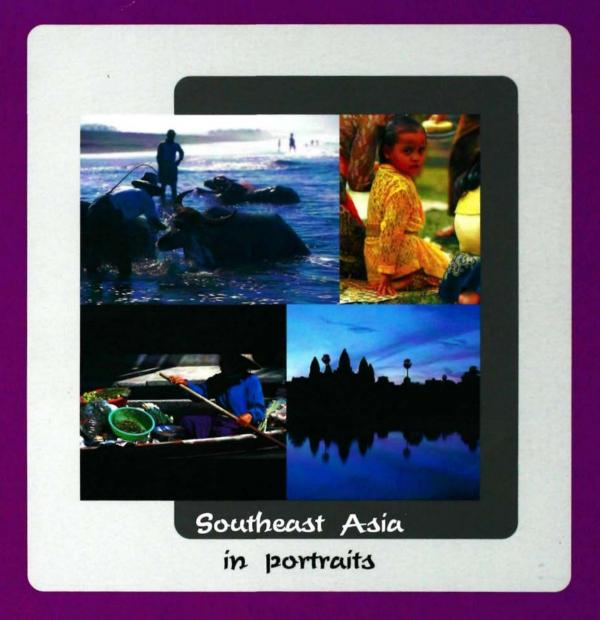
# \$AAAA JOURNAL



A Publication of the SEAMEO Regional Centre for Archaeology and Fine Arts

Volume 14 Number 2 May - August 2004 • ISSN 0858-1975



# SEAMEO-SPAFA Regional Centre for Archaeology and Fine Arts

SPAFA Journal is published three times a year by the SEAMEO-SPAFA Regional Centre for Archaeology and Fine Arts. It is a forum for scholars, researchers and professionals on archaeology, performing arts, visual arts and cultural activities in Southeast Asia to share views, research findings and evaluations. The opinions expressed in this journal are those of the contributors and do not necessarily reflect the views of SPAFA

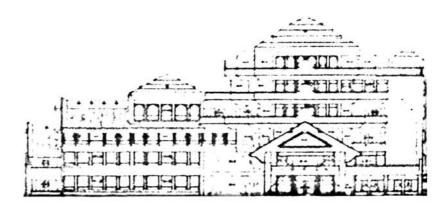
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Promote awareness and appreciation of the cultural heritage of Southeast Asian countries through preservation of archaeological and historical artifacts, and traditional arts;

Help enrich cultural activities in the region;

Strengthen professional competence in the fields of archaeology and fine arts through sharing of resources and experiences on a regional basis;

Increase understanding among the countries of Southeast Asia through collaboration in archaeological and fine arts programmes.



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#### **Annual Subscription Rates:**

US \$27 (Air Mail) US \$24 (Surface Mail) US \$19/Baht 465 (Within Thailand)

Cost Per Issue: US \$6/Baht 150

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# Roaming Restorers in Luang Prabang, Laos

Restaurateurs Sans Frontieres (RSF) is an organisation that mobilizes groups of conservators, restorers, and other professionals to undertake assignments around the world, helping in the conservation-restoration of heritage, objects and monuments. Founded in the early 1980s, RSF is particularly interested in the heritage, such as those that are not protected under the Unesco World Heritage list. The professionals in this established worldwide network - including architects, technicians, craftsmen, historians, scientists, ethnologists, image experts, etc. - collaborate in projects concerning forgotten heritage in various parts of the world.

The director of RSF, Robert Bougrain Duborg, has master's degrees in art conservation from France and Belgium, and visited Southeast Asia in 1979 with his wife, a Médecins Sans Frontieres

doctor, and they both helped in the refugee camps on the Cambodian-Thai border. During that time, he had the opportunity to visit many sites and temples in the region, and was struck by the state of several monuments. After his return to France, he founded RSF, which proceeded to carry out repair/restoration of monuments, starting with four in different parts of the world, each of a major religion: a Havana synagogue in Cuba; an Islamic house in Cairo, Egypt; an orthodox monastery in Greece; and a Catholic church in France.



Robert Duborg

In 1998, a crew from RSF restored the murals of a temple, Wat Srisakhet, in the province of Nakhon Ratchasima, following which they worked on the collection of paintings belonging to HM the King of Thailand. When they first began restoration at Wat Srisakhet, Dubourg observed that the temple was visited by few villagers, and learned that it had been like this for several years. He said that the villagers saw the progress of the work, and when it was finally concluded, a new Buddha

statue was enshrined, a ceremony held, and the community began visiting the temple again.

RSF has worked on other projects in the region, relating to: the mural paintings inside Wat Phou Xang and the National Museum in Luang Prabang (both in Laos); the paintings in the collection of Jim Thompson (Bangkok, Thailand); restoration of the Kiem Lien temple (Hanoi, Vietnam); the paintings of the Pagoda (Phnom Penh, Cambodia); and work on temple of Kompong Tralach (Cambodia).

The organisation is guided by the philosophy of gaining understanding of the culture in which they work, and relying on indigenous materials with the view that the efforts can be replicated and continued by local craftsmen. In Dubourg's view, humility, respect, and solidarity are required in their conservation approach as monuments and objects reflect the spirit of the community that share them. These monuments and objects represent the sensibility of those who conceived them, those who respected and worshipped them, lived in them, used them, etc.. He considers intervention as entering a profound and essential communication with the community, its creations and its ideas and beliefs. The RSF director sees the work of a restorer/ conservator beginning with learning from scratch, appreciating both the outcome of and the original intentions for the work; to try to feel the essence of the creator's act, for to restore beauty is to show again the spirit, story, functions and roles that are inherent in the creations. Restoration also starts with a need, an expectation, and a distress call, and it is therefore necessary to evaluate the condition of the work on the basis of these elements.

Dubourg wants another group involved in his projects: Buddhist monks. He feels that temples have resources that allow the monks to do more. He is interested in persuading temples to restore the old parts of it, rather than build new ones, pointing out that he has seen the joy in locals when they saw that faded murals and faltering structures in the place they have worshipped in for years were revitalised and used again.

The following is a summary of a project report produced by RSF on its restoration work in the National Museum in Luang Prabang, Laos in 2003.



#### Restoration of Paintings in National Museum, Luang Prabang

RSF engaged students of Ecole de l'Art d'Avignon (School of Art, Avignon) in a project to restore paintings inside the National Museum in Luang Prabang, Laos. The effort lasted six weeks, including a two-week workshop in Bangkok at the Silapakorn University. From 15 March to 12 April last year, a team of nine persons worked in Luang Prabang; it consisted of two students from the conservation-restoration section of L'Ecole de l'Art d'Avignon; five RSF professionals (two of whom, Robert himself and Laurence Durand supervised the work on the site); and two students of Fine Arts Group (Lyon) who worked on the photographic documentation of the restoration and conservation activities.

The project was implemented with the support of AFFA (Association Française d'Action Culturelle, Ministry of Foreign Affaires), Ministry of Culture and the Region of Provence Alpes Cote d'Azur. RSF in Bangkok provided financial assistance for the restoration work.

#### **Background**

The idea for the project was first discussed when representatives of RSF and La Maison du Patrimoine de Luang Prabang (a heritage organisation of Luang Prabang) met in January 2001 during the conference, 'La conservation et la gestion des monuments ancient et des oeuvres d'art' (the conservation and management of historic monuments and art works). During the conference, organised by the French Embassy, presentations of RSF and its activities attracted the attention of many concerned with heritage conservation not only in Thailand but also the other countries of Southeast Asia. La Maison du Patrimoine de Luang Prabang contacted RSF with regard to conservation matters, and consequently, a decision was made on reparing and restoring the paintings in the National Museum in Luang Prabang, which is a UNESCO World Heritage Site since 1995.

La Maison du Patrimoine de Luang Prabang is an inter-ministerial national commission, to whom the Laotian Ministry of Foreign Affairs delegated in 1996 the full responsibility of management and conservation of heritage. The commission was established at the initiative of the mayor of Chinon, France, with the support of funds and technical assistance. The Commission co-ordinates the financial and other support

among the several ministries, UNESCO, European Union, the French government, and local French organisations.

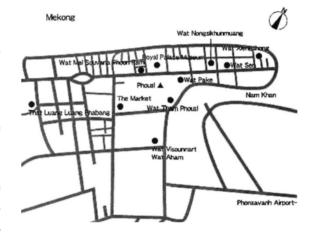
#### **Project Site**

The National Museum is located at the foot of the Phousi mountain in Luang Prabang. It was constructed with the help of Vietnamese engineers, under French supervison (Luang Prabang was once a protectorate of France). The building was the royal palace of King Sisavangvong, but after the monarchy fell in 1975, it was opened to the public as the National Museum. Divided into numerous halls and rooms which display the throne, the presents that the King received from other countries, and a collection of Buddha images, the museum is of an architectural style that illustrates the combination of traditional Lao motifs and French influence.

#### The reception room

The paintings that are restored under this project are in the room that used to be the royal reception room. All four walls in the room are covered with huge canvas paintings, which were created in 1930 by the female French painter, Alix de Fautereau, who lived in Southeast Asia in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. She came to Luang Prabang after being commissioned to decorate the walls of this room, making nineteen paintings on canvas that depict life in Luang Prabang then. The artworks were produced from the

perspectives of the French painter, and they illustrate the daily local life sensitively. Apparent from the entrance of the museum, the art pieces present and introduce visitors and guests to the everyday aspects of life and customs in Luang Prabang.





#### **Problems encountered**

The building of the National Museum, including the walls of the reception room, where the artworks are located, were infested by termites. The paintings were significantly damaged; termites damaged the cellulose as well as the wood, paper, leather, parchment, bone, and ivory. The climate of the country and the conditions of the museum

favoured the proliferation of these organized and social insects which are lucifugous, and which thrive in heat and shumidity.

#### Conclusion

It seems that the techniques and the materials used for the paintings by Alix de Fautereau in 1930 are totally occidental. The products used in the project were carefully chosen. Several problems are related to these techniques and materials: the use of caséine (sort of glue) to prepare for painting caused a fragmentation of surfaces, as it is a very weak adhesive for oils.

The use of organic colours during that time, because of their weak stability, contributed to considerable deterioration of visual quality in the course of time. It also appears that cotton canvas, which had not been part of the intial plan of decor, was not an ideal material to use in this context.

#### Results of Survey and Problems of the Collection

Results from the survey before restoration work revealed that thirteen paintings were severely deteriorated. There are various types of treatments for restoring and conserving paintings, such as stretching, incrustation and reproduction for long-term conservation. The paintings required attention for their conditions: broken paint layers, torn fabric, deformation and deterioration of the picture frames (caused by termites). The survey results also indicated that disintegrated paint layers on the paintings needed to be scraped off before repainting.

Insecticides were used, and placed on the wall and in the nail holes to exterminate weevils and other wood insects. The use of insecticide had been accepted as a temporary measure, with the whole building included in the treatment programme. Approval for the treatment plan was sought from the museum's conservator and from La Maison du Patrimoine.

#### Problems found during restoration

Restoration work had to be conducted in what used to be the Reception Hall of the Royal Palace where the pictures were. As a first step, the parquet floor of the Hall was covered to protect it from dirt.

#### Working Process

There were five steps in the process:
Removing paintings from frames
Cleaning the frames
Mending
Stretching
Placing linens on the frames

#### Cleaning the frames

The damaged frames were cleaned by using a knife and scissors to scratch off the dirt caused by termites.

#### Mending

For mending the canvas, linens were dipped in Plextol 50%, which was diluted with water. The areas around the holes were glued with Polyvinyl. To reinforce the linens and the canvas, medium-thick polyester fabrics dipped in Plextol B500 and Plextol D360 (2:1) were used.

#### Stretching

Beva 371 was used to stretch the linen.

#### Place linens on the frames

The damaged frames were cleaned with colourless insecticide products, which were procured in Laos. Each wire used for stretching the canvas was about 10 mm. each.

#### **Analysis**

During restoration, painting materials on the canvas were segregated and carefully analysed. The scientific results helped the conservators to comprehend the painting techniques, which led to decisions on the most suitable products for the task.

#### Canvas

Linen

Cotton

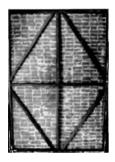
Most of the canvases were linen imported from overseas, along with



Luang Prabang

pigments and linolenic oil. According to the treatment plan, the conservators were supposed to use the same types of original materials in the restoration of the paintings. However, in the case of repairing the canvas of the painting above the door, an adaptation was necessary, and the original cotton was replaced by cotton made locally in Laos.

