Thai Traditional Painting

THAI CULTURE, NEW SERIES No. 20

By Elizabeth Lyons

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Mural at Wat Bang Yi Khan, Thonburi

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Thai painting at Phutthaisawan Chapel, the Front Palace, Bangkok.

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Preface

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

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

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

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

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Fig. 1 Scene of the Temptation and Defeat of Mara. Wat Dusit, Thonburi, Reign of the first King of Chakri Dynasty.

ELIZABETH LYONS

was a specialist in Asian Art who worked in Thailand under the Specialist Program of the United States Department of State. She became interested in Thai painting on her first visit in 1955 and made an extensive photographic survey of this traditional art throughout the country.

She was educated at the University of Michigan, Michigan State University, Institute of Art of New York University, Brussels and Paris. While living in New York, she was on the staff of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and the Art History Department of Queens College. She also worked as a project specialist at the Ford Foundation Office in Bangkok.

Temple banner, tempera on cloth, from Amphoe Hod, Chiang Mai.

Fig. 2 Cloth banner from Chedi Wat Dok Ngoen, Amphoe Hod. The Buddha descending from Heaven.

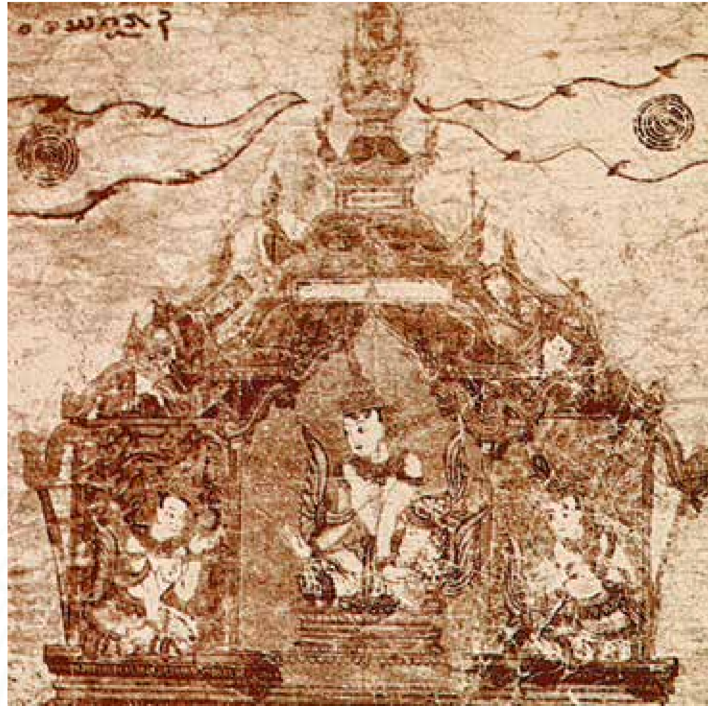

Fig. 3 Detail of a painting on Koi paper from a Maha Chat set, Chiang Mai, late 19th century. Phusati descends from Heaven to become the mother of Prince Wetsandon. (Vessantara).

THAI TRADITIONAL PAINTING

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The painting of Thailand is an art of great interest and sometimes of remarkable beauty. Although it must have been originally derived from the Buddhist painting of India and Sri Lanka (Ceylon) it became so adapted to local thought, needs and materials that by the time of its greatest popularity in the 18th and 19th centuries it must be considered an original and unique art. Only by subject matter and superficial generalities can it be connected with the painting of other Buddhist countries.

These paintings, like the early religious art of any other faith, have a basic purpose to instruct, guide and inspire the devout by illustrating scenes of religious history and moral value. They are never an individual aesthetic expression and, in fact, only rarely is the name of an artist recorded. The painter was an anonymous monk or dedicated layman. Often he had more devotion than skill, but sometimes faith and a great natural talent were combined, were refined by training, and then his creations are stirring by the standards of any age or country.

The new guardian figures on the same window shutters of Wat Daowadueng, Thonburi. (Compared with Fig. 5)

There are several different forms of traditional painting. The most important type is the dry fresco mural found in one or more of the buildings which make up the wat complex. A typical hall would have its walls covered with murals from a shoulder - high dado to the dim reaches of the high ceiling (Fig. 1). On the top part of the wall facing the main image of the Buddha there is generally represented the unsuccessful temptation and attack by Mara, an allegory of the victory over evil. Behind the image may be scenes of Hell, of the Buddhist cosmos; the life of Buddha or Jataka stories are usually pictured on the other two walls. These main, story telling murals are often surmounted by rows of seated Buddhas or heavenly beings kneeling in adoration. The majority of wats follow this arrangement but there are interesting exceptions in the minority.

