A recent spate of reports has expressed concerns about **Luang Prabang coming under the pressures of modernization, development, tourism and commerce.** Emerging from the reports was the question of whether its World Heritage Site status contributed to the ancient city receiving attention of undesirable and negative nature.

AP reported that "Unesco accelerated traffic to Luang Prabang by declaring the one-time royal capital a World Heritage site in 1995, describing it as the best preserved city of Southeast Asia".

Emmanuel Pouille, an adviser on the Unesco Heritage House project, was quoted by *AFP* as saying: "Every time a site is inscribed...tourism increases very fast, in some cases explodes." The *AFP* report described the rich architectural heritage of Luang Prabang today as proving "something of a double-edged sword for the tiny city, transformed since it was added to the list of World Heritage sites..."

Lodged inside the hinterlands, with the Mekong River running by it, Luang Prabang had not been accessible to tourists due to its remote location, war and isolation imposed by Laos' communist government until tourism was allowed in the nineties.

The tranquil city has been inhabited by traditional communities, with a colonial heritage of French architecture, and over thirty monasteries, some dating back to the 14th century when the city was founded.

Today, an estimated 70,000 tourists visit Luang Prabang annually, reports Bronwen Roberts (journalist). This figure represents four times the population of the city. Guesthouses, cafes, restaurants, internet shops, karaoke entertainment and massage services are sprouting, but there are no huge international hotels.

Unesco's involvement and the local government legislation seem to have prevented Luang Prabang from becoming like many Asian historic places: razed, clogged with traffic and incongruous architecture, polluted, noisy, degraded and hectic. Buildings in Luang Prabang are inventoried and governed by strict regulations. Sites are placed on watch to protect them, and a master plan covers a large area of the city. Many construction practices and traditional skills have been revived.

Nevertheless, while the picture is one of Luang Prabang being under control in its tourism and development, the future appears to be less than bright.

Even though Unesco, France and the European Union contribute millions of dollars in aid, conservation efforts and scarce resources struggle to keep up with increased tourism and crass commercialism. Traditions are disappearing, and the community changing as inhabitants turn to the more profitable tourist trade. Native residents are leaving, as rents and value of property rise. Even ancient rituals have been transformed into tourist attractions, such as the Buddhist practice of monks collecting alms in the morning. The daily ritual is now part of the tourist itinerary, with tour packages organised for it. What Unesco set out to prevent from happening may be difficult to stop. A busy city over-run by tourists, money and cars is a frightening image. Think Siem Reap. The UN agency itself acknowledges the difficulties, and has supported the publication of IMPACT, Luang Prabang to assist tourism planners and operators to collaborate with heritage managers and residents in balancing the demands of tourism with the needs of the community. It also gives an idea of the extent of development in the city, with a rapid and largely unplanned expansion of transportation infrastructure and accommodation facilities. Public utilities relating to electricity, water, sewage and garbage collection are also placed under stress as the construction boom increases demand for land, adversely affecting the environments and cultural heritage of the serene city.

The case of Siem Reap can be instructive. Observers are apprehensive that the **rampant development and construction boom in Siem Reap are degrading the cultural heritage site, and also damaging its monuments.** Siem Reap, once a tranquil village where Hindu-Buddhist temples were constructed between the 9th and 14th centuries, has been attracting huge number of tourists and increasing businesses. Close to these temples, built by a succession of kings who reigned over a 500-year empire covering almost all of Southeast Asia, are modern hotels and guest houses, and many more under construction. The Cambodian tourism

ministry expected the number of rooms available for guests to reach 10,000 this year, with the number of visitors soaring to 2.5 million by 2010. In the plans for the area are golf courses, sport fishing and freshwater lake tours on the Tonle Sap, as well as a $14 million cultural village (to promote more tourism?). Will Disneyland executives jump on the bandwagon too? Developments and planned projects in Siem Reap do not hold out a rosy picture of its future.

Writer Harold Stephens recently wrote an interesting article on **lost art in Southeast Asia.** He revealed how Belgian artist, Le Mayeur, who lived on Bali more than 47 years ago, acquired several Balinese paintings during his time there. Each of the paintings eventually fetched over $400,000 at a Christie's auction in Singapore four years ago. Also, one of Theo Meier's works was auctioned off for $110,000, a sum of money that would have procured an inordinate amount of burlap sacks for him – Theo was a very poor artist on Bali, and painted on burlap sacks.

Taking after novelist Somerset Maugham, who searched for but did not find any lost Gauguins on Tahiti (concluding the mission by writing a book, 'Moon and Sixpence' which became a bestseller and made Gauguin famous), art dealers and collectors are searching for lost art in unlikely places around the world.

