



An Appreciation of Sukhothai Art

THAI CULTURE, NEW SERIES No. 17

AN APPRECIATION OF SUKHOTHAI ART

BY
PROFESSOR SILPA BHIRASRI



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Preface



Fig. 1 Indian statue of the Gupta period, 5th century, having the characteristics of stone statuary. Compare it with fig. 2 to notice the difference of expression due both to different materials used and to different individual interpretations of the figure of the Buddha.

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

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

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

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

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

Fig. 2 Statue of the walking Buddha of the Sukhothai period, 14th century, remarkable for its extreme spirituality. The exceptional veneration the old Thai had for Lord Buddha inspired them to create an image belonging to heavenly spheres. The statue represents Buddha after his Enlightenment advancing gently to teach the Doctrine.





A subduing Mara Buddha Image, Bronze, Sukhothai Art, 14th Century



❖ AN APPRECIATION OF SUKHOTHAI ART ❖

Every important civilization has a golden age when material, intellectual and spiritual progress simultaneously reach a high level. The Sukhothai period was the golden age of Thailand and the determining factors were national independence and religion. No free people of the past have been ethically united without a common belief; for the Thai this belief was, as it is now, that of Hinayana Buddhism. It was this doctrine of the Buddha which met their spiritual needs and which they chose over the Mahayana Buddhism and Hinduism of the previous Khmer rulers.

If one understands that the Thai embraced Hinayana Buddhism because they felt the truth of this doctrine in their own hearts, one may better understand their greatest artistic creation, the Sukhothai image of the Lord Buddha. Over a period of two thousand years in the Buddhist countries of India, Ceylon, Indochina, Indonesia, Thailand, Burma, Japan and Tibet millions of Buddhist images have been made in any material that can be moulded or carved. It is an immense production of many different styles, yet one will find that very few of these statues represent an individual interpretation of the figure of the Teacher. As a rule, the image is a translation of a classic and honored specimen. The creation of a new style is possible only under special circumstances such as those prevailing in Sukhothai.

In any image representing a super-human or divine figure there should be a sensitively balanced relationship between the anatomical forms and the sculptor's subtle modelling to reveal the inward quality which arouses our aesthetic and emotional feeling.

It is possible, of course, that one may be inspired by a statue of poor proportions and crude workmanship by the association of it with one's faith. However, in the case of the Sukhothai image, its true beauty brings out a spirituality that can be felt by all and is irrespective of religious creed.

Until the 12th century, the majority of statues in India, Indonesia and Indochina were executed in stone. Bronze images were few in number and imitated stone prototypes. In Thailand, for example, almost all images of the Northern or Chiang Saen style are in bronze, but they still retain the peculiarity of the Gupta or post Gupta, Pallava style. On the other hand, Sukhothai bronze sculpture is quite different from any stone model.

When Hinduism arose again to be the dominating spiritual power of India its philosophy and literature inspired artists to conceive many gods and demi-gods in their various cosmic forms. There was a great individual demand for statuettes of these figures with the result that the art of bronze casting became very important in south India and, in some measure, in Ceylon.





Fig. 3 The spirituality and suave serenity of the heads of the Sukhothai period Buddha images issue from an exquisite and sensitive modelling emphasized by the rhythm of the parallel undulating lines of the facial lineaments. Drawing from a bronze of the 14th century.



Fig. 4 Detail of the statue illustrated in fig. 2 showing the exquisite modelling of the hand of the Sukhothai statuary. The gesture of the hand means the “Wheel of the Law”, the fundamental principle of the Buddhist Doctrine.

The technique of bronze casting dictates certain style peculiarities. First, a model of clay mixed with sand is prepared. When this is dry, a heavy coat of wax is applied and modelled to bring out the form and the details. The figure is then covered by various coats of sand and clay, or, as in Europe, with brick powder mixed with plaster of Paris. The prepared model is baked, the wax melts and runs out from a special tube in the lower part of the mould. Then, metal is poured into the mould and fills the space vacated by the melted wax. This is the process known as “cire perdue” or “lost wax”.

The technique of developing sculptural form by modelling the soft wax over the clay core permits subtly flowing masses and delicate, sinuous lines far different from the style produced by a direct carving of resistant stone.

THE CONCEPTION

A typical Sukhothai image represents the Gautama Buddha after his Enlightenment. The body is in complete rest, the muscles are relaxed, and the face is serene with a faint smile reflecting a state of deep inward contentment. After his Enlightenment, the Buddha belonged more to the sphere of Nirvana than to the Earth and therefore the Thai conceived an image in which this ethereal quality is perfectly realized. The Sukhothai images of the Buddha, whether sitting, walking or reclining all have a particular undulating and soaring character which seems to render immaterial the heavy bronze of which they are made. Yet this spirituality does not destroy the sculptural qualities of the statues. The human forms, simplified and idealized, are exquisitely modelled and there is no disharmony between the abstract idea and its material realization. This had not always been the case in the past. We feel that in some statues of the Gupta period, the sculptural volumes appear too heavy to convincingly portray a transcendental and sacred figure. See comparative figures 1, and 2.



