

## Sculpture in Public Area: A Thai Perspective

*Prof Dr. Pairoj Jamuni, a lecturer in Art History and Aesthetics at the Silpakorn University, Thailand, shares his thoughts on the art of sculpture and its place in Southeast Asia*

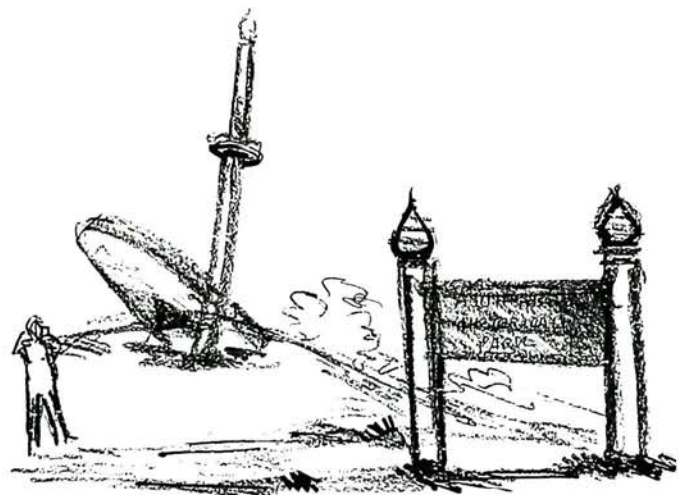
When we speak of sculpture or other art in the public area, most of us think about the Western-oriented mode of artistic expression such as a monumental sculpture, a statue of the national hero or groups of figures created in a naturalistic style with a fountain or a pond to decorate the park or main road junction. There are many other choices or alternatives that we can think about.

Although oriental cultures are very different from the European and American, some of the creative ideas found among Western artists, as we have studied in art history, can be modified to make reflections of our national or regional spirits.

Creating a large statue of a hero is something influenced by Roman culture (in the east, the great king Asoka the Great placed his pillar in the city of his conquered land, declaring an achievement - of expanding his empire). The idea of creating monumental sculptures has been adopted in many countries in Asia, including Thailand. When Silpa Bhirasri (Corrado Feroci) came to Thailand in the early twentieth century, his first assignment was to create a monument of the Thai king and other national heroes. This Florentine sculptor introduced the Western realist style of art to Thailand. He did his job with a high professional quality. The Thais admired this man who was later recognized as "The Father of Modern Thai Art". It was with a lofty intention that he made the statue of Thai

King Taksin, the Great, who had liberated the country after the fall of Ayutthaya in 1767. Silpa Bhirasri, who was trained in the academic art of Europe, explained that the monument he created might be naturalistic, but his intention was to add the flavour reflecting the spirit of the Thai. The Italian-born sculptor said that he was not creating the statue of a Roman emperor or a general but a Thai King, a Southeast Asian hero with a special personality of Thai characteristics.

My point is that the people of Southeast Asia may adopt a Western style of art but should make the details or add the flavour and spirit of Southeast Asia to the work. This is easy to say but difficult



*A gigantic sword, in a Claes Oldenburg pop sculpture style for historical site*

to do. I am trained as a painter by an art school in New York, and I know that doing what I just suggested is not easy at all.

Monumental sculpture is only one among many other choices of art in public areas. There are many other examples. About ten years ago, I visited Narathivas, a city in southern Thailand. The city is well known for the artistic tradition of making a “Korare” fishing boat. It has a unique structure with colourfully-painted patterns. On the main road of the city, not very far from the sea, a Korare boat was installed as a public art work.

I agreed with the idea that a master piece of craft, a boat, or even unique pottery of a certain region, if it is properly selected, can be used as art work in a public place. The following, however, are some considerations to note:

- 1) Each town, city, island, etc. should have a local committee to choose items such as species of plant or animal, craft, unique object that are appropriate as art work in a public area;
- 2) After a certain theme or subject matter is selected, making the art object and the specific site installation must be properly planned;
- 3) The size, composition colours, etc. must be carefully considered;
- 4) The art work must be in harmony with the physical and cultural environment of the place;

I think the last item is very important (once, in the USA, a large piece of metal sculpture of a well-known artist was for some reasons removed from the park upon request). What are some of the issues in selecting something to be an art work in a public place?

I would like to propose the following:

- 1) Historical site and its history;
- 2) Folktales or myth;
- 3) Native species of plant or animal;
- 4) Handicraft, e.g. pottery, musical instrument or other object of regional culture

The place can be the site where the inhabitants first settled. City walls or an art work in the style similar to the ancient architectural structure are appropriate. In the case that it is a battlefield, a sculpture of a gigantic piece of weapon or armor may be installed. When I visited the Netherlands, I saw Claes Oldenburg’s large-size garden tool with its tip pierced into the ground. The silver colour of this huge tool placed above the green lawn and colourful flowers made an interesting scene. It was also a unique aesthetic experience which gave me the idea that if we have a historical site, such as the place where a certain race built the city or a battlefield, some popular artistic expression of ancient pottery, armor, helmet or sword left on the ground could be a proper cultural statement.

I am also aware of the negative consequences from using a battlefield as a historical site for artistic expression. It is possible that two nations, once enemies, can become friends. This is a common phenomenon in human history. As far as art in public places is concerned, reminders of negative feelings between two races or nations should be avoided.

Every race or nation has unique folk tales and myths, and they can be sources of material and interesting ideas to make art in public places. Pra Lor is a Northern Thai folk tale, a love story between a handsome prince, Pra Lor, and a pair of twin princesses, Peun and Paeng. Although the story ended with all three leading characters killed, the tragic scene of Pra Lor and the two princesses in the royal garden, for example, can be an inspiration for a sculpture in the northern part of Thailand.

In central Thailand, the city of Pichit has a story of a hero, Krai Thong, who killed the mighty

crocodile and rescued the governor's daughter. A large-scale sculpture in the pond of the city with a theme from this folk tale could be - not only as a piece of art work - something to inform future generations, and to honour courage in social crisis.

When I travelled to teach in northeastern Thailand, I remembered that many areas in Khonkhaen were decorated with realistic sculptures of the gigantic dinosaurs. I am not opposed to the idea, but these art works displayed in public areas were made almost of the same style. Many of these areas had limited space so that the artwork could not make an interesting aesthetic experience for the viewer as much as it should. The stories about dinosaurs are now popular in northeastern Thailand because of the findings of dinosaur bones about ten years ago. The artwork reflecting the birthplace of the prehistoric animal in Thailand, however, should be done with more diversity and carefully chosen artistic expression so that it can make a more powerful impact on the public.

For my conclusion, I would like to say that Southeast Asia should be proud of its rich cultural heritage, and use it extensively to make contribution toward contemporary art

expression. For some cultures, because of religious or other reasons, certain artistic expression in realistic/naturalistic styles or other subject matters may not be acceptable. This is understandable. It is necessary that each region, island or province in, for example, Indonesia or Philippines, etc. should find something as a reflection of its unique culture. It can be architecture, craft or other objects to model on in creating sculpture that represents a certain species of plant or animal unique to the land. By doing this, art in public place can serve its significant function: to educate the tourists, to inform of history, culture, folktales, and beyond all of these, the true spirit, feeling and thinking of the peoples: artisans, dancers, architects, poets, etc.. The creators have something to tell and to share with the visitors, and strengthen our spirit and pride in our cultural heritage.

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(This paper was presented at a Workshop on Public Art, organised by SPAFA, March 6, 2002)