Another type of painting is a long cloth banner (Fig. 2). One or more of these are displayed by the Wat on special occasions. The most usual form shows a standing figure of the Buddha flanked by two disciples or attendants. More rarely seen are the main events of his life, such as the Great Departure, the Preaching in the Deer Park, or the Death. Only a few paintings on cloth earlier than the 18th century have survived.

Probably every wat once also owned a set of scenes on cloth, Koi paper or wood illustrating the Jataka story of Prince Wetsandon (Vessantara), the last of the 547 Jatakas or previous births of the Buddha. Called the Maha Chat (Great Birth), it is a story of selfless generosity and sacrifice known and revered by every Thai, and recited in most wats at the end of Lent (Fig. 3).

The Thai version of the thousand verse Pali original is a very long prose-poem in thirteen cantos, and the majority of the sets contain thirteen paintings illustrating the main episode of each canto.

One also occasionally finds a set of ten paintings representing the Tosachat, the last ten births of the Buddha during which he perfected himself, or a set of five to ten paintings representing the main events of his life.

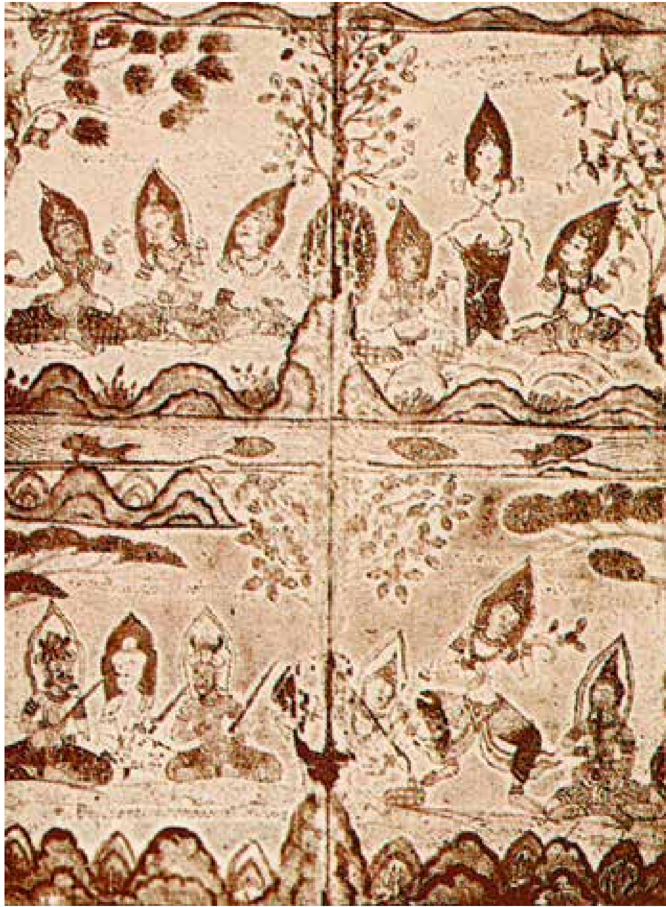

Fig. 4 Manuscript of the Triphoum, mid-16th century.
National Museum, Bangkok.

Paintings on cloth or paper parallel the style and development of the mural paintings although they do not often match them in quality. Perhaps this statement is true only for the Bangkok period as the few surviving Ayutthaya* examples are extremely fine.

Manuscript illustrations represent an important category of painting. The long, narrow, palm leaf books, like the Indian ones, have had a continual use in Thailand, but are rarely illustrated. The usual illustrated manuscript, called a "Samut Thai" is of Koi paper in one continuous sheet folded like an accordian. It is read across the length of the page. Those of pre-Bangkok date usually have a large illustration in the middle of the page, sometimes covering the double unfolded section (Fig. 4). Those of later date generally have one or two smaller illustrations on the ends of the page with the text between them.

Fig. 5 Guardian figures on the window shutters of
Wat Daowadueng, Thonburi, Reign of King Rama II

* In the former editions the spelling of this word "Ayutthaya" was "Ayudhya" according to the pronunciation in the Pali and Sanskrit languages which have been frequently used in this book series.

