

Towards a Definition of Isan Mural Painting: Focus on the Heartland

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Characteristics of northeastern Thailand (Isan) mural painting are described for a subgroup of examples in the heartland of the region, located at three temples: Wat Matchima Withayaram (more commonly known as Ban Lan), Wat Sanuan Wari Phatthanaram, and Wat Sa Bua Kaew, all in Khon Kaen province. The stylistic consistencies in their murals as well as their unique traits are investigated. The combination of their characteristics exemplifies the creativity of “Isan heartland” mural painting early in the 20th century and the distinctiveness of the local Buddhist imagination.

Since mural painting in the northeastern region (Isan¹) of Thailand has been relatively undocumented by art historians, an attempt to define its stylistic characteristics as a school may seem premature. However, taking into account the extensive area, numerous murals on temple walls, and diverse painting styles of the region, an attempt to begin exploring seems reasonable, focusing on a small, localized group.

The diversity in style among temple murals in the region was first noted over two decades ago by Pairote Samosorn (1989) who found murals at 70 temples (*wat*) and classified them into three sub-schools of painting: one centered in Ubon Ratchathani, another along the Mekong River, and a third in the interior provinces of Khon Kaen, Maha Sarakham, Kalasin, and Roi Et (Pairote, 1989), which the present author refers to as the “Isan heartland”. Mural paintings in this area exhibit the least stylistic influence from those of the Central region; in this sense they comprise an authentic local school. The present article focuses on three examples at temples in Khon Kaen province:²

¹ The term “Isan” is used among the ethnic Lao–Thai and Khmer–Thai in reference to their region, ethnicity, and culture, although it does not come from their tradition. The term was invented by (Central) Thai government officials. A politically neutral term might be preferable in the present context of the cultural heritage; nonetheless, local inhabitants seem accustomed to “Isan”.

² The first two are located within 20 kilometers of each other. The third is some 90 kilometers distant. The proximity of these sites suggests the presence of historical connections and exchanges of influence between them as well as with three other *wat* in nearby Maha Sarakham province that share many of the same features—Wat Photharam, Wat Pa Rerai, and Wat Ban Yang.

1. Wat Ban Lan (see figure 1)
2. Wat Sanuan Wari Phatthanaram (figure 2)
3. Wat Sa Bua Kaew (figure 3).

The murals at these three temples are painted on the exterior, and sometimes interior, of ordination halls (*sim*)³ that are unlike all other temple buildings in Thailand. Modest little structures, their walls are completely covered by the murals, which extend even into the corners of pilasters and indentations around windows. Local people explain that the exterior location enabled the murals to be seen by a large number of laypeople, especially women, who were not allowed to enter the tiny *sim* interiors, which were reserved for monks and men being ordained. At the present time most *sim* are no longer used for ordinations, having been replaced by homogeneous, modern Central-region–style structures like that in figure 2 (rear structure).

All three *wat* were established during the first quarter of the 20th century. Their *sim* were constructed by Vietnamese builders several years later.⁴ The murals were painted still later by local Thais of Lao ethnicity. The three *sim*, constructed of brick and mortar, share roughly similar architectural features, including a single entryway reached from a short stairway that is flanked by highly stylized figures of mythical animals—*naga* at two *wat* and *singha* at the other (figure 4). The side walls consist of three panels, two of which have windows. The roofs of all three *sim* have wide gables that extend outward and shelter the murals from rain and sun. The roofs were originally covered with wooden shingles that have been replaced by galvanized metal at one site and Central-region–style glazed tiles at the other two. The similarity of the original roof patterns is obscured by the differences in quality and authenticity of the renovations undertaken over the years at the three sites.⁵

(1) Wat Ban Lan. Located in Ban Lan, Tambon Ban Lan, Amphoe Ban Phai,

³ “*Sim*” is the Lao word for the buildings known as *ubosot* or *bot* in other parts of Thailand.

⁴ Vietnamese builders presumably learned their trade in colonial French construction projects in Viet Nam, Laos, and Cambodia.

