

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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Ulu Kelang, Selangor
Malaysia
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BEB-7

Art and Celebration

Mr. Peter Bird Martin
Institute of Current World Affairs
Wheelock House
4 West Wheelock Street
Hanover, NH 03755

Dear Peter,

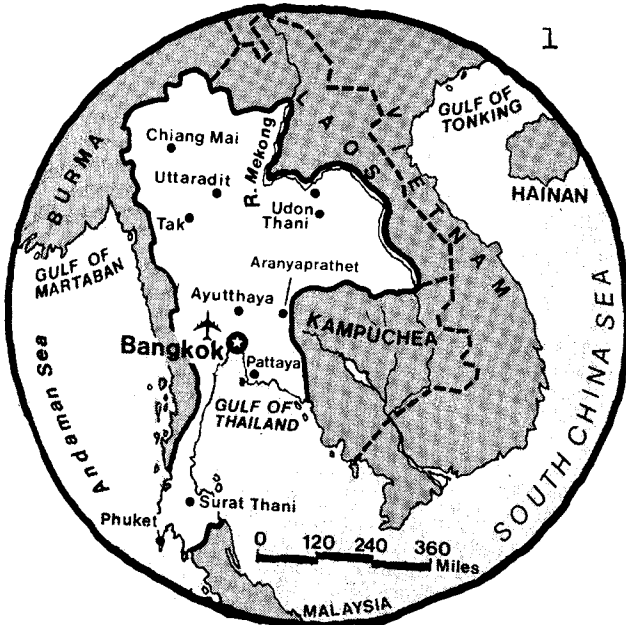
"Rak sip lor, tong ror sip mǒng": "if you love ten wheels, you have to wait until ten o'clock." This Thai pop song was all the rage during my recent visit to Bangkok, played on radio and tape by street venders, in shopping malls and on the central parade ground, Sanam Luang. Sung by the Royal Sprites, the tune is a love song of sorts, eulogizing the ten-wheeled trailer-trucks that are allowed within the city limits only after 10pm. These giant rigs rumble through the streets of Bangkok well into the wee hours of the morning, servicing the city's factories and shops. The song also has a popular rhyming rejoinder, "rak sip lor, tong ror taw mǒng": "if you love ten wheels, you'll be waiting to build a coffin." This refers, I was told, not only to the daredevil antics and spectacular accidents occasionally caused by the ten-wheelers, but also to the song's composer, Chamnong Pensuk, killed by one of the big rigs soon after the song hit the Bangkok charts.

Life isn't terribly safe for a Bangkok resident at any time of day, pedestrian or no. Restricting the ten-wheelers to the late night and early morning hours has done little to ease the city's congested traffic situation. Throughout the day and into the night the streets are choked with trucks, cars, taxis, tuk-tuks (jitneys) and hordes of motorcycles and bicycles, filling the hot, steamy air with clouds of sooty, noxious smoke that give the city an overall gray tonality, not to mention one's clothing, skin and hair. Venturing out onto the streets, much less trying to cross them, is a rather chancy affair.

Nor is there any escape on the klongs, the canals that once served as Bangkok's main thoroughfares. Linked to the Chao Phraya river meandering through the city's western quarter, the waterways also provided access to the port of Bangkok at Klongtoey and thence the sea. Most of the klongs have been filled in and asphalted over now. The remainder, cut off from the river, are

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black, fetid and stagnant, saturated with sewage and refuse. The annual monsoon waters once carried off by the klongs are now confined to the streets and inadequate storm drains. Worse, as the aquifers beneath Bangkok are drained to slake the population's thirst, buildings and streets are beginning to compress the soft alluvial soil beneath them. The city, already near sea level, is beginning to sink in various quarters, at rates approaching one-half inch per year. Flooding worsens annually.



