

Development of Contemporary Art in Thailand

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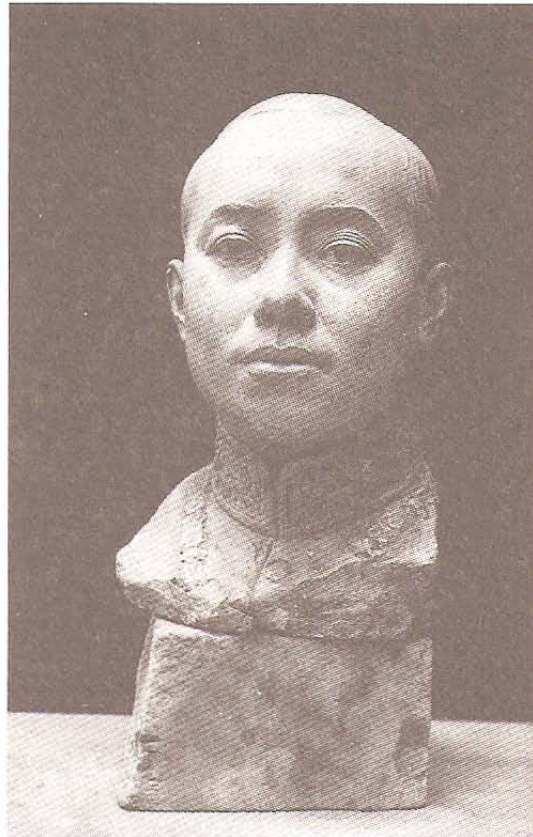
In the early Ratanakosin period, Thai artisans were inspired by Buddhist beliefs and literature in creating their art. This is evident in mural paintings in Buddhist ordination halls, ancient scriptures, Buddha images, Buddha statues, and fine arts items in temples, as well as in Thai architecture.

Thai art during the reigns of King Rama I until King Rama III (1782 - 1851) of the Chakri dynasty did not change much from the precedent Ayudhya period because it is the kingdom - stabilizing time. Any modifications and evolution of Thai art came later.

Traditional Thai art is carried on from generation to generation mostly through apprenticeship : each master passes on his knowledge and artistic skills to his apprentices. There was no art school in the old days in Thailand. Those who wished to study art had to seek apprenticeship with famous masters, who passed on their skills to those promising ones only.

After Thailand, then Siam, had more contacts with foreigners, new ideas and knowledge in various fields pervaded in the kingdom. In the reign of King Rama III (1824 -1851), Siam started trading with China, and then expanded to other European countries in the reigns of King Rama IV - VI (1851 - 1925). From Western ideas originated many new beliefs and ideas, national development, and changes in art and culture.

It is very fortunate for Thailand that the kings during the transitional periods wisely chose to selectively and carefully adapt Western ideas and beliefs that could be integrated into Thai heritage without overshadowing the Thai roots of our art and culture.



King Vajiravudh, 1923
by Silpa Bhirasri
Plaster

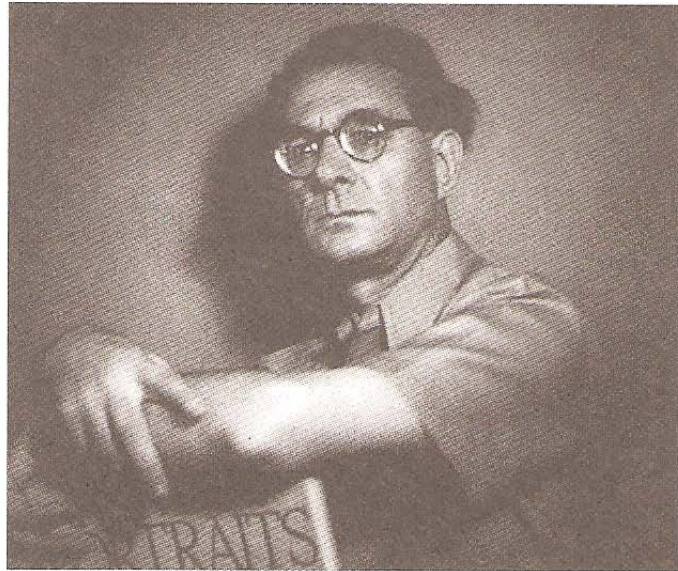
Art Institutes in the Early Days

Despite his education abroad, King Rama VI (1910 - 1925) realized the importance of protecting Thai cultural heritage from Westernization. In 1911 he founded the Fine Arts Department, a government agency, to safeguard Thai art and culture. The department, then part of the Royal Household Ministry, was then divided into seven divisions, which are sculpture, painting, music, dancing, rhetoric, architecture, and liberal arts. After many changes, the department eventually became affiliated with the Ministry of Education.

In 1913, King Rama VI founded the first art school in Thailand. It is called "Poh Chang School". The school teaches various crafts. The king then organized crafts exhibition in Suan Kularb School, which since then has become an annual event.

In 1917, he had a painting competition held at Bhumisathien Palace to raise fund for the purchase of Phra Ruang combat ship. There were two other painting competitions held in 1920.

In 1923, the king started a project to build monuments to commemorate Thai kings, and then employed an Italian art master. Corrado Feroci (1892 - 1962), or Professor Silpa Bhirasri, was the selected one. He was employed as a sculptor at the Fine Arts Department. The Italian artist was later naturalized and changed his name to "Silpa Bhirasri".



