Miraculous Amalgams: The In Khong Style Murals of the Fourth Reign (1851–1868)

Paul McBain[1]

Abstract—In mid-19th century Bangkok, Siamese temple mural art saw the rise of the innovative "In Khong style", characterized by three-dimensional landscapes and European-style buildings, departing from relatively two-dimensional Buddhist narratives. Proliferating during the Fourth Reign (Rama IV, 1851–1868), this style extended beyond Khrua In Khong's documented works. This article argues that the In Khong style was a modern art form unique to Siam, shaped by the development of a class of hired craftsmen inspired by imported wallpaper and prints. Reflecting Siam's age of wonder and fascination with the West, these murals expressed a reimagined world through fantastical landscapes and structures, rather than merely imitating European forms and techniques.

Keywords: Asian Modernity; European Influences; Khrua In Khong; King Mongkut (Rama IV); Siamese Art; Temple Murals

Introducing the In Khong Style

Sometime around the middle of the 19th century, Siamese temple mural art in the greater Bangkok region underwent a profound shift. Replacing Mount Meru, gilded temples, and pavilions, the "In Khong style" of steam ships, railways, aerial and linear perspective or shading and converging lines which lend to images an illusion of depth, emerged. These murals of the Fourth Reign (Rama IV, 1851–1868) suggest less the fabled, arcadian landscapes of the *Thotsachat Chadok* (ทศชาติชาดก; stories of ten former lives of the historical Buddha) and other narratives which celebrate the Buddha's lives and accomplishments. Rather, they evoked fabled future landscapes of worlds and buildings populated with *apsara*s and European architectural forms which these craftsmen had never seen except in prints. They also evoke, strangely, the "cloud-capp'd towers, the gorgeous palaces" and "solemn temples" of Shakespeare's *The Tempest* (1610). That is to say, they are images of fancy so whimsical as to call attention to their own insubstantiality, images which seem abundant in the art and literature of ages characterized by epistemological change.

Wat Bowon Niwet (วัดบวรนิเวศ) showcased this new style, painted in about 1840 by the elusive monk-painter Khrua In Khong (ขรัวอินโข่ง; ca. 1800–1860), which then spread across the capital during the Fourth Reign. In this article,

[1] Thammasat University, Bangkok.
Email: paulmcb@tu.ac.th.

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expanding on a prior article published in this journal (McBain 2022) which analyzed the murals of In Khong's two flagship temples, I explore the development and historical context of the In Khong style more broadly. I endeavor to understand from what internal and external conditions this modern—i.e., breaking consciously from traditional styles and subjects—artistic style arose. I argue that the mural craftsmen, following the tastes and ideals of their chief patron, employed Western painting techniques and architectural forms, but elaborated on these forms to express a sense of wonder at the possibilities of a new world.

During the Fourth Reign Siam shifted from wishing to see itself as part of an Indic and Sinic civilizational sphere to advertising itself as part of Western civilization (Peleggi 2002: 12). In his nearly two decades as a monk, King Mongkut, Rama IV, learned English, Latin, and astronomy with visiting missionaries. His new order of *thammayut* monks was conservative, basing itself at least in principle on the practice of an ancient Mon Buddhist lineage, but was also modern in that it encouraged a "skeptical attitude on the natural world" and came to dismiss many popular Buddhist narratives as mere fables (Reynolds 1973: 125). In a previous article (McBain 2022), I analyzed the allegories in the murals of Wat Bowon Niwet and its sibling temple, Wat Borom Niwat (วัดบรมนิวาส), and argued that these images not only presented European culture as something marvelous but were also a kind of visual rhetoric working to assimilate European ideals of scientific and even political enlightenment to the new *thammayut* Buddhist ideals of the future king. Looking beyond those two flagship temples, this article looks at the development of the In Khong style as a modern art form unique to Siam.

"Modern" in European art is associated with Impressionist figures, such as Oscar-Claude Monet (1840–1926) and Vincent Van Gogh (1853–1890), and representative movements such as Cubism or Expressionism. Generally speaking, it denotes a clear and usually self-conscious break from preceding stylistic art traditions. The In Khong style, drawing self-consciously on foreign sources, represents a palpable break from the comparatively two-dimensional, stylized mural art that preceded it in Siam. However, to say that it is an example of "modern" art, participating in a world historical movement, implies coherence with other outside movements and discontinuity with internal, domestic visual discourses (Clark 2021). Endeavoring not to understand the "modern" as a European import, John Clark understands the Asian Modern more comprehensively as styles which demonstrate a "new relativization of the pasts of any group or group of cultures" or a "temporal discontinuity with innerness"—styles which "posit an outside" (Clark 2021: 22).

In Khong and his contemporaries are famous in Thailand as the first artists to effectively employ "Western" techniques such as *chiaroscuro* and linear perspective. Wiyada, for example, writes that In Khong "was the first Thai to adopt the true three-dimensional perspective technique to Thai painting" (1979: 125). But rather than seeing their work as a simple West-East import or as a

Figure 1: South wall mural, Wat Mahaphruettharam, *ubosot*, Bangkok, ca. 1860s. In Khong style, blending European landscapes and mixed architecture © Paul McBain

progression from stylized to realistic visual representation, we may start to write the history of Siamese art's "modern" by paying close attention to internal structures and discourses, the reasons and aims behind its own particular radical break from prior styles. The modern In Khong style arose not from mere importation, but from its own socio-economic structures, including the rise of a class of hired craftsman, the aspirations of the king, and their felt need to assimilate Buddhism to certain Western ideals. This article thus begins by exploring the internal conditions under which the In Khong modern style developed.

Patronage and the Royal Taste

Although Khrua In Khong is now by far the most famous mural craftsman of the Fourth Reign, we know very little about him except that he was a monk and probably came from Phetchaburi, south of Bangkok.[2] Having painted the murals of Wat Bowon Niwet and Wat Borom Niwat (ca. 1840s), we know that he went on to paint murals at the Ratchaphong-sanuson Pavilion (หอพระราชพงศานุสร) in the Royal Palace. However, in addition to the handful of murals attributed to him, many temple walls painted during the late Fourth Reign such as at Wat Mahaphruettharam (วัดมหาพฤฒาราม) have a similar style, with gradient blue skies, wide landscapes, and European-style buildings and steamships **[Figure 1]**.

[2] In this article, I refer to Khrua In Khong and other mural painters as "mural craftsmen" because *chang phap* (ช่างภาพ) or "picture craftsman" was how they were referred to in writings of the mid-19th century. The modern Thai term for artists *silapin* (ศิลปิน), implying the higher status accorded to an original creative designer, was not generally applied to mural painters.

I began this article searching for an elusive "school" of murals painted by craftsmen who are sometimes said to have been Khrua In Khong's students. Wiyada Thongmitr writes of Khrua In Khong's "disciples", including Phra Khru Kasinsangwon (พระครูกสิณสังวร; dates unknown), the abbot of Wat Thong Nopphakhun (วัดทองนพคุณ) in Thonburi (Wiyada 1979: 135). Steve Van Beek mentions that In Khong's "students" painted Wat Ratchapradit (วัดราชประดิษฐ), one of King Rama V's (r. 1868–1910) landmark temples (Van Beek & Tettoni 1991: 190). However, I have found no primary textual evidence for "Achan In" (อาจารย์อิน), as he fleetingly appears in the chronicles, as have named disciples.[3] Though we have no primary evidence about a "school" of Khrua In Khong in the sense of a group of students that he personally trained, there is little doubt that he had the status of "most favored" artist in the Fourth Reign and that his style flourished. It is possible that he was something akin to the chief artistic "director" of the reign, rowed from temple to temple to inspect and advise on mural art projects.