Fig.6 Still life of offerings,
Wat Suthat Thepwararam,
Bangkok, Reign of King Rama II.

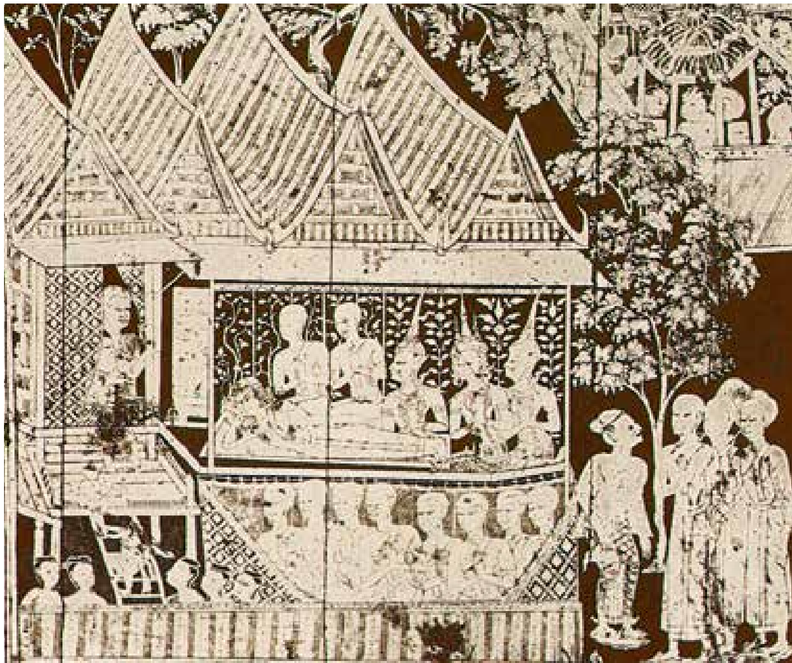

Fig. 7 Gold and black lacquer painting, 18th century.
Suan Pakkad Palace, Bangkok.

The subject matter of the manuscripts is extremely eclectic. Although the majority are devoted to clearly religious works, others are treatises on the real or legendary worlds of humans and animals, and include texts on boxing, massage, the diseases of elephants, horoscopes, etc.

Murals, paintings on cloth, and manuscripts represent the largest part and most important aspects of Thai painting. The other examples play a subsidiary role although to class them as merely "decorative" is rather arbitrary. This is especially true of the guardian figures painted on the inner side of the doors and the window shutters of monastery buildings (Fig. 5). If they are stock types, they are unusually beautiful ones, graceful and benign, quite unlike their fierce Chinese and Japanese comrades-in-arms who guard the Buddhist world from harm. In a few wat buildings, the window shutters or pillars have still lifes of offerings : flowers, bowls of fruit or rice. These are done in quite a different style from the murals ; in fact, with their strong patterns and flat color they seem related to modern western art (Fig. 6). According to the monks, they were often painted by Chinese artists who were also employed for decorative bits on columns or beams.

Fig. 8 Wat Suthat Thepwararam, Bangkok, Reign of King Rama II.

Fig. 9 Brushes and pigments used in Thai painting.

Thai painting at
Wat Phra Sing, Chiang Mai.

Detail of a scene,Wat Suwannaram,Thonburi.

Fig. 10 Scene of Devadhamma Jataka incised on a stone set into the ceiling of a passage way at Wat Si Chum, Sukhothai. Sukhothai period.

Fig. 11 Crypt of Wat Ratchaburana, Ayutthaya, 15th century.

Designs in gold leaf and black lacquer, found particularly on large wooden bookcases, chests and screens is still another type of pictorial art. The usual subjects of the life of Buddha or Jataka scenes may be illustrated, but even more likely to appear is the Rāmakien, legendary themes or floral and animal motifs. One of the most effective uses of this technique in architectural decoration occurs in an early 18th century monastery library now restored in the grounds of Suan Pakkad Palace in Bangkok. With its numerous panels depicting, in the upper registers, the principal events in the life of the Buddha, and in the lower registers, scenes from the Rāmakien, this unique, jewel-like structure represent a high point of graphic art of the Ayutthaya period. It is also an invaluable document of the life of the Ayutthaya kingdom at the moment of its greatest prosperity (Fig. 7).