Professor Silpa Bhirasri

Modern Art Institute and Realism

Prof. Silpa Bhirasri instructed Fine Arts Department's artisans, and ran the monument construction project. He also laid the foundations of modern art education for Thai youth. He played a pivotal role in art development in Thailand until his death at Siriraj Hospital in 1962.

During his service at the Fine Arts Department, Prof. Silpa, together with former director - general of the department Phraya Anumanrajadhon and architect Phra Saroj Ratananiman (Saroj Sukhayang), founded Praneet Silpakum School (Fine Arts School) in 1934. The school offered courses in art for civil servants and other Thais in an academic way. Prof. Silpa was an instructor himself.

In the early days, Fine Arts Department's officials were instructors. After the first class graduated, many of them became teaching assistants. In 1937, the school name was changed to Silpakorn Panaek Chang School (Silpakorn School of Fine Arts, Artisan division) to produce craftsmen to serve the government.



Monument of King Rama I., 1932

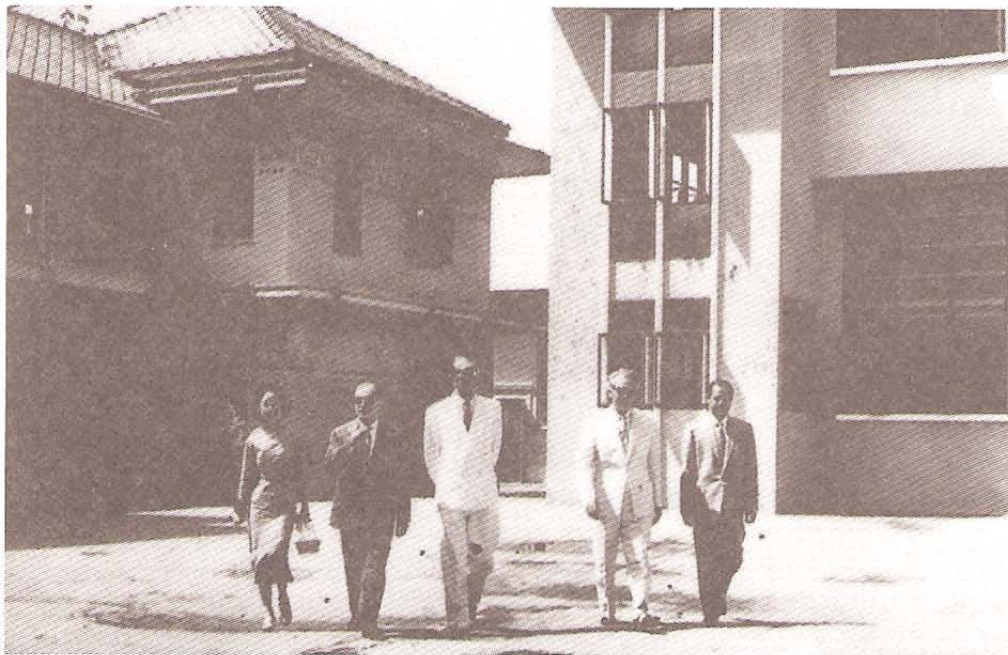
Designed by Prince Naris and Sculpted by Silpa Bhirasri

The then government under the premiership of Field Marshal Plaek Pibulsongkram recognized the importance of the school. The then prime minister sometimes paid a visit to the school himself.

The works of both instructors and students of Silpakorn attested to their talents and skills. They were exhibited at the Constitution Fair in 1937. Many fine arts works from the school have been part of many monuments, and architectural structures constructed in that time, such as the monuments of King Rama VI, Tao Suranaree, Democracy Monument, and the Victory Monument.

With full support from Field Marshal Plaek Pibulsongkram, Silpakorn School became a university in 1943. He asked Phraya Anumanrajadhon then director - general of the Fine Arts Department to revise the curriculum, and drafted an act to found Silpakorn University on October 5, 1943. The act was published in the Royal Gazette on October 12 of the same year.

The university then had only one faculty, which is the Faculty of Painting and Sculpture, where offered classes in painting and sculpture. Prof. Silpa was the first dean and academic principal. It was a 5 - year degree. Those who passed the third year were entitled to a diploma.



Professor Silpa Bhirasri and lecturers at the Faculty of Painting and Sculpture,
Silpakorn University

During Prof.Silpa's leadership between 1943 - 1962, the university emphasized art foundation. Students had to learn to understand nature, and how to express their art in a realistic style. In the early years, Silpakorn students were highly skillful in creating realistic paintings and sculptures. Their paintings focused on the theme of nature.