Fig. 5 The bronze Buddha Image, Phra Phuttha Chinnarat in Phitsanulok Bronze, late 15th century, having the characteristics of the late Sukhothai art. These peculiarities are particularly noticeable from the exaggeration of the curve of the overlapped legs, the lesser spiritual expression, and from the even length of the fingers of the hands.

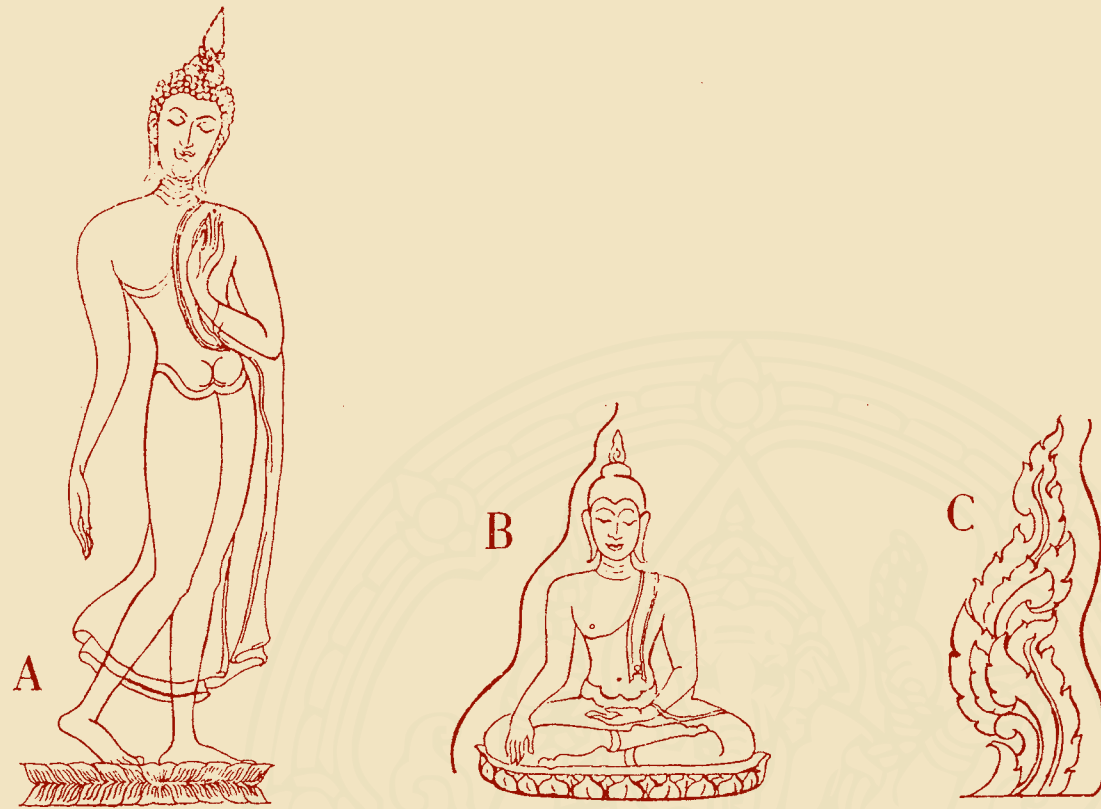


Fig. 6 Diagram, showing the universal undulating and soaring sense of the Thai art.

A. From a votive tablet of the Sukhothai period, 14th century.

B. Outline of the Sukhothai sitting images.

C. Ornament termed Lai Kanok.

The representation of the image of the Buddha is, in fact, a complex problem. Mere technique and artistic qualities are not sufficient because it is the essence of the Buddhist doctrine that the sculptural forms must convey. Indeed it is the Doctrine, not the physical form of the Teacher which inspires the image. Thus in conceiving an image of the Buddha the artist must portray through the use of human forms a being who is removed from earthly matters.

The old sculptors of Sukhothai did solve this dilemma. Their creations seem to master the tumult of human passions, and the faint smile tells us of happiness and peace gained by subduing the earthly and primordial instincts. One may note, technically, that the parallel, delicate, undulating lines of the mouth and the base of the nose and eyes emphasize this spirituality.