⁵ All have had new roofs constructed within the past decade. The roof at Wat Ban Lan has a Central-style pitch and brown-glazed shingles. The roof at Wat Sanuan Wari, constructed about three years ago, while accurate in shape, is made of corrugated aluminum, which is unattractive and radiates heat onto the walls, putting the murals at risk. The new roof at Wat Sa Bua Kaew was built under a project initiated by the Siam Society and is stylistically authentic and handsome, although it is composed of Central-style red ceramic shingles. The Siam Society website acknowledges assistance from many sources. See <http://www.siam-society.org/heritage/watsrabua.html>.

⁶ According to a sign posted in front of the *sim* by the Fine Arts Department, the *wat* was founded in 1867, the *sim* was built in 1923, and the murals were painted in 1953. The date given for the paint-

its formal name is Wat Matchima Withayaram. Its murals, on the *sim* exterior, are devoted exclusively to scenes from the *Vessantara Jataka*, known in Lao as *Pha Wetsandon Sadok*, or simply *Pha Wet*. The story relates the Buddha's penultimate existence as a prince, Pha Wet, and his unparalleled acts of generosity. His first great donation was his kingdom's auspicious white elephant whose presence ensured adequate rainfall. After giving it to a Brahmin who requested it, he was banished to the forest for having put his kingdom at risk of drought. His wife Matsi and two children accompanied him. There he was approached by another Brahmin, Chuchok, who wanted the prince's children as servants for his wife. The prince agreed, much to the distress of Matsi who found out later. His final act of generosity was to give his beloved wife to Pha In (the god Indra) disguised as a Brahmin, who thereupon revealed his identity and returned her to him. Having perfected the virtue of generosity, Pha Wet was invited back to the kingdom and welcomed by his parents along with throngs of royal attendants, musicians, dancers, and others.

The murals at Wat Ban Lan (figures 5 and 6) are notable for the large size of the figures and landscape elements relative to the parameters of the panels. Another unusual feature is that the compositional principle on the side walls differs from that on the back (west) wall. The side walls are composed of three registers with figures that appear to be moving across the entire wall, from one panel to another. The north wall depicts scenes from the early chapters of the story, in which Pha Wet and his family travel from the kingdom to the forest, while the south wall depicts their return from the forest to the kingdom. This type of organizational scheme, with figures moving across the register as if on a journey or in a procession, is typical of Isan heartland narrative murals. Here, however, the back wall is not divided into registers; instead, the mural depicts a forest setting that provides a backdrop for all the scenes that take place in the forest. This type of scheme is characteristic of Central region murals.

The palette here is limited to diverse shades of indigo, brown, and aquamarine along with touches of white and black. Originally, natural colors were used, derived from the bark and leaves of plants such as indigo and cinnabar. Over the years, however, some parts appear to have been retouched using chemical dyes. The blue tones stand out, particularly in the forest scene on the back wall. Despite the few colors the artist had at his disposal (the artist is likely to have been male), he created rich textures, particularly in the foliage, through varied and skillful brushstrokes. The feathery brushwork of the tree canopies is reminiscent of impressionistic painting and adds a serene, dreamlike quality to the paintings. A similar feeling is evoked through the faces of the main characters whose softly arched features and gentle, sweet expressions convey a humble acceptance of their fate.

Figures of divine beings and royalty, such as Wetsandon and Matsi, have delicate figures and features and wear highly attenuated crowns. Their postures may be called "natural", for want of a better word, in contrast to the stylized dance-drama

(*lakhon*) type of postures typically found in mural painting in other parts of Isan and the Central Region. The latter have the mannered gestures and exaggerated leg positions seen in the *lakhon* and the *nang yai*, the classical giant shadow puppet theater. In contrast, most Isan heartland figures have less theatrical stances. At Wat Ban Lan, the graceful, curved fingers of the hands exhibit a hybrid character, as does the composition itself. Postures, however, are natural.

The drawing of human and divine figures here, as in most Thai art, follows conventions that are typical in shadow puppets found throughout Southeast Asia. For example, the faces of heroic male characters are drawn in profile, which imparts a sense of movement and energy. By contrast, females and spiritually advanced males, such as the Buddha, are drawn full face or three-quarter face, giving them a stable, tranquil demeanor. Standing figures, both males and females, are drawn in poses somewhat similar to the *tribhanga* (“three bends”) found in Indian sculpture; that is, the shoulders are drawn parallel to the picture plane, the torso is twisted so that the waist and hips are shown three-quarters, and the knees and feet face forward, parallel to the viewer. Such stylization in postures typifies the figures at Wat Ban Lan, but not those at the other two sites under discussion.