The style of Thai painting has the basic elements of all Asian painting with no shadows; time is not stopped at any particular moment. There is no western perspective with its fixed view and vanishing point. Here, the spectator is allowed to rove through the painting. He may stand directly in front of an audience hall, or he may look down from a height into its courtyard, and he may do both at the same time if it seems necessary to the story. Distance is an illusion achieved by the relative placement or overlapping of figures and objects (Fig. 8).

The composition is a combination of mass and line. The figures are drawn with an even, flowing contour, then filled in with flat color and the detail and ornament applied in a manner similar to the Indian and early Islamic technique. Buildings, furniture, chariots, etc. are done in the same way, but the background is a very generalized landscape. Here and there a group of rocks or a clump of flowers shows a Chinese influence in the style. The artist probably copied and adapted those bits from porcelain or decorative screens popular at the time. He does not consider landscape as important in itself : it is only the necessary but incidental setting for the action, and is often done in a very summary fashion. In some cases the contrast between an uninspired or crude background and the sensitive, intricate figures leads one to believe that the former was done by pupils or lesser artists.

Fig. 12 Frieze of heavenly beings,
Wat Yai Suwannaram, Phetchaburi.

Fig. 13 Wat Phutthaisawan, Ayutthaya.

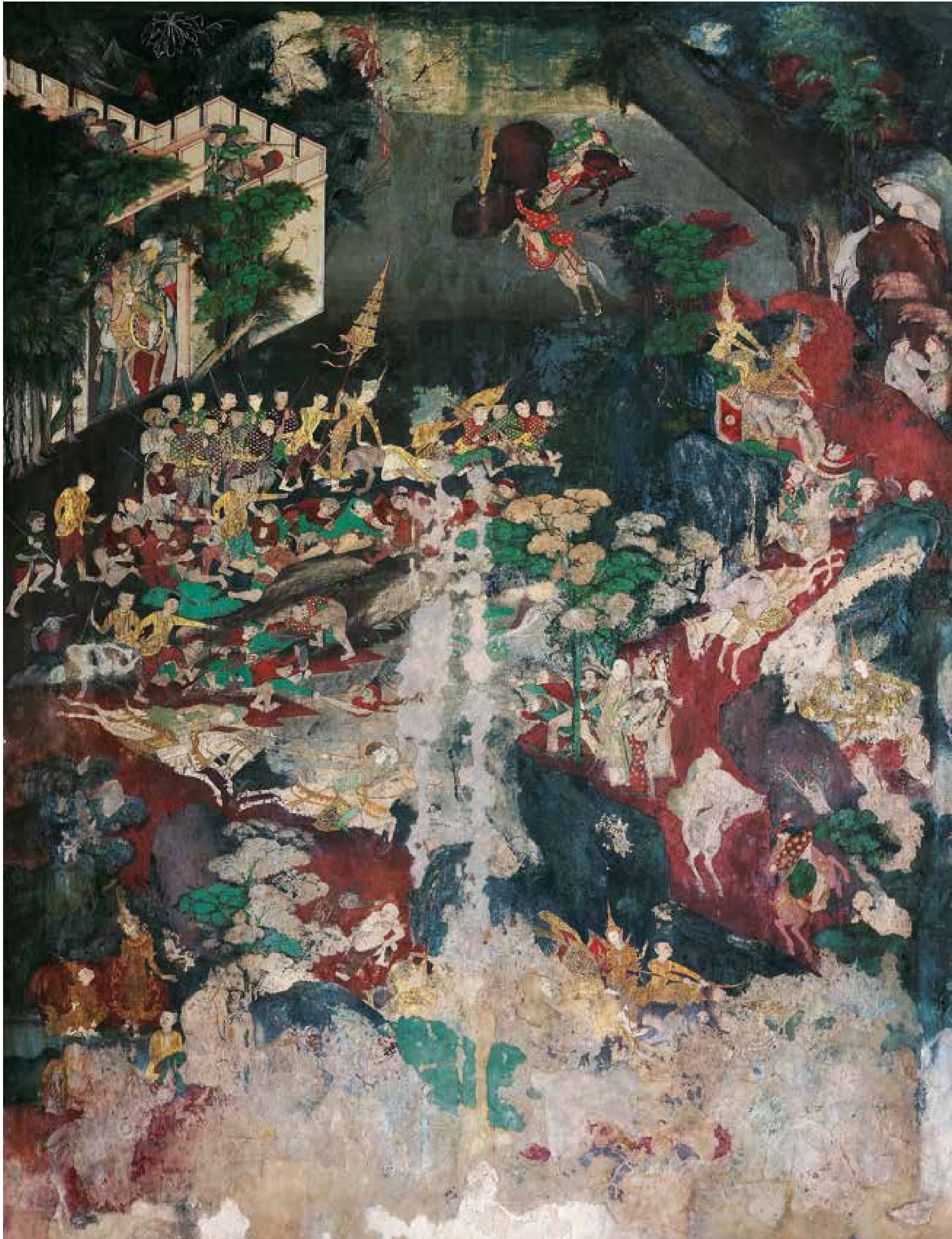

Fig. 14 Battle scene from
the Mahosot Jataka,
Wat Suwannaram, Thonburi,
Reign of King Rama I.

Thai painting at Wat Phra Sing, Chiang Mai.

In the narrative murals there is a type of continuous action although the scenes do not merge into one another. The important episodes are separated in the early examples by an arbitrary zig-zag line, and in the later periods by more natural means such as a row of trees, a wall or a screen.

The technique of the painting has some unusual points. For murals, the wall is prepared by washing it several times with water in which ki-lek leaves, (Cassia siamea legumniosaea) have been pounded. This is supposed to remove any trace of salt. Then a coating of plaster, white chalk mixed with a binder of tamarind seeds which have been baked, ground and boiled, is applied and carefully smoothed. Cloth and paper are sized with a thin application of the same mixture.