#### **Preparation**



Frame of painting (view from the back)

Calcium carbonate, carbohydrate and casein were mixed together to apply to the canvas to reinforce it. It was obvious that at that time the artist was aware of the humidity of the local region, and that casein, as a substance, had adhesive capabilities to prevent against damage from humidity. However, the substance was too harsh for the soft canvas and it caused drooping. Consequently, cracks occurred and pigment layers dropped off. The condition of the painting was quite severe, and fragile. Carbohydrate found on the painting was analysed, and found to have had been pasted during the preparation before painting. Nowadays, this method of blending two substances is unknown but it had been largely used at that time. The mixed compound protected the canvas from water and humidity better, and kept the painting in conditions that could tolerate considerable impact.

#### **Paints and Pigments**

The result of the analysis revealed that all the paints used were of good quality and imported from overseas. Some paints were glazed, such as bright red and bright green. These glazed colours did not protect the painting from humidity and light, so the artists needed to apply the opaque paints on them. Local materials were not found in the paints.

After the preparation, two wheel-scaffoldings were put into position. These scaffoldings, which were donated by La Maison du Patrimoine, were 4 metres high, 2 levels, and 6 square metres on each level.

La Maison de Patrimoine had kindly offered help in documenting, removing and returning each painting to its proper place. Tables were set up to place the more important paintings during the conservation process. The conservators took all the paintings down from the wall, laid them on the floor and worked on them together, to make faster progress. There was not enough light, although the throne hall had

many doors and windows, thus gas lamps found at local markets were used to light the room. The preparation lasted a week before the team started working on the paintings.

#### **During the Restoration**

Some tasks had to take place outside the museum; for example, making stands to support the stretched canvas, coating and glue-spraying to strengthen the canvas, and cleaning and repairing the stands. Because of the improper sizes of the tables and the number of paintings, two new scaffoldings were made to lay painting frames.

Operation hours corresponded to the office hours of the museum, six hours a day. To make faster progress, the team extended the working period for two more hours each day.

#### **Procurement of Material**

There were some difficulties in obtaining necessary materials and equipment, thus some were imported from France and Thailand, such as linen canvas, polyester fabrics, including a few implements used for conservation works (scalpels, etc.). Other supplies included: absorbent papers, newspaper sheets, spraying machines, pliers, hammers, metal sheets, lamps, 90% alcohol solvent and ready-to-use termite insecticide that were found easily in the local area.

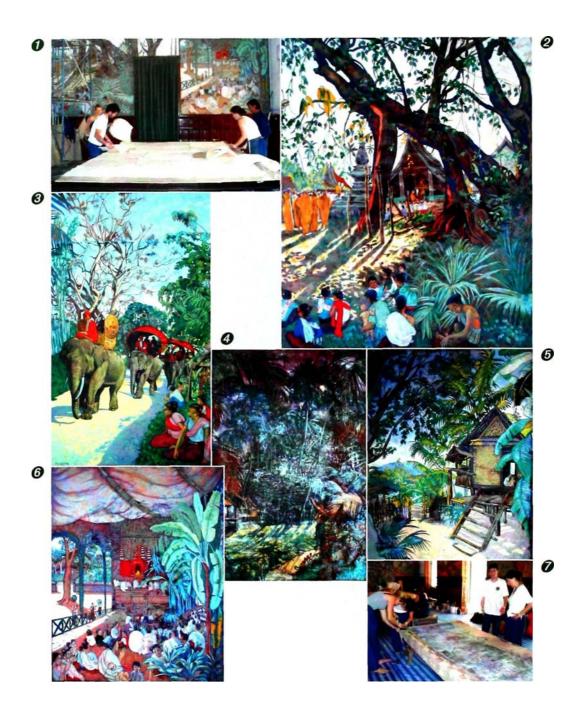
At the local market where the staff shopped, it was difficult to find implements appropriate for the conservation work. Language barriers and difficulties of communication with vendors and merchants also slowed down the process. However, some museum officers and native Laotians were able to help the conservators to obtain suitable tools.

The work was gradual, sometimes more rapid, but over time, and with hard work, the team generally succeeded in carrying out the tasks. II

Photographs supplied by RSF



- $O\ Temple\ with\ monks.\ Principal\ colours\ used:\ greens,\ ochres,\ earth\ browns\ and\ blues.$
- © Scene of children in the afternoon, vegetation and a temple on the horizon. Principal colours used: greens, ochres, earth browns, whites, reds and blues.
- © The market is depicted in this painting. Different ethnic groups of the country are distinguished by their respective traditional clothings. Principal colours: greens, ochres, earth browns, red and blues.
- O The river in the painting seems to be the Nam Khan, a tributary of the Mekong. Principal colours used: greens, ochres, earth browns and blues.



Treating deformations on a painting, applying humid blotters.

Painting depicts a religious ceremony in front of a temple. Principal colours used: greens, ochres, earth browns, reds and blues. This scene describes a parade of elephants, a day of festivities, perhaps the New Year. In the foreground are young women in traditional dresses, watching the parade. Principal colours used: greens, ochres, earth browns, reds and blues. This scene describes the serenity of the town once night has fallen. The main tone of the picture is very dark, with moonlight through the foliage of trees. A man plays an instrument in the foreground, and villagers are at rest. Principal colours used: greens, ochres and earth browns.

**0** The scene represents a traditional house surrounded by tropical fauna in the morning light. A young mother looks after her child while villagers pass by her house. Principal colours used: greens, ochres, earth browns and cerulean blues.

© A religious gathering. Principal colours used: greens, ochres, earth browns, reds and blues. Using small tension bands to stretch and reinforce canvas.

# Photography: Hobby for Life

Paul Beiboer has travelled around Asia for over a decade, residing in Jakarta, Bangkok and Hong Kong. He is a bank manager, whose passion in photography has driven him to carve out a distinctive style in his portraits of Asians and the lush landscapes they live in. Born in Wamena, West Papua, Indonesia, Paul developed an affinity with the cultures and peoples in the region; and has today amassed a vast collection of photographs - he has taken - which evoke the beauty and exquisiteness of Southeast Asia. Many of these photographs have been exhibited in Jakarta, Singapore, Bangkok and Hong Kong, and published in books, travel and other commercial publications as well. Paul's photographs are also posted on his website www.paulbeiboer.com

#### How much time have you spent in your country of birth?

I was born in Indonesia, and feel a bond to the country and people, but I've only lived there for four years between 1996 and 2000. It was the period of the end of President Suharto's reign. Indonesia was booming initially during that period, and then went through undergone a very difficult time following the collapse of the local currency, the Rupiah, and the social unrest. It was a time of immense contrast.

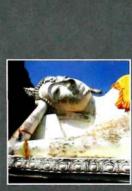
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Rtrlining Huddha. Aynddhaya. Thailand

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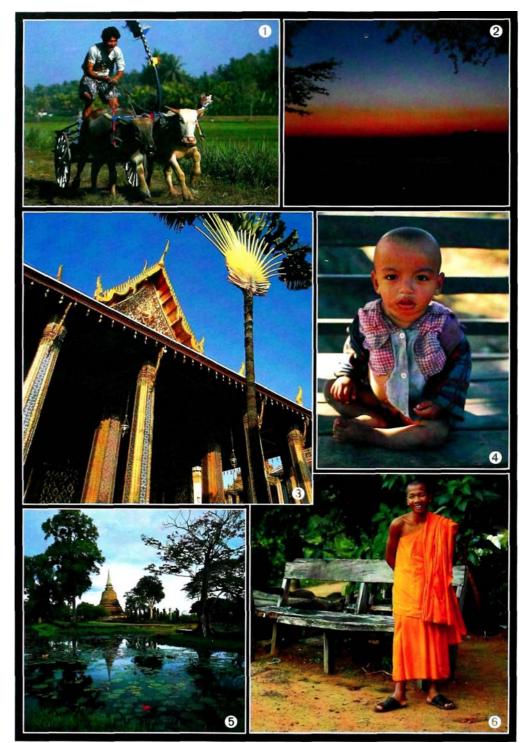








15



- O Buffalo races, Bali
  O Pagan sunset, Burma
  & Royal Palace.Bangkok
  O Burmese boy, Pagan, Burma
  O Sukhothai reflection, Thailand
  © Happy monk, Luang
  Prabang.Laos



Angkor Wat, Cambodia

#### What are your experiences there?

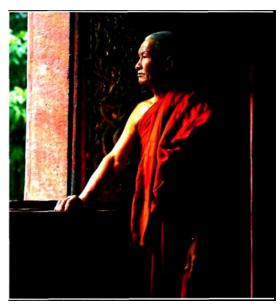
It was both an interesting and challenging time, with the political changes occurring. I became more familiar with the culture and people, and found Indonesia a fascinating place. During this period, my interest in photography - which has been my hobby for more than 25 years - became more serious and intense. I had mainly taken photos and slides, which were great for travel photography, when I concentrated on landscape, architecture and people. Six years ago, however, I began to explore the black and white medium.

#### Why the change?

I joined the Leica Club, a photography society in Jakarta, and the photographs taken by members there showed how powerful black and white photographs could be in comparison with colour ones. It opened my eyes to black and white. People responded well to my black and white photographs when I held exhibitions of my work. It was a rewarding period for me. Lots of positive feedback.

## Is it presumptuous to say that if you did not become a banker, you would now be a professional photographer?

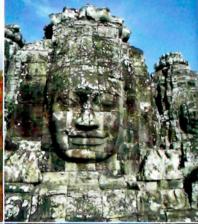
I am currently working in a Dutch bank, Rabobank. Photography spurs my travels in Asia, which I have been doing for about ten years now. On weekends and vacations, I always bring my camera out in search of interesting subjects. It is quite a serious hobby to me. I hold a solo exhibition every year, pretty much wherever I live. It is certainly true that I would be a professional photographer today had I not been involved in the bank business. My head may be in banking, but my heart is in photography.

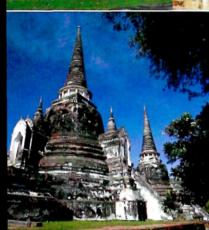


Reflecting, Luang Prabang, Laos













Ayuddhaya temples, Thailand

Monks at Golden Mount, Burma

Sukhotai Buddha, Thailand

# Obviously, you must be very committed to the hobby because you have a family and children, and you're not making a living out of photography, so how do you manage your time?

I receive some income out of the hobby, when magazines, books and other commercial publications use my photographs, but I think of it as my hobby basically. It's nice to see people appreciate what I produce with the camera, and the small income I make helps me with the expenditure, which can be costly. Even though I do not develop the photos myself, and do not have the facilities to, the films and travel expenses can add up to much. And we're talking only about expenses in taking photographs. If you're also organizing exhibitions, they involve a great deal of finances and time. It's my hobby, so I enjoy it tremendously.



## Having traveled in Asia for more than 15 years, which place held the fondest memories for you?

My top destinations were Tibet, Burma and Irian Jaya. All very different, but very pure.



## How has Asia been a place of inspiration where you could fulfill your life's passion?

Pretty much everywhere you go, there are fascinating people and cultures to explore. Going around Asia, you are never short of interesting subjects. I thoroughly love documenting all of these places. In so many of the locations, time stood still and it was a joy to spend time there.