I am reminded of an episode which occurred during the second World War. An elderly lady, very much worried because her two sons were fighting in Europe, used to come to my house and remain in silence a few minutes before a head of a Buddha of the Sukhothai period. I did not dare to disturb the lady in her meditation, but one day I asked her what she felt in beholding the image. She said that the serenity of that face was such as to restore her peace of mind. This is the spiritual power of Sukhothai art.





Fig. 7 By comparing the photograph of this statue taken in profile with that taken in front the exaggeration of the attachment of the right arm is noticeable; such emphasis was purposely made by the artist to give more roundness to the chest of the figure when it was seen from the frontal angle because originally the statue was placed into a niche and for this reason was meant to be seen from the front only.

From the profile is seen the emphasis of the projecting heels due to a too strict fidelity of the old artists to the written iconography of Buddha's physical characteristics.



The representation of the walking Buddha had a special appeal for the artists of Sukhothai and they succeeded in creating several masterpieces of this type. When we behold a fine example of this image we have the impression of movement; that with a graceful gesture of the fingers symbolizing the turning of the Wheel of the Law, the Teacher is advancing to announce the Doctrine. The body has a graceful undulation, the trunk swinging slightly to the side, and the hanging arm rhythmically following this curve. The head is shaped like a lotus bud, and the neck spreading at its base merges harmoniously into the shoulder. Each detail, as for example, the delicate outline of the lobes of the ears which curve a little outwards serves to emphasize the harmony of the whole composition. The hands, in particular, are modelled with a grace and elegance. One should notice that in some images of the 15th century, like the Phra Buddha Chinnarat in Phitsanulok, fig. 5, the fingers of the hand are of equal length.

The toes on the walking images are also of equal length, the soles are flat and the heels protrude markedly. These and other characteristics often appear exaggerated or even unaesthetic to some people. The Sukhothai artist was perfectly capable of modelling any part of the human body in its normal proportions, but with pious veneration, he preferred to follow the ancient descriptions of the Lord Buddha's super-human appearance.

Some of these statues have such a delicacy that they appear somewhat feminine. This again is due to the veneration of the artist and his interpretation of a transcendental figure. Once Gautama had achieved Enlightenment he belonged to an abstract, heavenly world where the characteristics of sex no longer exist.

In order to appreciate the fine qualities of Thai sculpture we should look at the images from the angle that their masters intended they be seen. The majority of the large Buddha images were enshrined in niches and accordingly were meant to be viewed from a frontal angle only. But now most of these statues have been removed from their original place and put here and there without consideration for the proper height, position and light. For example, the large statue of the walking Buddha in Wat Benchamabophit in Bangkok is one of the most spiritual and most exquisitely modelled images of Thai art, and indeed when we behold it from the front its superb qualities are shown to perfection, but when we look at the same statue in profile we notice a certain disharmony in the attachment of the right arm.

Should the statue be enshrined in a niche and placed somewhat higher than at present, we would enjoy its extreme spiritual beauty according to its creator's conception. Fig. 7.

Besides Buddha images, statues of Hindu Gods were also cast in Sukhothai. This does not imply any compromise of religious beliefs in that period. It has always been the custom, from the remote past to the present, that the Buddhist kingdoms of Southeast Asia attached Brahmins to their courts to perform royal and civil ceremonies. It was for this reason and purpose that Hindu Gods were cast in Sukhothai, Ayudhya and even in the Bangkok period.

By and large, the Hindu Gods cast in Sukhothai lack that cosmic force so evident in Indian statuary; such a result could not be otherwise because the Thai, believing in Buddhism, found Hinduism foreign to their conception of religion. However, some of the statues, such as that illustrated in Fig. 8, are exceptionally beautiful both for spiritual and sculptural values.



Fig. 8 A beautiful statue of Vishnu cast in Sukhothai. The artist conceived it as a majestic vision, proper to the representation of this beneficent god of the Hindu pantheon.