The paints are mineral and earth pigments like malachite and cinnabar; from the beginning of the 18th century, at least, they have been imported from China in powder form. The duller and more limited colors of the earliest painting are probably local pigments as is the red ochre always used for a preliminary outline. The binder used with the paints is a tree gum, ma-khwit, (Feronia elephantum rutaceae). Another gum, ma duea (Ficus hispida urticaceae) is used as a glue for the gold leaf. The paint is applied to the dry plaster, thus it is not a true fresco technique.

Brushes are made of tree roots and bark and are often set into elaborate silver handles. The brush of lamjiek root (Pandanus tectorius) is cut flat across the end and then split several times. This produces a stippling effect which is used for trees and shrubbery masses. Another brush is made of gradang-nga (Canagiun odoratum) which peels off in long flakes. The ends of this are pounded and frayed, and both brushes are well soaked in water to make them pliable before using (Fig. 9). Details are added with brushes made of cow's hair, and exceptionally fine work may be done with a special brush made of hair taken from the inner part of a cow's ear.

Much of the distinctive appearance of Thai painting is due to these wooden brushes. They give an even, wirelike line, often of amazing sinuosity, and quite unlike the modeling line of the flexible Chinese brush.

It is unfortunate that Thailand adopted a type of dry fresco which is much too perishable in a humid climate. Only a few examples remain which can be safely dated before the 17th century, yet historical references and archaeology give evidence that painting must have existed much earlier.

Fig. 15 Wat Phra Sing, Chiang Mai.

Fig. 16 Detail of a scene,
Wat Phumin, Nan.

Detail of a scene, Wat Phumin, Nan.

Dvāravatī, the kingdom of an early Mon speaking people in central Thailand, undoubtedly had connections with India of the Gupta period. It is reasonable to expect that an Indian tradition of painting, such as may be seen at Ajanta in India, or Sigiriya in Sri Lanka (Ceylon) would also be implanted in Thailand, but we have only a few bits of rather crudely incised stone to show the relationship. The Dvāravatī paintings were probably similar to those done by their cousins the western Mon of Burma, at Pagan around the 12th century.

Perhaps the oldest painting of which some trace remains is on two walls of a cave halfway up a low mountain in Tambon Na Tham, a Moslem village near Yala. The paintings were effaced by fanatics soon after their discovery a few years ago, but enough remains to discern rows of Buddha images with monks or disciples, and three standing female figures with leaf shaped halos. The pigments are a muddy red, black, blue and yellow; the style seems to be Singhalese-Srivijaya, and the date could be between the 10th and 13th centuries.

