

Making Merit, Making Art: A Thai Temple in Wimbledon

Review >
England

Wat Buddhapadipa in Wimbledon is the most prestigious Thai Buddhist temple outside of Thailand. The initiative to build a temple in England came from a group of Thai nationals in 1964 and received sanction and substantial supports from the Thai government, elites, influential patrons, and even royalty. The temple's prestige is also enhanced by the long-standing cordial relations between the royal houses of Thailand and England, and by the persistent Thai view of London as the main centre of Western civilization. Sandra Cate's *Making Merit, Making Art* is based on the story and ideas behind this temple.

By Nandana Chutiwongs

For Thailand today, Wat Buddhapadipa in London represents an officially sanctioned version of Thai identity, conforming to the National Cultural Policy to maintain 'the good image, fame and dignity of Thai culture in the world community'. For well-to-do Thais, it is almost a place of pilgrimage, a legitimate goal for fund-raising, travelling, and merit-making. For others, it has become a highly recommended stop on tourist itineraries. The most celebrated feature of Wimbledon's temple is its Thai-style *bot* or *ubosot/uposatha* (ordination hall), which holds mural paintings depicting the life of the Buddha in an unusual style that may be classified as 'neo-traditional', one of the many trends of contemporary art in Thailand.

From the records of various interviews Cate has conducted with founding members, supporters, and patrons of the temple, we can glean an idea of its actual functions. These tally, in gen-



The defeat of Mara and the Enlightenment.

eral outline, with what has been known in Thailand since ancient times. As a rule, Cate wisely refrains from judgement, thus letting interviews and interviewees speak for themselves. The temple's murals, in particular, generate much animated discussion and controversy as to their suitability as media to disseminate the true message of the

Buddha, their legitimacy as representations of Thai cultural identity, and their debatable aesthetic values.

The paintings still follow established conventions in theme and basic design, reflecting styles of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. But the intensity of the new palette and the 'radical' mode of representation unsettle the average audience. The incorporation of contemporary elements, such as portraits or caricatures of living persons, generates disapproval, not because of their presence, but more on account of the hybrid Western styles employed to depict them.

For many long years 27 Thai painters, trained in both Thai and Western art history and history, worked together on these murals. As volunteers they only received free board and simple lodging from the temple, yet subsequently gained substantial renown from working on this prestigious project. This process may be viewed in conformity with the Thai ingrained belief in karma. Merit-making, besides bene-

fitting others and the world in general, also enhances one's own current and future prospects. Success, generally measured in terms of fame and finance, indeed elevated the painters' own career, and consequently had a far-reaching effect on the trends and development of the country's contemporary art on the whole.

Cate explores the characteristics and significance of these paintings from anthropological and art historical points of view, addressing the complex relationships between art and religion, and society and power. The motivations of the artists and their sponsors, public response, and the diverse views of the critics, are all presented against the lively and changing backdrop of contemporary Thailand. The author's summary of first-hand information on the Thai system of art education and training is highly relevant to understanding the background, ideologies, and work processes of artists in Thailand today. Debates on the multiple roles of art, as an act of selfless devotion, a medium of moral instruction, an expression of ideas and convictions, and/or as a purely aesthetic revelation, are still going on in full force in contemporary Thailand. Fortunately, the author's analytical remarks, often short and to the point, usually bear marks of sincerity that take most of the sting out of many of these sensitive issues.



The ubosot at Wat Buddhapadipa, Wimbledon, England.

The book gives a short but adequate overview of the nature and function of mural painting in Thailand, assigning its shift of place from religious space to secular environments to the agencies of modernity and commercialization. Although this is not a new theory, the many examples provided in the book emphasize the author's point. In spite of a slight weakness in her knowledge of the early history of art in Thailand, the unique nature of the Buddhapadipa murals and their highlights are adequately underlined. As she explains, they form part of two large designs conceived by two leaders of the working group. The conventional composition and distribution of scenes relating the life of the Buddha are substantially retained, as well as the two-dimensional and multi-perspective style of the nineteenth century. Nevertheless, the murals also incorporate details that belong to the modern world, presented in strikingly non-conventional styles.

The delicate, elegant lines, enriched by profuse and detailed ornamentation, originally found in traditional art and generally considered representative of



'Thainess', predominate in the murals. On the contrary, the intensity of the new palette, of cool but clear and ethereal translucent greens, blues, and pinks, evokes a striking contrast to the familiar dark but warm red and gold palette of the old murals.

'Modern' elements, bearing stylistic qualities of Western surrealism, realism, fantastic realism, and even pop art, appear in the detailed Buddha scenes. These include portraits and caricatures of important and notorious political figures and popular TV phenomena, such as the action heroes Superman and Ninja Turtles, all shown in their characteristic poses and dispositions. In these trivial details, the neo-traditional artists make use of the traditional poetic/artistic licence that permits events of everyday life, including those of unrefined humour and of human faults and failings, to appear in the periphery of religious scenes.

The author also notes the significance of the Buddhapadipa temple paintings as a mode of 'social portraiture' in multiple dimensions. She argues that they transport a contemporary vision of Thai society beyond the boundaries of Thailand, and carry the message of Thai Buddhism into the contemporary world. The painters unfold the story of the Buddha's life as told in their own culture and in hybrid styles reflective of the various conceptions and art phenomena as known in contemporary Thailand. Depictions of persons and places representative of contemporary political powers and the diversity of global cultures are interwoven into the imaginary and fantastic setting of the Buddha story. Hybrid in style, evocative and controversial in expression and artistic valuation, Cate is convincing in her argument that the murals at the Wat Buddhapadipa Temple undeniably embody a spirit of universality, portraying the world as one large community that shares the same fate, confusion, disharmony, and troubles. There is a sense that wholesale sufferings can be eliminated by a clear understanding and by the subtle but brilliant spectrum of light emanating from the revered figure of the Buddha, the teacher of peace and tolerance. <

- Sandra Cate, *Making Merit, Making Art, a Thai Temple in Wimbledon*, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, (2003), pp. 218, 48 colour plates, ISBN 0-8248-23575

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