

SILPA BHIRASRI AND THE MAKING OF THAI MODERN ART: A HISTORIOGRAPHICAL JOURNEY

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ABSTRACT—Often described as the “Father of Thai modern art”, Silpa Bhirasri (1892–1962; born Corrado Feroci) occupies a canonical place in Thai art history. This article adopts a historiographical approach to examine how his artistic production, pedagogical role, and public writings have been received and interpreted in Thai scholarship and how these readings have shaped his reputation and legacy since his death in 1962. Drawing on sources in Thai, French, Italian, and English, the study highlights both convergences and divergences in these discourses. It concludes by identifying avenues for future research on his role in the formation of Thai modern art.

KEYWORDS: Historiography; Italian Artists in Siam; Silpa Bhirasri (Corrado Feroci); Silpakorn University; Thai Modern Art

Silpa Bhirasri Reconsidered

During the period between World Wars I and II, many Asian territories, colonized or independent, adopted European-style art academies to promote nation-building and modernization. In this context, curator Yu Jin Seng (b. 1979) notes, “Art was thought to somehow exhibit and manifest the nation and its identity, and national art exhibitions evidenced the ‘national characteristics’ of art” (2017: 217). While Siam was never officially colonized, it adopted this approach by pursuing its own modernization goals through two related strategies: introducing Western art education and redefining national artistic traditions. In Siam (Thailand after 1939), this transformation was personified by the Italian sculptor Corrado Feroci (1892–1962), who arrived in the kingdom in 1923 and was naturalized as Silpa Bhirasri (ศิลป์ พีระศรี)

in 1944. Scholar Pandit Chanrochanakit (บัณฑิต จันทร์โรจน์กิจ) encapsulates the complexity of his identity, portraying him as:

an Italian sculptor who taught and protected Thai art and aesthetics, an alien who was confined in the Japanese concentration camp during World War II, an Italian who naturalized to become a Thai citizen to avoid further confinement by the Japanese, and lastly an artist who loved and protected Thai culture (2004: 45).

According to Pandit, Silpa Bhirasri’s name change was linked to the wartime context; other narratives, however, remain less explicit, suggesting motivations such as devotion to art and attachment to Thailand. He remained in Thailand until his death in 1962, witnessing

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four successive reigns—from Rama VI (1910–1925) through Rama IX (1946–2016)—and experiencing the political shift from absolute monarchy to a constitutional regime following the 1932 revolution. He served under various governments, notably during the leadership of Field Marshall Plaek Phibunsongkhram (แปลก พิบูลสงคราม; in office 1938–1944 and 1948–1957) and Sarit Thanarat (สฤษดิ์ ธนะรัชต์; in office 1959–1963). Initially employed as a foreign court sculptor, Silpa gradually became a central institutional figure, ultimately serving as professor and founding dean of Thailand’s first national School of Fine Arts, the future Silpakorn University in Bangkok.

Assistant Professor Thanavi Chotpradit (ธนาวิ โชติประดิษฐ; b. 1981) underscores Silpa’s overwhelming presence in Thai modern art historiography, observing, “When knowledge of modern art history is insufficient [...] modern Thai art history is studied primarily through his biography” (2555: 36).² Influential scholar and curator Apinan Poshyananda (อภินันท์ โปษยานนท์; b. 1956) similarly emphasizes Silpa’s formative influence as what he terms “Bhirasri-ism”: “This generation of artists emerged as proponents of Silpa and his pedagogical approach. They continue to staunchly uphold ‘Bhirasri-ism’ long after his passing in 1962” (2007: 32). In parallel, Silpa has been widely framed as a heroic figure in both Thai and international scholarship. Italian scholar Maurizio Peleggi notes, “Feroci is memorialised in the national pantheon as ‘the father of Thai modern art’” (2003: 100), while Justin McDaniel observes that he is

regarded as “a national hero in Thailand” (2011: 161). Art historian Kessara Srinaka (เกษรา ศรีนาคา) similarly observes, “Writings about Silpa Bhirasri’s art [...] narrate his life in the manner of a heroic or venerable figure who rendered virtuous service to the ‘Thai nation’” (2558: 5). This heroic framing is echoed in the writings of two academics from Silpakorn University: Maneepin Phromsuthirak (มนีปิ่น พรหมสุทธิรักษ์), who depicts Silpa as “the soul-lighter of Thai artists” (2003: 39), and Pairoj Jamuni (ไพโรจน์ ชมูณี), who asserts, “If Professor Bhirasri had not founded an art institute nearly seventy years ago, Thailand would not have been given this pride in the modern artistic heritage” (2000: 20).

Previous academic work highlighting Silpa’s impact frequently obscures the distinction between rigorous historical analysis and nationalistic reverence, resulting in accounts that are shaped predominantly by sentiment and ideology rather than critical evaluation. While Silpa Bhirasri’s recognition differs from that of Victor Tardieu (1870–1937), founder of the École des beaux-arts de l’Indochine in Hanoi, and George Groslier (1887–1945), founder of the École des arts cambodgiens in Phnom Penh, both operating in colonial contexts, the exceptional scope of Silpa’s influence nonetheless invites comparison with other early-modern Asian art histories. Junichi Shioda offers a pertinent parallel with Japan’s early modern period, noting that Feroci’s role in Thailand recalls that of the “‘hired foreigners’ Fontanesi and Ragusa, [...] who] laid the foundations of modern Japanese art by teaching Japanese students the techniques of Western painting and sculpture at the Art School” (1995: 238). This comparison

² Here and below, all translations from Thai, French and Italian sources are mine.

is particularly relevant since Japan, as with Thailand, remained uncolonized while Western influence shaped these two nations. Shioda further observes, “it would be no exaggeration to say that the modern period in Thai art begins with Feroci [whose influence he considers] incomparably greater than that of Fontanesi and Ragusa in Japan” (Ibid.). These observations call for a more precise assessment of Silpa’s singular prominence among foreign artists in Siam. He was neither the first Italian in Siam, nor the first sculptor, nor the first artist to adopt a Thai name. He followed a line of Italian artists already active in Siam, including architects Carlo Allegri (1862–1938), Annibale Rigotti (1870–1968), Mario Tamagno (1877–1941), and painters Galileo Chini (1873–1956) and Cesare Ferro (1880–1934). Other Italian sculptors were active in Siam, including Rodolfo Nolli (1888–1963) (Somporn 1995: 243–244). Nor was he unique in adopting a Thai name, as architect, painter, and sculptor Ercole Manfredi (1883–1973) became Ekarit Manfendi (เอกฤทธิ หมั่นเพินดี).