No trace of painting remains from the Lopburi period, but in Sukhothai we can begin to see the evolution of the national style. Set into the ceiling of a narrow stairway at Wat Si Chum, Sukhothai, are several stone slabs incised with Jataka scenes and identifying inscriptions in the Sukhothai script. The Indianized figures, the linear style, and the detailed representation of jewelry and ornament lead one to believe that they were derived from illuminated manuscripts brought by the Singhalese monks who were established at Sukhothai (Fig. 10).

Combining this Singhalese style with the new grace of the Sukhothai period are some fragments of murals at Wat Chedi Chet Thaeo, Sawankhalok. They represent the Buddha seated among disciples and adoring figures, and must date from the beginning of the 14th century.

The first fairly well preserved painting is found at Wat Ratchaburana, Ayutthaya, founded in 1424.The paintings were discovered in the main prang of the wat in two crypts which had remained sealed from the date of its construction until recently (Fig. 11).

The paintings are of two types. In the lower crypt are hieratic rows of seated Buddhas and standing disciples, and in four niches are Jataka scenes. The ceiling is decorated with a large circular medallion formed with concentric bands and floral zones and surrounded with small gilt circles reminiscent of a ceiling in Ajanta. In the upper crypt there is a frieze of heavenly beings closely related to the style of the Wat Sri Chum engravings, and on two walls are Chinese scenes too fragmentary for positive identification, but unmistakably Chinese in content and execution. In spite of long contact with China and a rather large Chinese population very little Chinese influence is apparent in Thai painting and there are only rare examples of actual Chinese work.

Mural painting similar to those in the lower crypt of Wat Ratchaburana are found in a chedi of Wat Mahathat, Ayutthaya, and some interesting paintings of monks standing in adoration their hands clasped around lotus buds are found on some thin metal plaques which were affixed to a niche in the large eastern chedi, dated 1492 of Wat Phra Si Sanphet.

Manuscripts of the Ayutthaya period provide important help in dating paintings besides being interesting in their own right. One of the most treasured manuscripts in the Bangkok National Museum collection is a Triphoum, a midsixteenth century copy of a 14th century treatise on Buddhist cosmology. It is an unusually large one, unfolding to a length of about five feet, and contains illustrations of ten Jatakas and the thirteen chapters of the Wetsandon story.

While not technically of the finest quality, this manuscript is an important document to show the continuity and slow development of Thai painting. For example, the figures of gods and goddesses in the Himavanta forest go back in stylistic conception through the Sukhothai stone engravings to the Ajanta type, and as they go forward from the 16th to the 19th century painting they suffer only minor changes in coiffeur and costume, and grow a bit more lissom (Fig. 4).

AIso present in the manuscript are the stylized landscape forms and the groups of neatly detailed plants and flowers which seem to be derived from Chinese porcelain. A type of floral ornament was present earlier, but not in as naturalistic a style.

The earliest painting on cloth yet known was discovered in 1960 in Amphoe Hod, near Chiang Mai in the area of the Bhumipol Dam. This long banner, about 7' by 4½ had been folded into a clay jar and placed in the crypt of Chedi Wat Dok-ngoen (Silver Flower) along with some Chiang Saen style images of the Buddha and some Chinese Ming porcelain. These latter items are not of much help in precise dating since the worn condition of the painting and its ancient reinforcements indicate that it was already very old when it was piously retired from service (Fig. 2).

The painting represents the Buddha descending from the Tavatimsa heaven in a shower of flowers, jewelry and silver nuggets, and accompanied on either side by heavenly musicians. Below the figure of the Buddha are two groups of figures, disciples on one side, and an unidentifiable group, perhaps royal personages, on the other. At the bottom there is a horizontal band representing the waterworld of lotus and nagas. The style contains elements from all the influences that must have penetrated northern Thailand, Chiang Saen, Sukhothai, Singhalese and there is even a Chinese treatment on the robes on one group of female figures. The date of the painting should fall somewhere between the 15th and 16th centuries.

The paintings in Wat Yai Suwannaram, Phetchaburi considered from historical evidence to have been done in the latter part of the 17th century show rows of seated and praying heavenly beings, including Indra and Brahma (Fig. 12). The figures are not small in scale, each row measuring over two feet in height, but the technique is delicate and miniaturistic and the ornament is detailed. Each figure is given a certain measure of isolation and importance by having its head and shoulders framed in a tent like space. The edges of the tent are marked with vertical striations with a curious hook at the top of each line. The general effect is of a flowered and fringed baldachin hanging over the figures, and that may well indeed have been the original source of the motif. The striations are mentioned because they are an element in the dating of other paintings. They occur again in the murals of Wat Ko, Phetchaburi finished in 1714. Here the usage is similar, but in other 18th century paintings the hooked striations are used like a picket fence to separate one scene from another.