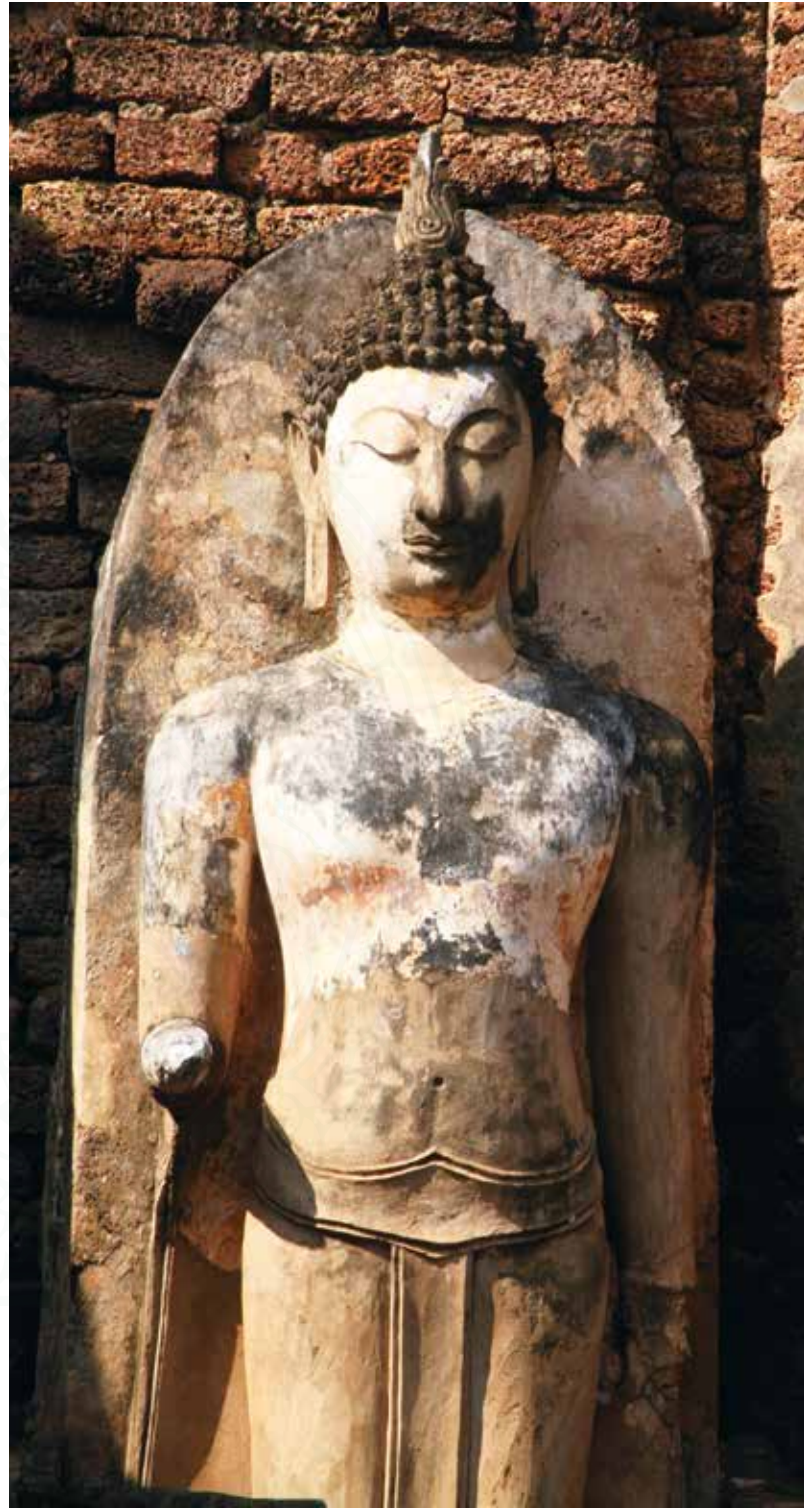


Fig. 9 Large Buddha image at Sawankhalok modelled in stucco. The conventional posture of the walking Buddha is to be found in statues made in bronze and stucco as well as in round and bas-reliefs.



Stucco decoration of angels in adoration bedeck Mondop of Phra Si Ariyabot at Wat Phra Phai Luang.

STUCCO

Sukhothai images of the Buddha were cast in bronze or modelled in stucco in high and low relief and in full round. Since each is essentially a modelling technique, the two materials produce similar style results. And, as previously remarked, the soft material of the wax model, or the stucco responds easily to the artist's fingers and gives him a better opportunity to convey his inner feelings than would resistant stone.

Stucco had a great importance in Dvāravatī, Khmer and Thai arts. Architectural monuments built in laterite or brick were plastered with stucco, mouldings were done in the same material, and finally the exquisite decoration was modelled.

This decoration consisted of the representation of human, animal, and mythical figures or ornaments. Because stucco, composed of lime, sand, and juice of sugar-cane, hardens in a few hours, the artist must be very skilled and able to execute the work quickly, although the work may be corrected by the addition of more stucco. The beauty of the decoration depends on the sensitive touch of the artist; if the ornaments were done by a talented man they have a striking vitality, otherwise they may be mechanical and unexpressive.

Exposed to the atmospheric agents, particularly to rain, stucco becomes so hard that it may stand unaltered for a long time. Indeed had it not been on account of the collapse of the monuments or the unscrupulous hands of men who destroyed many monuments and images in search of valuable objects, the works in stucco made centuries ago would be in good condition today.

