

THE SĀVATTHĪ MIRACLES ON PAINTED WOODEN PANELS IN SIAM

Natchapol Sirisawad¹

ABSTRACT—The Great and Twin Miracles of Sāvattthī are among the Buddha’s most renowned miraculous acts, providing key episodes to his biography. Widely transmitted in multilingual textual traditions, these narratives became illustrations across South and Southeast Asian Buddhism. This article examines seven painted wooden panels from Buddhist sites in central Siam dated to the late 19th to early 20th centuries, analyzing how artists translated these stories into visual form. Scenes of the Twin Miracle and related episodes generally reveal reliance on Pali sources while incorporating contemporary social imagery, demonstrating a localized reinterpretation of canonical narratives within Siamese artistic practice.

KEYWORDS: Central Siam; Painted Wooden Panels; Sāvattthī Miracles; Theravada Literature; Twin Miracle

Introduction

The Śrāvastī (Pali, Sāvattthī) miracles constitute one of the most important miraculous episodes in the life of the historical Buddha—and, indeed, of all past and future buddhas—narrating his public display of supernatural powers to subdue the pride of non-Buddhist ascetics. These episodes hold a central position in Buddhist textual and visual traditions and are preserved in multiple languages and lineages. The earliest written account survives in the Kharoṣṭhī Split-Collection manuscripts, composed in Gāndhārī and dated to the 1st century CE (Falk & Steinbrückner 2020). The oldest Sanskrit versions are preserved in Gilgit manuscripts from the 6th to 8th centuries CE (Natchapol 2021). Additional accounts are known in

Pali, Tibetan, Chinese, Mongolian, and Siamese sources, reflecting the wide geographical and doctrinal spread of the narrative.

From an early period, the Śrāvastī miracles were widely represented in Buddhist art across India, Central Asia, and Southeast Asia. In India and Gandhāra, relief sculptures of the Twin Miracle (Skt, *yamakaprātihārya*), dating from the 1st to the 4th centuries CE, depict Śākyamuni Buddha levitating in the air while emitting flames and water from his body. Another miracle in which multiple buddhas appear instantaneously, known as the Great Miracle (Skt, *mahāprātihārya*), is often rendered in monumental compositions. By the Pāla period (8th to 12th c.), the miracles at Śrāvastī were incorporated into the *aṣṭamahāsthānāni* (Eight Great Sites), reflecting the eight great miracles as part of a recurring pattern that appears in the lives of all buddhas—past,

¹ Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok.
Email: Natchapol.S@chula.ac.th.



FIGURE 1: The Sāvattthī miracles, wooden panel dated 1887, Wat Pak Khlong, Phetchaburi © Fragile Palm Leaves Foundation

present, and future. These include the four major events: (1) the Birth at Lumbinī, (2) the Enlightenment at Bodhgayā, (3) the First Sermon at Sārnath, and (4) the Great Extinction at Kuśinagara, along with the four secondary miraculous events: (5) the Taming of the mad elephant Nālāgiri or Dhanapāla at Rājagṛha, (6) the Monkey's gift of honey at Vaiśālī, (7) the Performance of the miracles at Śrāvastī, and finally, (8) the Descent from Trāyastriṃśa heaven at Saṃkāśya (Strong 2001: 107ff). The narrative of the Śrāvastī miracles was transmitted northward along the Silk Road, as evidenced by mural paintings in Central Asian cave sites and southward into Southeast Asia, where it became an important subject of mural and relief art.

In Siam, the narrative emerged as a particularly popular theme in Buddhist visual culture from the Dvāravatī period, one of Siam's oldest artistic and

religious cultures in the 7th to the 8th centuries CE, up to the Rattanakosin period (1782 CE to present), appearing in sculptures, reliefs, clay tablets, and especially mural paintings. Scholars have noted that regional artistic traditions sometimes combined elements from different textual lineages, resulting in iconographic innovations not explicitly described in surviving literary sources (Brown 1984: 79, 83; Natchapol 2022; Revire 2022). From the late Ayutthaya period, murals depicting the Buddha's life increasingly followed the narrative of the *Paṭhamasambodhi*, a trend that continued into the early Rattanakosin period. The earliest surviving Siamese mural illustrating the Buddha's Sāvattthī miracles dates to the late Ayutthaya period, around 1734 CE, found in the *ubosot* (ordination hall) of Wat Ko (วัดเกาะ) in Phetchaburi. From the early Rattanakosin, during the reigns of kings Rama I (1782–1809) to



FIGURE 2: The Sāvattthī miracles, wooden panel dated 1888 or later, Wat Ko, Phetchaburi © Fragile Palm Leaves Foundation

Rama III (r. 1824–1851), notable examples of these murals can be found in Bangkok in the Phutthaisawan chapel (พระที่นั่งพุทไธสวรรย์), the *ubosot* and *wihan* (Buddha hall) of Wat Suthat Thepwaram (วัดสุทัศนเทพวราราม), the *ubosot* of Wat Suwannaram (วัดสุวรรณาราม), and on various gilded lacquer cabinets. From the reign of King Rama IV, in the mid-19th century onwards, illustrations feature the life of the Buddha in both murals and wooden panel paintings in central Siam.²