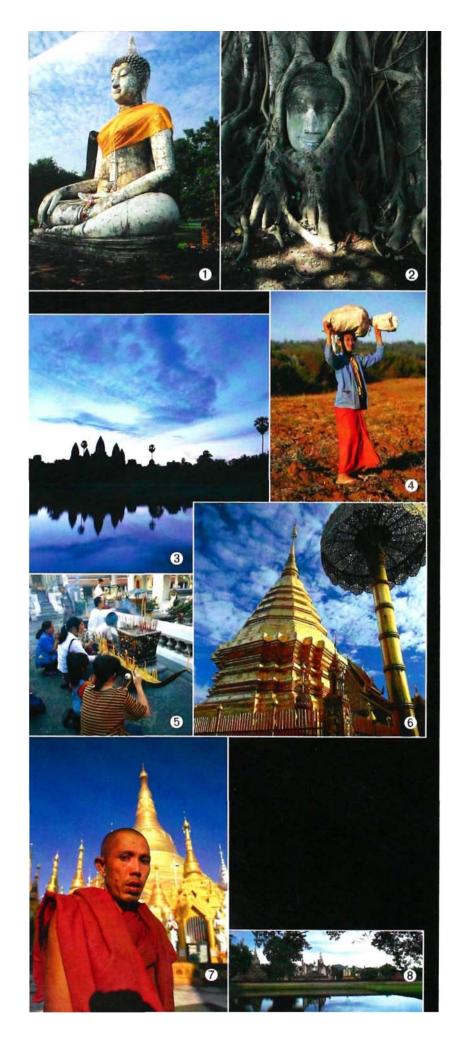
Sitklwtlwi. Thailand

## As you have lived in Hong Kong, Jakarta and Bangkok, which city impressed you the most, and why?

I have to say that Bangkok is my favorite although all three of them have a lot of character. Bangkok has great food, nice temples - it's a bustling city. It really has a lot to offer. Life by the river is also very interesting.

# How have you participated in the attractions of the local life in Asia that fascinated you?

I always try to avoid the touristy sites and find the most unspoiled places.



Sukhothai Buddha, Thailand Buddha head in the roots oft'ee, Ayuddhaya, Thailand Angkor sunrise, Cambodia Harvest at lake bile, Burma Praying, Royal Palace, Bangkok DoiSuthep, Chiang Mai, Thailand Burmese monk, Yangon, Burma Early morning at Sukhothai, Thailand

After years of photographing people and their culture, do you feel that you have a more intimate knowledge about them, or have you remained detached (as a photographer tends to be distant from its subject)?

I try to read up on all the places I visit, its people, history, culture, etc.. I try to spend time in each location to soak up the atmosphere rather than rushing through.

Those who were photographed by you in portraits tended to look directly at the camera as if charmed; how do you manage this, and does it entail rolls of film before you achieve the ideal shot?

Almost all people I photographed were very willing subjects. They felt at ease. That was probably because I tried to spend time with them and make them comfortable.

From the angles and lighting you use, a viewer of the portraits you made may think that you were not too distant from the subject. How do you approach the people? How do you get them to agree to pose for you?

Again, I try to spend some time in each place where I take photos. As soon as you do that, they warm up to you, and I only start shooting once they have gotten used to my presence. Quite a few of them like looking through my camera, from my perspective, and once they have seen that, they are more willing to have their photo taken.

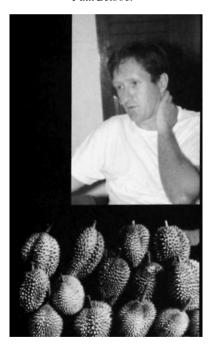
#### How do you make a landscape photo interesting?

Composition is really the main element for making a landscape look good on photograph. Obviously if you get the right light, that helps a lot. But composition is key.

It's been said that your work has given you the opportunity to express your unique point of view. Are you able to sum up that point of view briefly?

I am always trying to bring out the best in the people that I photograph. I try to get them to relax, make them look good.

Paul Beiboer



Durions

# Regarding the portraits of Asians whom observers may consider "ordinary people", did you gravitate gradually toward your subject matter, or did it choose you?

I guess it's a bit of both, really.

# What do you reckon is the historical significance to your photographs? And what's the secret to taking good photos?

A lot of places, lifestyles and cultures are changing and westernizing rapidly. I try to capture the traditional lifestyles before they disappear. To make good photos, interesting composition is the most important factor, I find. You really need to have an eye for it.

### Can you describe how you create your images? What do you look for?

I look for interesting facial expressions, interesting compositions and/or interesting light. In landscape photography, I look for great colours and interesting shapes. Again, composition is key.

## What ideas did you wish to convey in your photographs?

I like to show unique places and cultures. Document them before they change for good.

### Which photographer do you most admire for her/his work?

Ansel Adams is obviously a great master and I love his work.

## Which is the most interesting place you have visited to photograph?

Burma is a great place to visit and take photos. It's like stepping back in time.



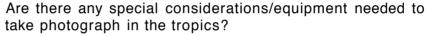
Sadhu, an ascetic holy man, Nepal

#### What's your favorite way to waste time?

Walking around little villages in remote areas.

These days just about anyone can afford a camera, and is a photographer. In regarding yourself as a photographer, I'm sure you sought to explore undiscovered ground that distinguish your approach. What is your "undiscovered" ground?

It's really about looking for subjects that appear ordinary but are actually very interesting. Making ordinary people and subjects look special. It's about catching them at the right time and getting the perfect composition.



You have to protect your camera from dust and moisture. Most of the lime, you are shooting in humid and dusty conditions so you need to keep your camera clean. Also, avoid shooting during the middle of the day as the shadows are harsh. Go for the golden hours when the sun is lower or catch people in the shade.

What can you share with photographers who hope to make Asia the playground' of their photographic aspirations?

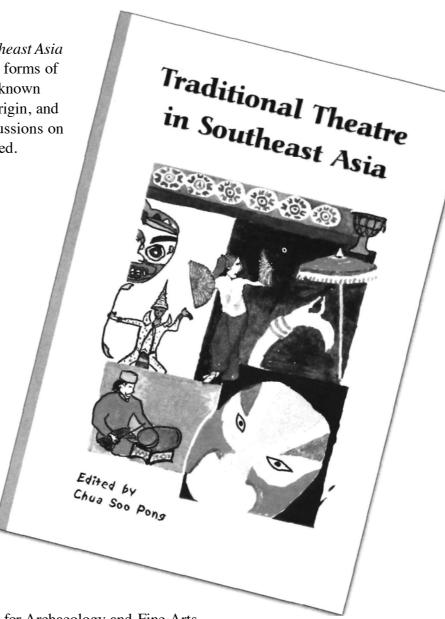
I would say you will be rewarded if you stayed off the beaten track. Avoid the crowded touristy places. You will obtain great benefits if you spend time with your subjects. They will warm up to you and you will achieve better results. II



#### Traditional Theatre in Southeast Asia

9 Euro / US\$10

Traditional Theatre in Southeast Asia focuses on many traditional forms of theatre that are not widely known outside their countries of origin, and provides analyses and discussions on how they could be revitalized.



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# Southeast Asian Performing Arts: Losing footing/finding new ground?

Ean Lee

Dramatic arts and theatre have been striving for a long time between keeping faith with traditions, and breaking into new forms and genres. Whither and thither?

In collaboration with Bangkok University in November last year, **SPAFA** organised a '**Seminar-Workshop on Southeast Asian Performing Arts**' to explore questions regularly raised about the development of the arts. The event was held at Bangkok University's Faculty of Communicative Arts for five days.

Speakers from several countries shared their opinions and concerns relating to the performing arts scene in the region, while performers, teachers and dancers conducted workshops in such diverse art forms as the dancedramas of Bali, contemporary Filipino theatre, Laotian puppetry, Malaysian

shadow plays (wayang kulit), Vietnamese water puppetry, and classical Thai dance (khon). Many participants were delighted to rub elbows with the masters, and practise classical moves or simply learn how to jerk a puppet into life.

There were also performances, of which Maestro I Wayan Dibia, a dancer from Bali, provided some of the most memorable moments. He was a mesmerizing presence with his demonstrations of Topeng mask dance movements and gestures.

Commenting on his performance, Thai TV actress Tharinee Songkiatthana, who participated in the workshop, said: "I love the ancient feeling in the energetic movements of Balinese dance, its costumes and choreography... so different from Thai dance. The emotions are intense and awe-inspiring while in Thai it is mellow and gentle."

Leuthmany Insisiengmay, the stage director of Object Puppet Theatre (Laos), trained participants in performing with puppets made from recyclable items, such as old shoes and coconut shells. His enthusiasm was contagious, and his philosophy practical: what is traditional is less of a

concern to him than discipline, imaginative ideas, the ability and opportunity to be creative - and having a lot of fun.

Yet another puppeteer, Tin Maung Kyi, fascinated the audience with his marionettes from Myanmar, where the tradition of puppetry has stood its ground, thanks to the ironic fact that poverty and censorship have kept globalisaton at bay.

Classical dance was also represented. Mann Kosal shared his knowledge and skills in Khmer dance, while Narapong Jarassri, a well-known Thai dancer and choreographer, showed students the basics of ballet and contemporary dance.

Along with the diverse practices, theories were also tossed around. Chua Soo Pong, director of the Chinese Opera Institute in Singapore, said that for Chinese opera to avoid becoming a cultural anachronism, it needs to be appreciated by the young, and thus modernised - without losing its traditions, especially the story-lines. He pointed out that wayang kulit (shadow plays) in Indonesia are incorporating contemporary props, like motorcycles and mobile phones,





I Wayan Dibia performing Balinese dance

and yet continue to send the same social messages inherent in their source - Indian classical literature.

Instead of spouting the usual cliché about how the new West is ruining the traditions of the old East, he said, "While the region pickles in consumerism and commercialization, and conveniently blames the erosion of its cultures on the West, the Western theatrical tradition of realism has helped Southeast Asian performing arts realise its potential as the voice of the people, and in reflecting and assessing its own values."

Soo Pong, however, is not a fan of the current trend of blending all sorts of cultural ingredients into a Southeast Asian potpourri. He said that, "Hybrid theatre may be hip, but it is often difficult to appreciate due to its lack of depth."

An experimental fusion of several different Asian traditions of dance, literature, and music, such as Lao country-folk singers, surrealist artists from Korea, and a huge assembly of Tibetan monks was presented by Ong Keng Sen in his video on the multi-cultural 'Flying Circus Project' he organised. The slide and video promo from the director of Theatre Works (Singapore) was a montage of cultural juxtapositions, performance art and artistic experiences. Many in the audience were left scratching their heads. Performing arts student Asid Suthigasame was not alone when he questioned the director's intentions. "What was the point of it all; what was he trying to achieve?" Keng Sen said that he was aiming for a hybridization in which "multi-ethnicities work toward a common identity."

However you thought about it, the Flying Circus Project served as a thought-provoking catalyst for reflecting on the apparent divide between the contemporary and traditional performing arts. It generated questions, such as "Is it cool to mix a wide range of traditions into a pseudo-contemporary/ traditional hotchpotch?" or "Is multi-culturalism in the arts popular only in the commercial and "touristic" sense?"

In his keynote speech, Dr. Surapone Virulrak observed that the trend of globalisation has been promoting "cultural diffusion" in the performing arts. He said that "some elements were ignorantly borrowed" from "indigenous identities" and fused together in new creations.

Seminar

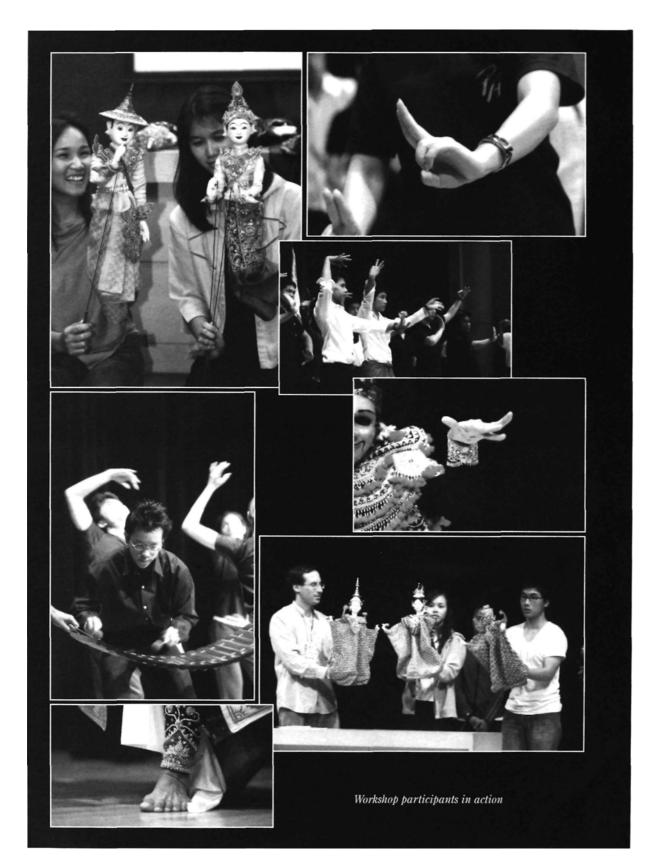




Workshop

Practising the Ramakien •











Getting in on the act

Photographs by Nipon Sud-ngam

That said, the fusion project of Keng Sen certainly made a lasting impression on Canadian student Alanna Maloney. "He was passionate about what he did. I had never thought of combining different cultures in a single production to show the diversity and varying aspects of Asian cultures," she said. 'To bring these differences together was spectacular."