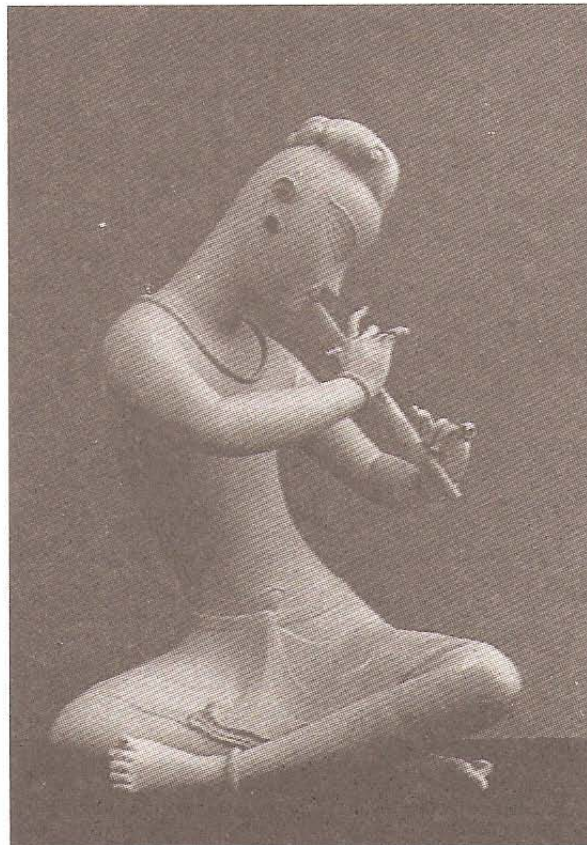
Due to Prof.Silpa's high standards and tough disciplines, there were not many graduated from the university. However, those graduates from Silpakorn University and the Fine Arts School all become Thailand's renown artists in realism, such as Piman Munpramuk, Sitthidej Saenghiran, Sanan Silakorn, Paitun Muangsomboon, Chamras Khietkong, and Tawee Nuntakwang, etc.

There was a few progressive artists who wished to escape from realism. In 1944, Chakrawat Sinlapin Group (Chakrawat Artist Group) was formed to provide an independent venue for their creative works. The group had 5 areas - literature, painting, dancing, sculpture, and architecture.

The group's symbol is a hand, which was designed by Prince Narisaranuwattiwongse. The hand has five fingers, which represent the five fields of the group. Its slogan is "Art is artists' outfit".

The group held two exhibitions, and dispersed in 1947. However, the group's activities inspired the first National Art Exhibition in 1949. This signified a big development of the Thai art movement when artists wanted to bring their works to the public, and let viewers judge their works. Chakrawat Sinlapin Group indeed is Thailand's first gathering of progressive artists to show their views and art works to the public.

In 1953, there was another art group called "Painters and Sculptors Association". The group organized an art exhibition at Grand Theatre in Wangburapa area of Bangkok, and there was a committee to select art works to display, just like the National Art Exhibition. However, the group later disappeared.



Magic Flute, 1949 by Khien Yimsiri
Bronze, 59 x 38 cm.

National Exhibition of Art

In 1937, the Fine Arts School under Prof. Silpa Bhirasri's leadership exhibited students' art works at the annual Constitution Fair for the first time. During the period, former prime minister Field Marshal Pibulsongkram's main policy was to instill nationalism to the public.

Prof. Silpa Bhirasri suggested the Fine Arts Department hold the National Exhibition of Art for the first time in 1949. The purpose then was that the country could have progress in art, and make contemporary art more accessible to the Thai public. That was the start of the national event in which many artists participated, and a pioneer of Thai Contemporary art exhibitions.

During the first few years, award winners got a medal as their trophy. Later the cash award was added, and there is a classification of trophy medals. The first prize includes a gold medal, second prize a silver medal, and a bronze medal for the third prize. Any artists who have won at least three gold medals, or two gold medals and two silver medals in the same category will be awarded as "outstanding artist". This is to encourage artists and at the same time upgrade contemporary Thai art to meet international standard.

The National Exhibition of Art has continued until today. Participating artists include not only graduates from art schools, but also self-taught, and independent artists. The judging panel comes from professional artists, art academics and experts in the field.

In 1962, King Bhumibol graciously presided over the 13th National Exhibition of Art. In the following year, his Majesty the King had some of his paintings to display in the exhibition, and has continued to do so until today. Since the 22nd National Exhibition of Art, his representative has graced over the event.

From Realism to Diversity

A few years after the Chakrawat Sinlapin Group was founded, many Thai artists have had scholarships provided by both the Thai and the European governments to study modern art in Europe.

Most artists studied art in Italy. Only a few went to Britain, the Netherlands, Germany and the United States. Upon returning, they brought with them new art genres such as impressionism, post impressionism, and cubism to Thailand. Many became art instructors, and helped spread the new art genres to the Thai art circle.



Nude, 1949 by Chamras Khietkong, oil on canvas, 90 x 132 cm.

Impressionism then pervaded both America and Asia. Thailand was no exception. Many progressive artists struggled to advocate the new genre. Development in Thai art works could be seen in many art shows and works of many artists in the period.

The European impressionism influenced Thai artists who were then educated in Italy. The fact that they were primarily trained in realism and developed their art from nature, helped them develop their works by using natural light in their works, combining with scientific colour theories. Thai art works during the period are impressionistic, created in relaxed atmosphere, with simple forms and not detailed - oriented. Their works are straight forward, just like the way artists perceived their subject matters, but full of the emotions of the artists.

For many artists, it is boring to stick to the rules of nature, to depict everything exactly the way it is. The new European perspective appeared as a challenge, for Thai artists, a totally new way for their attitude, the way they perceive nature. Thai artists began to look for more new theories, kept themselves abreast to new fields of studies and new information. They were in search of a new presentation for their art.