The size of the images modelled in stucco did not prevent the old masters from attaining very good proportions of idealized human forms. Huge statues such as that of Wat Saphan Hin in Sukhothai and the other of the Great Relic Monastery in Sawankhalok appeal both for their sculptural harmony as well as for their spirituality. The difficulty of executing large statues in stucco is so great that often the result is unpleasing or almost grotesque. This did not happen in the classic period of Sukhothai. Fig. 9.

The beautiful stucco images of Wat Chedi Chet Tao in Sri Satchanalai have a particular religious and aesthetic value from their refined and sensitive modelling, but in our opinion, the most impressive masterpiece is the image of the walking Buddha in high relief in a niche of the Mondop of Wat Trapangtonglang in Sukhothai. The idealized forms are most spiritual and the image seems to be a heavenly vision walking with a divine rhythm. Any person with aesthetic feelings should, in beholding this statue, receive a profound and lasting impression; the remembrance of this masterpiece gives us a renewed sensation of serenity and purity. This feeling cannot be otherwise because the image truly embodies the very essence of the Buddhist doctrine : purity of thought, purity of speech, purity of action.

The sculptor who made this statue did not follow to the letter the poetical description concerning the physical proportions of the Teacher. He seems to have felt that if he modelled the feet according to the given rules, it would have affected the harmony of his creation.

The image is flanked by the figures of Brahma, Indra and other celestial beings in a smaller scale. The artistic difference between the Buddha image and the Hindu Gods, the understanding of sculptural volumes, composition and modelling show that these smaller figures were made by less gifted artists .

It is to be regretted that the head of this image has been destroyed by treasure hunters in a search for precious articles that were sometimes placed in sacred figures or monuments. Fig. 10.





Fig.10 A beautiful specimen of a walking Buddha image in stucco. The delicate movement and the finesse of modelling give this statue a divine appearance. Wat Trapang Tong Lang, Sukhothai, 14th century.



Fig. 11 Detail of mural at Wat Mahathat in Ayudhya, bu 15th century, showing the universal theme of composition of the Thai painting up to the 16th century. To our knowledge only the murals of Wat Ratchaburana in Ayudhya of the 15th century differed from the universal composition.



Fig. 12 Detail of one stone-engraving at Wat Si Chum of Sukhothai showing the characteristics of Indian art.

PAINTING

It is unfortunate that with the exception of some ornamental designs the painting in Sukhothai has been completely obliterated. However from some fragments in Wat Chedi Chet Thaeo in Si Satchanalai we may trace this art from the end of the 13th century A.D. These paintings were faithfully reproduced several years ago on the suggestion of the Director-General of the Fine Arts Dept, Mr. Dhanit Yupho. The fine reproductions by Mr. Fua Haribitak are most valuable because few traces of the original painting remains today.

Thai painting is a two dimensional art in contrast to the three dimensional one of the West, and much of its beauty depends on the expressiveness of the line.

The stone engravings illustrating the life of the Buddha and Jataka stories in Wat Si Chum in Sukhothai are certainly connected with painting. They are in an Indian style and may have been done by Singhalese monks who came from Ceylon to assist the Thais with the Hinayana doctrine, but some of the figures show a Thai feeling and from this we presume that some Thai artists helped with the execution of the work.

The visitor to Wat Si Chum will notice that the engraved stone slabs are incorporated in a random manner with the walls of the Mondop. This would show that they were originally done for some other religious structure which was either never erected or was destroyed. As holy works these pieces were saved and fixed into the walls of Wat Si Chum.

Between these engravings and our oldest recorded painting in Wat Chedi Chet Thaeo in Si Satchanalai there is a great difference in style. The engravings are separate compositions treating the life of Buddha and stories of His previous births, but the painting is a repetition of seated Buddha images flanked by worshippers in superimposed horizontal bands. This theme became universal and was repeated till the end of the 16th century A.D.



Fig. 13 Detail of a mural of a small chapel in Wat Chedi Chet Thaeo in Si Satchanalai (Sukhothai). End of the 13th century. From this specimen it will be noticed that while the Buddha image has already definite characteristics of the Sukhothai statuary, the figures of the worshippers still retain the peculiarities of the Indian art.

What also strikes us in the paintings of Wat Chedi Chet Taeo is the difference of style between the Buddha images and that of the other figures. The images of Buddha already have the peculiarities of the Sukhothai sculpture while many of the worshippers still retain the character of Ceylonese art. Figs. 12 and 13.



