

Modern Sculpture in Thailand

The First Episode

*Sculpture in Thailand used to be confined to casting of Buddha images, in bronze, stucco and sandstone. The works, in the past, rank among the greatest expressions of Buddhist art, especially those produced during the Sukhothai period. In this article, **Krisana Honguten** writes about the modern era of sculpture and the sculptors who jump-started modern art in the country.*



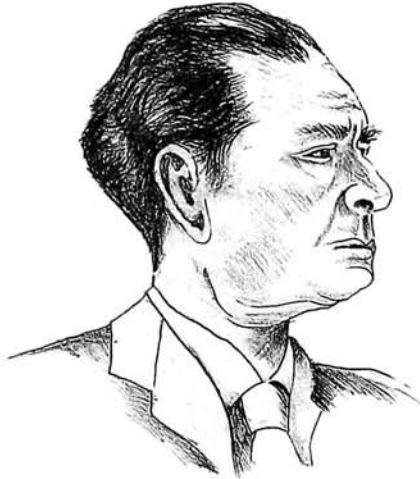
Foreword

It has become a tradition for Silpakorn University's Faculty of Painting, Sculpture and Graphic Arts to hold an exhibition - on 15th of September each year - of works by the faculty members. The major purpose of the event is to commemorate the birthday of Professor Corrado Feroci (Silpa Bhirasri) to whom the university is greatly indebted, and to demonstrate the loyalty of the students towards the professor. It was his wish to see that his students work laboriously and consistently with sincere dedication. Nothing could, therefore, be more invaluable and appropriate than his students holding an exhibition of their efforts every year, and dedicating it to him as his birthday present.¹

The origin of modern art in Thailand began with sculpture and Silpa Bhirasri, who was by training an Italian sculptor. He taught both art theory and practice to interested students without charging any fees, and even provided pocket money when they needed it.² When the art school was initially set up in 1934, sculpture as well as painting was taught.

School of Fine Arts and the Disciples of Silpa Bhirasri

After Professor Feroci returned to Thailand (from leave to visit his home country Italy in 1930, and also to supervise the casting of the statue of King Rama I), he reasoned that it would save Thailand a great deal of money if Thais could produce works of art in



Silpa Bhirasri
Sketch by Pattanapong
Varanyanon



Statue of Silpa Bhirasri
at Silpakorn University
Photograph by Nipon Sud-Ngam

the same way as Europeans. In those days, to cast a monumental statue, the design would have to be sent for casting in Europe. Thus in 1934, Feroci set up an art school under the Department of Fine Arts with the support of Phra Saroj Rattanimman. This

was the first formal art school in Thailand that taught both painting and sculpture. During a four-year course, students had to learn both theory and practice. The History of Art and Architecture was taught by Phra Saroj; Thai History by Luang Vijit Vathakarn; Thai Art by Phra Dhevapinimitr; Thai Architecture by Phra Phrombhichitr; and Sculpture and European Arts and Crafts by Professor Silpa Bhirasri.³⁾ Other subjects in the curriculum were: theory of art, colour theory, perspective, anatomy and styles of art. The programme was very intensive and the first graduating classes were truly qualified sculptors. Most of them assisted Professor Silpa in casting monumental works, and became teachers at the school. Among the most talented were: Chaem Daengchompoo, Phiman Moonpramook, Sitthidej Saenghiran, Sanan Silakorn, Sawaeng Songmangmee, Paitoon Muangsomboon, Khien Yimsiri, and Pakorn Lekson.

The Early Styles

Looking at the works of these graduates, two distinct styles are apparent: one is realistic, and the other is concerned more with plastic, free flowing contours. The former is exemplified by Chaem Daengchompoo, Phiman Moonpramook, Sitthidej Saenghiran, Sanan Silakorn, Sawaeng Songmangmee and Pakorn Lekson; the latter by Sitthidej Saenghiran, Khien Yimsiri, and Paitoon Muangsomboon.

Chaem Daengchompoo (1910-1944), Phiman Moonpramook (1912-1992), Sanan Silakorn (1919-1986), and Pakorn Lekson (1923-) were Feroci's most instrumental collaborators

in undertaking monumental cast works. The most important collaboration between Chaem Daengchompoo and Phiman Moonpramook and other sculptors were the reliefs on the Democracy and the Victory monuments. Pakorn Lekson was one of three artists who worked on the King Taksin Monument together with Professor Feroci. As for Sanan Silakorn, apart from his own works, he was also amongst other artists on several monuments, such as the statue of King Taksin, King Naresuan Monument at Don Chedi (with Sitthidej and other sculptors) and King Naresuan at Naresuan Infantry in Phitsanulok (the King's statue). Sanan also worked amongst others on the reliefs at the Democracy Monument, and worked independently on the Monument to Thai Heroes at Vajiravudh Camp in Nakorn Sri Thammarat, the Monument to Prince Mahidol at Siriraj Hospital, and the Monument to Krom Luang Ratchaburi Direkridhi at the Ministry of Justice.