This article examines representations of the Sāvattthī miracles painted on seven Siamese wooden panels (*phap kho song*; ภาพคอสอง) dating from the late 19th to early 20th centuries. The panels are named after the beams (*kho song*; คอสอง) that support the roof of wooden halls. The paintings were executed with natural pigments (*si fun*; สีฝุ่น) on elongated wooden panels made by joining two or three wide hardwood planks and subsequently mounted along

the beams and rafters of monastic buildings such as teaching halls (*sala kan parian*; ศาลาการเปรียญ) or, occasionally, entrance and resting pavilions (*sala*; ศาลา) situated along canals. The paintings form part of the intricate craftsmanship and design traditions of Siam's premodern wooden architecture, which by the mid-20th century began to be replaced by the modern concrete style (Skilling 2022: 379). Donative inscriptions at Wat Chantharawat (วัดจันทราวาส), Phetchaburi, refer to them as *chak* (ฉาก), *chak phaen* (ฉากแผ่น), and *phaen* (แผ่น). In some cases, two or even three series of paintings are placed at different levels within the same building. Occasionally, the panels are positioned in locations that make them difficult to view.

This study focuses on examples from six temples in three central Thai provinces: Phetchaburi, Ratchaburi, Samut Songkhram, and one of uncertain provenance kept in the Folklore Museum in the southern province of Songkhla. Chronologically they are listed as follows: Wat Pak Khlong (วัดปากคลอง),

² See how these panels are positioned in some of the temples examined in Skilling 2022: 378, figs 1–6.



FIGURE 3a: The Sāvattḥī miracles, wooden panel dated 1918, Wat Chantharawat, Phetchaburi © Fragile Palm Leaves Foundation

Phetchaburi, dated to 1887 CE [FIGURE 1]; Wat Ko, Phetchaburi, dated to 1888 CE or later [FIGURE 2]; Wat Chantharawat, Phetchaburi, dated to 1918 CE [FIGS 3a–b]; Wat Thung Ya Khom Bang (วัดทุ่งหญ้าคมบาง), Ratchaburi, undated but probably from the Fifth or Sixth Reign [FIGURE 4]; Wat Chi Prasoet (วัดชีว์ประเสริฐ), Phetchaburi, dated to 1930 CE [FIGURE 5]; the Folklore Museum, Thaksin Institute for Southern Studies (พิพิธภัณฑ์คติชนวิทยา สถาบันทักษิณคดีศึกษา), Songkhla, undated but probably from the Sixth or Seventh Reign [FIGURE 6]; and Wat Pradu (วัดประดู่), Samut Songkhram, undated but wood panel paintings probably from the Sixth Reign or later [FIGURE 7]. Although these panels form an important part of the premodern wooden architectural and pictorial tradition of Siam, they remain insufficiently studied. By situating them within the broader textual and visual history of the Sāvattḥī miracles, this article aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of late

traditional Buddhist painting in central Siam.

The present article analyzes Siamese painted wooden panels depicting the Sāvattḥī miracles by comparing their narrative elements with a selection of literary sources in Pali. The analysis is structured around three phases: events preceding the Twin Miracle, representations of the Twin Miracle itself, and other associated miraculous demonstrations.

Textual Sources

Accounts of the Gotama Buddha's miracles at Sāvattḥī are preserved in several Pali commentarial sources. An early version appears in the *Jātaka-aṭṭhakathā* as the “story of the present occasion” (*paccuppannavatthu*) of the *Sarabhamigajātaka* (no. 483). The narrative describes how the disciple Piṇḍola Bhāradvāja performs a miracle to obtain a sandalwood bowl, after which the

Buddha forbids *bhikkhus* from performing wonders, leading to a miracle contest with rival non-Buddhist ascetics (*titthikas*). As part of this competition the Buddha announces that he will perform the Twin Miracle (*yamakapāṭihāriya*) at the foot of a mango tree at Sāvattihī on the full moon of Āsāḷha. Despite the *titthikas*' attempt to prevent the event by destroying all mango trees, the Buddha causes one to grow instantly from a seed offered by Gaṇḍa, the royal gardener. A more detailed account is found in Buddhaghosa's *Dhammapada-aṭṭhakathā*, composed around the 5th century. This version elaborates on the disciples' request that the Buddha entrust the task to them, the creation of the jeweled walkway (*ratana-caṅkama*), the performance of the Twin Miracle, the Buddha's encounter with the *titthikas*, and Pūraṇa's flight and eventual suicide.

The account of the Buddha's Twin Miracle also appears in the *Paṭhamasambodhi* and closely follows the *Dhammapada-aṭṭhakathā*.³ One notable variation is that King Ajātasattu, rather than Bimbisāra, is identified as the ruler of Magadha. Both versions, however, place the defeat of the *titthikas* and Pūraṇa's suicide before the Buddha's Twin Miracle. In these accounts, the miracle ultimately leads the audience to realize the meaning of the Dhamma rather than merely emphasizing the defeat of the ascetics (Natchapol 2019: 195–197).