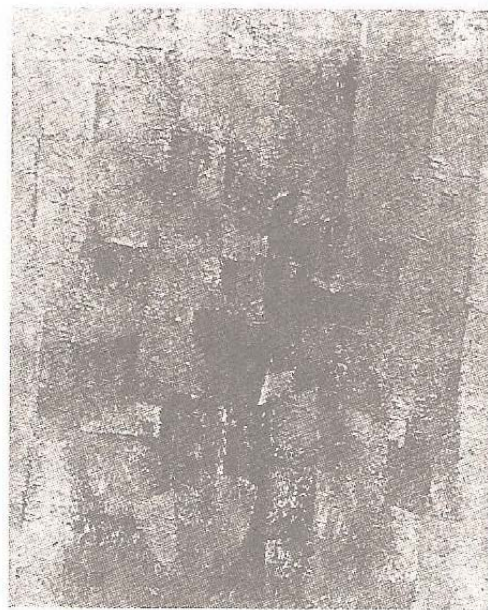
As Thai artists became more open and creative, they have become more inspired to create something new, and no longer desired to imitate nature. They developed imagination from nature, which was then a new trend in the Thai art circle. Thai artists learned new colours, lighting, and philosophical ideas. However, this new enthusiasm was kept in a small circle of artist groups and art enthusiasts.



Granny and the Cat, 1937
by Fua Haripitak
Oil on canvas, 49 x 39 cm.

The switch from realism to other art genres were evident in works displayed in the National Exhibition of Art during the period. Many works departed from the old rules, and turned more to impressionistic presentation. Some used simple composition, but focused more on impressionistic elements in light and colours during different times of day. The light and colour in the atmosphere of paintings outshine other forms in their paintings.

Cubism also played a great influence on Thai artists. Impression in structure and geometric forms which are foundations in nature dominates the group's philosophy. Artists of this genre



Still - life, 1975
by Sawasdi Tantisuk
Oil on canvas, 65 x 50 cm.

represented objects, people, or landscapes as many - faceted solids, emphasizing volume. Forms and lines are reconstructed and simplified into cubic forms, which are detached from emotions and nature. Points of view and attitude spell out in the genre.

In the first decade of King Bhumibol's reign (1946 - 1956), modern art in Thailand has substantially progressed. It is not only "modern" for the Thai society, but also more international, as can be seen in works of many Thai artists who have interacted more to the world. There are also many Thai artists who have modified traditional Thai art to a more modern, and international perspectives, yet preserving the Thai roots.



Realm of Matter, 1965 by San Sarakornboriruk
Woodcut, 71 x 102 cm.

Semi - abstract art

The cubist influence in Thailand continued until the year 1957. This can be seen in Sawasdi Tantisuk's *Old Milan* and *Bracciano*, where the artist employed soft pigments, of which intensity has been decreased to create depth and dimensions.

Other Thai artists such as Amnaj Puangseri, Chalood Nimsamer, Sompote Upa-in, and Panom Suwanboon employed the analytical cubism, in which objects were "analyzed" into planes, revealing their voluminous structure of geometric forms - linears, circular, rectangular and triangles, for examples.

The simplification of naturally complicated forms in cubism greatly influenced the Thai art circle in this period, both philosophically and methodologically. However, many Thai artists tried to be creatively different in their artistic presentation. The cubist influence shows Thai artists' struggle to find new way of presentation - a search for a more meaningful execution of their art.



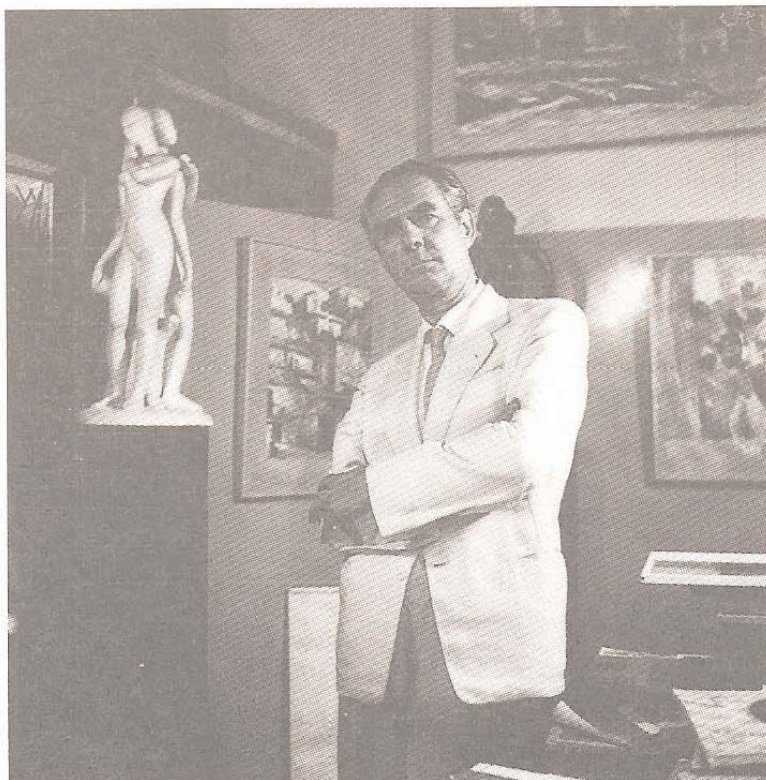
Painting No. 6, 1968
by Thongchai Rukpathum
Mixed technique, 120 x 80 cm.