Despite this hazardous environment, Bangkok remains Thailand's primate city, an urban magnet of some 4.9 million people (15% of the Thai population), growing through migration and natural increase by some 3.5% per year. Bangkok is the focus of contemporary Thai urban life. Though Thailand, alone among Southeast Asian nations, managed to stave off colonial domination, centuries of contact with the West have left their mark, particularly in the capital city. Western dress is ubiquitous, except for the minority of saffron-robed Buddhist monks (95% of all Thais are Theravada Buddhists. Most Thai males enter the monkhood for at least a short period of time

during their lives). Though Bangkok is famed for its ornate Grand Palace, glittering wats (monasteries), temples and monuments, the pervasive style throughout the city is, for the most part, Western. The average street is lined with drab, concrete structures of uncertain vintage, punctuated by the occasional columned manor or Victorian-with-cupola. Skyscrapers are rare, save for a scattering of apartment blocks and crumbling Vietnam-era R&R hotels. Though traditional Thai music can be heard, Western rock, jazz and Thai versions thereof



(like rak sip lor) seem more popular. Most traditional Thai art is religious in nature and confined to wats, temples, museums and antique stores. True, many of the city's structures sport nagas (serpents)



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gilded angels and all manner of mythical creatures. The more pervasive art-style, however, is Western: giant 30 to 50 foot high, hand-painted posters grace every movie marquee, advertising the latest local and imported offerings. Brooke Shields, 40 feet tall and clad in little else than her hair, was a common sight during my stay, advertising the opening of Blue Lagoon. Equally familiar, though smaller in scale, was Rembrandt's "The Night Watch," numerous copies of which were on sale at local art studios

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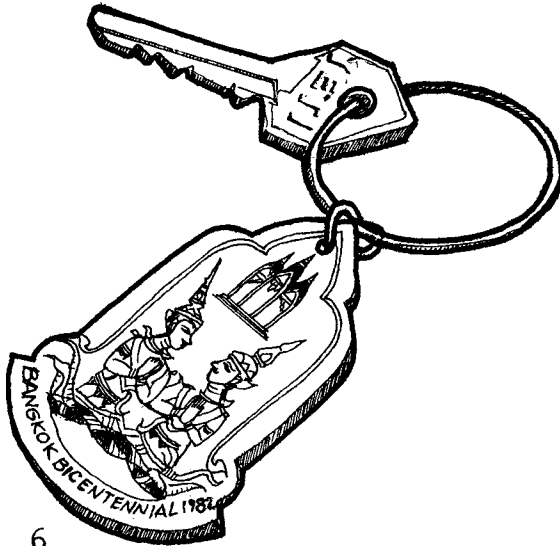
along with cubist, abstract impressionist and photo-realist work, calendar reproductions and painted photo-conversion portraits. Much of this work was actually produced at Pattaya, a beach resort south of Bangkok.

Western influence has not negated tradition, however. Though Bangkok is symbolic of all that is modern in Thailand it is also the main focal point of traditional Thai culture, center for Buddhist and lay scholarship and primary conduit for the performing and fine arts. My April visit to Bangkok coincided with a Thai cultural extravaganza, the main events of this year's Rattanakosin Bicentennial. Rattanakosin is a shortened version of the city's official name, whereas Bangkok, the term familiar to foreigners, refers to the original village on which the city was built. Bangkok is the latest in a series of Thai capitals. The previous one, Ayuthia, was sacked by the Burmese in 1767. Rattanakosin commemorates the founding of the new capital in 1782 by Phraya Chakri, King Rama I, and 200 years of subsequent rule by he and his successors. The present monarch, King Bhumibol Adulyadej, is Rama IX. Absolute rule by the Thai monarchy was ended in 1932 by a military coup and real power has been wielded ever since

by a series of military regimes. The King, however, remains the head of state.

Much of the organization and preparation for the Bangkok Rattanakosin festivities was the responsibility of the Department of Fine Arts, a government agency normally charged with such diverse tasks as archaeological research and excavation, reconstruction and renovation of traditional Thai architecture, art and sculpture, as well as support and promotion of the traditional and modern performing and fine





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arts. To give the city some of the sparkle appropriate for such an auspicious occasion, some US\$15 million in government funds and at least as much private money was spent refurbishing and redecorating the temples and monuments throughout the city. The Grand Palace, Wat Phra Keo, Wat Mahatat and other buildings surrounding Sanam Luang -scrubbed, regilded and retiled- fairly glistened in the sunlight and were set ablaze by floodlights each evening. Less auspicious buildings along Ratchadamnoen Klang, the main avenue leading into Sanam Luang, were also decorated with lights.

