

## A History of Phaiboon Suwannakudt (1925-1982)

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**ABSTRACT**—The artist, Phaiboon Suwannakudt, was descended from a renegade Lao prince from Chiang Rung (Jinghong), who founded Ubon Ratchathani. Born in 1925, he was schooled in Ubon before moving to Bangkok and studying at Poh-Chang Academy of Arts and then at Silpakorn University from about 1944. He lodged at a *wat* with the art historian, Prayoon Uluchata (No Na Paknam), and the poet, Angkarn Kalayanapong, who became close friends. He worked as an artist, art teacher, draftsman, dance teacher and art director on movies, besides writing features, short stories and political commentary for newspapers, and painting watercolours for tourists. He was married in 1955 and helped raise seven children, but lived a nomadic life, paying little heed to money. In the late 1960s, he started painting murals at Wat Theppol in Talingchan, followed by commissions at the Montien Hotel, Dusit Thani Hotel, Phuphing Palace in Chiang Mai, and the Dusit Mahaprasat at Muang Boran (Ancient City). He was criticized for adapting the themes and methods of temple murals for commercial art. In 1975, he was diagnosed with kidney failure and died in 1982. His last commission at the Peninsula Hotel (now Anantara Siam Bangkok Hotel) was completed by his daughter. Phaiboon was an outsider in the contemporary art world, but was greatly admired and loved by a broad swathe of Thai artists and art connoisseurs for his independence and tenacity. He belonged to the first generation of modern-trained Thai artists, and his works, which are a crossover between elite art and popular culture, are a record of their time.

Why is Phaiboon Suwannakudt<sup>1</sup> important? The authors have a personal interest in Phaiboon because he was Phaptawan's father. Yet, this would be an inadequate reason for writing his history, other than as extended family reminiscence.

Phaiboon became an artist, as a member of the first generation of modern-trained Thai artists under Silpa Bhirasri (Corrado Feroci), so his own history is that of modern Thai art before its formal institutionalization by the mid-1950s. Moreover, the art world which Phaiboon entered, just as it was being formed, was not one with a history of formal competences and worked out canons. The vestiges of mural painting practice

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<sup>1</sup> Phaiboon means 'Prosperity'; Suwannakudt means 'Mountain of Gold'. Although the name Phaiboon is sometimes romanized as 'Paiboon', we will use 'Phaiboon' throughout. Phaiboon has also been frequently named in art world sources as 'Tan Kudt', the 'Tan' being a form of respectful address which roughly translates as 'Honoured', and in Phaiboon's case was also used as an in-group term of address with other art world people.

by competent craftsmen-artists were, with the exception of some Chinese artists in the 1830s like Khong Pae and Thong Yu,<sup>2</sup> or those inculcated by royal patrons to introduce elements of ‘Western’ painting into formal temple schemes like Khrua In Khong in the late 1850s,<sup>3</sup> hardly to be regarded as working with a unified pictorial discourse. In any case, there had been a huge physical break in the continuity of Ayutthaya painting after the Burmese irruptions of 1767 destroyed the material base of the preceding Ayutthaya culture, which itself had multiple origins.<sup>4</sup> If the modern is the relativization of the traditional or the customary, then Thai art in Phaiboon’s lifetime was faced with reinventing that tradition in order that there could be a modern.<sup>5</sup>

The second major importance is that Phaiboon’s life and work have largely disappeared from art history, despite a large number of artists and art world people who have expressed their personal indebtedness to him. The Chinese expression, ‘*qima kanhua*’, to see the flowers from high on a galloping horseback, seems to fit the intellectual frames which have developed. Thai modern art history has been reconstructed from a rapid run-through of accepted positions seen from a height which is peculiarly convenient to accepted viewpoints or prevalent ideologies, whether conservative or radical. Sometimes the art historical riders have been academics keen to reconstruct ‘Thainess’, and the artists have only wanted to see self-confirming radicalisms or order-propagating conservatism. Sometimes a vapid kind of ‘feelingness’, sentimentality, or transient irritation and even brute anger, marks the audience and artist as dominant modes of appreciation. What art was actually made for, by whom, for what reasons, is often off the art historical and artistic agenda. This sort of lack of interest in the artistic/art historical real, except perhaps for attention to patrons, also marks much transnational contemporaneity or ‘discovery’ of the Thai radical.

Understanding Phaiboon and his work allows us to reconstruct and re-enter much of modern Thai art history, which has been facilely set aside as too difficult to transmit, or too unfashionable for ‘contemporary’ taste.

### Predecessors

It can easily be forgotten that artists exist inside a family history, a genealogy of kinship that defines many historical contexts for them. This genealogy can appear to latecoming outsiders as a kind of archaeological tracing, but it is important to make the levels of a family past clear because they can be obscured or set aside by later historical ignorance, despite their positional implications for an artist in the contemporary present.

<sup>2</sup> On these painters, see No Na Pak Nam, *Khru Khongpae & Khru Thongyu*, Bangkok: Muang Boran, 1987; No Na Pak Nam, *Wat Suwannaram*, (2nd ed.), Bangkok: Muang Boran, 1997.

<sup>3</sup> On Khrua In Khong, see Wiyada Thongmitr, *Khrua In Khong’s Westernized School of Thai Painting*, Thai Painting Series No.1, Bangkok: Muang Boran, 1979. There is also a chapter on this artist in John Clark, *The Asian Modern*, Singapore: National Gallery Singapore, 2021.

<sup>4</sup> Chris Baker and Pasuk Phongpaichit, *A History of Ayutthaya: Siam in the Early Modern World*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017, reviewed by John Clark in *Southeast of Now*, Vol. 2, No. 1, March 2018, 229-236.

<sup>5</sup> See John Clark, “‘Tradition’ in Modern Thai Art”, *Southeast of Now*, Vol. 4, No. 2, October 2020, 38-94.

This is particularly important in Phaiboon's case because of his descent from a renegade Lao prince, who allied with King Taksin and later the Chakri dynasty in the turbulent politics at the end of the 18th century. Their late 19th century descendants also married into the family of King Chulalongkorn (Rama V, r. 1868-1910); see Appendix 1.

In 1685, a city in the south of Yunnan, then called Chiang Rung (now Jinghong 景洪) was attacked by bandits. The then Prince Intakumar, Princess Chantakumari and Prince Pangkham fled to their maternal cousin, King Suriyawong Sathamikaraj, who ruled the city of Vientiane (now in Laos). The King gave them autonomy to settle and rule the land at Nong Bua Lam Phu and called the city, Nakhon Khuenkan Kabkao Buaban, in present-day Northern Isan. When Pra Wao and Pra Taa, sons of Prince Pangkham, were in conflict with King Suriyawong Sathamikaraj about personal matters, they turned their backs on him and allied with King Taksin of Krung Thonburi. Together with King Taksin, Pra Taa fought and won the battle against Vientiane. It was from then that the family was allied with Siam and the relationship continued into the Chakri dynasty in Bangkok after 1782.

Prince Pangkham, father to Pra Wao and Pra Taa, was from Chiang Rung Sen Wi Fa (Sen Wi Fa means 'governor of the outpost'), which is now in Xishuangbanna, Yunnan province, China. It was Prince Prapatum Worarachasuriyawong, also known as Thao Khamphong of Ngon Kam, the prince son of Pra Wao, who founded the city of Don Motdaeng (Plateau of Red Ants). This later came to be called Ubon Ratchathani, the capital of the new province of Ubon Ratchathani from 1792. The population of Ubon celebrates their forbears every year with ceremonies and a dance procession in front of the monument of Prapatum Worarachasuriyawong (Figure 1). This ceremony involves and acknowledges the Suwannakudt (also Suvarnakuta, Suwanakuta) family, among other families who are direct descendants of the Prince, as the first families.<sup>6</sup> So Phaiboon was part of an old and very publicly-known group of lineages, in the space left by aristocracy for provincial governors, and for sons of demoted or minor wives, and craftsmen-artists.



Figure 1. Portrait sculpture of Caaw Kampong, reigned, 1767-1795, Ubon Ratchathani (1955).