The second group of artists consisted of Sitthidej Saenghiran, Sawaeng Songmangmee, Paitoon Muang-somboon, and Khien Yimsiri. Apart from working on the monuments with Feroci and other artists, they also

produced several important works, which not only set the path for modern sculpture in Thailand, but influenced fellow artists, and inspired the younger generations as well.

The Pioneers of the New Direction

Sitthidej Saenghiran (1916-1957)

Sitthidej's early works are realistic and life-like qualities, and have a powerful effect on the viewer's feelings and emotions.

Circle (Fig. 1) (Silver Medal, 4th National Exhibition of Art, 1953) is a sculpture of a nude Thai boy with pig-tails wearing an amulet around his neck, an anklet, and

a lucky charm around his waist. His left hand is on the bamboo hoop getting set to roll it; the right hand holds a stick for conducting the hoop to keep it moving; his feet are spread



Fig. 1 Sitthidej Saenghiran: Circle, 1953, bronze, 60 x 70 cm.



Fig. 2 *Sitthidej Saenghiran: Thai Boxer, 1951, plaster, life-size*

apart ready to run, his head turns slightly to the left, his eyes stare in anticipated direction. He makes the contemporary viewer nostalgic for the simple joys of childhood and for the traditional Thai life of the past. The hoop also suggests joy and poetry for the viewers.

Thai Boxer (Fig. 2) (Gold Medal, 3rd National Exhibition of Art, 1951) reveals the strong muscular anatomy of a boxer whose facial expression clearly suggests a sense of pride. The Last Quest (Fig. 3), (Gold Medal, 2nd National Exhibition of Art, 1950) is totally different from the other two works. It depicts a naked, withered old man carefully groping his way forward. He is blind, his face tilts slightly upwards, and he gropes around in space to find his way whilst his weak skinny legs seem to stagger slowly and carefully. The image evokes a sense of pity in the viewer.



Fig. 3 *Sitthidej Saenghiran: The Last Quest, 1950, plaster*

The two last works of this short-lived sculptor reveal changes that took place in his creative style and the search for his own individuality. In 1956, Sitthidej submitted two works in the 7th National Exhibition of Art: Mourning and Grief. Although they had a similar theme and manner of presentation, the details were slightly different. Here the artist intentionally abandoned his naturalistic style for greater abstraction, reducing human anatomy to a simplified form with emphasis on mass and contour.

In Mourning, (Fig. 4) he embodied the torment that was swelling up inside it. The flowing contour of the figure allows us to immediately identify with that silent sound of weeping through the dramatic posture. Grief, (Fig. 5) however dispensed with all detail. The smooth texture, the simplified