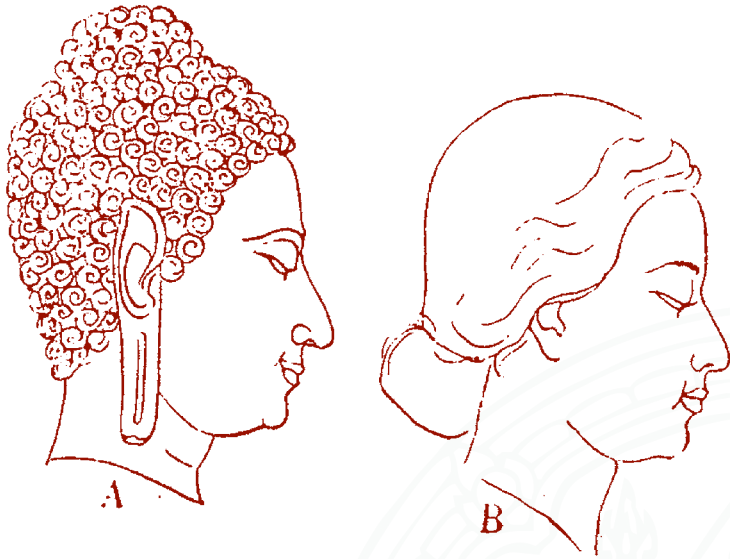


Fig. 14 The old masters of Sukhothai were such acute observers of nature as to depict the very characteristics of the Thai race and transmit them in their statues.

A. Profile of a bronze Buddha's head.

B. Profile of a woman of Sukhothai from which it can be noticed the strict relationship with the sculptured head.

This observation is of some importance in the understanding of Thai art. The graceful, curving outlines of Sukhothai sculpture and the fineness of its details correspond to the physical structure and the temperament of the Thai race. If we study the Thai people in their natural surroundings, we will notice the same anatomical characteristics as in the Sukhothai statues, and even in the facial lineaments of some people of Sukhothai we may trace the likeness with the old bronzes. Figs. 14, 24 and 25.

The artists of Sukhothai interpreted the particular qualities, physical and temperamental of the Thai race in both painting and sculpture. One may remark that in as much as the color scheme of Sukhothai painting is a monochromatic red, white, and black, it has some of the character of sculptural relief. The distinctive Sukhothai style has had an influence on succeeding periods even including the modern. This is not due to deliberate imitation, or a desire to create a neo-classicism, but because the artists of Sukhothai imprinted in their art the very character of the Thai people, and as such it will exist forever. Fig. 15.

