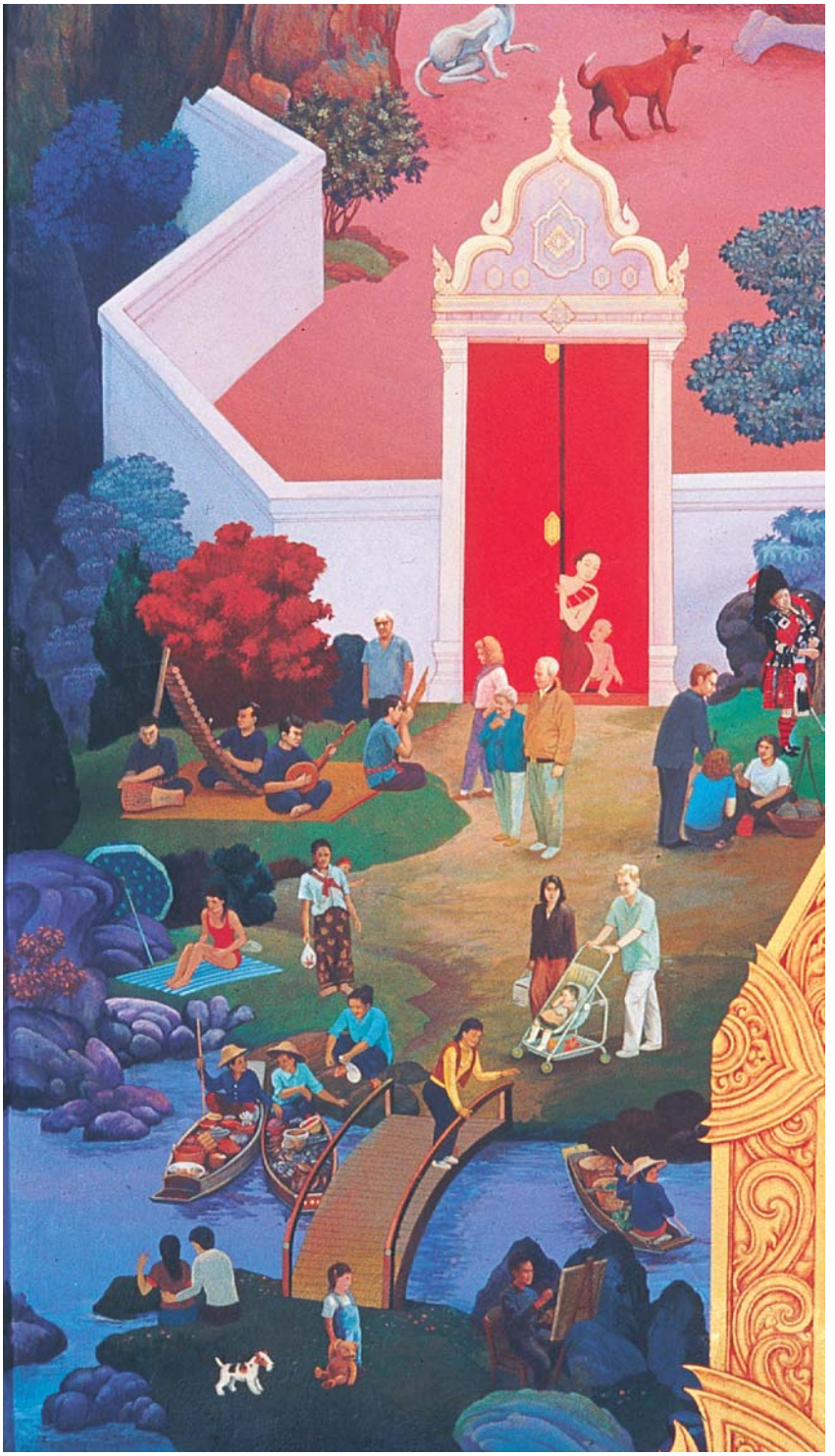
45. Detail, *Phra Nemiraj Observes Sila:* Mother Teresa, Thai development weaving project, artist Sompop with wife and child (top right) (Sompop Budtarad). Photo by Andy Whale.

46. Detail: *Mahosot* Jataka, *Army Attacks Mithila:* George Bush/Saddam Hussein (center, near window) (Sompop Buddtarad, painted by Boonkwang Nonchareon). Photo by Andy Whale.



47. Detail, *Phra Temiyaraj* Jataka: Golfer, beauty pageant (Sompop Budtarad). Photo by Andy Whale.

48. Detail, *Phra Temiyaraj* Jataka: Scotsman, Thai classical music ensemble (Sompop Budtarad). Photo by Andy Whale.



chapter seven

Tourists and Templegoers, Religion and Art

"Everything is paired, that is the ordinary thing. The meaning is in the middle, not in the oppositions."
—Sompop Budtarad, artist

Returning to London

The passport control officer at Heathrow was friendly, an auspicious sign. I had written "Wat Buddhapadipa, Wimbledon," as my place of residence on the arrival card. He knew Wat Buddhapadipa, as he lived in the area and often cycled past. Although he had not seen the murals, he thought the place "quite impressive." He wished me the best of luck.

As I walked up the hill from the train station past the open space of Wimbledon Commons, leaves on the trees, in full autumnal color, shimmered in the bright sun. The air carried that light touch of chill that signaled the winter to come. I arrived at the temple just at noon. "Mr. Jeremy," an elderly English gentleman, answered the door.[1] I introduced myself; he asked quite directly if I had been invited. When I explained that I had come to complete my research on the temple, he beckoned me into the foyer. I could hear the clatter of silverware as the monks ate their midday meal in the dining room beyond. I slipped into the adjoining shrine room, where I sat on the floor with other visitors, mostly Thai. One woman, Khun Supatra, spoke to me in English about making merit. She said that one should give only when one is happy. "If you are not happy, it is bad luck," she continued. "You must give from your 'mind' (putting her hand on her heart), you can't expect to get anything back, like a big name."[2] I took this unsolicited explanation of merit and intention as a second omen of the day, an important orientation as to how I might be expected to behave while at the temple. I had come to England thinking about art; with this encounter I was reminded that Wat Buddhapadipa was above all a temple and that religion—Buddhism and the workings of merit—was inextricably entwined with my study.

Shortly after lunch sixty "little brutes" (as Mr. Jeremy called them) arrived from a local middle school to see the murals. As they entered the *bot* after removing their shoes, their first reactions included, "Whoa," "Oh, cool," and "This is amazing." Mr. Jeremy proceeded to explain

how Wat Buddhapadipa had been established, the origins of the two Buddha images, and a brief outline of the life of the Buddha as painted in the stories on the walls. He made frequent comparisons to Christianity, to render some of the episodes more familiar to his young English audience. When he spoke of the miracle of throwing the tray onto the river, he compared it to Jesus being tempted in the wilderness by Satan. "In Buddhism, you have almost the same. Satan is known as Mara. Here you walk into the temple through the mouth of Mara, and then back through into the world without." As he guided the children through various scenes, Mr. Jeremy pointed out details they might recognize: the pagoda in Kew Gardens, Stonehenge, and David Hockney. When one child viewing the Mara scene asked, "Why that airplane?" Mr. Jeremy explained that the artists were "putting in what they saw. If you look closer, it is a Thai Airways plane. The artists came on Thai Airways from Thailand, they put it in to remember."

The visitors' book inside the *bot* reveals the complicated routes of travel that intersect here. In June 1995, visitors arrived from all over the world—from Fiji to Mauritius to Hong Kong—and their comments reflected their diversity: "Trippy." "A complete surprise—beautiful." "Brill!!!"[3] Indicating a different public, some visitors wrote in Thai the intention of their visit: *"tham bun"* (to make merit) or *"thawaay sanghathaan"* (to donate food to monks). The brief scribbles in the guest book only hint at the individual life stories of the visitors and their engagements with Buddhism and contemporary Thai art represented by the murals.

Wat Buddhapadipa continues to evolve as a tourist attraction—a moment's stopover on a larger tour of Europe, or an unusual site for local residents to show off to out-of-town guests. It is now even listed in at least one tourist guide to London, in the Wimbledon section. Wat Buddhapadipa has also evolved as a center for Buddhism in England—the mission stated so clearly by the temple's sponsor, Khun Sawet. Several monks have moved to various other *wat* in England to promote Thai Theravada Buddhist practice, including one in Wolverhampton and one in Birmingham. The latter, Wat Buddhavihara, serves a community of Anglo-Indians with roots in the Punjab region of India.[4] In addition, one English supporter at Wat Buddhapadipa was ordained and now resides in Thailand, where he teaches meditation and writes on his experiences as "Phra Farang." The social processes set in motion by its establishment, the building of the *bot,* and the painting of the murals continue to ramify as instances of long-distance merit-making, travel, and adventure along paths set out long ago. This concluding chapter makes further observations on art and religion as issues of identity, authority, and value intersect at Wat Buddhapadipa.

Identity: Art and Nation

In his commentary on the body of scholarship addressing dimensions, meanings, processes, and hegemonies in constructing "Thainess," Thongchai Winichikul makes a point worth examining here for its articulation of some problems of position. He discusses the "significance of familiarity" that Thai scholars believe give them positional superiority over Western scholars in the study of Thailand; in his words, "national community and its numerous aspects—nationalism, patriotism, identity, culture, history, image, worldview, and so on—are not merely

the objects of scientific study. They are aspects, physically and spiritually, of We-self for studies as well as for empathy, loyalty, partiality, and obsession" (1994, 8). Thongchai notes that such a discourse masks the array of competing interests within the Thai scholarly community and often implicitly or explicitly reproduces views and ideologies of an elite to the exclusion of "subordinated" or "marginal" viewpoints. In examining the microprocesses of building and painting the *ubosot* at Wat Buddhapadipa, it is clear that even this "Thai elite" is neither stable nor clearly bounded. The Thai elite comprises numerous individuals promoting their diverse private interests in consonance with (and often framed by) interests of career, commerce, merit, *sangha,* nation, and king. At Wat Buddhapadipa, the private interests of the sponsors, various Thai ambassadors to the United Kingdom, Panya, Chalermchai, and their assistants, as well as local Thais, monks, and temple visitors, converge at a temple characterized as "Thai" through the prisms of merit-making, Buddhist practice, festival, food, tourism, and art.

In the above quote Thongchai identifies ineffable aspects of Thainess arising in a social context and extending beyond the nation. The murals at Wat Buddhapadipa, as art and as social process, display this intensely personal sense of collective identity that resides in memory, in the experience of community, and in the practices and embodied experiences of the everyday, and that adheres in a *place* (Geertz 1973; Bourdieu 1977; Nora 1989; Appadurai 1996). Of course, "We-selfness," or Thainess, does not exist independently from the official discourses, practices, and controls exercised by organs of the Thai nation-state.[5] The efforts of such state agencies—such as the Fine Arts Department or the National Culture Commission of the Ministry of Education or even Silpakorn University—intentionally attempt to cultivate notions of a distinct, shared, and deeply historical identity.[6] Nor does Thainess exist outside the representations and interpretations of individual actors. My point here is simply that Thainess as national identity coexists with other levels of communality—from family to *klum,* university cohort to corporation, village or city to region, and nation to world. The conventions of modern social interaction in the global arena still include identification by nation—although frequently hyphenated, pluralized, and historicized (such as the young woman visiting Wat Buddhapadipa who introduced herself as an expatriate of the *former* Yugoslavia, to distance herself from the then current ethnic wars in Bosnia). These aspects of personal place (or cultural location) and group identity all remain ingrained in, and to varying degrees relevant for, Thais moving through the world.

In its totality, Wat Buddhapadipa represents the cultural expressions of an expanding elite and competition between its various sectors—the formation and reformation of symbologies of power, as it were. Such processes attached to temple building and ongoing merit-making in support of temples indicate the extent to which conceptions of power, at least among the current older generation, remain tied to merit (Hanks 1962). Further, the pursuit of that merit—the *kathin* junkets to Europe to donate robes and money to the monks, for example—is implicated in and suffused with other contemporary cultural values of consumption, investment, and Thai cultural citizenship. The values of the younger generation that participated in the art events supporting the mural project certainly include merit-making and the patronage of distant temples (usually forest *wat* in Thailand's northeast). Having become aware of the value of

art as cultural capital in an international system of status and display, the younger generation—peers of Chalermchai and Panya—also values the collection and patronage of art.

Although adapted to its location in England, the *ubosot* at Wat Buddhapadipa cannot be said to embody Thai national culture as any unified, reified concept. What was considered potentially offensive by an ambassador concerned with international diplomatic relations—a mural detail portraying Ronald Reagan as a solider in Mara's army, for example—contradicted agreements regarding artistic freedom made between sponsor and artists. The Fine Arts Department's determination to install a presiding Buddha image to match the period and style of the *ubosot* at Wat Buddhapadipa conflicted with the monks' and other sponsors' commitment to the Black Buddha, an image popular among Thai templegoers because of its magical powers. Rather than a singular concept of national culture, the *ubosot* represents nationalizing processes within sectors of the Thai elite. In terms of its sponsorship, some of these processes seek to represent the Thai nation favorably beyond Thai borders (as, for example, a temple in England). Other processes have related to imagining a national community embracing Thai emigrant communities abroad. However, objectifications of Thainess (such as the *ubosot* being Thai in overall design and detail and the traditionality/modernity of its murals) are fissured, disjointed, and ad hoc. They have resulted from lengthy processes of negotiation, competition, conflict, and problem solving by numerous individuals acting in multiple social arenas and in spaces both English and Thai.[7] With multiple visual references to national monuments, national costume and custom (such as the Scottish piper), and individual heads of state (the king and queen of Thailand, Margaret Thatcher, Ronald Reagan, George Bush, Saddam Hussein, and Muammar al Qaddafi), the muralists also acknowledge the continuing conceptual force of the "nation." The murals' location, presence, and intended meanings, however, expand beyond issues of national identity to imagine a world encompassing all peoples. The artists' visual narratives claim consequence in much broader terms—those of moral action and ongoing human struggles.

Authority: The Material and the Spiritual

Thongchai's earlier quote also raises the issue of position, a "Thai" versus "Western" variant of Orientalism. At an exhibition opening in the Bay Area, Vishakha Desai of the Asia Society admitted that religion was a continuing "problem" in contemporary Southeast Asian art.[8] Reducing a complex situation to catchwords, we agreed that one reason was lingering Orientalism and a reluctance (especially on the part of scholars writing primarily for a Western audience) to reinscribe and essentialize Asia as "spiritual," implicitly contrasted with the "rational" West. Indeed Apinan, as curator of *Traditions/Tensions,* an international exhibition of contemporary art of Southeast Asia produced by the Asia Society Galleries, downplayed work that concerned itself primarily with religious themes or doctrine, favoring instead installations and conceptual pieces infused with ideas about violence, powerlessness, consumerism, social anxieties, and political resistance.[9] A thorough analysis of the position and immensely variable meanings of "religion" within contemporary art movements is beyond the scope of this dis-

cussion. However, the sponsorship and painting of Wat Buddhapadipa, the ascendancy of Thai neotraditional or neo-Buddhist art, the *Phujatkan*/Silpa Bhirasri scandal, and critical writing of the early 1980s through the late 1990s suggest that the confluence of religion, art, spirituality, and materialism continue to be controversial in a Thai social discourse on modernity and remain a site of contention for cultural authority. A point of irony emerges here. Art suffused with religious iconography and/or addressing religious themes has attempted to reclaim such imagery as "traditional" and "Thai" against their peers' perceived obsession with and imitation of Euro-American styles—seeking to create alternative artistic modernities. Yet their artistic choices have grated against other modernist sensibilities that favor innovation and originality. Albert Paravi Wongchirachai, who has written about Thai art in the international press, here poses the problem:

> For many Thais, being Thai and being Buddhist are synonymous. When asked to explore Thai identity, most artists respond with a repertoire of Buddhist motifs and symbols derived from classical temple art. . . . Many see this neo-Buddhist solution to the question of Thainess as a sort of no man's land. To committed modernists, it represents bad art, a blatant rehashing of old icons. To traditionalists, it borders on desecration and the simple failure to understand one's own culture. (1992, 58)

That neotraditional art became extremely popular in the 1980s and early 1990s suggests that this conundrum troubled critics more than collectors. Artists, dealers, and buyers together created a market for artworks of all genres at continually escalating prices, stimulating vociferous criticism from art writers, which melded into other social discourses of authenticity, materialism, commercialism, and the quality of art.

These controversies in the Thai art world reached their apotheosis, perhaps, at an auction that took place in Bangkok in 1998. It would be Bangkok's first art auction, widely seen as an opportunity to "test" the value of Thai contemporary art in the international art market, here represented by Christie's, who was just establishing a Bangkok branch.[10] The auction, sponsored by the Finance Sector Restructuring Authority (FRA),[11] would sell fifteen hundred works of art and other collectibles, assets of companies that had declared bankruptcy following the 1997 collapse of the Thai baht.

According to my sources, most of the works had been purchased during the height of the art-buying frenzy of the early 1990s. Architects or interior designers had bought the works, often in quantity, on behalf of their corporate clients. At the auction, items were divided into the following categories, which mixed references to social hierarchies with art: "The Master and Senior Artists," "Senior and Distinguished Artists," "Thai Arts," and "Collectible and Decorative Items" (Finance Sector Restructuring Authority 1998).[12] The committee that set the reserve prices for the works was comprised of ten "local art specialists," including a few professors from Silpakorn University, who had produced some pieces to be sold in the auction. They set prices well below prevailing market rates, a standard enticement for potential buyers at many auctions.

The buildup to the auction stimulated public discussions of artistic worth. The managing di-

rector of Christie's Singapore noted widespread disagreement as to the quality of the pieces for sale and characterized the group as "mixed." In contrast, one Silpakorn University artist and professor claimed that the works represented cultural patrimony. Many were an "important part of Thai history" that should remain in the country (Vichoke 1998). Others saw the auction as little more than a "fire sale of garbage," according to an organizer. Most of those interviewed about the art for sale characterized the works' original buyers as ignorant, fashion victims, or speculators. Individual artists expressed concern that the market value of their work would plummet. To stimulate interest, attendance, and sales, Chalermchai appeared on television. He scolded the FRA committee for their low reserve prices. In the *Bangkok Post* he was quoted as wondering, "How can that be? I believe they set the prices so low to lure in collectors, but the amounts paid for many works, including mine, will soar far higher at the actual auction" (Pattara and Kanjariya 1998). He also threatened (or promised) to cut his throat if the prices of his own two works up for bid failed to meet their reserve prices.

The actual event, from all accounts, was fraught with excitement, anticipation, and the maneuverings that signal the onset of a major status competition. The auction was successful well beyond expectations. Christie's had hoped to clear around 32 million baht, but at the end of the two-day event, it cleared nearly 60 million baht (about US$1.7 million). Works described as second-rate or as knockoffs by established artists seeking a quick sell also hit the stratosphere in terms of their final prices. Chalermchai's status—as culture hero as much as artist—was acknowledged at the auction when his painting (with a reserve price of 30,000 baht, or US$860) sold for 450,000 baht (US$12,850). When the gavel came down, many in the crowd turned to give him a standing ovation. An untitled painting by Tawee Nandakwang, a National Artist of Thailand and one of the so-called "masters" of Thai painting, had been given a reserve price of 400,000 baht (about US$11,500).[13] In an atmosphere participants variously described to me as a bidding frenzy, a game show, and a gambling spectacle, the painting fetched 2.8 million baht (about US$80,000). The high bidder for the Tawee was a notorious politician who had become quite wealthy through his lumber dealings. He explained his high bids as his desire to "do a service to the nation," but this was perhaps an after-the-fact high-minded justification, for at the auction, when his bid won, he pulled the 2.8 million baht in cash from his hip pocket in a supreme display of personal wealth. He had never before bought art.[14]

For many observers, the FRA auction became a major cultural event, a site for the production of status and counterdisplay of Thailand's "lost wealth." Buyers were able to assert their financial robustness at a moment of great general economic anxiety, indicated in the after-the-fact claim of doing "a service for the nation." Other observers were more sanguine. They viewed the auction as "democratizing," as allowing wider access to cultural capital, another positive development in the emerging "civil society" of Thailand, where processes of citizen participation were opening up outside of established institutional mechanisms and becoming more transparent and accountable.

The notion that the "value" of a work of art is mediated by institutional and individual collecting practices, art historical and critical interpretation, media hype, and even individual artists' strategies is certainly not novel. As the FRA auction indicates, however, Thai artists par-

ticipate in different "regimes of value," which I loosely characterize as "international" and "local."[15] Actors—including artists, art critics, journalists, art historians, and anthropologists—vie for the authority to set standards and assign value in these different regimes. Works of art circulate, or are removed from circulation, within and between these regimes of value, each with its own politics and structures of power. Artists in Thailand like Chalermchai respond to a panoply of values operating in the local regime, while others position themselves more internationally, where different standards of evaluation—artistic, historical, and financial—operate.[16]

As well as inhabiting different regimes of value, works of art also respond to different registers of value, variously articulated in social, aesthetic, and financial terms. As we shall see, "value" can adhere to works of contemporary Thai art as Buddhist merit, national patrimony, markers of Thainess, social status, fame, patriotism, and aesthetic achievement, or "good art." In the negative, "value" can attach as overpriced commodity, ideological hammer, escapist fantasy, spiritual fakery, sacrilege, and "bad art." The precise terms of value emerge from social processes, institutions, and structures of authority within each regime.