Lampposts along the street were decked out with whirling, pulsating light displays, one for each of the nine Chakri Kings. Some functional work was also undertaken: roads were resurfaced, sidewalks patched, the more obvious klongs dredged and badly needed shade trees planted.

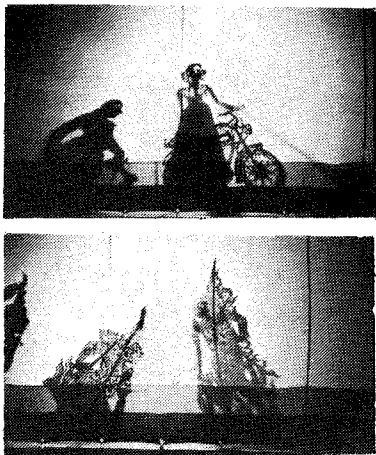
Though billed as a primarily Thai-oriented event, Rattanakosin was also highly touted abroad. Articles on the preparations for the celebration appeared in the regional airline magazines, posters and brochures were given away at the Singapore International Travel Fair (BEB-5) and Rattanakosin calendars were included with the usual tourist literature at Thai embassies in Singapore and Malaysia. Marketing continued in Bangkok. Rattanakosin signs and decals were displayed in store windows, on bumpers, lampposts and book covers. The Rattanakosin Information Center near Sanam Luang had a plethora of items for sale and giveaway: posters, brochures, maps, glasses, mugs, ashtrays, key rings, T-shirts and other assorted paraphernalia. Street hawkers sold the same items for a few baht more.*

One particularly hot item was the poster of the Royal Barge procession, one of the main Rattanakosin events. The barges, each carved from a single teak log and gilded, were pulled out of drydock for the occasion and floated down the Chao Phraya with the King, Queen and retinue, to the accompaniment of chanting and drums. The procession was held April 5th. By April 8th, Royal Barge posters were being hawked on the sidewalks throughout the city, alongside the temple rubbings and portraits of John Lennon.

Sanam Luang was the nocturnal focus of the first week of Rattanakosin festivities. Each evening, movies, mostly documentaries and nature films, were shown on 20-foot tall screens set up in the center of the parade grounds, while regional troupes from around the country performed nang talung (shadow

* 22 Baht = US\$1

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play), puppetry and folk theater in makeshift pavilions erected around the perimeter. All performances were well attended. Audiences were 95% Thai and packed the grounds and surrounding area from six pm to midnight, vindicating, perhaps, the government's contention that this was indeed an Event for the People.

By far the biggest draw was the four-night performance of the classical khon masked dance-drama, the Ramakien, Thai version of the Hindu Ramayana epic. Despite Buddhist primacy, Hinduism is an integral part of Thai culture, as it is in most of the cultures of Southeast Asia. Garuda, the mythical mount of the god Vishnu, is the state symbol. The Ramayana, story of the travails of Rama, a Vishnu avatar (incarnation), provides the inspiration for much Thai art, literature, dance and drama. This particular performance of the Ramakien employed 2525 dancers, one for each year since the death of the Buddha. A special stage and football field-sized performance area was set aside for the occasion, promoted as one of the most spectacular events of the celebration. Sheer weight of numbers insured some measure of pageantry, but unfortunately over half the dancers (the armies of Rama and his antagonist Ravana) appeared to be ill-trained school children, stumbling and bumping their way through the steps. The main dancers, however, performed their roles with exquisite grace and precision. Narrator-singers provided the voices for the dancers. Classical Thai music accompanied the performance. Audiences for the Ramakien were huge and again, mostly Thai. At one point the crowd looked to number 20,000, seated 100 deep on the ground around the performance area. By morning Sanam Luang, the "grassy esplanade" of the tourist brochures, was a dustbowl.