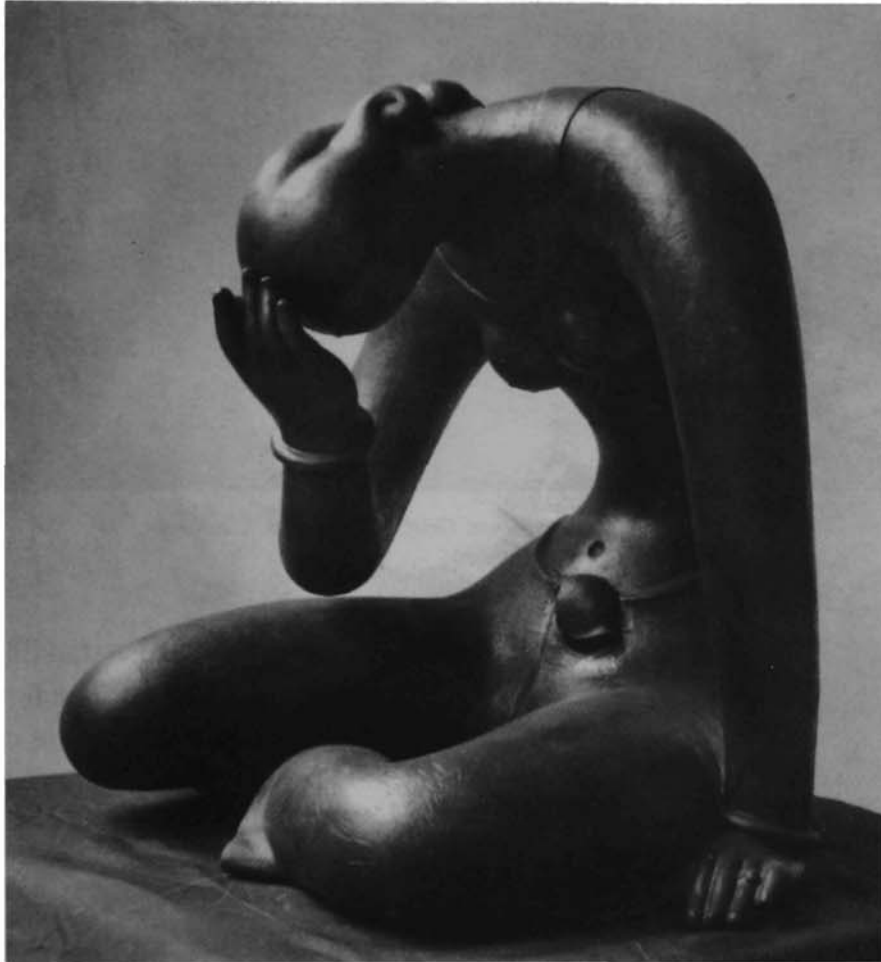


Fig. 4 *Sithidej Saenghiran: Mourning, 1956, plaster*



Fig. 5 *Sitthidej Saenghiran: Grief, 1956, plaster, h. c. 80 cm.*



Fig. 6 *Venus of Willendorf: around 25,000 - 20,000 BC, limestone, Naturhistorisches Museum, Vienna*

form, the still, lifeless grave with a cross standing on a square base, all suggest a sense of emptiness. The figure crouches above the grave weeping for her loss, full of confusion and loneliness as her sobs reverberate in the solemn air of the graveyard.

Sawaeng Songmangmee (1918-1958)

Sawaeng was the first Thai artist to produce a sculpture of the female nude in the style of western art. Nudity in art has been in existence since ancient times. The Venus of Willendorf (Fig. 6) for example dates back to when man began creating images for fertility worship. The Greeks made mainly sculptures of gods and nude males in elegant, classic postures; sculptures of nude females began to appear around the middle of the 4th century B.C.

After the fall of the Roman Empire, when Christianity began to spread across Europe, the nude was not represented in

Fig. 7 Donatello: *David*, around 1425 - 30, bronze, h. 185 cm., Bargello, Florence



Fig. 8 Sawaeng Songmangmee: *Blossoming Malee*, plaster, 1949, h. 155 cm.





Fig. 9 *Sawaeng Songmangmee: Bathing, 1950, plaster, h. 150 cm.*

art. It was in the Renaissance period that the nude statue was revived. David (Fig. 7), which was created by an Italian artist named "Donatello" in the Quattrocento⁴), was the first nude sculpture to appear in a millennium. Still, artists during the Renaissance were preoccupied more with the male than with female nude sculptures.

Although the nude had a long tradition in western art, the appearance of nude statues at the First National Exhibition (1949) created a great controversy. Normally, Thai people are very discrete in revealing their bodies. All of Sawaeng's sculptures of female nudes emphasise their beauty. It is therefore no surprise that his works were much discussed by the public during the first three national exhibitions of art.

Blossoming Malee (Fig. 8) (Silver Medal award, 1st National Exhibition of Art, 1949) is a sculpture of a young girl with a flower in her hand symbolising purity and innocence whilst her eyes drift as if pondering images of her future. Apart from revealing the artist's concern with the human anatomy, Malee also has the connotation of the fact of life represented in art form.

Bathing (Fig. 9) (Gold Medal, 2nd National Exhibition of Art, 1950) is different from Malee in that apart from being concerned with the human figure in motion at a specific point in time, it also reveals the beauty of the female form in a feminine posture whilst toweling her wet naked body after a bath. The sculpture reflects the artist's intention to create a work that is lifelike without



Fig. 10 Sawaeng Songmangmee: *Sleeping Beauty*, 1951, plaster, life-size

arousing sexual implications. For Thais, the appearance of the nude female sculpture was shocking but Sawaeng tried to create a life-like work without making it overly sexualised. For this reason, there appears to be no cause for it to be labelled as pornographic.

Sleeping Beauty (Fig. 10) (Gold Medal, 3rd National Exhibition of Art, 1951) is entirely different from the other two works mentioned. The figure of a woman is in repose on



Fig. 12 *Khien Yimsiri: Musical Rhythm,*
1949, bronze, 55 x 38 cm.

a rock with trickling stream of water. Her pose, with her arms above her head revealing her full round breasts, is extremely provocative. The round face turned sideways, the tiny lips and closed eyelids that seem full of contentment, appear to be full of sensuality. But the eroticism of the naked and beautifully perfect figure however, does not in any way evoke a sense of lust since it resembles more a goddess of love relaxing in the tranquillity of the woods with musical sounds in nature to serenade her. Although "Sleeping Beauty" is reminiscent of *Maja Unclothed* (Fig. 11) by Goya, it is different in that Goya's woman stares alluringly into the eyes of the viewer and is explicitly solicitous.