This search later developed in both paintings and sculptures to expressionism, which later led to the route to semi - abstraction and abstraction in the end.

Despite heavy Western influence, Thai contemporary art does not follow every step of the Western art movement. Some development in the Thai art movement show they have their individualistic path for presentation.

The semi - abstraction movement indicates that Thai artists still cling to the same inspiration from Thai artists in the realism period, which is the early period when Thai artists first adopted Western perspective. However, this genre has diversified into many new presentations. Some art works can still be identified of their subject matters, while some artists simplifies their subject matters into the

essence. There have been many Thai artists who start with realism, but later develop into semi - abstraction, and abstraction in the end.



Professor Silpa Bhirasri and Students' works of art

Artistic inspiration in abstract art stems from many different things. Many artists begin with objects in nature, some start with their innermost feelings and bring them out to reflect their tactile sense to the outside world. Synthesis and presentation of the essence remain the concept of many Thai artists as they want to present their innermost feelings. Abstract art works are not realistic, but a glimpse inside the artist's world.

From contemporary art to internationalism

Contemporary art has made progress in the Thai society, and become more acceptable. The annual National Exhibition of Art has reached out to the public, and educated Thai people about contemporary art. From art appreciation only in traditional Thai art in temples and old palaces, Thai people gain more understanding of contemporary art in various art exhibitions. Many Thais collect art works to decorate their offices and their residences.

Thai art has dramatically developed from idealistic traditional art to mingle more with Western art, which emphasizes individualism in themes, concepts, techniques, and presentation.

In 1960, Prof.Silpa Bhirasri headed the Thai delegation to the 3rd International Artist Convention in Vienna, Austria. Apart from the convention's agenda, there were small group meetings between Western and Eastern countries about art and artistic techniques.

At the meeting, Prof.Silpa and the Thai delegation prepared a proposal to call for cooperation between Thai and international artists for an artist exchange project. Another proposal from the Thai delegation was to set up an Asian artist center to promote art and culture of countries from the oriental.

Private galleries sprang up in this period. Among the pioneers was Tinnakorn Gallery, which was opposite to the Central Post Office.

The Thai art movement became more lively when private galleries came into existence since this allows more display venues for artists. The Young Artist Group was formed, and held their shows at a new gallery in Makasan area in Bangkok. The gallery was called "Bangkok Art Center".

Many galleries since then joined the art scene. M.R. Pantip Boripatr opened another at Suan Pakkard Palace, which made art even more accessible to the Thai public.

Other well - known galleries included Pathumwan Gallery, which was launched in 1966, and Sumej Jumxai's Gallery 20 in the following year.

Art For Social Criticisms, and Art for Life

Since 1968, contemporary art became even more diversified in Thailand. Artists have developed their individualistic style to present their idea. "Art for Art" defines artists' attitude in this particular time. Art in each field strives to reach their ultimate goal.

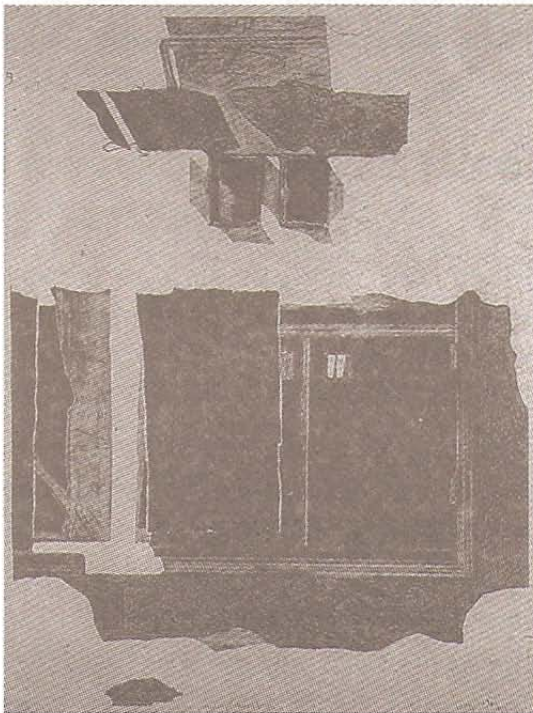
A good sign in this period is that the Thai society generally opened the door to artists and their works. Art criticisms became more prevalent. Also it was the time when abstract art reached its heights, the golden era of abstract art in Thailand.

Two major political uprisings happened during this period as well. The popular uprisings on October 14, 1973, and October 6, 1976 substantially contributed to the Thai politics, as it was the first time Thai people called for their rights and democracy.



Thai Farmer I, 1979
by Thammasak Booncherd
Oil on canvas

On October 14, 1973, Thai students staged a demonstration, with backup from people, asking the military government under Field Marshal Thanom Kittikachorn to quit. It was successful. The then - Prime Minister, as well as other senior officials, had to leave the country.



Woodcut, 2 February, 1971
by Ithiphol Thangchalok
Woodcut, 81 x 61 cm.

