



CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

A trip to the Grand Palace to witness the glorious national treasure is on the agendas of many visitors to Thailand. The sacred Emerald Buddha, housed in the inner sanctum of Wat Phra Kaew, is surrounded by detailed murals depicting the life of the Buddha on his journey to enlightenment and impressive gold Buddha images dedicated to H. M. Kings Rama I and II. Outside in the courtyard, the mixture of Eastern and Western architecture, the towering stone Chinese generals guarding the gates, the model of Angkor Wat and the fantastic *Ramakien* epic, revealing extraordinary deeds of good and evil as it unwinds around the cloister walls, add to this unique 'Thai' experience of religious, royal and national history.

In 1990, when I first came to this country to explore Thai society and culture, I took this path. From there, I crossed the road to Silpakorn University, known as the central institute of modern art, and entered the old marble-floored former-palace building which houses the University Art Gallery. Many of the paintings on display showed strong traces of the early visual heritage I had just encountered at Wat Phra Kaew, with beautifully executed line drawing, the distinctive swirling Thai

kanok motif, and clear religious themes. As I wandered through the exhibition, I was struck by the 'aura' of an installation entitled Venus of Bangkok (see Fig. 1). Created from rough construction-site materials, this work of art shouted the injustices of young women lured from the villages to work in the city as prostitutes and distinguished itself from the beautiful art on the walls by its creative attempt to portray one of the uncomfortable realities of modern Thai life.

Since then, I have continued to investigate Thai art of all forms and have begun to view art more as a specific form of culture, as a social and cultural phenomenon. At the time in the midst of a major economic boom, Thailand was providing many artists with numerous opportunities to earn substantial incomes via generous corporate sponsorship of art competitions, and commissions of artwork for mushrooming office and hotel buildings. Galleries were busy, tourism was increasing and local Thai customers with newly-acquired wealth sought prestige in the form of owning art. Acknowledging that responses to art are personal and subjective, I was interested to follow the career of the talented Venus of Bangkok artist, Montien Boonma, and learned that he supported his art by teaching at a government university and borrowing from relatives. During peak boom-time in Thailand, it seems Montien's form and content of art did not suit the mass of generous corporate sponsors. I began to wonder about the art patronage network in Thailand and the forms and interactions. Who helps who, how and why? And to what effect? Who/what are the dominant agents? Leaders?

Inhibitors? Promoters? Experts? Taste-makers? And how could such a study be undertaken?

Purpose of the Thesis

The purpose of this thesis is to locate art in a cultural and social context, rather than consider it from a strictly Aesthetics or Art History framework, as it is commonly approached. By adopting a multidisciplinary approach, this study extends the perspective to see the work of art as a cultural product - as a complex product of economic, social and ideological factors mediated through formal structures and existing by the hand of a socially-located individual. Consideration is not only given to the structures within which the art is produced but also to the creation of those structures and the dynamics of interaction of the agents, i.e. networks between the agents within those structures, and what effect these may have in terms of enabling and confining creativity. The study directs attention to these dynamics, the decline and growth of institutions within the structure (classes, levels, groups, and individuals) and the mechanisms and practices which operate. By examining the structural-functional role of art alongside its inter-relationship with the social, political and economic arenas we can learn about its place in society and the way it is produced.

Objectives of the Thesis

The objective of this thesis is to answer the research questions: In what ways do the agents in the network of art production in Thailand support/enable or restrict/confine the kind of art that is produced? And what projections of identity can be conveyed via art? Further questions asked include: How is art, as an element of culture, linked to other cultural systems such as ideology and status? What directions is art taking in response to particular determinants? What socio-economic-political structures currently exist relative to art? What is art's role in Thai society?

Definition of Terms

The term "social production" is used to encompass the many and varied ways individuals, groups and organisations may behave as separate units or co-operatively. "Patronage" refers to support by sponsorship in the form of financial assistance or in kind. "Commoditisation" is considered as exchange and the creation of value. Various definitions of "Culture" are considered in Chapter 2 and include learned world-views, values, beliefs, ideas, motives, experiences, social expression, customs, interactions and art. "Neo-traditional Thai art" is used in this study to refer to art which employs traditional Buddhist elements in largely traditional forms as well as art which portrays everyday Thai rural life. Although modern materials and

interpretations may be incorporated, the form generally follows that which has appeared in murals on temple walls in Thailand for hundreds of years.

