

# Modern Art in Thailand

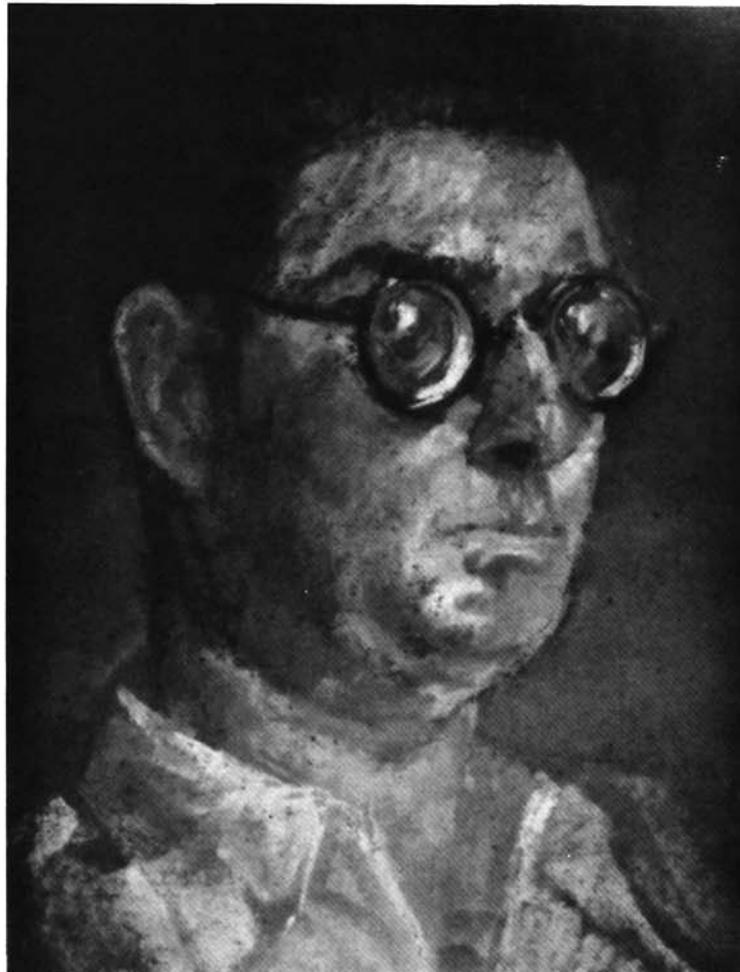
## An Outline of its Development from 1932-1960

by Helen Michaelsen

*Indeed, for sentimental traditional reasons, to the contrary, many people did not understand that Art, being a living part of culture, cannot be static, and, as such, an original conception, even if not quite successful in its artistic realization, is far better than copies or imitations, of what has been repeated for centuries.'*

*Silpa Bhirasri*

The year 1932, is often stated as the beginning of modern art in Thailand, especially painting due to the change of the political system from an absolute to a constitutional monarchy. The previous tendencies in Thai art



Professor Silpa Bhirasri, by Fua Haribhitak, 1935.

since the middle of the 19th century will be briefly outlined, in order to illustrate that it was a long-term process and not a sudden break with traditional art in 1932.

The first attempts to change traditional artistic presentations and pictorial elements occurred in the reign of King Mongkut (r. 1851-68). In total they do not have any far-reaching effects yet. But they have laid the basis for further development.

During King Chulalongkorn's reign (r. 1868-1910) the non-religious art sector gained more and more significance. Due to the religious orientation of traditional art in

Thailand, the secular art sector was greatly influenced by European artists. Consequently this development also had effects on Thai traditional painting, which in total was losing its domineering significance. Western techniques and expressions increasingly succeeded, both in the new secular and traditional art sector.

The decreasing emphasis on Thai traditional painting and the increasing European influence in this field continued further during the reign of King Vajiravudh (r. 1910-25). In addition, King Vajiravudh tried to give "pure" traditional art new impulses, especially through the founding of the Arts and Crafts School (Pohchang) in 1913.

After King Vajiravudh's reign, his successor, King Prajadhipok (r. 1925-34) cut down tremendously the expenses for the art sector. Owing to his drastic austerity programme King Vajiravudh's promotion measures for the traditional arts were mainly affected. Although King Prajadhipok's policy led to a decrease of artistic activities, the two tendencies remained unchanged: western influences on the traditional painting and dominance of western artists in the secular art sector.