Stylistic characteristics of the In Khong style are: a deployment of linear and aerial perspective, *chiaroscuro*, and wallpaper-like landscape vistas with follies, often of Grecian or classical-like architecture mixed with Siamese forms. Clark (2013) also notes much darker coloring than earlier murals, perhaps to indicate the colder climate of Europe as well as new "realistic" elements from Euro–America such as trees with straight trunks, water flowing in ripples, and splashing white foam. The style appears largely limited to the capital and its environs with the exception of a few temples in Ayutthaya and Phetchaburi. Moreover, it was largely outside of contemporaneous vernacular practices of mural painting such as, for instance, at Wat Phra Singh (วัดพระสิงห์) in Chiang Mai or Wat Khongkharam (วัดคงคาราม) in Ratchaburi.[4] I refer to this style of mural painting simply as the In Khong style because, although we know little about the artist and have no way of knowing if he trained students, we can

[3] The idea of Khrua In Khong having had named "disciples" seems to have originated with No Na Pak Nam. He writes in his *Dictionary of Art* that Khrua In Khong had "many disciples, amongst whom were some well-known names like Phra Khru Kasinsangwon of Wat Thong Nopphakhun" (2522: 43; my translation). However, it is not clear where this assertion comes from. Perhaps No Na Pak Nam may have had interviews with surviving artists, monks, or nobles who may have known this, at least second-hand.

[4] Examples of the In Khong style are located as follows. In Bangkok: Wat Bowon Niwet (วัดบวรนิเวศ), Wat Borom Niwat (วัดบรมนิวาส), Wat Mahaphruettharam (วัดมหาพฤฒาราม), Wat Sommanat (วัดโสมนัส), Wat Pathumawanaram, (วัดปทุมวนาราม), Wat Ratchapradit (วัดราชประดิษฐ), Wat Makut (วัดมกุฏ), the Ratchakoramuson Pavillion (หอพระราชกรมานุสรณ์) and the Ratchaphongsanuson Pavillion (หอพระราชพงศานุสร) in the Royal Palace. In Thonburi, Wat Thong Nopphakhun (วัดทองนพคุณ), Wat Buppharam (วัดบุพพาราม). On Ko Kret in Nonthaburi, Wat Paramaiyikawat (วัดปรมัยยิกาวาส). In Samut Prakan, Wat Protketchettaram (วัดโปรดเกศเชษฐาราม) holds framed paintings in the style. In Phetchaburi, Wat Mahasamanaram (วัดมหาสมณาราม). In Ayutthaya, Wat Phra Ngam (วัดพระงาม). Clark (2013) also notes Wat Kanmatuyaram (วัดกันมาตุยาราม) in Bangkok; Wat Pradu Song Tham (วัดประดู่ทรงธรรม) in Ayutthaya; Phra Nakhon Kiri (พระนครคีรี) in Phetchaburi; Wat Wang (วัดวัง), Wat Wihan Beuk (วัดวิหารเบิก) in Phathalung; Wat Matchimawat (วัดมัชฌิมาวาส) in Songkhla; Wat Aponsawan (วัดอัปสรสวรรค์), Wat Chinorot (วัดชิโนรส), Wat Pao Rohit (วัดเปาโรหิตย์) in Thonburi. This is not an exhaustive list. Sketches and other materials by Khrua In Khong and artists exist in private collections and in the National Library of Thailand. These include hanging pictures such as the anonymous work *Inao in the City of Kalang* (1887) displayed at Bang Pa-In Palace in Ayutthaya.

be fairly certain that this elusive monk from Phetchaburi was the style's originator.

Prior mural painting in Thailand, from which the In Khong style was a radical departure, has few surviving works from before the 18th century. What we now see is largely the reconstruction and development of artists in Bangkok after the late 1780s (Clark 2021: 42). Prior murals in Bangkok had tended to depict Jātaka tales and stories of Gotama Buddha's past lives. By the Third Reign (1824–1851), there was a marked increase in the variety of subjects (including Chinese subjects) depicted as well as in the detail of scenes, though the In Khong murals nevertheless mark a radical departure in both their commitment to the illusion of spatial realism as well as their inclusion of European architectural forms. Changes in mural art styles in the early 19th century were likely accelerated by a change in the role and reimbursement of craftsmen. In the first two reigns of the Rattanakosin Era (1782–1824), craftsmen were either *phrai* (ไพร่) *corvée* laborers or royal craftsmen. Royal craftsmen were co-opted into *krom* (กรม) or troops for their given specialty, such as woodworking or lacquer work. To make a single "lion-footed table" (โต๊ะเท้าสิงห์, *to tao sing*), for example, required that the table be passed between no less than ten different specialized troops (for instance, carpenters, whittlers, lacquer painters, gold painters, to name only a few) before completion (Saran 2534: 44). Craftsmen could not be outsourced, unlike the majority of *corvée* laborers, attesting to their short supply.

Beginning with the Third Reign, however, craftsmen were frequently hired from outside the palace. Wat Phra Chetuphon (วัดพระเชตุพน) or Wat Pho (วัดโพธิ์), the king's flagship temple restoration was, we know from inscriptions, largely completed by hired laborers, often at great cost. Some sections were done by royal craftsmen overseen by royal pages, but the majority consisted of a mix of monks and hired craftsmen, sometimes working together on the same project. Some of these craftsmen were immigrant Chinese, as the poet Muen Phrom Samaphatson, colloquially known as Nai Mi (หมื่นพรหมสมพัตสร or นายมี; ca. 1795–1850) describes in his *Nirat Suphanburi* (นิราศสุพรรณ; ca. 1840):

> พวกช่างจีนสินจ้างรางวัลเพิ่ม
> ช่างไทยเติมเบี้ยหวัดล้วนจัดสรร
> บ้างเลื่อนที่มีนามขึ้นตามกัน
> ทั้งช่างปั้นเขียนถากสลักกลึง
>
> Those Chinese craftsmen were hired for labor with yet more rewards.
> Thai craftsmen got more allowances at the temple allocated to them.
> Some moved around, gaining names for themselves,
> All craftsmen, builders and painters, sculpting and lathing (Saran 2534: 88; my translation).

The hired laborers included monks, as Nai Mi notes in a sarcastic tone:

> ไตรพระช่างตั้งเพียรปั้นเขียนงาม
> สร้างอารามมาช่วยรวยทุกองค์
>
> And monk craftsmen, industrious in sculpting and painting well,
> Built temples, came helping and getting rich, every monk (Saran 2534: 96; my translation).

Figure 2: Panel, northern wall, Wat Mahaphruettharam, *ubosot*, Bangkok, ca. 1850s. European bay motif with Chinese-influenced brushwork © Paul McBain

Craftsmen who achieved fame almost always began learning their trade as novice monks, studying at a temple which was well-known for a particular craft. A great number of the craftsmen who worked on Wat Pho were from Wat Rakhang (วัดระฆัง), indicating that the latter was something of a training school for artisans. Nai Mi writes of Khrua Nak (ขรัวนาค) at Wat Phleng (วัดเพลง) in Bangkok Noi Canal:

> แต่ก่อนพระวัดนี้ท่านดีมาก
> ชื่อขรัวนาคช่างฉลาดข้างวาดเขียน
> มีคนจำแบบอย่างมาวางเรียน
> จนช่างเขียนประเดี๋ยวนี้ก็ดีจริง
>
> In times before, a monk of this temple was excellent,
> His name Khrua Nak—a craftsman skilled in painting and drawing,
> Many people came in crowds to study with him,
> And so painter-craftsmen these days excel truly (Saran 2534: 70; my translation).

Despite the fame they could achieve in their own time, their biographies were scarcely recorded because for chroniclers they were simply "craftsmen" (ช่าง, *chang*) specialists, a status similar to those who specialized in making fireworks and Mount Meru funeral pyres.