After the 1973 event, students movement in Thailand became very strong when college students came out in the forefront to comment on politics and many social issues. However, the October 6, 1976 event broke down the movement. Student activists were cracked down. Social criticisms, again, were suppressed under the ruling political regime.

Artists, like other elite groups, were greatly affected by both events. Art deals with human life, and is inspired by what happens to life.

Impacts from the political situation in the period are twofold. On one hand, it instilled many artists to reflect what happened in their works. Some artists were emotionally involved with the incidents, and created their works on the theme of the then political turbulence.

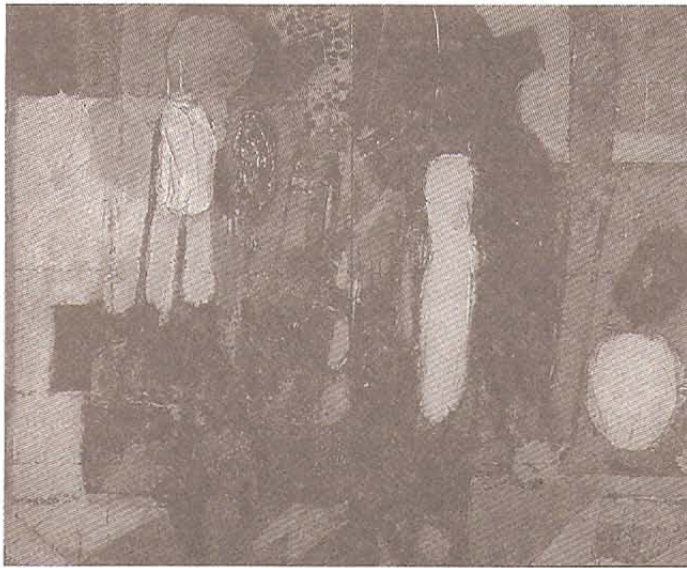
On the other hand, there were those who created art works for political propaganda to promote certain political ideas into the Thai society. This kind of works brought in questions the demarcation between art and propaganda. If a painting depicts someone's suffering, does it mean to call on people's movement to free the oppressed from their suffering?

A concluding note here may be that artists who create their works to reflect truth, and to satisfy themselves, not just working as commissioned. One's freedom in thoughts and minds would be totally crushed once artists have bias, or work solely under instructions by authorities.

Presentation of new materials and methods

After many political conflicts had unfolded and subsided after 1980, the country's economy progressed. Thai people began to have better life. Along with the social and economic improvement, Thai artists continued to search for creative means for their art.

The young artist generation in this period explored new artistic techniques to differentiate themselves, but at the same time tried to be responsive to the ever - changing society. They employed new materials, new presentations - particularly mixed media technique, and new subject matters that are more relevant to their time. New social issues that sprang out from the evolving economy and society became main themes in this period's art.

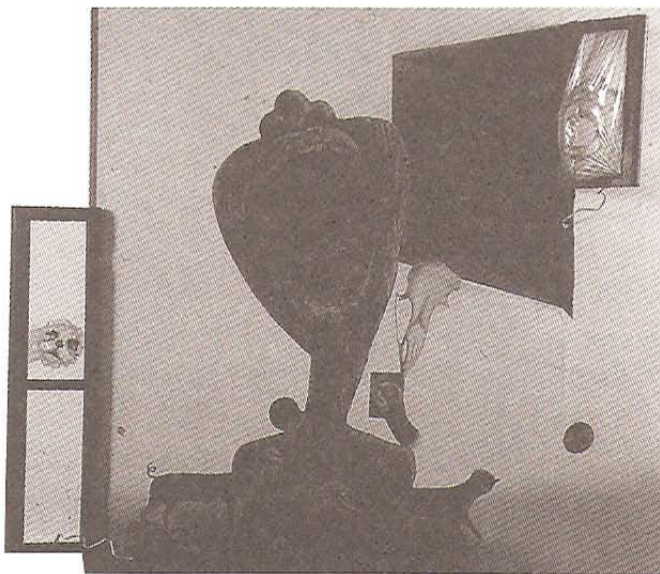


Collage No. 3, 1966
by Prawat Laochareon
Mixed technique,
152 x 185 cm.

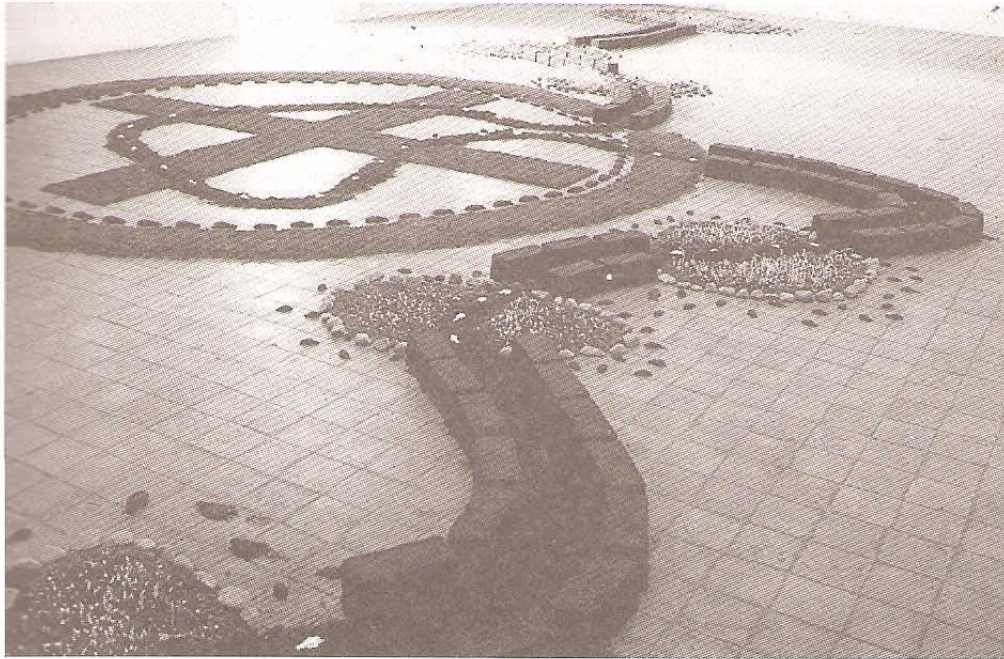
Actually mixed - media technique is not completely new to the Thai art scene. Pichai Nirand used sand and colored glass in his oeuvres and Prawat Laocharoen painted on sack clothes.