The political overthrow on June 24, 1932 shifted the political centre of power from the monarchy to the state. The state, instead of the king, gained supremacy. Hence a takeover of the king's patronage over the art sector by the state resulted.

The Department of Fine Arts, which in 1926 had come under the control of the Royal Institute, came, in 1933, under the supervision of the Ministry of Education. The new rulers tried to improve the education system with an ambitious educational programme, essentially and led it to the level of the western standard.



Above: Statue of King Rama I, by Corrado Feroci, 1927-30.

Top left: Victory Monument, by Corrado Feroci and students, 1937-41.

Left: Part of Democracy Monument, by Corrado Feroci and students, 1939.

In 1933, the Department of Fine Arts founded the School of Fine Arts (Rongrien Silpa). The aim of the school was to systematically teach young artists in the fields of painting and sculpture. Their graduating artists were supposed to execute the works from the Fine Arts Department and to gradually substitute the foreign artists in the kingdom. The increasing demand by the state for monuments, medals, statues, etc. had led the authorities to the conclusion that an institution for the education of artists was needed. By these means, their graduates actually contributed to modern statebuilding. Nevertheless, the founding of this art school "only" institutionalized the development initiated in the reign of King Mongkut.

The elaboration of the curri-

culum for this art school was entrusted to the Italian sculptor Corrado Feroci. Feroci was also appointed as the director of the school. In 1944 he became a Thai citizen and changed his name to Silpa Bhirasri. The appointment of a foreign artist for this task illustrates the educational emphasis laid on modern expressions and therefore on western art.

It can be assumed that Feroci made use of his experiences at the Florence Academy of Fine Arts, where he had also been a teacher. Graduates from this programme assisted Feroci in his works with the numerous commissions from the Fine Arts Department.

Feroci's major arguments for bringing the training of artists in line with modern western art were: the

change in society and the job perspectives for artists. The study of traditional Thai art was also included in the training programme. But in practice, traditional Thai art only played a minor role at that time. Feroci justified this decision with the importance of tradition for Thai modern art.

However, Feroci rejected the mere copying of the old arts, because, in his opinion, the artists would become epigones. He was also very aware of the problems that were caused by the introduction of modern art forms. For him the study of traditional art was especially important in connection with the preservation of the cultural heritage. Nevertheless, it was beyond question for him that the

alignment of art had shifted due to the changes in society. Therefore religious texts could not be a basis for art anymore.

The first class of Feroci, which started in 1934, had a total of 10 students. These students had previously trained at the Arts and Crafts School. Their works, done during their education at the School of Fine Arts, were all either in a realistic or impressionistic style. At the new school, Feroci's own art perception was put into practice. As Feroci said, "They are at the beginnings of their careers, impressionism and realism is the first stage which all modern artists have passed through".

In the traditional teacher-student relationship in those days, as

it is today, the teacher is considered as the unquestionable authority because of his experience and profession. Therefore, Feroci's students, especially those in the sculpture class, exactly imitated Feroci's own style. They were "trained" to copy in a precise manner. In the long run, however, Feroci hoped the artists could find their individual style through their own experiences and by practicing with different styles.

In the first place, the aim for training Feroci's first class at the School of Fine Arts was to assist Feroci with his government commissions. Later on they were to execute the works themselves. The students officially completed their training in 1937. Their first major project was the "Victory Monument", which had been started in 1937 and finished in 1941.

The Victory Monument is an obelisque pillar surrounded by statues of soldiers and civilians. It was done in an over-emphasized realistic style, symbolizing the nation's unity. The same intention, namely to represent the motive in a heroic manner, underlay the 'Democracy Monument', which was commissioned in 1939. The eight low reliefs of the monument are meant as a manifestation of the close connection between civilian and military life and the importance of education, economic productivity and Buddhism. The 'Democracy Monument' was done, like the 'Victory Monument' in the style of heroic realism. Although Feroci was a follower of the realistic style, this over-emphasized forms did not correspond with his ideas. But because of his position as a civil servant he did not have much freedom to decide and had to go along with the visions of his commissioners.