By the 1840s, the period in which Khrua In Khong was likely painting Wat Borom Niwat, a class of hired craftsmen had emerged. They likely journeyed between temples to learn with well-regarded masters, making sketches of famous murals. Scholars have noted a marked improvement in technique, in the quality of detail and realism, of murals painted in the Third Reign (Phanuphong & Chaiyot 2549: 50–52). This change has been attributed to increased trade caused by improvements in shipping technology, the importation of prints (particularly from India and Burma), new dyes from China, and skilled immigrant painters. Immigrant painters brought both a competitive edge as well as new painting techniques. Effective renderings of aerial perspective and an atmospheric painting of buildings and trees appeared using characteristically Chinese painting methods such as the "dabbing technique" and bark brushes at Wat Suwannaram (วัดสุวรรณาราม) and Wat Daowaduengsaram (วัดดาวดึงษาราม) in Thonburi (Apinan 1992: 4). The In Khong craftsmen, even as they depicted European buildings and landscapes, continued to display the influence of techniques learned from immigrant Chinese, as we can see in a panel from Wat Mahaphruettharam which seems to blend Siamese architecture, European aerial perspective, and Chinese landscape painting **[Figure 2]**. But the single most transformative factor causing changes in mural representation during this period surely derives from a shift in the ways in which craftsmen were hired and reimbursed. To be a mural craftsman was, quite suddenly, a profitable occupation available to anyone who had skill, encouraging competition amongst painters for patronage.

While financial rewards, local fame, and freedom to experiment had improved, mural craftsmen still relied on patronage, particularly royal patronage. Siamese kings had immense power to dictate aesthetic tastes during their

reign, as epitomized by the old Siamese expression "The lord says it is beautiful, so we say so too" (เจ้าว่างาม ก็ว่าตามเจ้า; Koompong 2003: 149). We know well that King Mongkut had a taste for things from Europe and America. Sir John Bowring (1792–1872), when taken on a tour of the king's private apartments, noticed pendulums, watches, barometers, thermometers, and a microscope, all items which might be found "in the study or library of an opulent philosopher of Europe" (Peleggi 2002: 23). While it is true that Mongkut's Europhilia was to some extent a strategy to appear "civilized" according to Euro–American preconceptions, he also wrote copiously in Thai on the wonders of Europe. He would often refer to European science as *mahatsachan* (มหัศจรรย์) or miraculous (Wilairat & Thawatchai 2559: 141). The king also seems to have been much more concerned than prior Siamese monarchs for artwork to achieve European-style realism. He hired the French sculptor Émile-François Chatrousse (1829–1896) to make his likeness but, apparently finding it insufficiently realistic, ordered a new sculpture by a local artist. Apinan suggests that Rama IV's receipt of photographs and portraits of monarchs such as Queen Victoria (r. 1837–1901) convinced him that the exchange of realistic portraits as acts of diplomacy were important to Western kings and queens. However, "disregard for shading, foreshortening, and perspective in traditional Siamese art" meant that the "indigenous" style of Siamese painting had to be augmented to achieve such realism (Apinan 1992: 11).

Mongkut's reaction to one mural allows us to glimpse how carefully he thought about art. The incident occurred at Wat Thong Nopphakhun in Thonburi, said to have been directed by the abbot Phra Khru Kasinsangwon. The king, having seen some interesting copies made by student painters of these murals, visited the temple in 1860, apparently with the intention of asking if Phra Kasin could oversee the restoration of certain temples. Mongkut praised the monk-painter's "strange and wondrous style which does not imitate anyone else" (เขียนแปลกประหลาดมากไม่เลียนอย่างของใคร), a style which had "the wisdom to avoid and elude old forms" (ทำไปด้วยปัญญาที่เลี่ยงหลีกหนีอย่างเก่า). It was "a style of craft which is most strange and excellent, charming and delightful to the royal heart" (มีฝีมือช่างแปลกประหลาดดูเป็นที่เพลิดเพลินเจริญพระราชหฤทัยได้นั้น). However, as the king was leaving, he discovered images which were "disgraceful to the eyes" (อุจาดตา, *uchatta*), images of *apsara*s bathing in the gardens of heaven. One lady was urinating, and others had their skirts up so that their "nether regions" (อุทรประเทศ, *uthara prathet*) were visible. These images led Mongkut to reflect on what may be considered "improper" in mural art. The king wondered: "What are the purposes of these images—are they a metaphor for the contemplation of worldly desire or about belief?" (จะเป็นประโยชน์โภชผล เป็นปริศนาธรรมทางสังเวช หรือทางเลื่อมใสอย่างไร). And, if not, in what way are they "edifying" (เจริญจิต, *charoenchit*)? Finally, he felt that such images, unlike "the dances of actresses who perform in an open field" (โขนละครฟ้อนรำตกแต่งไปออกโรงในท้อง สนาม) were simply not the kind that should be enjoyed "publicly" (ที่แจ้ง, *thi chaeng*).

They were comparable to the kind of art made by "a Chinaman who painted similar pictures" (อย่างจีนเขาเขียนรูปเช่นนี้บ้าง) and placed them behind a mirror coated with wax that could only be seen with a candle. The offending images were corrected (Royal Writings 2518: 88).[5] This account shows us just how much power kings had to dictate the tastes of mural art. It also demonstrates that Rama IV thought mural art should be "edifying" and that he favored that which was "strange" and original, deviating from old forms. We also know he was concerned that everything in the capital be as proper as possible.

The "strange" style so favored by the king seemed to have included a love of fantasy and the marvelous. We know, for instance, that King Mongkut had a special liking for angels. He ordered that craftsmen at Wat Pathumwanaram (วัดปทุมวนาราม) make a painting of "angel children and angels on an excursion in Dawadueng [Tāvatiṁsa Heaven]" (เรื่องเทพบุตรเทพธิดามาประพาสในสวนที่ดาวดึงษ). He later wrote in a letter that "though I may be old, though I may be frail already, angels are still with me [...] angels, if there are any, surely go alongside the king" (ถึงแก่ชราแล้วเทวดายังเข้าด้วย [...] ถ้าเทวดามี เทวดาคงเข้าด้วยในหลวง) (Patsaweesiri 2558: 334). Patsaweesiri (2558) believes that such a preference must have become well-known and inspired the proliferation of firmaments of angels in the murals of this period.

[5] These are my own translations. This section is from the Royal Writings in 1860, which are not written directly by the king himself but reports of his activities and declarations written by his secretaries.

Despite his reputation as the Siamese king who was most keen on scientific innovation, these comments indicate a love not so much of scientific empiricism and exactitude, but of wonder. King Mongkut's well-chronicled love of scientific subjects such as astronomy did not share the decorous ethics of "integrity and disinterestedness" which was becoming widespread among European scientific intellectuals. Rather, his aesthetic tastes indicate the "atmosphere of wonderstruck novelty" with a particular love for "things rare and unusual", more commonly found in the writings of natural philosophers of the 17th century (Daston & Park 1998: 329). For instance, at Phra Pathom Chedi, the sight of a ball of light glowing above the stupa "delighted" Rama IV, even while he opined that the effect was likely caused by rainwater encountering elements in the bricks (Johnson 1997: 239). Newly encouraged by the possibility that technical skill could reap rewards and especially mastery of Euro–American forms, artists of the Fourth Reign developed a radical, modern style under the supervision of their chief patron: a king who favored the strange and unconventional and prized originality.