Although Silpa’s prominence is unmatched among his Italian predecessors, Peleggi nonetheless notes, “an exhaustive study of him is still waiting to be written” (2017: 217). One reason for this omission, as Thanavi (2017: 134) observes, is that Thai art history remains largely focused on premodern art. Thanavi also underscores “blind spots in Thai art historiography [... such as] the study of art produced during the People’s Party (คณะราษฎร) era (1932–1947)” (2555: 36), including the under-researched artistic production of Silpa during this period. For Thanavi, this absence “is not solely due to the marginal and underdeveloped status of art history as a discipline” but

reflects “the political dimension of art historiography itself, [...] deeply shaped by successive waves of royalist ideological restoration following the 1947 coup” (Ibid., 37). While Thanavi acknowledges the relative underdevelopment of art history in Thailand, she also emphasizes an ongoing process of rewriting within the discipline. This contrasts the field of history, where, as Thongchai Winichakul (ธงชัย วินิจจะกูล; b. 1957) notes, Professor Charnvit Kasetsiri (ชาญวิทย์ เกษตรศิริ; b. 1941) identified a more elaborate classificatory framework, comprising “those of Damrong [Rajanubhab] and Luang Wichit along with four additional categories which materialized after 1973: the nationalist revival, Marxist, Historicist, and Asiatic society of schools” (1995: 100). Thus, whereas history reveals a plurality of schools shaped by ideological conflict, art history—less institutionally developed—registers fewer internal divisions but remains marked by politically inflected processes of selection and rewriting. Professor Emeritus John Clark and artist Phaptawan Suwannakudt (ภาพตะวัน สุวรรณกูฏ; b. 1959) likewise highlight this tendency, noting,

Thai modern art history has been reconstructed from a rapid run-through of accepted positions seen from a height which is peculiarly convenient to accepted viewpoints or prevalent ideologies, whether conservative or radical. Sometimes the art historical riders have been academics keen to reconstruct “Thainess”, and the artists have only wanted to see self-confirming radicalisms

or order-propagating conservatism (2021: 2).

In these conditions, Silpa Bhirasri's legacy, as historian Pinyapan Potjanalawan (กัญญพันธ์ พจนานวณ) observes, has been celebrated to such an extent that it becomes "difficult to subject him to critique—despite his historically significant role" (2557: 180).

Rather than offering a biographical account, this study considers the representation of Silpa's role in Thai art historiography. It proposes neither an inquisition nor a hagiography, but a critical scholarly examination of the available literature to reveal the multiple dimensions of his persona as they emerge through academic and institutional narratives. In this sense, the analysis relies primarily on publications about Silpa rather than on Silpa's own writings. The study draws on primary sources, including testimonies and writings by Silpa's former students—many of whom later became Silpakorn lecturers or prominent artists—as well as on secondary sources by both Thai and international scholars, encompassing Thai scholars trained abroad, those educated locally, and those affiliated with other academic institutions within Thailand.

By the late 19th century, Italian artists and architects were already active in Siam: figures such as Tamagno and Rigotti were recruited to contribute to the modernization of royal and civic architecture, while painters such as Chini, whose work had drawn the attention of King Chulalongkorn (Rama V; r. 1868–1910) at the Venice Biennale, were invited to undertake prestigious royal commissions. Silpa Bhirasri's

trajectory, however, followed a different pattern. Rather than arriving with an established artistic reputation, Feroci was selected through an administrative process; art historian Viboon Leesuwat (วิบูลย์ ลีสุวรรณ; b. 1947) notes, "Feroci was chosen to work for the Fine Arts Department out of 200 Italian candidates whose portfolios were screened by King Rama VI" (1996: 69). He was subsequently appointed state sculptor under a three-year contract, indicating an initially technical and contractual role rather than a pedagogical one.

On this basis, the study initially considers Silpa as an artist to grasp the aesthetic foundations and transnational dialogues that underpinned his practice. This dimension contextualizes his subsequent position as professor and mentor, through which he formalized and transmitted his vision to successive generations of Thai artists, contributing to the shaping of a national modern artistic identity. Finally, the analysis turns to Silpa's role as a scholar, whose writings, curatorial initiatives, and cultural policies helped construct the very framework through which Thai modern art has been defined and historicized.

Artistic Legacy

From Florence to Bangkok

In their study of artists' biographies, Ernst Kris & Otto Kurz (1979) identify several recurring themes. In the case of Corrado Feroci/Silpa Bhirasri, the biographical discourse foregrounds the theme of departure and personal sacrifice, illustrated by two pivotal episodes: (1) his move to Siam with his



FIGURE 1: Corrado Feroci in Italy, 1918–1922 © Silpa Bhirasri Research Center

family in 1923, and (2) his return to Thailand in 1949, leaving his wife and child in Italy. Viboon interprets the 1923 departure as a major personal and professional sacrifice, observing, perhaps with a certain degree of hyperbole, that “had he remained at the Academy or begun creating artistic works in Italy, he would have definitely become one of the world’s foremost sculptors, in the footsteps of Michelangelo, the artistic genius of Florence (1475–1564) or Leonardo da Vinci (1452–1519)” (1996: 21). Yet, as Viboon notes, concerning Feroci’s early career, including his nine years of teaching at the Academy of Fine Arts of Florence (from which he graduated in sculpture in 1914), “there is no serious documentation of his works” (Ibid., 67). This absence nevertheless allows later narratives to construct an image of innate mastery. Viboon also observes that “the few photographs he brought with him to Siam endorsed Feroci as a sculptor of high quality in the realist school. It was believed Feroci was particularly accomplished in portraiture and religious sculptures” (Ibid.) [FIGURE 1].

