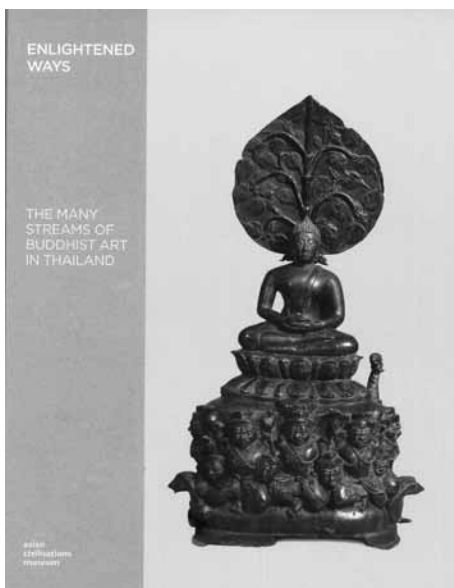


their own sense of community and practice. However, I would argue that it is risky to try to find a term for something that did not yet exist, however strong some of its antecedents may be. To take a nod from the world of American celebrity, can we speak of the “Religion/Practice/Lineage Latterly Known as Theravāda” before it was so christened? The Western academic tradition arranges the world into discrete categories and piles them into ever higher superordinate structures. While notions of ethnicity, identity, religion – just a few of the big categories of modern thought – all have their roots “out there” in the observable world, the very act of bringing together disparate phenomena under a delineated rubric and giving it a name is in itself an act of creation and birth.

How Theravāda is Theravāda? features rich illustrations of the art, personalities, artifacts, and architecture of the Theravāda world. While some of these plates support the text, others are rather more examples of cultural riches, with a decided emphasis on the art of Thailand. Readers who are not specialists of Thailand would no doubt have appreciated the use of dates in preference to the exclusive use of reign names in some of the contributions. The essays in this volume together offer a highly useful reminder that many of the categories of thought that we use to understand the past are of very recent provenance, and that the solidity that we attribute to the past may disappear under closer investigation.

Patrick McCormick

Enlightened Ways: The Many Streams of Buddhist Art in Thailand edited by Heidi Tan (Singapore: Asian Civilisations Museum, 2012). ISBN: 978-981-07-4628-5.



I was indeed fortunate in 2013 to have been able to visit the fascinating exhibition at the Asian Civilisations Museum (ACM) in Singapore for which this book served as the accompanying catalogue. I was overcome not only by the quality of the exhibits that Principal Curator Heidi Tan and her team had managed to assemble from the ACM's own collection, the Thai National Library and several National Museums around Thailand, but the superb way they had been arranged and thoughtfully displayed. The lighting and the clear signage were excellent. Fortunately for those who could not travel to Singapore, there is still an opportunity to examine

carefully the more than 160 exhibits illustrated in this beautiful 267-page publication that demonstrate the extraordinary range and beauty of Buddhist art in Thailand over 1,500 years.

The catalogue comprises a Foreword and six short chapters written by leading Buddhist and Thai art historians, followed by the catalogue of exhibits. Interspersed throughout are short one-page summaries describing the standard “Periods of Thai Art” – divided into eight periods: Early confluences, Dvaravati culture, Srivijaya empire, Lopburi with Khmer influence, Sukhothai kingdom, Lan Na kingdom, Ayutthaya kingdom and Rattanakosin period – then the role of “Brahmanism in Thailand” and various aspects of “Merit Making”. In his *Foreword*, Alan Chong, Director of the ACM, explains the background and aims of the exhibition, and why the organisers covered such considerable ground; they have not tried to define “genuine Siamese or Thai culture or what true, doctrinal Buddhism encompasses.” Rather, the aim of the exhibition was to examine “art related to the evolving practice of Buddhism” in the geographic area that now constitutes Thailand.

In the opening chapter, *The Many Streams of Buddhist Art in Thailand*, Heidi Tan provides a concise, yet highly readable, survey of Buddhist art in Thailand chronologically and by region, and notes that “the very eclecticism of the artistic styles in Thailand shows how Buddhism has taken on multiple meanings.” She then takes the reader on a journey through the various periods of Thai art history, highlighting the cultural exchange that took place, before showcasing the wide variety of styles found in the production of assorted devotional and utilitarian objects. Lay practitioners commissioning the manufacture of such articles likely wished to demonstrate their religious devotion, and thus make merit. For artisans involved in their production, merit would have been continuously accumulating. Tan finally examines the “syncretism, hybridity and globalization” that are now taking place, and their impact. She concludes that the ways in which merit making can be expanded appear limitless, and have even taken on a global dimension thanks to ease of communication and the Internet.