Student Paintings at Wat Protket

An excellent source for understanding the development of the In Khong style is a collection of what was likely student practice art now housed at Wat Protketchettaram (วัดโปรดเกศเชษฐาราม) or Wat Protket, Samut Prakan. These works of art in the In Khong style are, unusually for Siam, framed rather than

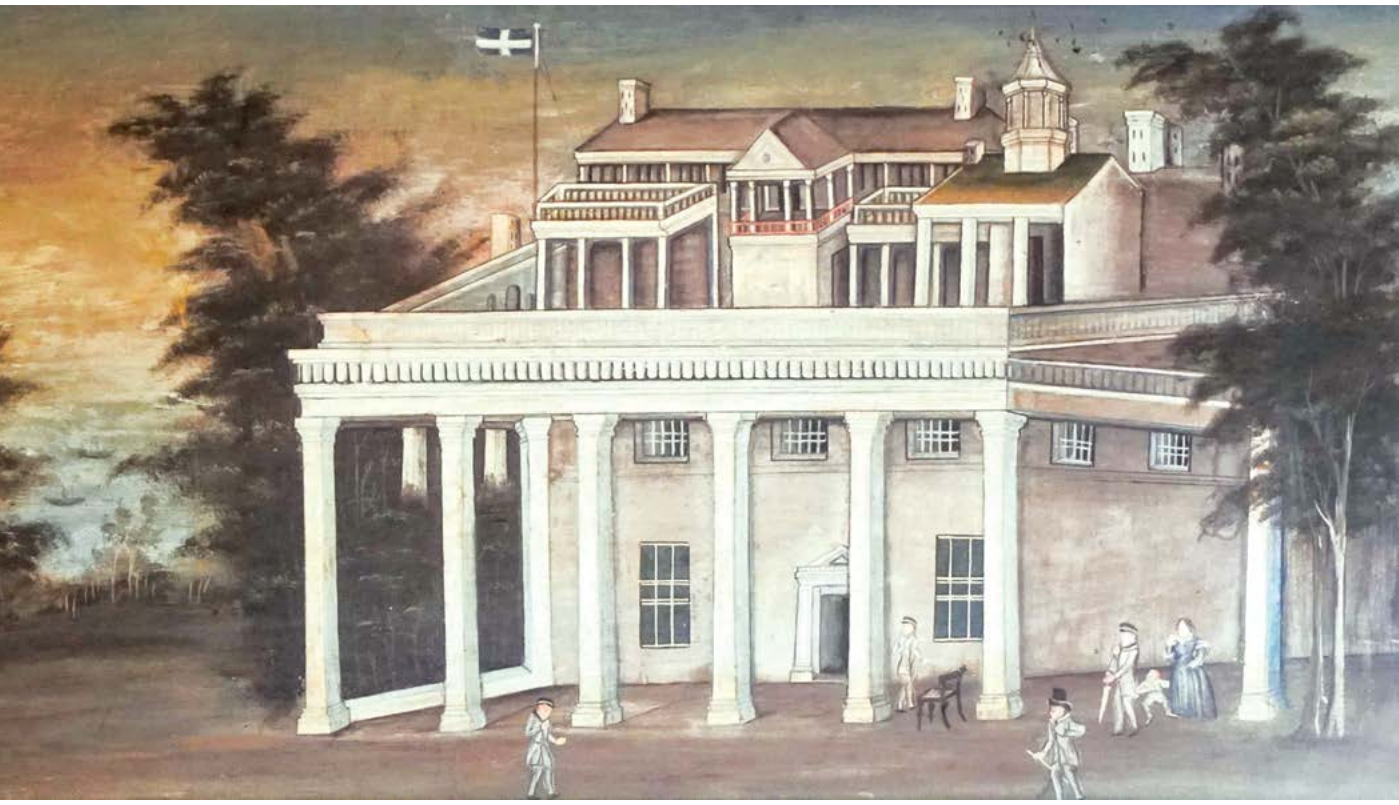

Figure 3: Tempera on panel framed painting, housed in the *ubosot* at Wat Protketchettaram, Samut Prakan, In Khong style, ca. 1850s © Paul McBain

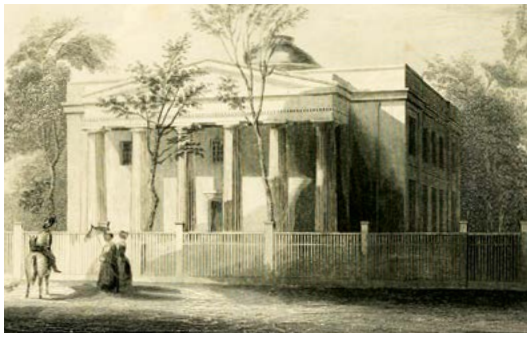

Figure 4: Thomas Addison Richards, "Medical College, GA" from *American Scenery, Illustrated,* 1854, p. 71 © Library of Congress

mural images. The paintings were clearly made by different painters with different levels of technical ability. Though we cannot be certain about the training process for Siamese painters outside of the In Khong style, accounts by later craftsmen strongly suggest that this involved copying existing elements with feedback from the teacher (Saran 2534: 67). However, here we will see that the In Khong style painters did not merely copy European sources but added their own creative elaborations.

One example at Wat Protketchettaram is of a large colonnaded house **[Figure 3]** possibly drawn from a scene from *American Scenery* (1854), a copy of which was gifted to King Mongkut by Ambassador Townsend in 1856 **[Figure 4]**. To the left of the house, the landscape with trees and the ocean shows a good understanding of aerial perspective. Yet, as No Na Pak Nam notes (2537: 107), the two central trees and the flag blow leftward in the wind, while the copse of trees on the far left bend to the right.

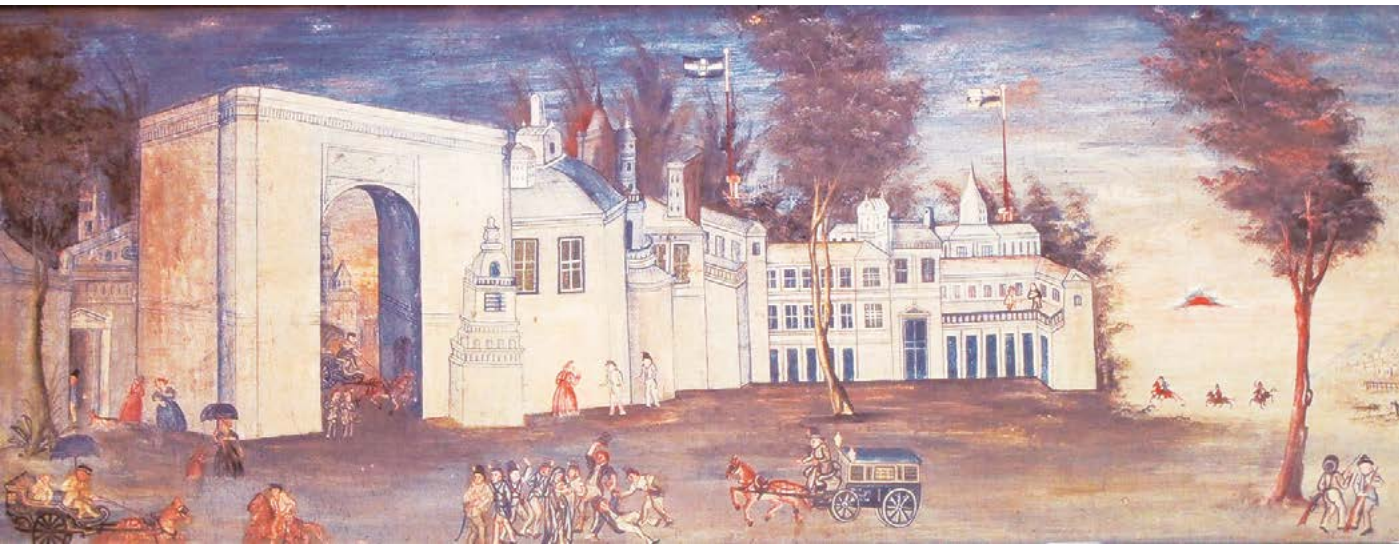

Figure 5: Tempera on panel, framed in the *ubosot* of Wat Protketchettaram, Samut Prakan, In Khong style, ca. 1850s. European buildings clustered near a triumphal arch © Paul McBain

Also, several chimney flutes emerging from the building's roofs have slats in them, similar to windows. No Na Pak Nam believes that this may be because Siamese painters did not know the purpose of chimney flutes and so may have added these embellishments. The painter also enhanced the image by adding structures on the main roof with pillars and balustrades. This example of Siamese artists adding their own creative touches demonstrates that they would elaborate on forms of European architecture without necessarily knowing their functions. A similar tower with slats, painted many decades later at Wat Paramaiyikawat (วัดปรมัยยิกาวาส), indicates that Siamese craftsmen did not merely copy prints, but developed their own style with its defining elements copied across different works.