Fig. 11 *Francisco de Goya: Maja Unclothed, 1799, oil on canvas, 97 x 190 cm., Prado, Madrid*

Khien Yimsiri (1922-1971)

Khien is a sculptor who found his own creative direction in a very short time and he continually evolved throughout his career.



Fig. 13 *Paitoon Muangsomboon: Colt, 1950, plaster, 72 x 100 cm.*

Musical Rhythm (Fig. 12) (Gold Medal, 1st National Exhibition of Art, 1949) is undeniably the most beautiful work by Khien. The sculpture of a young man playing the flute with his gracefully placed fingers appears to be alive in a pose that suggests movement in harmony with the tune of his music. The simplicity of the form, the free flowing curves and lines, and the slight body movement that is yet full of life, all seem to have come from the sculptor's background and involvement with



Fig. 14 *Paitoon Muangsomboon: Calf, 1951, plaster, 66 x 81 cm.*

Thai art which he synthesised into his own unique style. Therefore it is not surprising

that Khien's works clearly possess the spirit of the Thai identity. The power of his works lies in the fact that no matter where they are placed on exhibit amongst works by artists of other nationalities around the world, they are readily recognisable as being Asian in origin even if no one is familiar with his name or his works. As Professor Silpa Bhirasri once said, but art is not a matter of copying or strictly imitating works of the past; the artist, who is genuinely creative, shall always be coming up with something innovative, something inspirational from his own thoughts and emotions that arise in his world.

This is why art is something individualistic and is always being created.⁵⁾

Paitoon Muangsomboon (1922-1999)

Paitoon is a sculptor of animal figures who is unrivalled by any other Thai artists. His sculptures are lively and naturalistic, testifying to his profound and intimate knowledge of animal gestures and movements which allowed him to portray them perfectly.

Colt (Fig. 13), (Gold Medal, 2nd National Exhibition of Art, 1950) in a posture of nudging itself, and Calf (Fig. 14), (Gold Medal, 3rd National Exhibition of Art, 1951)

scratching its ear with a hind hoof, are the most beautiful works to have been produced, and no other Thai artists, then or now, have managed to capture that split second gesture quite as beautifully. Paitoon also sculpts human figures with pleasantly flowing contours capturing a certain moment in time, but not in the realistic style, by eliminating the finer details. This can be seen from



Fig. 15 Paitoon Muangsomboon: Acrobat No. 5, plaster



Fig. 16 Acrobat, Aegean civilization around 1500 years BC, ivory, Archaeological Museum, Candia / Iréklion

the Acrobat series in which there are altogether a total of 5 pieces of work. Acrobat No. 5 (Fig. 15), for example, is reminiscent of Acrobat (Fig. 16) which is an ivory carving dating back to the Aegean civilisation about 1500 years B.C..

Conclusion

From the study of early sculptors of the School of Fine Arts, we can see that apart from being inspired by Thai art which they were familiar with, the artists were also influenced by western art in terms of subject matter, style, and techniques. They were influenced by their sculpture teacher Professor Silpa Bhirasri and by the Thai instructors at the School of Fine Arts. They also absorbed ideas from foreign magazines and books, which were brought into the country at the time. Nevertheless, these artists developed in individual ways and thus paved the way for sculpture in Thailand towards becoming more international. The works of these sculptors and the National Art Exhibitions, which were first conceived by Professor Silpa in 1949, led to the development of modern art in Thailand.

Translated from Thai into the English language by Assistant Professor Den Wasiksiri

Photographs from Collection of Silpakorn University

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¹ Damrong Wong-Uparaj referred to Professor Silpa Bhirasri's birthday in his book as follows: A special day that teachers and students all waited for was his birthday. In the evening, tables would be set up full of snacks and fruits. He would arrange the party for his students and colleagues himself. It was a day that made him very happy. Ask him to sing Toselli's Serenade, and he may do so. He was like a father to all. After the party was over at the university, we could follow him home and continue there if we had still wanted to. See Damrong Wong-Uparaj, Professor Silpa Bhirasri, Bangkok 1978, p.38.

² Silpakorn University, "Rak Ngao" Silpakorn University, Bangkok 1993, p.16.

³ Ibid. p.17.

⁴ "Quattrocento" is an Italian word referring to 1400 A.D. and commonly used to identify art of the 15th century from 1420 onwards.

⁵ Professor Silpa Bhirasri, Old and New, translated into Thai by Phraya Anumanrajadhon from original English version; in: Faculty of Painting and Sculpture, Silpakorn University, Contemporary Art in Thailand, 2nd Ed.; Bangkok, 1969, p.28.

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