Nicanor Tiongson, who worked on the ASEAN 'Realising Ramayana' contemporary dance project, pointed to the democratic nature and innovative processes behind such integrative attempts as the Flying Circus Project. "A modern work may be a version of an ancient classic," he said, "yet it may not be showing who we are, but how we are today."

Not surprisingly, the issues of preservation of the traditional, and development of the contemporary in performing arts, and that of the melding of different traditions, such as Keng Sen's Flying Circus Project; will continue to accompany the growth of the arts in the region.

What will also persist are concerns about intellectual property rights, the effects of tourism on the performing arts, preservation of art forms that are at risk of becoming extinct, and the authenticity of traditions (something that is hard to verify, as traditions - like life - evolve too). Performing arts change in reaction to, or as consequences of, social transformations.

What should perhaps follow this effort to heighten awareness of the various aspects of the Southeast Asian performing arts is a focus on the choices in balancing innovation and tradition. By examining the choices available and taken, for instance, by the Indonesian traditional dance theatre, the Central Javanese Wayang Wong', other art forms may be able to stay relevant and popular too. Wayang Wong has a long tradition, probably dating back to the 16<sup>th</sup> century Majapahit Kingdom in East Java. It has changed its form from a symbol of royal legitimacy to royal entertainment,

from a state ritual to a commercial enterprise, and from a tourist attraction to a form of regional expression. To arrest the decline in the popularity of

theatre, performances may need to be brought out more to public arenas, merging them with food festivals or fun fairs, as the survival of a performing art depends on its versatility to transcend its origins and become a work of lasting value and continuing significance.

Burmese puppet Master Tin Maung Kyi

Also necessary is a better understanding of the relationships between audience, patrons and performers. The corporate sector has a role in boosting the arts, particularly now that many of today's art performances are supported commercially, rather than by community or royal patronage.

We are confronted by a challenge to lure television viewers away from their Home Entertainment Theatres, cineplexes, and shopping malls. But we surely cannot expect to make live theatre and drama the major entertainment choice for the majority of people in our multi-media-crazed world. It should be encouraging that the quantity and quality of performances, events and festivals in the region do not bolster any prophecies of doom about the death of dramatic expression in Southeast Asia.

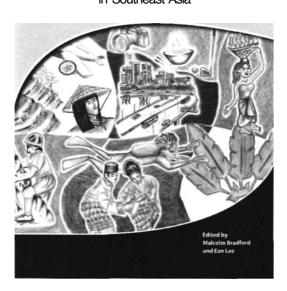


# Tourism and Cultural Heritage in Southeast Asia

US\$10 9 Euro

@2004 ISBN 974-92382-1-4 Published by SEAMEO-SPAFA

### Tourism and Cultural Heritage in Southeast Asia



Tourism is today one of the largest industries in the world, and Southeast Asia is a favourite destination among tourists. It generates immense income and employment, and is economically beneficial, but can also leave a negative impact on the environment and culture of the host country.

The management, preservation and sustainability of cultural heritage and an ongoing discussion on their effectiveness in the Southeast Asian region are the particular focus of this publication. Case studies, and essays on heritage management and eco-tourism are presented in this volume, which includes information on the effects of tourism on Southeast Asian society and culture, and the measures and actions taken in response to the phenomenon.

Tourism and Cultural Heritage in Southeast Asia is published by SPAFA, and is available at book shops of Asia Books, River Books, all Bookazine branches, and Muang Boran in Bangkok. For information and purchase, contact:

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# Southeast Asian 'Living Theatre'



Matthew Isaac Cohen

International arts promoters and not a few scholars are heavily invested in the dichotomy between the traditional and the contemporary. Books, exhibits, and performances on 'sacred/classical/indigenous' art and 'innovative/cutting-edge/postmodern\* art are marketed to consumers around the world each year. Such labels, however, poorly fit much recent Southeast Asian theatre, which muddles received categories.



The new and the old, the foreign and the local, the urban and the rural: all of these apparent dichotomies have long existed in dynamic relation in Southeast Asian theatre. Today's living theatre is traditional and contemporary, a restoration of the past and alive to the present, locally rooted and globally aware. In the course of two days of academic presentations on theatre and dance flowing into three days of practical workshops on contemporary dance, Burmese marionette puppetry, theatre games, Balinese traditional dance, object animation, tableaux, and Thai traditional dance-theatre and rod puppetry, the SPAFA seminar-workshop on Southeast Asian Performing Arts vividly brought these complexities to life.

#### Tradition-based contemporary performance

Nicanor G. Tiongson, in his presentation, described a recent revival of sarswela. A musical theatre popular in the Philippines at the turn of the century, traditional sarswela

was a cheery cultural defence of class privilege, produced by the middle class for a predominately lower-class audience. The award-winning entry in the 1998 Centennial literary Prize sarswela competition, Mario O'Hara's Palasyo ni Valentin (The Palace of Valentin), is a subversion of the ideology and form of traditional sarswela. Palasyo is a memory play set in a decrepit theatre in the city of Intramuros. Brutality, murder, suicide, deception, and revolution are explored through the ghostly recollection of pre-independence sarswela theatre.

Palasyo rejects a linear plot, stereotypically 'good' and 'bad' characters, and pat moral messages in order to explore class conflict and the vicissitudes of history and character. No easy pleasure or reassurance is to be had. Palasyo uses songs, sarswela acting, and even excerpts of sarswela plays. But is Palasyo sarswela?

In her presentation on Thai comic performance, Wankwan Polachan described the Talok Cafe, and then led participants to this well-known feature of Bangkok nightlife. The Talok Cafe is a comedy and music club, as well as an eating establishment, frequented primarily by migrants from rural Thailand. Comedy troupes presenting comic skits and sketches with an emphasis on physical humour and bawdy word play alternate with attractive male and female singers performing Thai pop music. The atmosphere is chic and urban, but the slapstick humour and conventions of audience performer interaction are traditional and rural. Guests socialize with the singers, and present garlands of money as tokens of appreciation. Some of the comedy troupe leaders are long-time Bangkok residents and have become nationally recognized stars through their Talok Cafe performances, television appearances, and VCDs but their humour remains rooted in rural ways. The comedians, however, are now faced with a dilemma. They are running out of jokes and losing touch with recent rural developments. Some performers are educating themselves on rural migrants' urban concerns to better relate to their audiences. The Cafe now stands at a cross-roads. Will it transform into an urban venue? Or will it disappear?



Wankwan Polachan

Zulkifli Mohamad

The internationally famous Singaporean theatre maker Ong Keng Sen presented an overview of his intercultural productions and Flying Circus workshops. Ong's work shows that Southeast Asian practitioners best known for their ground-breaking work are often

vitally concerned with the traditional arts of their countries of origin, and of other countries in the region. One of his recent projects on

Nicanor Tiogson





Thai Television actress and dance teacher Tharinee Songkiatthana taking part in the workshop sessions

Cambodian court dance and drama resulted in the reconstruction of core repertory items, as well as a powerful piece of reminiscence theatre performed by and devised together with former court dancers: *The Continuum: Beyond the Killing Fields* (2001). The Flying Circus Project was conceived in the same spirit. The 'antithesis of the museum',





Chua Soo Pong

Trainning at the Bangkok University

Flying Circus brings together traditional and non-traditional artists into a space for exchange and exploration, leading to moments both silly and sublime.

Ong Keng Sen has been criticized by scholars for his 'Made in Singapore' cultural imperialism and entrepreneurship - criticism he has cannily incorporated into his work. Should Ong Ken Sen be seen within a history of Singaporean Chinese cultural brokers and impresarios, or does his work demand appreciation according to non-local standards?

Zulkifli Bin Mohamad presented a possible solution to some classificatory problems in his discussion of the political economy of Malaysian performance. A new mode of practice is emerging in Southeast Asia, which Zulkifli calls 'tradition-based contemporary dance and theatre'. Artists from both traditional and modern backgrounds are reinterpreting time-honoured disciplines as the basis for new performances, accessible to non-traditional audiences in national and international venues. Tradition is not merely appropriated by these practitioners, but is transformed in the process. Traditional and new audiences equally appreciate many of these artists. Some are as adept in performing folksy comic turns as in discoursing on critical theory.

Tradition-based contemporary performance is a particularly critical cultural intervention in Malaysia, where government and religious authorities have colluded to end old patterns of sponsorship for *wayang kulit*, social dance, and ritual drama.

#### **Border crossings**

A number of papers and presentations explored the historical and contemporary dimensions of Southeast Asia as a lively crossroads where global artistic practices inter-articulate in exciting and often surprising ways. Southeast Asia's shadow puppet theatres have long ignored what Ghulam-Sarwar Yousof called 'the often artificial boundaries between nations', with performers and puppets travelling overseas for economic, religious, and political ends. As I discussed in my own paper, popular theatre in the Indonesian archipelago has seen the active participation of artists from India, China, Malaysia, Singapore, the Philippines, and many other countries for hundreds of years. Singapore's Chinese Opera Institute, under Chua Soo Pong's direction. not only teaches and performs staples of the Teochew operatic repertoire; it has also reinterpreted The Golden Deer' episode of the Ramayana as bilingual Chinese opera. As Pawit Mahasarinand demonstrated, twentieth-century European and American spoken drama in Thai translation has provided a mode for exploring subjects customarily considered taboo in Thai society.

Many issues brought up at the seminar-workshop demand further exploration, including the reinvention of tradition, the politics and aesthetics of Southeast Asian intercultural theatre, copyright and other legal issues involved in the consumption of artistic property across national borders. Virtual and real routes connect the theatres of insular and mainland Southeast Asia. Some are new, others old. The theatre of Southeast Asia will continue to live as long as it flows across borders, representing the past and imagining the future.

#### Students and professional actor-dancers in a Khon workshop

The seminar and workshop on Southeast Asian Performing Arts, organized by the Regional Centre for Archaeology and Fine Arts (SPAFA) and Bangkok University, brought together Southeast Asian academics and practitioners of drama, dance, and puppetry, and Thai theatre professionals, young and old, to discuss, act out, and evaluate issues engaging theatre in Southeast Asia today.

**Dr Matthew Isaac Cohen** *is a lecturer in theatre studies at the University of Glasgow, where he teaches anthropology of theatre, performance studies, puppet theory, and Indonesian theatre. He was an HAS fellow in the research programme 'Performing Arts of Asia: Tradition and Innovation' in 1998-2000. He is currently completing a book on the Komedie Stamboel and has written extensively on wayang kulit and other forms of Indonesian theatre. He is also a practicing dhalang and convenes the Glasgow performance ensemble Gamelan Naga Mas (www.nagamas.co.uk).* 

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HAS Newsletter # 33 March 2004 Photographs by Nipon Sud-Ngam

#### Without Fear or Favour



Datuk Seri Dr Rais Yatim.

There are hopeful and exciting days ahead for all in Malaysia who love the arts and culture as JUNE H.L. WONG and VERONICA SHUNMUGAM find out in an exclusive interview with the new Arts, Culture and Heritage Minister **Datuk Seri Dr Rais Yatim.** 

THE appointment of Datuk Seri Dr Rais Yatim as the Minister of Arts, Culture and Heritage came as a surprise to many. After all, his background was law, and he has not been previously associated with the arts, culture or heritage.

But there is a "softer" side to Dr Rais and truth be told, this man has long declared his own heritage in a most visible way: his house with its soaring *Minangkabau* \* roofs, which he built in 1975, is a well-known landmark in Ampang Jaya, Kuala Lumpur. Not only is he a passionate defender of the national language but he sees himself, along with his ministry officers, as the custodians of the "Malaysian inner psyche".

In a nearly two-hour interview, he revealed an impressive familiarity with wide-ranging issues affecting the arts, culture and heritage. Yes, he will wield the law, but only as a weapon to protect, define and guide a sphere that has long been left to fend for itself and was often subjected to arbitrary governing.