<sup>6</sup> Genealogical details are provided in Appendix 1. The politics at the end of the 18th century were most complex. King Taksin (1734-1782), who defeated the Burmese after their invasion and sack of Ayutthaya in 1767, recovered the Thai kingdom with the help in North-east Siam of the renegade Lao princes who were among Phaiboon's ancestors. However, the situation then became much more fraught after the deposition and execution of King Taksin and the rise of the Chakri Dynasty which itself became engaged in large-scale wars in Laos. These raged across the then Lao state of Lan Sang, which stretched from Vientiane in the north-west to what is now Ubon Ratchathani in the south-east. On the bewildering course and intensity of this conflict, which resulted in the incorporation of a very large Lao population into what would later 'officially' become Siam, and then Thailand, see Mayoury and Pheuiphanh Ngaosyvathn, *Paths to Conflagration: Fifty Years of Diplomacy and Warfare in Laos, Thailand, and Vietnam, 1778-1828*, Ithaca, NY: Southeast Asia Program, Cornell University, 1998.

As part of the control-by-marriage alliance politics of the Bangkok court, Prachao Nongyathoe Krommuen Sanphasittiprasong (1857-1922, in post 1893-1910), the half-brother of, King Chulalongkorn, took as his consort in 1893 Ms Thao Jiengkham (Figure 2), who was a descendant via the female line from Ngon Kam. The *monthon* (circle or province) at this time was called Lao Kao and not yet *monthon* Isan.<sup>7</sup> Khun Borikutkhamket, Phaiboon's grandfather, asked for a Thai surname from King Vajiravudh (Rama VI, r. 1910-1925), who bestowed the family with the name, then written as Suvarnakuta (Mountain of Gold), in 1917.



Figure 2. Thao Jiengkham (photo from Toem, *Prawatisart Isaan*, 366, with kind permission of the publisher).

Such details need emphasizing at the outset, since it is easy to consider Phaiboon as having developed as an artist out of his own innate qualities as an outstanding local talent. That is rather than as the minor offspring of a long and known genealogy with complicated cultural origins, crossing many historically placed families and hierarchies. Indeed, one might hypothesize that some artistically talented people become artists because they are shut out of, or otherwise alienated from, claiming current status via family background. This may particularly be so if, like Phaiboon, they are marginalized by the early loss of their father, and by the undignified, or in caste terms, 'polluted', position of their mother, who was a widow when she married his father.

## Family

Phaiboon's father, Maak Suvarnakuta, as originally written, was a fourth-generation direct descendant from Prince Prapatum Worarachasuriyawong (Thao Khamphong), the founder of Ubon Ratchathani.

Phaiboon's mother was Doung Songsri, who was a widow with two children. Local custom frowned on persons of higher birth marrying a widow, who was in caste terms unclean, so Maak was ostracized by his own family. He later became a craftsman under apprenticeship of Doung's father and was close with Pho Songsri, the renowned craftsman brother of Doung. Maak became known for producing gold and silver ornaments while Doung was talented at weaving and was creative in making *mudmee* patterns for silk,

<sup>7</sup> For recent examination of some historical texts on Isan, see Iijima Akiko, "The Invention of 'Isan' History", *The Journal of the Siam Society*, Vol. 106, 2018, 171-200. Of course, 'Isan' is a nomenclature, politically motivated for the last 100 years, which elides the fact that most of the population of Isan actually speak a dialect of Lao. Thus, Isan, but for Thai cultural and political domination, could actually be understood as a large, southern extension of what is now Laos because of former French colonization north of the Mekong River. There is both an Isan and a Lanna (or Northern Thai) aspect to Phaiboon's preceding genealogical history. Chiang Tung appears in the imagined histories of the Myanmar borderlands. See Klemens Karlsson, "A place of belonging in myths and memories: the origin and early history of the imagined Tai Khuen Nation (Chiang Tung/Kyaintong Myanmar)", *Southeast Asian Studies*, Vol. 9, No. 2, August 2020, 181-210.



skills that were passed on to her first daughter. She passed away in her eightieth year with cataract cancer and was seen by her grandchildren, including Phaptawan, for the only time in 1972. Maak had died when he was thirty-eight years old, but the exact date of death is unknown, and is put between 1931 and 1933.

Phaiboon Suwannakudt was born on 1 October 1925 in Ubon Ratchathani, the fifth generation descendant from Prapatum Worarachasuriyawong.<sup>8</sup> He went to Prachanukul Provincial School, to the missionary-run Seventh Day Adventist College, and to Benjamamaharaj School in Ubon. So we may assume he had a mixed, but relatively modern, education.

Phaiboon had three siblings: Siri Suwannakudt (a headmaster of a remote school in Dejudom District, who did wax carving and represented district waxwork during annual processions in the city of Ubon Ratchathani), now deceased; Phisamai Sangkharom (née Suwannakudt, a sister married to an army medical officer), now deceased; and Lampoon Suwannakudt (b. 1929, the former head of the Nurses' College in Sanphasittiprasong Hospital, who was still living in Ubon in 2021), aged ninety two. He also had a step-brother, Pitch Unhasuwan (a teacher), recently deceased, and a step-sister, Homthong (Unhasuwan) Prajamkhai (a talented *mudmee* silk weaver and the daughter from Doung's previous marriage). She supported Phaiboon's childhood education, and Phaiboon was close to her until the Second World War.

Yet, there was another side to Phaiboon's early education in Thai literature, music, dance and folklore. He was a child, barely ten years of age in 1936 (Figure 3), when his mother took him to stay with his noble uncle (his in-law married to Maak's sister, Naknual), Khun Prom Prasart Gavee (Wanthong Promakasikorn), district governor of Khueng Nai, who was also a poet, before then moving on to stay with her brother, Luang Prachakornkasem (Poey Songsri), a district governor for Khukhan district (Sisaket). Phaiboon was effectively an adopted orphan of these two relatives, who moved with their posts, but they educated him in classical Thai literature, given his profound literary knowledge as later evidenced. We may also assume acquaintance with, if not training in, traditional dance, given Phaiboon's later display of balletic talents. His early childhood, which was so formative, thus took place after the 1932 revolution ended the absolute monarchy. Phaiboon went along between the two uncles to every position they were



Figure 3. Phaiboon Suwannakudt, aged about eight, circa 1934.

<sup>8</sup> Many details of Phaiboon's early life are drawn from No Na Paknam, "Phaiboon Suwannakudt", in Srisakdi, 1984, 23-35.

posted, mainly in North Isan. His maternal uncle, Luang Prachakornkasem, possessed three elephants, which came with the rank of his post. Phaiboon became very attached to them and was therefore nicknamed *Xang*, or ‘Elephant’ in Isan dialect. He painted a forest full of elephants at play in his first mural in the Aiyara lounge at the Montien Hotel in 1968. Unfortunately, the painting does not survive, but there is a cognate early sketch in Wat Theppol (Figure 4). He also included elephants in many other works. He often later performed the elephant walk dance for his followers and team, and even nicknamed his second daughter, Phaptawan, *Chang*, which means ‘Elephant’ in standard Thai.



Figure 4. Mural at Wat Theppol, 1970s (photo, 1992).

Phaiboon went to Bangkok around 1938 and stayed initially with one of his cousins, whose family branch had owned land in Ubon Ratchathani, which was to become the site of a school named Anakevitaya after Luang Anake, Phaiboon’s grandfather.<sup>9</sup> The cousin became an architect and appears to have employed Phaiboon off and on as a draftsman in the 1950s when Phaiboon may have stayed with him. Sometime around 1938, Phaiboon went to study at Poh-Chang Academy of Arts in Bangkok when he stayed as a temple boy at Wat Patumwanaram. In 1938, he was not in the first group of students to enter the *Rongrian Praneet Silpa* (School of Fine Arts, founded in 1933), a generation which included Fua Hariphitak, Piman Mulapramuk and Sitthidet Saenghiran (a famous sculptor).<sup>10</sup> In 1943, the School of Fine Arts became the *Mahawithayalai Silpakorn* (University of Fine Arts) where Phaiboon went on to study from 1944. During his time

<sup>9</sup> The school has quite a local standing and was discussed with family members from another branch of the Suwannakudt family on a visit around 2006.

