

*Buddhist Murals of Northeast Thailand: Reflections of the Isan Heartland* by BONNIE PACALA BRERETON & SOMROAY YENCHEUY (Chiang Mai: Mekong Press, 2010). ISBN 978 616 90053 1 5 (soft)

At first glance, this publication appears to be a coffee-table book from the 1950s; but as you flip through the pages, you begin to see highly unlikely images. The happy-go-merry dancing to the cheerful *khaen* (panpipes). Botanical species that emerge in stark nudity from a *nari phon* tree! Wild and uninhibited spirits of villagers as they fondle and canoodle through festivities. ‘These are scenes from a Thai temple mural?!’ one might exclaim.

This illustrated volume of Isan Buddhist murals is beyond the imagination of any conservative Central Thai. Bringing to you the beauty of Isan livelihood and its abundance of sensuality in a friendly and unpretentious manner, Bonnie Brereton and Somroay Yencheuy cater to the readers their knowledge of these erotic and free-spirited murals of Isan. These little-known temple paintings with unusual charms are powerful but you will have to go through the book before discovering that. The distinctive appeal is somehow lost in the mundane book design.

As we live in an age of information overload, a short attention span among the public makes it all the harder to captivate an audience. A successful book design must appeal to the potential reader in a split second. In advertising literature, the impact of an ad is determined in the first 5 seconds. This is the most

significant moment when a prospect decides to stop and make the purchase. With close to 800 books printed in the USA each day, the very same principle applies to books. Unless intended, textbook design approach is not going to take a book very far simply because textbooks are deadly boring. For most people growing up, they do not conjure the fondest of memories, neither are they stylish. Nonetheless, the images in the book can’t help but burst out of the pages. Like Thai folk wisdom, they are vivid and sharp with an intended punch.

Surely, *Buddhist Murals of Northeast Thailand* is a gem of a book. The subject is intriguing and the pictures of the murals are outstanding. Regrettfully, however, little thought was given to the book design, robbing it of its fullest potential. It is like not even considering to ‘Garnish it with coriander’ at all—a Thai saying that explains the attempt to try to make something look good. Thai folk wisdom is extremely witty; this should be reflected in the book design and composition as well. Essentially, anyone attempting to bring to life in a book on the subject of folk art must treat it with reverence—not by portraying it formally, but giving it the liveliness it exudes. The book should shine with the all-enchanting force of a bygone culture. The role of such book is to rekindle the fire, intoxicating the imagination of the reader with the spirit of our forefathers.

Isan is a minority culture that is slowly vanishing under the nationalist policy of “Thai-ification.” This policy promotes the incorporation of Isan as an integral part of Thailand while

de-emphasizing its Lao and Khmer antecedents. Therefore, this book comes as a very rare treat. Identifying a forgotten artistry that is quickly lost in assimilation, it gives lavish insight and celebrates the sensational artistic expression of the Isan people. The dominating indigo and its various shades and tones illustrate the creativity of a community restricted to natural pigments but yet seemingly unfettered. The startling sense of liberation portrayed by the ever-present sensuality will captivate the reader. Tempting them to scrutinize these erotic scenes invites the understanding of a community that openly embraces their desires. Above all, the amalgamation of royals, deities and peasants in one composition is a rare sight—impossible to be found in such small compass anywhere in Thailand, thus conveying the unique democratic lifestyle of the Isan heartland.

Even though the book design leaves much to be desired, the intention to highlight a declining form of art is commendable. The substance of the subject is so rich and bewitching it bursts out of the pages. If only the composition of the book had been given more thought, the book would be singing in soprano! But then as the old English proverb goes, ‘Don’t judge a book by its cover!’

Tulaya Pornpiriyakulchai

*Studies on the Art of Ancient Cambodia: Ten Articles by Jean Boisselier*, tr. & ed. by NATASHA EILENBERG & ROBERT L. BROWN (Phnom Penh: Reyum Publishing, 2008). ISBN 978 999 5055 38 7 (soft)

Jean Boisselier (b. Paris 1912 – d. Paris 1996) was arguably the 20<sup>th</sup> century’s preeminent scholar of mainland Southeast Asia art history. Over the course of a long career that consisted of various institutional affiliations, including the Phnom Penh Museum (now the National Museum of Cambodia), the École française d’Extrême Orient (ESEO), the Centre national de la recherche scientifique (CNRS), Silpakorn University, and the University of Paris-III, Boisselier generated a prodigious body of erudite scholarship predominantly on the art histories of Cambodia, Thailand, and the Cham of Vietnam, much of which continues to set the standard today. With this book, art historians Natasha Eilenberg (an independent scholar) and Robert Brown (University of California, Los Angeles) have gathered ten of Boisselier’s most important articles on Khmer art, all originally published in French, and provided painstaking English-language translations with helpful annotations and insightful introductions to each essay. Students and scholars of early Khmer art and culture, and of early Southeast Asia in general, will find it to be a very important and useful publication.

Nearly twenty years in the making, *Studies on the Art of Ancient Cambodia* represents the third of Natasha Eilen-