Datuk Seri, since you have said you welcome views from relevant parties to help you as you formulate plans for the new ministry, will you have an open channel - perhaps a weekly meeting - for them to present their ideas and feedback?

We could have regular meetings, and a dual-carriage way of thinking

should be encouraged. The arts are something that is not stagnant, and it is a field in which every Malaysian should have a say. It is not regulated too much, in terms of the law. It is quite a different field for me, after having been in Law (as Minister in the Prime Minister's Department) for the last five years, and coming from a legal background. (Yet) this is a field which has always been close to (my heart) because I enjoy the arts.

My first observation is that Malaysians are not a very artsorientated community. Therefore, the arts-conscious segment of our community ought to come forward and let us know how they feel about things - (in terms of) facilities, deeper involvement in the arts, culture and heritage of the country, and to determine the future. There is a lot to be done.

You have indicated that you've been asked to handle this ministry as there are some urgent issues that need your attention. You also mentioned that you would be here for two years?

Well, the Prime Minister has told me that we ought to lay the foundation for a more sublime culture. It is very easy to talk about arts, culture and heritage but there are so many intangible things within the parameters of this subject.

On the one hand, some quarters think there is wisdom in separating tourism from arts and culture. We could pursue arts, culture and heritage independently of tourism's commercial demands. On the other hand, there is the school of thought that says that if you don't have arts, culture and heritage, what are you going to show the tourists? To me, the marriage of the two must still be there so we will still help the tourism part.

My predecessor has done a good job, I believe, in the commercial aspects but I am more concerned about bringing arts, culture and heritage to all levels of society - in the schools, Felda schemes, new villages. That's because every Malaysian community should have a share of the cultural heritage in all its representations, and it shouldn't be urban-centric.

But what kind of artistic pursuits and cultural interests should we imbue in the system? Now, that's not an easy question to answer. I can not say that we can do it within two or two-and-a-half years.

Having said that, I think all the three segments of this ministry welcome views from the public. I cannot say that my officers alone are



Heritage is a 'new additive' to the Miaistry, and Dr. Rais Yatim believes it needs a definition that goes beyond buildings

the experts. So, we will tap the public sentiment and expression.

But why the two-year or two-and-a-half-year tenure? (The former Arts, Culture and Tourism Minister Datuk Paduka Abdul Kadir Sheikh Fadzir held office for four-and-a-half years)

That is the (usual) tenure, and ministers hop from one portfolio to another. I don't want to be too ambitious but I want to be quite tenacious in what I see as important to this ministry. We are the custodians of the Malaysian inner psyche, so to speak. I do not want to see too much of an overbearing by one racial denomination. At the same time, I cannot please everybody.

#### Would you say that heritage is the ministry's first target?

Heritage is a new additive to this ministry (and) it has not been spelt out. My question to the framers of this new title is, "Do you know what heritage is?" This is the same question I ask myself. (To me) heritage has to be determined beyond buildings. It should also include artefacts pertaining to the language - poetry, the artistry involved in creative writing, the pantun (a Malay poetic form) and others. On the other hand, you have heritage left by the *Babas* and *Nyonyas* (*Peranakans*, descendants of the early Chinese immigrants, who spread through Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia) as well as the orang asli. So, how do you "cement" all these into what we call the Malaysian heritage and culture?

If all this is accepted, obviously we have a heavy task ahead. A bit of my experience between 1974 and 1976 (as Parliamentary Secretary to the then Culture, Youth and Sports Ministry; Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, coincidentally, was Head of Youth) could be of help.

In terms of performance, heritage such as the *manora, mak* yong, wayang kulit ax\ú ma/r/peter/have been decimated, especially in the last 10 years when PAS issued proscriptions on these forms in Kelantan and, later, Terengganu. Will your ministry help revive these art forms?

A definite "Yes". We would like to put on the map again what has been lost. This is where I would say politics and culture don't seem to mix in the hands of those responsible in the last decade.

The other part is, of course, the buried past of the *Babas* and *Nyonyas* in Penang and Malacca, and the Sanskrit-ised elements of the culture. These are all very rich. I think studies must be encouraged, and we would like authoritative, serious people to go into these fields and produce research for us.

The heritage element in *Bahasa Kebangsaan* (the national language) has (also) been left out for so long. We don't mention much the poetry and literary achievement in the language. And most glaring is how language is being spoken in the country. That can also be a question for (the) Education (Ministry) but in the heritage department, we would like to say: Do not make the language so *rojak* (mixed) so as to make it unintelligible in the future. The French don't mix their language with other words. But in Malaysia, half our sentences are in English while the other half is in Malay. In the end, we don't pick up the good parts in either language.

Now, there are people who would quarrel with me and say "Aha! That is not heritage!" But to me, it is. A language well nurtured and well-parametered within the cultural and artistic module could become a symbol of pride for the country.

I've already told my officers: "When you give briefings, either you give it in Malay or you give it in English. Don't make a *rojak* out of it."

Prior to this interview, *StarMag* sent out a mass e-mail requesting a "wish list" from nearly 100 practitioners, workers and groups in the arts and culture fields. Feedback has shown a strong demand for a more comprehensive inclusion of performing and visual arts in the school syllabuses - from primary right up to the tertiary level. How will you work with the Education Ministry on this?

Well, a syllabus is a very touchy subject, and it is not fair for us to say that we make the arts part and parcel of it. But it is fair, I believe, to say that some segments of the arts must be planted in the curriculum. We should not overburden the pupils and the schools but the lack of visual or performing arts within the schools is very evident. Even the recitation of beautiful pieces of literature is no longer heard.

When I was in school, the teachers used to compel us to learn chunks of beautiful poetry from Shakespeare as well as from arrangements by Malay writers, for example. But now, that sort of inclination is no longer present in the system. We will have a discussion

with the Education Ministry. Although we have had some programmes with them, I believe we have to evaluate some of the modules again.

Will the ministry set up an arts council to handle needs such as grants, training and regular big-scale arts events? (A document on the setting up of an arts council entitled Majlis Seni Malaysia was drafted by theatre practitioners Marion D'Cruz, Faridah Merican and Ann Lee, and sent to the former Arts, Culture and Tourism Ministry two years ago.)

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either language.

You hit the nail on the head. This was our decision (recently) and I have stressed the need that we should give scholarships and encourage grants. We should expose local and regional talents, and even sponsor those who are oozing with talent to go to the best art schools. This is not only for the fine arts - we stress the need for music and cultural pursuits.

These grants must also be spelt out well beforehand and must be part of the (arts) calendar in Malaysia. We will involve the corporate world as well.

#### What sort of money are we looking at here?

That's a sensitive question and I haven't looked at the budget yet. But we'll find a way to get the grants and allocations.

My detractors have termed this ministry to be a *rugi* ("loss") ministry. Of course, (that shows) they don't understand what arts, culture and heritage is about.

## Datuk Seri, when you say detractors, do you mean within Government or outside or both?

Well, both. I cannot say they are only from outside. Even within, they say "You're going to the museum, good bye!" That is the "dilapidated" sense of arts, culture and heritage that we have in the country. They don't look at it from the positive point of view, how it benefits the nation and the people.

## Can shutterbugs look forward to more opportunities in photography arts?

Certainly. I'll be biased here, being a shutterbug myself. Seni foto (arts of photography) will become an integral aspect in the modern art expression. I would strongly urge the newspapers to continue to

recognise the best photographers and to produce coffee table books on Malaysia, for example, A Day in the life of a Malaysian, Life in the New Villages or Life in the Felda Scheme. Most of such books are done by outsiders. Very few of us are interested in doing it because it is very tedious work. But we will encourage it in a big way now that digital photography is available to almost everyone.

#### Are you into digital photography yourself?

Yes. I carry the camera wherever I go, hoping for a good click. Sometimes out of twenty, I get one that I like. (Digital photography) is an art by itself but you have to know the software as well, such as Photoshop and Adobe, otherwise you can't understand it. As to whether it is acceptable as an art form, that is still debatable.

## Istana Budaya (Cultural Centre of the state)'s director-general Dr Hatta Azad Khan's contract ended on March 8. We've heard that he had applied for a renewal of his contract.

We need to look at it as a service matter as well as the national need for him, either to continue on the same basis or on another basis that can assist that institution. But allow me to say that he should not be "let go" just like that since he has a deep interest and service orientation for that institution.

#### So, there is no decision yet?

Not yet. I understand that he would be continually useful to us at the ministry on the whole and specifically to Istana Budaya. At the same time, we do not want to jeopardise the opportunity of others to "come up", in terms of promotion. But a personality of his calibre should always be useful to all of us and, we would like him to continue his services. We will see to it.

First published in The Star, Sunday April 18, 2004

\*characterised by upward curves reflecting the water buffalo's horns - the Minangkabau tribe is indigenous to the highlands of West Sumatra in Indonesia.

### Art Criticism: Fervent Mediation between the Artist and the Public

Pulling criticism out from under the carpet, **Prof.** Chetana Nagavajara examines its public role in the arts.

#### An Apologia for Constructive Intrusion

Criticism in Thailand is not in a healthy state. To criticise (openly) is, in the Thai context, to run the risk of incurring the wrath of friends and colleagues, who prefer a friendly discussion on the weaknesses of their works rather than a published account. Some Western-trained artists are no exception in their reaction to such criticism. These artists usually caution colleagues, who are critical, in the following manner: "If you have anything to say about my work, come and tell me in private, but don't make it public." This attitude has been confirmed by the research on criticism ("Criticism as an Intellectual Force in Contemporary Society") which my colleagues and I have been conducting during the past few years under the aegis of the Thailand Research Fund (TRF).

This does not mean that Thais are totally bereft of critical ability. It simply means that our critical culture is intrinsically linked with an *oral tradition*. Furthermore, people tend to avoid an activity that is

confrontational in character. The advent of the internet has opened up new possibilities for criticism, but adherents to the new system have gone to the other extreme, giving free rein to critical exchanges marked by acerbity and vulgarity. There is a lesson to be learned from making too big a leap from critical reticence within the bounds of an oral culture to a free-for-all mode of (often

To criticise is to run the risk of incurring the wrath of friends and colleagues, who prefer a friendly discussion on the weaknesses of their works rather than a published account.

anonymous) communication without passing through the intermediary stage of a *written culture*. There is something to be said for a criticism

anchored in a written tradition which commits its practitioners to a *public* responsibility.

People growing up in some open societies can take criticism for granted. But we in Thailand cannot presume upon a ready-made

acceptance of written criticism as part of our contemporary culture. As far as the arts are concerned, it is often necessary for criticism to play a mediating role between the artist and the public. Contemporary art in this country may be moving so fast as to leave the general public behind, and only caters to a small group of connoisseurs or wealthy

Criticism can perform a valuable duty in creating a true understanding between the artist and the public.

collectors who regard works of art as mere adornment of their luxurious way of living. As for myself, my academic provenance is Comparative Literature, and in that discipline, mediators and intermediaries are regarded as performing an extremely useful function in bridging cultural gaps. Criticism too can perform a valuable duty in creating a true understanding between the artist and the public. I shall illustrate my point about the need for criticism by way of three anecdotes.

A prize-winning painting adorned the ante-room of a Rector's Office, depicting a rural Thai house. Two professors were standing in front of the painting, with me standing intrusively between them (criticism being by its very nature intrusive). The following was their conversation:

Prof. A: It does not look like the real thing.

Prof. B: Well, if you want to look at it that way... (He never finished his sentence).

Myself (being still young and impertinent): It doesn't have to look like the real thing.

That was the end of the story. You can well understand that my intrusive behaviour has made my professional life at this university rather difficult. I have since become a critic.

The second anecdote tells of a distinguished Thai painter and academic who saved enough money to build a country home which he turned into a private art gallery, containing a significant collection of his own works, which he treasured and did not want to sell. The gallery was open to the public by appointment. The artist eagerly desired to make his home a meeting place for artists, critics and art lovers and even instituted his own prize which he awarded to colleagues who had made contributions to the art world. I myself was one of the laureates on account of my critical activities (mainly in non-visual fields). His sudden demise seems to have changed all that. When a

group of critics and scholars contacted his heirs with the wish to visit the collection and organise in *situ* a critical discussion on the late artist's works, the response was negative. The very term "criticism" scared off the heirs who declined to receive the group on the grounds that since the artist had already passed away, he would not be in a position to defend himself against criticism. Incidentally, the artist's heirs too had received formal training in the visual arts at the tertiary level.