<sup>10</sup> Piriya Krairiksh; Paothong Thongchua, et al, *Silpakam lang P.S. 2475 /Art since 1932* [Bilingual] Bangkok: Thammasat University, Thai Khadi Research Institute, BE 2526 [1983], 65. This book has a page for Phaiboon, but neither biographical details nor images.

at Silpakorn University, Phaiboon's peer, Angkarn Kalayanapong, was ordained as a monk at Wat Mahathat near the university, where Phaiboon and Prayoon Uluchata, a close friend from Silpakorn University, also joined. Angkarn was a monk for two years, but the three friends stayed in the temple and lived poorly from the monk's alms for another year. Angkarn became a great poet and artist, and Prayoon was called No Na Paknam as an art historical writer, who also gained repute under the name Pluluang as an astrologer published regularly in major newspapers.

### Education as an artist

Phaiboon studied as a sculptor (Figure 5) with Silpa Bhirasri, who taught him to listen to European classical music records, including opera, when working in the studio. At that time, Phaiboon is said to have written the constitution of the Silpakorn Students' Association, which included Lawan Daorlai (Upa-In) among its members. She was later out of favour with the Silpakorn authorities for her social radicalism before later becoming a National Artist. In Phaiboon's funeral memorial volume, No Na Paknam amiably mentioned that Phaiboon was very clever and had a very good memory.<sup>11</sup> He and other students did not see Phaiboon as studying hard, but he knew dates and chronology well and often recited and even delivered tuition to his friends on different subjects, including Anatomy, Philosophy, and the subject that other students thought most difficult, Theories of Light and Shade. Phaiboon stated in his memoir (written in 1980) that during his years at Silpakorn:

The result of my study practice inclined me to being artistic. This was not in line with many lecturers who were inclined to academic theories. Professor Feroci usually used me as studio assistant.

I am not pleased with the fact that art studies are endlessly inconclusive, and what is art is an issue, which should not be settled with pedagogy based only on forms and decorations. In contrast, art should ultimately aim to reach and enrich the minds, the souls, sensations, intellect and philosophical thoughts, among other things...

I opposed and vetoed the National Art Prize Competition because these engaged in power [struggles] through comparison of art.

When Ajarn Farang (Corrado Feroci) passed away, I decided that I would follow in his footsteps through my devotion in art practice.

I strongly disagreed and was in conflict with academic factions, particularly those who manipulated and used academia to interfere with wider knowledge in art and culture.<sup>12</sup>

In 1948, Phaiboon received his Diploma, but did not graduate with a degree. (Chalood Nimsamer who later became Dean of Painting, Sculpture, and Graphic Arts

<sup>11</sup> See No Na Paknam, "Phaiboon Suwannakudt", in Srisakdi, 1984, 23-35.

<sup>12</sup> Phaiboon Suwannakudt, "Prawat Phaiboon Suwannakudt" [History of Phaiboon Suwannakudt], Srisakdi, 1983, 18.

was among the first students actually to graduate with a BA in Sculpture in 1954.)<sup>13</sup> (Figure 6) In 1949, Silpa Bhirasri left Thailand for Italy because of economic hardship, but returned to organize the First National Thai Art Exhibition in the same year. In 1951, Prayoon Uluchata (No Na Paknam) received the second prize at this exhibition, which Phaiboon continuously criticized despite having supposedly won a bronze medal (third prize) for painting at the 3rd National Thai Art Exhibition in 1951.<sup>14</sup> By 1950, Phaiboon had left the University, but continued visiting the campus. He taught art for a while at Sirisat school where his friend, No Na Paknam, also taught in 1953 (Figure 7). On 14 May 1962, Silpa Bhirasri died in Bangkok.

Phaiboon worked as an independent artist, possibly as an architectural draftsman, as noted above, and certainly in the late 1950s and early 1960s was known as a dancer and dance teacher for groups of students. He formed the Modern Dance Group and trained Silpakorn University students between 1961-1967. There were three students—Munkorn Dhammasuree,<sup>15</sup> Prasarn Kunadilok and Tamnu Haripitak (son of Fua Haripitak)—when Phaiboon established the dance workshop. They first performed at the welcome ceremony for freshmen students, which was well received by Thammasat University and the general public attending the event. He was then invited to give a workshop and train students at Thammasat University Business School and later at the Faculty of Science in Chulalongkorn University. His performance was broadcast on Channel 4 on Thai TV.<sup>16</sup> Later, Phaiboon organized a fundraising performance for his hometown of Ubon Ratchathani in which he incorporated native folk rituals into modern dance (Figure 8). He also wrote two songs for a play performed by a young tenor, Chun Citayasothorn, that stunned the audience. He worked as Artistic Director in the early period of Wanglawoo Film, and was responsible for settings in many of the earlier movies, including *Amata Dhevi*.<sup>17</sup>

Phaptawan learnt later from No Na Paknam that, before her birth, Phaiboon had been engaged with theatre and doing stage sets at the National Theatre. In fact, he was an in-house resident with a studio inside the building. It was there that most of the materials he had hitherto worked on were destroyed in a fire that burnt down the building (then

<sup>13</sup> There are further details in Clark, 2020, note 5 above.

<sup>14</sup> Some sources doubtfully state he was awarded the Second Prize, the Silver Medal (Painting) at the 2nd National Exhibition of Art in '1949', as for example in Department of Fine Arts and various authors, *73 Thai artists from the Silpa Bhirasri School*, [Bilingual], Bangkok: CON-Tempus, 1992 [BE 2535], 73, 247, the second exhibition actually being held in 1950. This was despite Phaiboon continuously having decried this exhibition for the non-art considerations of the largely Silpakorn-staffed jury. Amnaat Yensabai, *Prawatsaat sinlapakam ruam samay khong Rattanakosin, itthipon khong sinlapakam tawan dok thi mi do sinlapakam thai, P.S. 2492 thung 2522* [History of Modern Art in the Rattanakosin era: the influence of Western art on Thai art from 1949-1979, Teacher's College teaching materials], Bangkok: Krom kaan Fuk Hat Khru, BE 2524 (1981), 93, records him as having been awarded the Third, Bronze Prize, for painting in 1951. It is likely the confusion is with Phaiboon's friend and colleague Prayoon Uluchata (No Na Paknam), who did exhibit in the 2nd National Exhibition of Fine Art in 1950, when he won the Third Prize for an abstract painting, 'Symphony in Yellow', see *73 Thai artists from the Silpa Bhirasri School*, 1992, 250.

<sup>15</sup> See his account in Srisakdi, 1983, 79.

<sup>16</sup> This channel began operating in 1955 so the TV broadcast is presumed sometime thereafter.

<sup>17</sup> Thai movie databases indicate this film was made in 1949, so Phaiboon's involvement with movie set decoration must have begun about the time he left Silpakorn University with a Diploma.





Figure 5. Phaiboon Suwannakudt at Silpakorn University, circa 1944-48.



Figure 6. Class photograph with Silpa Bhirasri, circa. 1948. Phaiboon Suwannakudt is at centre, No Na Paknam is far left, Angkarn Kalayanaphong is fourth from left.



Figure 7. With friends at dinner, 1950s. Phaiboon Suwannakudt is seated at extreme left and No Na Paknam is third from left. Angkarn Kalayanaphong may be the figure behind Phaiboon.

belonging to the Fine Arts Department), probably on 9 November 1960.<sup>18</sup>

Phaiboon often mentioned with high respect Princess Laksamilawan (1889-1961, spouse of King Rama VI), who was involved with theatre and was brutally murdered by a gardener. In an article included in the funeral book he wrote:



Figure 8. Phaiboon Suwannakudt as a dancer (in centre), from 1950s to early 1960, probably at Tha Tian.

The beauty of Dance came to me from the fact that I travelled around Isan. I moved along with the audible music nearby when I worked in the workshops inside Silpakorn. With the mind of a street-side dreamer and free thinker, then I took the course every Wednesday in the hall of Silpakorn to learn Relative Art and Music Appreciation from Pra Jenduriyang, the Dean of Musicology then. In addition, I studied Composition of Art and Anatomy from Ajarn Sanan Silpakorn, which I incorporated into movement and diligently worked out with my own limbs day in day out for more than ten years. Princess Laksamilawan generously shared and exchanged freely her knowledge on the discipline of Thai classical dance and elaborated further on the gestures of Thai dance, and on the collaboration in the whole performance which included the work of conductor, composer, actors, musicians, architects, designers, make-up artists, costume designers. I now prostrate myself on the concrete pavement where her Highness' sad and lonely soul is laid for the last time and could never imagine what had happened there.

