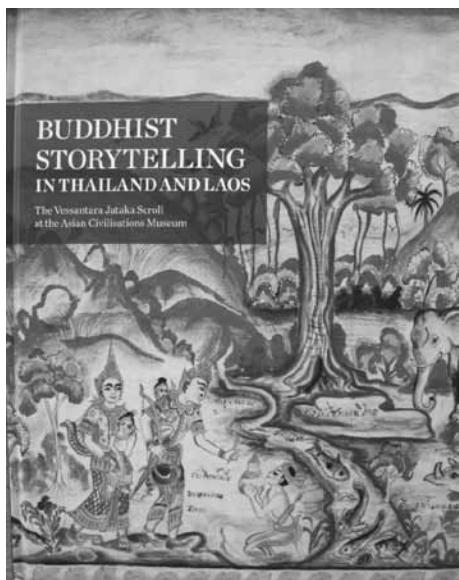


and concludes with a detailed exhibition design concept that accommodates these different perspectives.

This colourful publication is a fitting tribute to the Ring collection and a long-needed contribution to the study of this exuberant ceramic tradition. The Museum is to be congratulated for dedicating resources to this project and for drawing together an international group of scholars, without whom this unique multi-perspective approach would not have been possible. The result is a publication that appeals to both scholars and general readers.

Heidi Tan

Buddhist Storytelling in Thailand and Laos: The Vessantara Jataka Scroll at the Asian Civilisations Museum by Leedom Lefferts and Sandra Cate with Wajuppa Tossa (Singapore: Asian Civilisations Museum, 2012). ISBN: 978-981-07-2478-8 (hard).



The study of the art of Thailand and other Southeast Asian countries has long been confined primarily to the stone and bronze works of kingdoms, dynasties, and monarchs. Generally neglected have been the ephemeral works in cloth and wood, created and used by religious devotees far from centers of political power. In recent decades, however, the aesthetic and socio-religious value of textiles and their role in religious practice have been recognized by art historians and ethnographers. Among these scholars are Leedom Lefferts and Sandra Cate, who have co-authored several articles on ritual and artistic aspects of Vessantara Jataka scrolls (*pha yao phra wet*) in northeast Thailand and

Laos. *Buddhist Storytelling in Thailand and Laos* grows from, extends, and integrates that work with a close examination of one such scroll and comparisons of others.

Vessantara Jataka scrolls play a central role in annual merit-making festivals, known as *Bun Phra Wet*, which reenact the story of Prince Vessantara as he perfects the virtue of generosity. The scroll featured in the book is extraordinary in many ways, from the meticulous rendering of human figures, animals, and landscape elements, to the masterful flow of the composition which moves seamlessly from one chapter to the next.

The book begins with a brief introductory chapter situating the scroll in its geographic and cultural context and the unique place it holds in annual Buddhist merit-making festivals of the ethnic Lao people. Through information on the dedicatory panel the authors were able to learn the name of the artist, Sopha Pangchat, who completed painting it in 1960, as well as the *wat* which received the scroll as a donation.

Chapter 1 examines the scroll closely, as if unrolling it, starting with the dedication panel and moving through each of the Jataka's thirteen chapters. The story unfolds not only through the artist's rich visual imagination and attention to detail, but also through his story-telling ability as manifested in his captions. The book's large-size format (9.5 x 12 inches) allows details to be noticed and savored. Particularly delightful is the Mahaphon (Great Forest) chapter, with its forest creatures, especially four flocks of birds that sing to lift the spirits of Phra Wet and his family.

Chapter 2 situates the scroll – and Vessantara scrolls, in general – in the ritual, religious, and social setting of *Bun Phra Wet*, the most important merit-making occasion among the Thai-Lao and Lao. Descriptions of aspects of the festival alternate with the authors' analyses and interpretation in the light of local beliefs. Here they argue that the scroll – and not the written text – is the center of the festival and that it, along with the procession and the community, coalesce to 'actively become' the story (p. 51). In their analysis, Lefferts and Cate emphasize that it is the procession, and not the recitation, which attracts the most participants. The *Bun Phra Wet* festival, they maintain, has an important performative aspect, in that members of the laity—and sometimes monks as well—play the roles of the Jataka's characters.

It should be noted, however, that processions with music, dancing, and offerings of gifts to the Sangha are a main component of many other merit-making occasions as well, including *thod kathin*, ordinations, and even traditional village weddings. Ordination processions could also be said to be performative, in that the young men being ordained dress in royal costume and ride to the *wat* on the shoulders of other men as if on horseback, replicating the Bodhisattva who left his palace on horseback to become an ascetic. Merit-making processions for all occasions usually involve drumming, dancing, and consumption of varying amounts of alcohol.