The third anecdote happened at the exhibition hall of the Faculty of Painting, Sculpture and Graphic Arts, Silpakorn University in Bangkok. A young artist was organising a one-man show at the Faculty's Gallery, and was very keen to have his exhibition critically assessed by a group of critics and scholars, and the general public. The wish in itself was a great advance in terms of the recognition of the merit of criticism. Around sixty people turned up, and a lively discussion ensued, which testified to the fact that his works succeeded in arousing genuine interest Being well-educated and a modest man, the artist absented himself. His works were imbued with the spirit of Buddhism and lent themselves to various conflicting interpretations. A proposal was made that it would be futile to guess what the artist had in mind and that it would have been better to invite him to be present and to explain his works in detail for the enlightenment of the visitors, and better still, that all artists should henceforth be invited to introduce their exhibitions (A gap of twenty years separates Anecdote I and Anecdote III, but it would seem that not much progress had been made in the way of understanding or appreciation of what art is about - there is justification for criticism to continue to perform an intrusive function).

There exists a misapprehension about the nature and function of criticism that needs to be rectified.

I *suggest* that the intention of the artist and the finished product did not always converge, and cited theories (drawn mainly from literary criticism) about the "intentional fallacy" and, to cap it all, Roland Barthes' point about the desirability of the "death of the author".

will offer three points. First, there exists a misapprehension about the nature and function of criticism that needs to be rectified. Second, basic concepts and fundamental principles about the arts cannot be taken for granted. Third, criticism certainly has a role to play in Thai society, and should also fulfil the function of public education. Things being what they are, principles about the playing the principles are the property of the principles are the property of the

criticism should not hesitate to become intrusive, that is to say, *constructively intrusive* in the sense that it should be ready to offer its good services in good faith, even when no explicit demand is forthcoming.

#### The Plight of the Mediated World

Let's face it; our experience of the arts in the contemporary world is increasingly mediated. The advent of technical reproducibility (to borrow Walter Benjamin's term) has opened up immense possibilities that inevitably enlarge the horizon of artistic reception. From a democratic standpoint, this may be considered a boon for the common people nowadays who can have access to great works of art which at one time were enjoyed by only a privileged few, albeit in reproduced form. The area of classical music is perhaps the supreme example. Nevertheless, it may not be easy to conclude whether the advantages outweigh the disadvantages. The difference between first-hand and second-hand experience may not be that of emotional or aesthetic involvement: a recorded performance and a live performance can both engage the audience emotionally and aesthetically, and the pundits of contemporary technology even claim that great perfection can be achieved in a recording studio rather than in a concert hall. Besides, some artists, such as the late Canadian pianist Glenn Gould, maintained that a musician could give his best through a recorded mode of communication. But his case may be an exception. People born and bred in the push-button age may not always appreciate the value of real human contact through a live performance, unless and until it is worked up or jazzed up to a point of frenzy by extra-aesthetic sensationalism! The famous Italian conductor, Riccardo Muti, was very critical of his own profession, or to be more precise, of some of his colleagues who had exploited the media for the purpose of self-aggrandisement, and in a television broadcast some years ago came up with the verdict: 'We are a race that should disappear. We do a lot of stupid things!" Self-criticism counts as much as critical accounts offered by professional critics.

It may not be sufficient to weigh up the pros and cons of reproducibility from the point of view of the recipients alone. What may have been lost in our technological age is the mutual enrichment between creating and receiving. The arts of the previous era thrived through the support and involvement of *amateurs*. And it may be worthwhile to take cognizance of the etymology of the word "amateur", signifying one who loves. The appreciation of the arts at the receiving end often inspires amateurs to cross the frontier to the *creative* realm. The poet and dramatist Bertolt Brecht once expressed the desire that an ideal theatre should be one in which the dividing line between the performers and the spectators should be obliterated and that such a theatre should be sustained by amateurs. On the other hand, the professionalism of our age, propped by sophisticated "reproductive"

technology, has been successful in ensuring the viability and desirability of mediated experience.

Yet, it would be unfair to deny the *educational* impact of these technological achievements. The study of art history, for example, has been revolutionized by the advent of reproducibility and lately by the Internet But this can go too far. Even some decades ago when photography was the major instrument of reproducibility, critics were already wary of the mediated appropriation of knowledge. Students

The media becomes constructive when they constitute themselves into an integral part of the creative process - witness the immense contribution to the contemporary artistic world by the cinema, electronic music and video art. Their achievements can be ascribed to the fact that they can communicate directly with the public.

were taken on study tours to visit architectural gems, but they rarely paid attention to the real things: they just took photographs. In the past, art history used to be in the hands of those who could at least *draw*. In other words, they were expected to be minor or amateur artists who were appreciative of the artistic value of the objects under scrutiny. The new breed of "professionals" commands an amazing amount of facts and data, but may be weak in aesthetic capability. When we turn to music for comparison, we find one comforting feature of contemporary musical education and musicology: many educational institutions still require a minimum competence in a

musical instrument (predominantly the piano) for would-be music scholars and musicologists.

Lest I be misunderstood as being fundamentally hostile to modern technology, I should make it clear that I am sceptical of the media and technology only when they are bent on reproducing first-hand experience, and thereby unwittingly engender a passive attitude which in turn frustrates all creative urges. To put it more radically, the media often fail when they merely *mediate*. The media becomes constructive when they constitute themselves into an integral part of the creative process - witness the immense contribution to the contemporary artistic world by the cinema, electronic music and video art. Their achievements can be ascribed to the fact that they can communicate directly with the public.

#### The Rise of the Middleman

Being a language and literature teacher, I am rather sensitive to lexicographical and semantic possibilities. When people these days talk about "curators", I cannot help looking back to my early experience with museums in Thailand, and the image of a haggard-looking elderly gentleman sitting in a dimly-lit corner of a museum, peering over a

book of inventory and blinking profusely with an expression on his face that betrayed some hidden apprehension about objects not yet lost but might be lost in the future. No curator of a contemporary international exhibition would look that way anymore, for he would normally be proud of the project in hand which is supported by a huge subvention either from the state or from a foundation. Besides, he would be conscious of the immense power of his position which he could wield over the art world, for even the most distinguished artists who want to exhibit with his help will have to fit into his conceptual framework which he can sometimes dictate with his own will. Moving from the word "curator" to "curate", older dictionaries do not make an entry of the latter as a verb at all, although the current usage of the word "to curate" signifies the task and responsibility of a contemporary curator of a museum of modern art or an exhibition, thus reflecting the dynamism that characterizes his status in the contemporary world. The passage from a nominal to a verbal status does portend some socio-cultural change that will have a far-reaching effect.

This phenomenon is in consonance with our current mode of living. The art world has expanded so fast and to such an extent that it is no longer possible for the artist to organise his own activities in

such a way as to cater for the needs of the public, and some organisational and managerial mechanisms have become necessary. The new arrangements, in principle, should benefit both the artist and the public, and the ideal middleman should possess a high degree of technical knowledge as well as sufficient critical acumen to be able to make judgment as to how the public should have access to works of quality. The ideal intermediary is usually sympathetic to both the artist and the public and is adept in steering the middle course that will protect the

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interests of both parties. He need not be a first-rate artist himself, but he must be able to tell a great artist from a mediocre one.

His aim should be to serve the arts in such a way as to make them thrive on the basis of quality and public accessibility. In other words, he should also be a good critic. Let me cite some specific examples. A famous German symphony orchestra fell prey to a self-serving star conductor who had been appointed conductor-for-life, and it is said that the orchestra survived because of the perspicacity and fair-mindedness of its manager (called "Intendant" in German) who knew how to attract great talents as guests to the orchestra, thereby maintaining quality on all fronts. And one of his managerial skills was

to be able to "manage" in his own unassuming way the maestro at the helm of the orchestra as well. Another example may tell a different story. A national museum of modern art in a Western country acquired immense space for exhibition through conversion of an old building into a spacious museum. It was supposed to exhibit works of international stature, and if this principle was strictly adhered to, artists of its own nationality would not have much of a chance. The *curators* were smart enough to introduce a new concept based on subject matters, and in this way lesser artists of their own nationality could fill the almost inexhaustible space. They were probably not acting as good critics. But who would question their skills as managers?

If I have been crossing over back and forth between the visual and the performing arts, I have done so with a purpose. The advent of *performance art*, usually originating in the domain of the visual arts, must give us pause, for there seems to be a confusion between the attractiveness of a concept and the quality (or lack of quality) of the work produced.

A Thai visual artist has attracted attention on the international scene by cooking and serving Thai-style fried noodles (Phad Thai) to visitors, but it is doubtful whether his culinary ability was of an international standard. But that is perhaps the secret of performance art in that the quality of the work does not count as much as the idea and the concept behind it. Within the past few years, another Thai artist has been presenting her video art depicting her reading of traditional Thai poetry to corpses in a mortuary, to the consternation of some viewers and the delight of others. I noticed that the charm of her recitation came precisely from her defective reading, which was somewhat out of tune and rhythmically faulty. Had she delivered her verses with greater professional skill, something would have been lost, and that something was perhaps a kind of Brechtian alienation (Verfremdung) which invested her work with a quaint attractiveness. Are we to conclude that a defect in one art form is the hallmark of another? If the argument is carried to its logical end, we may have to pass the final verdict to the effect that *performance art* is the prerogative of those visual artists who have not mastered basic skills in the performing arts.

It may be a dangerous proposition to lump managers, curators, critics, directors and performing artists together under the rubric of "middlemen". Certain art forms, especially among the performing arts, do not establish direct communication between the creator and the recipient, and require intermediaries in the form of performing artists to interpret and convey the message of the originator. Among the

performing artists themselves, distinction has to be made between those who actually perform and those who direct performances. Music and theatre have made room for this second-type of artistic personnel whose power has grown beyond measure within the past century or so. Musical tyrants are notorious for their dictatorial rule over orchestras and opera houses, and history has confirmed that a few (or very few) of them have made significant contributions in terms of their interpretative power, but the rest of them, more often than not, can thrive only through conspiracy with managers, impresarios, business manipulators and publicity tycoons, as demonstrated convincingly by the British critic Norman Lebrecht in his books The *Maestro Myth* (1991) and Who *Killed Classical Music?* (1997). Needless to say that their status as middlemen (with direct artistic function), supported by other "middlemen" (with no direct artistic function), affords them opportunities to enrich themselves at the expense of those who really perform the music. How many orchestras have become bankrupt because they pay the maestros so much that there is very little left for the musicians?

The situation in the modern theatre runs along a similar line, with theatre directors acting as interpreters of the works of playwrights, and staging these works in such a way as to captivate the attention of the public. In some countries, like Germany, theatre directors can let their imagination run wild in the staging of plays (unless they run into trouble with the heirs of certain playwrights, such as the children of Bertolt Brecht). They too enjoy absolute power (but perhaps are not rewarded as astronomically as their counterparts in the concert halls and opera houses), and can tyrannize actors and actresses in the name of artistic quality and innovation. Again, contemporary society tends to favour and empower these intermediaries to such an extent that a term has emerged to designate this type of theatre as the directors' theatre (known in German as "Regietheater"). And when state subvention comes into play, these directors become the envy of their colleagues in other fields, for some theatres may receive a greater subsidy than a tertiary institution. Lavish productions rely far too much on scenery and theatrical gadgetry, such that they obliterate the role of the actor on stage. I saw a production of Georg Büchner's Woyzeck at the Schillertheater in Berlin over a decade ago, which must have cost a fortune to stage, although we all know that the text is suited for a studio theatre or a workshop. In a subsequent conversation with one of the actors, I learned how humiliated actors felt as a result of the stress on non-human components of the production. The actor said something to me which became prophetic: "If state subvention is withdrawn tomorrow, the German theatre will enjoy a new life." A year or two after that, the Berlin Senate closed down the Schillertheater. The actor lost his job, survived on a meagre pension and spent his time constructively by reading poetry. As a literary man, I did not find that counterproductive at all. But look at what the middlemen can bring us to!