In the scenes here, certain details appear to have been deliberately damaged by scratching of the surface of the walls. On closer examination, the scratches clearly are acts of censorship and the obliterated details are, not surprisingly, parts of the human anatomy. Such scratches appear on the pelvic area of the Brahmin Chuchok, a dark male figure. In another example (figure 7), a *withiyathon* (a forest-dwelling magician known for using meditation to gain supernatural powers) is depicted lying on his back ogling several *nari phon* (“maiden fruit”) figures dangling from a tree. Here, as in other murals in the region, the maiden fruits are clad in nothing more than jewelry. The *Traiphum Phra Ruang* includes such trees among the wonders of the Himaphan forest and compares their fruits to “maidens who have just reached sixteen years of age. When men see them, they fall in love with them...” (Reynolds, 1982: 291–292). As for the *withiyathon* in the painting, he does appear to be smitten—either through love or simple lust—with the sight of the nubile forms in front of him. The viewer can easily imagine the erect body part that was censored. The interjection of such bawdy details is a common feature of heartland murals.

(2) Wat Sanuan Wari Phatthanaram. Located in Ban Nong Ngeo, Tambon

ing seems late; it may refer to a restoration rather than the original painting, as there are numerous signs of repainting on both the interior and exterior murals. Moreover, captions on the murals can be found in both the Thai Noi script, which was used locally in former times, and in the Central Thai script, suggesting that the former are original and that the latter are later additions.

Ban Phai, Amphoe Ban Phai, the *sim* has murals on both the outside and inside,⁶ unlike that at Wat Ban Lan discussed above. The exterior walls are covered primarily with scenes from the *Sinsai* epic, which begin on the south wall and move clockwise around the building, interrupted by a panel of hell scenes on the west wall. The interior walls are devoted exclusively to the *Vessantara Jataka*, like those at Wat Ban Lan.

Sinsai, known among the Central Thai as *Sang Sinchai*, is one of the most popular stories in the Isan heartland and is re-enacted in the vigorous regional shadow theater, *nang pramo thai*. The epic appears to have originated in Laos and shares many motifs with the *Ramakien* and the *Phra Lam Chadok* (Lao: *Pha Lam Sadok*), the Lao *Rama* story. The main character is Sinsai, a prince and Bodhisattva (Chob, 2007: 1–3). As in the various tellings of the Thai version of the *Ramayana* epic, *Sinsai* involves the abduction and rescue of a princess by a giant (*yaksha*) who has fallen in love with her. It is full of extraordinary, magical events and has a leading character known for his heroic actions and sexual prowess.

In *Sinsai*, however, it is not the abducted woman's consort who rescues her, as in the *Ramakien*, but her nephews, the three sons of her brother the king. They all have unusual physical attributes: Sinsai, the most human-looking of the trio, holds a sword and bow and arrow (which he was born with); Siho is a *khotchasi*, a mythical lion-like animal with elephant tusks and trunk; and Sang Thong has a body that is part-human, part-conch (figure 8). In their quest to rescue their aunt, numerous adventures, romantic encounters, and battles ensue. In one scene Sang Thong transforms himself into a boat to allow his brother to pursue the giant who has crossed a stream. In another, Sinsai comes upon a grove of *nari phon* trees, again surrounded by *withiyathon*, as at Wat Ban Lan, above (figure 9). The latter are depicted with dark skin and exposed, exaggerated phalluses, obviously aroused at the sight of the maiden fruit. However, Sinsai, unlike the *withiyathon*, maintains his dignity and successfully establishes a liaison with one of the maiden fruits. Being a prince and Bodhisattva, his advanced spirituality gives him control over his passions, so he is not depicted in an aroused state like the devious magicians. In the course of the long siege, the giant is killed and regenerated numerous times, but Sinsai finally finishes him off and the family is reunited in the royal city.