By framing Silpa as an artistic genius akin to Renaissance masters, Viboon places him within a conventional narrative of exceptional talent, echoing the description offered by Nipan Khamwilai (นิพนธ์ ขำวิไล; 1939–2014), editor of the commemorative volume: *Prof. Silpa Bhirasri and His Students* (อาจารย์ ศิลป์กับลูกศิษย์), which compiles recollections by former students. Nipan describes him as “a saint of art, from the city of Florence, a devout believer in the glory of the Renaissance, who journeyed eastward and devoted his entire life to the land known as Siam” (cited in Thanavi 2555: 34). Drawing on former students’ testimonies, Apinan similarly conveys the impression that Silpa “aroused fanatical loyalty in his admirers and students, many of whom credited him with almost superhuman powers” (1992: 93).

Collectively, these tropes illustrate the patterns described by Nathalie Heinich as a hagiographic regime of admiration. In her analysis of Van Gogh publications, Heinich argues that biographical narratives often cease

to function as historical accounts and instead become modes of veneration: “some of [their] forms are canonical in hagiographical terms. They repeat and perpetuate what has been said before”, driven “less by information [...] than by celebration” (1996: 36). Such narratives obey a temporality “not that of historical research but that of collective celebration [...] with its commemorations, its exhibitions and its pilgrimages” (Ibid.). Thai narratives surrounding Silpa closely follow this pattern.

However, while hagiographic framing dominates earlier narratives, several scholars offer more historically grounded interpretations of his departure from Italy that challenge this saintly image. Massimo De Grassi suggests that the move ultimately worked in Feroci’s favor: “What we do know for certain is that this decision [...] granted the Tuscan sculptor a degree of fame and prominence that he could hardly have achieved had he remained in his homeland” (2022: 138). De Grassi further notes that Feroci would have struggled to stand out in the crowded post-First World War Italian art scene, where he “would indeed have faced great difficulty in distinguishing himself among that multitude of ‘workers of glory’—sculptors who, during the 1920s, were engaged in filling Italy with monumental memorials dedicated to the fallen of the Great War who, in the following decade, would become, with the necessary qualifications, the celebrants of the fascist regime’s exploits” (Ibid.). Apinan, however, shifts the focus from missed opportunities to the alignment between Feroci’s realist training and institutional patronage, “Having gained a reputation as a sculptor of war memorials [...]. If Feroci had

remained in Florence, his status as an official artist working for the Fascist government would have assured his reputation” (1992: 34). In this sense, Apinan’s remark complements De Grassi’s contextualization: both suggest that Feroci’s realist orientation tied him to forms of state patronage, whether in Italy or later Thailand. Viboon also addresses the stylistic dimension, citing the artist and former student of Silpa Bhirasri, Damrong Wong-Upparaj (ดำรงวงศ์อุปราช; 1936–2002), who observed, “While Feroci was teaching in Florence, Europe was rife with modernism movements. Siam, on the other hand, was a peaceful country far removed from modernism. Such a country would seem ideal for an artist of the classical school like Professor Feroci” (1996: 23). Viboon further notes, “One remembers that when Feroci completed his studies at the Academy in 1914, modernism was at its peak in Europe. This would have been alien to Feroci, whose whole education had been in the realist school. Opportunities to build a reputation through his realist creations would have been few and far between” (Ibid.). This stylistic conservatism is echoed by Gigi Salvagnini, who observed, “Throughout his Italian production, Feroci demonstrates a persistent fidelity to pre-20th-century stylistic conventions, entirely immune to avant-garde temptations—which he must have known, yet which had no discernible influence on his sculptural practice” (1998: 12). Salvagnini’s analysis corroborates Viboon’s assessment while providing a more detached art-historical perspective, demonstrating that Feroci remained firmly rooted in descriptive realism without engaging the formal innovations of the European avant-garde.

These interpretations are not merely variations on a theme but often point in opposite directions: while some accounts portray Feroci as a celebrated sculptor whose departure from Italy interrupted a promising trajectory, others argue that remaining in his home country would have offered limited prospects. Such divergence reflects not only the different evidentiary bases mobilized by each author, but also the distinct historiographical aims shaping their narratives. Viboon underscores Silpa's role as the foundational figure of Thai modern art, thereby cultivating a national myth; De Grassi and Apinan situate him within the Italian interwar and fascist artistic context, emphasizing how his realist style both constrained and enabled his career; and Salvagnini highlights his stylistic conservatism, framing his œuvre as aligned with enduring academic and classical values. Rather than revealing a single historical truth, the historiography of Feroci's move to Siam exposes a persistent tension between retrospective canonization and explanations rooted in the historical circumstances of the time.

Between Commission and Compromise

While Feroci's classical training in Italy partly explains his distance from the European avant-garde, state commissions further constrained his creative freedom. As influential Thai artist and scholar Piriya Krairiksh (พิริยะ ไกรฤกษ์; b. 1942) notes, "As a government employee, Feroci was not as free to work as he wanted and, on many occasions, had to compromise with the wishes of his superiors" (1982: 66). This view is echoed by German scholar Helen Michaelsen,

who recalls, "because of his position as a civil servant he did not have much freedom to decide and had to go along with the visions of his commissioners" (1990: 34). Consequently, while Feroci's works in Siam may have fulfilled their official purposes, he did not necessarily regard them with high esteem. Michaelsen provides a concrete example: "The 'Democracy Monument' [อนุสาวรีย์ประชาธิปไตย] was done, like the 'Victory Monument' [อนุสาวรีย์ชัยสมรภูมิ in Bangkok], in the style of heroic realism. Although Feroci was a follower of the realistic style, these over-emphasized forms did not correspond with his ideas" (Ibid.). Piriya (Op. cit.) likewise observed that Feroci "was so unhappy with the alterations to his design of the figures ornamenting the Victory Monument, that he referred to it as the Monument to his embarrassment" (p. 66). Notably, scholars discussing Feroci's constrained creative freedom repeatedly cite this same example, raising questions about its emblematic status and the absence of alternative cases. Feroci thus functioned less as an autonomous artist than as a highly skilled artisan under state commission. As Apinan argues, "it took several years to establish his reputation as a sculptor in the Department of Fine Arts, where he was responsible for producing official sculptures" (1992: 34). These institutional constraints complicate the conventional portrayal of Silpa Bhirasri as an independent genius, indicating that his legacy cannot be understood solely through technical skill or aesthetic innovation but must be situated within the political and administrative conditions shaping both production and reception in Siam.