The Asian Art Museum in San Francisco held a symposium in 1998 to discuss whether or not the "new Asian" should collect contemporary art. The topic turned to "modernism," both as a unified concept or force in art and as a plurality of experiences in the world. Participants spoke of the difficulty of translating artistic meanings and intentions across cultural boundaries and how modernism tends to become a "totalizing" and limited paradigm if curators cannot include work that, in the words of one person, "doesn't make sense in New York or San Francisco." Another curator admitted that she had indeed excluded some works of contemporary Japanese art from her canon because she knew they "wouldn't fly" abroad. This incident lines out one regime operating in the valuation of contemporary art—a regime I set within an international circuitry of exhibitions, biennials, triennials, catalogs, collecting practices, and academic conferences. The curator's statement ostensibly concerned artistic taste as works approach and attempt to cross cultural boundaries. But symposium participants acknowledged that this problem of "flying" also touches economies of taste, as viewers/collectors consider art to purchase and eventually donate to museums. Works of art that I suspect would not fly across cultural boundaries filled the FRA auction. The significance of that auction lies in standards and concerns of a more local regime of value, where the work of art may be less important than the name of the artist and where price alone *does* claim value.

Art and Religion: Regimes of Value

The relevance of value and context for Wat Buddhapadipa and its murals arises in part precisely because it is a religious space, where the social processes of production and patronage of art at a temple contrast with or map over art production more generally in Thailand. Buddhist principles of merit-making must be acknowledged as the basis for action in the case of Wat Buddhapadipa. It framed the relationship between patron, artists, and project in terms comprehensible and valued in both Thai and English society. For some of the artists, the reli-

gious meanings in the stories they painted suffused the act of painting itself, delineating a particular understanding of and orientation to the world and to the struggles of daily existence. During one of our many conversations, Panya described the personal difficulties he encountered while working for three years in London,

> Too many problems. Too much depression living and working over there. I cannot explain how much the depression became really a problem in working over there. One thing is similar to it, the subject of the Buddha's victory over Mara. It is on my mind . . . it is in my mind all the time, trying to solve all our own problems. So that is why this scene is my favorite. Because everybody . . . everyone has this feeling in their lives. We have to stand by and attack our troubles or any problems in our lives.

He then spoke of mural painting as social practice:

> One thing I believe is that the spirit of giving . . . that spirit is in art. I believe this kind of spirit we can't see much in the present day, because we are living in a "quarreling society." Taking, not giving. So that is why we think we have to give so much spirit to mural painting and to human beings.

Yet these artists came from, and returned to, secular settings for their art. In their work, they acknowledge and reproduce the authority of the past—for them the genealogy of Thai temple mural painting—while seeking cultural validity in the present and in material terms. They have developed their individual artistic visions (by the terms of their past, a "modern" act) regardless of location or context of exchange. Chalermchai cultivates his image, status, and wealth by orienting himself to long-established Thai cultural arenas of drama and spectacle, but utilizing the business techniques (catalogs, exhibitions, sophisticated promotional and marketing brochures, media coverage) of the international art world. His work at Wat Buddhapadipa solidified his status as one who "goes out," but he has chosen to remain within Thailand, to produce paintings as consumable commodities that enhance the social position of their buyers, in part because the work marks off a Buddhist philosophy and a particular decorative aesthetic. Oriented in other directions, Panya reenacts collective practices of art making and explores contemporary versions of the Thai conceptual approach while encouraging his students and apprentices to develop individual ideas and styles. His work at Wat Buddhapadipa has enabled expansive imaginings of the world. His murals now locate Buddhist places (the Daowading heaven or the Himaphan Forest) as scenes accompanying the emergence of the modern Thai economy, where people can see art in banks, corporations, and shopping malls. These artists—as do many others in Thailand and Southeast Asia—make the "traditional" and the "modern" discursive positions with performative force. Evaluations of their contributions to neotraditionalism are most profitably viewed in the play and performance of categories and in the quest for social legitimacy and cultural values regarding spirituality in evolving material worlds.

As processes of constructing value, writing on Thai art takes place in many discursive arenas. Locally produced journals on art, architecture, and interior design, and newspapers in Thai are clearly aimed at a Thai audience. Some critics write for English-language magazines

and newspapers largely destined for a cosmopolitan Bangkok readership; such periodicals include the *Bangkok Post, The Nation, Bangkok Metro,* and the now defunct *Caravan*. Others write in English for journals such as *ART Asia/Pacific* or in exhibition catalogs, venues to which non-English speaking Thai artists or collectors have limited access. Seeking a broader audience and the enhanced cultural authority that derives from participation in more globalized art arenas, Thai art writers educated in Europe or the United States now write for an international audience more than a Thai one. In all arenas, they have mounted attacks on much of the neotraditional painting produced in the last decade as "bad art" from several overlapping critical positions. Some attack its ideological support of the status quo and the ways in which such art fosters a kind of cultural avoidance for having lost mooring in the social realities of contemporary Thailand.[17] Thanom Chapakdee, the art critic who has written most extensively in Thai, dissects the institutions of the Bangkok art world: Silpakorn University and its "outdated" curriculum, principles of seniority, and patron-client relations. He lambastes trends fostered by those institutions that encourage students to "work harder at producing superficial fantasy—gaudy products that float above reality." Those who cloak themselves in Buddhist values do not serve the development of an art truly one with its society, for, he argues, "[c]onservative moralists and their writings on religion and the beauty of nature—sweet lullabies that generate interest—can only be regarded as promoting bad art" (1995, 73).

Critiques based on aesthetic grounds fault such artists for their easy reliance on stock Buddhist symbols rather than a more innovative exploration of artistic (and cultural) possibilities—echoes and variations of discussions on a perceived Thai propensity for "copying." John Clark has described the art that came after the Wat Buddhapadipa murals (which he credits with "social insight" and "design power") as "numberless sentimentalized residues from the 'Thai' past" (1997, 86).

Still other positions dismiss neotraditional painting as a degradation of "authentic" Buddhist art, claiming that Buddhist art loses its spiritual aura once removed from a religious context and placed into a commercial one. Albert Paravi Wongchirachai has criticized the sale of Buddhism-inspired artwork as "spiritual charlatanism," for whatever the faith or intention of its maker or origins of the imagery, art attains the particularities of its spiritual value in context. He acknowledges that early artisans of Southeast Asian temples and temple art may not have been Buddhist or Hindu and that art produced in one religious context can, and does throughout history, metamorphose into objects of worship in another religious context. The art market lies outside those contexts. He argues,

> When symbol is encased by religious context, it manifests a specific boundary and intention. Once the context shifts, a redefinition inevitably takes place. Within the primary context of the art market today, we may wonder if the artists are not making tall claims in calling their pseudo-religious works a Buddhist endeavor. (1993, 38)

Arguments that Thai contemporary artists have claimed to "revive" traditions of Buddhist painting do not sway Wongchirachai. He finds that certain traditions of religious art—the casting of Buddha images, mural painting, wood carving, and plasterwork—although often dis-

missed as "fossilised and uninteresting," are not dead and continue "in the ateliers of Thonburi."[18] Addressing, although not naming, those who position themselves as "modernist," he writes,

> Impersonation, parody and ersatz are respectable devices within a post-modernist dialogue. There is something cheap and damaging, however, in pretending to be a work of faith, especially against the backdrop of a living tradition. For all its serious claims to spiritual legacy, the genre lacks concepts and—dare we say it—understanding. Novelty is contrived for its own sake, and stylistic experiments are tagged with religious titles like *Selflessness, Four Noble Truths,* and most shameless of all, *Transcendental.* What is so transcendental about an object for sale? (1993, 39)

From this position, the attribution of religious authenticity—art as a representation or manifestation of an act of devotion—to some quality of spirituality adhering in the piece of art itself is problematic. However, Wongchirachai makes an exception for one enormously popular and commoditized class of objects. Amulets and statues traded in the Thai marketplace do not count in the same way as "pseudo-Buddhist art" in his view, for such objects are exchanged "within their context to impart protection and blessings; they function as objects of faith." It is not clear that he would make the same exception for easel paintings done in "Thai style" donated to contemporary Thai temples, for their exchange remains within a religious context. Another case to measure by these criteria might be Sompop's installations in the meditation garden at Wat Buddhapadipa, objects and creations involving trees, ash, earth, or shadows that invite reflection upon impermanence and change. Sompop has exhibited the same (or versions of the same) installations in art galleries—contexts for the promotion and sale of art, not religion. These objects would appear to move back and forth across the boundaries between art and religion, depending on their location at the moment. Absent from Wongchirachai's position is the intention of the maker that such work impart a Buddhist "truth" to the viewer, an issue that presents thorny problems of access and analysis. Absent also is the relationship between the piece of art and the viewer—a relationship that may or may not evoke attitudes of devotion or religious awe. As we have seen with the Wimbledon murals, viewers may admire such obviously religious artwork without imparting explicitly religious value (as do many of its non-Buddhist viewers) or evaluate it negatively according to other cultural standards (as have many Thai viewers).

Since the completion of the Wat Buddhapadipa murals, many Thai artists—especially members of the Chiang Mai Social Installation group, who seek out temples and temple cemeteries for their installations and performances—are deliberately attempting to reconstitute the relationship between religious space and contemporary "art," rather than divorcing the two concepts.[19] Some art historians and critics have pointed out that Thai temples, with their simultaneous combinations of painting, sculpture, fragrance of flowers and incense, and sound of bells and chanting comprise indigenous Thai Buddhist versions of installation art. However, in an article comparing international to local forms, Ajarn Somporn Rodboon raises the issue of context and draws another boundary between "art" and "religion," writing, "[I]nstallations have

existed here for many centuries, concealed in the trappings of religious and other kinds of ritual ceremony. This idea can be defended in purely formal terms, but it must also be remembered that Western installation art and traditional Thai ritual are radically different in purpose and concept. To conceive of them as installations is to extend the installation aesthetic in a specifically Thai direction" (1997).

Sompop reminded me one afternoon at his house that Buddhist aspects of Thai traditional art must be understood in a cultural, rather than doctrinal, way when he said, "Thai traditional painting is not only about Buddhism, [it is] just Thai traditional culture. But Thai culture is Buddhist. Like the artists who worked for Thai painting, before, right? Artists were supported by the temple and they have to be concerned with the temple, for their livelihood." We agreed that conditions in Thailand are different now, with an art world largely disconnected from the temple and artwork displayed in private homes and entering streams of collecting and commoditization. Sompop noted that "they [artists] have to adapt themselves. . . . It is not that if you are Buddhist, you work for the temple, and you earn nothing, you are a volunteer. I don't think that." We discussed whether his use of symbols of his own past—of rain, so critical to daily life in Isaan—or of his Buddhist upbringing kept their meaning alive. "Yes," he said, describing to me why he drips candle wax onto canvases:

> My work still has the old, and the present moment. It is like the candle. The candle gives the feeling of ritual, of [lighting] the darkness, or of fire. The candle represents falling and rising at the same time. The candle smoke is rising, but it [also] looks like the rain is dropping. There are two meanings to what we are. It is not like the Thai traditional art. I work in any style, or any technique, or any material—but the Buddhist idea comes first.

Through exchange, display, and interpretive practices, individual works of art (including collectively produced murals) travel across boundaries of categories—"Buddhist narrative," "art," "history," "heritage," "Thai identity"—but value does not. Value remains to be determined from within a regime, from a given set of terms, and by actors in that social world. The production of art with Buddhist content, imagery, and intention, the market in such art (to the extent an art market in Thailand survives the current economic crisis), and the critical discourse about neotraditional and/or neo-Buddhist art in Thailand indicate that the relationship between religion and art, art and society, is far from stable and continues to be negotiated and understood in different regimes of value.

Binarism, Redux

Oppositional contrasts, so striking in the representations of and by Panya and Chalermchai, remain salient in the lives and works of many Thai artists and in Thai (and Southeast Asian) culture more generally.[20] For these Thai artists concerned with making a living through their art in the mid-1980s, categories of traditional and modern served important cultural functions. "Traditional" legitimated their work as "Thai" and responded to conservative anxieties within Thai society about the increasing influences of globalized popular culture and loss of distinc-

tively Thai cultural characteristics. "Traditional" also recalled the classic period of Thai painting, a connection both Panya and Chalermchai fostered in a variety of ways. At the same time, defining their artistic production as "modern" distinguished their murals from other contemporary mural painting—in hotels or in small provincial *wat*—which had become marginalized. "Modern" (in the sense of "contemporary" rather than "modernist") identified them with an international art community. The simultaneous play of these two signs underscored the project's innovative claims of repairing the divisions between the classic and modern in Thai art. Applying both labels (art writers combined them into "neotraditional") also maximized public interest, making it easier to raise money from the public at large.

The Wat Buddhapadipa murals represented an attempt by its artists to reconcile contradictions and incompatible aspects of the different epistemologies regarding painting: art as Buddha story (or religion) and art as art. The artworks that have gained the widest recognition and greatest monetary value (as quite distinct from critical praise) within Thailand in the early 1990s are the paintings that draw in theme or imagery from fundamental and familiar cultural values. Buddhist themes are primary in this regard; nature and rural life have been popular themes as well. The Wat Buddhapadipa artists participated in this process of valuation and contributed to the establishment of a mediating category that bridged the traditional and the modern. Their efforts received royal notice, as three of them, and the art they promoted as neotraditional Thai art, were selected to be part of the king's retelling of the *Mahajanakan* Jataka, celebrating the fiftieth year of his reign (Bhumiphol 1996). The Wat Buddhapadipa artists took Thai mural painting, already iconic of Thai sociality, identity, and history, to claim a more elevated place for it in the Thai and international art worlds.

In Thailand, where the "Western art system" has engaged with local systems of aesthetic production, we see distinctive modes of understanding and discussing "art" coexisting simultaneously, incompletely syncretized. That these modes retain their distinctive force has been evident in much of the negative assessments made of the murals. Viewers criticize the art at Wat Buddhapadipa based on Thai notions of religious space, in which the Buddha image itself should dominate. Out of their encounters with Western art, artists create hybrid forms not totally of either Western or indigenous systems but totally comprehensible to those producing, valuing, and consuming such forms. Their hybridity has purpose. The Wat Buddhapadipa artists (viewers and art writers considering their art) are themselves participants in a hybrid modernity "at large" within Thailand and through travel and education abroad (Appadurai 1996).

In terms of cultural discourse within Thailand, the success of the mural project has held national significance as well. Wat Buddhapadipa displays traditional Thai culture—intended to enhance the image of modern Thailand—in England, the long-standing model of civilization and modernity for elite Thais. The temple claims religious importance through its art and architecture, propagating Buddhism in Europe by attracting public attention and a constant stream of visitors. At Wat Buddhapadipa, an old-fashioned boat (taking passengers to nirvana) can represent Thai tradition. The latest model of airplane (carrying artists and long-distance merit makers to Europe) can represent it as well. Using dualistic categories (Thai and Western,

or traditional and modern) enables conservative but open-minded Thais to move comfortably outside and indeed indicates that these expansive processes are taking place. Wat Buddhapadipa's mediation of oppositions discussed in this study—traditional/modern, religion/art, global/local—suggests an alternative, poststructuralist perspective of "both/and" rather than "either/or." Such categorical pairings represent "tokens in highly varied discourses about power and legitimacy" (Bowen 1995, 1063) and manifest the lived experience of contradiction and tension inherent in competing ideologies and views of the world.

Discussions about the enduring value of the Wat Buddhapadipa murals further activate these differences. Art historian Apinan Poshyananda claims that art on this scale and in this context "becomes a catalyst to start this dialogue," referring to encounters of Asians with Christian cathedrals, or the English with Buddhist temples. "This comes back to the re-looking and the re-definition of temples, because this is about 'Thainess,' about projecting Thai identity," he continued. "It is very much about how one defines and what is the context of Thainess and Thai identity."[21] In their travels through England, the Wat Buddhapadipa artists began such a dialogue and, in scattered details such as angels and depictions of early Christians, continued it in their murals. Despite the plurality of visions that designed, built, furnished, and painted murals, Wat Buddhapadipa remains a temple where "Thainess" is expressed in Buddhist terms, yet with a moral vision imagined on a global, rather than local or national, scale.

Another writer on Thai art and culture, John Hoskins, acknowledging ambivalence in the reception of the murals, told me, "They are permanent; they are not as transient as the hangings in an art gallery. It's done. It's a permanent thing that has been done in London. It happened, whether you like it or not. It's there. How that example is used remains to be seen. But just the mere fact that it was done makes it important. Very important."[22] One of the muralists offered a different assessment, arising from a perspective that accepts the transience of things. When I asked Sompop if he thought the mural project was important for the art of Thailand and in their place at a Thai temple in England, he replied, "No, I don't want to say that they are very important. They should serve the people." In terms of learning about Buddhism from the murals, he continued, "[People] can read a book, visit with a monk." Sompop did agree that the murals have encouraged people to ask questions about Buddhism and about the artists' dedication to a project that took so long. I myself asked, "How can they do this?" when I first met Sompop in 1992. But, he insisted, the murals were "not important." An Englishman, who had also been drawn toward Buddhism and ongoing participation in life at Wat Buddhapadipa while the murals were being painted, had a much different reaction. He told me, "The first time you go into the temple, you are taken over by the color. After a few times, you begin to see the images. After 101 times, you think about what you see. The murals on the wall are as important as the monks."

Finding a Place

Just as the airplane in Panya's *Mara* scene carried artists, sponsors, and merit makers, it carries multiple meanings. Several of the artists mentioned that this airplane represented their trip

to England, a visual reminder of that long trajectory out of Thai provincial villages. With this airplane (and other evidence of contemporary technology in this scene), the artists deliberately reference their own movement of "going out" in the world to find a place for themselves and their art. Just as the artists honored the patronage of Khun Sawet with a portrait, here, too, they acknowledge the sponsorship of Thai Airways International (then an enterprise of the Thai government)—contributions that complemented the airline's goals to expand its market into Europe. In this tiny detail the artists also assert the Thainess of their endeavor in clearly depicting the logo of the national airline.

Throughout the history of Thai mural painting, muralists have localized Buddhist narratives (to take place in Thai temples, palaces, villages, and forests), expanded with themes particular to these local settings (royal processions, the presence of foreigners in Thailand, and social customs), painted with local aesthetic sensibilities, and claimed as distinctive of local identities both "Thai" and regional variants of "Lanna" or "Isaan." At Wat Buddhapadipa, mural details such as the airplane (and the missiles, the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, prominent architectural monuments, and numerous recognizable individuals from Charlie Chaplin to Rambo and the pope) extend Thai versions of this localizing process into a globalized setting, familiar to viewers from anywhere. One might imagine that this tiny airplane symbolizes these links in knowledge, experience, and movement between the local—perhaps the village worlds in which many of these artists were raised—and the global, implied by these details painted in this place. An airplane situated in a mural scene in London flies in an open sky from Thailand to London, and perhaps back again.

With these and similar details, the artists have cast the setting of ancient tales into the place and time of the viewers—a subtle challenge to viewers. They subvert the viewer's position "outside" the world painted in the murals. Some viewers confront their stereotypes about Thailand (one American friend said the airplane "forced me to think about Thailand as a country with airplanes"). Others, long familiar with these stories and how they have seen them in Thailand (or in other Theravada Buddhist countries), confront their attitudes toward "tradition."

Phra Maha Term, the artists' technical and spiritual advisor at Wimbledon, explained the airplane in Buddhist terms. As we sat at the dining room table at Wat Buddhapadipa one afternoon, he told me that these artists struggled to understand the stories they painted. "For them," he said, "they usually express their knowledge according to the tradition outside, whatever they have seen outside. Tradition? What does it mean, what does it really mean? This group did the work according to their own selves. They got to know the abstractions of such things. The concrete form depends on their ability—they draw according to their knowledge. Abstract to concrete. Formlessness to form." He offered the example of Nang Thorani, goddess of the earth, who answers the Buddha's call for a witness to his numerous lives of great merit by drawing torrents of water from her hair, thereby subduing Mara's army. This current, Phra Maha Term said, represented the abstract notion of the Buddha's loving kindness. The artists' job was to draw this symbolism out, to place it in the public's eye. Tradition, he continued, was like a boat, a vehicle for the teachings of the Buddha. He agreed that just as the forms of boats

change, that vehicle for the Buddha's teachings can change—even into an airplane. Speaking of Thai visitors to Wat Buddhapadipa, he observed, "When they came to see these paintings, they were a big surprise. They [the Thais] were used to the old temple paintings. They would ask, 'Why is a rocket here? Why is an airplane here?' That was the reaction of some. As for me, I see only the meanings."

Notes

Preface

1. The "first hair-cutting" ceremony, or *phithi tham khwaan* (literally, ceremony of "making the life-spirit"), of a month-old child welcomes it into the family and ritually protects the fragile soul, which Thai believe can escape from the soft spot, a sort of aperture, on the baby's head. In earlier times, the baby's head would be shaved except for that spot, where a topknot would grow, to be cut off in a coming-of-age ceremony around age thirteen. See Phya Anuman (1968).

2. I have changed or omitted the names of informants, except the names of those (such as Khun Sawet, Chalermchai, Panya, and the other artists) who would be impossible to disguise, who are public figures, and who understood that they would be quoted for publication.

3. Thai temples, or *wat,* are complexes of buildings. The *ubosot* or *bot* is the chapel where major Buddhist rituals, such as the ordination of monks, are performed. Largely due to frequent thefts of the donation box sitting inside, this *bot* is kept locked during the week and opened on the weekends, when many more visitors and worshipers arrive. During those periods, one of the monks remains in the *bot.*

4. Thai forms of worship before a Buddha image usually include an offering of flowers, incense, and candles, as well as the prostration *(wai phra).*

5. At Thai Buddhist temples, lay worshipers support the monks through donations of money, food, robes, and other items of daily use; these donations accrue merit for the giver and constitute the exchange basic to lay-monk relations in Theravada Buddhism. At Wat Buddhapadipa, lay Buddhists—many of them owners of Thai restaurants—often make merit by preparing the meal eaten by the monks before noon.