³ The *Paṭhamasambodhi* exists in Pali and in several vernacular languages of Southeast Asia. The Thai version, known as *Pathomsomphot* (ปฐมสมโพธิ), was compiled and translated in 1845 CE by Somdet Phra Maha Samanachao Krom Phra Poramanuchitchinorot (สมเด็จพระมหาสมณเจ้า กรมพระปรมานุชิตชิโนรส; 1790–1853) during the reign of King Rama III (1824–1851).



FIGURE 3b: The grove-keeper's mango offering to the Buddha, detail of FIG. 3a
© Fragile Palm Leaves Foundation

Prelude

The Mango Offering

All three literary sources, the *Jātaka-aṭṭhakathā* (J iv 264–265; trans. Cowell 1990: IV, 167–168), the *Dhammapada-aṭṭhakathā* (Dhp-a III 207; trans. Burlingame 1921: III, 41) and the *Paṭhamasambodhi* (Poramanuchitchinorot, ed. 2551: 232–233; trans. 2016: 472) agree that Gaṇḍa, the royal grove-keeper of Sāvattihī, found ripe mangoes in the royal park and initially intended to offer them to the king, but instead, out of reverence, presented them to the Buddha.

On painted wooden panels, this episode typically depicts a male figure kneeling respectfully while offering a ripe mango to the Buddha, seated on a throne at a level higher than the



FIGURE 4: The Sāvattthī miracles, showing a deity bringing a storm to the pavilion and the ascetic leader Pūraṇa committing suicide, wooden panel, undated, Wat Thung Ya Khom Bang, Ratchaburi © Fragile Palm Leaves Foundation

kneeler, receiving the offering with his right hand. This scene appears on panels from Phetchaburi at Wat Pak Khlong [FIG. 1], Wat Ko [FIG. 2], Wat Chantharawat [FIG. 3b], and Wat Chi Prasoet [FIG. 5].

The Pavilion

According to the *Dhammapada-aṭṭhakathā* (Dhp-a III 208; trans. Burlingame 1921: III, 42) and the *Paṭhamasambodhi* (Poramanuchitchinorot, ed. 2551: 233; trans. 2016: 473), the destruction of the non-Buddhist ascetics' pavilion is carried out through coordinated divine intervention: Sakka (Indra) commands the wind-cloud deity Vātavalāhaka and the sun deity Suriya to demolish the structure prior to the Buddha's performance of the Twin Miracle. These literary sources thus emphasize the participation of multiple deities, each fulfilling a distinct role in the narrative.

Visual representations, however, frequently simplify this sequence. Some panels depict a single deity flying among clouds and seemingly bringing a storm to destroy the pavilion, as seen in a wooden panel from the teaching hall of Wat Thung Ya Khom Bang, Ratchaburi [FIG. 4]. In other examples, divine figures are omitted altogether. Four wooden panels [FIGS 1, 2, 3a, 5] instead focus on the physical collapse of the two-story pavilion: the roof caves in, ceremonial parasols and flags fall, and the ascetics scatter in confusion. By emphasizing the visible destruction and the disorder of the rival ascetics rather than the divine agents responsible for it, these murals transform the episode into a dramatic prelude to the Twin Miracle. The emphasis on chaos and humiliation suggests that the destruction of the pavilion functioned less as an independent miracle than as a narrative device



FIGURE 5: The Sāvattthī miracles, showing at the center the multiplication of buddhas atop the mango tree, wooden panel, dated 1930, Wat Chi Prasoet, Phetchaburi © Fragile Palm Leaves Foundation

highlighting the Buddha's impending triumph over rival teachers.

The Ascetics

According to the *Dhammapada-aṭṭhakathā* (Dhp-a III 209; trans. Burlingame 1921: III, 42) and the *Paṭhamasambodhi* (Poramanuchitchinorot, ed. 2551: 233; trans. 2016: 474), following the destruction of the pavilion the defeated ascetics flee. Their leader, Pūraṇa, receives a waterpot and rope from a follower, hangs the pot around his neck, and drowns himself, resulting in rebirth in Avīci hell. Despite the dramatic nature of this episode, it is rarely represented in Siamese mural painting. It can be securely identified

only on the wooden panel of the teaching hall at Wat Thung Ya Khom Bang, Ratchaburi, where it appears between the collapse of the pavilion and the Buddha touching the sun and the moon [FIG. 4]. The earliest known visual representation of this episode occurs much earlier in a 12th-century mural at Kubyaukgyi temple, Myinkaba, Bagan (Bopearachchi 2024: 328, fig. 2.9).

South Asian textual traditions themselves present notable variation. In *Mūlasarvāstivāda* sources, in Sanskrit, Pūraṇa drowns himself with a sand-filled pot and some disciples follow his example; the Tibetan *Vinayaśūdrakavastu* describes a collective suicide, while the Chinese version records only a single disciple drowning himself.

By contrast, the Sanskrit *Divyāvadāna* omits the suicide entirely (Natchapol 2019: 268).