In the early 1960s, Phaiboon became involved in set design and became close friends with Arai Shigemi, dance director of Shôchiku Theatre Company. Then he worked with Tom R. Hill and Jim Dudastadt<sup>19</sup> on the stage design for the production of Rogers and Hammerstein's *South Pacific* which played at Thammasat University.

<sup>18</sup> See Mattani Moj dara Rutnin, *Dance, Drama, and Theatre in Thailand: The Process of Development and Modernization*, Tokyo: Centre for East Asian Cultural Studies for UNESCO & Toyo Bunko, 1993, 225, also for details of new theatre construction after the 1960 fire.

<sup>19</sup> Head of the audio-visual unit at United States Overseas Mission (USOM).

Phaptawan recalled that there was a time when Phaiboon could have been involved with Javanese and Balinese theatrical groups who made tours to Thailand. That is why his children had the leftover fabric from their shows to custom-tailor into dresses.

He was mentioned by Hiram C. Woodward in a 1964 Bangkok review of the visiting Merce Cunningham troupe:

Noting the comment that Merce Cunningham has been neglected in the U.S. whilst praised abroad, it might be said that Thailand herself has choreographers, notably Phaiboon Suwannakudt and his followers, who, with neither professional training nor trained dancers, achieve remarkable results but who have never performed in Thammasat Auditorium before a distinguished audience.<sup>20</sup>

### Inspiration for other artists

Phaiboon was known to be the inspiration for many artists, including Lawan Daorlai, Damrong Wong-upparat, Tawee Rachanekorn, Panya Vijnthanasarn, Pratuang Emcharoen, and Mit Jai-in.

Lawan stated that Phaiboon was her idol. Tawee said the same. Pratuang mentioned him in one of his many public talks as an inspiration. Surachai Chantimaton (Nga Carawan, founder of a famous music group) mentioned him in a published article. Surachai was the brother of Sathien Chantimaton, who had known Phaiboon via his writings and the Wat Teetuat circle.<sup>21</sup> Thepsiri Saksopha described Phaiboon as an artist, who had inspired him to take up free-form dance. Mit Jai-in was inspired as an orphan to study art, following in Phaiboon's footsteps.<sup>22</sup>

At Wat Theppol, Phaiboon trained some monks, who were interested in painting, and also others, who had left the monkhood. At Tha Tien, he trained dancers and also, while in Wat Theppol, he trained young monks and tutored some students wishing to enter Silpakorn University from Poh-Chang Academy of Arts, for free. Numthong Saetang, who was seventeen at the time, was among students who went to work with Phaiboon in Muang Boran for three months, along with Waravut Chusaengthong, and Panya Vijnthanasarn for two years. Panya spoke in some detail to Sandra Cate, stating that he learned his commitment to the life of an artist from working with Phaiboon Suwannakudt:<sup>23</sup>

At Poh-Chang, they tried to make you draw a nice, neat line but I didn't like the discipline and control required. Then I worked with Khru Phaiboon and he taught me about the artist's life. Through his example, I came to appreciate the necessity of line and discipline.

Phaiboon's example taught Panya that life itself is the inspiration for art and that

<sup>20</sup> *Bangkok World*, 6 November 1964; thanks to Hiram C. Woodward for providing this.

<sup>21</sup> Online interview with Phaptawan Suwannakudt, April 2019.

<sup>22</sup> As noted in the funeral volume.

<sup>23</sup> Cate 2003, 139.



art practice requires seeking to understand and appreciate the art of others—old and new—by constantly reading about art, looking at art, and discussing art. In Panya's interpretation, artistic ideas must flow from “real experience, from life. And the artists must have inspiration from the life outside the studio”.<sup>24</sup> Phaiboon attracted young people in the arts who were always at his home.

In 1970, Phaiboon went to see an Indian-educated scholar, known only as Manut, who resided with his wife in Banglamung, Chonburi. Manut was involved in a community project in a temple nearby called Chittapawan Witthayalai (also romanized as Djitthabhawan College of Consciousness Pavilion). Phaiboon was not involved in the founding or management of the place, but sometimes gave lectures, and also took Hiram C. Woodward there to talk to the monks. It was then that the nine-year old Mit Jai-in, who as a novice attended Phaiboon's lectures, decided to commit to art practice.<sup>25</sup> Mit later disrobed when Kittiwutto, the abbot of Chittapawan Witthayalai, infamously said that killing a Communist was no wrongdoing and therefore the doer did not commit a sin (*kha kummunit mai bap*).<sup>26</sup> Chittapawan Witthayalai was broken up in 1979, but there was an attempted revival in 2013 around the time of the Bangkok shutdown.

### Political attitudes

Phaiboon protested against the unlawful election during the General Phibunsongkram government in March 1957 (*luak tang phai faay*) when Phao Sriyanond was in charge of the police. One unlawful incident led to another intervention in 1957 with General Sarit Thanarat gaining power. Later, it is inferred by Phaptawan that Phaiboon had implicitly (or even actively, if secretly) supported radicals thereafter until the 1970s.<sup>27</sup> One of the Muang Boran artisans even went to the Nakhon Pathom campus of Silpakorn University in 1977, where Phaptawan was studying for her BA in Languages, to tell her he was going to join the guerrillas in the jungle. Also that year, a collection of short stories, *Langkhen*, that included Phaiboon's writing, was published but banned by the dictatorship of Thanin Kraivichien. In 1978, a painter in Phaiboon's team was arrested and imprisoned for fifteen months for an incident unrelated to politics, but was charged as *pai sangkhom* (dangerous to society) when martial law was declared. This resulted in

<sup>24</sup> Cate 2003, 139-140, and 191, note 41; Cate 2003 139 citing John Hoskins, 1984, 165.

<sup>25</sup> As he mentioned in a conversation with Phaptawan Suwannakudt in 2011 in Chiang Mai before he exhibited at the Biennale of Sydney.

<sup>26</sup> See John L.S. Girling, *Thailand: Society and Politics*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981, 157. On Kittiwutto, see Charles F Keyes, “Political crisis and militant Buddhism in contemporary Thailand”, in Bardwell L. Smith, ed., *Religion and Legitimation of Power in Thailand, Laos, and Burma*, Anima Books, 1978, 147-164; on killing communists, see 153, and on the Chittapawan College, see 148-150. See also “The Right-wing political monks” in Somboon Suksaram, *Buddhism and Politics: The Political Roles, Activities and Involvement of the Thai Sangha*, PhD Thesis, University of Hull, 1979, 259-273.

<sup>27</sup> There is no doubt this was a very dangerous time in Thai politics for those with publicly declared left wing, or just anti-establishment, views. See the entries for 1949-1970s, in Junya Yimprasert, *60 Years of Oppression and Suppression in Thailand*, Bangkok: Action for People's Democracy in Thailand, 2011, including murder of at least six MPs and former MPs. These trends are analyzed in Benedict Anderson, “Murder and Progress in Modern Siam” (originally in *New Left Review*, no 181, May-June, 1990) in his *The Spectre of Comparisons: Nationalism, Southeast Asia and the World*, London: Verso, 1998, 174-191.



dispersal of the mural painting team. In effect, it was left to Phaiboon, Pi-Seb Theerasak Petchyingvorapong (his senior assistant), Phaptawan and few young apprentices, like Phi Tid No Na Paknam's nephew, to complete the rest of the projects at Muang Boran and the Montien Hotel, which overran into 1979.

In 1980, Phaiboon sent a post card to Phaptawan, while working as an English teacher in a Refugee Camp in Nong Khai, which read:

Bangkok is not as beautiful as the artwork that you and I have been working hard to build. There are these Major Generals and Deputy Major Generals who keep on fighting, struggling for power, bellowing at each other on the radio.

There were times when a non-artist *sahai* (comrade) came to see Phaiboon at the painting site in Talingchan where he worked with the team on the Regent Hotel project in 1982; Phaptawan saw more than once that Phaiboon wrote him a cheque.