At Wat Sanuan Wari (the last word in the name, "Phatthanaram", is dropped in common parlance) the artist has made the same creative use of a limited palette as at Wat Ban Lan. Again, indigo predominates with a selective use of brown and aquamarine, as with the figures of animals and birds, respectively. Aquamarine is also found in the details of foliage and in such clothing as the bandoliers worn by princely figures. The effect, however, is totally different from that at Wat Ban Lan because the composition is defined by the open space of an off-white background, rather than by dense foliage. The paintings here could be called classic examples of village folk art. The figures are limited to essential components and their postures

only approximate the conventions of murals and shadow puppets seen elsewhere. Male figures, apart from the giants, are drawn mainly in profile with no twist to the body, while females are drawn frontally, nearly parallel to the picture plane. Their feet point in the direction in which they are going. While lacking the energetic tension of their counterparts in Central Region mural art, they nonetheless express a wide range of emotions, from excitement to grief, through basic gestures like pointing their fingers and covering their eyes (figure 10). To dismiss these murals for a lack of sophistication and artistic quality would be to ignore the exuberant, unaffected expression of the local imagination.

The murals on the interior walls of Wat Sanuan Wari depict scenes from the 13 chapters of the *Vessantara Jataka*, known in Lao as *Pha Wetsandon Chadok* or *Pha Wet*. Like those on the outside, the interior figures are simply and expressively presented. The paintings are organized into two horizontal registers of panels separated by vertical decorative borders (figure 11), reflecting the compositional scheme of *pha phra wet* (transcription of Thai, not Lao), the horizontal cloth scrolls used in Bun Pha Wet or *Vessantara Jataka* festivals that take place annually in virtually every *wat* in Isan (see the scroll in figure 12). The narrative begins on the side wall to the left of the back wall, in the upper right corner (hence, adjacent to the back wall), and proceeds counter-clockwise. Each register is divided into panels, as with cloth scrolls, for a total of 13 panels; each of the 13 panels corresponds to one of the 13 *jataka* chapters. Unfortunately one commentator, Gerhard Jaiser, apparently was not aware of the existence of such cloth scrolls, for he compares the mural compositions instead to a comic strip (2009: 78–79). Jaiser also misreads the role of the captions in the murals, surmising that the artist “could not rely upon the knowledge of the observers” (2009: 78). While the captions undoubtedly served a didactic function, they also appear to be a direct influence from *pha phra wet* scrolls, that also bear captions with the name of the respective *jataka* tale. Significantly, in Bun Phra Wet recitations of Isan, local Buddhist laypeople are well aware of the chapter names and events as they listen to the recitations and sponsor their favorite chapters.

Jaiser appears to disapprove of the bawdy scenes in Isan murals, for he writes: “the scenes of local life are dominant and sometimes rude. One wonders if what is shown on these walls really happened during processions in Isan during that time.” Jaiser was referring to scenes like that in figure 13, of a characteristic theme found in both cloth scrolls and Isan heartland mural paintings of the final procession back to capital of the *Vessantara Jataka*. The bawdy detail in the lower right corner here is bolder than most; more commonly, men are dancing and wrapping their arms and legs around the women.

For an understanding of why bawdy elements are included in some Isan murals (as well as in murals elsewhere in the country), the socio-historical context must be considered in which the murals were created. What might seem shocking to

a Westerner in the 21st century might not necessarily have been viewed in the same way to an Isan villager 100 years earlier. The narratives portrayed in temple murals stem from a vigorous oral tradition of story-telling throughout Southeast Asia that was manifested in various ways, depending on the locale: sermons, shadow plays, dance drama, and *moh lam* performances are just a few examples. From Burma to Indonesia, night-long recitations and performances were, and often still are, held in conjunction with religious or merit-making festivals, funeral wakes, and rituals intended to repay deities or spirits for a favor. Deeply entrenched in this tradition is a love of humor, especially bawdy humor. Examples can also be found throughout literary works such as *Khun Chang Khun Phaen*, which grew out a tradition of oral folk performance by troubadours in the Central Region. In this famous story, Khun Chang is a buffoon-like character whose sexual bumbledings have their counterpart in the bawdy scenes here. Moreover in southern Thailand, the most sacred character in shadow play, Ai Teng, has a prominent forefinger in the shape of a phallus.