Peter Skilling structures his chapter, *The Aesthetics of Devotion: Buddhist Arts of Thailand*, around the two “bodies” of the Buddha, namely *rupakaya*, his “form body” or representations of the Buddha in the form of relics, images and statues, and *dharmakaya*, his “dharma body” that comprises his body of teachings. Skilling quickly covers plenty of ground, providing an overview of Buddhism in Thailand in the Dvaravati and early period before looking at the mass production of moulded images, better, but incorrectly according to Skilling, known as votive tablets. He then reviews the production and types of various images of the Buddha before examining Buddhist painting, the Ten Jātaka tales and stories of the miracle-working monk Phra Malai, who is frequently depicted in folding manuscripts. Skilling reminds us that ‘Buddhist art was not made to be viewed in a museum’, and that the objects he has reviewed “are produced by spirituality and inspire spirituality.” Yet, the

Buddhist art objects illustrated in this catalogue clearly demonstrate the level of artistic achievement that has been attained, to the degree that some can certainly be considered “among the masterpieces of world art”.

John Listopad’s chapter, *The Walking Buddha in Thailand*, concisely explores the history of this famous figure “striding fluidly through time and space,” that gained in popularity from around 1400 as a visual aid for “meditation and ascetic devotion”. He then provides examples of different types of Walking Buddhas, focusing in particular on those now more commonly referred to as Sukhothai Buddhas, before connecting the role of these figures to the creation of images of the Buddha’s footprint. Although popular in the northern regions throughout the 15th century, this type of Buddha image declined in popularity in the Ayutthaya kingdom. Listopad speculates that its decline perhaps occurred due to “fundamental changes in the practice of Buddhism”.

The chapter titled *Naming the Buddha: Thai Terms for Images of the Buddha* by Amara Srisuchat, a former director of the National Museum in Bangkok, is quite revealing in detailing how names given to various Buddha images “shed light on popular perceptions and expressions of faith”. After providing information about epithets for the Buddha that appear in the Pāli Cannon and Sanskrit scriptures, Amara examines many popular terms for the Buddha, and how the type, material, posture, weight or height might lead to a particular nomenclature. The chapter ends quite suddenly after a review of names given to the Sinhal Image of the Buddha and the etymology of the name of the revered Emerald Buddha in the Grand Palace.

The standout chapter is Justin McDaniel’s essay on amulets titled *A Buddha in the Palm of Your Hand: Amulets in Buddhism*. Although there is abundant material available in Thai – magazines, newspapers, books, TV shows, Internet sites, etc. – there has to date been little written in English about the history and role of amulets in Thai society. Amulets come in many forms in Thailand and continue to be hugely popular due to their supposed protective powers. McDaniel examines the materials, the categories and types of amulets produced before looking at the social and economic roles played by these small devotional objects in Thai Buddhism. He argues that the trade in amulets is not a commercialisation of Buddhism, but a legitimate means of benefiting monasteries and creating communities. There is room for further research, and perhaps even another exhibition could be held, on this fascinating topic.

Alexandra Denes provides an interesting insight into more recent and current roles of Buddhist faith and art in the lives of ordinary people in her chapter, *Trees of Offering: The Salak Yom Festival in Lamphun Province*. After a short preamble about popular Buddhism in Thailand, Denes explains why The Salak Yom (literally “lottery trees”) festival of the minority Yong people of Lamphun in northern Thailand is a good example of the reconstruction of rituals associated with merit making. Traditionally, a young, unmarried woman prepared and offered the tree to show that

she was ready for marriage, but also to demonstrate the importance of making merit in return for happiness and prosperity. This tradition has now disappeared, as groups of villagers produce trees decorated with gifts that are disbursed to monks through a lottery system. With the revival some ten years ago of this annual festival between September and October, the trees appear to grow taller and more ostentatious each year. Despite criticism that sees “competitions and monetary prizes for the best Salak Yom tree as a distortion of the original Buddhist values of merit making”, the festival now attracts large numbers of domestic tourists and wealthy donors.

If it seems churlish to offer criticism of the catalogue of exhibits – actually this is more mild disappointment - I would like to have seen an even broader range of artefacts displayed, including Bencharong utensils or tiles (such as those used to decorate Wat Phra Kaeo and the charming Wat Rajabophit), mother-of-pearl decorative objects or furniture, enamelled copperwares, betel sets and other paraphernalia, such as fans, used by monks during religious ceremonies. Although rarely used now, all of these objects have played an ubiquitous role in Thai Buddhist ritual, and fine examples can still be found at the royal Buddhist temples of Bangkok and in museums.

In summation, this is a “must-have” book for anyone interested in learning about Thai Buddhist art history, and provides a suitable legacy to the original Exhibition while the photos certainly do justice to the many rare and important exhibits. We should be grateful to the ACM for assembling one of the finest exhibitions ever on this subject matter.

Paul Bromberg

The Philosophical Constructs of Wat Arun by Chatri Prakitnonthakan (Bangkok: South East Insurance Pcl, 2013). ISBN 978-974-289-781-9.



Over the past few years, the Fine Arts Department and the Royal Institute have published high-quality versions of some of the oldest and most important Thai texts, particularly from the early Rattanakosin era. This represented a significant and very welcome change from the parsimonious policy of these bodies in the past. The result is a new wave of scholarship, based in part on these texts, which is substantially revising the history of the late Ayutthaya and early Bangkok eras.