The near absence of this episode in Siamese mural cycles suggests that painters and patrons did not consider it a central visual moment within the narrative sequence. Instead, mural programs typically emphasize scenes that directly highlight the Buddha's miraculous authority—such as the collapse of the ascetics' pavilion or the performance of the Twin Miracle itself. The suicide of Pūraṇa, although morally charged in textual sources as a demonstration of karmic retribution, shifts attention away from the Buddha toward the tragic fate of a rival teacher. For this reason, it appears to have been treated as a secondary narrative element in Siamese visual tradition, occasionally included but more often omitted in favor of scenes that more clearly celebrate the Buddha's triumph.

In several painted wooden panels, particularly at Wat Pak Khlong and Wat Ko [FIGS 1–2], Siamese artists depict non-Buddhist ascetics as foreign-looking figures wearing distinctive textiles and costumes. Their appearance—beards, head coverings, long garments, and fitted trousers—resembles visual types often associated with Arabs or Muslims in Siamese mural painting. Variations in complexion, with some figures rendered darker and others lighter, further distinguish these characters. Such features, however, should not be read as precise indicators of ethnicity or religion. Rather, they reflect conventional pictorial types used to represent the broader category of *khaek* (แขก), a term historically

applied in Siam to a wide range of peoples from South Asia and the Islamic world.

The continued depiction of such foreign figures in early Rattanakosin-period paintings likely echoes cultural memories of the Ayutthaya court, where diverse foreign communities played visible roles. Although many had by then assimilated or adopted local forms of dress, artists continued to portray them according to established visual conventions. The representation of non-Buddhist ascetics in this manner can already be traced to Ayutthaya-period precedents, such as the earlier murals found in the *ubosot* of Wat Ko (Skilling & Santi 2010: 158, fig. 8). As Somlux (2550) notes, the inclusion of foreign figures in Siamese mural painting from the late 17th to 18th centuries formed part of a broader artistic strategy, adding visual variety while helping to convey Buddhist narratives more vividly.

The Twin Miracle

The *yamakapāṭihāriya*, or “Twin Miracle”, originally refers to the miraculous emission of fire and water from the Buddha's body in opposing directions. As summarized elsewhere, the term *yamaka* denotes “twin” or “twofold”, signifying the simultaneous production of fire and water from the upper and lower parts of the body (Natchapol 2019: 249).

The Twin Miracle as such appears primarily in the narratives of the *Mūlasarvāstivāda* and *Theravāda* (hereafter *Theravada*) schools. In *Mūlasarvāstivāda* sources, including the *Vinayaṣudrakavastu* and the

Divyāvadāna, the Buddha enacts a sequence of miraculous feats across the four directions: (a) displaying four bodily postures in the sky, (b) emitting a great light, and (c) producing fire and water from his body. The Tibetan translation of the *Vinayaśūdrakavastu* explicitly refers to this complex as the “Twin Miracle” (*zung gi cho 'phrul*; རྩུང་གི་ཆོ་འཕུལ་), a term absent from the Chinese translation and Sanskrit versions (Ibid., 160 §14.6, 244–245).

Pali texts such as the *Paṭisambhidāmagga*, the *Dhammapada-aṭṭhakathā*, and the *Madhuratthavilāsini* expand the definition of the Twin Miracle beyond the familiar image of fire and water to include three distinct manifestations: (a) the simultaneous emission of fire and water from different parts of the Buddha’s body, (b) the emission of radiant light, and (c) the appearance of a duplicate buddha performing the four bodily postures in the sky. These correspond closely to accounts preserved in the *Mūlasarvāstivāda* tradition, although the sequence of the miracles varies across textual sources (Natchapol 2022: 18–19). Even within the Theravada tradition, textual treatments differ. Only the *Dhammapada-aṭṭhakathā* explicitly associates all three miracles with the event at Sāvattihī, whereas the *Sarabhamigajātaka* and the *Paṭhamasambodhi* describe the Twin Miracle more narrowly as the emission of fire and water. These differences are significant for the study of visual representation, as mural cycles often select and emphasize particular elements of the miracle rather than reproducing the full range of descriptions preserved in the literary tradition.

Fire, Water, and Light

The wooden panel at Wat Chantharawat, Phetchaburi [FIG. 3a], depicts only the emission of light, selectively visualizing one aspect of the Twin Miracle. According to the *Yamakaṇṭhāriyavatthu* of the *Dhammapada-aṭṭhakathā*, the Buddha emits radiant light of various colors—blue, yellow, red, white, crimson, and crystal-like—from his body as part of the miracle (Dhp-a III 213–214; trans. Burlingame 1921: III, 45–46). *Mūlasarvāstivāda* sources attribute this phenomenon to the Buddha’s entry into the fire-element concentration (*tejjodhātu*), whereas Theravada texts do not associate the emission of light with a specific meditative technique (Natchapol 2019: 159).

In contrast, Pali sources such as the *Yamakaṇṭhāriyavatthu* and the *Paṭhamasambodhi* emphasize the emission of fire and water from the Buddha’s body, yet these elements are not specifically depicted on the wooden panels.

The Buddha Multiplied

One of the most striking features of the wooden panels is the depiction of the Buddha performing the miracle alongside a magically created double, resulting in multiple manifestations of the Buddha shown in different postures and activities. This motif dominates most visual representations of the Twin Miracle. An exception appears in the wooden panel at Wat Thung Ya Khom Bang, Ratchaburi [FIG. 4], where other miraculous aspects are emphasized.