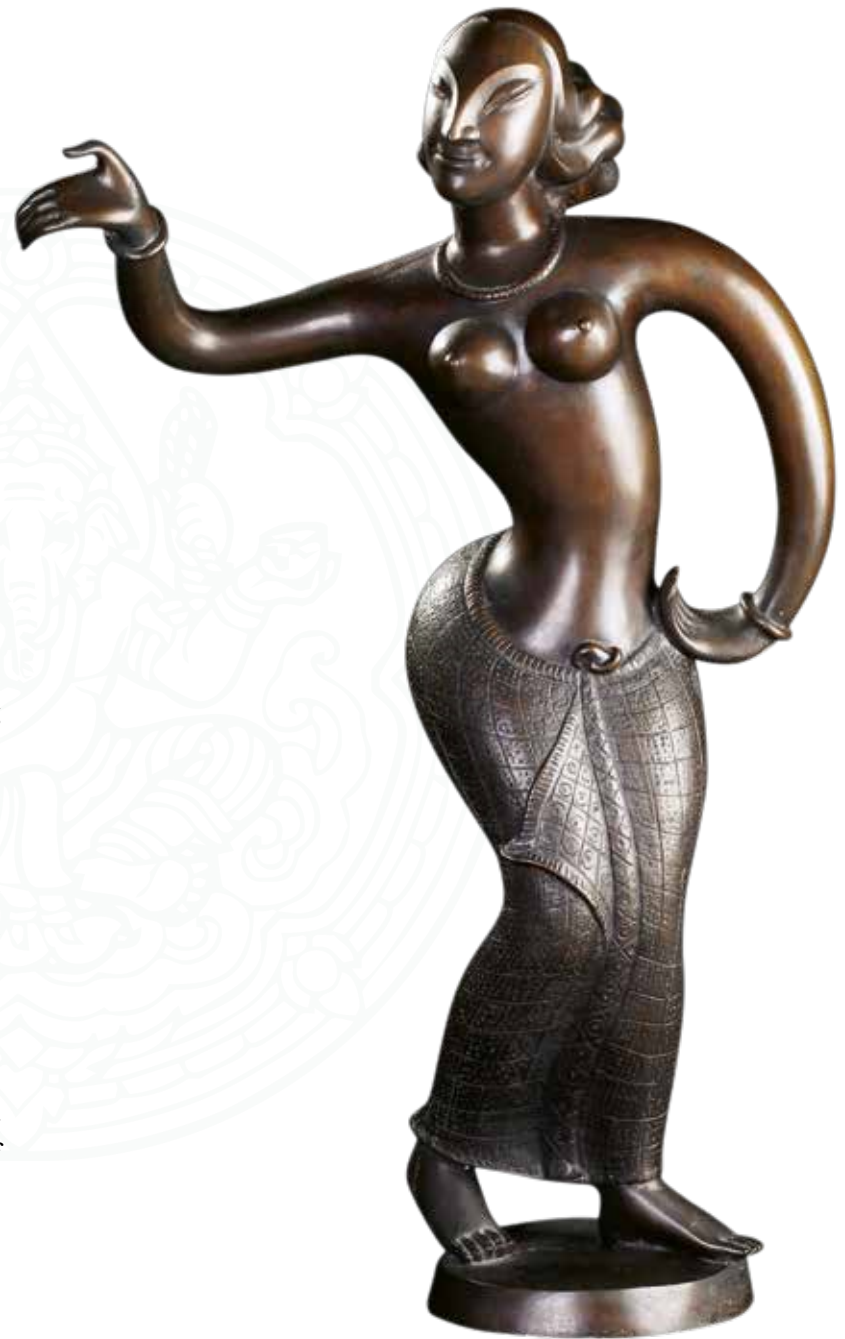


Fig. 15 Bronze statuette by Khien Yimsiri showing the flexuosity of lines of contemporary art corresponding to the peculiar characteristics of the Thai race.



Fig. 16 A magnificent specimen of Northern Thai art influenced by the Sukhothai statuary.



Fig.17 Represents a Buddha image showing pure characteristics of the northern style. From the comparison of these two statues it will be noticed how the blending of the Sukhothai and northern styles was achieved successfully.

The great influence Sukhothai had over all other styles of Thai art may be noticed also in the sculpture of northern Thailand and in the production of the Ayudhya period.

In the 14th century the images of Sukhothai inspired a more spiritual and a finer anatomical modelling in the Northern sculpture, and in some instances the result of the blending of the two schools is exceptionally good, Our example is the bronze image of a seated and meditating Buddha belonging to Wat Suthat in Bangkok. Indeed, this statue may be considered one of the masterpieces of Buddhist art. See comparative figs. 16 and 17.

Although, since the 15th century Ayudhya also imitated the sculptural style of Sukhothai, it seldom reached the standard of the classical specimens. In fact, with few exceptions, the images cast in Ayudhya are a more or less stereotyped imitation of the classic sculpture of the previous period. See comparative figures 18 and 19.



Fig. 18 Bronze head of the Ayudhya period inspired by the art of Sukhothai.



Fig. 19 Beautiful statue of the 14th century belonging to the National Museum of Bangkok. The posture of the statue represents the absolute enlightenment of the Buddha and as such the body shows a serene relaxation of the muscular system. The faint smile, reflect the abstract inward contentment of the Buddha. The right hand has the gesture of touching gently Mother Earth calling her to witness his complete enlightenment. Note the realistic rendering of the feet contrasting with those of the walking Buddha images.



Fig. 20 Small bronze representing Buddha reclining in the absolute serenity of Nirvana. Also this specimen is characterized by a harmonious undulating sense. Collection of H.H. Prince Bhanubhandu Yugalza.

POTTERY

Pottery is characterized by form and thus is related to sculpture. As the sculpture of Sukhothai is a great artistic expression, so, accordingly, is the pottery. The ceramic of Ayudhya referred to as Bencharong is enriched with many colors and is related to both sculpture and painting, but the production of Sukhothai and Sawankhalok is monochromatic and its beauty relies upon the fineness of its forms.

Pottery had a wide range of use. Vases, for example, were made in many sizes and for various purposes, from the tiny ones to contain perfumes or ointments to huge water jars. Ceramic was also much used in connection with architecture : bluish-green glazed roof tiles, triangular decorations for the ends of the roof ridge, makara figures to decorate the lower end of the gables, figures of lions, demons, etc. There were also many small statuettes made for animistic ceremonies, and, while primitive, they have the appeal of spontaneity. Some of the small, glazed figurines representing elephants and other animals are rendered with charming realism.