Another example from Wat Protketchettaram shows a line of European buildings leading to a triumphal arch **[Figure 5]**. This is likely based on a slide from a viewing device

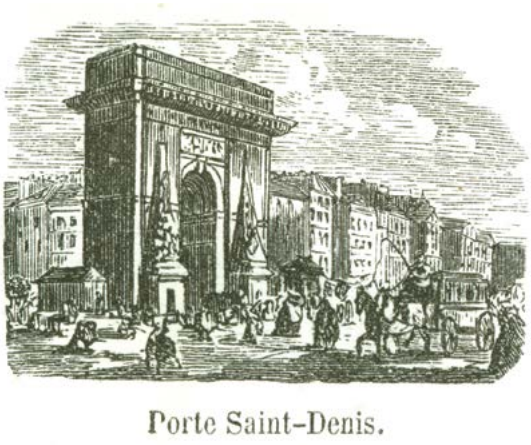

Figure 6: Postcard from ca. 1840s, unknown artist © Public Domain

called the Panoptic Polyorama, almost certainly "a viewing box with various slides for use with it" presented to King Mongkut by the French Embassy in 1856 (Clark 2013: 19). The slide is of an image based on a lithograph print of the Porte Saint-Denis in Paris **[Figure 6]**. In the Wat Protketchettaram painting, the buildings on the right are not arranged geometrically, but are two-dimensional renderings of copied architectural forms

crammed together irrationally. This results not so much in a realistic-seeming rendition of physical space from a single perspective, but a projection of a sense of whimsical proliferation.

Clark (2014) writes that the "major visual discourse" of the school consisted of prints from various ambassadors. But, as we have seen, the painters did not so much copy European architectural models or endeavor to mimic the illusion of spatial realism in these prints faithfully. Rather, having learned various design elements from prints, they proceeded to create their own designs, free from the dictates of form and functionality. Before speculating about what effects they were trying to achieve with these elaborations, we should consider some other possible inspirations for the artists and the ideas that they may have inferred from these sources.

Inspirations: Wallpaper, Follies, and Perspective

As well as prints from books, printed wallpaper art may have been another important inspiration. Prince Narisara Nuwattiwong (นริศรานุวัดติวงศ์; 1863–1947) wrote briefly in his correspondence that Khrua In Khong had never visited Europe, but had largely learned his craft copying European and American wallpaper prints (Narisara & Damrong 2512: 258). In my earlier article, I suggested that landscape wallpaper was likely the compositional form which Khrua In Khong found could best "bridge the difference between European perspectival art and the wide vistas of Siamese murals" (McBain 2022: 31). By the mid-19th century, when we know from foreign accounts that European wallpaper became popular amongst Siam's elites (McBain 2022: 30), techniques employed to design and print landscapes on paper were highly developed. French companies such as Zuber & Cie in Rixheim and Dufour et Cie in Mâcon competed with one another and, as well as against their classification as craftsmen of a minor art, these companies employed some of the most highly skilled artists for their designs. Drawing on the insight of master landscape painters that, since the sky needed to be executed perfectly because it occupied much of their work, wallpaper designers developed techniques to brush on a graded blue color consistently before applying the prints of the landscapes themselves (Nouvel-Kammerer 2005: 96). We find such attention duplicated in the subtle atmospheric gradients in the murals of Wat Borom Niwat and other works from this period in Bangkok. The use of clumps of trees distributed regularly in landscape wallpaper "served to separate the scenes and to provide a rhythm for the composition as a whole". Clumps of trees could also be used as convenient separators between the blocks used to print wallpaper (Nouvel-Kammerer 2005: 103). These characteristic tree spacings can be found in many In Khong style murals. We also find characteristic floral patterns of European wallpaper in temple murals of the period.

As well as depicting exotic landscapes, scenic wallpaper landscapes were often peppered with "follies", functionless buildings, often mock ruins or buildings in a classical style which augmented

the view of wide spaces. The seeming frivolousness of follies were, in both the In Khong style and in Euro–American gardens and landscape paintings, more often an expression of ideology. Follies, such as pyramids, colonnades, and rotundas in the landscape acted as "portals" to imaginative and historical realms and even inscribed the landscape itself with classical values (Carso 2021: 3). Indeed, print books from the United States that the In Khong artists used prioritized examples of classical architecture in the American landscape, because such architecture possessed valences for Western consumers connoting civility, classical values, and historical depth. The American landscape painter Thomas Cole (1801–1848) described his homeland in his "Essay on American Scenery" (1836) as a historic "shoreless ocean" and wished for elements such as follies of ancient-seeming ruins to populate the wilderness with the "memories" of ancient culture. The European-style designs in In Khong style murals became a way of "inscribing" the landscape of temple murals with either European ideals or imagining a future amalgam of European and Thai Buddhist elements.

An example of such an amalgam can be found at Wat Sommanat (วัดโสมนัส) in Bangkok. On the east wall near the main entrance is the image of a temple with various figures drawn in traditional Siamese court dress worshipping a buddha-image **[Figure 7]**. The building is an open-air pillared hall capped by a triangular pediment with painted floral motifs, topped by a large dome. We find such dome-topped temples—with domes so large that the building's base would not have supported them in reality—throughout the murals of this reign. One can see another example in the mural of Wat Buppharam (วัดบุปผาราม) in Thonburi **[Figure 8]**. The domes may have been based on prints of domed buildings such as the Roman Pantheon found in illustrated encyclopedias including *Iconographic Encyclopedia of Science, Literature, and Art* (Heck 1852), gifted to Mongkut by the United States in 1856. Siamese mural artists relatively freely combined elements drawn from different sources. This is one small example of artisans experimenting with the design without knowledge of the function and construction requirements of European architectural forms, creating quite fantastical-seeming buildings.[6]

We can perhaps think of the inclusion of these European-style buildings as examples of a fascination with an "exotic" foreign culture. King Rama IV found mastering these Euro–American styles was desirable, perhaps as a sign of the kingdom's "civilized" abilities. As Roger Nelson writes, the love of and attraction to all things unknown and foreign ("xenophilia") played a significant role in the development of modern art in Southeast Asia. A tendency for Asian artists to "seek approval [...] especially in the West", which began in the 19th century continues to this day (Nelson 2019: 254) and the In Khong style may be seen as one example. Just

[6] Such buildings were not usually seen in the landscape of Bangkok, only appearing in piecemeal. Examples of European-style buildings constructed during the Fourth Reign include the clocktower in the palace which had window-like indentations in its tower as well as the observatory tower in Ayutthaya.