The textual tradition provides a useful point of comparison.



FIGURE 6: The multiplication of buddhas atop the mango tree at Sāvattihī, wooden panel, undated, Folklore Museum, Songkhla © Natchapol Sirisawad

In Pali sources, particularly the *Yamakapāṭihāriyavatthu*, the miracle is described as a didactic display in which the Buddha creates a duplicate (*nimmitto*) who teaches the Dhamma while the Buddha simultaneously performs different bodily postures. Because both the Buddha and his magically created counterpart enact the miracle, it is designated a “Twin Miracle”. The *Dhammapada-aṭṭhakathā* (Dhp-a III 213–214; trans. Burlingame 1921: III, 45–46) explains that when the Buddha walks, stands, sits, or lies down, the duplicate performs a contrasting posture, and vice versa. In another passage (Dhp-a III 216; trans. Burlingame 1921: III, 47), the duplicate is said to engage the Buddha in dialogue, enabling the teaching of the Dhamma to a vast audience.

The paintings, however, seem to develop this idea differently. None of the principal textual sources—the *Yamakapāṭihāriyaniddesa* in the *Paṭisambhidāmagga*, the *Dhammapada-aṭṭhakathā*, or the *Paṭhamasambodhi*—specify the number of duplicates. The texts suggest only a single magically created counterpart performing actions distinct from those of the Buddha.

In contrast, wooden panels frequently depict several duplicate buddhas, commonly four, arranged symmetrically around the central figure on the branches of a mango tree [e.g., FIG. 5]. This multiplication probably reflects an artistic convention rather than a literal transcription of textual descriptions.

Another difference concerns the miracle’s setting. Pali sources vividly describe the mango tree at Sāvattihī, but do not specify the Buddha’s exact position, noting only in the *Paṭhamasambodhi* that the miracle occurred “near the mango tree” (Poramanuchitchinorot, ed. 2551: 232; trans. 2016: 471), as echoed in the *Dhammapada-aṭṭhakathā*. In paintings, by contrast, the emanations of buddhas are typically placed directly on the branches, an adaptation that clarifies the scene visually.

The structure of the tree itself plays an important compositional role. In many murals and wooden panels, the mango tree is rendered with a broad, rounded base tapering to a pointed top. Two reclining buddha manifestations usually occupy the lower and widest part of the tree. Above these appear two

seated figures, while a standing buddha crowns the apex, as in the example from the Folklore Museum, Songkhla [FIG. 6]. This arrangement allows several postures to be displayed simultaneously while maintaining visual balance within a vertical composition.

Such images suggest that Siamese painters organized the scene according to pictorial logic rather than textual sequence. The number and placement of buddha figures clearly respond primarily to the shape of the tree and the vertical surface of the wall or panel. Multiple manifestations are arranged along the trunk and branches in a clear hierarchy, transforming the narrative into a visually coherent composition.

The earliest surviving painted examples of this arrangement appear in murals from the late Ayutthaya period, where reclining manifestations occupy the lower register, standing figures the middle, and seated buddhas the upper part of the tree (Skilling & Santi 2010: 157, fig. 7). Although the painted wooden panels display slight variations, the persistence of this vertical organization indicates that Siamese artists developed a stable visual convention for representing the Sāvattthī miracles.

Sun and Moon

Several painted wooden panels depict the Buddha reaching toward or touching the sun and the moon as part of the miracle scene. At Wat Thung Ya Khom Bang, Ratchaburi, the Buddha sits atop a mango tree with both hands raised, touching the sun with his right hand and the moon—presumably—with his left [FIG. 4]. A similar theme appears on certain gilded lacquer cabinets

(Bunthoeun 2549: 211), where the Buddha stands on the tree and reaches toward the two celestial bodies. Another example occurs on a wooden panel at Wat Pradu, Amphawa, Samut Songkhram [FIG. 7], where the Buddha stands touching the sun and the moon; an accompanying inscription, however, identifies the episode as a miracle at Kapilavatthu rather than at Sāvattthī.

This motif has earlier visual precedents. In Dvāravatī-period reliefs and molded tablets, multiplied buddhas placed at the top of compositions often display the gesture of touching circular forms on either side (Natchapol 2022: figs 1, 2, 4, 7; Revire 2022: fig. 5). These circles are commonly interpreted as the sun and the moon, although they have also been read as a double manifestation of the solar deity Sūrya (Brown 1984: 90).

Textual sources provide only partial parallels to these images. The gesture does not appear in the Pali or Mūlasarvāstivāda accounts of the Sāvattthī miracles but is described in the *Paṭhamasambodhi* (Poramanuchitchinorot, ed. 2551: 236; trans. 2016: 479). There, the Buddha enters the fourth *jhāna*—the foundation of supranormal powers—before creating a magical double (*nimmitabuddho*) and performing various feats, including extending his hand to touch the sun and the moon.