Bali and Chiang Mai are two places where a great deal of lost art can be found. Artists have been attracted to the two Southeast Asian havens since the 1920s, and have left behind legacies of their paintings. Walter Spies, Rudolf Bonnet, Le Mayeur, Theo Meier, Han Snel, Le Pho, Man Fong Lee, Affandi, Tawee Nandakwang and Fua Haripitak were listed by the author as some of those whose works are highly-prized today.

Painters moved to Chiang Mai during World War II and the Japanese invasion. The author wrote that "the line of Impressionism that many expat painters on Bali followed also played an all-important role in the development of art in Thailand from 1940s onwards." He reported that only a small number of works by Southeast Asian artists of that era has been recovered, and he mused that in the numerous shops selling antiques and junk, closets, storage sheds, and attics you just might get your hands on one of these paintings, and make a fortune.

Conspicuously, the role of auction houses in turning these art pieces into riches and in promoting Southeast Asian art is immensely significant. Art critics used to make or break artists, but now it may be the auction houses. Art critic James Earkel claims that it is salesmanship that sells painting, notwithstanding the quality of the art, leaving one to consider how many artists have not been recognised and whose works have not been given any financial or aesthetic appreciation.

Described as "an internationally-recognised platform for cultural exchange and exposure to contemporary art practices in the region and beyond", the Philip Morris ASEAN Art Competition has nevertheless been criticised, and calls were made for it to be canceled. **Anti-smoking lobbies rallied the government in Thailand to scrap the 2004 art event, citing that Philip Morris, a major cigarette manufacturer, exploited artists and their art in promoting its tobacco products.** The protesters claimed that the ulterior motive of Philip Morris in supporting art was to raise its image and increase its profits. This year's event, "Ancient Roots: Modern Bridges" aimed to capture the spirit of cultural diversity in the ten ASEAN countries, and form friendships and understanding through contemporary art. As ASEAN's top art competition, thirty-five artists from seven member nations participated, with winners of national and regional competitions receiving awards totalling $145,000. The event was launched by Philip Morris Asia Ltd in 1994. Related to the issue of smoking, authorities in Singapore and Malaysia were moving to implement more stringent anti-tobacco legislations. Singapore is considering following Ireland in banning smoking in pubs while Malaysia have increased tobacco duties by 40% raising cigarette prices by 20%

As one of the biggest events aimed at promoting the relationship between human beings and the environment, The World Exposition will take place in Aichi, Japan this time. The **World Expo 2005** is expected

to draw approximately fifteen million visitors to its sites in Nagakute Town, Toyota City, and Seto City. First held in London more than a hundred years ago, this will be the 43rd Expo, and will have two themes, nature-related wisdom and life in the 21st century. Directions for new ways of life, and the issues of aging populations and the creativity of the young generation will be explored. On the walls of the biggest ceramic environment-monitoring tower on earth will be messages from people all over the world aged 10 years or older. Exhibits include presentations of regional arts and customs associated with nature and life. The fine arts, daily customs and performing arts of various cultures in harmony with nature will also be featured. The theme of nature's wisdom is most appropriate for the hosts, as Japan comes to terms with the enormity of its loss in terms of having inadvertently sacrificed their human values, open spaces and resources on the altar of economic development. There is hope in the idea of fusing Asia's traditional wisdom with modern science and technology to create a better world where humankind and nature can co-exist in harmony. Acknowledging that "nature is a vast font of wisdom, and nature's wisdom stretches from the simplest cell to the infinite reaches of space" and that "this is the wisdom that has given rise to life and eventually ourselves on this planet", the organisers raise the imperative of regaining our nature's wisdom, and of incorporating this wisdom in our technological achievements. The Expo will reinforce the idea of rediscovering nature's wisdom, adjusting the relationship between humanity and technology as well as the social relations among human beings. The hosts hope to provide the opportunities for people to interact imaginatively, where young and old can rediscover the wonder of their own lives. They saw that the human beings' insatiable desire to expand has placed a tremendous burden on the natural environment, exceeding its capacity for self-recovery, and resulting in potential world crises. In Aichi Prefecture between 25 March and 25 September, 2005, the world will gather for a massive intercultural exchange to avert such crisis, and propose better paths to take. For more information, visit (www-1.expo2005.or.jp/en/).

Haney Farid, a professor of applied mathematics and computer science at Dartmouth College, has **analyzed works by Renaissance artists using a high-resolution digital programme.** Applying complex mathematical formulas, the authentication process was able to differentiate original paintings from the imitation ones. Portions of a painting by Italian artist Perugino was also discovered to have been done by someone else, perhaps his apprentices. Farid explained that the underlying style of an artist, not visible to the human eye, contains mathematical properties that can be captured and identified.