Another example of late 17th century painting is found at Wat Phutthaisawan, Ayutthaya, in the brick pavilion built for the abbot between 1688 and 1702 (Fig. 13). The building has been badly neglected but a few patches of mural painting still survive. The varied subject matter includes a scene of the Buddha's enlightenment, a king going on elephant to worship the Buddha's Footprint, scenes from the last ten Jatakas, the Three Worlds, the legend of the Buddha Khosacharn meeting the Buddhadatta Thera in mid ocean. There are also scenes from the Rāmakien, and painted on the window shutters are figures of different Asian races, and garudas, demons and guardians.

The style has the linear quality and limited color of the Phetchaburi wats mentioned previously, but it has a sharper vitality. There is an uneven quality to the composition of the various scenes, probably illustrating the difference between master and pupils who worked on the walls.

From the fall of Ayutthaya to the middle of the 19th century, the murals grow in complexity of composition and in a richness of color which is heightened by a lavish use of gold leaf. One may use as a good example the murals of Wat Suwannaram in Thonburi, just across the river from Bangkok. The scenes, done in the last few years of the 18th century represent the last ten Jatakas and the life of the Buddha. There are heavenly or earthly palaces that with their glittering, soaring spires and their multicolored and many-layered roofs have the splendor of fantasy although they have an actual counterpart in the present day wats of Bangkok. Richly dressed processions of men and ornamented elephants wind through the hills to bring Prince Wetsandon back from exile. A small scene on another wall shows a raging battle. The composition is an intricate counterpoint of figures in action, and the tiny, inch-high faces are clear portraits of Japanese, Chinese, Indian, Portuguese villains and Thai heroes (Fig. 14). The center wall is like a great medieval tapestry with several scenes of the Life of the Buddha woven into one unified composition. Wat Dusit and Wat Daowadueng also in Thonburi, the Phutthaisawan Chapel in the compound of the Bangkok National Museum, and Wat Suthat Thepwararam in Bangkok are other fine examples of this rich and colorful style (Figs. 17, 18).

The painting of northern Thailand is usually strongly Burmese in style and there is very little that predates the 19th century. The drawing of the northern murals is somewhat less sensitive, the color is much colder in tone, and the general effect is dry, crisp and much less luxurious than that of the Bangkok school.

Wat Phra Sing, in Chiang Mai, is the most important of these northern wats. One of the walls is painted with the story of Sang Thong, a fairy story prince who was born in a golden conch shell (Fig. 15). This is one of the "Fifty Stories" that are often represented in this area in place of the authentic Jatakas. One may note that in the Wat Phra Sing murals, the royal personages are clothed in traditional Thai costume of royalty which survives today in the costumes of the classic dance, and the common people are dressed in contemporary 19th century Burmese style. Here, as in the murals elsewhere, there is a great deal of factual reporting and earthly humor tucked into the most reverent scenes. Children play, women cook food, a man flirts with a group of girls and on the roof above his head a tom cat stalks a female.

Other paintings, rich in scenes of local life, are found at Wat Phumin in Nan, east of Chiang Mai, (Fig. 16) and in Phayao.

Murals probably existed where ever there were wats in the 18th and 19th centuries. They are sparsely represented today in many areas. Wat Na Phra That, near Khorat, has the main example for the Northeast, with a few provincial fragments in Ubon Ratchathani and Udon Ratchathani.

Wat Mahathat in Songkhla, has the best mural painting in the South. This work in the style of the Third Reign was painted by an artist from Bangkok and does not show any regional style. Paintings in Nakhon Si Thammarat and Pattani are better examples of local taste. These murals are limited to a wooden cornice, about 2' deep running around the upper portion of the walls. The painting is very linear, the colors are light, and often on a white background, the quality in general is provincial.

Fig. 17 Inner side of the doors at the hot,
Wat Suthat, Bangkok.

Fig. 18 Detail from the Mahosot Jataka, Wat Daowadueng, Thonburi.

More cloth banners and Wetsandon sets than murals are found in these outlying districts. They are similar in style to the wall paintings and differ widely in quality.