### Family

Around 1955, Phaiboon met his future wife, Prayat Wongsas (called Siriwan by Phaiboon), who was born in January 1933. She was the daughter of a traditional herbalist from Chiang Mai. He was possibly a Thai Yai from Qian Dong (黔東) in present-day Yunnan, like the historical Chiang Rung mentioned above. Despite her father squandering his fortune on minor wives, Siriwan was educated at the Catholic Regina Coeli College in Chiang Mai. She wanted to become a doctor, but did not graduate and instead was forced into an arranged marriage. In 1954, she had a child called Phi Ut Phenphrapha Wongsas, born out of marriage. Siriwan decided there was no future in the relationship and left for Bangkok where she met Phaiboon and lived with him from the late 1950s.

Phaiboon's first daughter Plengsakoon, who became an ICU nurse and instructor, was born in September 1957, and his second daughter, Phaptawan (Picture of the Sun), nicknamed *Chang* (Elephant) by Phaiboon, was born in November 1959. She became a painter after studying languages at Silpakorn University. His other children were: Earth, his first son, born in November 1961, who became an electronic engineer after obtaining a scholarship to study in France; his third daughter, Krataay, born in September 1963, who became a painter trained at Chiang Mai University; and his second son, Nakhimit, born in October 1965, who became a designer trained at the Faculty of Decorative Arts, Silpakorn University. In December 1971, there followed the birth of Jong, another daughter, who became a manager and accountant trained at Thammasat University. She was born to Siriwan by a different father, but despite knowing this, Phaiboon always acknowledged her as his daughter. He always told other people that he had seven children.

### Onset of mural painting

Phaiboon had been a sculptor until Silpa Bhirasri saw one of his paintings and told him to go and study the old styles. Those active in studying temple murals were his friends, No Na Paknam and Angkarn Kalayanapong, but Phaiboon essentially taught

himself how to paint them. His only predecessor was Hem Wetchakon, the realistic painter in the Wat Phra Kaeo manner. Phaiboon later studied with craftsmen during his time at the Muang Boran (Ancient City) from 1972, among whom were workers in coloured-matter ornament and lacquer painting. He also met Ajarn Thongruang Aimoute, the stucco master from Phetchaburi and Ratchaburi, to whom he subcontracted stucco work for the Montien Hotel project in 1978, while he made his team learn the technique. He had already been to Laos, and had surveyed Ayutthaya period paintings with No Na Paknam. In Phaiboon's funeral book, Mai Rakmoo states that during the time when he was a temple boy at Wat Sam Pluem, he served the venerable monk Somdej Pra Teerayanmuni.<sup>28</sup> The abbot mentioned a mural at Wat Taku in Pakthongchai, his hometown in Isan, to Phaiboon.<sup>29</sup> He remembered, and later made the effort to see the 300-year old mural. This was one of the catalysts for Phaiboon's love of Thai painting.<sup>30</sup>

### Life and friends

Phaiboon took the murals and other wall decorations at Wat Pho, Bangkok, as his model. He frequently visited during 1967-1969 and befriended the owners of a group of souvenir art shops. He started training their children to do contemporary dance, choreographed around a play he wrote called *Thipnijaay Ao Siam* (The Tale of the Gulf of Siam). They danced at a warehouse near the pier, provided by the group. For him, it was a place to work and study. He went with one of the souvenir shopkeepers by long-tailed boat to stay at Wat Theppol and was introduced to Ajarn Boonma, the abbot. Phaiboon was enthralled and decided that he would complete a mural for the *ubosot* (ordination hall) of the temple for free. During long school holidays and at weekends, he left his children at the temple whilst he commuted between the two sites. For a living, he did tourist watercolours of river scenes from Tha Tien Pier. His watercolours appeared on the front page of *Chao Krung* literary magazine where he periodically published poems and verses.<sup>31</sup>

Phaiboon and Siriwantha lived, and moved, from one friend's house to another. They had to live separately when Siriwantha went back to stay with her family on the birth of their first daughter, Plengsakoon, and they did not reunite until Phaiboon got his first paid job, as a writer for *Phim Thai* daily newspaper. He was also paid as part of the

<sup>28</sup> See Srisakdi, 1983, 40.

<sup>29</sup> This temple was visited by Phaptawan in 2017 during a residency. See [samritresidency.com/residency-blog/i-observed-rhythm-of-life-within-the-culture-through-which-i-explored-local-histories-phaptawan-suwannakudt-sydney](http://samritresidency.com/residency-blog/i-observed-rhythm-of-life-within-the-culture-through-which-i-explored-local-histories-phaptawan-suwannakudt-sydney)

<sup>30</sup> Mural painting in public sites, like hotels or offices, was not without its later critics, who thought some of the neo-traditional mural painting of the 1980s was more innovative in its range of content and stylistics. "Critics and artists themselves often dismiss many of these mural projects as 'just traditional' or just in 'Thai style'. Explicitly contrasting the work with that of Chalermchai [Kositpipat] and Panya [Vijinthanasarn] at Wat Buddhapadipa, where they 'dared to record the political situation and sense of place'." Cate 2003, 180, n. 79, citing an interview with Somporn Rodboon, the art historian and curator, in 1995. Idiosyncratic and personalist at best, it is doubtful if the work of either Chalermchai or Panya merits the term 'innovation' aside from its 'Popist' tendencies.

<sup>31</sup> This was directly mentioned in the 2019 interview with Ruangchai, and is discussed somewhat vaguely by Mairakmoo in Srisakdi, 1983, 40.

editorial team, and wrote critical essays on film under the pen name, *Lilarom*. He even wrote radical political commentary under the lesser-known pen name, *Ab-sa-daek*.

Phaiboon continued to live a nomadic life, even when there were more children, moving his family from one rental house to another, but remained on the Thonburi side of Bangkok. There were many visitors from art and literary circles, including Pratuang Emjaroen and Chang Sae-tang (Tang Chang), Angkarn Kalayanapong, Nandha, Phaiboon Chanama, Sathien Chantimatorn, and Prince Chanjirayurachanee (M.C. Chand Chirayu Rajani, also known to Hiram C. Woodward as Prince Chand or Than Chand), amongst others. Without much knowledge of, or pretensions towards, a notion of the avant-garde, these artists and writers fairly self-consciously constituted an anti-establishment art world outside that of Silpakorn University and official art exhibitions.<sup>32</sup> There were many occasions when Phaiboon engaged his friends in passionate and vigorous debate and conversations lasting through the night. Children went to sleep next to Phaiboon whilst the debate continued.

Phaiboon also supported people from Isan, many of whom were from outside the family and came to stay with Phaiboon, and learn from him, in his rented accommodations. One of these was Pongsak Chantaruka, from Ubon Ratchathani, who arrived in the 1960s when he was a teenager before becoming a songwriter and film-maker; he was awarded the title of National Artist in 2014.

Over ten or so years, between 1968-1979, Phaiboon says he frequently saw Sulak Sivaraksa at Suksitsayam (Education Siam, located at Sam Yan) across the Rama IV Rd opposite Montien Hotel.<sup>33</sup> This was the space where Phaiboon met many scholars and friends in the literary world. Sulak included Phaiboon in a periodical talk series on art at Thai Khadi Sueksa (Thai Studies) at Thammasat University. Angkarn Kalayanapong, the poet, and Chulatas Payakranont (Chulathat Phyakhranonda), the cultural historian, were among other speakers. The latter argued with Phaiboon for having disrespected Thai culture by taking temple and court art to hotels. Positioning himself as the fount of orthodoxy, Chulatas opposed the influence of Western oil painting, and thought that red was a religious ground colour for the display of heavenly beings in temples, and that blue had never appeared as a ceiling colour.<sup>34</sup> In fact, it is to be seen in murals from at least the 1860s. Phaiboon countered that art is actually a public facility. The hotel was a new public space and the hotel lobby has its function as an assembly hall, a communal space, an

<sup>32</sup> It is very difficult to say ‘outside’ since many of these figures were linked by marriage to other parts of the Thai elite, if not to Thai artists in the patronage of sections of the elite. This elite has been so tightly and comprehensively interlocked by marriage and descent genealogies since the late 19th century, it is difficult to conceive of art figures standing even notionally outside, as one might expect with various kinds of the European avant-garde. On the interleaving of sections of the Thai elite, see in detail, Nishizaki Yoshinori, “Birds of a Feather: Anand Panayarachun, elite families and network monarchy in Thailand”, *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 51(1-2), 2020, 197-242.