Some people use computers to authenticate art, and some others use food to make art. **A group of South American artists uses a variety of foodstuffs and other items to produce paintings** that (may) strike more than just the eyes. Left-overs, biscuits, cheese, smoked ham, and unusual materials but not paint are worked onto the canvas by this innovative group of three young artists (average 28 years-old) known as Mondonge, a reference to a traditional Argentine meat stew. The group's latest works were displayed in an exhibition 'What a Big Mouth' at the Daniel Maman Fine Arts gallery in Buenos Aires, Argentina. The exhibition attracted thousands of visitors, and a majority of the paintings was sold for up to $35,000. So, if you're an artist, next time you are about to throw away your left-over, think again.

In art, one is never too young to start. An **art kindergarten** under the Nanyang Fine Arts Foundation, will commence classes in 2005 as the first and only kindergarten in Singapore that provides daily art and music lessons. The four-hour class includes a range of learning that nurtures children in expressing their creativity and individuality. For the older ones, and those who are in the teaching profession, the Nanyang Fine Arts Foundation recently collaborated with the Centre of Excellence for Art in Singapore in holding **art workshops for teachers.** Some two hundred participants participated in the workshops that were conducted by the School of Visual Arts. The teachers enjoyed learning art-teaching from hands-on sessions in a 'back to school' approach, including art-making, design and mixed media, and use of diverse materials.

On exhibition at the Prado museum of Madrid are

portrait paintings representing 500 years of Spanish portrait art. **'The Spanish Portrait: From El Greco to Picasso'** is a new exhibition that puts on show many great painters' works which contribute to a background view of the Spanish social evolution.

The exhibition (until February 6, 2005) is an attempt to respond to the question posed by Prado museum director, Miguel Zugaza: "Is there such a thing as a Spanish portrait, a school identity for the genre?"

Eighty-seven portraits are displayed, more than half of which have been loaned from both local and foreign galleries. Artists included, naturally, are Titian, Juan Gris, Velazquez, Goya, El Greco and Picasso.

The remains of a primate have been discovered by palaeontologists who believe that it could have been **an ancestor to humans and also to all great apes,** including chimps and gorillas.

Researchers unearthed the partial skeleton at a site near Barcelona, Spain; they were commencing an excavation when a bulldozer dug up a tooth. Salvador Moyà-Solà of the Miquel Crusafont Institute of Palaeontology in Barcelona and colleagues discovered parts of the skull, ribcage, spine, hands and feet, along with other bones. It is one of the most complete skeletons of an ape from the Miocene Epoch (about 22 to 5.5 million years ago), when earth was filled by a great number of apes. From Asia to Europe to Africa, the ancient world was dominated by about a hundred different species of apes. The finding is also sensational in that the fossil record of apes from this period is sketchy.

The 13-million-year-old specimen was likely male, and was smaller than a chimpanzee, scientists say, and have assigned it to a totally new genus and species: *Pierolapithecus catalaunicu.*

Between 11 and 16 million years ago, it is believed that the great apes evolved separately from another primate group known as the lesser apes. *Pierolapithecus* appeared during this transitory period, and may fit the "missing link" category.

Evolutionists claim that after the lesser apes went their own way, evolutionarily, *Pierolapithecus* existed before the great apes diversified into various forms of orang-utans, gorillas, chimps, and humans. Professor Moyà-Solà said that *Pierolapithecus* appears to be very close to the last common ancestor of great apes and humans.

The ribcage, lower spine and wrist of the "new great ape" bear evidence of specialised climbing abilities that the modern great apes possess. For vertical climbing and suspending from tree branches, such a body structure (as that of this creature and the great apes of today) is considered to be an evolutionary adaptation.

Was Atlantis an imagination of utopia in the mind of Plato when he wrote about it over 2,000 years ago, or did it exist - off the coast of Cyprus? American researchers recently claimed that they have convincing evidence that the site of the **lost civilization of Atlantis** is located near Cyprus. For six days, the team of researchers used sonar technology to scan the ocean floor between Cyprus and Syria, and believe they discovered structures under the sea bed that match Plato's accounts of the city (Plato described Atlantis as a kingdom of abundant wealth, and natural beauty, and inhabited by an enlightened society). The researchers would return for more investigation of the site at 1.5 km below sea level.

An Office of Contemporary Art and Culture (OCAC) have been established in Thailand as a "department" in the Ministry of Culture. It is administered as an agency that came into being in 2002 with the agenda to promote preservation of local culture.

Under its director, Prof Dr Apinan Poshyananda, the office has undertaken the challenge to unshackle the idea of culture from the confinement of the past, and locate its place in the present and future. The agency has sponsored many activities to promote the vibrancy and diversity of culture, such as outdoor art market, festival of plays, rock-music competition, and an arthouse cinema.

Dr Apinan, an art lecturer with a doctorate in art history from Cornell University, is attempting to embolden the young generation in expressing themselves, and to nurture dynamism for creativity and innovation.

In 1993, ten local artists were supported by OCAC in their exhibitions at the Venice Biennale, considered the most important event in the art world.