Painting, in Thailand, like sculpture, architecture and the dance was in the service of religion from its earliest days, and the traditional style still is, more or less. Thailand enriched the simple ritual of Buddhism by borrowing themes from the Hindus and Brahmins as well as certain rites concerning artists.The painter dedicated his life to his craft, and thereby to the service of the Buddha. He went through an ordination, part of which is similar to the ordination of a monk, was dressed in white and presented traditional objects of sacrifice.

In the villages, at least, the Indian traditions regarding the painter's attitude toward his art were also accepted. He must not take his craft lightly, must pay respect to his teachers, and he must

go through proper ceremonies and explain to the spirits that when he paints the story of Buddha it is an act of devotion, he is not imitating holy events and not usurping the act of creation. The villagers say that a painter will usually paint only one set of pictures and that he will leave one section unfinished because when he adds the last stroke his life's work will be done and he will die. The truth of this would be hard to check in one of the large murals, but it can explain the broken roof line, the incomplete column etc., found in many of the Wetsandon sets (Fig. 3).

Traditional Thai painting began to die out in Bangkok in the middle of the 19th century. Western oil paints were introduced, the artist found a new interest in Western shading and perspective and occasionally in Western scenes. An interesting early example of this hybrid style can be seen on the upper portion of the walls at Wat Bowonniwet, Bangkok, where King Mongkut ordered the painting of western scenes, including Mt. Vernon and Versailles, a sailing boat and a wind mill as a kind of educational mural. The paintings of the Rāmakien in the covered galleries of Wat Phra Kaeo, the Temple of the Emerald Buddha, must have originally been a superb example of the traditional style, but after several restorations it was completely repainted in the modern manner about thirty years ago.

The Silpakorn, the Fine Arts University and also the Arts and Crafts secondary school have trained some painters in the old techniques and they have preserved in copies some of the vanishing murals (Fig. 19). School children are taught to draw some of the decorative motifs, but traditional painting no longer survives even in the remote villages. The young Thai artist has joined the modern, international art movement and is finding new ways to express his ancient and rich heritage.

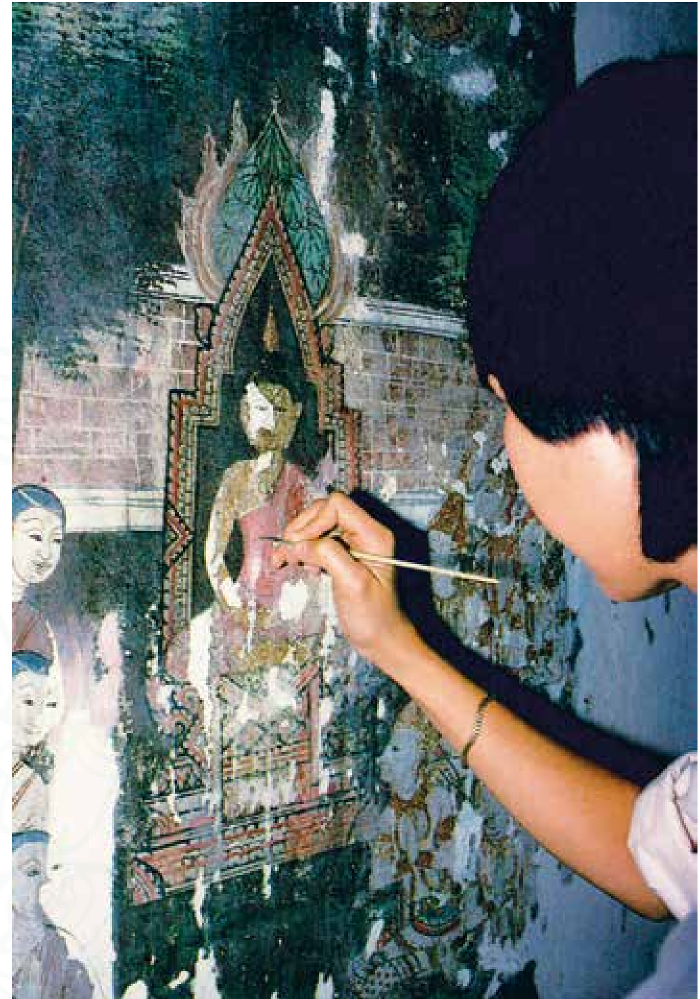

Fig. 19 Students of the Arts and Crafts School, Bangkok, painting in the traditional style.

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