**Palm-Sugar Harvest, by Manit Poo-Aree, 1958.**



**Dreamer's Alley, by Misiem Yipintsoi, 1949.**



**Portrait, by Banchob Palawongse, 1954.**

The main aim of the new rulers were to build a modern nation. The new rulers' vision of a modern state was one that was strong in military terms. And this they endeavoured to visualize in their artistic presentations, for foreign countries to see as well as for their own public. When Field-Marshal Phibun Songkham, one of the coup's leaders in 1932, became prime minister in 1938, those tendencies were even more stressed upon. The main outcome of the efforts of Phibun's government programme were militarism, economic nationalism, chauvinism directed against the Chinese minority in Thailand, and cultural nationalism which had major relevance to the arts.

Although Phibun's programme showed strong parallels with King Vajiravudh's programme of nationalism, Phibun primarily based his programme on the development in Italy, Germany and Japan. He stressed traditional values as well, like what King Vajiravudh had done before.

Nevertheless, Phibun introduced essential elements from the western culture. It was inevitable for the sake of progress and modernity of the nation. With his campaign on the ideal "Thai-culture", Phibun wanted to stir the people's awareness on their life in the new society, which was being newly built up. In addition, the government was convinced that the realization of this campaign could help Thailand to be considered as "civilized" abroad. For this reason the government issued the "12 Cultural Mandates" (Ratthaniyom), during 1939 and 1942. Moreover a National Culture Council was created. Within this political scope the extension of Feroci's field of competence had to be seen.

In 1938 Feroci was appointed as Chief of the Art School Division of the Fine Arts Department. Besides



**Chantaburi, by Payoon Ulushata, 1954.**

overseeing the conduct of the School of Fine Arts, he had the assignment to advise the government on questions pertaining to general art.

Because of Feroci's suggestions, art competitions were included in the programme of the Annual Constitution Fair, established in 1938. Student from the art school participated in these competitions. Apparently, these art competitions were successful, because several events of this kind took place in the beginning of the 40s. For example, in 1941 the National Culture Council sponsored a poster competition in 1941 for the promotion of art and home industries.

The 11th Cultural Mandate of 1941 contained the government's notion about the daily routines of a modern Thai. Among other things, it mentioned that Thais should go to art exhibits.

Phibun, aware of the important function of contemporary art in his

policy of cultural nationalism, further directed the upgrading of the School of Fine Arts to university level (Silpakorn University), in 1943. Through this step the status artists in society was at least formally upgraded. During that time, only university students received official and private recognition.

In 1944, the League of Artists, consisting of well-known personalities, literates and artists, organized a private "art exhibition". Participants were graduates from Silpakorn University, hobby painters, photographers and commercial artists. The graduates' work were mainly in the realistic style. The members of the League of Artists and the promotion issued by the state clearly showed how undifferentiated the term 'art' was at that time. Still based on the traditional understanding of art, there was yet no effort to differentiate arts and crafts, decorative art, art imitations and fine arts.

Moreover the public reacted indifferently to the attempts of Pibun's government to teach the public art appreciation. On the one hand the Thai people then still lacked understanding for modern art, on the other hand, the measures in the field of cultural nationalism were unpopular.

To sum it up, it can be stated that Phibun encouraged the development of art by creating state-funded institutions for the teaching and propagation of art. But a differentiated art reception was missing.

In 1944, Phibun's government was forced to resign. Civil forces then came to power. In the same year, some of Phibun's most questionable decrees were dissolved, including the 11th Cultural Mandate of 1941. The new government did not exert much influence on the development of art.

Instead, the new government focused on the stabilization of its own power position and the elimination of political opponents. Although this meant the artists were relatively free from state interventions, it also meant that they hardly received any placing of orders from the government. Referring back to the beginning, one of the main objectives of the previous government, in their decision to educate artists, was to utilize the graduates in the production of public monuments, medals, statues, etc.

In 1947 there was a new military coup, in which Phibun was substantially involved. As a result, in 1948 he once again became the prime minister. Then, the promotion of art was re-established. The instructors of the Arts and Crafts School, which had a new curriculum for painting and sculpture, formed a group and organized, in 1948, an exhibition of oil paintings. It was the first of its kind in Thailand.



