

**Art
Education in
Thailand:
An Australian
Perspective**

By Ian Brown

A kaleidoscope of colours, a mass of moving figures, a continuous repetition of shapes or forms, a technical skill which jumps from the page... A few humble impressions of an Australian art educator confronted by the artworks of eight, ten and twelve year olds in schools in Thailand.

This article is the result of a recent visit to typical Thai elementary and secondary schools, teachers' colleges and colleges of fine arts, where observations were made of how art education is taught and how it differs from Australian practices.

After teaching for a number of years in Australian primary schools and now at a tertiary institution, words cannot describe how one is visually confronted (and amazed) when one arrives at an educational institution which is so culturally different. To visit schools where students do not pass without lowering their heads,

raising their hands to their chins and offering a greeting of respect!

Few would dispute Eisner (1972) when he claimed that children are not only different in developmental levels but also in respect to the cultural backgrounds which affect their lives and their views of the

world. In respect to art education, the cultural differences are limitless. Brian Allison (1978) claims "remarkably few systematic and controlled studies of children's artworks on a cross-cultural comparative basis have been carried out".

Nevertheless, quantitative studies, although few, can be found which have shown that culture has some influence on children's graphic expression, (Kellogg 1967; Wilson and Wilson 1974, 1977, 1979; Brown 1990).

Carson (1981) claims that teachers across America are finding that in their classes children with Asian backgrounds, particularly those from Laos and Vietnam, are producing artworks which reflect impressive skill and aptitude. Carson claims that children from these cultures have "an innate respect for art as well as an unusual propensity for keen observation and the ability and

desire to draw and paint". In a study by Brown (1990) it was found that children with Vietnamese ethnic background, when compared to children with an Australian ethnic background, appeared to have superior drawing ability in all domains tested, using the Rouse Scale for Measurement of Art Products.

With moves for Australia to become more closely aligned to our Asian neighbours rather than our traditional English, European and American counterparts, speaking for Australians, I say we must make a concerted effort to redress the obvious void in cross-cultural art education research. The multi-cultural nature of Australia's society should encourage acceptance of the diversity of backgrounds of Australian children.

Recognition that the educational development of children, art education in particular, may be affected by both cultural and individual differences, is important to the development of relevant and appropriate curricula experiences for children in any country.

Could I start by generalizing, based on observation, that although the teaching methods appear not too dissimilar, certainly the products and discipline recognition are quite different.

System differences

It is interesting to note that the reform of education administration in Thailand (1980) closely parallels the New South Wales educational reform (Scott Report, 1989), where in both countries there has been an attempt to decentralize administrative powers to the local level.

In Thailand this power of decision making is channelled through the committees formed at its four levels of administration, namely the national, provincial, district and school-cluster levels.

In Thailand in 1978, drastic curriculum reforms were carried out through the introduction of a new organizational structure for curricula content. The old method of teaching each subject separately or in isolation was replaced by the teaching of subjects under four subject groupings of skill, life experience, character development (which included art, music, physical and moral education) and work experience.

Similarly, New South Wales is currently rationalizing curriculum offerings by introducing six key learning areas within the primary

(K-6) area, one of which is called Creative and Practical Arts (art, craft, dance and music).

And Thailand, like Australia, has recently opted for a system of six years of primary schooling in one cycle. The division of the primary and secondary levels at the terminal grade six is thought to coincide with physiological and psychological development stages of children.

Obviously, many structural correlations can be made but the unique nature of both countries lend themselves to many system differences such as the non-formal school system, lunch programs and welfare programs.

Art education differences

In regard to art education teaching, one major difference appears to be that, although all children are instructed in art at the primary level, instead of being taught by the generalist primary teacher, as in Australia, children in Thailand are taught by a teacher who has art qualifications from institutions such as a teacher's college or college of fine arts.

It is interesting to observe the Thai art teacher at work. Children do not sit at desks as in Australia. The specialized art rooms, rarely found in Australian schools, are bare of furniture, and the walls, instead of displaying copies of 'fine' arts artists such as Van Gogh or Rembrandt, display the art works of the

students, which have been meticulously framed in glass and wood. More importantly, in many schools, rooms sometimes larger than the work rooms, are proudly used to display the medals, awards, certificates, and photographs of ceremonies or students' works which have been submitted, both nationally and internationally, to exhibitions and competitions. Participation in these competitions is obviously encouraged and promoted within Thai schools. Honour and recognition, by students and more importantly teachers, are obviously brought upon the schools. Many schools proudly display the 'diamond' painted above the door of the art room within the school.

Thais would obviously find it strange that within Australia we are constantly encouraging schools to exhibit children's artworks but discourage art competitions.