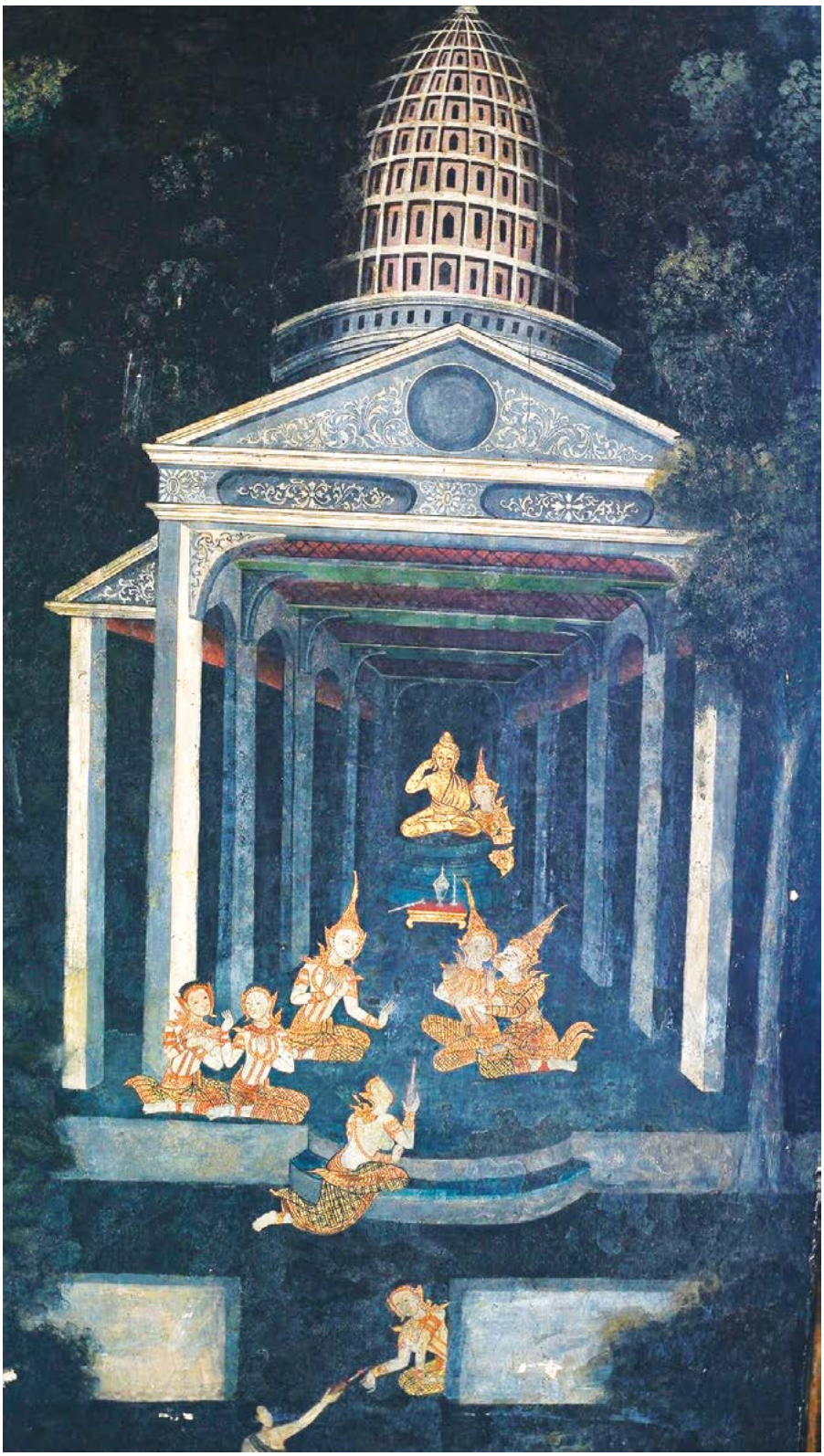

Figure 7: Detail, east wall, Wat Sommanat, *wihan*, Bangkok, ca. 1853. Court figures in a hall with a European-style pediment and a large dome © Paul McBain

Figure 8: Mural, western wall, *ubosot* of Wat Buppharam, Thonburi, ca. 1860s. Daily life with Siamese and European forms, including a domed temple at top left © Paul McBain

as European artists such as Walter Spies (1895–1942) rendered the lush foliage of Bali or Granada Carbezudo (1865–ca. 1900) portrayed the finely-wrought costumes of local Filipina fashion, In Khong artists showed a fascination with European architectural forms and fashions. The difference is that while the exoticism of these European artists displayed these foreign lands as colorful cornucopias of difference from their home cultures, In Khong artists rendered the architecture and dress of Europe in a way that if anything celebrated an amalgamation of forms and designs, demonstrating perhaps an exoticism of aspiration rather than an exoticism of seductive difference.

Examples of this amalgamation can be seen in the murals of Wat Paramaiyikawat (Temple of the Grand-mother), a Mon temple on the island of Ko Kret in Nonthaburi famous for its "leaning" pagoda. These were painted during the Reign of Rama V and depict the thirteen ascetic practices (No Na Pak Nam 2546: 14). In the part of the landscape depicting the ascetic practice of *abbhokāsikaṅga*, dwelling in the open air, monks walk in front of a fenced monastery with a brown, bare yard **[Figure 9]**. The large tower in the center seems to arise from a pale blue lake on the right. The tower serves no obvious purpose, but is used artistically to balance the composition of the landscape. The two spires on either side of the central structure are reminiscent of the chimneys embellished with windows that we saw above at Wat Protket. In the background, next to a gated temple, are a line of multi-storied

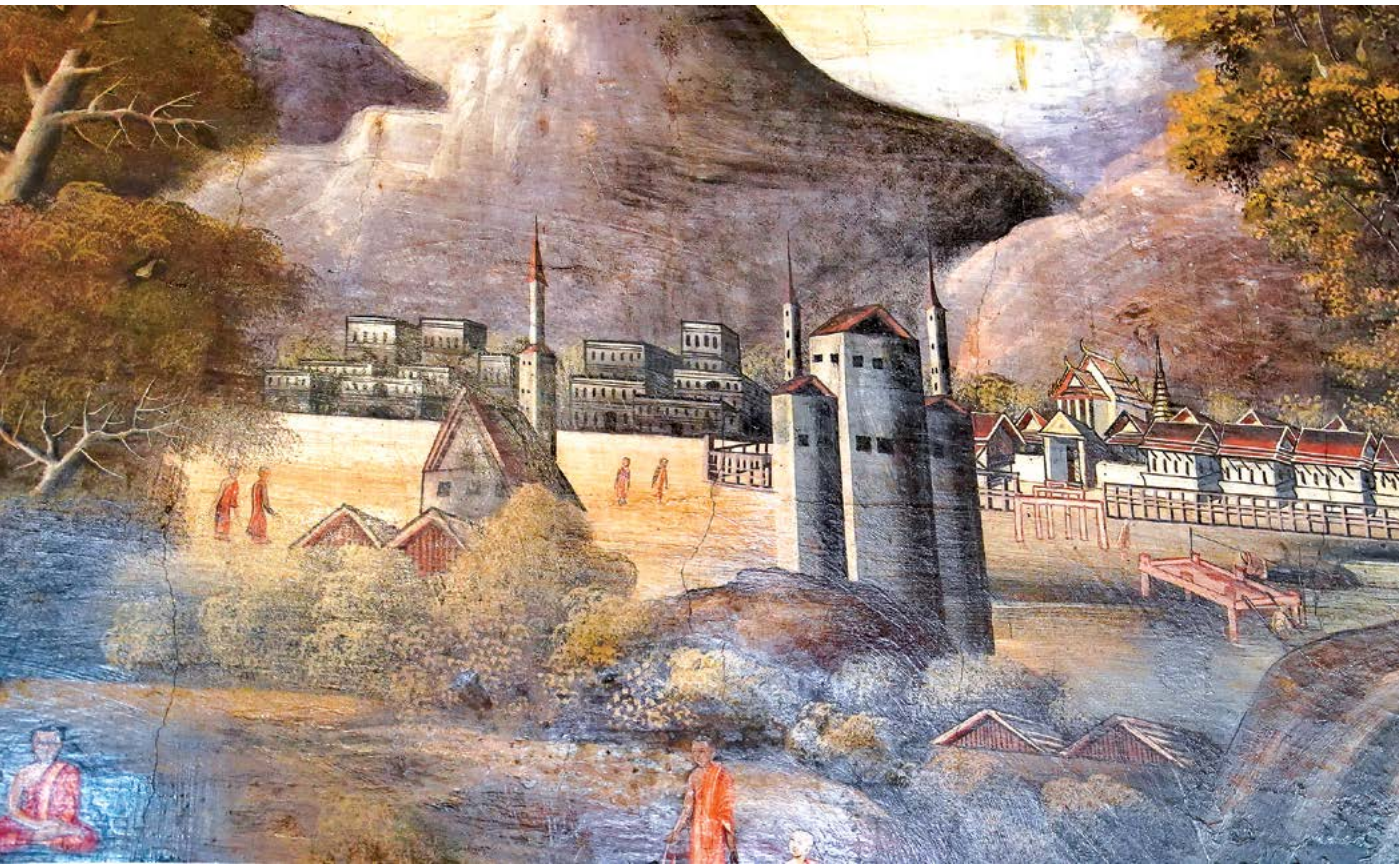

Figure 9: Detail, north wall, *ubosot* of Wat Paramaiyikawat, Ko Kret, Nonthaburi, by MC Pravij Jumsai, ca. 1876. Practicing monk with towers resembling earlier In Khong style elements © Paul McBain

buildings which, since they are a dense cluster in a rural area, seem not to make practical sense. But, just as folly structures in European or American gardens served in part to imbue a certain classical memory to the landscape, these proliferating nonsensical structures perhaps served to inscribe the landscape with a sense of wonder about a new age.