However, mixed media became another category for the 27th National Art Exhibition in 1981, but it was canceled three years later. The category was added in again in the 37th National Art Exhibition.

In a way, different methods and materials actually offer a way to create art. They are tools for artists to present their thoughts-artists can pick any way they want to achieve their goal in art.



Painting, 1969 by Kiettisak Chanonart
Mixed media, 140 x 140 cm.



Out of Balance, To Turn a Blind Eye on chao - pra - ya River, 1993 by Kamol Phaosavasdi
Soil, Aluminum fish moulds and bean sprouts varierble,
Dimension variable

Expansion in art study and contemporary art for the young generation

From the Poh Chang Art School founded in 1913 and the first art education at the college level at Silpakorn University's Faculty of Painting and Faculty of Sculpture in 1943, art education in Thailand has gradually expanded.

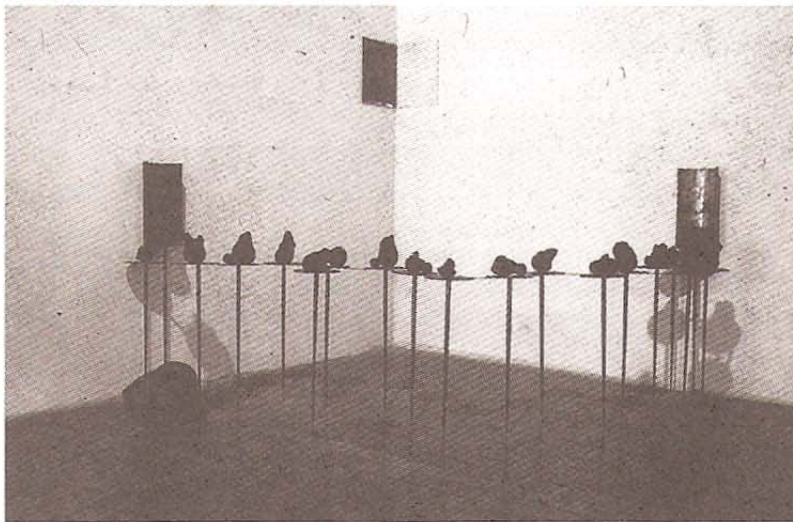
In 1983, Chulalongkorn University opened its Faculty of Fine and Applied Arts which teaches both fine art and designs. Chiang Mai University in the north opened its in 1983, and northeastern Khon Khaen University, and central Sinakarinwirot University founded their Fine Arts Faculty in 1993. Burapa University followed very briefly. There are many other state universities, as well as private ones, which plan to offer art courses and degrees. This is due to growing interest in art in Thailand.

Such variety in art courses offered at various institutes create even more diversity in the Thai art scene as never before, as each institute has its own philosophy and ways of producing their students.

Younger artists of the new generation work with confidence that one day their art will affect the society, and in some way solve some social problems. Their works are more reflective and responsive to rising social issues. Young artists incorporate in the works the issues of their time-environmental issues, modern lifestyles, pressure from work and life, and Thailand's transition to a new techno-dominated nation.

In 1984 Silpakorn University unveiled a new art venue for these young artists, a new art competition, the Contemporary Art Exhibition For Young Artists. The art contest is open for all categories of visual arts painting, sculpture, prints and any others. Contestants must be from 16 to 25 years old.

The contest, which is still held today, has served as a stepping stone for many promising artists, many of them have contributed to the Thai art scene.



Homage to Uncle Rouen, 1993

A man who tries to pull out his identity by Montien Boonma
Terracotta, steel, Film Transparency and glass, Dimension variable

Multi - culturalism in the borderless world

The economic boom in Thailand began in 1988 under the premiership of General Chatchai Choonhavan who focused on economic progress to lead the country to industrialization, and played down the role of the agricultural sector. With industrialization came scientific and technological development. The sweeping globalization trend coerced Thailand to adjust herself to the world of information technology.

Many important political events outlined this period. During the Chatchai government, the army's National Peace Keeping Commission staged a coup d'état, and General Suchinda Kraprayoon assumed the premiership. But the popular uprising denounced the army and staged a mass demonstration which led to the May 1992 bloody crackdown.