6. Sompop knew anthropologist Herbert Phillips, who had organized an exhibit of contemporary Thai art, including one of Sompop's paintings, and who had urged me to visit Wat Buddhapadipa while I was living in London for the summer.

7. Marcus (1995) and Clifford (1997), among others, have raised issues of the spatial and temporal boundaries of ethnographic research among traveling subjects. Clifford probes issues of boundedness and constructions of the "field" that privilege dwelling over travel. This multisited ethnography examines the "circulation of cultural meanings, objects, and identities in diffuse time-space," (Marcus 1995, 96) remaining focused closely on my informants' understandings of the processes by which their lifeworlds have expanded and been made mobile. It attempts a look from the inside out (cf. Clark 1998, 262–263, in which he poses questions that enable us to "be close to the artists, accept their agency, and see the world that produced their work through the artists' concerns").

8. Early in my fieldwork, I conducted interviews in English or with an interpreter. I later worked in Thai without an interpreter. All interviews in Thai were taped and have been transcribed by native Thai speakers.

9. I chose Wat Mahathat for meditation instruction because many of Wat Buddhapadipa's monks

are based there, including its abbot. I first met The Venerable Phra Ravanakitkolsul, the abbot of Wat Buddhapadipa, at Wat Mahathat while he was there on business.

10. These activities match those performed generally by *mae chii,* or nuns, in Theravada Buddhist temples.

11. Thais customarily use their personal names only, often including an honorific to indicate respect. "Khun" serves as the general-purpose equivalent of the English "Mr." or "Ms." I retain its use for Khun Sawet because I always called him that. As my relationships with other informants grew less formal, I would eliminate "Khun" and/or use nicknames.

Chapter 1: Finding a Place

1. Prime Minister Field Marshal Plaek Phibunsongkhram renamed the kingdom of Siam "Thailand" in 1939 (see C. Reynolds 1991, 2–6). Throughout this work "Siam" and "Siamese" refer to Thailand prior to this date.

2. In the *Nidanakatha* (Talk on the Origin), the Buddha, having begun his long spiritual journey, the Wayfaring in the Better, makes a vow that "having become supremely wise (literally, awake), he might build a Dhamma-ship (a ship of the Right), and so cause the multitude to cross over the ocean of Wayfaring, and then (himself) pass utterly away" (C. Rhys-Davids 1929:xviii).

3. As Vishakha Desai notes, cultural hybridity or "this clash between traditional Asian culture and modern Western influences have been an integral part of Asian life for most of this century" (Desai 1996, 13). Major publications pioneering the study of contemporary Southeast Asian art and these issues include Apinan (1992, 1996), Clark (1993a, 1997), Furuichi and Nakamoto (1995), Phillips (1992), Turner (1993a), and Wright (1994). Along with Wright and Clark, this study takes the position that artistic modernism is a plural concept to be investigated in specific times and places with reference to local discourses on the "modern."

4. The social construction of "tradition" as applied as a category to Thai art appears in chapter 3.

5. This improvisational commentary characterizes Thai literature as well as folk narrative (oral and visual) and performance throughout Southeast Asia. For a discussion of the shadow play in southern Thailand, see Vandergeest and Paritta (1993). Chetana (1993) discusses this type of localization in Thai folk theater (*likay*).

6. Alfred Gell notes that the art object indexes both the agency of its creator and its reception by a public (1998, 24). Art objects can have many receptions; Gell discusses transformations over time, but one must note that receptions also differ according to the viewers' subject position. In any case, the relationship between the work of art and its viewer always takes place in the present tense. The "present" that is painted into these murals is contemporary with their viewers, unlike other contemporary mural paintings and easel paintings in "Thai traditional style" (discussed in chapter 3) that depict an imaginary and idyllic Thai village past and avoid reference to social realities in the urbanized Thai present.

7. Interestingly, the murals contain no reference to tennis. The temple plays a significant role in the annual event, however—as a site of some of the least expensive parking in the area.

8. Chalermchai and Panya's twenty-eight assistants included Sompop Budtarad, Pang Chinasai, Kittisak Nuallak, Pichit Tangcharoen, Suwan Khomthipayarat, Sakya Khunpolpitak, Boonkhwang Noncharoen, Phusit Phudsongkhram, Sanan Sinchalaem, Prakit Kobkitwattana, Nopadol Itthipongsakul, Paisan Paovises, Apichai Piromrak, Uthai Comwingwarn, Sittichoke Kornnark, Daeng Kutipek, Prasat Chandrasupa, Roengsak Boonyavanishkul, Niramon Ruangsom, Suraphol Chinarat, Thongchai Srisukprasert, Teerawat Kanama, Alongkorn Lauwattana, Kanokwan Nakaapi, Areeporn Suwannanupong, Preeda Suetrong, Pichai Lertsawansri, and Sukanya Budtarad.

9. But with the dominance of more secular models of art and art education from the late nineteenth century on, women have emerged and continue to emerge as highly respected artists in Thailand. However, few (the sculptor Misiem Yipintsoi is an exception) have attained the status of and their work the monetary value of male artists.

10. However, several women have become accomplished muralists, most notably Phaptawan Suwannakudt, daughter of Tan Kudt, the muralist discussed in chapter 3. Phaptawan and her teams have painted in both temples and secular spaces, but because she is a woman, she has occasionally not been allowed by monks to paint on the upper walls of a temple, as this would violate proper spatial etiquette—women may not stand above a monk (Phatarawadee 1995b, C2). This was not the case at Wat Buddhapadipa; Niramon painted the Parinirvana, at the top of one wall.

11. His Majesty King Bhumiphol Adulyadej (1996).

In addition to illustrations by several artists of an earlier generation, this book includes works by three of the artists who painted at Wat Buddhapadipa: Chalermchai, Panya, and Teerawat Kanama.

12. F. Reynolds (1978c), Somboon (1982), Keyes (1987), Murashima (1988), and essays in C. Reynolds (1991) analyze and critique this particular formulation of Thai national identity.

13. Appadurai and Breckenridge 1988. Wat Buddhapadipa constitutes just one of many examples of major religious constructions sponsored abroad or by diasporic communities, serving multiple publics. These highly visible temples (also churches, mosques, or religious communes) often test local understandings and tolerance of difference.

14. In the catalog of the murals, Chalermchai and Panya translate *phraphenii* as "tradition," a word frequently translated as "customs." Writing of "modern art," they use *silpa mai baep tawantok,* or "new art in Western style."

15. In an attempt to avoid the trap of erasing heterogeneity under the rubric of "Thainess" or "Thai," I endorse Appadurai's notion of the cultural as "situated difference, that is, difference in relation to something local, embodied, and significant" (1996, 12). I also follow Ong's insistence that the claims of culture (i.e., what "Thainess" is or might become) be attached to the dynamics of power and strategies of position (1999, 243) at the interpersonal, national, and geopolitical level. Thongchai (1994, 6–19) analyzes *khwaam pen thai* (Thainess or we-selfness) in this latter sense, with nationalist overtones.

16. This concern with details of the physical setting for meditation arose several times in my discussions with Wat Buddhapadipa regulars, who compared various Thai temples in England. Some criticized the "austerity" of Amaravati, a monastery in the south of England, but they criticized also the thick, plush blue carpet in the meditation room at the temple in Wolverhampton in the English Midlands. This concern reflects, I think, a much larger doctrine in the Buddha's teachings on the importance of finding a Middle Way, of allowing neither extreme of ascetic denial nor sensual indulgence.

17. According to one observer of contemporary Thai art, Somsak is one of Thailand's most noted colorists.

18. While Appadurai (1986, 15) and Meyers apply "regimes of value" to acts of commodity exchange that involve differing sets of cultural and economic assumptions, I extend the concept here to other processes that construct "value" outside the context of exchange. In the case of Wat Buddhapadipa, the value at stake is noneconomic, though I will argue that as art and as signifiers of cultural identity, its murals have had economic implications for their artists.

19. These discursive moves do represent the shifting of mural painting into new categories, which anthropologists of art have discussed as distinguishing "art by metamorphosis" from "art by destination" (Maquet 1979, 1986) or "art by appropriation" from "art by intention" (Errington 1994a, 1994b, 1998). Two additional points are relevant here, which suggest that analytical approaches anchored to the workings of an (often singularized) art "market" require further discussion: temple murals do not circulate in the art market (although reproductions of them do), and "art" is only one of several new categories of cultural production they have entered.

20. Becker (1982). While the individuals and institutions of the Bangkok "art world" remain central to this book's discussions of the artists and their work, I argue that the complex reception of the murals themselves elude the totalizing perspectives of art-theory discourse. Following Alfred Gell, this work adopts an anthropology of aesthetics as a mode of enchantment defined by "how social agents produce particular responses in particular social settings" (Gell 1998, 4) and views artworks as "material entities that motivate inferences, responses, or interpretations" (Thomas in Gell 1998, ix).

21. The issues of "boundaries" of "art" (popularly expressed as "art for art's sake") that became essential to the modernists are reviewed and analyzed in Marcus and Myers (1995). This work will analyze the construction of similar boundaries in a different historical and cultural context.

22. Errington (1994a, 1994b, 1998) examines many of the narratives that create "art," selectively and in particular cultural and historical settings. "Artwriting," coined by Carrier (1987), refers to the writings of critics, historians, curators, and artists themselves that establish a context in which artists' works are evaluated. "Arttalking," in a more or less private arena as gossip, can be equally as important. This is the case in local art worlds where critical artwriting remains relatively inaccessible, as in Thailand, where English or Thai articles often remain untranslated and thus largely unavailable to those who are monolingual. In Thailand, media coverage of art also remains circumscribed by public conventions of politeness, praise, and the ignorance of many journalists. Those who violate social conventions by publicly at-

tacking individual artists and writing negative critiques of their work risk retaliations that can range from arrest for defamation, to mass protest, to personal threats.

23. Discussions of this issue by anthropologists include Marcus and Myers (1995) and Firth (1992). The art historian J. Clark, specifically addressing Asian and Southeast Asian modern art, usefully proposes a distinction between an open discourse of work in the world (the artist responding to and appropriating ideas in the larger art world) and a more closed discourse of interpretation, which he finds is largely derived from Euro-American paradigms (1993a).

24. In earlier eras, inside the *bot,* artists painted rows and registers of large Buddha figures and other divine beings, filling the spaces above the windows. All were turned toward the presiding Buddha image, drawing the eyes of the visitor to the statue.

25. His Thai word *"prasong"* (purpose) is a synonym for *mung* (intention).

26. The article appears in both Thai and English. Thai *bot* is translated as "chapel." The verb *tang jai,* often translated into English as "to be determined," has been translated here as "true intention," which has particular resonance in Thai Buddhist belief. To have the right intention is the second precept of the noble eightfold path to enlightenment.

27. This description aptly refers to Buddhist articulations of the ugly physicality of *samsara,* the cycle of birth and rebirth.

28. A Thai architectural historian disagreed with the opinion that bright mural colors violate hierarchies of Thai religious space. He observed that muralists have always worked with available colors, thus earlier "muted" palettes were temperas derived from natural materials. Art historians who define the key features of classical Thai mural painting as muted coloring and a harmonious palette assess preacrylic technologies, accentuated by fading and the accumulation of grime, rather than conscious artistic choice.

29. At Wat Buddhapadipa, meditation classes are usually held in the basement of the *bot,* a relatively plain room. On several occasions I went upstairs to receive additional instruction and to meditate in the main shrine room. Indeed, it is extremely difficult to concentrate on breathing instead of the sumptuous coloring and endlessly fascinating details of the murals.

30. Of course, temples and other Hindu/Buddhist constructions themselves have long been seen as monuments of the state. Throughout the history of Indian and Southeast Asian kingdoms, such monuments articulate the convergence of divine and earthly power in the person of the monarch. The primary difference here, I would argue, is that of creating a symbology of *national* power in the context of Siamese resistance to the colonialist threats of England and France.

31. Wyatt argues for murals as historiography in this sense in his analysis of the Wat Phumin murals in Nan (1993).

32. As Kammerer and Tannenbaum note in their introduction to the complexities of Buddhism's encounter with animism in Southeast Asia, "Buddhism on the ground is not the Buddhism of texts, and the canon is not practice" (1996, 10). A classic study of Buddhism in social context is Spiro (1970).

33. F. Reynolds sees the evolution of the Theravada tradition of Buddhism (as distinguished from Mahayana Buddhism, that doctrinal tradition concentrated in north and east Asia) in three strands: the doctrinal, the buddhological, and the cosmological. The latter two strands, with concerns in the "foreground at the popular and royal levels of communal life," relate most directly to temple mural themes and iconography, at least in Thailand (F. and M. Reynolds 1982, 13).

34. Ideas here of "textual practices" were stimulated by Anne Blackburn in her critique of the panel "Theravada Buddhism: Strategies of Knowledge and Authority" at the 1999 meetings of the Association for Asian Studies.

35. One could just as easily argue that issues of Thai *national* identity and tradition have dominated public discourse at other moments in Thai history—particularly during the 1930s and 1940s and the promulgation of the Cultural Mandates of the Luang Wichit era (an influential member of the first postcoup government of Phibunsongkhram). I agree with Kasian (1996), however, that the terms of the discourse have shifted from national identity to individual, personal identity with the gaze of international tourists and the widespread (if recently deflated) prosperity and proliferation of consumer choices.

36. Thai banks have been particularly prominent in these processes. Gray (1991) analyzes the increasing appropriation by Thai banks of key Buddhist rituals through sponsorship and control as a means of legitimizing their penetration into local economies. Temple (and ritual) sponsorship, as merit-making, is a key component of the indigenous symbology of power. Banks have become the primary patrons of Thai contemporary art as well (Apinan 1992; Phillips 1992).

The economic crisis of 1997 has, in the views of many observers, resulted in a (perhaps) temporary suspension of the proliferation of these international status symbols. One Bangkok Mercedes-Benz dealer even established a flea market for the "formerly rich" to divest themselves of their excess goods—automobiles, furniture, watches, and wine collections. However, the 1998 auction of Thai art in the collections of finance companies, which had been closed because of the crisis, resulted in a surprising (some termed it "outrageous") inflation of the prices of Thai paintings by some famous artists, while prices of art have fallen in general. See chapter 7.

37. It was only later that I learned about the detail in the mural where Panya is portrayed looking over the shoulder of David Hockney. Like Hockney's assemblages, these written "snapshots" form uneven junctures rather than a smooth, coherent narrative or picture.

38. *Khon baan naawk* (also *chao baan naawk*) refers to people living "upcountry," i.e., people living in the villages and small towns of Thailand outside Bangkok. *Khon thii kuey pai muang naawk* identifies people who go abroad (literally, people who are used to going to countries outside). The latter term generally associates "abroad" with Western countries. In terms of social status, the two are opposites—countrypeople whose culture is "lower" contrasted with those who have knowledge of the West and are therefore more "civilized." According to my informants, traveling to other countries of Asia does not accrue the same status. Burma is out of the category, and Laos does not really count. Singapore and Hong Kong are better. England rates at the top. If a Thai goes abroad, his or her status changes permanently. They are no longer *khon baan naawk,* even if they come from upcountry or live upcountry upon their return. See Thongchai (2000) on the nineteenth-century discourse on travel and *siwilai,* or "civilization." He argues that Thai elite concerns with the comparative geographies of "civilization" included creating categories for the "Others within" Thailand.

39. For the purposes of this chapter, I use "citizenship" more in its cultural sense, as social practice, rather than as an "effect of state instrumentality," although the latter remains relevant to artists traveling to work abroad (Ong 1993, 747). Foster (1991), in his analysis of "national cultures," sees the creation of a national citizen broadly as "a particular kind of subject with a definite sort of historical consciousness, view of authority, and sense of self." The process of creating the Thai citizen became paramount during the reign of King Chulalongkorn; as discussed below, Thais continually refer to that era as formative of "Thainess" in its nationalist sense.

40. Wolters (1999). In Wolters' classic formulation, "men of prowess" possess both spiritual and leadership resources. In Thailand historically, as in other countries of Southeast Asia, geographical mobility—for work, education and/or adventure—contributes to social constructions of masculinity and male potency. Phillips (1965) and Kirsch (1966) examine rural attitudes toward mobility. The more recent phenomenon of Thai males traveling abroad as contract laborers, however, has engendered social anxieties in rural areas (Mills 1995). Women who travel alone violate social norms and can incur sanctions of suspicion, gossip, even accusations of sorcery (Mills 1997, 1999; Forshee 2001). Mills examines the new spatial mobility of rural Thai women migrating to Bangkok for work; Forshee (2001) looks at emerging cultures of travel relating to the trade in *ikat* cloth in Sumba, Indonesia, especially relating to travel's effects on gender relations.

41. I have adapted the concept of "geographies of identity"—articulated through "differential consciousness"—from Lavie and Swedenburg (1996, 4).

Chapter 2: Long-Distance Merit-Making

1. Cited in Apinan (1990, 166).

2. Being ordained as a monk for three months remains a rite of passage for Thai Buddhist males, although less widely practiced among recent generations.

3. Buddhists who emphasize practice—as opposed to study and teaching—consider meditation, as mental development, to be central. There are two kinds of meditation: *samathi* and *vipassana*. The former, often called concentration or tranquility meditation, involves focus upon a meditation object. The latter, insight meditation, trains the mind to observe reality and the constancy of change (Sumedho 1987).

4. Cremation books written or compiled to honor the dead comprise a significant sector of Thai literature (Phillips 1987a, 20–21). Sawet's wife Sobha had already been cremated; Sawet intended this volume to be distributed at a memorial ceremony for her in Chiang Rai.

5. Unlike the travel of Western explorers, missionaries, or colonialists, travel in Thailand does not generally represent a claim of dominance or position

over others (Said 1979), but rather an attempt to increase social standing at home—in much the same ways certain types of tourism, including travel to promote world peace, build social currency or cultural capital in the West. The comparative knowledge gained through travel often transmutes into standards by which "Thai culture" is then measured; the religious, administrative, and cultural reforms of mid-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries have been analyzed from this perspective (Thongchai 2000). Thongchai rejects these impulses as self-Orientalizing ones, claiming instead that Western-derived standards of *siwilai* have functioned more as internal buffers of social class and power. Nonetheless, the opinions of Westerners about Thailand matter to Thais as an external source of validation; this concern informed the building and painting at Wat Buddhapadipa from the beginning.

6. As of 2000, the classrooms had been constructed, as were separate restrooms to accommodate the crowds at temple festivals.

7. Numerous scholars have addressed the emergence of urban middle-class Buddhist sects in Thailand, another manifestation of this continuing realignment of laity, *sangha,* and state. See, for example, Jackson (1989), Keyes (1989), R. O'Connor (1993), Schober (1995), Suwanna (1990), Taylor (1989, 1993), and Zehner (1990). Some of these movements—especially those involving forest monks—have encouraged a domestic version of the sort of long-distance merit-making discussed here (Taylor 1993). Others, such as the controversial Dhammakaya Movement, have taken the notion of money for merit to new extremes of corporate rationalization, sophisticated marketing techniques, and networking (Zehner 1990; Sanitsuda 1998).

8. "Economy of merit," (cf. Lehman 1989, 1996; Schober 1995, 311) refers to the gift exchanges and ritual sponsorship that reproduce a conceptual linkage of social position, religious belief, and ethical action. Considerations and implications of merit are deeply ingrained in Thai social interactions and continue to operate in all spheres, including those not directly involving lay/monastic relations. The Thai continually create opportunities to "make merit" in new contexts, such as through tourist travel to Europe, hence an "expanding economy of merit."

9. Schober (1995) argues that lay Buddhist groups redirect emphasis away from temple-based merit-making rituals toward Buddhist principles of ethical action and political engagement by lay elites. Such shifts in practice remain within the conceptual field of an economy of merit, however, as the notion of accumulating merit or of seeking future rewards for ethical action serves as a key legitimating concept underlying social and exchange relations. R. O'Connor (1986) connects the specifically Thai meanings of "self-interest" (merit-making to enhance one's position in this life) to broader Western philosophical paradigms of self-interest, such as economic rationalism. His distinctions between domains of relationships (market, benevolence/respect, and discipline/respect) elucidate the means by which ethics of modernity have meshed with Thai notions of merit in specific contexts of "capitalism," the "bureaucracy," and "science."

10. The following discussion of the sponsors is based on extensive interviews with Khun Sawet, Dr. Konthi, and others attached to the Thai embassy at the time of the temple's construction. The two books published on the history of Wat Buddhapadipa (Phrakhru Palaat 1987; Konthi 1982) include lists of donors and the amount of their contributions. Many sponsors who had given the most money were unavailable for interviews. Some had passed away; others were ill; and several claimed that the project happened "too long ago" for them to remember details. This made impossible a comprehensive analysis of specific donor's interests.

11. "Cultural citizenship" in this study refers to discursive practices by powers of the state (king or government) that define or model a "good citizen" and promote a sense of cultural belonging. See Ong (1993, 747–751).

12. General Kriangsak headed the Thai government 1977–1980.

13. Professor Sanya, an important elder in Thai society during critical events of the 1970s, was selected by the king to be prime minister after the 1973 student demonstrations. His administration lasted less than two years. He had also served as president of the Privy Council, which advises the king, and as minister of justice.