Let us now turn to literature. Perhaps one might think that the literary world is free from the dictates of middlemen and that writers reign supreme. This may

be true of a few well-established writers, but those struggling to find a foothold in the republic of letters do have to contend with middlemen as well. Their presence may not be readily felt, but budding writers know only too well that their future lies in the hands of publishers, readers, members of literary juries and, above all, the press. This is where the critic makes himself felt. If he is honest and discriminating, he can do a great deal to separate the wheat from the chaff. But power corrupts, and critics who at first are well-respected for their critical acuity may soon become enamoured with absolute power. They will not exercise their influence on the print media only, but will also appear on television, adjudicate for literary prizes, receive honorary doctorates, and get appointed as adjunct professors at prestigious universities. People look to them as the "Literary Popes", an originally derisive term in German (Literaturpapst) to signify a narrow-minded dogmatist in the Age of Enlightenment, but in our unenlightened era, the expression most probably makes you think of a well-respected literary personality. If criticism presumes upon its infallibility, it is committing suicide. The decline of the critic occurs when he becomes an arrogant middleman incapable of self-criticism.

#### Militating against Mediation

It will have been noticed that the approach I have adopted for this article is more of a macro-treatment of the subject of criticism. I do not mean to belittle the role of criticism in assessing the merits of works of art or artists, but I believe that the social, cultural and, last but not least, economic environment has a bearing on artistic creation and reception, and should be subjected to criticism as well. It would be unrealistic to wish that business considerations be excluded from all dealings with the arts, but the minimum that any sensible amateur of the arts is entitled to ask for is a certain measure of fairness in the "business". Business people do have (or at least claim to have) their professional ethics, and we should demand the same from all sectors of the art world. Criticism will offer its good services in this respect. Perhaps 1 have been too harsh on the "middlemen", as though the artists themselves have always been beyond reproach. It comes to pass that a performing

Criticism at its best should act as a voice of conscience to society.

artist settled for a fee and a few days before the actual performance announced that his/her fee had gone up by 50 percent. Short of a contract, what could one do in such a situation? I once read a critical account in a newspaper telling of such an incident, and the critic concluded with a statement that lingers on in my mind after so many

years: "The public should be told." Yes, the prime contractual partners (whether there exists a contract or not) are the artist and his public. An intermediary does not play a role here, even if the artist may have been (ill-) advised by his manager!

We live in an age swamped by publicity. Much creative imagination has gone into advertisement. It can easily be noticed that our press expends great effort in

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making previews of coming events, whose thoroughness and sophistication far surpass accounts of the actual events. My colleagues and I recently organised a discussion group on criticism; it was attended by journalists responsible for the art and entertainment section (the combination of art with entertainment belies a distinct policy adopted by our press). They refused to call themselves critics, and this happened not out of modesty. They would rather describe themselves as "journalists interested in the arts". When we chided them that their papers give ample room for elaborate previews and are not very supportive of reviews, they maintained that this is the policy of all newspapers in Thailand. A preview can raise hope about what is to come and its author can use his literary power to laud things which have not yet happened. A review is an account of what has happened, a look backward which must reflect the real thing, and our journalists do not enjoy full freedom to give an honest and truthful account of what actually occurred, especially when it happened to be a failure. Artistic events are usually run or supported by business concerns, and if a newspaper has the temerity to publish a critical account by its own journalists of an artistic fiasco, then this is to be considered a commercial loss to all parties, and the newspapers concerned may be chastised by having advertisements withdrawn. The 'Kapital' remains, after all, the decisive factor. Where is freedom of expression? What do we mean by freedom of the press? We all know that the situation is deteriorating in this country.

Criticism in such a socio-economic limbo must have a very difficult time indeed. But there is a way out. Newspapers are ready to publish critical articles written by academics who are willing to identify themselves and assume responsibility for what they write. That is why we find distinguished academics writing for newspapers or magazines with a wide circulation instead of concentrating on producing academic papers for publication in learned journals with peer review! People did tolerate us until very recently, for the present political leadership finds criticism, and especially political criticism, a nuisance and often brands academics as people lacking in experience of the real world; people who bury themselves in the library. It is a boon that the present leadership is not overly interested in the arts, but the recent creation of the Ministry of Culture, disbanded some forty years ago and now revived, is not to be welcomed uncritically, for it is difficult to find a state apparatus enlightened and impartial enough to gauge critically the true merits of artistic enterprises. Critics cannot help being wary of lending support to those "middlemen" with business interests and political connections (and the two often go together); they are also sceptical of colleagues from academia who are only too eager to serve the powers-that-be, over-confident that they will be able to

exploit the naivety and ignorance of politicians when it comes to artistic matters. I never underestimate the prowess of politicians to exploit those who originally set out to exploit them.

So where do we stand with criticism? The context of the arts being what it is, it would appear that criticism has to pitch itself into an oppositional stance, that is to say, into a paradoxical situation in which one group of middlemen (and critics also qualify in that capability) has to militate against other groups of middlemen (including artists who have turned middlemen) to clear away obstacles impeding the public's true appreciation of the arts. A question could be asked about the legitimacy and credibility of the critic to act in the name of public interests. What right has he to set himself up as the judge of artistic (and sometimes ethical) values? That is why we expect a critic to act in good faith, and in the pursuit of true iudgement he must be knowledgeable and competent in his field and possess a high degree of objectivity and, above all, fair-mindedness. To earn the trust and confidence of the artists and the public, his fervent mediation need to be governed by an ethical mission. Criticism at its best should act as a voice of conscience to society. Yet, if we think of a critical culture as a process of maturation, the question arises as to when does criticism come of age. An answer could be that in an ideal art world, there is no need for criticism at all, for the public will have been enlightened to such a point where it can independently and critically assess the works of artists, in which case criticism will have only an interim function to perform, and an educational one.

The death of criticism will be its own consummation.

The above article is an edited version of Keynote Address delivered by the author at the International Seminar 'Reshaping Realities and Representation' at Silpakorn University, Bangkok, 10 June 2003

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## The Scream' - hauled away from Munch Museum

The Scream' and 'Madonna', famous paintings of Norwegian artist Edvard Munch, were yanked from the Munch museum in Oslo on August, 2004. Two gunmen threatened the museum staff with a handgun, while dozens of horrified museum-goers watched, stunned as the armed men carried the paintings to a waiting getaway car. Many visitors panicked, thinking they were being attacked by terrorists.

As they drove through the city, the thieves broke the frames of the paintings, and threw out the bits from the window of the car, in case tracking devices were lodged in the wood.

This is not the first time The Scream went missing. In February 1994, it was stolen from the museum, and recovered by police almost three months later, undamaged in a hotel in Asgardstrand, about 65km south of the capital, Oslo. The police arrested three Norwegians for the theft. The trio had demanded from the government a US\$1 million ransom for the work of art, but a deal was not made, investigators said.

The Scream, which was created on fragile paper in 1893, evokes a terrified human figure with hands to the head, in an apparent panic under a tumultuous blood-red sky. It makes reference to the horrors of the Holocaust, nuclear explosions and a world of fear. It has been estimated that if auctioned legitimately, The Scream would be worth about US\$70 million.

The Madonna is a painting of a mysterious, bare-breasted woman with black hair surrounded by sperm in motion, and a fetus in the corner. Munch, both painter and graphic artist, painted it between 1894 and 1895. He also worked in Germany, and his works featured a highly-charged emotion, gaining significance during the growth of the 20th-century Expressionist movement.

Security provided for works of art is barely existent and amazingly lax. Most museums operate on limited budgets, and could not afford it. In some, such as the Munch, there had not been an alarm system or protection for the paintings. They were attached by wires to the walls, and could be pulled loose, and carried off.

Insurance is a rare practice, even though private collectors might be covered; protection, it is reckoned, can be extremely costly.

AP reports that The Scream joins more than 150,000 lost works of art which specialists say may never be found. Stealing art may be easy, but finding someone to buy it is a long, difficult process. During the millennium celebrations on December 31, 1999, thieves in Oxford, England made off with Paul Cezanne's Anverssur-Oise, worth US\$5 million. The painting has not been found. London writer Edward Dolnick has published an estimate of works of art stolen, lost, and missing, including 551 Picassos, 43 Van Goghs, 174 Rembrandts and 209 Renoirs.

The database at Interpol tallies 20,000 missing art works, paintings making up half of them; while the Art Loss Register in Britain lists perhaps 150,000, with Italian authorities giving a higher number.

A report by *Reuters* revealed how poorly Edvard Munch treated his own art work. It found that the artist often left oil paintings outdoor, exposed to the sun, rain and snow, footprints, even bird droppings, etc. (The Scream and Madonna were not exposed to outdoor conditions). He stunned experts at the time by deliberately not protecting his works from the elements so as to make them appear faded, with broken pastels, holes and scratches. Munch described the treatment as the "horse cure" or "kill-or-cure" process. It seems that he didn't like the heavy, shiny surface of oil paint, and the "cure" helped to give the surfaces a matt look, because it cracked finely and appeared like a fresco or pastel.

It was reported that in 1972, Munch shocked a German art specialist by using a broom to sweep snow off works that were buried in his Oslo garden. Another visitor said that when Munch was living in Berlin in 1893, paintings were found in the wash basin, and others placed on the floor, where some had been walked on.

Munch, who lived from 1863 to 1944, and never married, is known, however, to value his works of art despite the treatment - he referred to his paintings as his "only children". The artist made many versions of his main works; the well-known version of The Scream, in Oslo's National Gallery, contained dribbles of candle wax on the right side, apparently spilt by Munch, and a small hole, dabbed over with blue paint. He once wrote to reassure a friend: 'To become a real Munch, they [the paintings] have to have holes and scratches".

#### A Vermeer sold for \$30m

Johannes Vermeer's "Young Woman Seated at the Virginals' became the first painting by the Dutch master to be auctioned in more than 80 years. The painting, which for decades has been suspected of being fake, sold for US\$30 million at Sotheby's on 7th of July 2004. Intense bidding took place before an anonymous telephone bidder finally clinched it

Over the last century, art historians have alternately accepted/rejected the painting, but after years of forensic examination, including chemical analysis of the paint and pigment and x-rays of the canvas, \*Young Woman Seated at the Virginals' is finally accepted as a part of the collection of paintings acknowledged as the works of Vermeer by a group of scholars, museum curators, painting conservators, costume experts, paint analysts and auction house experts who studied it Sotheby's believed it was genuine. The investigation revealed that the pigment in the 25x20cm small painting is identical to that used by Vermeer, and that the canvas is the same size as his The Lacemaker\* (now displayed in The Louvre Museum, Paris).

"Young Woman Seated at the Virginals', a sensual work that dates about 1670, depicts an intimate scene of a young woman seated at a kind of harpsichord, her eyes gazing directly at the viewer. The origin of it is as obscure as the history of Vermeer who was not a prolific artist; he lived, worked and died (at 43, in 1675) in the picturesque Dutch pottery town of Delft It appears that the recent popularity and interest in Vermeer has been inspired by the best-selling novel, 'Girl With a Pearl Earring" and the recent movie based on the book.

The previous Vermeer auctioned was The Little Street" (1658-1660) in Amsterdam in 1921, which failed to attract a buyer at the sale. It was subsequently bought by a collector who donated it to the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam.

#### Italy: most Unesco heritage sites; Spain in 2nd place

Italy has become the country with the most sites on the United Nations' World Heritage List; with its Etruscan tombs and Tuscan area included as on 14 July 2004. The 9th century BC Etruscan necropolises include thousands of ancient tombs, murals and elaborate 'tumuli' or burial mounds at two massive cemeteries north of Rome. The other site is the Val d'Orcia rural landscape of rolling hills and picturesque villages near Siena, a region that was redesigned during the 14th and 15th centuries, featuring valleys consisting of vineyards and fortified settlements on top of conical hills.

The famous Etruscan Necroplises of Cerveteri and Tarquinia and the rural landscape of Tuscany's Val d'Orcia increased the number of heritage sites belonging to Italy to thirty-nine. Spain, previously tied with Italy at thirty-seven sites each. The Unesco list includes 788 cultural and natural properties.

#### **Business blighting Borobudur**

Borobudur in west Indonesia, built around 800 AD, is the largest Buddhist temple on earth, located in the world's most populous Muslim country. A team of explorers and surveyors, searching for the glorious ruin of a lost site in central Java, discovered the monument under volcanic ash and jungle in the 1800s. It had been abandoned for about a thousand years.

The site has become a major tourist attraction for both Indonesia and Southeast Asia, but the religious significance of the monument, however, does not seem important to many in the country, and commercialization is very much present at the site today.