General Suchinda stepped down eventually. Ex - diplomat and businessman Anand Panyarachun then became the next prime minister.

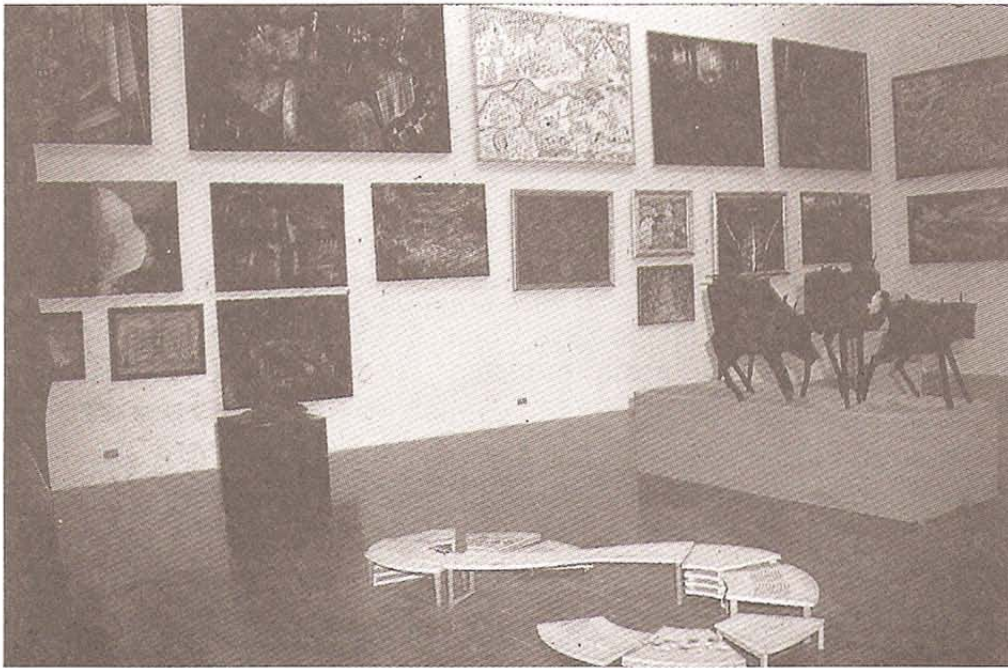
After the general election, Chuan Leekpai who led the majority in the Parliament was prime minister. He later had to dissolve the parliament because of the land scandal which badly tarnished his Democrat Party. General Chaovalit Yongchaiyudh of the New Aspiration Party took the post. In his time the Constitution Drafting Committee was founded to draft a new constitution which is believed to be the country's most democratic one which benefits people.

Along with political and economic growth, there has come an influx of international culture and thoughts to Thailand as communication technology makes the world smaller, and fast - moving. The Thai art scene is no exception, there has been exceptional progress in the Thai contemporary art both in concept and presentation. While a number of artists search the world for new ideas, many go back to the Thai root - the national heritage to find their way. Doubts, inquisition, and uncertainty always pose questions for artists. Some artists become successful with their new means of expression, while many are questioned about their quality and originality whether they are too much influenced by the outside world.

Economic crisis and contemporary art in the Thai way of living

Thai people came to the realization that they had lived in a bubble economy in 1996 when Thailand faced one of its biggest economic crisis. Everyone from the government, business people, to people on the street had their share of suffering in one way or another. General Chavalit Youghchaiyudh had to step down to make way for Chuan Leekpai to resume the premiership.

The art scene is as badly affected by the economic crisis as others. Art institutions had to tighten their budget in art education, museums and other art-related activities. Private supporters of art also had to cut down their spending. Many businesses had to fold, their assets confiscated by the state's agency to be auctioned as part of the financial reform.



Work of Arts in 55 Years of Faculty of Painting, Sculpture and Graphic Arts, 1998
at The National Gallery

From then to now, Thailand has faced economic difficulties, and is still under treatment. Artists have their share as collectors can no longer afford to buy their works. Many art activities have been delayed, some even canceled. Many young artists may be discouraged as their works lack financial supports.

Looking at the bright side, artists may have more time to concentrate on their art and there sprang many new issues to talk about. It depends on how artists can respond to what has happened with a broad perspective.

One obvious trend is that many have returned to the Thai way of living, the simple and serene lifestyle. Many turn to appreciate the Thai heritage that has shaped our nation to this day. Many also see virtues in the Thai system of beliefs, and want to present those in their art. Artists never stop to develop their presentation techniques to carry their message to viewers, and reach out to a more international level.

In sum, Thai contemporary art has continued from the reign of King Rama IV when Western civilization was brought in, in an attempt to save the country from colonization, until the reigns of King Rama V, and VI when Thai cultural heritage's importance became more acknowledged.



Meditation, 2001 by Vichai Sithiratr

Plaster, white yarn and artist in meditation Dimension variable

Location : KunstWerk, Cologne, Germany

Thai contemporary art has developed until today, and it will never stop. At times, the Thai art has brought new perspective to the Thai society, but sometime it becomes one with the Thai people, reflecting what they think and see. It also plays a monitoring role every time a change comes. Art in fact offers a big wide perspective for people from every walk of life, regardless of genders, age, and nations.



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