<sup>33</sup> Its journal, *Sangkhomsat parithat* (Social Science Review), was founded in 1963 and its thought “tried to merge socialism and this-worldly Buddhism”; see Chris Baker and Pasuk Phongpaichit, *A History of Thailand*, second edition, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009, 185. In a later telephone interview with Phaptawan Suwannakudt in April 2019, Sulak said they were not so close.

<sup>34</sup> Chulatas had some very conservative views on what constituted tradition in Thai art. See the discussion in John Clark, “‘Tradition’ in Modern Thai Art”, *Southeast of Now*, Vol. 4, No. 2, October 2020.

exposed space where the interchange of views, Thai and international, took place.

Phaiboon kept a studio separate from home, which he was given by friends or rented when he could afford it. When the children were old enough, Phaiboon usually brought one or two, if not all of them, along with him and usually involved them in the activities of his work when he travelled between worksites. Towards the end of the 1970s when Phaiboon was terminally ill, he settled in one rental house in Soi Wat Suwannaram where there were some painters living in the house. The painters, apart from Pi-Seb, were from Isan. They commuted between worksites while Phaiboon went for dialysis treatment at King Mongkutklao Hospital twice a week. This continued until the end of his life. The family moved to the land in Talingchan, which was given to Phaiboon on a lifetime contract lease by Wat Theppol, the temple where Phaiboon had started painting murals in the late 1960s.



Figure 9. Mural at Sriviat Kaiyang, around 1969; photo by Aroon Peempoonsophon, courtesy Nakhimit Suwannakudt; detail opposite.

### What is art for? Poverty and life values

Phaiboon mentioned publicly on many occasions that artists, who sold their art, were no better than prostituting themselves by selling their soul. He sold watercolours when the family had no food, but not without lamenting that he had sold his soul. He never exhibited his work in a gallery and did not want to send his work to competitions. He would rather paint a mural in exchange for free food to feed the family. During school holidays, he boarded his children at Wat Theppol in Talingchan where they could eat properly. Phaiboon painted a mural for Shusri (now deceased), his relative from Ubon Ratchathani, who ran a successful BBQ chicken restaurant called Sriviat Kaiyang near the Boxing Stadium on Ratchadamnoen Road (Figure 9). The building has since been demolished, but the mural was rescued by Phaiboon's son, Nakhimit, in around 2007







and is now restored to the family house in Talingchan.

The oil painter, Uab Sanasen, talked to Phaptawan in 1993 when he commissioned her to paint a mural project at Wat Jaksapataram in Uthai Thani:

What a bunch of poor kids you were! Your Dad never thought of family before his art and ideology. Every time I (Uab) saw him (Phaiboon), he asked for a few pennies to make ends meet for the family at least for another day.

Phaiboon, however agreeable his personality, was socially irresponsible with regard to the needs of his family. Phaptawan accepted that there were days when children went hungry and, on many occasions, the first meal of the day was late at night when Phaiboon came home with chicken and sticky rice, often from his relative's Srivivat Kaiyang restaurant. Siriwantha agreed, saying that once she went to confront him at a publishing house where he worked. Suwannee Sukonta, a renowned author who had graduated from Silpakorn University, pulled off a gold ring from her finger and gave it to Siriwantha.

Phaiboon systematically and routinely burnt rolls of drawings (elaborate fine line drawing with ink on drafting paper), which he had used to supervise the team and had taken months to produce. They were actual-size drawings with fine detail to be used as master designs for his murals, that were transferred to a blueprint and traced with carbon paper. All these tracings were destroyed after use Phaptawan once contested this habit of burning the underdrawings, which meant the wilful destruction of family capital, but Phaiboon simply pointed his index finger at his head, then hand and chest and said: "Work stays here, not them drawings. I don't want you to learn to copy from old materials. I want you all to learn how to create with hands, eyes, and mind."

There were some aspects of Phaiboon's approach to working and finished drawings, which overlapped with his psychology of art.

Tan Kudt (Phaiboon) called his approach the "power of visualization"; it anticipates Panya's [Vijinthanasarn] own pedagogical approach. In an incident recalled by his daughter Phaptawan, Tan Kudt asked her to paint an elephant. "But how do you want the hide?" she asked him. "Like elephant hide," he replied, forcing her to rely on her own memory and imagination.<sup>35</sup>

This method of visual concentration and destruction of drawings had its consequences in a certain repetitiveness of motifs and technique that some apprentice artists found irksome.

According to one artist, who worked with him, Phaiboon would sketch his designs for the murals, but his apprentices would paint them. "He said he was the conductor and all the people are musicians. The conductor does not paint, but he controls," this former apprentice said. When Phaiboon asked him what he would like to paint, the young man replied, "Birds." Phaiboon then began to indicate perches for birds

<sup>35</sup> Cate, 2003, 63, via Gampell 1995.



Figure 10. Chang Sae-tang, Phaiboon Suwannakudt and Pratuang Emjaroen with a child, 1970, courtesy of Gerald Flavin.



Figure 11. Phaiboon singing with Gap Areerak in a yellow shirt, a student from Silpakorn at Wat Theppol. 1970, courtesy Gerald Flavin.

everywhere in his trees and asked the assistant to paint in the birds. He left his position with Phaiboon after two years.<sup>36</sup>

### Works by Phaiboon, 1960s-late 1970s

In 1967-68, Phaiboon did a painting of an elephant herd in the Aiyara lounge at the Montien Hotel, but this building was demolished and subsequently rebuilt. However, he did not confine himself to reinventing murals, but also published as a writer. In 1969, he wrote the critical short story, *Khieuw Muu Paa* (The Boar's Tooth, see Appendix 3), which

<sup>36</sup> Cate, 2003, 63.

was published in 1971 in the September issue of the literary journal, *Kanyayon Nalin*. This journal brought out collected poems, essays and short novels in a twelve-month series, and was edited by Rong Wongsawan and friends for Fuengnakorn Publishing. It was part of the humanistic anti-establishment culture that led to the student revolt of 1973.

Here we see, in Phaiboon, the continuation of a vivid oral storytelling tradition, but one admixed with a flavour of lived history. Phaiboon carried around in his head this habit, but also the accumulated moral knowledge buried in popular sayings attributed to his forbears. Indeed, he often recited the proverbs in Lao of Pra Taa from the 18th century (which we have translated in Appendix 2). Three brief extracts indicate a kind of populist identification between the ruler and the ruled, but an individualistic awareness of the limits of one's own rice bowl. Their pithy, earthy quality also points to the ruler understanding the farmers, and the creatures on whom their livelihood depends.

When you eat a good serving do not forget your empty vessel.  
When you are king, you ride on an elephant's back with a royal gazebo.  
Do not forget your people on a leach-infested buffalo's back.

Phaiboon commuted to his projects from Wat Theppol (Figure 4), where he left some of his children to board on and off until 1971. In 1976-77, Phaiboon, who was ill by that time, did not go into that temple but arranged for Phaptawan and some painters to go back and paint for the temple during some weekends when the window panels and ceiling were added. However, the mural remained uncompleted.<sup>37</sup>

In 1970, Phaiboon painted at the Dusit Thani Hotel (Figure 12, opposite, 1970, photographed by Aroon Peampoonsopon; and Figure 23). He rented a studio and met three foreigners: Gerald Flavin from the Peace Corps, living in Sydney in 1996; Dwight Robinson, in the process of relocating to Texas; and Tony (surname unknown), an Australian diplomat. They were neighbours to the studio Phaiboon rented, whilst Phaiboon worked on the Montien Hotel and Dusit Thani murals. Phaiboon took these three foreigners to meet the artists, Pratuang Emjaroen and Chang Sae-tang (Figures 10, 11).