It appears, through loose translation of Thai art curriculum documents, that education is still based on the elements and principles of design, with much emphasis on composition. The repetition of similar compositional features recognizable

in many works at many different schools is overruled by the unique skill in the handling of the media displayed by the children.

I will identify four main differences in children's artworks and their teacher's strategies, between Thailand and Australia, from my own observations.

Observation one

Teachers in Australian schools are encouraged to help their students develop their senses and their imagination by looking and seeing. Teachers provide experiences for children which are direct.

Children are encouraged to explore and discover media in a variety of ways. This is one aspect that differs greatly between the two cultures.

and meticulously complete the works.

Observation three

Art in Thailand is steeped in cultural traditions. Art is an important part of the life of the Thais. The Thai religious culture is a blend of beauty and colour where the drabness of unpainted shanty buildings are suddenly overpowered by the richness and opulence of a Buddhist temple. The inside walls of the temples are intricately covered with colourful images which tell stories in a surreal and mystical manner. One can only assume that if a child is continually immersed in this kaleidoscope of artistic wealth, then the influence must be great.

Art in Thailand is recognized for what it is (or what it should be), a worthwhile educational activity, obviously encouraged by both the community and the educational system. Whereas Australians are immersed in twentieth century media and popular arts, the Thais contend quite satisfactorily with the blend of traditional, cultural images sitting side by side with contemporary 'western' representations. It is interesting to observe students working at colleges of fine arts in Bangkok where one group of students are expressing themselves in a post-modern, abstractionist or contemporary manner while just next door, another group is being instructed on how to apply gold leaf to lacquer using traditional techniques which have been passed

encouraged (as we do in Australia) to be expressive, free and to experiment with a host of media, with the belief that it promotes creativity (with the possible result that the child never gains mastery over any media)? Or do we limit the media, which allowing for extraordinary mastery of use, could somehow limit or stifle the breadth of expression?

Observation two

Thai children have the astounding ability, at a very young age, to persevere with an artwork over an extended period of time. Australian children appear to have a very short attention span, obviously cultural in nature, and will only spend a very short time on their works of art. I can imagine the dumbfounded expressions on the faces of ten year olds, if I insisted they spend three to four hours, over a few days, working on one artwork.

Time is devoted in Thai schools to the making of artworks but not necessarily at one sitting. Many of the schools which I visited encouraged their children to return after hours and on weekends to sit

Australian children's art consists of many media: paint, crayon, printing, collage, ceramics. In tune with the relative autonomy exercised in Australian classrooms, the use and choice of media is determined by each individual teacher or school.

It appears that the art produced at the primary or elementary level in Thailand consists mainly of oil, pastel or crayon. There is little doubt that Thai children have mastered pastel with the dexterity that many adult artists are still trying to grasp. The pastels are delicately blended and manipulated to produce a tonal quality quite unique. Colours jump from the page: bright, fictitious yet appealing.

When a teacher was questioned why the young children were not given paint to use, he retorted quite adamantly that the children were developmentally not ready for it. Here we have a philosophical dichotomy — should children be

on for thousands of years. The students appear to quite harmoniously accept the cultural traditions which are important to everyday life in Thailand.

Observation four

Undoubtedly, the subject matter of visual arts should be the child's world.

Thailand is, again, not unlike Australia, where in their early years all children are concerned in an egotistical way, about representing their lives and the things which are important to them. It appears that young Thai children enjoy representing village life, games which children play and landscapes or cityscapes from where the children live.

There appears to be quite a shift from younger children's work to those of the older children, in that the subject matter and compositional qualities change dramatically. Self is still of concern but instead of the truly representational nature of the

earlier works, it changes to take on a somewhat surreal feel where thought clouds appear and projections of life surround the subject. (Not unlike the inside walls of the temples).

In the number of schools visited over a variety of locations, it was interesting to note compositional similarities between the works. The obvious eastern style of perspective, by building the subjects towards the top of the page, could be found. After many years of observing Australian children's artworks, I was continually aware of differences as my eye was drawn to the horizon line at the top of the page. I was interested to discover the same shaped, two-tone blended pastel trees in schools in Bangkok and Loei, geographically poles apart. The students were obviously taught the elements and conventions of drawing from a very early age. There was an uncanny consistency in style and subject matter.

It is obvious that there are many similarities and differences in art education between the two countries. Acceptance that we can improve any one system would have to come with recognition that we need to share strategies and cultural traditions which are applicable to each educational context. Australia is one of the most multi-cultural countries in the world today. As an

Australian I would like to say that the exploration and realization of the wealth of information that exists, not only within my country but neighbouring countries, must be paramount to Australian educational research.

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