Art Under Debate

Continuing the Thai context, we may recall Annabelle Boissier's observation on modern art, in which the French social anthropologist of art notes that "it is often academic artists, rather than avant-gardists, who constitute the driving forces behind the emergence of modern art movements in non-European countries" (2008: 38). In the case of Thailand, the late artist, art critic, and lecturer Thanom Chapakdee (ถนอม ช่างศักดิ์; 1958–2022) highlights that modern art was shaped by state patronage, marking a sharp divergence from European trajectories: "It can be seen that the foundation of modern knowledge of arts had been well established carefully by all forms of tools planned by the government. In contrast, the European way of modern arts had been originally created by thinkers, philosophers, rebel artists, not by the state" (2012: 279). This contrast, however, should be qualified, as many figures associated with European modernism were themselves trained in state art academies or worked within institutional frameworks. Within this state-supported context, curator and scholar David Teh (b. 1977) notes that Feroci/Silpa occupies a central yet contested position: "[He] was certainly no vanguardist—his 'new' was that of neoclassicism that in 1930s Europe was buffing Roman imperial heritage for the purpose of fascism" (2017: 127). Boissier (Op.cit.) adds: "It is his own ultra-conservative aesthetic choices that will be valued, while abstraction and the avant-gardes will consequently be rejected" (p. 38). Such assessments help explain why, despite Feroci/Silpa's

institutional prominence, many scholars have remained critical of his artistic achievements. British historian Michael Smithies (1932–2019) frankly asserts, "He was not a great artist" (1978: 147); Piriya notes, "By Western standards, Feroci's works are not particularly distinguished. They are academic and unimaginative" (1982: 66); Peleggi even goes so far as to call him "a mediocre sculptor" (2017: 128).

At the same time, several scholars acknowledge Silpa's positive impact on Thai modern art. Piriya (Op. cit.) notes that "in the context of Thai art, [Silpa's works] are of great importance for the influence they exerted on generations of students" (p. 66). Similarly, Peleggi (Op. cit.) argues that Silpa's "localization of academicism not only exerted a huge influence over the subsequent development of modern art in Thailand but was more intellectually sophisticated than his critics tend to assume" (p. 128). Despite these acknowledgments, Peleggi calls for a more critical and nuanced approach: "The new breed of Thai revisionist art and architectural historians relish in challenging institutional memory of Corrado Feroci/Silpa Bhirasri as 'the father of modern Thai art'—a memory championed by Silpakorn University, where his life statue is the object of devotional care by students (see below), especially at the time of exams—by denouncing, somewhat simplistically, the fascist root of Feroci's aesthetic" (Ibid., 128). These positions expose a central tension: while his style was conservative, his institutional and pedagogical influence was decisive.

The "fascist root of Feroci's aesthetic", identified by Peleggi, is further elabo-

rated by Thanavi, who argues that Silpa's sculptural style evolved "from Neoclassicism to exhibit Nazi characteristics in the case of the Democracy Monument, reflecting both the aesthetic preferences of that era and the use of art as a vehicle for political propaganda—akin to the appropriation of fascist styles in Italy and Nazi styles in Germany" (2553: 108). Within the Siamese/Thai ideological context, the fascist doctrine promoted by Phibunsongkhram and Luang Wichit Wathakan (หลวงวิจิตรวาทการ; 1898–1962), the chief architect of modern Thai nationalism, shaped Feroci's institutional role; as Apinan notes, both "were interested in the use of art as propaganda, [through which] Feroci became an important link and his status correspondingly increased" (1992: 36).

Given his direct involvement in a politically instrumentalized visual culture, scholars have questioned whether Silpa himself endorsed fascist convictions. British-born writer Michael Wright (1940–2009), for instance, suggests, "Bhirasri may have decided to enter government service in Siam in order to flee the fascist ideology taking hold in his homeland", but immediately adds: "this assumption becomes difficult to sustain". Wright specifies: "his work—particularly the Democracy Monument—is imbued with characteristics commonly associated with fascist aesthetics, such as severity, historical distortion, uniformity, and a propagandistic use of monumental form to exert ideological influence" (2535: 178). This reasoning often rests on a reductive syllogism: since Silpa produced works aligned with fascist aesthetics in Italy and continued to do so after relocating

to Siam/Thailand, some infer that he shared fascist political convictions. Such a conflation between aesthetic affiliation and ideological alignment risks oversimplifying the conditions of artistic production under authoritarian regimes. In light to these suppositions, Thanavi draws a clear distinction between stylistic production and personal conviction, noting: "[T]here is insufficient evidence to determine whether Silpa was a fascist. Conversely, there is also no conclusive evidence to affirm that he was not. His true political stance thus remains undetermined, as no writings or memoirs have surfaced that seriously articulate his political views" (2555: 40). Thus, in the absence of conclusive biographical evidence, Silpa's political orientation therefore remains open to interpretation.

From Sculptor to Master

Career and Teaching Philosophy

Corrado Feroci began his educational career at the Academy of Fine Arts in Florence, where he taught from 1914 to 1923. Upon arrival in Siam in January 1923, he signed a three-year contract as a state-employed sculptor. Pairoj retrospectively frames this phase as the beginning of "a far more important mission: to create an art institute to develop the nation's artistic resources" (2000: 20), an interpretation that appears premature given the gradual development of Silpa's institutional authority. In 1933, the Department of Fine Arts founded the School of Fine Arts, Pranit Sinlapakam School (โรงเรียนประณีตศิลปกรรม), renamed the Silpakorn

School of Fine Arts (โรงเรียนศิลปากร) in 1937 and elevated to Silpakorn University (มหาวิทยาลัยศิลปากร) in 1943. Feroci/Silpa taught there from 1934 until 1962. Despite its transition to university status in 1943, Silpakorn University “continued to teach an academic syllabus based on the European academy practice remarkably similar to that practiced before the Second World War in Tokyo” (Clark 1998: 162). This assessment is reinforced by distinguished scholar Soranat Tailanga (สรณัฐ ไตลังคะ), who asserted that “Students were not encouraged to practice modern art since the professor emphasized the Academy’s teaching techniques. Students who painted in a modernist style usually received strong criticism and low grades from the professor” (2008: 128). While this indicates strict conservatism, it also demonstrates Silpa’s active role in defining the aesthetic boundaries of Thai art education, reflecting both his academic training and his vision of a culturally, even perhaps politically grounded pedagogical model.