**Blue-Green, by Fua Haribhitak, 1956.**

Also in 1948, an exhibition of Thai modern art together with antiques and artifacts was shown for the first time abroad, in London. The fact that Silpa Bhirasri, was sent to explain the exhibits to the visitors showed that the Thai government attributed some importance to this exhibition.

The more important event, however, came in 1949 when the first National Exhibition of Art was held. It was organized by Bhirasri, and from that year on the exhibition took place annually. For the first time an exhibition was based on a systematic structure. The National Exhibition of Art was divided into four categories:

painting, sculpture, decorative art and applied art. Another difference to former exhibition attempts was that the art works were selected by a judging committee. Aside from Bhirasri, Thai artists from the older generation were selected to seat as judges for the exhibition.

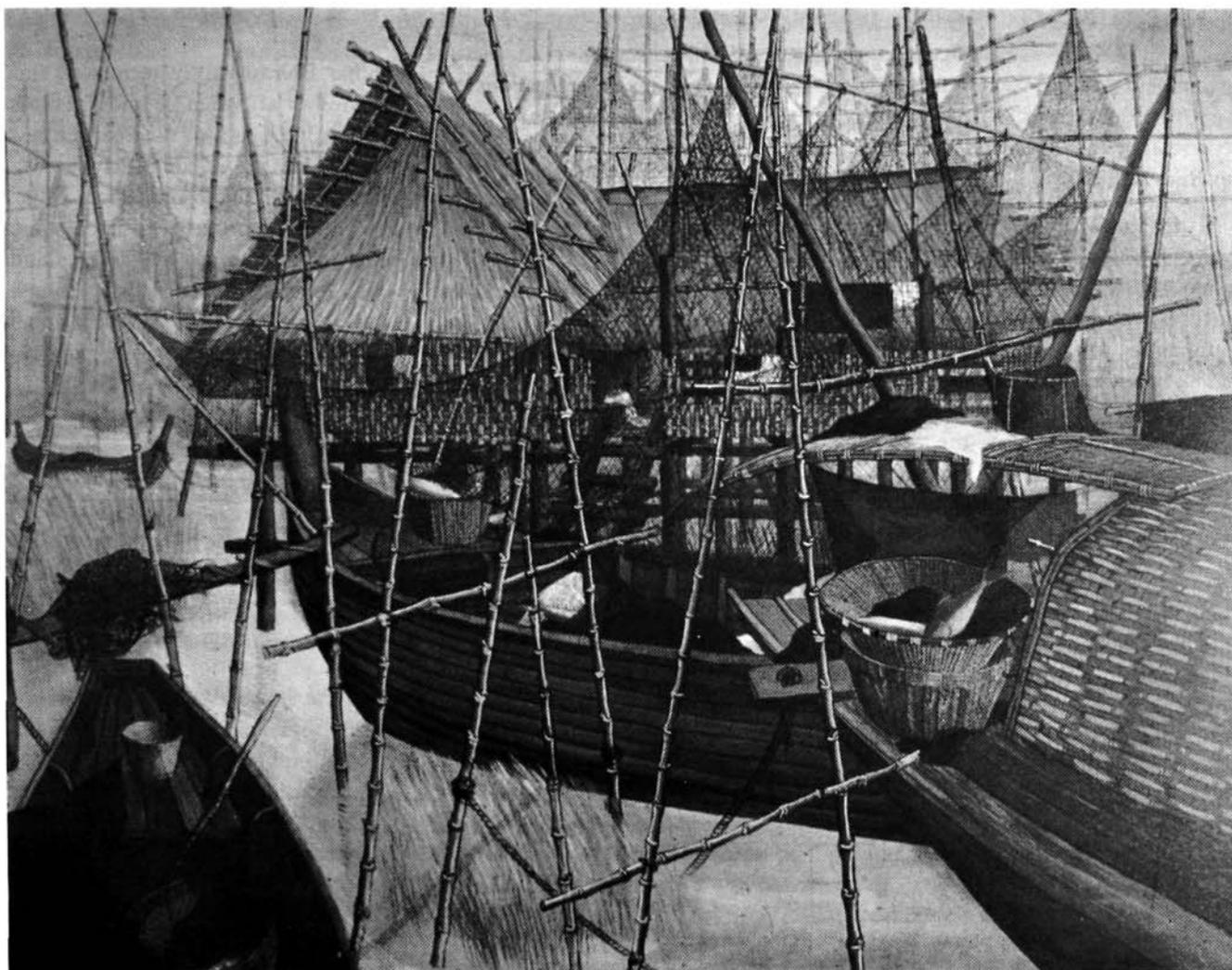
Those artists selected as judges had either studied abroad or had come in contact with western artists, who were engaged in collaborating art works in Thailand. The organizing committee also awarded gold, silver and bronze medals to the works they