14. Szanton Blanc (1997) and Kasian (1997b) analyze the contemporary positions and cultural politics of the Sino-Thai in Thailand. Gray (1991, 1992) discusses merit-making activities on the part of Thai bankers seeking legitimacy in rural communities. The imprint of the Thai Farmers' Bank logo on the monks' seats at a temple outside Bangkok, where I visited in 1999, visually confirms these converging economies of merit and capitalism. Bank sponsor-

ship of merit-making rituals also, of course, involves individual motivations to *tham bun*.

In discussing Chinese immigrants in the U.S., Ong (1993, 1997) argues for an inversion of Bourdieu's 1984 equation of symbolic capital with economic capital: wealthy Chinese immigrants convert economic capital into cultural capital. As a substantial segment of the Thai elite is Sino-Thai, Ong's point is relevant here as well.

15. Buddhism took root in England in the Victorian era, resulting from the expansion of British colonial and commercial interests in Buddhist Ceylon (Sri Lanka) and Burma and the exposure of colonial functionaries to Buddhist thought and practice. In 1881, one of the members of the colonial service, T. W. Rhys-Davids, founded the Pali Text Society in London to promote the translation of sacred Buddhist texts. At the turn of the century, British enthusiasts opened a Buddhist bookshop. The British Buddhist Society was established in 1924. The resurgence of interest in so-called "Eastern religions" of the 1960s overlays these intellectual interests of earlier generations in Britain. Oliver (1979), Almond (1988), and Bell (2000) recount this history of Buddhism in Britain, with attention to the different strains of Buddhism and their respective temples.

16. "Phra" means "monk"; *khru* and *ajarn* both indicate teacher, the latter usually applied to a professor or teacher possessing an advanced academic degree. As I will discuss in chapter 3, the teacher/student relationship is one of the most important in Thai society.

17. During his thirty years as a monk, King Mongkut initiated strict, textually based reforms of the Thai *sangha* (Mahanikai order) in the ordination, dress, daily practice, ritual, and preaching among a group of monks that became the Thammayut sect ("Order Adhering to the Dhamma"). This influential sect moved to Wat Boworniwet, an important royal temple in central Bangkok, with Mongkut as its abbot, in the late 1830s. While the Mahanikai sect continues to dominate the Thai *sangha* in terms of sheer numbers, the Thammayut order has extended its influence through connections with the monarchy—Thammayut monks were named exclusively as Supreme Patriarch until 1938—and establishment of temples in the northeast. With its emphasis on strict monastic discipline and disdain for the magico-religious practices that had become pervasive in Thai Buddhism, the Thammayut order has fostered a modernist worldview (Kirsch 1978; Keyes 1989). In everyday terms, the differing stress on discipline and the nature of proper relations with the lay community has engendered some tension between the two orders, primarily between monks.

18. A full explication and analysis of the political controversies that preceded the establishment of Wat Buddhapadipa are beyond the scope of this discussion. An account of the conflict between the Mahanikai and Thammayut orders, which had been building throughout the 1950s, and the controversy between Phra Phimolathan and Phra Mahawirawong (his Thammayut rival) described as "two lions trying to live in the same cave," is offered in Tambiah (1976, 253–261). See also Ishii (1968) for discussion of the earlier events, and Jackson (1989, chapter 5).

19. Taylor suggests that the establishment of forest *wat* (a temple complex) in upcountry Thailand, and the nurturing by Thammayut order monks of connections between charismatic forest monks and lay members of the Bangkok urban elite, was in part a response to the growing popularity of the *vipassana* meditation movement at Wat Mahathat (1993, 260).

20. Tambiah contrasts this type of this-worldly organizing on the part of individual monks within the Thai *sangha* with the Thammathut program, a project of the Thai state, in which monks are sent to villages throughout the country to promote community welfare and national development. The monks who serve at Wat Buddhapadipa are Thammathut.

21. According to Tambiah, the Siamese monarchy (and later Thai state), in its role as protector and patron of Buddhism, has controlled the affairs of the *sangha* through departments of ecclesiastical administration since the Ayutthayan era. In the late nineteenth century King Chulalongkorn consolidated state control over the Thai *sangha* through the Religious Affairs Department (RAD) of the Ministry of Education. While the *sangha* and the RAD may be described as having parallel titles and hierarchies, Tambiah notes that the relationship between the two is asymmetrical, with the affairs of the *sangha* formally supervised by the minister of education (1976, 370). The director-general of the RAD, considered by one informant a "prime mover" in the founding of Wat Buddhapadipa, clearly did not consider sending Phra Rajsidhimuni to London a threat.

22. In the late 1970s, following the establishment of Wat Buddhapadipa, the renowned Thai forest monk Ajarn Man visited the Hampstead Buddhavihara. His visit eventually led his American-born disciple, Ajarn Sumedho, to establish several other Thai

Buddhist monasteries in England, collectively known as the as the British Forest Sangha (Bell 1997, 2000). These rural monasteries contrast quite dramatically with Wat Buddhapadipa in their emphasis on strict (some have said "austere") monastic practice, in accordance with Thammayut principles. Wat Buddhapadipa is a Mahanikai temple.

23. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, King Bhumiphol traveled extensively throughout his kingdom. Having been raised largely outside Thailand, his travels during this period consolidated his symbolic capital and preeminent position as righteous monarch of the Thai nation (Gray 1992). His participation in this dedication ceremony may be seen as an acknowledgment of (and gesture of dominion and protection over) communities of Thais abroad.

24. The deed has remained in the name of the Royal Thai government for tax purposes.

25. The Temple of the Emerald Buddha houses the most sacred Buddha image in Thailand, upon which the legitimacy of the Chakri dynasty—and the nation—is believed to rest.

26. A few Thais spoke to me of overt English racism, usually name-calling on the streets. Local opposition to the construction and operation of a Thai temple in upper-middle-class English suburbs may have had racialist undertones, but they were publicly expressed in terms familiar to many neighborhood development projects: noise, preservation of neighborhood character, and property values.

27. Before such festivals, temple personnel inform neighbors about their plans. The English press has lauded Wat Buddhapadipa for being a "good neighbor" for providing parking at the lowest local rates during the annual Wimbledon tennis matches.

28. Thai temples conventionally receive annual support budgets from the Religious Affairs Department. However, to finance building and renovation projects they raise funds through donations and through selling amulets.

29. For Thais, donating money to build a temple—thereby spreading the teachings of the Buddha and supporting the *sangha*—ranks as one of the most meritorious acts, far more ennobling than Western charity donations. Historically, when *wat* were the centers of Thai social life, they performed charity functions as schools, orphanages, old-age homes, recreational centers, etc. Thus merit-making at the temple supported the entire community. Now Thais also give to nonreligious charity organizations and sponsor events that raise funds for charities—see chapter 6 for an account of one such event.

30. The oft-discussed "three pillars" of Thai official ideology—religion, nation, king—were propagated as such by King Vajiravudh (Rama VI, r. 1910–1925). Popular discourse interchanges them in that an appeal to one implies the other two. In this ideological configuration, "Nation" usually refers to the Thai citizenry, not the Thai state. The latter remains conceptually separate because of the unpopular military dominance of Thai governments since the overthrow of the absolute monarchy in 1932. For further discussions of this "civic religion," see Reynolds (1978a) and Keyes (1987, 59).

31. For discussions of the transfer of merit—between son and parents, between neighbors, on behalf of the dead, or in honor of the king—see Tambiah (1968), Ingersoll (1975), and Spiro (1970, 124). Keyes argues that this transfer of merit enables the laity (householders in Buddhist terminology) to live in a social order and at the same time adhere to a soteriology that stresses nonattachment (1983, 271).

32. In this sense, merit-making fulfills those requirements that make the gift a total social phenomenon, according to Mauss' classic formulation (1990 [1950]). Mauss' essential point revolved around the notion of the degree to which gifts entail obligations of reciprocity and animate continuing social relations. Can merit exchanges entail obligation yet remain pure acts of selfless giving? Thais usually avoid judgments of intention, acknowledging them to be entirely personal and ultimately unknowable. As scholars have long argued, merit-making actions animate social as well as religious values. They do, however, evaluate the acts (giving) themselves and the effects of such gifts (Hanks 1962). Thai forms of sociality suggest that merit-making occasions entail obligations to reciprocate. Public lists of donations—often posted prominently outside temple buildings—not only validate the merit of the gift, but also constitute a form of status competition. For example, villagers who participate in another village's Bun Phrawes Festival or life-cycle events—which have explicit merit-making components—participate in balanced exchange. Individuals seek donations for their favorite temples from their associates and make similar donations in return, especially during *kathin* season. One informant distributed 200–300 envelopes seeking donations for Wat Buddhapadipa among his friends; his requests were rarely refused. Two points are salient here: such specific donations take place within a larger system of gift, service, and favor exchange that is structured by the ethos of merit. While merit-making results in *bun*

(merit) for individuals, it represents a more generalized "enhancement of positive social relations," giving others happiness, gaiety, laughter, and fun (Ingersoll 1975, 235).

33. I am grateful to Ajarn Prapod Assavavirulhakarn for discussions of these matters.

34. Theravada Buddhists donate food daily to monks as they walk on alms rounds, or visit the temple to prepare food and make merit on other specific occasions, such as birthdays.

35. This celebration marked the 200th birthday of the city of Bangkok and, more important, the Chakri dynasty that founded the city—one of the longest-reigning dynasties in the world. The boundary stones are buried beneath the *bai sema,* markers erected at eight points around the perimeter of the *ubosot* at Wat Buddhapadipa, and delineate that space as sacred.

36. This anecdote gains special significance when understood as a son making merit on behalf of his mother. In Thai Theravada Buddhism, women may not be ordained as monks, a position of considerably enhanced merit and essential for final enlightenment. Theravada Buddhist sons may be ordained at least once in their life on behalf of their mothers, as an act of gratitude that transfers the accrued merit from the son to the mother (Keyes 1984; Kirsch 1982). Due to the exigencies of war and his diplomatic commitments, Dr. Konthi had not been ordained prior to his mother's death. He was ordained for one month after she died.

37. As of the dedication of the Wat Buddhapadipa murals in 1987—the small rooms were not finished until 1992—the estimated total worth of the hundreds of donated air tickets was 1.12 million baht (US$48,000).

38. In the context of an expanding global economy, the project of any national embassy now includes the promotion of exports, investment, and tourism in addition to processing visas and servicing its nationals living in the country. One former Thai ambassador to the United Kingdom described his mission there precisely in these terms of economic expansion as well as the reestablishment of historically close ties between Britain and England. These ties had withered with the contraction of the British Empire following World War II and the expansion of Japanese corporate investments in Thailand.

39. Thai Airways International has also subsidized the travel of many of the artists participating in the exchanges sponsored by the Thai Art Council of Los Angeles (a project of artist Kamol Tassananchalee, a longtime Thai expatriate).

40. These differing orientations relate to fundamental contradictions in the Dhamma teachings between ideals of the pursuit of individual salvation through study and meditation and the delay of the attainment of nirvana to teach others the path to enlightenment. These issues are explored in greater doctrinal and historical depth in Taylor (1993), Ishii (1986), Tambiah (1976, 1984) and Kirsch (1978).

41. Loy Krathong, the floating of "leaf-cups" containing candles and other offerings, honors the Thai goddess of water. Wat Buddhapadipa sponsors this celebration at the same time as the annual *kathin* ceremony. Songkran celebrates the Thai New Year.

42. In a contrasting selection of "image," one of Thailand's leading architects, Sumset Jumsai, sought a clean-lined modernist image for his *ubosot* at Wat Sri Khom Kham in Thailand's northern Phayao Province.

43. The "slippery" meanings of *siwilai* ranged widely from specific ideas of etiquette and dress (e.g., wearing shirts) to more generalized notions of progress and advancement (Thongchai 2000). This discourse marks a new historical consciousness of the type that signals a divide between "tradition" and "modernity."

44. Scholars dispute whether these reforms constituted the beginnings of modernization, as the country's power structures remained largely intact (Anderson 1978). The historian Thongchai Winichakul makes the persuasive argument that these reforms, and the quest for *siwilai* more generally, represented attempts by the monarchs to maintain a Thai elite perception of relative superiority over their own sphere of power domestically and in the region as well as to stave off expansionist pressures by the English and French.

45. The "authenticity" and "Thainess" sought by the architect and sponsors must, of course, be understood according to their subject position. Thais who see the *ubosot* at Wat Buddhapadipa note its "foreign" qualities, especially the number and shape of its windows. This contrasts with the view of non-Thais, who see the temple as "Thai style," whether traditional or not. It is certainly not "English style."

46. Buddhism is often contrasted to Christianity in their respective approaches to proselytizing. Buddhists seek to make Buddha's teachings available rather than to seek converts. Constructing temples and offering classes and meditation sessions indicates such an approach. Buddhists often stress that to accept the Dhamma requires no conversion, since Buddhism is not a matter of faith.

47. As an agency of the Thai government, the Fine Arts Department (FAD) produces portraits of the king and other national and historical figures that hang in government buildings. Its staff also designs elaborate structures for public ceremonies and rituals. Hence, the FAD generates official, state-sponsored Thai cultural productions.

48. "National Artists" are so-named by the Office of the National Culture Commission in recognition of their excellence in the contemporary practice of traditional Thai literary, visual, and performing arts.

49. In the context of designing and building this *ubosot,* the architect and sponsors sought authentic "Thainess" more in the ornamental surface details than in the overall design or underlying structure of the building. This illustrates Spooner's formulation that sets the "authentic" at the intersection of facts—the characteristics or qualities of objects, such as age, mode of production, and material—and values—the cultural interpretations and significance given those qualities (1986).

50. While many, if not most, *ubosot* under construction within Thailand are built as "traditional," which is to say in the late Rattanakosin style of the *bot* at Wat Buddhapadipa, notable exceptions throughout the country represent radical departures from this dominant architectural style. While retaining overall symbolic shapes characteristic of *ubosot* and *viharn,* some contemporary architects (and the temple abbots who commission such buildings) are rejecting extremes of color and ornamentation for simplicity. They hold both doctrinal and philosophical reasons that architecture must fit into its environment. "Buddha teaches us to practice the middle path, to avoid extravagance," notes one such architect. But concerns are also practical, as the costs and skills required to produce elaborate ornamentation are extensive (Patima Tha Hla, 1994).

51. Wat Benchamabophit in Bangkok—the "Marble Temple," built during the reign of King Chulalongkorn—is considered one of Thailand's first modern temples and served as a model for Ajarn Praves' design. It also contains two wings. Thai evaluations of the design of the *ubosot* at Wat Buddhapadipa parallel those criticizing its murals on the grounds of hybridity. One architectural historian believes that by Thai standards, the final design is "too simplified" and that in adapting it to the English environment and to British construction standards it ended up lacking the grace and harmonious proportions of classical Thai architecture.

52. The "Past Ten Lives" *(thosochat)* are the final ten Jatakas, stories of the Buddha's past lives.

53. Given the discrepancy in both age and social status between these two artists and Khun Sawet, a senior politician, this is a rather audacious act, and one typical of Chalermchai.

54. This particular concern was not an abstract worry. In a later conversation he referred to two other well-known mural projects in Thailand where the artists had had difficulty completing their work—one because of the artist's personal situation and the other due to conflicts between the artist, sponsor, and temple abbot.

55. This gross underestimate perhaps shows the naiveté or inexperience of the two regarding the project: in the end, the murals took eight years (1984–1992) and cost 9 million baht (US$360,000).

56. This statement appeared in the pamphlet published by the London Buddhist Temple Foundation (1989) to accompany the exhibit at the Thailand Cultural Centre.

57. A number of visitors to Wat Buddhapadipa bring donations of ninety-nine eggs, said to be particularly favored by this image. The artists themselves credited the image with enabling the wife of one of the artists to become pregnant twice. The caretaker at Wat Buddhapadipa, an excellent cook, prides himself on his repertoire of recipes requiring lots of eggs.

58. When two presiding Buddha images are offered to a temple, the monks would ordinarily install one in the *ubosot,* the other in the *viharn.* The solution here of installing two large images at the same altar creates an anomaly—as does the painting of murals by two artists of equal stature—and contributes further to the binary or hybrid character of Wat Buddhapadipa.

59. Taylor (1993) outlines how similar personal networks have connected the urban elite of Bangkok with forest monasteries on the peripheries of Thailand. The establishment of Wat Buddhapadipa represents another level of that process. Several people with whom I spoke describe the evolution of the Thai temple in Los Angeles, California, in much the same terms.

60. The Thai temple in Los Angeles, which serves the largest Thai community outside of Thailand (estimates range from 100,000 to 200,000), is much larger than the one at Wimbledon. The area surrounding the temple has become, in the words of one Thai observer, "like a Thai village." But the ori-

entation of this temple is primarily toward serving the needs of the Thai community, largely Sino-Thai and working class rather than the more upper-class population in London —and not toward projecting an elite image of Thai culture to an international audience. Both temples, however, are sources of national cultural pride.

Chapter 3: Thai Art and the Authority of the Past

1. In the context of the following discussion, "tradition" includes modes of making art that artists themselves learn as "Thai" and situated ideas about the past summoned into the present as an authority that legitimates such practices and relations. Art historian Stanley J. O'Connor suggests we view tradition in art "never merely [as] a set of transmissible practices but rather a way that consciousness is caught up in things" (1995, 4). My concern here is to convey some notion of how interests—academic, state, and commercial—shape that consciousness about mural painting in different historical contexts.

2. Silpa Bhirasri—the Italian sculptor formerly known as Corrado Feroci, who immigrated to Thailand in 1923 to work for the Fine Arts Department—became popularly known as the "Father of Thai Modern Art" (Michaelsen 1993). In contrast to this view, articulated by his students and the official histories of Silpakorn University, which he founded, a few Thai art historians now temper the centrality of his role. They focus instead on the earlier initiatives of Thai royalty in introducing Western genres of artistic production and concepts of modernity to Thailand (Apinan 1992; Clark 1997; Thanom, personal communication).

3. At that time, *Phujatkan* was one the periodicals most widely read by the Thai business and middle classes, who collect Thai art.

4. The timing in this case was probably intentional. Thais show concern for the auspicious timing of public and private events, often determined through careful astrological reckoning. See note 59 for discussion of the *wai khru* ceremony.

5. *The Nation,* an English-language daily, also published a collage to illustrate its article on the controversy. Presumably to create a parallel effect for its many foreign, English-speaking readers, the newspaper superimposed Vishnu's face on the *Mona Lisa* with two labels: "50% DISCOUNT" and "NEGATIVE SHOCK?"

6. In Thai Buddhist culture, full prostration before a monk or Buddha image shows the deepest form of respect and devotion.

7. Supporters included artists and arts faculty from Chulalongkorn University, who publicly scolded *Phujatkan* in other newspapers. However, a former dean of Thammasat University was quoted as saying that while the action was entirely in keeping with the *Phujatkan*'s style, "others may not take it as sensitively as the people at Silpakorn University do."

8. To *wai* (a gesture of respect), one bows one's head with hands placed palms and fingers together and touching the forehead or nose. Youth and/or social inferiors usually *wai* their elders or social superiors, who then return the gesture. Students *wai* their professors in greeting and in passing.

9. "Santa Lucia," the official song of Silpakorn University, can be heard on the university's website, www.su.ac.th.

10. In his description of the *wai khru* ceremony, Dhanit Yupho makes explicit this connection: "Generally speaking, a baby cease [*sic*] to be animal-like because it lives in the society of other human beings who care about it. When young a child is reared and trained by his parents. When he grows older he receives guidance and instructions from teachers" (1990, 3).

11. The status and power of "images"—statues, portraits, and likenesses in the form of amulets—remain of vital interest for the Thai. See Tambiah (1984) on the cult of amulets of monks and Apinan (1996a) on the 1990s cult surrounding King Chulalongkorn's statue and amulets. Silpa Bhirasri himself is the object of such veneration: Silpakorn faculty and students pay respects daily to his statue, draping the statue with garlands of flowers *(maalai)* and other offerings. Students have been known to cast the professor's image into amulets, believing them to contain supernatural powers.

12. The issue of an inflated art market was not new to the Bangkok art world. In the 1960s, when *farang* residents and tourists began to buy Thai art, *Bangkok World* art critic Michael Smithies criticized young artists who priced their work beyond the means of the average Thai, thus isolating themselves from a wider Thai audience (1978).

13. Works by well-known painters were routinely priced at 500,000–1 million baht (US$20,000–40,000). To a large degree, the public pricing of art itself had become a status competition, as many Thai collectors equated high prices with high artis-

tic value. In many venues, public prices alone indicated artistic worth—indexing popularity and potential resale value (see the account of the FRA art auction in chapter 7). The actual sales price of this art remains another, quite private, matter, as negotiations most often take place directly between artist and buyer. Deep discounts were quite common.

14. Another prominent factor in this discourse on commercialization is jealousy. In private conversations, artists often accuse the detractors of highly visible and financially successful artists such as Thawan Duchanee and Chalermchai Kositpipat (see chapter 6) of being jealous (*idchaa)* and of lacking success in their own lives.

15. Other public universities established fine arts departments in the 1990s, including Khon Kaen, Srinakharinwirot, and Burapha. Rangsit and Bangkok University, both private institutions, also teach fine art (Henderson 1998, 138–139). The Thai elite consider Chulalongkorn University the most prestigious in general; however, many told me Chulalongkorn art students were not those most interested in art—indeed, they may be studying art because they failed entry into other curricula.