Scope, Organisation and research methods

The scope of the research is largely restricted to Bangkok, though references are made to examples in Chiang Mai, Phuket and other provincial cases along with coverage of international exchanges. The time frame covers 1980-1998, a period of extraordinary transition within Thailand with booming economic growth in the late eighties and early nineties and increasing market and corporate power, followed by the dramatic burst of the bubble in the mid-nineties. An historical perspective is given through reference to secondary sources published in English.

The thesis contains six chapters. Following the introduction which presents the interest, raises questions and relevant issues, Chapter 2 builds theoretical background. Theories of cultural reproduction relating to dominant class and culture, and the concepts of cultural and economic capital presented by Pierre Bourdieu are described. The 'core-periphery' theme is explored, through the World-systems theory of Immanuel Wallerstein. World-systems theories on socio-political-economic development refer to the evolution of culture as a function of colonisation and are relevant in areas of economic class and nation-state. Due to a lack of indigenous theory on this subject, various forms of

patronage in the West, outlined by Raymond Williams are considered, to support the view of 'collective production' of art. The patron-client relationships emerging from the trading of interests by the parties involved in the process are included as a point of reference from which to view the Thai situation. Arjun Appadurai's analysis of exchange and commoditisation is explored for the insight it offers regarding the creation of value and cultural capital. The notion of 'artist as genius' is reviewed, leading to a more useful term of the artist as 'cultural producer.' A section on aesthetics, taste and value explores the ideas of Theodor Adorno which challenge the notion of 'pure aesthetics' and consider how the nature of art, aesthetic judgement and aesthetic experience may be socially and historically specific. These theories provide a means by which to analyse the empirical findings.

Chapter 3 builds the historical background and covers the development of art in Thailand from early art, Buddhist art in temples, the role of art in the Sukhothai and Ayudhya periods, European influences during the turn-of-the-century, Nationalism of the 1920-1950s with the use of art for ideology promotion, the economic development of Thailand following a Western capitalist model and internationalisation following the implementation of the 1960 National Development Plans.

Chapter 4 looks closely at the dramatic changes during the 1980s and 1990s. It discusses Thailand's socio-economic and political development, and the repercussions of this transformation throughout society,

which have created modern concerns previously unaddressed by art, including issues such as environmental degradation, urban alienation etc. The cultural campaigns promoted during the 1980s and the implementation of government tourist campaigns (*1987 Visit Thailand Year* and *Amazing Thailand 1998-99*) is discussed in light of the effects on culture and national identity. The rise of neo-traditional Thai art is outlined. This period reveals a general transformation of visual art in Thailand with new spaces being found for art on bank, office and hotel walls, new forms of reproduction, new customers including increasingly powerful financial and corporate institutions along with Thai collectors with increased disposable incomes and tourists, as well as new media awareness and coverage.

Chapter 5 outlines specific forms of patronage including ethnographic descriptions. Royal and religious art patrons are reviewed, followed by consideration of the Thai government policy on arts and culture. Educational influences are noted, with particular reference to Silpakorn University as the central art institution in Thailand. Details of competitions, commissions, exhibitions, collections, sales and auctions are presented, along with regional and international movements of Thai art.

Methodology

Combined methodologies of archival research, field research and content analysis are used. Archival

research provided the theoretical and historical information on which to base the findings of the field research. Historical research looked at the role of art in the early feudal-monarchy society, where early artworks were royally sponsored, unsigned and located in temples as forms of religious expression. The evolution through phases, transitions and conflicts was traced up to the modern commoditised state and the turbulent economic and political climate of the 1980s and 1990s. Field research included participant observation since 1991 and one-to-one interviews over a period of two years until March 1998. More than 90 interviews and informal discussions were held with artists, curators, art teachers (at government and private institutions), art students, art dealers, decorators, architects, tourists, local Thai art viewers, investors, government cultural officers (Office of the National Cultural Commission and Tourism Authority of Thailand), hotel gallery managers, bank and other corporate sponsors of Thai art.

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