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Other Rattanakosin events included daytime performances of regional folkdances and a bevy of "friendship dances": Thailand-Malaysia, Thailand-Burma, etc. There were also exhibitions on Thai culture, history, currency

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and art.

One event not strictly associated with the Bicentennial, but nevertheless, of particular interest to me, was the 28th National Exhibition of Art at Silpakorn University. Established in 1933 by the Fine Arts Department as the Academy of Fine Arts, Silpakorn became a University in 1943, granting the BA and MA degrees. Though the emphasis is Western, Thai techniques are also taught. Students learn watercolor, anatomy, art history, composition, sculpture, graphics and classical Thai painting. This last emphasizes traditional techniques, materials and iconography. Occasionally, students are commissioned to produce reproductions of traditional works for corporations. The University also has a department of Thai art. Students studying in this department may work in any media as long as their art employs Thai imagery or themes.

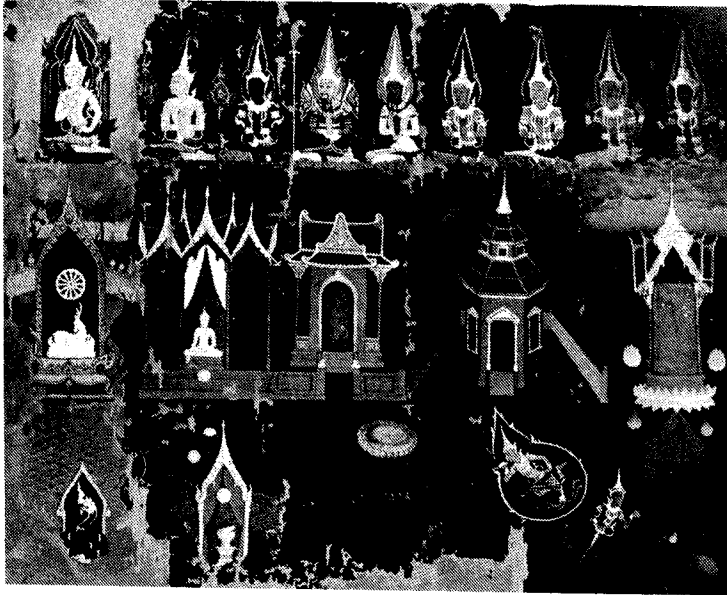
Works at the exhibition were heavily Western in style, execution and presentation, not surprising in light of the University curriculum

and a history of Western influence in Thai art that goes back to the reign of Mongkut, Rama IV (1851-63). Painting made up the bulk of the exhibition, spanning virtually the entire range of modern Western art history: impressionism, cubism, pop and op art, surrealism and photo-realism. There were also a few paintings that employed Thai imagery and even a few classically-styled pieces that looked for all the world like temple walls transferred to canvas. Sculpture at the exhibition included figurative work in bronze and plaster, welded sheet metal abstracts, soft-sculpture and low-relief wood carving. I was particularly impressed with the lithography and serigraphy. As with most of the work, quality of execution was excellent, but these media seemed to afford the widest range of expression and produced some of the most intriguing works of the exhibition: dark, moody, surrealist landscapes, montaged juxtapositions of traditional