Borobudur reflects a Buddhist view of the universe, and is a construction of a series of square and circular terraces that visitors can move on toward the top where a stupa (mound-shaped structure sheltering relics) is located, representing nirvana - the ultimate religious experience and enlightenment. On stone walls are carved reliefs that illustrate Buddhist philosophy and the Buddha's life. Staircases lead up to the circular terraces, where stupas host Buddha statues overlooking the tropical green plain and its distant volcanoes.

While Indonesia cashes in the Unesco World Heritage site through tourism, observers are concerned that the increased number of vendors at the site might be putting tourists off. Hawkers haggling visitors is becoming an all too common sight. Tourists find themselves followed by sellers of musical instruments, soft drinks, souvenirs, etc..

The situation led to ideas about cleaning up the site by building a shopping complex. Critics are adamant that such ideas are not solutions to the problem, but rather an exacerbation of it. Somehow, a shopping mall and a place of peace and contemplation do not seem to be incongruous to some tourism promoters. Not even the fact that the landscape there evokes a sense of serenity and peace. Opponents have warned that promotion of shopping tourism within the preservation precinct of Borobudur is not acceptable.

Tourists said they were attracted by a mystique in the monument, but found themselves hassled by sellers on site whom they described as annoying, aggressive, pushy ... and just too many of them. The Buddhist temple and site are in danger of being degraded by commercialization that prevents visitors from enjoying the experience they can expect.

Borobudur drew over two million tourists, mostly local, in 2003. Retail plans recently have shocked many, as they include a 'Jagad Jawa', or 'Spirit World of Java' shopping centre and a rail transport system as proposed by the authorities (held up after negative public reaction).

Unesco and the International Council on Monuments and Sites, which offer advice, suggest that local arts and crafts markets may better help the surrounding communities.

#### Great Wall crumbling?

Of the 6,300-km Great Wall of China that was constructed or reinforced during the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644), only about 2,500 km are intact, *Xinhua* news agency cited a report as indicating. The rest of China's 2,000-year-old wall is deteriorated or demolished. The report by the Chinese Academy of the Great Wall has generated demands for more stringent laws to ensure that the cultural heritage survives.

AFP reported that the academy has requested the authorities to examine the state and condition of the whole wall, and implement measures to preserve it.

Heavier punishments for offenders who damage the wall were also in the frame. The report said that some sectors have illegally used part of the wall for tourism and in development projects.

An example was that of a real estate development of 11 villas built close to the Badaling section in Beijing, "damaging the ancient outlook of this segment of the Great Wall".

The state media also reported that white ants

are damaging the famous heritage of China, irretrievably destroying historical structures in the ancient capital of Xian,

It reported the *China Daily* as saying that the insects are biting into the old wood, and monuments such as the Dayan Paoda, built 1,400 years ago, or the even older Beilin Museum, are deteriorating alarmingly.

#### Apsara angels dance again

Ed Cropley reported for *Reuters* that, today, about 700 students attend Phnom Penh's Royal University of Fine Arts, which is "an oasis of calm and serenity amid the hustle and bustle of the Cambodian capital".

Apsara dancing, rooted in ancient mysticism and Hinduistic beliefs in the 1st century AD, is now being taught and learnt by many pupils. The art form has been glorified in the history and courts of the kings who ruled the Angkor empire 800 years ago.

The writer said that Apsara is undergoing a revival after a period of decline and neglect, further complicated by the "cultural nihilism of the Khmer Rouge and the corrosive influence of Western modernism traditions across the developing world".

With top-level political support, and a dedicated and popular television channel, the report indicated that the Apsara dance tradition seems capable of overcoming contemporary influences and culture to shine again as a fine example of Cambodian heritage.

## Landscape architect defends authentic Balinese style

A former professional tennis player is now an influential landscape artist in Southeast Asia, and makes his home in Bali, reports Marilyn August.

Michael White, a 51-year-old Australian-born whose Hindu name is Made Wijaya, came to Bali when he was nineteen, a graduate with an architecture degree. He became a Hinduist and has been living on the island.

Wijaya believes that the Balinese architectural language is the best in the tropics in terms of scale, beauty and functionality. Taking from that, his architectural design style has, in twenty-five years, developed into a signature known as the "Tropical Cotswold", combining colours, textures, poetry, and romance. He has been involved in projects relating to 600 gardens in

Indonesia, Singapore, Vietnam, Brunei, Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur and Hawaii. Singer David Bowie's house on Mustique island in the West Indies was designed by him, as well the homes and gardens of other celebrities, and residences of ambassadors in Jakarta.

His landscape architecture company is based in Bali, and hires some 350 Balinese gardeners, carrying out about 40 projects in the region annually. Currently, Wijaya is working on a Balinese hotel for Bulgari, the Italian luxury company; a spa in the Botanical Gardens in Putrajaya, Malaysia; a boutique hotel in Hoi An, Vietnam; and a book on Indian gardens. He is, however, preoccupied with protecting the Balinese style and culture from a trivialization that usually accompanies fads and popular trends. With the benefit of a column in an English language magazine in Bali, he uses it to protest and caution against "perching fragrant yellow and white frangipani flowers on urinals at the Denpasar airport", and tourism promotion representing "young white nubile females wearing no panties". He scoffed at what he described as "pretty litter" of a new design trend that does not respect the "classical language of Balinese architecture".

Obviously dedicated to the place he has decided to call home, Wijaya recently completed a book, which is a study of traditional Balinese architecture/landscaping and their influence on modern Balinese design. It is a compilation of photographs that he has made for more than 30 years. He said that the publication, The Architecture of Bali', was his greatest achievement because he had struggled against time to document the places, many of which are now no longer in existence.

## 4,000-year-old cave paintings found near Sydney

Aboriginal cave paintings dating back 4,000 years have been discovered close to Sydney, Australia's largest city.

The find was made in the bushland of the National Park northwest of Sydney, a few hours away by car. Over 200 paintings were discovered, and they have been described as one of the most significant discoveries of Aboriginal art in 50 years.

The Wollemi is a group of aborigines in Australia that had been thought to be extinct A bushwalker found the cave by chance in 1995, but investigators had not been able to access the site until May of 2004.

It was reported that the bushwalker is believed to be the first person to have seen the paintings after the last aborigine departed during European colonisation 200 years ago.

Authorities are maintaining a confidentiality about the precise location of the area to prevent damage and a siege by curious sightseers.

Reports indicated that it is a twelve-metre-long, six-metre-deep and one-to two-metre-high rock shelter, rather than a cave. An anthropologist said that there were 11 layers of more than 200 paintings, stencils and prints executed in a diversity of styles. The art is believed to have spanned the period between about 2000 BC and the early 1800s.

The paintings also provide ideas of the rituals of the aborigines, with human representations and realistic and symbolic depictions of birds, lizards and marsupials, including life-size eagles, kangaroos and a rare wombat.

## 'Cultural Exception' to US dominance

In the run-up to the global free trade accord in 1994, a group of French movie producers, directors and actors succeeded in removing cinema and other forms of audiovisual entertainment from the agreement. This in effect was regarded as a victory over Hollywood.

Known as the "cultural exception", the practice allows France - and any other country choosing the cultural exception - to minimise foreign competition against its films, television/radio and entertainment industries through subsidies and quotas. This is justified so as to protect from being imposed upon by Hollywood and international media giants in terms of the global entertainment market and expressions of diverse cultures.

Now the World Trade Organisation has gotten into the act, and negotiating on trade in services, with America, Japan and other countries debating the cultural exception practice. Representatives of professional cultural organisations from 35 countries met at the Louvre, Paris to discuss and support the cultural exception, calling for an international Unesco convention on cultural diversity "to remove culture from the World Trade Organisation", as reported by *NYT News Service*.

Part of the arts elite participated in reflecting a political commitment during the three-day meeting,

which was opened by France's culture minister, Jean-Jacques Aillagon, and by Viviane Reding, the European Union's commissioner for education and culture. Representatives went to the Elysée Palace, where President Jacques Chirac met them and major film directors, actors and writers, and strongly endorsed the objectives of the gathering.

The Louvre meeting provided an idea of the difficulties in resisting a dominant American audiovisual industry. Productions in United States, for example, regularly drew 85% of audiences worldwide. In audiovisual trade in 2000 with just the European Union, the United States had an \$8.1 billion surplus, divided equally between movies and television rights.

Professional arts organisations in several countries disagreed with governments that are making concessions on audiovisual issues for benefits in other trade areas; plus, America have bilateral and regional trade accords that often include the audiovisual sector, opening more markets for American movies and television shows.

#### Cultural Liberty in Today's Diverse -World Human Development Report 2004

In our diverse world, more than two-thirds of countries have minority groups that make up more than 10% of their population, and nearly a billion people belong to groups that are subject to some form of exclusion. 'Human Development Report 2004: Cultural Liberty in Today's Diverse World' argues that states must actively devise multicultural policies to prevent discrimination on cultural grounds - religious ethnic and linguistic. The expansion of cultural freedoms, not suppression, is the only sustainable option to promote stability, democracy and human development within and across societies.

The Report debunks the myths that have been used to deny expansions of cultural freedoms, showing that diversity is neither a threat to state unity, nor the source of inevitable "clashes", nor an obstacle to development. Instead, it is at the core of human development - the ability of people to choose who they are.

The Report presents a framework to examine issues that leap from the headlines to the forefront of the international policy agenda: migration, predatory extremism, customary law and cultural diversity. For

more information, contact: Human Development Report Office 304 E. 45th Street, 12th Floor, New York 10017, US. Tel: +1 212 906-3661; Fax: +1 212 906-3677 Go to <a href="https://www.crin.org/resources/">http://www.crin.org/resources/</a> infoDetail.asp?ID= 4366

#### New lives for old towns

The first master plan for the conservation and development of Thailand's old towns is to be implemented in June 2004.

Under the five-year plan, known as the Strategy for Old Town Conservation and Development, places of historical significance will be declared as old towns and receive special privileges. A national cultural fund will also be established to finance conservation work.

The blueprint contains two sets of specifications to apply to an old town, to differentiate between areas of extreme historical and archaeological significance, and less important sites. To start, each province will have at least one old town, with committees of local officials, academics and members of the public to supervise conservation and development efforts. Nine provinces are included in the initial implementation, and they are: Chiang Mai, Nan, Lampang, Phitsanulok, Kamphaeng Phet, Nakhon Si Thammarat, Songkhla, Nakhon Ratchasima and Lop Buri.

#### Art Websites grow in Thailand

Thai artists are increasingly displaying their works on the internet, easily accepting it as a new frontier in the local art scene. In this respect, Pitakpol Visudhamporn, manager of the Rama IX Art Museum Foundation, has been a pioneer in the field.

He and art collector Sivaporn Tantranondh have through the foundation established two art websites - <a href="https://www.rama9art.org">www.rama9art.org</a> and <a href="https://www.supremeartist.org-with">www.supremeartist.org-with</a> - to provide new venues for local artists to exhibit their contemporary and modern art, as well as to promote the artistic prowess of His Majesty the King, who has been supporting the development of Thai modern art

The establishment of the websites marks a new era for the Thai art world, where a range of Thai contemporary art and the heritage of the modern arts are documented and displayed.

The <u>www.rama9art.org</u> site catalogues works created by 3,000 artists over 50 years (1946-1996).

#### bookmark

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**Silpakorn Journal.** Published twice a year by the Promotion and Public Relations Section Officer of the Secretariat, Fine Arts Department, Na Phra That Road, Bangkok 10200 Thailand Tel. (662) 224-2050 Fax. (662) 222-0934 ISSN 0125-0531

National Library of Australia News. Published monthly by National Library of Australia Council, Publication Branch, National Library of Australia, Canberra ACT 2600 Australia

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Asian Perspectives: The Journal of Archaeology for Asia and the Pacific. Published quarterly by University of Hawaii Press, Journals Department, 2840 Kolowalu St., Honolulu, HI 96822, USA. Tel. 808-956-8833 Fax: 808-988-6052 ISSN 0066 8435

Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society is published for the Royal Asiatic Society in April, July and November by Cambridge University Press. Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland, 60 Queen's Gardens, London W2 3AF Email: <a href="mailto:info@royalasiaticsociety.org">info@royalasiaticsociety.org</a> ISSN 1356 1863

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