However, instead of emphasizing Silpa’s rejection of modernism, educator and curator Somporn Rodboon (สมพร รอดบุญ; b. 1947) highlights his pedagogy’s strong orientation toward Thai traditional art. She explains that Thailand appreciated Silpa because he “laid a strong foundation for Western academic training as well as encouraging his teaching staff and students to appreciate their own culture and to do more research on Thai traditional art. He successfully tutored them in assimilating Western and traditional styles in a way that has led Thai artists to create international art works without losing the essence of ‘Thainess’” (2005: 278).

Shioda similarly argues, “In performing his role of educating Thai students and introducing Western academic art and its techniques, Feroci issued a warning against the excesses of modernism and advised Thai artists to respect the traditions of their own country and seek their own kind of originality. In other words, he was an advocate of preserving traditions as well as being the promoter of a policy of modernization and Europeanization” (1995: 238).

If these interpretations are justified, one might ask why postcolonial theories or other analytical frameworks have not been more widely applied to theorize this phenomenon. In this regard, Homi K. Bhabha’s notion of mimicry, developed in *The Location of Culture* (1994), can help us understand ambivalent imitation, producing a localized hybridity in which Thai traditions and European forms intersect. Shioda (Op. cit.) also draws comparisons with the development of art pedagogy in his own country, viz. Japan, notably through the figure of American art historian Ernest Fenollosa (1853–1908), “the ideologue who advocated a return to the past in modern Japanese art” (p. 238). He later highlights that “Fenollosa, together with his Japanese colleague Okakura Tenshin [1863–1913], encouraged the creation of a modern form of Japanese-style painting to be achieved by reforming the traditional painting schools, which were enervated by the influx of Western-style painting, and restoring tradition in modern context. The ideas of Feroci and Fenollosa are quite similar in many respects” (Ibid.). Silpa is frequently portrayed in Thai art history as an artist and educator with a distinctive approach. Yet the observation that



FIGURE 2: Silpa Bhirasri teaching at Silpakorn University, Wang Tha Phra Campus, 1950s © Silpa Bhirasri Research Center

Fenollosa employed comparable methods in Japan suggests either that Silpa's contributions were not entirely exceptional or, conversely, that they formed part of a broader intellectual and pedagogical current spreading across East Asia at the time, within a context shaped by Western cultural influence.

The Cult of the Teacher

Venerated in Thai art history as a devoted educator, Silpa's biography abounds in anecdotes drawn from former students.

Viboon underscores this dimension in his biography, dedicating an entire chapter, "The Spirit of a Teacher", to Silpa's pedagogical role [FIGURE 2]. Viboon writes, "Professor Silpa was determined to be an exemplary teacher. He lived a life of 'giving', from educating his students to helping them financially. His undoubted spirit of a teacher served as a profound example for his students" (1996: 215). Viboon cites several testimonies from Silpa's former students to highlight this stance, revealing a semantic elevation from teacher to

paternal figure. Master sculptor and disciple Sanan Silakorn (สนั่น ศิลากรณ์; 1919–1986), for instance, recalls that Silpa “eventually became like another father to me” (Ibid.). Viboon concludes, asserting, “He did not teach because it was his job; he was sincere and dedicated to his students” (Ibid., 220–221). While Viboon convincingly foregrounds Silpa’s human qualities, the repetition of these motifs gives the narrative a distinctly hagiographic tone. Even Smithies, who remained critical of certain aspects of his work, emphasizes Silpa’s role as a catalyst for artistic inspiration: “He was something more important in the context of the art scene of the time, serving as a tremendous inspirer of individuals. Through his enthusiasm and personality, he ignited the imaginations of generations of young men and women alike” (1978: 147).

Other accounts deepen this idealized image, portraying Silpa as a man consumed by ascetic dedication, for whom “water was the only drink to quench his thirst” (Viboon 1996: 225). A star pupil of Silpa, Khien Yimsiri (เขียน ยิมศิริ; 1922–1971), recalls that Silpa “led a life of solitude, living for work rather than pleasure”, and his “closest friend then was a Thai dog which accompanied him to and from school every day” (2545: 225–227). Another dimension shaping Silpa’s constructed persona concerns language, as former students recalled his limited spoken Thai and heavy accent. Khien notes that Silpa “could speak some Thai, but his accent was very strong, even though he had lived in Thailand for many years” (Ibid., 13). This perception is echoed by Damrong Wong-Upparaj, who recalled that “we

understood his Thai, but [...] his accent was terrible” (cited in Clark 1995: 52). Thanavi (2555) situates these anecdotes within the mythic construction of Silpa, observing that variation in portrayals lies in his idiosyncrasies: “If there is variation in portrayals of Silpa, it lies chiefly in anecdotes recounting his endearing idiosyncrasies—such as his mispronunciation of Thai. These are not intended as irreverent mockery, but function as a rhetorical strategy of respect in another form” (p. 34). This rhetorical strategy allows intimacy and reverence to coexist, culminating in Thanavi’s description of Silpa: “Consequently, Bhirasri embodies both the untouchable saint and the touchable beloved father of his students—an ambivalent figure characteristic of many cultic personalities elevated for veneration” (Ibid.).

From a historiographical perspective, these testimonies, together with Thanavi’s interpretation, contribute to the construction of an idealized narrative around Silpa Bhirasri. The emphasis on sacrifice, perseverance, and moral purpose transforms biographical detail into an uplifting narrative of vocation and destiny. Even minor traits—e.g., his accent, his solitary habits—serve to reinforce a dual image of Silpa as both revered and relatable, at once saintly and paternal. Such tensions suggest that idealized narratives simultaneously construct and obscure historical figures: Silpa emerges not as a flawless originator, but as a historically situated individual whose authority rested as much on symbolic capital and institutional reverence as on pedagogical and artistic merit. Consequently, his legacy functions



FIGURE 3: Cover of *Phuchatkan* Newspaper, 9–15 January 1995 © *Manager Weekly*

as a highly charged cultural reference, in which even minor gestures involving his image may provoke controversy.