Complementing this chapter's description and analysis are the authors' photographs of various aspects of the festival, all of exceptional quality, some absolutely stunning.

Chapter 3, "Artists tell the story", examines some of the spatial and organizational issues artists consider when planning the painting of a mural or a scroll. Vessantara Jataka scrolls—at least the older ones, like older Isan murals—differ greatly from each other in virtually every way – composition, narrative imagination, artistic skill. This point is illustrated with examples from more than ten other scrolls. Older scrolls have more details and took a long time to complete, as did

the one by Sopha, which took nearly a year, “suggesting a major investment of time and care.” Contemporary scrolls, however, have few details and are produced in assembly-line fashion with stock scenes, some of which are achieved by using time-saving techniques like stencils. Moreover, some contemporary scrolls exhibit strong compositional influence from prints mass-produced by the Bangkok firm, So. Dhammapakdi & Sons, in the placement and posture of figures. Most of the scrolls in northeast Thailand are now made at two villages, and the final products are standardized and simplified.

Scenes from the Phra Malai story, the tale of the *arhat* who travels to the hells and then to Tavatimsa Heaven, are found on almost all scrolls. In heaven he meets the future Buddha Maitreya, who exhorts him to tell those people in the human realm to observe the Buddhist precepts and to participate in the *Bun Phra Wet*. Hell scenes, vary from one scroll to another and are generally gory and include the thorn tree which adulterers are forced to climb. Lefferts and Cate describe some of these as they appear on scrolls, but claim that descriptions of specific offenses and consequences “are not present in published Phra Malai texts” (p. 85). This is incorrect. Such descriptions are, in fact, found in numerous texts from various periods and in various Thai languages, including works in both poetry and prose.¹ This minor slip-up, however, does not detract from the authors’ well-considered analysis and comparison of visual strategies employed by different artists.

Chapter 4, “The writing on the scroll” examines, scene-by-scene, the scroll itself and points out the location of each line of text in the scroll. It also includes comments and notes by the authors and translator. One is able to compare Wajuppa Tossa’s transcription of Thai-Lao words (written in Thai characters), translation into standard Thai, and translation into English. The transcription is keyed to caption numbers on each scene. It is interesting that the artist, who apparently knew the Dhamma and Khmer scripts, as he included a few statements in them in the scroll, did not use the old local Thai-Lao script known as Thai Noi (or Lao Buhan), possibly because it was not known to most local people. Moreover, many of the “Thai-Lao words” are actually the same as central Thai and use the Thai letter for the sound “r” even though it is not found in Lao. Much of the difference lies in the fact that Lao has few words of *ratchasap*, the royal words used in reference to the Buddha and

¹ These texts include *Phra Malai Klon Suat*, *Dika Malai Thewa Sut*, the southern Thai *Kap Malai*, the northern Thai *Malai Prot Lok*, and the modern novel *Phra Mali Phu Poet Narok-Sawan*. I pointed this out in my book *Thai Tellings of Phra Malai: Texts and Rituals Concerning a Popular Buddhist Saint* (Tempe, 1995), which discusses the relationship between Phra Malai tellings and the Vessantara Jataka. In the Phra Malai Klon Suat approximately twenty-five per cent of the text is devoted to hell scenes. (pp. 110-112). The authors also erroneously claim that my study was limited to Central and northern Thai texts and rituals, while, in fact, it included material on the northeastern *Bun Phra Wet* as well. When I brought this to the attention of Leedom Lefferts in an email, he explained that when writing *Buddhist Storytelling* in Singapore, he did not have with him the copy of my book which I gave him.

royalty, and fewer honorific phrases. The lack of *ratchasap* also results in shorter captions, thus saving space.

The book's final section, "Notes on the artist and the scroll in Singapore," provides background information about artist Sopha Panchat's life, education, and work. These are welcome details, as most Southeast Asian art is anonymous. We learn that in addition to painting scrolls and murals, Sopha also produced palm leaf manuscripts and ornate funeral pyres in the shape of the bird known as *nok hatsadiling* for cremations of important monks and local royalty. We also learn how he went about painting a scroll. This section tells us a little about the scroll's life as well, including where the bolt of cotton on which it was painted came from (Japan), its size and the measurements of each chapter and details about wear and tear that reveal how it was held while being carried in procession and how it was folded while being stored.

In sum, *Buddhist Storytelling* is a delight to the eye as well as a rich source of information about Vessantara Jataka scrolls as works of art and mainstays for merit-making through enactment of the Phra Wet story. The book accords these scrolls and the artists who created them their rightful place in the world of Southeast Asian art. Moreover, it highlights the continuing vitality of complex practices and Buddhist beliefs among Thai-Lao and Lao people under changing social, political, and economic conditions. Both stunning and scholarly, it is a book that the reader will want to return to again and again.

Bonnie Brereton