16. Henderson notes that in 1997, of eleven judges of the Bua Luang competition sponsored by the Bangkok Bank, eight were Silpakorn graduates or faculty (1998, 153).

17. These scholars include Silpa Bhirasri (1959a), Lyons (1960), Wenk (1975), Boisselier (1976), Ginsburg (1989), and Ringis (1990). The elements of tradition these scholars enumerate also apply to related genres of manuscript painting and cabinet lacquer work.

18. In Thai art generally, the sense of linearity dominates that of volume, as in the Sukhothai-era Walking Buddha images, iconic of Thai sculpture. In this image, the S-curve recalls the *tribhanga* curve of early Buddhist sculpture. Scholars of Thai painting cited above consider the incised stone Jataka tales at Wat Sri Chum in Sukhothai as the antecedents of painted murals (see, e.g., Silpa Bhirasri 1954, 281; Boisselier 1976).

19. The dichotomy between the "conceptual" and the "perceptual" cannot be sustained to the point of positing a mind/body split that would somehow sidestep the visual faculties of painters. I use these terms, as have Thai art writers and artists, to differentiate an emphasis on the visual enactment of an idea from attempts to render elements and locations of the "real world."

20. "Chakri" designates the position of military commander held by Thong Duang (the first Bangkok-era monarch) when he ascended to the Siamese throne in 1782. This king, who reigned as Rama I—was named after the hero of the *Ramakien*, the Thai version of the Indian epic *Ramayana*. His rule inaugurated the Rattanakosin, or Bangkok, era, conventionally figured as the third era of central Siamese/Thai history following the Sukhothai (mid-thirteenth–mid-fifteenth centuries) and Ayutthaya (mid-fourteenth–eighteenth centuries) monarchies. Chakri monarchs have reigned in Siam—renamed Thailand in 1939—continuously ever since. A coup in 1932 abolished the absolute monarchy, reestablishing it as a constitutional monarchy. The present Thai monarch, King Bhumiphol Adulyadej, reigns as Rama IX.

21. Chetana's 1993 essay traces out parallel transformations in Thai literary production. Scholars have recognized "localization" as a long-standing trope in Southeast Asian studies. See Wolters (1999, 73–75). The nature and significance of these localizing or indigenizing processes dominate theoretical discussions of contemporary Southeast Asian art—see Clark (1993a and b, 1997) and the essays in *Traditions/Tensions* (Asia Society 1996).

22. As discussed in chapter 1, such criticisms come from both Thai and Western scholars, although the Western criticism tends to focus on perceived awkwardness in the modulation of color, not the bright hues per se.

23. See Boisselier (1976, 104–106) and Apinan (1992, 3) for further analysis of "Sinomania" in Thai art in the early nineteenth century, a result of the influx of Chinese artisans, King Rama III's personal interest in things Chinese, and the patronage of temples by Sino-Thai merchants.

24. *Stupa* and *chedi* are usually bell-shaped structures containing bones of deceased persons or important religious relics. *Viharn* (a hall housing sacred images, used for public lectures) and *ubosot* are similar structurally; *ubosot* differs by being consecrated by the *bai sema* and boundary stones (see chapter 2, note 31) for the ordination of monks.

25. Wannipa 1994, personal communication. M. L. Pattaratorn Chirapravati (2000) analyzes the findings at Wat Ratchaburana.

26. Brown (1997) analyzes the spatial positioning of many early Buddhist narrative carvings and their arrangement in "non-narrative" order. I accept the thrust of his argument that early carvings of the Buddhist Jatakas were probably not intended to be didactic or instructional.

27. Ishii (1993, 187) discusses the state's institution in the fifteenth century of the *samanasak,* or ecclesiastical rank, and *ratchathinnaman,* or ecclesiastical title. Monks were also integrated in the Ayutthayan system of social ranking whereby all individuals and positions in the kingdom were graded according to *sakdina,* literally, "field power." These changes were designed to bring the *sangha* under the administrative control of the ruler.

28. Art historians Huntington (1990, 1992) and Dehejia (1991, 1992) debate whether such elements constitute aniconic representations of the Buddha, references to his teachings, or markers of the sacred site itself.

29. Just as people bow before the Buddha, they bow to and *wai* the king. The close association that Ayutthayan kings claimed with *chakravartin* (universal king), bodhisattvas, or Buddhas-to-be has been drawn by several scholars (for one, see McGill 1993, 1997). Figures on temple walls assume devotional attitudes appropriate to the making of both Buddhist and royal subjects. At Wat Tri Thosothep in Bangkok, the association between king and Buddha is made quite explicit—this contemporary Buddha image, called the "Phra Phutta Navaracha Bopitre," resembles the present king.

In a lecture on postcolonial Southeast Asia and economic nationalism, C. Reynolds asks, "Does this assertion of the nation-as-subject rely entirely on elite material for its formulation or is it a more complex amalgam of subjects or selves formed 'out there' in society? How were these subjects or selves 'out there' formed and when?" (1998, 31). It is my contention that temple murals—to the extent they appear in public spaces—contribute to the shaping of Thai Buddhist subjects.

30. The *vinaya* is the list of restrictions and prescriptions adhered to by devout Buddhists. Monks observe the most number of *vinaya* rules.

31. My fieldwork experiences supported scholarly claims for the didactic function of temple murals. If I encountered a monk while visiting temples, he often explained Buddhist ideas using the murals as references.

32. Ferguson and Johannsen (1976) have advanced this argument in terms of temples in northern Thailand. Chapter 4 discusses further this particular Jataka tale and its enormous cultural significance in establishing models of generous giving. The story recounts the life of the Buddha as Prince Wesandorn, who gives away the wealth of his kingdom and his family as he seeks enlightenment.

33. Until the late nineteenth century, the production of texts was centered in monasteries, where sacred books were copied onto manuscript pages made of palm leaf or split bamboo. Thai literature was transmitted orally (sung or chanted) or to the court elite via manuscripts handwritten on locally produced *khoi* paper.

34. The pavilion at Wat Buddhaisawan in Ayutthaya is believed to be the first public space with paintings of the *Traiphum* (Boisselier 1976). A cosmological and ethical treatise composed by the Sukhothai king Lüthai in 1345 A.D., this text describes thirty-one levels of existence, divided hierarchically into three worlds.

As religious doctrine, the *Traiphum* maps levels of spiritual attainment in the striving for nirvana. At the lowest level, the *kama loka* or *kama phumi* (the world of form and sensual desire) appears below the *rupa loka* (*rupa phumi*), a world whose inhabitants have form but who are detached from material desires. At the highest level, the *arupa loka,* the world of formlessness completes this conceptual progression from "corporeality to incorporeality, from body to intellect" (Tambiah 1970, 36). Beyond the third world lies nirvana, where sentient existence is extinguished and beings obtain release from the endless cycle of births and rebirths. Deities *(deva),* humans, animals, ghosts, and demons inhabit eleven levels of the first world, the *kama loka.* These eleven levels are grouped into the three sections of heaven, earth, and hell, also popularly called the "three worlds." C. Reynolds claims that one's placement in these worlds indicates an "index of one's self-reliance and freedom from the earthly world and its social and spiritual corruptions" (1976, 205). As popularly interpreted by Buddhist monks to lay worshipers, these worlds—with their attendant sufferings and delights—represent the consequences of sin and merit, the workings of karma.

Subsequent Siamese monarchs and their agents have compiled their own versions or have sponsored new editions of the *Traiphum,* most recently in 1985 by the Fine Arts Department. Reynolds and Reynolds (1982), who have translated the *Traiphum Phra Ruang* into English, discuss this text's position within the cosmological strand of Theravada Buddhist literature and practice. Andaya (1976) analyzes the context of the creation of King Lüthai's text. C. Reynolds (1976) and Jackson (1993) analyze the *Traiphum*'s centrality in Thai (and Southeast Asian) intellectual history and political reform movements.

35. Here, C. Reynolds (1976) borrows Hanks' 1962

classic formulation linking merit to power. Reynolds suggests a conceptual link between the levels of the *Traiphum* and the *sakdina* grading of social status prevalent in early Siam. He also examines the gradual displacement of the totalizing authority of the *Traiphum* by Western scientific knowledge in the reign of King Mongkut. Jackson (1993) analyzes the more recent interpretations and claims by Thai scholars of the *Traiphum* as political and social ideology that legitimates competing claims to the nature of Buddhist kingship, the Thai monarchy, and democratic reform movements in Thailand.

36. Thongchai Winichakul (1994) analyzes indigenous conceptions of space coexisting with the *Traiphum*—for example, a northern Thai topography of twelve sacred places of pilgrimage spanning human and celestial realms. The Thai also produced topographical maps in the late eighteenth century. Some of these maps related places not by "true geography," but by their position in the spread of Buddhism from its place of origin. Thongchai notes, "The Traiphum earth and the geographical earth are different, but related, kinds of space operating in different domains of human conception and practice" (1994, 30).

37. R. O'Connor has argued that ethnic T'ai (the dominant ethnic group in Thailand) culture is a culture of place, a continual negotiation between people and the sites they inhabit through the propitiation of local spirits of place (1990, 68). He notes also the Thai preference for verticality to articulate status and social relations in any given domain, even extending to naming practices of Bangkok neighborhoods.

38. Gordon (1996) assumes such scenes have no religious significance because of their marginality and lack of overt ideological content, in contrast to the scenes of temple and court. The very marginality of such scenes, I would argue, *is* ideological, as it positions common folk in the visual moral hierarchy painted into Thai murals. The doctrinal meanings of the *phaap kaak* scenes are overshadowed by their historical significance—for it is these scenes that scholars look to for visual documentation of past practices of dress, hairstyles, tattooing, architecture, customs of religious worship, forms of entertainment, and social relations.

39. The multiculturalism of attacking armies does reflect the actual composition of the Thai military. The armies of the Chakri monarchs in the nineteenth century (especially during the reign of Rama III) were largely non-Thai: Vietnamese (as artillery), Mon (as infantry), and Khmer and Lao (King's Guards). Cham and Malay dominated the Thai navy. As the Thai military during the reigns of Rama III and Rama IV functioned largely as instruments of internal political consolidation rather than as defenders from external aggression, these mural representations raise questions as to the moral positioning of the armies in a Buddhist context (see Battye, cited in Anderson 1978, 202, note 12). At Wat Buddhapadipa, an association of state warfare with the evils of Mara is quite explicit, as the war weapons of modernity (AK-47s, bazookas, missiles) constitute many of the weapons of Mara's army. These tokens of Western technology emblematize "modernity" in a general way, much as the Western-outfitted army itself did.

40. No Na Paknam (1986) illustrates and discusses many of these examples.

41. The painting of foreigners and state ceremonies into Thai temple murals parallels developments in Thai historiography, although with some lag in time. Such changes in historiography began in the seventeenth century with King Narai and his engagements with European, Japanese, and Persian diplomats. Forms of written history shifted from Buddhist history contained in legends *(tamnan)* to chronicles of royal activities *(phongsawadan)*. See Charnvit (1979) for early Thai historiography and Thongchai (1995) for contemporary changes.

42. This literary production embraces native genres as well as reworkings of tales from India, Persia, Sri Lanka, and Indonesia, including the *Ramakien*—the Siamese version of the Indian epic *Ramayana*. The carvings and murals at Wat Phrachetuphon (Wat Po) in Bangkok, renovated by Rama III, constitute a "visual encyclopedia" of Siamese knowledge, including medical practices. See Wyatt (1982, 175).

43. Boisselier 1976. Ishii (1993) discusses the introduction of new weaponry from the Portuguese during this period.

44. See Ringis (1990, 116) and the Muang Boran books on temples built or painted in the reigns of Mongkut and Chulalongkorn (the fourth and fifth reigns), when these changes in murals accelerate. King Chulalongkorn commissioned scenes from the life of the Ayutthayan king Naresuan, who defeated Burmese invaders in 1593, for Wat Suwanadaram in Ayutthaya. At the royal palace, murals at the Song Panuat chapel depict King Chulalongkorn's own travels in Europe and Asia and the renovations of the *chedi* that he sponsored at Nakhon Pathom.

45. In the context of nineteenth-century emerging nationalisms in Europe, being civilized meant "hav-

ing a culture" (Handler 1985), materialized through the discovery and display of "old things" that supplement written texts and oral histories. King Mongkut's discovery of a pillar containing Inscription Number One, a long passage reputedly inscribed during the reign of King Ramkhamhaeng, provided material evidence of a long-standing Siamese past, connecting Mongkut's reign and that of other Bangkok kings to the ancient kingdoms of Sukhothai and Ayutthaya. Cary (1994) documents Mongkut and Chulalongkorn's growing interest in the collection and display (in museums) of Siamese historical artifacts.

46. C. Reynolds (1976).

47. Khrua In Khong and his contributions to Thai mural painting are analyzed in Listopad (1984) and Muang Boran (1979).

48. Thongchai 1994.

49. Photography and visual realism in Thai portraiture develop in a parallel fashion. Cary (2000) analyzes the Siamese royal experiments with photography in the latter half of the nineteenth century as the "reinvention of themselves, their roles, and Siam's position in the world." She contrasts how King Mongkut (Rama IV) used photographs to cultivate personal relations with powerful foreign monarchs with how his son Chulalongkorn projected Siam to the larger world as modern and civilized in both institution and image. Apinan (1995a) traces the history of representations of Siamese monarchs, also in the context of modernization. The various styles of representation range widely, from a Westernized Mongkut in suit and bowler hat to a traditional monarch in the full regalia of a *devaraja* (god-king), suggesting strategic concern with self-presentation, multiple audiences, and ambivalence regarding the nature of the "modern" monarch.

50. One might claim that animals are "closer to nature" as well. In Thai social and moral hierarchies of space, the places inhabited by animals—forests (*paa*)—are associated with remoteness and lack of civilization (Tambiah 1984; Taylor 1993; Thongchai 2000). Taylor notes that the forest "outside ordered society . . . is somehow raw, dangerous, and unpredictable" (1993, 249). In contemporary Thai religious practices, urban lay practitioners establish ongoing merit relations with forest monks, believed to possess heightened supernatural powers in their ability to live in and mentally transcend the wildness of such places.

51. Wiyada (1989, 117) asserts that Khrua In Khong's easel painting of forests, currently in the National Gallery in Bangkok, is Thailand's "first truly realistic work." The "painterly realism" or naturalism that Thai artists adopt represents a "perceptual" attempt to render beings as they appear, as opposed to the "conceptual" approach of painting from the imagination, further discussed in chapter 6. Thai artists do not subscribe to the realism propagated by French realist Gustave Courbet, who wrote that painting is an "essentially *concrete* art and can only consist of the representation of *real* and *existing* objects" (cited in Smith 1996, 242). At Wat Buddhapadipa, this distinction is evident in the contrast between the "realistic" elephants of the *Mara* scenes (Plate 10) and the imaginary "Thai-style" elephants of the *Phra Wesandorn* scene (Plate 42).

52. Here I deliberately overstate and essentialize the "Thainess" of these scenes to make a point, but note that northeastern Isaan or northern Lanna mural variations in styles of figuration, decoration, and detail remain distinctively local as well. The settings and characters of these same narratives and scenes appear "different" in Burmese art, although rendered also in a flattened, linear style. See, for example, Herbert's *The Life of the Buddha,* with illustrations derived from Burmese manuscripts of the same period as the classical Thai murals. My point is precisely that the look of mural spaces and inhabitants *are* localized, enhancing an experience of the stories unfolding at the very moment and in the very place of their viewing.

53. Kubovy (1986) analyzes the psychology of perspective in Renaissance art. Panofsky argues that the effect of perspective on religious art was to "seal off" such art from both a realm of magic (where the work of art constitutes a "miracle") and a realm of dogma (where the work of art functions to foretell the depicted action or bear witness to it). Rendered in linear perspective, the "miraculous becomes a direct experience of the beholder" (1991, 72).

54. I acknowledge the discursive difficulties of a singular concept of "modernism," following Harrison (1996). In the Thai case, artists who rejected mural styles of the past (Khrua In Khong, Carlo Rigoli) were working with styles that would be considered classical or academic in the West, according to conventions of Western art modernism attached to the 1860s in France. I thus use "modern" in a social sense instead of "modernist" specific to the terms of art history.

55. The most comprehensive discussions of the origins of Thai modern art include Piriya (1982), Apinan (1992, 1993b, 1996a), Phillips (1992), Michaelsen (1993), and Somporn (1995a).

56. Piriya (1982) and Michaelsen (1993), especially, identify nationalism as the driving force behind the adoption of Western genres and styles of art and highlight the role of Silpa Bhirasri. Apinan (1992) and Somporn (1995a) associate the introduction of modern ideas in artistic production with the outward-looking interests of King Mongkut.

57. See Wiyada (1979).

58. Apinan characterizes the "Royal Preferred Style" as the result of the Thai royal elite's interest in Western modes of decoration, fashion, and photography. These preferences were selective toward realism in that, as Apinan notes, Chulalongkorn's tastes excluded European modern art styles such as Post-Impressionism, Fauvism, and Expressionism (1992, 12–15).

59. In premodern eras, various categories of craftsmen or artisans, including painters, carvers, lacquerers, and plasterers, worked in service to the court on temples, usually as monks or hired laborers. Training in these crafts (collectively known as the *chang sip muu*), was obtained through apprenticeship and was initiated through the *wai khru* ceremony honoring the gods and past masters of the craft. In the constituent ritual act of drawing, the prelude to painting, the master teacher guided the trainee's right hand in drawing a simple line. One scholar explains, "This act was believed to invite the spirits of dead masters to transfer their creative powers and skill to the trainee." Beliefs circulated that those who draw without first undertaking this ceremony would become insane, oppressed by the old masters' spirits (Pairoj 1988, 16). See Dhanit (1990) and Wong (1991) for an analysis of the annual *wai khru* ceremony.

Skill in drawing largely consisted of learning to create a smooth, sinuous line *(laai thai),* practiced through rigorous and extensive copying of images in manuscripts and manuals, and on murals. The mnemonic "arabesques, females, simians and pachyderms" referred to the four classes of visual elements basic to classical Thai mural painting: design and patterning based on the flame-like *kranok,* male and female deities, ordinary folk, and various demons and monsters, and the real and imaginary animals of Hindu-Buddhist mythology. Apprentices thus worked toward the goal of mastering both the *laai thai* techniques and a specific vocabulary of forms (Temsiri 1982).

60. Piriya (1986) notes that in Thai *sinlapa,* the root of *sinlapin* meant "knowledge or learning" in the early twentieth century and "skilled craftsmanship" by 1927, as new art institutions were established in Thailand. In 1929, in official dictionaries another meaning was added, that of "an aesthetic expression touching the emotions."

61. Somporn (1995a, 243). Phillips (1992), an anthropologist, evades these sharp oppositions and instead characterizes modernizing processes in Thai art as the ongoing "integration" of genres, styles, and techniques. More recent scholarship on Thai art acknowledges diverse paths into modern art, for example through Chinese and Japanese modernisms (Junichi 1996; Somporn 1996). While "modernizing" processes affecting Thai painting began in the nineteenth century, the ideologies of modern art regarding the creativity and autonomy of the individual artist did not take root until Silpa Bhirasri's educational reforms of the 1930s. The adoption of single-point perspective—while radically changing the look of Thai murals in the mid-nineteenth century—is an insufficient basis for calling such temple paintings "modern."

62. Phillips, for example, characterizes Thai classical art as an "inherently uncreative enterprise" and as "essentially a craft tradition with unknown artists copying from other unknown artists or from their own teacher" (1992, 18).

63. See No Na Paknam (1987b) and Muang Boran (1979). A. B. Griswold discusses copying in Siamese sculpture and reconciles the ideas of imitating prior models with obvious differences in actual rendition: "The 'essence' of the original, corresponding approximately to its iconography, had to be reproduced; but the sculptural style—including things like facial expression, canons of proportion, and conventions for representing drapery—would depend much more on the artist's training than on the model" (1966, 37). In this way, the reproductions of models, which may be of foreign origin, become more acts of translation according to learned formulas and skill rather than of imitation.

64. In stronger terms, Boisselier characterizes this innovation as a "hopeless attempt to synthesize" (1976, 119), words echoed by some in the criticism of scenes at Wat Buddhapadipa, as discussed in chapter 1.

65. Indeed, they have been exhorted by Thai rulers to do so, as in the Cultural Mandates (1939–1942) issued by field Marshall Phibulsongkhram, which addressed such intimate issues as men's hats, ladies' dress, and leave-taking customs between husband and wife.

66. See Silpa Bhirasri's essay (1960).

67. Apinan (1992) attributes Silpa Bhirasri's patriotism (and his subsequent rejection of "ultramodern" European art movements such as primitivism and cubism) to his conservative Italian roots, his participation in art in the Fascist era, and his exposure to anti-abstractionist and anti-avant-gardist trends in modern Italian art.

68. Silpa Bhirasri 1960, 20.

69. Piriya offers an additional gloss on the issue of copying: the influence of Singhalese Buddhism and notions of the genealogical relationship of images of the Buddha as a source of their "aura" (1986, 7; Benjamin 1992[1936]).

70. "Copying" is an issue in many other domains of cultural production in Thailand, especially in literature, journalism, and academic writing. In Thai literature, the line between influence or inspiration and "plagiarism" as defined by Western literary convention is a fine one indeed. "Intellectual property" is a relatively recent concept in Thailand, and one entangled with international cultural politics. Writers did not receive lifetime protection for their work until 1911—and Thai authors, including many prominent intellectuals, have pushed at the fine line (Anchalee 1994). As a value of globalizing capitalism, intellectual property rights is gaining ground in Thailand; one scandal contributing to the downfall of Prime Minister Banharn Silpa-Archa in 1996 was the discovery that he had plagiarized part of his masters' thesis.