A striking example occurred in January 1995, when Vishnu Chotikul (วิชณู โชติสกุล), editor of *Phuchatkan* (ผู้จัดการ) or *Manager Weekly*, featured on its cover a photograph of Silpa's statue at

Silpakorn University with a sign at its base reading "Sale 50 %", [FIGURE 3] intended to criticize the "commercialism and inflated prices of the Bangkok art market" (Cate 2003: 44). This act challenged the boundaries of permissible critique, as the statue had become a sanctified symbol of national artistic

identity and provoked outrage among Silpakorn staff and students.

The symbolic significance of the statue derives from its creation by Sanan Silakorn in 1966 and its installation in 1969, marking Thailand's first monument dedicated to a foreigner [FIGURE 4]. As artist, writer, art critic, and art teacher Pishnu Supanimit (พิชญ์ สุภณิมิตร; b. 1948) notes, following Silpa's 1962 death, "his students found themselves without a spiritual anchor—lacking a symbolic representation that could stand in for the profound virtues he had embodied and contributed to the academic institution, the artistic community, and the nation" (2015: 19). Seen in this light, the portrait statue cemented Silpa's status as an untouchable figure, rendering his image prescriptive rather than merely depictive. Yet while monuments consolidated his symbolic authority, his influence was equally articulated through his writings on Thai art, archeology, and cultural heritage.

Writing Thai History

Any serious engagement with Silpa's writings must consider both their thematic breadth—from archeological reflections on Siam to critical essays on Western and contemporary art—and the mediating role of translation. As Pinyapan observed, "access to his ideas for the general Thai public has always depended on translation" (2557: 203). The translators—Phraya Anuman Rajadhon (พระยาอนุมาน ราชธนะ; 1888–1969), Khien Yimsiri, Dhanit Yupho (ธนิต อยู่โพธิ์; 1907–2004), MC Subhadradis Diskul (ม.จ. สุภัทรดิศ ดิศกุล; 1923–2003), and Sulak Sivaraksa (สุลักษณ์ ศิวรักษ์; b. 1933) brought

diverse perspectives to this task, yet the implications of their editorial and interpretative choices have rarely been examined. Negotiating meaning, syntax, and conceptual frameworks, these translations shaped the reception of Silpa's thought and cultivated art-historical consciousness in Thailand. As Kessara notes, "Silpa Bhirasri's writings in the 1960s also played a crucial role in stimulating artists and scholars to develop an interest in and research Thai artworks from the past" (2558: 12). This success prompts reflection on Silpa's scholarly status, revealing a tension between the authority attributed to his erudition and the practice-oriented, pedagogical nature of his writings.

Scholar or Artist?

Silpa's significance in Thai art history derives not only from his institutional role, but also, equally, from his writings, which established a conceptual foundation for the field. Pishnu describes him as "an art scholar and an artist" (2012: 47), while artist, curator, and art historian Sutee Kunavichayanont (สุธี คุณาวิชยานนท์; b. 1965) emphasizes the enduring impact of his texts: "Some excerpts from his writings have become iconic and frequently cited, such as 'Tomorrow is already too late' and 'Art is long, life is short'. These phrases contributed to Silpa Bhirasri's status as a revered figure in the art community, deeply admired by his students. He became a central influential thinker, philosopher, and advocate for art in the country" (2546: 69). While Sutee presents both phrases together, only the first may be Silpa's