Among others, Phaiboon also took Phaptawan to meet Venetia Walkey (1932-2017), a trained sculptor and then wife of Commander James Michael Burnard, for the first time in 1971 at Venetia's exhibition on Wireless Road. Phaiboon made a drawing of her son, Justin, which is now kept in her former home in Lamphun province. The same year, Phaiboon and his family moved and lived briefly in Samut Prakan, where Phaiboon was appointed general manager to a new shopping centre, a post which in the end he did not take up. The family briefly moved to a house by the railway near Bangyirua district where Jong was born in December, then moved again to the house in Soi Wat Suwannaram the following year.

In 1972 (some sources say he started in 1969), he completed four mural paintings at Bhubing Rajanives Palace, Chiang Mai, prior to the visit of Queen Elizabeth II of Britain. Phaiboon's principal early patron was Goh Wan, who ran a construction company and

<sup>37</sup> There are Suwannakudt family plans to complete the mural in 2022 if financial and other circumstances allow.







whom Phaiboon thought of as his brother. Goh, which is a Chinese term for ‘uncle’, owned the Montien Hotel and was responsible, through contacts at the Office of His Majesty’s Principal Private Secretary, for the construction of the Bhubing Rajanives Palace in Chiang Mai, where Phaiboon did the murals.

Between 1972-75, Phaiboon undertook a very large scheme of paintings over fourteen walls in the reconstruction of a Rattanakosin period building, the Dusit Mahaprasat Palace, at Muang Boran (the Ancient City), a large zone of reduced-size reconstructions of ancient buildings and some moved buildings in Samut Prakan (Figure 13). This was financed

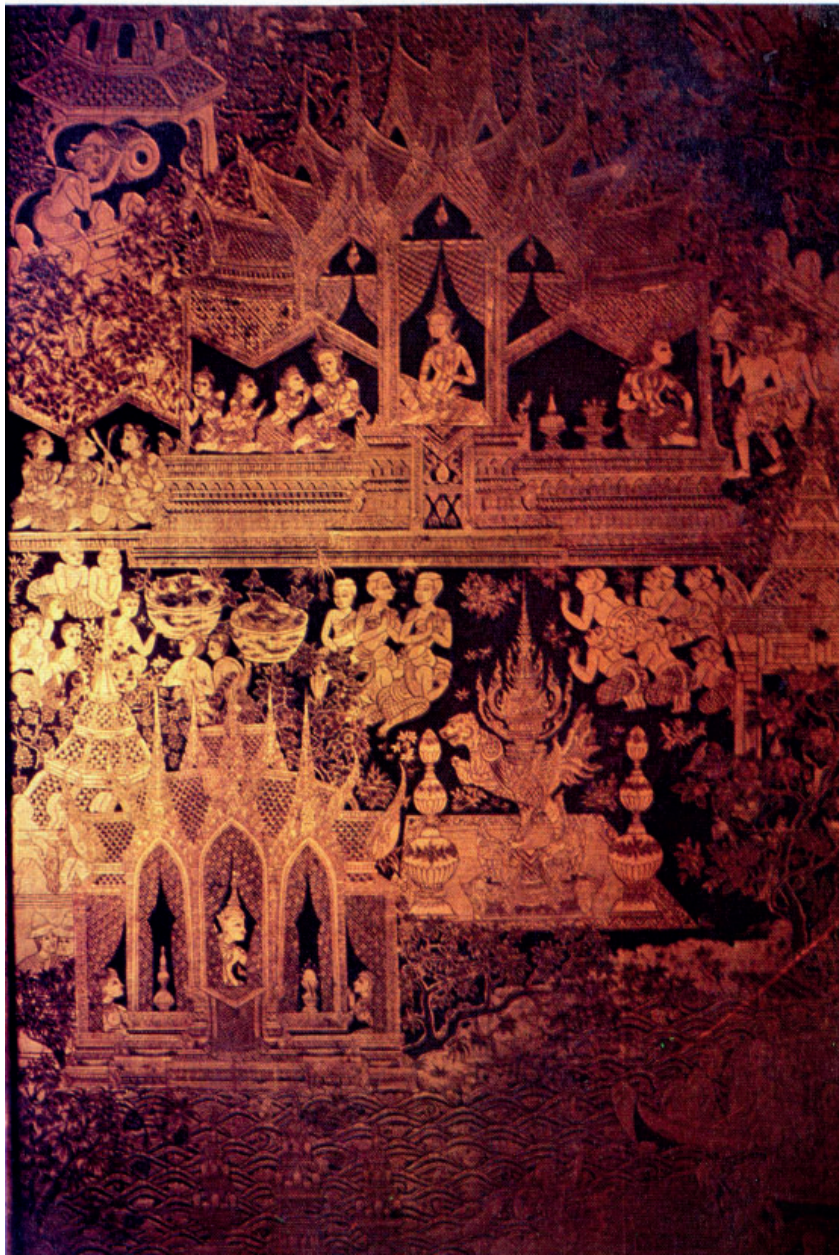


Figure 13. Drawn by Phaiboon, executed by unknown lacquer craftsman, 1973, in Dusit Mahaprasat Throne Hall, Muang Boran (Ancient City)

by Lek Viriyabhban (Sia Lek), the Mercedes Benz concessionary for Thailand and the owner of Muang Boran, to whom Phaiboon also acted as his art adviser.

Sia Lek was noted for his short temper and the self-centredness with which he drove his projects. Phaiboon would get up at 4.00 am, often with Phaptawan, to be driven to Sia Lek's home near Lumpini Park. Sia Lek would discuss Muang Boran work with Phaiboon when he got up at 7.00 am, after which Phaiboon, and sometimes Phaptawan as well, would then be driven to Muang Boran 90 minutes' drive away. Phaiboon would instruct the painting team and work with them until 9.00 or 10.00 pm when he would be driven back home, only to get up again at 4.00 am the next day.

Whilst at Muang Boran, the relationship with No Na Paknam became more intense with debates about academic findings on temple murals. One of No Na Paknam's children, Tit, and also his nephew, Thit, went to live with Phaiboon's team at the Dusit Mahaprasat Throne Hall painting site.

In 1973, Phaiboon obtained a formal contract to work at the Muang Boran. There were thirty students working under Phaiboon, including some from Achiwasin Art School. One of these, briefly, was Pi-Seb Theerasak Petchyingvorapong,<sup>38</sup> who acted like an elder brother to 'protect' Phaptawan against unwanted attention from the male members of the team. Others included Panya Vijnthanasarn from Poh-Chang and students from Thaijiwitsin, another private art school in Thonburi. At that time, Phaiboon was travelling a lot so eventually the group broke up.

In 1975, Phaiboon, very tired from overwork, fell off his bicycle in the Muang Boran. He was admitted to Mahesak Hospital where he had kidney stones removed, but also endured kidney failure. Phaiboon began renal dialysis in King Mongkut Hospital under Royal Medical Support funding by HM King Bhumibol from 1977 until his death in 1982.

Nevertheless between 1974-1976, he painted the Phimanman Bedroom Suite at the Montien Hotel (Figure 14), and in 1977, completed a large mural project in the Montien Hotel lobby, which included the Montienthip ballroom (Figure 15), discussed by Apinan (1992: 78, 108, 181-182). This mural was painted on silk stretched over plywood (10 panels), in an area on the top floor of the four-storey parking space building near Suriwongse Centre. The mural was designed and supervised by Phaiboon and a team led by Pi-Seb Theerasak Petchyingvorapong. The team was joined by Phaptawan, who was then studying at Suksanari High School near Wongwien Lek, after school and during holidays. The work continued while Phaiboon was in hospital.

After Thanin Kraivichien came to power in 1976 and declared martial law in 1977, in the atmosphere of fear and real danger for some, most of the Isan artists left during the time of the Montien Hotel projects directed by Phaiboon. After the Thammasat massacres of 6 October 1976,<sup>39</sup> this fear touched many lives. The next year, Phaptawan was admitted into the Faculty of Arts at Silpakorn University, Nakhon Pathom campus, to study English and German, against her wishes. She had wanted to study at the

<sup>38</sup> Pi-Seb made the only known recording of an interview with Phaiboon, which was transcribed by Phaptawan in about 1998.

<sup>39</sup> See Thongchai Winichakul, *Moments of Silence: The Unforgetting of the October 6, 1976, Massacre in Bangkok*, Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2020.