71. Cary (1994) traces the development of official Siamese/Thai interest in the preservation and display of the past, Thai heritage, and the display of old objects in museums. In the 1920s, the growth of provincial museums and the excavation and restoration of major archaeological sites such as Ayutthaya, Lopburi, Phitsanulok, Lamphun, Phimai, and Sukhothai took place as part of the Thai elite's early efforts to promote tourism, sparked by international interest in nearby Angkor. The Siam Society began to sponsor visits to such sites; local officials pressed for infrastructure improvements that would make the sites more accessible (Cary 1994, 291–299). Peleggi (1996) analyzes the efforts of the Tourist Authority of Thailand in promoting specific tourist sites, thereby selecting and shaping popular understandings of Thai cultural "heritage."

72. A full investigation of the role of temple murals in constructing Thai history—as both sources for and tokens of that history indicating changing relations between the Thai monarchy, *sangha,* and other sectors of the Thai elite—is well beyond the scope of this writing. Such a project might yield fresh insights into Thai historiography.

73. See de Guerny (1979) for an overview of the climatalogical, technical, and administrative problems in Thai mural conservation efforts.

74. The cleaning of the murals at Wat Phra Singh in Chiang Mai, which has left the murals vastly more colorful, invites comparison with the controversial cleaning of the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel and also invites a reevaluation of notions of subdued or dark-toned mural coloration and their subsequent place in religious space. The subdued pigmentation of older murals is as much due to soot and dirt accumulation as to their original coloring.

75. As well as indicating changing values toward materials and decay, tensions between the *wat* as a lived social space and as a preserved site of Thai "classical" heritage underline contradictions between social time, "defined by both formal relationships and daily interaction," and monumental time, an official view of history as frozen in the past, analyzed by Herzfeld (1991). In individual temples, some of these contradictions are resolved with relatively small, practical adjustments: furniture is not allowed to touch walls, burning incense is prohibited (as at Wat Buddhapadipa), or the *bot* is kept shuttered and locked. In these modest ways, the temple continues to be a lived-in space, yet the murals remain relatively protected from the potential damages of social use.

76. In filling in damaged areas, Wannipa trained her restorers to work from old photographs and the memories of monks to reconstruct missing scenes. Department policy disallowed painting over original work or adding new elements. It also required making the new work distinguishable from the original.

77. In provincial towns throughout Thailand, local patrons have sponsored mural painting in newly constructed *ubosot* and *viharn.* Notions of embellishment found in Western public buildings, the ubiquity of mass-produced religious imagery, commercial advertising, easel paintings, and framed reproductions have provided many local muralists with new idioms with which to paint. The "Thai postcard style," for example, relies on large naturalistic figures, bright colors, and simple and easily read compositions based on chromoliths produced in India and Sri Lanka. Individual "known" artists have accepted mural commissions but have not attempted

significant stylistic innovation. Angkarn Kalayanapongse's work at Wat Sri Khom Kham in Phayao, and Chaiwat Wannanant's paintings of Buddhist symbolism at Doi Saket outside of Chiang Mai offer two exceptions.

78. This anecdote suggests a division of labor among assistants in executing mural designs, which mural scholars have occasionally mentioned. Many of the muralists who worked at the Wimbledon temple did, in fact, work primarily on one type of detail—floral borders, small animals, or intricate clothing patterns.

79. Critics and artists themselves often dismiss many of these mural projects as "just traditional" or just in "Thai style," explicitly contrasting the work with that of Chalermchai and Panya at Wat Buddhapadipa, where they "dared to record the political situation and a sense of place" (Somporn 1995b).

80. A number of scholars have examined this process in Southeast Asia, including Thailand; a review of that history would be repetitive here. Working comparatively with Asian art, Clark defines neotraditionalism broadly as "a reinterpretation of the formal value systems that govern art, ones usually denoted by a set of style markers, or by technique or content. But it also involves the legitimizing of a claim to authority over the future by those who interpret the values of the past" (1997, 74). Scholars analyzing contemporary art in Asia address artists' grappling with ideologies of "tradition" and their reworkings of local forms, meanings, symbols, production processes, and materials.

81. See Kasian (1996) for an engaging analysis of changing signification of "Thainess" from the 1960s and 1970s, when discourses on "Thai" identity were largely anchored to the Thai nation, to the time of this research, when "Thai" identity was expressed in consumption and brand names.

82. The "Floating Market" school really responded to the art market that developed to serve tourists in the 1960's and 1970s.

83. Apinan (1992, 226).

84. The status of the cultural critique by this art has diminished with the success of individual artists. Their subsequent production and the inflation of the prices of their work has engendered a more general critique instead of such "neo-Buddhist" art and its presumed failure to address social issues in Thailand. See chapter 7, Apinan (1992), and Clark (1997).

85. See Smithies (1978) for a comprehensive description of the Bangkok art world in the 1960s; Piriya (1981), Somporn (1995a), Phillips (1992), and Apinan (1992) also discuss the important institutions affecting Thai art from the 1960s into the 1990s. Henderson provides an extensive analysis of the structures of the 1990s art world in Bangkok and their effect in "enabling or confining creativity" (1998, 3).

86. In her 1995 essay, Somporn notes that while the implementation of this curriculum might appear as a conservative action on the part of the university administration (controlled by the Ministry of University Affairs) to stem a tidal movement away from art forms related exclusively to indigenous practices and subjects, the administration was actually responding to a demand that already existed.

87. Damrong Wong Uparaj was a prominent faculty member at Silpakorn University, painting abstract versions of rural landscapes and village scenes. The "group" *(klum)* is a fundamental aspect of sociality in the Thai art world, discussed in chapter 5. Chalermchai's reference to "spirits of the ancestors" touches upon Thai views of the authority of the teacher and his own Sino-Thai background. His mention of being "in the middle" alludes to the Buddhist value of the Middle Way.

88. One Thai art historian, writing in English, credits the early generation of artists—Thawan, Pratuang, Pichai, and Angkarn—for establishing the "New Traditional Art" movement (Somporn 1995a).

89. Mead (1986).

90. Henderson documents the central role of interior design and architectural firms in commissioning contemporary art; not all are neotraditional (1998, 170–176).

91. Somporn (1995b), personal communication.

92. Numerous scholars have written on the commoditization of "culture" in an era of international tourism and globalized capitalism; indeed, it characterizes postmodernity (e.g., see Jameson 1992 [1984]).

93. See, for example, the cover of Lonely Planet's fifth edition of *Thailand.*

94. The image that appears on the Jim Thompson packaging reproduces a painting by Somnuk Permthongkum in mural painting style, commissioned by Thompson in the early 1960s, that now hangs in the entrance to Thompson's Thai Silk Company. Years later, after Thompson's death, the image was reproduced without Somnuk's permission, resulting in a lawsuit and eventual settlement. I thank Herbert Phillips for this information.

95. The work of Gray (1991, 1992) provides an in-

sightful and provocative analysis of the Sino-Thai banks' sponsorship of the *kathin* ritual at royal temples.

96. This is not to claim these symbols as exclusive; other images serve a similar symbolic function of national identity. My intention is not to participate in this type of cultural reductionism, but rather to note its operation in global consumer culture.

97. In an essay comparing neotraditional art in Japan and Thailand, J. Clark identifies three divergences in the movement in Thailand—those of "academic borrowings," "cultural charlatans," and of those "more humble" and "without bombast," no doubt referring in part to Tan Kudt and his apprentices, his own children, and their mural teams. Such muralists seek to "bring forward from the past what they think is genuinely theirs now, aware of loss, aware of new plenitudes" (1995). While generally admiring of the Wat Buddhapadipa murals, Clark expresses critical disdain for the subsequent work of Panya and Chalermchai.

98. Chapter 4 traces the early experiences and training of these artists.

99. The explosion in the amulet trade during this same period, producing lucrative streams of revenue for temples producing desirable amulets, and the corporate-like marketing tactics of the Dhammakaya movement offer other arenas for the exploration of this issue.

Chapter 4: From Buddhist Stories to Modern Art

1. *Buddhacarita,* Amritananda (attributed to Asvaghosa), trans. Cowell, 148 (cited in Cummings 1982, 2).

2. The Three Worlds scene is part of the larger composition, *Buddha Preaching to His Mother* and *The Descent from the Tavatimsa Heaven,* discussed below.

3. In the Thai text of the catalog, the phrase is *"ngaan sinlapa phuua sinlapa,"* which translates literally as "artwork for art."

4. The performative approach was suggested to me by Williams' analysis of Orissan manuscripts depicting the Ramayana (1996) and by performance theory in folklore (see, e.g., Bauman 1986). Kemp reminds us that performance lives within narrative, for narratives in any mode of presentation "do not exist in isolation. There is only narrative by somebody and for somebody" (1996, 65).

5. Jameson, for example, outlines a "central" feature of the postmodern as a "complacent play of historical allusion and stylistic pastiche" (1984, 55). Babha speaks directly to this issue of collapsing time when he says, "The 'present' of the world that appears in the art-work through the breakdown of temporality signifies a historical *intermediacy* . . . whereby the past dissolves in the present, so that the future [of identity or art] becomes (once again) an *open question,* instead of being specified by the fixity of the past" (1994, 219, emphasis in original).

6. I rely here upon Cowell's translation of *The Jataka* (1907), Cummings' discussion of the evolution of important Buddhist texts (1982), and Brereton's description of ritual practices involving Phra Malai (1995). This narrative structure has been reproduced literally in Thai temple murals. Ferguson and Johannsen (1976) note that some *wat* in the Chiang Mai area include a fourteenth panel in their depiction of the thirteen standard episodes *(kan)* of the Phra Wesandorn (Pali: Vessantara) Jataka. This fourteenth panel portrays either the Buddha or Phra Malai (a legendary monk popular in northern Thailand) explaining the importance of narrating this particular tale.

7. Buddha images cast in the gesture of "calling the earth to witness" (see chapter 3) directly recall Buddha's recounting of his past lives.

8. In his adaptation of the Mahachanuk (Pali: Mahajanaka) Jataka, containing illustrations by both Chalermchai and Panya, King Bhumiphol Adulyadej also retains this narrative link between past and present. He prefaces his retelling with a discussion of the occasion upon which he first became interested in the tale and of his reasons for his own telling (Bhumiphol 1996).

9. Here, artistic intentionality—considered by Baxandall (1985, 42) to extend beyond the artist's mind as the "product of purposeful activity" to the "relationship of the object to its circumstances"—intersects with Buddhist intentionality. Intention in this case contains both meanings.

10. As the canon of Theravada Buddhism is not in dispute (F. Reynolds 1978a), it is likely that the versions of these life stories learned by Thai—whether told in print, orally, or visually—derive ultimately from the *Jataka* (birth stories). The *Jataka* (Thai: *chadok*) comprises the fifth and final text of the *Sutta Pitaka,* one of the three texts of the Theravada canon, the *Tripitaka* (Three baskets). Buddhaghosa, the fifth-century Sri Lankan commentator on the

Buddhist canon, reputedly added both prose elaboration and commentary to the stories of the *Jataka*. Text, prose elaboration, and commentary together comprise the *Nidanakatha*, the "story of the origins of the Buddha." In Thailand, these texts are widely known as the *Pathama Samabodhi* —The Thai life of the Buddha. See Swearer 1993 and Lyons 1960 for discussions of these developments. Lyons (p. 167) claims that the Thai versions differ only in unimportant details from the Pali. My source for the above discussion is the *Nidanakatha,* translated into English by T. W. Rhys-Davids in the late nineteenth century and retranslated (with corrections and updated language) by Jayawickrama (1990).

11. Scholarship on the Jataka tales is extensive. Grey's *A Concordance of Buddhist Birth Stories* (1990) provides an entrée into the literature. It includes cross-references to Aarne-Thompson tale types, which trace cognate tales in the Indo-European canon. In the following discussion I use the term *"thosochat"* to emphasize the specifically Thai renditions and interpretations of those tales, which circulate widely throughout the Buddhist world.

12. The library at Wat Buddhapadipa contains numerous Buddhist texts in Pali, Thai, and English, thus written texts were at hand. Some artists did remember rereading them in preparation for painting specific mural scenes.

13. Boisselier argues that the Western propensity for "compartmentalization" of genres—a categorizing of "art" vs. "decoration," for example—is inappropriate in the Thai context. The same themes and sensibilities adhere in all forms, from manuscripts to wall paintings to lacquerware and carving. Indeed, theater and painting, he claims, "draw on the same literary sources and only express in plastic terms the same, usually poeticized, vision of things" (1976, 23). He would argue instead that we look at techniques, which "necessitate variations in interpretations" (ibid.).

14. Visual illustrations of the Jatakas appear in eighteenth-century manuscripts, but accompany other sections of the Buddhist scriptures, rather than texts of the Jatakas themselves. In these manuscripts, two scenes of each tale appear—hardly constituting a full-scale visual model for the entire story (Ginsburg 1989, 44). Other scholars suggest that influences may have flowed in the reverse, from murals to manuscripts (Brereton 1991), or in both directions (Boisselier 1976).

15. See Boisselier (1976) and Wenk (1975). These performance genres usually enact scenes from the *Ramakien.*

16. During the 1995 Bun Prawet Festival in Roi Et in Isaan, the parade was organized into contingents enacting each of the thirteen cantos of the Phra Wesandorn tale.

17. Since the reign of Rama III in the early nineteenth century, muralists often painted the *thosochat* in the bays between the windows of the *bot* —more or less at eye level for most viewers—accompanying or replacing episodes from the Buddha's final life. In many temples, both old and contemporary, the *mahachat* (great story), the story of the Buddha in his penultimate incarnation as Phra Wesandorn (Prince Vessantara), is the only narrative painted inside the *bot,* underscoring its cultural significance for Thai worshipers.

18. Murals appear in numerous other *wat* structures—assembly halls or *viharn,* scripture repositories *(ho trai)*, study pavilions—and even outside along galleries (as at Wat Phra Kaew) or on external walls of the above structures.

19. Matics (1992, 13) also observes that Thai temple mural scenes are often not painted with episodes in chronological sequence, but rather "juxtaposed for dramatic emphasis." One common exception is the tale of Phra Wesandorn, often painted as rectangular panels, one for each canto, which proceed in sequence around the walls of the *bot* or *viharn.*

20. In this mode of narration, numerous scenes comprise an episode; they are painted without separating devices and appear to "continuously flow across the available space" (Dehejia 1991, 374). Whether or not these stories are meant to be "read" in sequence, immediate apprehension of their doctrinal meanings rely upon viewers' prior knowledge of the stories.

21. Sculptural Buddha images cast in different postures are popular groupings in Thai *wat;* each has a donation bowl placed before it. Thais believe that donations to the Buddha representing one's day of birth bring extra *bun,* or merit. Wells (1960, 40) mentions nine different Buddha images associated with the planets and auspicious occasions such as birthdays; these artists painted only seven.

22. Giving visitors tours of the murals became one of my informal jobs while living at the temple.

23. Sompop and one of his main assistants, Boonkwang, majored in painting, not Thai art, at Silpakorn University.

24. Here Chalermchai exaggerates, as he is known

to do, about the monochrome palette of temple paintings in Bangkok. In an anecdote relayed by Chalermchai, the palette was immediately noticed by then Prime Minister Prem Tinsulanond on one of his visits to London and to Wat Buddhapadipa. "This," he reportedly said, "is the new. It is not like the old traditional, it is not like any murals that that I have seen in Bangkok. Why is the color like this?" Chalermchai explained their intentions and asked him if he liked them. He replied that he did, and subsequently his government gave millions of baht to support their work (Chalermchai 1994).

25. Hoskins (1984, 163).

26. Panya's depiction of this central moment at Wat Buddhapadipa might be seen as the culmination of his exploration of this theme, as his work since that time has veered into more abstractly contemplative moods.

27. This scene is thus organized sequentially from right to left as one faces the entire wall. If one begins viewing the story of the Buddha at the scene of his birth on the lateral wall and circumambulates through the events of his life, one approaches this culminating scene of the attack of Mara and the enlightenment from the right. In viewing the murals this way, one keeps one's right shoulder toward the wall, which accords with the conventions of *wien tien,* the Thai Buddhist rite of circumambulation.

28. A spark of recognition might strike Westerners familiar with news photographs from the Vietnam War era—when demonstrators stuck flowers in the barrels of the guns of police and National Guard soldiers. This motif (guns into flowers) has appeared in Thai temple murals since at least the mid-nineteenth century.

29. Apinan, the eminent Thai art historian, describes the artists' play with the history and conventions of Thai temple murals as the "shock of the old" (Apinan 1992, 199). However, in this instance, a privileging of "tradition" belies the startling newness of this composition—the overlaid visage of Mara. That is what shocks the viewer.

30. Panya "breaks the frame" in his easel paintings as well. In another context, he explained this device as a means of finding new solutions: "We try to break out from so many problems, then we see the image of the figures. The idea for the abstract comes through the figurative. When we break [out of the prescribed boundaries] we create great art. Our mind is unlimited, that is why I break it" (Phillips 1987c).

31. The motif of stylized foreigners "immortalized" in seventeenth-century dress had become a mural convention by the reign of Rama III (Ringis 1990, 109).

32. The artists attribute the elephants in this scene to Sompop, who they acknowledged possesses fine skills in pictorial realism. Elephants figure prominently in Thai folklore, literature, and art (Ringis 1996). Their realistic depiction here would provide an obvious point of contrast with the conventions of Thai "tradition."

33. Alfred Pawlin noted this connection to Austrian art.

34. See chapter 3, note 34.

35. Astri Wright noted a point in Panya's quote: Buddhism became popular in India in part because beliefs in the workings of karma and potential Buddhahood within all persons countered the Vedic-Hindu caste system, which fixed social differences.

36. This band of insistent yellow is most difficult to ignore when trying to meditate in this space.

37. In earlier Thai murals, scenes of hell often covered the entire wall behind the presiding image. Scenes of punishment of those who give in to sensual cravings thus contrast dramatically with the image itself, most often cast in the posture of "calling the earth to witness," the culminating moment of the Buddha resisting temptation (Matics 1992, 10). Images of hell appear in a variety of Buddhist and Thai texts, including those of the *Traiphum,* the stories of Phra Malai, and the Nemi (Thai: Nemiraj) Jataka—and constitute a favorite theme of Thai temple mural painters (Matics 1979; Brereton 1986, 1995).

38. These scenes of merit-making are thematically and stylistically reminiscent of Chalermchai's earlier tempera paintings.

39. One Thai academic described this scene of the Three Worlds as the "layman's version." My observations suggest that visitors to the *ubosot* spend the most time examining this scene. In doctrinal terms, this "Three Worlds" represents three levels of the lowest world of form, the *kama loka.* In Thai this scene is called *Pert saam loke,* or "opening the Three Worlds," to distinguish it from the full *Traiphum* cosmology, which appears behind the presiding images and which includes the realms of *rupa loka* and *arupa loka* as well as the *kama loka.*

40. One observer who knows these artists well commented that the assistant who painted hell now lives there because of his intense and tormenting desire for wealth.

41. After his years of study in London, Panya also commented in an interview on the social isolation of Londoners: "In England, there were many things which I learned, but even though the people are comfortably off, they don't have an inner peace, a spirituality—many of them are lonely" (Mead 1984, n.p.).

42. I am grateful to Joanna Williams for identifying this detail. While owned by the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City, this manuscript was well published in the 1970s.

43. This detail portraying Margaret Thatcher, the Tory prime minister of Great Britain while the murals were being painted, caused some controversy. Some friends of the artists argued for the inclusion (or substitution) of Neal Kinnock, then leader of Britain's Labor Party; at least one Thai government official was uncomfortable with the somewhat ambiguous portrayal of heads of state friendly to Thailand: Thatcher, Reagan, and Bush. Chalermchai told me that his assistant Thongchai greatly admired Thatcher.

44. These portraits may also reference earlier murals where artists "signed" their work. Thai mural scholars assume certain figures to represent the muralists. For example, Khru Khong Pae, dressed in Chinese garb, appears in the Phra Nemiraj scene at Wat Suwannaram. A figure framed by a ribbon border set above one window in the *bot* at Wat Phra Singh in Chiang Mai reputedly represents the artist. Stylistically, these two examples are painted in the flat linear style of Thai mural painting of that time—not in the three-dimensional, realistic style used here.

45. Tensions between renouncing the world and remaining in the world to teach others the way lies at the very heart of Buddhism (see, e.g., Tambiah 1976). Such tensions—and the symbolic mediations and reconciliation of those tensions—suffuse social institutions that have evolved in Buddhist societies, especially the *sangha* and the monarchy.

46. Buddhism sank deep roots in Southeast Asia in part due to its conceptual elasticity, allowing the incorporation of indigenous, pre-Buddhist spirit beliefs. The local *preta* (spirits) or the hungry ghosts of ancestors brought into the region from China were placed into levels of the *Traiphum* (Reynolds and Reynolds 1982).

47. One might view this process also as a minimizing, or erasure of difference, as does Mead when he analyzes the early work of Panya and his fascination with the English visionary poet/artist William Blake's conception of a cosmic order: his [Panya's] is a "diversity of cultural expression, not philosophy or religious belief" (1984, n.p.). In the context of this overtly "Thai" temple in Wimbledon, I think the effect of the artists' quotations of Western art is to subsume them into a Thai Buddhist universe.