Comparable episodes occur in other Buddhist traditions. The Chinese translation of the *Dharmaguptakavinaya*, for example, records a miracle demonstration in which the Buddha multiplies his body, reunites the forms, touches the sun and the moon, and extends his body to the Brahmā heaven (T. 1428: 949c23–29). Similar descriptions in *Dharmaguptaka* and related sources associate such feats



FIGURE 7: The Buddha performing the Twin Miracle, emitting light and touching the sun and moon, at Kapilavatthu, wooden panel, undated, Wat Pradu, Samut Songkhram © Thanaphat Limhasanaikul

Narrative Inscriptions

with the psychic powers arising from the fourth level of meditative absorption (Natchapol 2019: 260–261). Miraculous displays in early Buddhist literature are often presented as extensions of meditative mastery, expressing the power of the mind over matter (Fiordalis 2008: 4). A related episode appears in the Sanskrit *Buddhacarita*, where the Buddha performs miracles to convince his father of his enlightenment. Among these feats he touches the chariot of the sun, multiplies his body, emits fire and water, and moves freely through earth, water, and air (trans. Johnston 1995: 138–139).

Taken together, these visual and textual parallels suggest that Siamese artists drew selectively on a wider repertoire of Buddhist miracle traditions. The wooden panels do not simply reproduce a single textual narrative but seem to incorporate motifs circulating across multiple literary and artistic traditions.

The inscriptions on the painted wooden panels, all written in Thai script and language, function either as narrative captions or as donative records. The few narrative labels are presented here in modern Thai orthography, transcribed and translated into English by the author, with original spellings retained where relevant. Donative inscriptions belong to a different category of analysis and are therefore not treated here.

Wat Ko, Phetchaburi

The wooden panel kept in the teaching hall (*sala kan parian*; ศาลาการเปรียญ) depicts the Twin Miracle at Sāvattḥī paired with the Buddha's visit to the Sakyas at Kapilavatthu [FIG. 2]. Although the Twin Miracle is not explicitly named, a four-line inscription—identical in content to that at Wat Chantharawat, with only minor orthographic variation—appears at the bottom center within an ornate scroll frame [FIGURE 8]:



FIGURE 8: Narrative caption, detail of FIG. 2 © Fragile Palm Leaves Foundation

ยามสักราชก้อง
ไปสู่พระภะคะวันต
สรวมองค์พระทรงบรร
เปนภิกขุสุได้

ภากัน
เคี่ยมไหว
พชาเพศให้แะ
ดับร้อนเบญจะมาร

All the Sakyas gathered,
To approach the Blessed One with reverence.
They were ordained into the monastic life by the Buddha,
Becoming monks, the fires of the Five Māras were extinguished.

The inscription thus identifies the scene through the narrative of the Sakyas' ordination rather than the miracle itself, suggesting that the panel participates in a broader biographical cycle in which the Sāvattḥī miracles are visually paired with the episode at Kapilavatthu.

Wat Thung Ya Khom Bang, Ratchaburi

A short label inscription in Thai-Pali accompanies the scene and clearly identifies it as the Twin Miracle [FIGURE 9]. It reads:



FIGURE 9: Narrative caption, detail of FIG. 4 © Fragile Palm Leaves Foundation

กัณฑ์ ๑๙ ยะมกปาฏิหาร

Khan 19: yamokapatihan.

The label is written in Thai, employing Pali-derived vocabulary rather than a direct Pali transliteration. Here the term *khan* (Pali, *khaṇḍha*; “section” or “chapter”) designates a numbered episode within a narrative cycle of the Buddha’s life. Such numbering commonly appears in Thai vernacular sermon and illustrated traditions, where episodes are organized sequentially for didactic purposes. The inscription therefore identifies the scene as the 19th episode, corresponding to

yamokapatihan or the Twin Miracle (Pali, *yamakapāṭihāriya*), presumably in *Sāvatthī*, although the numbering does not necessarily correspond to a specific canonical textual source.

Folklore Museum, Institute for Southern Thai Studies, Songkhla

A two-line inscription accompanying the scene of the multiplication of buddhas reads [FIGURE 10]:



FIGURE 10: Narrative caption, detail of FIG. 6 © Fragile Palm Leaves Foundation

ที่สิบเจ็ดเมื่อทรงกระทำปาฏิหาริ
บนยอดไม้มะม่วง ฯ

Seventeenth: When the Buddha performed miracles
atop the mango tree.

The inscription also functions as a brief narrative label identifying the episode depicted. The phrase *thi sipchet* (ที่สิบเจ็ด; “seventeenth”) again indicates the position of the scene within a sequential cycle of events from the Buddha’s life. The expression *patihan* (ปาฏิหาริ) refers here to the Buddha’s performance of miracles atop the branches of the mango tree at *Sāvatthī*.

Similarly written in *khlong si suphap* (โคลงสี่สุภาพ), a structured poetic form in Siamese literature, the above inscriptions function as label texts that guide viewers’ interpretation of the images.

However, they extend beyond simple labeling by narrating and interpreting the visual scenes with literary richness, revealing a close intertextual relationship between verbal and visual storytelling. Their content is not strictly scriptural and often reflects localized Buddhist narrative traditions. For example, the explicit reference to the mango tree in the Folklore Museum inscription introduces a detail not consistently emphasized in canonical sources, indicating the integration of local folklore.