regarded as outstanding. Bhirasri noted that the main aims of this exhibition was to show the progress Thai artists had already made, and to stir public interest for modern art. During the first exhibition, the impressionistic style dominated paintings. But in sculpture, the realistic style predominated.

The second National Art Exhibition received a very negative criticism. Kukrit Pramoj, a newspaper columnist of 'Siam Rath', then, concluded that many artists in this exhibition lacked individual style and

technique. Nevertheless, he appealed to the public to support the artists by buying their works. Despite the fact that his criticism turned out to be very negative, it showed, at least, that there was a reaction to this exhibition, and therefore to modern art. Bhirasri himself also reacted, but rather defensively towards Kukrit Pramoj's criticism. He pointed out that Thai modern art was still in an early state and that the artists must have the freedom to choose their own style.

In the '50s the realistic style in sculpture and the impressionistic style



**Fishing Village, by Damrong Wong-Uparaj, 1960.**

in painting continued to predominate. Works in these styles received most of the awards at the National Art Exhibition. The main genre in painting then was still-life, portraiture and landscapes.

In 1956, painter Fua Haribhitak returned to Thailand from a two years stay in Italy. He started to experiment with cubistic forms. For Thailand this new form of expression also became obvious in other artists' works later on.

Parallel to this development, some artworks showed the return to traditional style of representation. This meant the pure two-dimensional lineal convention and certain individual motives that were executed in oil or tempera painting. These motives were, for example, deities, and scenes representing traditional daily life. But no Buddha figures.

In total the policy of Field-Marshal Sarit Thanarat (1958-63) could have been responsible for this. Sarit tried, with his policy, to emphasize on traditional values again, including the revival of traditional ceremonies. In effect, he put the king formally back to the top of the moral, social and political order. As a result, with this the monarchy was active in society again.

Bhirasri evaluated this return to traditional forms of expression "as an attempt to modernize old art". Simultaneous with the return to traditional style of representation, some painters turned to painting rural life in the naturalistic manner. Due to this development Bhirasri hoped that despite the adoption of western styles and techniques an independent typical "Thai-style" in art could show itself.

Although there was an increase in the ways of expression in the medium painting - in sculpture, realism

still predominated, with the exception of a few artists who started to reduce the forms - the public still remained indifferent towards modern art.

Two reasons are mainly responsible for the sculptors' cling to realism. First, besides the annual National Art Exhibition and the exhibitions of the Painters and Sculptors Association in 1953 and 1954, there were no other activities that helped to free modern art from its relative isolation in society. Second, a secular art tradition did not exist in Thailand and therefore the consciousness to collect and support modern art was not there.

Bhirasri complained about this fact in his numerous published articles. He made many suggestions on how modern art could be supported. Next to his suggestion on an official budget for buying works of art, he especially stood up for the creation of a museum of modern art.

In addition, Bhirasri tried, in each of his introductory articles for the National Art Exhibition, to point out to the public the high cultural

value of art. He did this by comparing art to religion and by using terms such as 'beauty' and 'righteousness'. Moreover he indicated the good support received by modern artists in other Asian countries; he warned that Thailand may be losing out to these countries.

Although Bhirasri tirelessly promoted and fought for modern art in Thailand, general acceptance and support did not come up. For most artists, the consequence was to earn their living by doing something else. Most of the graduates from Silpakorn University went into the commercial sector or became civil servants and teacher.

There was no other way. And Silpa Bhirasri aptly recounted this period of art when he said, "This is a transitory period. Whether the new expressions are yet completely successful or not, has no immediate value. What is important is to understand that contemporary art in Thailand has entered on a historical phase which has to follow its ascensional parabola to its complete achievement." ■

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