48. This tiny scene paints a vision of the Thai rulers as righteous rulers, further reinforcing a "Sukhothai" cast to notions of kingship. It also connects the Thai monarchy to the nation via the Thai flags, Thai citizen subjects, and Buddhism (the overall context for this detail, the Nemiraj Jataka), uncritically reproducing the ideological triad of Religion/Nation/King, discussed in chapter 2.

49. See chapter 2 for a discussion of giving and making-merit as a total social phenomenon in the Maussian sense.

50. Cone and Gombrich (1977) have translated the one thousand verses of this tale into English and provide excellent background and commentary on its significance in Theravada Buddhist societies. See Gerini (1976) for the historical context of performances of Prince Vessantara, Phya Anuman (1990) for an extended description of Thet Maha Chat (the chanting of Prince Vessantara), and Tambiah (1968) for an ethnographic description and a symbolic structural analysis of the Bun Prawet Festival, which celebrates the life of Phra Wesandorn. Lefferts (2000) analyzes changes in the enactment of Bun Prawet in Isaan. A 1995 Bun Prawet Festival in Roi Et in Isaan is briefly described above (Plate 23).

Many Thais believe that listening to the thousand verses of the Phra Wesandorn Jataka will enable them to be reborn in the time of the Buddha to be, Maitreya (cf. "Anisansa Gatha Phan," a sermon reprinted in Wells 1960, 275). Brereton (1995) examines the significance of the Maitreya in Thai Buddhist art and literature.

51. Pang painted his trees in excruciating detail, leaf by leaf. His assistants dubbed one the "Christmas tree," because this single tree required nearly the whole Christmas season to finish.

52. Scenes in this room may have been the ones Apinan had in mind when he wrote, "[c]ertain areas suggest dreamlike qualities which elaborate on contemporary desire and nostalgic yearning for arcadian fantasy" (1992, 199).

53. "Imagined worlds" extends Anderson's classic formulation of the nation as an "imagined community" to embrace diasporic communities that maintain close identification with and participation in their nations of origin through projects of "long-

distance nationalism" (1983, 1998). In considering the nature of "modern subjectivity," Appadurai (1996, 5–11) sees "imagined worlds" emerging from the daily practices of diverse peoples everywhere as they consider possibilities for their lives.

54. I have already mentioned Wyatt's analysis of the murals of Wat Phumin in Nan (1993) in this light; Thai mural scholars in general adopt uncritically the perspective that temple murals reflect the direction of their artists' sponsors.

55. Sompop then told me a parable to illustrate his point, which also comments on the social position of the artist: "God is walking along in a big hat. One half of the hat is red; the other half is blue. A farmer sees the red, the artist sees the blue. They start fighting."

56. In Thai popular discourse, hamburgers (à la McDonald's or Burger King) and pizza symbolize the increasing dominance of a Western-style consumer culture and the loss of traditional Thai lifeways—much as they do elsewhere in the world.

57. Philosophic distinctions between the "real" and the "imaginary" might be considered problematic in light of Buddhist doctrine of *anatta,* that holds that all sentient beings lack abiding essence, soul, or "self." In Buddha's words (cited in Mahasi 1996, 4), "*Rupam bhikkhave anatta:* Material form (*rupa),* monks, is not self, soul or living entity."

58. Boisselier (1976, 23) refers not to artistic styles, but rather to the interplay between scenes of idealized people and ordinary people living everyday life, as well as fantastic hybrid creatures—the *kinaree* (half-human, half-bird) or the *singha* (a lion-like animal).

59. Chapter 3 reviews the portrayal of foreigners in Thai temple murals.

60. The many visitors to Wat Buddhapadipa frequently include Thai female/*farang* male couples, but very rarely the reverse. Several English male informants at Wat Buddhapadipa admitted to me that what attracted them to this temple and Thailand itself was Buddhism, Thai hospitality, and Thai women. These attitudes point to continuing Orientalist stereotypes of Asian women and the asymmetrical socioeconomic relations that structure tourism, prostitution, and the ambiguous relationships that can derive from such engagements.

61. No Na Paknam (1986) discusses *farang* in Thai murals.

Chapter 5: "Going Outside" and the Experience of Modernity

1. This case study of a small group of artists represents one variant of the much larger demographic shifts taking place in contemporary Thailand. The "village"—constructed in any sense as a bounded entity that implies spatial and/or social isolation—may have never really existed in Thailand (Hirsch 1991; Bowie 1992). Movements of rural youth to and from urban centers on a seasonal or semipermanent basis for education, social opportunity, and work in large industrial factories, small sweatshops, or as domestic workers increasingly characterize rural/urban relations in Thailand (Mills 1999).

2. Phillips (1992, 51–55). While not yet having attained the reputation or influence of Silpakorn University in the Bangkok art world, Chulalongkorn University remains the most prestigious generally for the Thai elite. For a long time, Chulalongkorn hired as professors only artists with degrees from foreign universities. One exception was the late Montien Boonma, who was Silpakorn trained, but who had also studied in Paris.

However, within Thailand the results of foreign training have not been met with universal approbation. An exhibition catalog essay by Piriya Krairiksh (1986) criticized the works of those Thai artists who had studied and worked in the United States as derivative and imitative of Western art. Phillips (2000) discusses the subsequent controversy as indicative of the contentiousness in the Thai art world, on a par with the *Phujatkan* scandal discussed in chapter 3.

3. See chapter 1, notes 38 and 40.

4. An important exception is the nineteenth-century murals in the *ubosot* at Wat Suwannaram across the river from Bangkok. Chalermchai and Panya adopted Wat Suwannaram as the model for their public representation of their own murals, discussed below.

5. In many other contemporary mural projects, either the murals are fully commissioned, paying expenses and fees for the major muralist and assistants, or the major muralist donates the design and supervision of its execution, but the temple pays the assistants who actually paint the murals.

6. Thai language status indicators mark first age and then gender. *Phii* means older; *naawng* means younger. Thus an older brother is a *phii chaay,* a younger sister a *naawng saaw*. In conversation, *phii* or *naawng* are often used by themselves, but equally often with a person's name or nickname.

7. Cited in Sanitsuda (1983). Chalermchai's book was sponsored by the then cultural attaché of the German embassy.

8. The cultural sections of foreign embassies in Thailand—the British Council, the United States Information Agency, the Goethe Institute, and the Alliance Française—have played significant roles in the development of modern art in Thailand through exhibits, lectures, films, and above all scholarships, which have enabled Thai artists to work and study abroad. See Smithies (1978), Phillips (1992), and Apinan (1992).

9. See chapter 2.

10. Apparently a "senior artist" (probably Thawan Duchanee) convinced him that the project would be good for his career.

11. From an English perspective, upper Wimbledon would hardly be a place to seek the nontraditional or avant garde, with its high street lined with small shops and restaurants and its large stone houses with elegant gardens.

12. Panya's account of this first meeting also stressed their insistence on artistic freedom. Subsequent magazine and newspaper articles on the project usually mentioned both aspects of their working for free: that of independence and merit. As with this example of the meeting with Khun Sawet, the memories in this chapter that reconstruct the processes of the murals' production at Wat Buddhapadipa from 1984–1992 include those of the artists themselves and of Bangkok friends who visited them while they painted in London, monks, and regular templegoers (Thai and English) who witnessed the project, as well as published magazine and newspaper interviews from that period.

13. Thai theaters showing foreign films display commercially printed posters, but hand-painted posters still advertise Thai films, even in Bangkok.

14. In the mid-1980s, reciprocating their interest, Piak Poster directed a series of comedies based on a group of artists at Silpakorn University.

15. Quoted in Sanitsuda (1984). Local artists painting murals at small temples in the provinces often rely upon mass-produced sets of postcards and chromoliths as visual models for their paintings—see Ferguson and Johannsen (1976). While their survey of murals in northern Thailand was done over twenty years ago, several projects I witnessed underway were also designed from these printed models.

16. Pairoj's 1988 study of art education in Thailand documents the inclusion of arts and crafts in the national curriculum for modern secular education instituted by King Chulalongkorn. Art education was institutionalized further by King Vajiravudh, who established Poh Chang in 1913 to train art teachers. Pairoj notes that awareness of traditional art has been taught to secondary students since 1970 (1988, 188). Ampai (2000) analyzes more recent revisions of the primary Thai school curriculum that place art instruction in the category of "character development."

17. Henderson (1998) discusses efforts in the 1990s to promote artistic awareness and skill among Thai children through gallery-sponsored classes, nonprofit foundations, and corporate competitions and art events. While still largely urban based, some of these opportunities do reach rural children.

18. According to Panya, his own early experiences with art are the reverse of his students today, whom he believes "are given everything" by being taught in classes rather than learning by themselves.

19. Rama I, the first king of the Chakri dynasty in Bangkok, supervised the composition of the *Ramakien* in the late eighteenth century as a Thai version of the Hindu epic *Ramayana.*

20. Poh Chang, founded in 1913, began training teachers of arts and crafts in 1917 (Apinan 1992, 27). Although it emphasizes Thai art techniques, Poh Chang also instructs students in realism. Many of the artists who specialize in mural restoration are graduates of Poh Chang.

21. Sodchuen Chaiprasat's fascinating 1994 study examines the response of Thai artists to surrealism. While they widely adopted much of the artistic form of that movement—underlying compositional strategies, anthropomorphism, glossy surfaces, etc.—she argues that they never delved into the ideological basis of it, the liberating possibilities inherent in imagery derived from dreams and the subconscious.

22. One informant noted that when he was at Silpakorn in the early 1980s, Thais would commission portraits only of deceased family members, thus the artists had to paint from photographs. Their patrons believed that painting a portrait drained life from the person in order to create the image on canvas.

23. Phillips (1992, 35–37) and Henderson (1998, 142–149) discuss the formation of these artists' groups. While a number of groups form to promote particular artistic regional or stylistic identities, as Henderson notes, many derive from personal relationships established at university.

24. While the art teachers guiding these field trips did not use the term "Thainess" explicitly, they spoke of Thai history, the Thai characteristics *(laksanaa thai)* of what they viewed, the atmosphere

(baanyakaat), and the feelings *(khwaam ruusuk)* and ideas *(khwaam khit)* the students were to absorb and then express in their own work. At Muang Boran, for example, one instructor urged the students to look at "all the Thai trees." In this context "Thainess" includes all these aspects of cultural experience and identity—but excludes other, less pleasant contemporary realities of poverty, pollution, and bad traffic. See chapter 1, note 15.

25. In Thailand many public works projects and private construction efforts are timed so that they may be dedicated in honor of key life-cycle celebrations of the Thai monarchy. This type of dedication adds the luster of merit-making in the name of the Thai monarchy to such projects. The fifth-cycle birthday (age sixty) is the most important in the life of any Thai, as it celebrates the accomplishments of one's life.

26. Thai muralists use several means of laying out mural designs on walls, as do muralists everywhere. At Wat Buddhapadipa, they enlarged their sketches to full size, which their assistants then pricked and chalked onto the wall. The sketches included the outlines of the scenes; the assistants were required to fill in patterning and detail—and here is where the skills and creativity of the individual team members articulated with the vision and working styles of Panya and Chalermchai.

27. The ever-changing personnel involved in this mural project is, as much as I have been able to ascertain, fairly unusual for mural projects. Historically, Thai mural painters had assistants, but little has been written of them. On other mural projects contemporaneous with Wat Buddhapadipa, the size and composition of the painting teams varied with the scale and deadlines of the project. There were established, fairly stable mural "teams"—those of Phaptawan Suwannakudt and her associates, for example—that received numerous mural commissions from hotels and temples. There were also groups brought together for a single temple project, such as the students of SUPPORT (a foundation under the patronage of the queen), who painted murals at a temple in Angthong. At the Siam Commercial Bank project, discussed in chapter 6, Panya worked with some of his previous assistants from Wat Buddhapadipa as well as recent Silpakorn graduates.

28. Silpakorn University has expanded from its original mission as the university of fine arts into a broad liberal arts curriculum located on two campuses (and planning two more). The original campus near the Grand Palace, Wang Tha Phra, is the home of four faculties—painting, sculpture, and graphic arts; architecture; archaeology; and decorative arts. The Faculty of Painting, Sculpture, and Graphic Arts (which these artists attended) offers degree programs in five fields: the three named, plus art theory and Thai art. A sixth program—installation art—is being organized.

29. Fifty-four students graduated from the Faculty of Painting, Sculpture, and Graphic Arts in 1995; six of these were from the Thai art curriculum.

30. The exhibit opening of another of Chalermchai's *klum,* the Lanna Group, is analyzed in chapter 6.

31. One of the two did not particularly want to go because of the cold weather in England and a fear of falling ill. In the end, she returned for a second year and was pleased by her participation and at the opportunity to exhibit her skills in an important temple abroad.

32. I did meet one artist who turned down the opportunity to work on the mural project. He had not yet graduated from Silpakorn and was worried about delaying his final year if he went abroad. He told me he often regretted his decision not to go.

33. Phillips (1965, 23) states that for all (Thai) villagers kinship "provides a basic referential mechanism for expressing the degree of psychological affiliation that they feel towards other human beings." Indeed, claiming the relationship of family through the use of an honorific is a widespread social lubricant in the Thai setting, even in a casual marketplace exchange.

34. I borrow here Hanks' classic formulation of entourage, the Thai variant of patron-client relations (1975). The building of the two teams of painters at Wat Buddhapadipa, and their continuing salience in the professional and personal lives of many of the artists since the project, follow this pattern.

35. In the 1990s, reverence for King Chulalongkorn evolved into a cult, with portraits and amulets of the king for sale everywhere in Bangkok and periodic ceremonies held at his equestrian statue in Bangkok's Royal Plaza. Apinan (1996a, 103) sees this cult as "eroticized nationalism." Much of my own evidence suggests that in the mid-1990s context of increasing consumption and the proliferation of Western cultural forms—fast food, ATMs, plastic bags, and bad traffic—King Chulalongkorn represented a golden age of Siam, when social and cultural changes were rapid, but a wise and benevolent king sought to ensure Siamese control of change.

36. Travel has retained its symbolic associations

with the Thai monarchy, as King Bhumiphol (Rama IX) himself travels extensively and is often photographed or otherwise represented with a camera around his neck—as in the Wat Buddhapadipa murals. Without belaboring the point, going out also has Buddhist significance, for it was by leaving his protected and comfortable royal status that Prince Siddharta encountered the realities of suffering, illness, and decay and attained the wisdom that led to his enlightenment. Thus seeing the "real thing" can have Buddhist undertones. See Gray (1992) on King Bhumiphol's travels and the Buddhist significance of "seeing" in that context.

37. Indeed, I heard stories (with the quality of legends) among Thai friends about frenzied buying sprees in Paris, where boutiques hired Thai-speaking assistants.

38. Bourdieu (1984) and Ong (1999). See also chapter 2, note 11.

39. Many of the humorous details of *The Defeat of Mara* are credited to Boonkhwang, now a senior art director at a Bangkok art agency. Boonkhwang continues to paint his own work on weekends and holidays. He regularly returns to London, where he stays at the temple to serve the monks and paint.

40. Ghost stories are frequently told among Thais and, among others, serve controlling functions.

41. In Buddhist art, the scale of figures also relates to their degree of divinity, thus larger figures toward the ceiling would usually represent deities or *theweda.*

42. That the muralists lived in the temple space where they painted is not unusual. Early Thai temple painters were frequently monks themselves. This total immersion was one aspect of the "artist's life" adopted by Panya and others who followed him, although not carried over into corporate contexts.

43. *Phii/naawng* relations replicate other superior/inferior relations based on mutual respect: according to my informants, a *naawng* will never say no to a request from a *phii;* if the *naawng* does something wrong, the *phii* is supposed to feel sympathy and affection rather than anger. In addition to creating a hierarchy, casting relations in terms of family sets up an expectation of informality and of compromise if conflicts do erupt, assuming that the parties can solve the problem and stay together.

44. The Thai art world (like many) is full of gossip and backbiting; many rumors and allegations were repeated to me regarding schisms between Panya and Chalermchai, or their assistants, and who did what to whom. To the extent that I pursued these issues with the principals involved, they would often acknowledge that there had been problems but would decline to discuss them in detail with a *farang* and an outsider.

45. Gold has particular meanings in Thai Buddhist art as an indication of the divinity or purity of a thing or person. Applying gold constitutes a gift of a precious substance and thus connotes merit-making.

46. As discussed in chapter 4, a number of the artists cited this art directly, suggesting an ambiguous sense of position. These citations say, "I can paint in the style of early Christian art, or in the style of early Mughal painting, and I can paint in Thai style."

47. One of Thailand's leading intellectual monks, the Venerable Prayudh Payutto has written a number of books on Buddhist doctrine.

48. Several artists reported to me that sometimes the monks gave *them* rice and canned food, an inversion of the usual exchange.

49. At one of the other Thai temples in England, also named Amaravati, Ajarn Sumedho sends monks and lay Buddhists on retreat to the village for morning alms rounds to maintain *vinaya* discipline. It was reported to me that the local community has grown quite used to this activity.

50. The attainment of the state of nirvana represents release from the continual cycle of reincarnations and a final extinction of being—in this sense, "nothing." Nirvana is more usually represented as a lotus leaf only, an oft-used symbol of the Buddha.

51. The monk posted this letter the day he left London to return to Bangkok to avoid, I was told by Khun Sawet, direct conflict at the temple. As do other cultures that value the preservation of face, Thais carefully avoid face-to-face confrontations.

52. Phra Maha Term had arrived at the Wimbledon temple a year before the artists and stayed until after they were finished in 1992. He signed their visa applications as sponsor.

53. Quoted in *Bukkhon Wan Nii* 2530 (1987), 59.

54. Bourdieu (1977).

55. In 1996, Suraphol reportedly received 200,000 baht (US$8,000) per painting; Chalermchai sold them for around 500,000 baht (US$20,000) each.

56. One word these Thais used to describe the atmosphere at Wat Buddhapadipa and in London generally was "*sangop,*" which literally means "to be peaceful" but implies a certain sensibility that some Thais claim for themselves and for their past prior to

contemporary problems of construction noise, traffic jams, and pollution. It signifies a state of being in harmony with one's environment.

57. Notable Thai artists who live in this manner include Prawat Laucharoen in New York, Kamol Tassananchalee in Los Angeles, and Somboon Hormtientong in Germany. See Somporn (1995a, 250).

Chapter 6: Art, Identity, and Performance

1. In this context, *khru,* an honorific title for teachers, means master.

2. See, for example, Boisselier (1976, 102–104). Two books in the Muang Boran series on temple murals have focused on Wat Suwannaram—one book on the temple itself and the other on the work of its two muralists, Khru Khongpae and Khru Thongyu. Muang Boran is the publishing arm of the company that built the Ancient City tourist site.

3. His Majesty King Bhumiphol Adulyadej (1996). See chapter 1, note 11.

4. Chalermchai has published two catalogs of his work: *Buddhistic Paintings by Chalermchai Kositpipat, 1976–1992* and *23 pii chittrakam thai* (23 years of Thai art).

5. This particular opposition reverberates with tensions (some have said contradictions) at the heart of Thai Theravada Buddhist practice: between a renunciation of worldly affairs with the goal of personal salvation (the "practicing monk") and a deferral of personal enlightenment to teach others the path to salvation (the "teaching monk"). The opposition also plays out popular notions of the differences between the Thammayut and Mahanikai orders within the Thai *sangha.*

6. Thais use words of the heart *(jai)* to describe both character and mood. As a prefix, *jai* denotes fixed aspects of character—one's spirit or disposition; as a suffix it denotes temporary states of mind or qualities of feeling.

7. The quote marks around "indigenous" indicate that here I mean the "Thainess" of mural painting rather than the ethnic background of Thai mural painters. Many, including Khru Khongpae and a number of the Wat Buddhapadipa muralists, have had Chinese or part-Chinese origins.

8. As these artists' lives may move in new directions, I must acknowledge the contingent nature of these discussions.

9. It is important to distinguish between the mural project and the mural art at Wat Buddhapadipa. Chalermchai has been associated with organizing or leading the project, Panya with the innovative approaches and techniques used in the murals. Further, Thai social forms do not easily allow for equality among peers. One person nearly always emerges in a higher-status position. When twins are born in Thailand, the child who was born first (even if only by a few seconds) is declared *phii* to the younger *naawng.*

10. Cf. Chetana Nagavajara's 1993 keynote address to the Fifth International Conference on Thai Studies in which he discusses a notable tendency of Thai poets toward "self-assertion and self-aggrandizement," even *ahangkan,* or arrogance (1993, 3). Chetana also stresses the historical grounding of Thai literature in oral performance and *likay,* or folk theater, prevalent in Thai public culture.

11. In one of his essays for the catalog accompanying the exhibition *Traditions/Tensions* (1996a, 106), Apinan Poshyananda subdivides the "neotraditional" category for Thai art into "neo-Buddhist" ("an imagined indigenous space")—art that portrays a lost past or decaying heritage—and art that glorifies the Thai royal family. While this refinement contradicts his own analysis of royal portraiture as "modern" (1995a), it does buttress a larger distinction Apinan makes between mainstream art (the above categories) and the artworks in the *Traditions/Tensions* exhibit that address social problems in contemporary Thailand.

12. Anthropologist and prominent Thai academic Juree Vichit-Vadakan has characterized Thai politics as "a series of dramas" whose essential point is experiential, not the resolution of conflict or competition of interests (1996). The theatricality of politics in Southeast Asia has premodern roots (Geertz 1980; Reid 1988, 174–182), where the staging of public spectacles with the ruler at the center—in Geertz's terms the "theater state"—demonstrates the linkage of public ritual with power and the social hierarchy. In Thailand most public rituals outside the state context—from weddings to art exhibit openings—demonstrate this same linkage.