Concluding Remarks

This study has examined six painted wooden panels depicting the Sāvattthī miracles dating from the late 19th to the early 20th century. Although the number of surviving examples is limited, this situation reflects the broader condition of wooden architectural decoration in Siam, where earlier monastic structures and their painted elements have frequently been lost through renovation, replacement, or environmental deterioration. It is therefore likely that similar pictorial cycles once existed more widely, even if only a small number have survived.

These panels probably formed part of larger pictorial programs illustrating the broader biography of the historical Buddha, drawing on both Pali canonical texts and vernacular narrative traditions. Wooden panels offered considerable compositional flexibility and were commonly used to decorate the interiors of permanent monastic buildings. In

the surviving examples, the Sāvattthī miracles rarely appear in isolation; rather, they are presented alongside other major episodes from the Buddha's life. Arranged in multi-panel series, such paintings integrate several key events into a coherent visual narrative that encourages viewers to recognize the broader biography of the Buddha rather than focusing on a single episode.

The relationship between Buddhist literary texts and Siamese painted panels reflects the differing constraints of each medium. Pali texts recount the Sāvattthī miracles in extended narrative detail, leaving much to the reader's imagination. Painted representations, by contrast, operate within a limited pictorial space and therefore condense the story by selecting a small number of visually effective moments. As a result, wooden panels tend to emphasize the most recognizable and doctrinally significant scenes rather than reproducing the full literary sequence, as summarized in **TABLE 1**.

TABLE 1: Literary and Visual Traditions of the Sāvattthī Miracles

Narrative Elements	Wooden Panels					
	1	2	3	4	5	6
Prelude						
The mango offering	✓	✓	✓		✓	
The pavilion	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
The ascetics				✓		
The Twin Miracle						
Emission of light			✓	✓		
The Buddha multiplied	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
Sun and moon				✓		

**1: Wat Pak Khlong; 2: Wat Ko; 3: Wat Chantharawat;
4: Wat Thung Ya Khom Bang; 5: Wat Chi Prasoet; 6: Folklore Museum**

The table indicates that visual storytelling in these panels is selective, favoring scenes that can clearly structure the narrative within a confined pictorial field. For example, the grove-keeper's mango offering appears in four of the six examples, while both the destruction and collapse of the ascetics' pavilion and the multiplication of the Buddha occur in five. These episodes function as effective narrative anchors, enabling artists to evoke the broader story through a limited number of scenes. By contrast, other episodes—such as the suicide of the leader of the non-Buddhist ascetics—appear only once, likely because scenes centered on secondary developments or chaotic action were less suited to stable and legible compositions within the restricted space of a panel.

Variation also occurs in the depiction of miraculous phenomena. Although the emission of light forms part of the miracle textual narrative, it appears in only two panels. Other miraculous demonstrations, such as the Buddha touching the sun and the moon, are depicted only once among the examples studied here. A comparable motif appears in the panel from Wat Pradu, Samut Songkhram, but there the accompanying inscription identifies the episode as a miracle at Kapilavatthu rather than at Sāvattthī. This overlap suggests that certain miraculous motifs circulated relatively freely across different episodes of the Buddha's life and could occasionally lead to visual or narrative conflation between distinct miracle traditions. In practice, artists seem to have privileged the most immediately recognizable image associated with the Sāvattthī event: the multiplication of the Buddha upon the

mango tree. This motif condenses the miracle into a single visual scheme while allowing painters to organize the composition vertically and hierarchically—an arrangement particularly well suited to mural and panel painting.

Other narrative elements described in textual sources appear rarely, if at all, in the paintings. A notable example is the emission of fire and water traditionally associated with the Twin Miracle. Although this phenomenon occupies a central place in several literary traditions, it is entirely absent from the panels examined here. This absence does not imply that the scene was impossible to represent—artists occasionally depicted the fire-and-water miracle elsewhere—but rather suggests that most painters favored motifs capable of structuring the composition more clearly within a limited pictorial field.

Differences in textual interpretation may also have contributed to this pattern. While the *Paṭhamasambodhi* defines the Twin Miracle primarily in terms of the emission of fire and water, other Pali works—such as the *Paṭisambhidāmagga* and the *Dhammapada-aṭṭhakathā*—present a broader conception that includes the Buddha's multiplication. The prominence of this latter motif in Siamese wooden painting therefore reflects not only pictorial considerations but also the selective engagement of artists with multiple narrative traditions.

More broadly, the patterns observed in these painted panels correspond to strategies found in Siamese mural painting, where complex textual narratives were likewise condensed into visually legible scenes organized

around a limited number of emblematic moments. The Sāvattthī miracle panels thus illustrate how painters working in Siam transformed literary traditions

into coherent visual narratives adapted to the constraints and possibilities of monumental painting.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This article derives from the research project “The Buddha’s Miracle in Śrāvastī: The Relationship between Literary and Visual Representations in South Asia and Southeast Asia”. The project was supported by the Office of the Permanent Secretary, Ministry of

Higher Education, Science, Research, and Innovation (OPS MHESI), the Thailand Science Research and Innovation (TSRI), and Chulalongkorn University (Grant no. RGNS 65–004). I am grateful to Nicolas Revire and the anonymous reviewers for their valuable comments and suggestions, which helped improve this article.