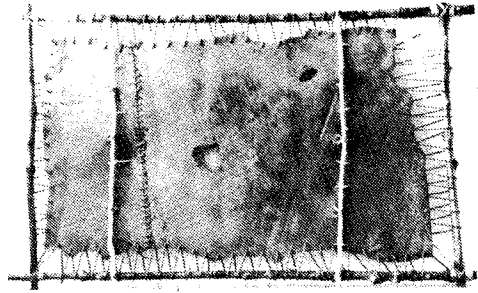


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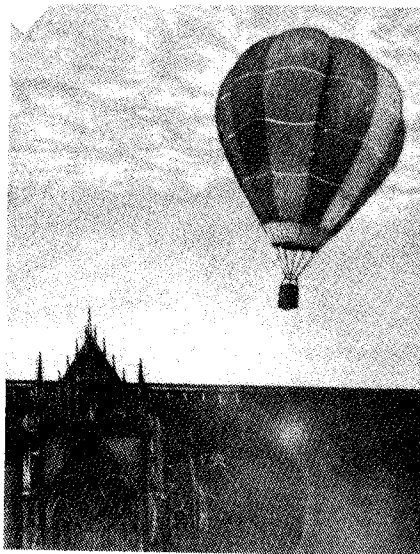
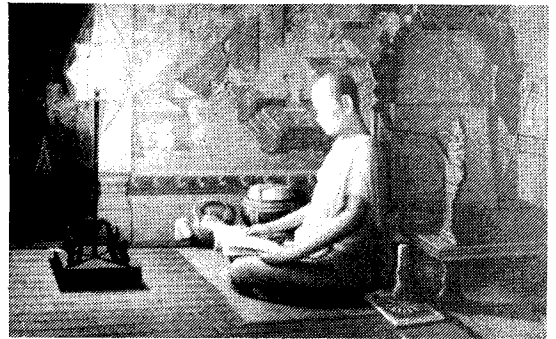
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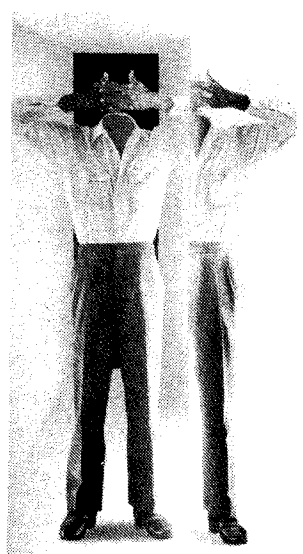


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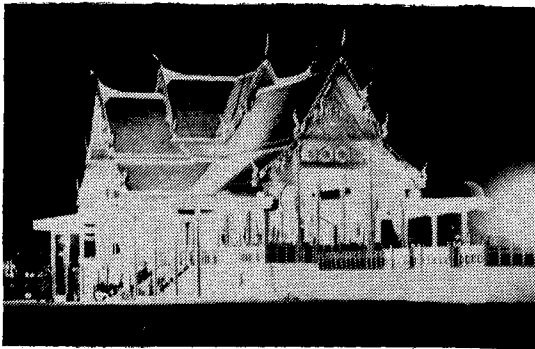
and contemporary imagery (shadow puppets and modern clock faces, khon masks and newspaper headlines from the 1973 student demonstrations) and a few rather forbidding self-portraits.

Unfortunately, there is little scope for the fine artist after graduation from Silpakorn. The domestic market for Thai fine art is small (though growing) and the foreign market unreliable. Only a few artists are able to support themselves on sales of their work, a situation not much different from elsewhere in Asia, or for that matter, the rest of the world. The majority find employment as teachers or commercial artists in Thailand or abroad. Thai illustrators, it seems, command an international market. In Singapore and Malaysia they are well known for the quality of their work and in some fields, like architectural illustration, are in high demand.

Rattanakosin and the Silpakorn exhibition are two very selective expressions of Thai culture, the one a celebration of tradition, the other a smorgasbord of tradition and modernity. They are hardly a sufficient basis for analysis or judgement. From the little I saw, however, it would seem that traditional Thai culture is not simply the province of aficionados and historians, but still an integral part of urban life as well. Despite their affection for Western dress, music and film, urban Thais seem well able to appreciate the ritual and story of the nang talung and the Ramakien or the iconography of a Buddhist Jataka story (a tale of one of the previous lives of the Buddha) on the walls of a Bangkok wat. Contemporary artists, though enamored with Western styles and techniques, still make reference to this traditional imagery, thus resonating the same chords in modern Thai audiences as artists of the past once did in theirs. The context of tradition may have changed in Bangkok, but the values it represents seem very much alive.

Sincerely,


Bryn Barnard



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