13. In this regard Chalermchai, who is Sino-Thai, bridges stylistic trends of generations of ethnic-Chinese Thais seeking social place: an older generation that often lives in Thai-style houses with Buddhist altars, emulating classical and folk Thai styles, and a younger generation of Sino-Thais characterized by "advanced consumerism" and international

forms of symbolic capital. See Szanton Blanc (1997) for a comparative analysis of the strategies by which diasporic ethnic Chinese construct cultural identity, and Kasian (1996, 1997), who argues that since the 1980s, Thai identity has become located almost exclusively in consumption rather than nationality.

14. Senior faculty members share teaching with junior faculty. Frequently, Panya complained to me, juniors do all the work of the teaching, but the senior faculty can override their grades. As the latter have exclusive access to prestigious and lucrative commissions, this arrangement fosters favoritism, artistic clientelism, and artistic mimesis as students attempt to curry favor with important senior faculty.

15. He frequently wears differently colored socks, a mannerism I have been told he picked up in imitation of David Hockney.

16. This foundation aims to sponsor vocational training for young northern Thai girls, considered at special risk for prostitution.

17. *Mor hom* are the baggy cotton pants and shirt made of indigo-dyed cotton worn by farmers of northern Thailand.

18. Respecting "face," interpreted here as not criticizing a person in front of others and thereby causing embarrassment, is an important lubricant of Thai social relations. Mitr, of a younger generation who had just two years prior demonstrated on the streets of Bangkok (demonstrations that sparked a military crackdown and national crisis), had here clearly violated this social edict.

19. While representative of all the art openings I attended in 1994–1995 in its basic structure, this event was by far the most elaborate. The social position of the presiding dignitary enhances the status of the artists involved and the event itself. Chalermchai had become acquainted with the prime minister, who appeared at several events Chalermchai organized in 1995.

20. Artist Vasan Sittiket satirized the commercialization of art and rituals of "Thainess" at the opening of his exhibit at Bangkok's National Gallery, titled "I Love Thai Culture," by serving food from Kentucky Fried Chicken and Pizza Hut.

21. The "artist's gift" refers to a climactic moment in the *wai khru* ceremony when the essence of the master's skill is invited to enter the hand of the apprentice artist (Wong 1991).

22. Chalermchai's success is due, no doubt, to his skill at controlling his own marketing—both image and price. He offered me numerous anecdotes of ways in which collectors attempted to manipulate him with lavish commissions. He claimed he always refused to allow them to gain any social status at his expense.

23. A handful of artists and their associates commented to me on how, with the passage of time, Chalermchai has taken the bulk of the credit for painting those murals. Indeed, in the dramatized depiction of his life on television in 1995, one Thai told me, "The way it is projected, for the whole of the Thai audience to see, was as if Chalermchai was the only leader. Panya worked merely as his assistant." Art world gossip attributed an estrangement between the two at that time to Chalermchai's denying Panya equal billing.

24. While one Thai long involved in activities at Wat Buddhapadipa described Chalermchai as a *nakleng,* other observers contend that he maintains the image of the *nakleng* but does not command enough of a following to be one.

25. Pasuk and Sungsidh (1994, 59–60) place the *nakleng* on a continuum of political figures with the *jao phau*—gangster-like provincial power brokers. *Jao phau* are often served by *nakleng,* who may be generous and loyal but also brutal. They also describe *nakleng* as those who "use their command of brute force to assist underdogs in the face of the brutality of other rogues or government officials."

26. As discussed in chapter 2, well-known temples attract patrons and thus money for building maintenance and expansion. In the contemporary Thai economy of merit, temples throughout Thailand—and Thai temples abroad—compete for Bangkok baht. That Thai artists have successfully repositioned themselves in the Thai social hierarchy is evidenced by the status and fame attached to a temple when a prestigious, well-known artist paints there.

27. Chalermchai used "pagoda" in the retelling in English. The structure to which he refers is a *chedi,* a crypt intended to hold the remains of the wealthy patron, his mother's friend.

28. Examples include the works *Overwhelmed* (1991), *Guiding Light of Dhamma* (1992), and *Means towards Enlightenment* (1992), reproduced in a catalog of his art (Amporn 1992, 104–105, 116, 137). A second catalog, *Twenty-three Years of Thai Art: Chalermchai Kositpipat (Song saam pii chittrakam thai Chalermchai Kositpipat),* features the *ubosot* he is sponsoring as well as some experimentation with Egyptian imagery and drawings of vernacular rural buildings.

29. "Aesthetic involution" refers to a process whereby a fundamental pattern (bubbles or the *kranok*) so dominates an art form as to exhaust "inven-

tive originality" and instead results in ever-increasing elaboration and technical virtuosity. Alexander Goldenweiser initially proposed the concept of "involution," using decorative patterning in art to illustrate his points (cited in Geertz 1963, 81). Contemporary *wat* buildings exhibit this quality in their generous application of wooden carvings, plaster detailing, and colored-glass ornamentation.

30. See chapter 2, note 14, on Sino-Thai issues of identity and economic/cultural capital.

31. The Wat Buddhapadipa murals would seem to contradict both characterizations.

32. Smithies (1978), Phillips (1992), Apinan (1992), and Henderson (1998) document the expansion of collecting in Thailand. Henderson's work is particularly useful for its extensive discussion of the social institutions that influence the directions of both Thai art production and collection.

33. Phillips makes a similar point: "For centuries Thai art has been an art of edification, beautification, and cultural enhancement for both artists and their patrons" (2000).

34. This quote by Angkarn, from a 1991 interview in *Phujatkan* magazine, is cited by Apinan (1992, 182). Like Chalermchai, Angkarn is well known in Thailand for his irreverent pronouncements and tendency to speak in hyperbole. Such pronouncements are common by public figures in Thailand—as play for publicity or as play for the sake of verbal play. Their "truth value" takes much less priority.

35. I have translated *"khwaam ruusuk khong jitjai"* as "feelings of my heart and mind" to acknowledge a component of consciousness and volition in the concept of *jitjai*.

36. His reference to other artists who complained included Mitr Jai-In's protest at the opening at Oriental Place, discussed above. Although Mitr's leaflet named Thawan Duchanee, Boonkhwang included Chalermchai as representative of the situation Mitr attacked.

37. This darker palette is characteristic of mural paintings of the Rattanakosin era, especially those of Rama III's reign. The murals of Wat Suthat in Bangkok from the same period provide another fine example.

38. I mean deliberately here to digress into a romantic reverie, for I believe that is precisely the intention of organizing such field trips for art students—not necessarily to evoke nostalgia, but to seek out the places and situations least affected by urban modernity. Many of these sites no longer serve their original functions (the Suan Pakkard Palace, Vimanmaek Mansion, and Buddhaisawan Chapel are three such sites) but are maintained now in the context of tourism and as monuments of Thai heritage. Issues of "authenticity" or "nostalgia" at such sites are, I believe, external to the experience of them as lovely, peaceful places metonymic of "Thainess."

39. In the past, as at Wat Phra Keow, artists continually repainted murals. In this way the past (represented by the original mural painting) and the present (the repainting) collapse into each other. Restoration standards have changed. At Wat Suwannaram, damage and the wearing of time are quite apparent, maintaining a break between the past and the present, unlike experiential aspects of the temple discussed above.

40. Throughout this lecture, Panya used the pronoun *"rau"* to address the students. *Rau* can translate as "I," "we," or "you" in the impersonal. This pronoun is the only truly status-neutral pronoun in the Thai language. It is also polite usage.

41. Panya's views may represent the influence of his mentor Tan Kudt, who very much stressed the development of an internal vision. Art critics, both *farang* and Thai, frequently criticize a Thai art educational system that relies on principles of seniority in artistic "mentoring" and an outmoded curriculum. One such critic said, "It does not matter what social class the student is from; his thinking and behavior will be sucked up and his art works will represent the system's uniform style. That means beauty of color and harmony of proportions, but with a lack of substance, message or cultural value" (Thanom 1995).

42. I have translated the phrase *"caak 'sense' thii kert kun nai jitjai"* as "from the 'sense' that arises in the mind." *Jitjai* is difficult to translate precisely; it implies "state of mind" or "spirit" rather than an intellect divorced from feelings.

43. Perspective, according to one leading art theorist, aims at an equation, as "it wants the image to appear like the object and the object like the image" (Gombrich 1961, 257).

44. I had this same experience at Phra Nakhon Khiri, King Mongkut's summer palace situated on Khao Wang in Petchaburi Province. I was looking out at the town below where the jumble of rooflines did not cohere into single-point perspective, but rather appeared as two-dimensional. In an instant of profound spatial destabilization, I felt suddenly as though I had entered into the world painted in the murals and was no longer looking out at that world.

45. Panya discussed this concept of "the life of the

artist" with me in a variety of contexts; the discussion that follows synthesizes those contexts and the thinking of others close to Tan Kudt.

46. Panya produces little for the individual collector to buy. One collector, long an admirer of his work, reputedly noted that if he wanted to buy Panya's work, he would first have to buy the Siam Commercial Bank.

47. This imagery of Buddhist cosmological themes, Rama IV, and astronomy represents the selectivity of the Thai approach toward modernity. King Mongkut avidly adopted scientific concepts of the West while continuing to maintain a Buddhist theory of human action. The imagery connects to the artist's biography as well, for Mongkut fell ill and died in Prachuab Khiri Khan, Panya's home province. Pineapples are Prachuab Khiri Khan's primary agricultural crop; the central image of the Daowading heaven appears in the shape of a pineapple.

48. Other Thai artists have also explored the connection of art to temples in new ways. Examples include Sompop Budtarad's site-specific works in the meditation garden at Wat Buddhapadipa, the Chiang Mai social installation artists who include temples as installation and performance sites, and Montien Boonma's installations that recall various experiences of such sacred places.

49. Here Panya mentions neither the National Museum—devoted to artifacts of national heritage—nor the National Gallery, which houses a small permanent collection of the "masters" of Thai modern art and provides a site for one-person shows.

50. In his portrayal of struggle and conflict—variants of Buddha's confrontation with Mara—Panya's earlier works drew upon Thai peasant notions of violence. His imagery included sharp-clawed, beaked mythological monsters and demons, of the sort which send drought and floods to destroy peasants' crops.

51. The "concept" receives additional emphasis in exhibition practice, as Silpakorn students learn to write "concept statements" (a widespread international art practice) to accompany their art in exhibitions and catalogs.

Chapter 7: Tourists and Templegoers, Religion and Art

1. The Thais at Wat Buddhapadipa had adapted to English the Thai convention of using an honorific title with the given name. Mr. Jeremy also referred to himself as *luuk sit wat,* a "student" of the temple, a term usually reserved for young boys who serve the monks.

2. The Thai word *"jai"* refers to both the mind and the heart.

3. A complete list of countries is as follows: Portugal, Canada, Indonesia, China, Scotland, Greece, Holland, Denmark, Fiji, Switzerland, Sweden, Germany, Philippines, West Indies, Australia, Finland, France, New Zealand, Hong Kong, United States, Slovakia, Latvia, Norway, Mauritius, Iceland, South Africa, Thailand, and cities all over England. An additional survey of the guest book in January 2000 yielded the same wide distribution of visitors, with similarly diverse comments on the temple and its murals.

4. In Birmingham, Phra Mahalao teaches the community Thai Theravada Buddhist doctrine and practice, closing a grand cycle of history that began as Indian Buddhists carried their religious beliefs into Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia. The supporters of this temple are comprised largely of adherents of the anticaste doctrines of Dr. B. B. Ambedkar, an activist in the Indian independence movement and campaigner for the rights of *dalit,* or so-called "untouchables."

5. A point emphasized by Thongchai (1994), C. Reynolds (1991, 12), and Ong (1999, 243).

6. Many scholars have analyzed various historical struggles over those attempts to define and delimit Thai national identity, notably the authors in the Reynolds' collection of essays (1991), Manas and Turton's anthology on the construction of Thai knowledge (1991), and Thongchai, "Introduction" (1994).

7. Another example of the contingent nature of projecting and negotiating Thainess abroad was the 1994 Smithsonian Annual Festival of American Folklife in Washington, D.C. A newsletter described the participation of agencies of the Thai government in the planning process as "an *opportunity for a national conversation on cultural identity* in Thailand" (Kennedy 1994, 1, emphasis added). These processes also take place in many less formal arenas—in Thai homes, restaurants, and temples everywhere outside Thailand, and in cyberspace.

8. It is acknowledged, however, as one of several themes that artists in Asia address in their work. For example, Turner states: "Among these [issues] are environmental and ecological issues, the issue of participation and democracy, the issue of women in society and important issues relating to religion and spiritualism, which have long been almost absent from the Western art tradition" (1993, xvii).

9. The exhibition did not exclude work on reli-

gious themes, however, for it included an installation by the late Thai artist Montien Boonma, known for his ability to "evoke the contemplative power of religion and the yearning for it" (Desai 1996, 14).

10. I have assembled my account of the auction from unpublished interviews with participants and the observations of several people who did attend. For published accounts of the auction, see Cunningham (1998).

11. As an essential aspect of the IMF bailout following the collapse of the Thai baht in July 1997, the Finance Sector Restructuring Authority was formed to oversee the debt consolidation and asset sales of the fifty-six failed finance and security institutions. They had invested heavily in nonperforming loans—largely real estate.

12. The social divisions between "Master and Senior" and "Senior and Distinguished" artists referred both to age and degree of recognition within the art world. Chalermchai's work was put into the "Senior and Distinguished" category, as he was considerably younger than all of those in the first category. Although the "Thai Arts" grouping contained only those works that would be characterized as "neotraditional" or "neo-Buddhist," the two socially defined categories included neotraditional works as well as abstractions or naturalistic renderings of landscapes and still lifes.

13. Even the Tawee, promoted as "rare" and "invaluable" and used as the cover of the auction catalog, was deemed mediocre. According to one Thai curator, "People know he has been copying his own lotuses for years."

14. See Kanjariya (1998) for one firsthand account. Thai and *farang* art observers interpreting the auction results stressed different aspects. The auction made quite evident the weakness of the Thai art gallery system, often noted in analyses of the Bangkok art world. One observer familiar with the crowd estimated that as many as 80 percent of those attending had never bought art. A major draw to this auction for such first-timers was the provenance of the pieces, which they believed had been bought or commissioned by some of the most successful and powerful financial firms in the nation. (That the same firms had failed, through incompetence or "chicanery," was not particularly relevant, for at that time many Thais largely blamed the economic crisis on international circumstances beyond their control.) One artist told me that such people were "scared" to go to galleries to buy art, but at the auction, dealings would be "transparent" (to use a buzzword in contemporary Thai political and social discourse). New buyers would not be at the mercy of manipulative merchant gallery owners, who largely sell to tourists or to *farang* expatriates living in Thailand.

15. Here I adopt Appadurai's concept of "regimes of value," which he proposes for a theory of commodity and exchange (1986). See also Cate (1999). With regard to Thai art, these regimes cannot be spatialized as "Thai" and/or "Western," for Thais and *farang* participate in each, and their operations take place in dispersed locales, including cyberspace (See, as examples, www.rama9art.org or www.thaiweb.co.th/artists). See Henderson (1998) for an extended analysis of patronage in Thailand as it shapes the "local" regime. French (1999), in a parallel application of Appadurai's "regimes of value" to the temples of Angkor in Cambodia, analyzes their formation in different historical moments and under different political systems, as well as their convergence and competition. Myers (2001) poses the category "art" itself as one regime of value and traces out the various values objects attain in other regimes, such as identity politics.

16. From the art historical perspective, artworks experience the "radical subjectivity of taste" (Koerner and Koerner 1996, 293). See also Bourdieu's analysis of learned dispositions of taste (1984).

17. Apinan Poshyananda's writings have consistently maintained this position, and his curatorial work at Chulalongkorn University and in international exhibitions, including *Traditions/Tensions,* has consistently offered alternative visions of Thai social reality.

18. Thonburi, the site of many temples of the early reigns of the Chakri kings, lies across the Chao Phraya River from Bangkok.

19. A number of Montien Boonma's installations also explore space, sensation, Buddhist symbols, and possibilities of religious consciousness, but in contexts not explicitly marked as "religious."

20. Reviewing the scholarship on social organization in Southeast Asia, which has been characterized by tensions between seemingly oppositional paradigms, Jamieson argues for the recognition of "a deep-rooted and widespread bipolarity that pervades the cosmologies, institutions, personalities, and social organization of the region." Without attempting to resolve the opposition, he instead proposes (building on suggestive insights of Leach and

Kirsch) that we consider Southeast Asian social organization as an "oscillation between two principles"—two quite different modes of thought and action—around some "ever-moving and probably unattainable point of balance" (1984, 322).

21. Personal communication (1995). Apinan has since recognized the Wat Buddhapadipa murals as "imagined beyond national boundaries" (1996a, 106).

22. Personal communication (1995).

Glossary of Thai Words

ajarn, ajahn: Professor.

bot, also *ubosot:* The ordination chapel or structure in a Thai temple complex or ***wat***.

bun, tham bun: Merit, to make merit.

chaang: Artisan or craftsperson.

chaang sip muu: Government department of artisans who carried out royal commissions. Diverse crafts included painting, sculpting, modeling, molding, engraving, plastering, turning, lacquering, metal beating, and carpentry. See Temsiri (1982).

chedi: A bell-shaped structure in a temple complex containing either relics of revered figures or the ashes of deceased monks or laypersons.

deva: Gods or deities.

Dhamma: The teachings of the Buddha.

farang: Foreign—usually referring to Europeans or North Americans.

kathin, thaawd kathin: The annual merit-making ceremony performed at the end of Buddhist retreat (also called Buddhist Lent), during which monks remain at their temples for the rainy season. *Kathin* refers to the giving of robes and articles of daily necessity to monks.

khru: Teacher or master.

khun: Standard Thai honorific, the equivalent of Mr. or Ms.

klum: Group. In the art world, *klum* refers to groups of artists, frequently of the same university cohort, who exhibit together.

kranok: Flame-shaped motif; basic design element in Thai traditional art.

laai thai: "Thai line," referring to the flowing, sinuous line deemed characteristic of Thai traditional art.

luuk sit: Student.

luuk sit wat: Literally, "student of the temple."

mahachat: Literally, the "great life," referring to the story of Buddha's penultimate incarnation as Phra Wesandorn (Prince Vessantara).

naay chaang: Master craftsman.

naga: Serpent-like water creature, prominent in Thai/Lao folklore and religious myth.

nak khian, nak waat: Two of several terms used by artists to refer to themselves, literally "one who draws." *Nak khian* also means author or writer.

pai naawk: To go "outside," usually meaning abroad.

pai thiaw: To go around, to go traveling (usually in groups), to go out for fun or pleasure.

phaapaa, thaawd phaapaa: Literally, "forest cloth"—referring to monks' robes. Thai Buddhists hold this type of merit-making ceremony, which involves lay supporters giving money, robes, and items for daily use to monks, at any time during the year.

phii/naawng: Older sibling/younger sibling. *Phii* and *naawng* are gender neutral and are used as affectionate or familiar terms of address, alone or with nicknames.

sangha: Buddhist community, consisting of all who accept basic tenets of Buddhism. Commonly used to refer to the institution of monks and *maechii,* or nuns.

sanuk: To have fun, to have a good time, to enjoy oneself.

sinlapa: Art.

sinlapa ruam samai: Modern art.
sinlapa thai: Thai art, usually refering to Thai traditional art.
sinlapin: Artist.
siwilai: Thai transliteration of "civilized," dating from the mid-nineteenth century. Used interchangeably as a verb, noun, or adjective. See Thongchai (2000).
stupa: See ***chedi***.
tham bun: To make merit.
tham hai sanuk: To have fun, in the sense of causing or creating the conditions for fun or a good time.
thephanom: In Thai murals, divine beings in an attitude of worship.
theweda: Thai angels.
thosochat: "Ten lives," referring to the ten final stories of the Buddha's lives (Jataka tales) before being born as Siddharta Gotama, a historical person. The ten narratives include the following, from the tenth to the penultimate (Sanskrit titles in parentheses): *Phra Temiyaraj* (Prince Temiya), *Phra Mahajanaka, Suwannasam* (Sama), *Phra Nemiraj* (Prince Nemi), *Mahosot* (Mahosadha), *Phra Puritat* (Prince Bhuridatta), *Phra Chanthakumarn* (Prince Candakumara), *Phra Brahmanarada* (Narada), *Vidhurapanthit* (Vidhurapandita), and *Phra Wesandorn* (Prince Vessantara).
Traiphum: Three Worlds; the Buddhist cosmology.
ubosot: Also ***bot***; the temple structure bounded by *bai sima,* boundary markers that consecrate the space for use in ordination ceremonies.
viharn, wihan, vihara: A hall used for housing sacred images and for public lectures.
vinaya: Rules or code of conduct followed by Buddhists, and one of the three central collections of texts in the Pali canon.
vipassana: Insight meditation.
wai: Thai salutation and gesture of respect performed by bringing the palms of the hands together at chest level or above.
wai khru: Refers to an annual *wai khru* ceremony, both an initiation ceremony and one performed by students to honor the spirits and past masters of their profession.
wai phra: To pay respect to the Buddha.
wat: A Thai temple complex comprising a number of structures: ***viharn***, ***ubosot***, *ho trai* (library or structure for storing manuscripts), *ho rakhang* (bell tower), *sala* (an open pavilion for gatherings), *stupa* or ***chedi***, and *kuti* (small structures used as monks' living quarters).
yak: Giant or ogre.

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