ABBREVIATIONS

Dhp-a *Dhammapada-aṭṭhakathā*
J *Jātaka*

T. 1428 *Sifen lu* 四分律

[*Dharmaguptakavinaya*, trans. by Buddhayaśas 佛陀耶舍 & Zhu Fonian 竺佛念, 408–413 CE], Vol. 22, 567a–1014b

REFERENCES

Primary Sources

- Burlingame, Eugene W., trans. 1921. *Buddhist Legends: Translated from the Original Pali Text of the Dhammapada Commentary*. 3 Volumes. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Cowell, E.B., trans. 1990. *The Jātaka, or Stories of the Buddha’s Former Births*. 6 Volumes. London: Pali Text Society [Reprint; 1st Ed. 1895–1907].
- Johnston, E.H., trans. 1995. *Aśvaghōṣa’s Buddhacarita or Acts of the Buddha*. New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal [Reprint; 1st Ed. 1936].
- Poramanuchitchinorot, Somdet Phra Maha Samanachao Krom Phra (สมเด็จพระมหาสมณเจ้า กรมพระปรมานุชิตชิโนรส), ed. 2551 BE (2008 CE). พระปฐมสมโพธิ [*Phra Pathomsomphot*]. Bangkok: Wat Phrachetophon.

———, trans. 2016. *Paṭhamasambodhi: The Life of the Lord Buddha*. Bangkok: Amarin Printing.

Secondary Sources

- Bopearachchi, Osmund. 2024. The Buddha Performing the “Twin Miracle” Creating the Spatial Cosmos. In *Kucha and Beyond, Divine and Human Landscapes from Central Asia to the Himalaya: Proceedings of a Conference of the European Society for the Study of Central Asian and Himalayan Civilisations (SEEHAC) held in Leipzig, 2–4 November 2021*, ed. by Eli Franco et al., 17–34. New Delhi: Dev Publishers & Distributors.
- Brown, Robert L. 1984. The Śrāvastī Miracles in the Art of India and Dvāravatī. *Archives of Asian Art* 37: 79–95.
- Bunthoeun Sriworapoj (บุญเตือน ศรีวรพจน์).

2549 BE (2006 CE). ชาดกและพุทธประวัติจากตู้ลายรดน้ำ [*Jatakas and Buddha's Life from Dharma Gilded Lacquer Cabinets*]. Bangkok: Document and Archive Committee of the 60th Anniversary Celebrations of His Majesty the King.

• Falk, Harry & Steinbrückner, Elisabeth. 2020. A Metrical Version from Gandhāra of the “Miracle at Śrāvastī” (Texts from the Split Collection 4). In *Annual Report of the International Research Institute for Advanced Buddhology (ARIRIAB)* 23: 3–42.

• Fiordalis, David V. 2008. *Miracles and Superhuman Powers in South Asian Buddhist Literature*. PhD Dissertation. Ann Harbor: University of Michigan.

• Natchapol Sirisawad. 2019. *The Mahāprātihāryasūtra in the Gilgit Manuscripts: A Critical Edition, Translation and Textual Analysis*. PhD Dissertation. Munich: Ludwig Maximilians-Universität.

———. 2021. A Newly Identified Manuscript of the *Mahāprātihāryasūtra* in the Gilgit Buddhist Manuscript: A Critical Edition and Translation. *Annual Report of the International Research Institute for Advanced Buddhology (ARIRIAB)* 24: 65–98.

———. 2022. The Śrāvastī Miracles: Some Relationships Between their Literary Sources and Visual Representations

in *Dvāravatī. Entangled Religions* 13(7). <https://doi.org/10.46586/er.13.2022.9908>.

• Revire, Nicolas. 2022. The Dvāravatī Relief at Wat Suthat, Bangkok, and Its Indian Roots. In *Decoding Southeast Asian Art: Studies in Honor of Piriya Krairiksh*, ed. by Nicolas Revire & Pitchaya Soomjinda, 74–89. Bangkok: River Books & The Piriya Krairiksh Foundation.

• Skilling, Peter. 2022. Tapussa and Bhallika in Thai Painting. In *Connecting the Art, Literature, and Religion of South and Central Asia: Studies in Honour of Monika Zin*, ed. by Ines Konczak-Nagel et al., 377–390. New Delhi: Dev Publishers & Distributors.

• Skilling, Peter & Santi Pakdeekham. 2010. Imaginaires of Late Ayutthaya Pilgrimage: The Seven and Eight Great Sites at Wat Ko Kaeo Suttharam, Phetchaburi. *Aséanie* 25: 147–194 DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3406/asean.2010.2131>.

• Somlux Khamtrong (สมลักษณ์ คำตรง). 2550 BE (2007 CE). ภาพชาวต่างชาติในงานจิตรกรรมไทย ประเพณีตั้งแต่ปลายพุทธศตวรรษที่ 23 ถึงพุทธศตวรรษที่ 24 [*Images of Foreigners in Traditional Thai Painting from the Late 18th to the 19th Century*]. MA Thesis. Bangkok: Silpakorn University.

• Strong, John S. 2001. *The Buddha: A Short Biography*. Oxford: Oneworld.