Faculty of Fine Arts, but Phaiboon would not allow it, considering the artist's life to be economically too precarious. Nevertheless, Phaptawan still commuted from Nakhon Pathom to the Montien Hotel to help in the team depleted by the exodus of the Isan artists.



Figures 14, 15, 16. Montien Hotel, 1976-8; (above) mural in Phimarnman Suite; (below) hotel lobby; (opposite) Garuda, at Montienthip Room; photos by Kapkaew Suwannakudt, 2021









Figures 17. Pratuang Emjaroen, Naknimit Suwannakudt and Chang Sae-tang perform water libation at Phaiboon Suwannakudt's funeral.

### Artist friends

Pratuang Emjaroen and Chang Sae-tang often went to see Phaiboon at his different houses over two decades, and even visited him at the hospital before he passed away. Phaiboon took foreigners to see Chang and was asked, “Why are you always taking *farang* to see that madman?” It was during this time that Phaptawan noticed that a pile of published books of *Thepkawee* (Concrete Poetry) containing Chang’s poems had appeared at their Wat Suwannaram home.<sup>40</sup> Phaiboon’s wife, Sriwanna, did not like the friendship between Phaiboon and Chang, and later disliked Chang visiting Phaiboon in hospital, dressed completely in black as was Chinese custom, since in North Thailand, wearing black is regarded as bad luck. Chang wore white for the first time at Phaiboon’s funeral (Figure 17). Later, her mother did not know Phaptawan was going secretly to see Chang whilst he was dying in hospital. Phaiboon had taken Phaptawan when she was a child to visit Chang’s house and sometimes to see him at Sanam Luang where he sold ginger tea from a cart. She often saw him around 1978 and visited regularly in 1981, by an arrangement of Phaiboon, to give her training in art, aesthetics and poetry. She was treated very well by him in a manner that made her feel proud. By that time, Chang did not welcome visitors so she was an exception since he respected Phaiboon and addressed Phaptawan as *Luk* (my child).

<sup>40</sup> Recently, Chang Sae-tang has been much noticed in international art circles. See David Teh., ed. *‘Misfits’ Pages from a loose-leaf modernity: Rox Lee, Tang Chang, and Bagyi Aung Soe*. Berlin: Haus der Kulturen der Welt, 2017; Orianna Cacchione, curator and editor. *Tang Chang: the painting that is painted with poetry is profoundly beautiful*. Chicago: Smart Museum, 2018.

### Last works

In 1979, Phaiboon painted the background painting from Burmese sources for the opening titles of the film, *Lueat Suphan* (The Blood of Suphan), directed by Chert Songsri, about a historical conflict between the Thai and Burmese (Figures 18, 19).



Figures 18, 19. Backdrops for the credits in the film *Lueat Suphan*, 1979. Images from the Thai Film Archive. Thanks to Kong Rithdee.



In 1980, he painted more murals, including ‘Cosmology and the Universe in Thai Thought’ at the Bangkok Peninsula Hotel (Figures 20-25), Ratchadamri Road, later the Regent Hotel, then renamed as the Four Seasons Hotel and now the Anantara Siam Bangkok Hotel. These murals were posthumously completed by his team working under Phaptawan, the first woman to lead a Thai mural painting team. Phaiboon never saw the painting installed on the wall and ceiling in the hotel.



Figure 20. Phaiboon Suwannakudt, mural “Coronation of the King” on the staircase at the Anantara Siam Bangkok Hotel (then Peninsular Hotel), nearing completion in 1982.

Figure 21 (opposite). Detail of Figure 16.

In a letter to Phaptawan written on his deathbed, Phaiboon wrote:

My child Chang, my heart is weakening and now I am saying goodbye. It may be no later than my Birthday this Friday. Dad....

... please take care of yourself. I am concerned for the painting. Try and finish setting the work up at the Hotel. I don’t want to cause the Hotel so much trouble.

Por Kudt (Daddy Kudt)

Phaiboon passed away on 20 October 1982 from kidney failure at Mongkut Klao Military Hospital, Bangkok. He was granted a Royal Cremation presided over by HRH Princess Sirindhorn.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>41</sup> At the request of HRH Princess Sirindhorn, Phaptawan became a part-time teacher at the SUPPORT Royal Foundation, which trains artisans in several fields. Phaiboon’s painting team was taken over by Phaptawan to do further mural projects from 1982-1996, and some of these, known as the Tan Kudt Group, exhibited together five times. In 1996, it disbanded with Phaptawan’s move to Australia. Some members later worked occasionally for projects organized by her sister, Krataay.











Figure 22-23 (opposite). Details of Processions on Land.

Figure 24-25 (above and right). Details of village scenes.

From the mural “Coronation of the King” at Anantara Siam Hotel (formerly Bangkok Peninsula Hotel), circa 1982.





### In conclusion: The significance for Thai art of Phaiboon Suwannakudt and his work

Phaiboon stands out as a figure of the ideal artist for his peers, but also as an art historical marker whose work stands between, and integrates, different kinds of art.

As an ideal for other artists, Phaiboon stands as someone trained in a metropolitan art school, who carries a very deep regional culture to the metropolitan centre. Phaiboon was the ideal of the survivor outside the academic system of art training and salon exhibition, whose inbredness he loathed. He, in a way, helped to establish an anti-establishment art that stepped outside the Silpakorn system. It might be that his resistance was idiosyncratic and not formal enough to become the centre of a flow of ideas and art practices that could form a school or a movement. He seems to have survived outside the art world, before the major commission in 1968, as a dancer, short story writer and newspaper columnist, art world political mover, and it is supposed, architectural draughtsman, as well as set decorator for movies. The decade, from the early 1950s to the mid-1960s, does not speak of an artist obsessively identifying his subject, displaying a skilled 'original' style and technical accomplishment, or becoming a designer of spectacles for the elite. Phaiboon opposed those features of Thai art culture, which turned him into a mere craftsman, or a performing show-off. He does not seem to have had particular political beliefs nor was he a revolutionary. It is certain, though, that he moved against the system of military rule of his time through his support for those damaged by it. He was a highly cultured, highly open person, who probably unreasonably over-idealized what an artist can know and do. But he was greatly admired and loved by a broad swathe of Thai artists and art world people, and this openness and stubbornness at the same time account for the attraction his model of being an artist exerted.

The other main set of reasons to do with his art historical relevance is the kind of art he did not produce or represent. His art was not collectable, or 'museum-able', but it let a gap into conservative art discourses of which thought they had a grasp, a sovereignty over tradition. This openness is barely seen in, and rarely taken up by, transnational contemporaneity. His work marks the ambivalent shifts in the identification of 'national culture' when he could paint in hotel murals scenes or narrative series previously only found in temples. His work, short in duration as it was in the fourteen years from the first Montien Hotel scheme in 1968 to that for the Peninsula [now Anantara Siam Bangkok] Hotel in 1980-82, marked the attempt to provide a visual cross-over between elite consumption of 'traditional—read, luxury' imagery and the types of popular enjoyment seen in the streets and shown in temple murals. Of course, his patrons were the Royal Court and rich Sino-Thai entrepreneurs, but his work shows that art did not belong to such patrons alone and could be carried forward by those outside the symbolic and economic elites. It was a modern popular art before the true advent of a popular mass to enjoy it, or its diversion into the narrative pleasures of film and TV soap opera.

We think that, highly informed as it was by the historical realia of Thai temple murals as they survived, Phaiboon's approach was neither one of a high intellectual criticism nor simply the sad expression of a forlorn and everyday hope. It will await fuller realization in the future.





Figure 22. Phaiboon Suwannakudt, 1982.

For the appendices, please use the QR code below or follow this link:  
[https://so06.tci-thaijo.org/index.php/pub\\_jss/article/view/248879/168471](https://so06.tci-thaijo.org/index.php/pub_jss/article/view/248879/168471)

Appendix 1: Ancestors of Phaiboon Suwannakudt

Appendix 2: A list of sayings by Pra Taa

Appendix 3: Texts by Phaiboon Suwannakudt

Appendix 4: Dramatis Personae



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Figure 23 (opposite). Detail of mural at Dusit Thani Hotel, 1970, photographed by Aroon Peampoonsopon







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