In another panel in the same temple, the historical Buddha sits with his disciples in the forest, then leads them in procession into the central plaza where an agricultural ceremony takes place, and then appears on the second floor of a European-style building **[Figure 10]**. It was not a departure from tradition to depict Gotama Buddha outside of his proper historical context. However, the Buddha is depicted in an architectural landscape that would have seemed to the painters and audience exotic and modern. Perhaps the effect was to produce one of a sense of possibility for Buddhism in a new age.

A third inspiration for the murals of the Fourth Reign are, simply, images which made use of aerial and linear perspective, effects which, as we have seen above, artists were keen to replicate. The In Khong murals of the Fourth

Figure 10: Detail, north wall, *ubosot* of Wat Paramaiyikawat, Ko Kret, Nonthaburi, by MC Pravij Jumsai, ca. 1876. Agricultural ceremony with European-style buildings © Paul McBain

Reign were not the first Siamese experiments in perspective. Phanuphong Laosom and Chaiyot Isawonphan studied the change in representation effected by the introduction of new technologies, in particular clear mirrors (Phanuphong & Chaiyot 2549: 57–59). Such mirrors were given as gifts to King Rama II (r. 1809–1821) by ambassadors from Portugal. These mirrors, the authors argue, could have encouraged not only a new understanding of one's own place in linear space, but also an understanding of visual composition with lines and corners to give a sense of space within a frame. However, the murals at Wat Bowon Niwet by Khrua In Khong clearly mark a strong departure from all prior mural art in Siam in that they effectively deploy effects such as aerial perspective and linear perspective based on imported prints. Yet, while they copied designs based on linear perspective, the realism of the in Khong artists seems only to have gone so far. The practice paintings at Wat Protket imitate Euro–American prints, but do not seem to have employed the mathematical calculations required to optimally render an illusion of spatial realism. The aim was not a simulacrum of reality from an individual standpoint, nor a desire to reproduce as faithfully

as possible a single moment in time. Rather, elements copied from examples of linear perspective and *chiaroscuro* were employed for "lyrical" effects. Indeed No Na Pak Nam (2537: 108) suggested that we should perhaps not look to early European linear perspective art for comparisons with the In Khong style, but rather the 20th century proto-surrealist painter Giorgio De Chirico (1888–1978). The "spatial theatres" of his trademark arcades give the impression of having been modelled after classical paintings but are really more like parodies of linear perspective in which the logic and order imposed on objects in space is subverted (Rubin 1982: 59). While there is of course no direct influence, the comparison is an apt one in that both De Chirico and the In Khong painters employ perspective, where the aim is not necessarily realism but the deployment of techniques associated with realism for "lyrical" effects.

"Age of Wonder"

What then were these lyrical effects—or non-realistic effects used to convey a certain theme or mood to the viewer—expressing? My contention is that the In Khong murals are examples of an age of wonder in Siam in the middle of the 19th century: wonder about the marvels of the West, during a time in which possibility and creativity were the guiding feelings, at least among a certain set of the elite surrounding King Mongkut. No Na Pak Nam cites MR Kratai Itsarangkun (กระต่าย อิศรางกูร, ม.ร.ว.), also known as Mom Ratchothai (หม่อมราโชทัย; 1820–1867), the author of *Nirat London* (นิราศลอนดอน) as one source for understanding Siam's sense of wonder (Kratai 2553). The long poem is an account of a Siamese ambassador's visit to London in 1857 in the classical *nirat* or "journey-of-separation" poetic style. It contains stories about motorcars and other machines which might have driven Siamese artists into a "marvellous world of imagination" (No Na Pak Nam 2526: 10). In London, the ambassador sees an "ingenious" tunnel under a river; he visits the College of Science where skeletons remind him of "pitiable *preta*", hungry-ghost spirits, and bottled specimens of unusual beings which cause his hair to stand on end (Kratai 2553: 81). He describes a dance at Buckingham Palace, with assorted sweets and champagne, comparable to a story about "heavenly ladies" dancing with a pack of angels (Kratai 2553: 92). His language strays into metaphors derived from classical poetic and Buddhist sources. His description of London Zoo is reminiscent of old poetic descriptions of the fabled Himaphan Forest. He frequently describes Buckingham Palace as "the heavenly palace" and even draws attention to the wallpaper adorning its many rooms (Kratai 2553: 83). He describes his visit to the wonderous sights of Crystal Palace, which would have been the permanent exhibitions in the relocated palace after the famous Exhibition of 1851, as follows:

> ดูวิจิตรพิสดารตระการแก้ว
> It appears—bewildering, exquisite,
> dazzling, all those crystals/gems.
>
> วับวามแววแสงสว่างกระจ่างใส
> Glittering, glimmering, dazzling
> lights limpid and lucid.

ทั้งหลังคาฝาผนังช่างกะไร
Both the ceiling and the walls—impossible!

ตลอดไปหมดสิ้นด้วยจินดา
They go on and on, beyond the imagination.

สูงตระหง่านยาวกว่าสิบห้าเส้น
So tall, so wide they must be more than 15,000 (Kratai 2553: 66; my translation).

He goes on to describe "the many varieties of flora" (พฤกษาต่างต่าง) on display and the "sculptures of lions, men and women" (รูปสัตว์สิงห์คนหญิงชาย) as well as "steam engines, large and small" (เครื่องกลไฟทั้งใหญ่น้อย). In the context of Siamese literature of the 19th century more broadly *Nirat London* can be seen as an example of the application of the lyricism of old poetry, previously used to evoke the semi-fantastical world of heavens and praise the resplendent public works of Siamese monarchs, to express the wonders of new lands. Earlier Siamese literature of the Ayutthaya period delighted in elaborate descriptions of buildings. The late 15th-century verse *Ocean Lamentations* (กำสรวลสมุทร) praised Ayutthaya, whose glory "from the skies above drops to the earth below" (ยิ่งฟ้า ลงดิน แลฤา) and was crammed with gorgeous chedis, "with gold their interiors painted, with gold bedecked" (ในทาบทองแล้วเนื้อ นอกโสรม). Ayutthayan literature delighted in an aesthetics of *alangkan* (อลังการ; Skt., *alaṁkāra*), elaborate ornamentation. There are long descriptions of the gilded, the glistening, and the gorgeous.