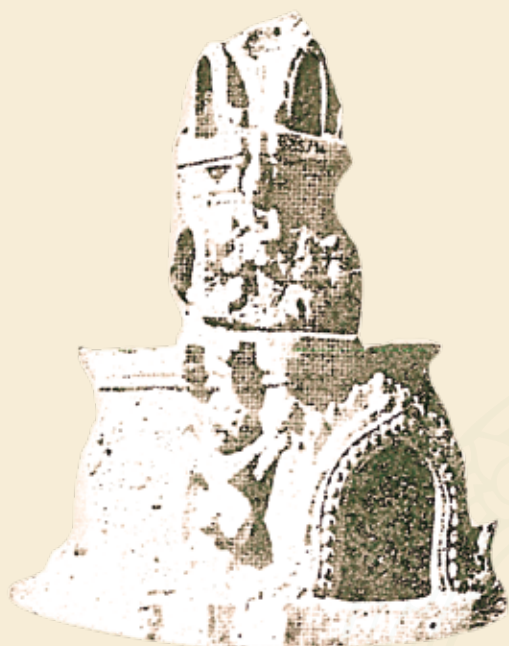


Fig. 21 Pottery. Upper part of a small shrine in glazed terra-cotta.



Fig. 23 Pottery. Head of a demon in glazed terra-cotta. The fierce peculiarities of this mythological character have been transmitted in painting, sculpture and theatrical masks up to modern time.



Fig. 22 Pottery. Many statuettes of celestial and human figures, demons and animals were produced in the kilns of Sukhothai and Sawankhalok. These sculptures served either for decorating architectural structures or for religious and animistic purposes. The small elephant with its rider on the back is rendered with simplicity, but still retains the characteristics of the pachyderm.



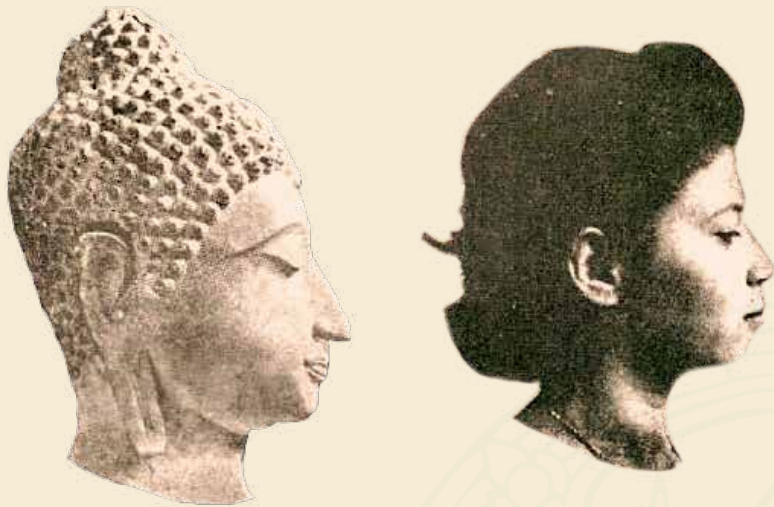


Fig. 24 Buddha's head of the Sukhothai art, 14th century, and a comparative portrait of a girl from Sukhothai showing how the old masters observed nature and transmitted the very characteristics of the Thai race in their statuary.

This ware, and especially the vessels from the kilns of Sukhothai and Sawankhalok is outstanding for the balanced proportions and solidity of its forms, the indispensable quality of classic pottery of any age or country.

Technically, the pottery was so excellent that it competed in foreign markets with the Chinese production. Japanese connoisseurs collected our pottery in those days, and today it is known all over the world.

The clay used was of good quality and when fired at a high temperature produced a very hard body. The glazing was excellent, fitting the surface smoothly. For many vessels, a delicate blue-green or grayish-green tint comparable to celadon was used, and the designs were painted in black or in a darker value of the tinted glaze. In some cases the body is white and the design is in black, but usually the white (broken with yellowish oxide) was used for sculpture such as the makaras, lions, demons, etc. The details on these objects are painted in brown or black. Another glaze used in some examples is pale- broken yellow ochre. In a few cases, a shallow engraving or incising replaced the painted decoration.



Fig. 25 Buddha's head of the Sukhothai art, 14th century, and a comparative portrait of a girl from Sukhothai showing how the old masters observed nature and transmitted the very characteristics of the Thai race in their statuary.

It has been said that the kilns of Sukhothai and Sawankhalok were started by Chinese potters. This is most probable and we certainly owe to the Chinese the technique of firing and glazing; however the artistic result is eminently Thai. We may also remark that Chinese pottery and porcelain is made in an enormous variety of shapes and styles, some of which can only appeal to a very specialized taste, but the Sukhothai- Sawankhalok pottery with its simple, classic forms has a universal appeal. The different characteristics of Thai and Chinese pottery are due not so much to technique as to the different artistic feelings of the two peoples. Figs. 21, 22, 23.

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