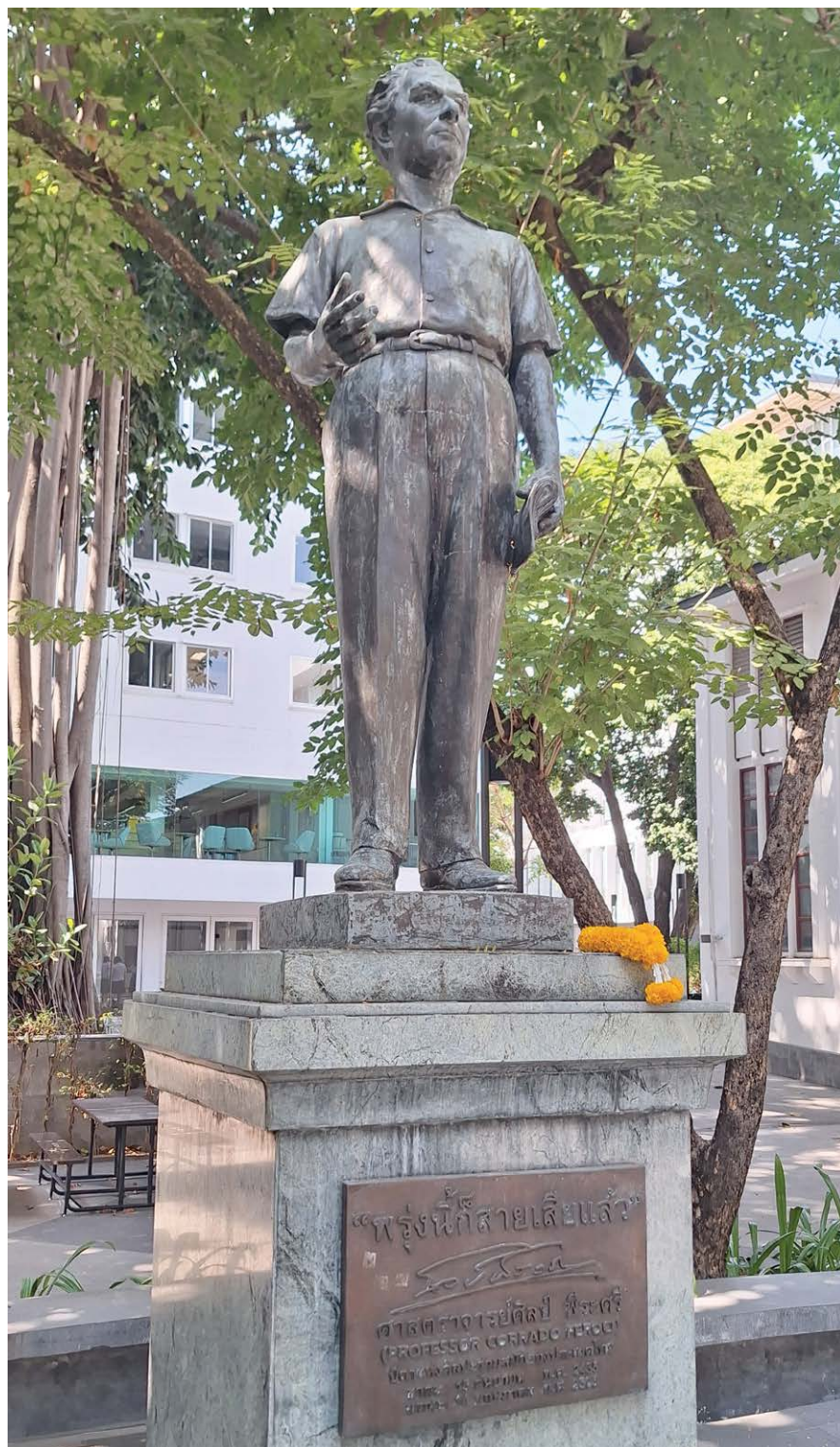


FIGURE 4: Statue of Silpa Bhirasri at Silpakorn University, Wang Tha Phra Campus, Bangkok © Sébastien Tayac

own; the second—the centuries-old aphorism *Ars longa, vita brevis* (Hippocrates; 4th c. BCE)—was cited by him rather than authored. Viboon acknowledges, “the written works of Professor Silpa Bhirasri, including his books and articles on contemporary art and culture, are of immense value” (2535: 149). He notes, “many articles and art textbooks, both in English and translated into Thai, are credited to him, representing his direct academic contributions and thoughts” (1996: 183). Even though Viboon (Ibid.) first notes that from these works “Professor Silpa’s status as an ‘Art Scholar’ is securely confirmed” (p. 205), he complicates this view by emphasizing that Silpa’s writings approach contemporary art “from the perspective of a sculptor or an artist, rather than that of an art scholar” (2535: 149) and that he “wrote his articles from the perspective of an artist and sculptor, not a scholar” (1996: 199). He also explains (Ibid.) why Silpa’s writings contain few references, noting that they were “never meant for serious academic discussion; they aimed at creating understanding among his readers” (p. 183). This tension—between acknowledgment of Silpa’s scholarly output and his orientation toward practical instruction—reveals a fundamental ambiguity: his writings are valued for their accessibility and scope, designed both for students and the wider public, but do not fully conform to conventional academic standards.

Despite these limitations, Yu Jin Seng highlights that from 1949 “until its 14th edition [of the National Exhibition of Art in 1964], Silpakorn University

and Bhirasri were given the power to shape the direction of the exhibitions in line with the education curriculum of the University” (2017: 217). In this context, Silpa’s writings became a key medium for transmitting his intellectual authority as they “had a significant influence on his students, many of whom played important roles in Thailand’s art scene” (Kessara 2558: 25). This observation aligns with Clark’s remark that “The study of Silpa Bhirasri’s biography, works, ideas, and followers are four topics embroiled within a cult of personality or cult of ‘great man’ worship still prevalent in Thailand today” (2020: 80). Through this alignment, Silpa’s students and institutional affiliates transformed his intellectual authority into a resource that legitimized their own positions and inscribed his discourse into artistic practice, cultural memory, and the historiography of Thai modern art. Operating as an art school from 1934 and a university from 1943, Silpakorn remained the sole university of fine arts until the 1980s, when, as Curtin notes, “the art departments at Chulalongkorn University and Chiang Mai University began to provide a counterbalance to its dominance” (2021: 48). Its authority over national exhibitions—including control over competitions, jury membership, and professors’ role as “status-bearing consecrators of new work” (Clark 2010: 121)—often generated tensions within the Thai art world. This interplay between Silpa’s writings, his students, and Silpakorn University raises important questions regarding critical engagement and invites a methodological reassessment of his legacy.

Public Discourse and Criticism

Beyond Silpakorn University, Silpa sought to reach a broader public through exhibitions. Recognizing that “the public, by and large, had not been sufficiently educated to appreciate modern art” (Piriya 1982: 71), he addressed this gap by including “a short note in each of the catalogues explaining art to the public and commenting on a few chosen works in the exhibitions” (Piriya 1986: 8). As Michaelsen notes, he nevertheless “constantly complained about the consequence of this lack” (1993: 66). Through these texts, Silpa mediated between contemporary artistic practices, which receive limited reception and institutional support, and the public

Despite these constraints, Silpa’s writings influenced Thai art culture. Smithies acknowledges that he “was one of the first to write seriously about art in Thailand in the Thai Culture Series of pamphlets published by the Fine Arts Department, and his book *The Meaning of Art* was translated into Thai” (1978: 147). Viboon similarly notes that these writings “significantly contributed to the public’s awareness and understanding of their own art and culture” (2535: 149); Somporn notes, “Bhirasri’s publications have proven to be very accessible and beneficial for anyone interested in art [...] and have done much to revive appreciation for Thai traditional art” (2017: 159). Together, these assessments indicate that Silpa’s writings shaped public perception and institutional approaches to Thai art, despite his recurring frustrations.

His legacy, however, was marked by contradictions. Apinan observes that his writing “reflects how his views of modern Thai art were transformed over the last decade of his career. Concerning the essence of modern Thai art, Bhirasri’s writings seem inconsistent and contradictory at times” (1992: 57). Teh similarly notes that his veneration as the progenitor of Thai modern art “was not for commitment to any modernist doctrine, but because he proved so pliable in changing ideological wings” and “Feroci’s knack for compromise has had profound and enduring effects on Thai modern art” (2017: 127). These critiques indicate that his influence rested as much on adaptability as on coherent aesthetic principles.