In the 19th century, a similar style was employed (as in *Nirat London*) to describe the little-known wonders of a new world. For example, in *Lamentations* (รำพันพิลาป; ed. 2510), Sunthon Phu (สุนทรภู่; 1786–1855) sails around the world in a dream journey, describing the color and variety of a market in India:

พื้นม่วงตองทองช้ำย่ำมะหวาด
ฉีกวิลาศลายลำยองเขียนทองจิ้ม
ทำที่อยู่ดูพิลึกล้วนตึกทิม
เรียบเรียงริมฝั่งสมุทรแลสุดตา
จะตามใจให้เพลินเจริญเนตร
ชมประเภทพราหมณ์แขกแปลกภาษา

The ground is purple and gold with Indian ornamented fabrics,
European intricate threads inscribed elegantly with gold.
Striking and strange seem all the rows of houses,
Arranged in lines along the ocean as far as the eye can see.
Gaze gladly to your heart's content,
Admiring Brahmins and Indians speaking in tongues unknown (my translation).[7]

A language of excess could now be applied to new, exotic realms. These descriptions were not necessarily meant to be serious or documentary, but were playful and excessive, in which the proliferation of the new was expressed via its sheer abundance rather than a detailed understanding. In his epic *Phra Aphaimani* (พระอภัยมณี; ed. 2507), Sunthon Phu describes how Sri Lanka sends out for "people of knowledge" (ผู้รู้, *phu ru*) from all corners of the globe, such as the "Gulf of Germany"

[7] For a discussion of both works and longer translated passages, see Chapter 5 of *A Drunken Bee* (McBain 2025).

(อ่าวเยียระมัน, *ao yiaraman*); possibly Egypt (ไอยกุปโต, *Aikupto*), and Medina (เมืองมัดชนะ, *Matchana*).[8] Perhaps in the same way this sense of profusion, of *alangkan*, overelaboration beyond the necessities of form and function, can be applied to understand the In Khong murals. The accuracy of the names of foreign countries did not much matter, nor did the faithful reproduction of linear perspective. Rather these murals celebrated the possibilities of the wonderful, but not yet fully comprehended, via an abundant elaboration of new forms. Both the artistic and literary productions of the age seem unconstrained by categories of old and new, foreign and local. Fascinated by the wonder of a new, faintly known other world and encouraged by their chief patron to experiment with the forms of that world, a similar sense of freedom from convention and categorization seems expressed both in the language of contemporaneous literature and in the In Khong style murals.

The Marvelous In Khong Style Declines

We can stress that the freedom from convention and categorization was characteristic of mid-19th century art in Siam by briefly looking at how in subsequent decades mural art became markedly less experimental. The age of wonder in Siam seemed to decline not long after King Mongkut's reign. Prince Damrong Rajanubhab (กรมพระยาดำรงราชานุภาพ; 1862–1943) wrote sadly that "Achan In Kong's rendering of the story of King Naresuan fighting with an elephant in the royal remembrance of Wat Phra Sirattanasasadaram" was in a chapel that was used as somebody's office. The prince was shocked to find that the resident worker had hammered nails into the mural so as to hang up a clothesline (Narisara & Damrong 2512: 182). Prince Narisara noted with great displeasure that a local disciple who had studied art in Europe called the murals of Wat Borom Niwat "ugly" and "embarrassing" and thought that they should be whitewashed. The lack of understanding by this privileged student made Prince Narisara "at (his) wit's end"; he worried for the future of these paintings. However, he finally conceded that it was simply natural that tastes change (Narisara & Damrong 2512: 258).

This change in taste seems to have come alongside a change in what constituted proper "art". Wat Ratchapradit (วัดราชประดิษฐ) in Bangkok was one of the few temples in which King Rama V had a personal hand during his reign. The murals depict his own version of the "Royal Ceremonies of the Twelve Months (พระราชพิธีสิบสองเดือน) (Pichit 2560: 1069). These also depicted King Mongkut's efforts to transform Buddhism, as well as notably his scientific efforts such as viewing an eclipse through a telescope. These murals exhibited a strong tendency to depict the reality of locations without whimsy in the actual moment of particular historical events. This is not to say that, as soon as the regime changed, there was an immediate shift towards a new kind of realism in mural painting. Nevertheless, the proliferation and reverie that had permeated the murals of the Fourth Reign gradually

[8] This long list of countries occurs in Chapter 53 of the epic.

lost favor and were replaced with other styles. During the Fifth Reign, there was a great increase in the hiring of foreign architects and designers. The idea for a special school for training craftsmen as well as making *tamra* (ตำรา) or manuals with examples of artistic elements to be copied which aimed to preserve "traditional" forms also developed during this period. Not long after the reign of King Rama V, local art for elites became even less of an experimental or creative force, but something to be protected. The Anglophone King Rama VI (r. 1910–1925) lamented that "Young Siam" only aped the ideas of Europeans and felt that "traditional art" needed support. He founded the Arts and Crafts School (โรงเรียนเพาะช่าง) in 1913, precisely to protect "traditional" art, apparently meaning Siamese art before it was corrupted by international influence. This then became art as "national essence" (Clark 2020: 47).

Just as Khrua In Khong and his contemporaries were inexorably tied to the favour and patronage of the monarchy, contemporary Thai artists have been compelled by particular expectations and market forces. As David Teh writes, contemporary Thai artists from at least the 1980s and perhaps earlier must cater to two "reliable" appetites: "the decorative patriotism of the *nouveau riche*, and the exoticism of tourists and expatriates" (2017: 47). Self-exoticizing "traditional" motifs, particularly Buddhist ones, proliferate in contemporary Thai art. As Teh's work makes elaborately clear, however, it was never really obvious what Thai art's "traditional" was, especially as Thailand, amongst other Southeast Asian nations, is a place of "mottled modernities" rather than "traditional" societies which happen to participate in the modern world. The In Khong style is one wrinkle in the idea of an homogenized "tradition"—some of the Kingdom's greatest religious art is not "traditional", but born of a productive tension between old and new, local and foreign. However, a handful of modern artists have employed the mixed amalgams of artists like Khrua In Khong. The 2022 exhibition *Déjà vu: When the Sun Rises in the West* by Natee Utarit (นที อุตฤทธิ์; b. 1970) imagined the historical Buddha's hypothetical journey to the West to meet Greco-Roman culture. In one piece, Natee mixes images of Greco-Roman architecture with modern-day visitors to a park, combined with In Khong's trademark giant lotus flower. Natee's work is an example of a contemporary Thai artist delving into the complicated array of temporal registers and international exchanges from which the country's mottled modernity arises.

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The murals of the In Khong school are modern in the sense that they markedly broke from traditional forms, endeavoring to describe an as-yet unfamiliar world. It was not the rebel imaginations of individual artists that spearheaded this change, it was an outward-looking intellectual king. At the disposal of King Mongkut was a new class of skilled and innovative mural craftsmen and many illustrated books from Europe and America to share with them. These

craftsmen, encouraged by a king with innovative ideas about Buddhism, were free to imagine elaborate landscapes. They also learned many new forms. These they scattered into their dreamy landscapes in an eclectic manner, perhaps because they felt few hard distinctions between old and new or "Western" and "local" forms.

At least it was not yet felt necessary to guard that which was felt to be "traditional" or to only imitate slavishly the foreign and new. Even in what are likely student paintings now housed at Wat Protketchettaram, these painters not only imitated European architectural designs, but lyrically expanded upon them. Perhaps the mural craftsmen, following the desires of their chief patron—who wished to import science but who worried about losing Buddhism—had been trying to visualize landscapes which were both modern and Buddhist, full of both realism and wonder. Or they may simply have been letting themselves experiment, converting Western architectural forms, which were less gilded and lavish than Siamese temples, but which had cultural cachet, into the sumptuous, crammed excess of prior murals such as those at Wat Suwannaram in Thonburi and the lyric extravagance of Siamese literature which described new lands like *Nirat London* and *Phra Aphaimani.*

Whichever way we interpret the In Khong style, these artisans' blend of technical skill, uninhibited mixing of both European and local elements, and creative abandon make these works both striking and unique. These murals are not modern merely because they use perspective and *chiaroscuro*. Their eclecticism represents an age in which all that was once solid could melt into air. They are modern in the sense that they evoke the sense of the possibility of a new age before it was given "a local habitation and a name".

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