Silpa’s public writings also include responses to criticism. A notable instance occurred during the second National Exhibition in 1950, when MR Kukrit Pramoj (ม.ร.ว. คึกฤทธิ์ ปราโมช; 1911–1995) published a critical article in the newspaper *Siam Rath* (สยามรัฐ). Referenced by both Piriya and Apinan, this episode serves as a case study of Silpa’s dual role as educator and defender of artistic agency. Pramoj dismissed the works as imitative or rudimentary, arguing that many artists lacked personal style and clarity of expression and did not seem to know what meaning or emotion they wished to convey (Piriya 1982: 68–69; Apinan 1992: 56). Piriya notes, “Bhirasri was defensive of such criticisms” (1982: 69) and felt compelled to respond. Piriya asserted, “what and how contemporary artists express must be entirely left to the individual feeling and judgment of each artist. They are

Thai, and as such their art will be Thai as well, even though the laymen's eyes may not yet discern such characteristics" (ibid.). This exchange, often cited for its combative tone, highlights Silpa's commitment to both education and artistic freedom.

While both Piriya and Apinan acknowledge Silpa's role, they do not explore the ideological implications of Pramoj's critique. Thanavi defines Pramoj as a "conservative royalist intellectual and politician" who dismissed the art associated with the People's Party as "alien to the basis of Thai society and even tasteless" (2017: 131). Pramoj reiterated this argument during the Bangkok seminar *Art since 1932* held at Thammasat University in 1983, when he claimed, "Thai art after 1932, frankly and patriotically speaking, is the most declining age because [the People's Party's] leading members came back from France and their taste of art is just from cafés along the streets of Paris" (cited in ibid.). Such critiques contributed to a widespread perception of art from 1932–1947 as derivative or culturally alien. Thanavi further notes that in 2005, architectural historian Chatri Prakitnonthakan (ชาตรี ประกิตนันทการ; b. 1976) challenged Pramoj's criticism of revolutionary art as mere Western imitation, reintroducing the subject into academic debate (ibid., 135). Although art associated with the People's Party was long regarded negatively, Silpa—despite playing a decisive role in its artistic production—was later canonized as the Father of Thai modern art, avoiding any lasting discredit. This apparent contradiction is not coincidental: it points to a historiographical

process that selectively minimized his involvement in the revolutionary project.

This tension became evident in the academic field when Thanavi delivered a lecture entitled "The Hagiography of Silpa Bhirasri: Memory and Forgetting in Art History" at the Faculty of Archeology, Silpakorn University, in Bangkok on 23 March 2012.³ She received criticism suggesting that her research addressed a topic "not worth knowing" and she "never seems to contribute anything worthwhile to the university" (cited in Thanavi 2555: 48). She later published an article based on this presentation, articulating her view of the university as "a space whose primary function is to generate and expand knowledge within each discipline. Challenging established arguments in order to introduce new perspectives is therefore essential, and engaging in scholarly debate through evidence and logic is entirely normal" (ibid.). She contrasted this conception with the Thai academic context, suggesting that, through her topic and approach, she

may have violated the conventions of Thai academic culture [...] where junior scholars are expected not to raise questions or express criticism, especially towards those who have been elevated to an almost sacred status. [...] In a pre-modern worldview, the university remains analogous

³ This lecture derives from a section of her doctoral research project, *Reassessing Silpa Khana Ratsadon: The Neglected Movement in Thai Art History, Nationalism, and Collective Memory*, undertaken at Birkbeck, University of London, between 2011 and 2016.

to a temple, and the teacher is seen as a monk or a saint. Within such a temple-like academic culture, the author's heterodox work is likely perceived as something *acintya* [อจินไตย; i.e., that which is unthinkable or beyond comprehension] (Ibid.).

Thanavi extends this analysis by situating the issue within broader cultural and ideological frameworks. She argues that the scarcity of critical perspectives on Silpa reflects "deeply rooted cultural values—gratitude, respect for elders, and the recognition of hierarchical status. These values are embedded in the long-standing conservative structure of Thai society. Such a conceptual framework permits no other mode of representation for Silpa beyond the sculpted image of idealization" (Ibid., 34).

By oscillating between explanatory essays and responses to critics, Silpa cultivated a public persona as both educator and advocate. This duality reflects his understanding that sustaining a distinctly Thai modernism required expanding art appreciation while defending artistic agency. His public texts thus form a dynamic archive that actively shaped Thai art historiography.

Concluding Remarks

In 2026, 64 years after his death, Silpa Bhirasri remains a revered figure in Thailand, commemorated by a statue, an annual day of remembrance held on his birthday (15 September), a research center (สำนักวิจัยศิลป์พระศรี), a national

museum (พิพิธภัณฑ์สถานแห่งชาติศิลป์พระศรี), and numerous artistic initiatives bearing his name. His legacy remains influential among students and professors of fine arts, reflecting his role in shaping the country's artistic landscape. Silpa's multifaceted roles in art were marked by a syncretic blend of European influences and a commitment to preserving Siamese traditions, while fulfilling the propagandistic imperatives of both the absolute and constitutional monarchies. Within debates on "multiple modernities", Silpa provides a particularly instructive case. Although he rejected modernist tendencies in Italy in favor of classical approaches, relocating to Siam/Thailand allowed him to reshape the local art scene by merging European techniques with Siamese traditions.

Over time, he came to be celebrated as the "Father of modern art" in Thailand, illustrating how modernity is mediated through local contexts, pedagogical authority, and institutional power. Although scholarly debates have questioned Silpa's originality and artistic merit, especially regarding "fascist" aesthetics, his dedication as a teacher remains largely uncontested, with former students consistently emphasizing his selflessness, rigor, and personal investment in their academic development. His writings and teachings produced a dominant narrative of modern Thai art that still shapes contemporary understandings, even as historians critically examine its ideological and institutional underpinnings. Despite frequent citation, critically distanced scholarship on Silpa remains scarce, highlighting the persistence of hagiographic representations and the need to reassess his legacy.

The harsh reception of Thanavi's critical work demonstrates how Thai academic and cultural contexts may hinder reassessment of established figures through seniority norms and sacralized institutional memory. Moving beyond commemorative mythologies requires addressing unresolved contradictions: how did Silpa's state-aligned role as a national artisan constrain his artistic vision? Can his Eurocentric pedagogy coexist with contemporary decolonial approaches to Thai art

history? Addressing these questions requires deeper archival research and critical effort to separate Silpa as a historical figure from ideological appropriations of his legacy. Only then can his contributions be assessed not as those of a singular "Father of Thai modern art", but as a historically situated figure embedded in ongoing global-local negotiations of modernity. To what extent might rewriting Silpa Bhirasri's biography reshape the narrative of Thai modern and contemporary art?

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