Along with literature, religious sermons in the past sometimes included not only moral teachings, but also humorous, slapstick passages aimed at keeping the audience attentive and interested. For example, *Phra Malai Klon Suat*, the religious treatise formerly chanted or sung at funeral wakes in the central and southern regions, contains descriptions of beings suffering in hell, one of whom has a grossly enlarged scrotum so long and heavy that he carries it slung over his shoulder like a *yam* bag (Brereton, 1995: 115). Chanting of the text included farcical singing and performance. Moreover, in pre-modern times, Buddhist village festivals included play between the sexes. Historian Kamala Tiyavanich's writings about early 20th century Buddhist culture shed light on activities that involved competing male and female principles that, she notes, sometimes became "unruly". Such events, she writes, were "ritual occasions during which people could rebel against the normal order with impunity" (Kamala, 1997: 26–28). Early in the 20th century, villagers would not have responded to such scenes in the same way as would a 21st-century Westerner, a Bangkokian, or even a resident of a provincial capital such as Khon Kaen city. More importantly, the existence of such bawdy scenes should not be blown out of proportion, since they are relatively few in number compared with depictions of the main story line. They can hardly be called erotic or pornographic; they are more akin to graffiti. Moreover, crudely drawn characters such as the *withayathon* obviously lack virtue.

(3) Wat Sa Bua Kaew. Some 90 kilometers distant from the two other temples, the temple is located in Ban Wang Khun, Tambon Nong Mek, Amphoe Nong Song Hong. Like Wat Sanuan Wari, it has murals on both the exterior and interior walls of the *sim*. The interior murals are relatively open, uncrowded compositions of finely drawn line figures. Although they appear to be the work of at least one of the artists who painted the exterior murals, they are much less cramped and reflect a

brighter palette, with red used for the monks' robes and a warm yellow for the skin tones of the Bodhisattva and members of the Sangha. The three previous Buddhas and Gotama are portrayed, along with scenes from the Sinsai story and the Buddha's life, including the Four Sights, the Great Renunciation, the Mara Vijaya, and the Parinirvana. In the Isan heartland, mural depictions of the Buddha's biography are generally limited to these events rather than many other episodes that are found elsewhere. Details of these scenes at Wat Sa Bua Kaew are particularly charming and idiosyncratic. For example, in the Four Sights, the Bodhisattva's chariot is a low-slung, open vehicle that seems to portray a villager's fantasy of an early-model automobile (figure 14).

The exterior compositions are remarkably different from those inside: each panel is divided into several registers, many of which are filled with rows of figures and tightly packed narrative scenes (see figure 4). They are much denser and much more detailed than those at the other two *wat*. They depict scenes from *Pha Lam Sadok*, the Lao version of the Rama epic. Significantly, the Lao version is a Buddhist rather than a Hindu story—a *jataka* in which Lak and Lam are twin brothers, the latter a Bodhisattva. It has been called “one of the most complex pieces of Lao classical literature to have been produced” (Wilson, 2009: 139–140), integrating themes from the *jataka* tradition, the *Ramayana*, Lao poetry, and folktales. It consists of two tales: the first tells of rivalry between two branches of a family, while the second follows the traditional Rama story along with many unique subplots and magical elements. In the first, the monkey general Hanuman (in Lao: Haluman) is Pha Lam's son. He was conceived after his father ate a fruit that caused him to be transformed into a simian after which he had a romantic encounter with a female monkey. In the second, Totsakan the giant (known as Hapmanasun) is the father of Nang Sida, who was conceived after he seduced one of Indra's wives by tricking her into thinking that he was her husband. The wife, in revenge for the deceit, arranged for her rebirth as her own daughter, Sida, in order to kill her father the giant. Before she could kill him, however, the plot was discovered and the infant was sent down a river on a raft fashioned into a tiny palace, which a hermit found; upon which he adopted her (figure 15).

Wat Sa Bua Kaew may be one of the more famous temples in Isan because of the publicity generated from the Siam Society's efforts to raise funds for replacing its roof. Only a few years earlier, its indigenous low-pitched, broad-winged roof had been replaced by a steep-pitched Central-style model that exposed the murals below to the elements. Her Royal Highness Princess Galayani Vadhana presided over the dedication of the new roof in February 2001. The murals are deservedly regarded as an important repository of local culture, for they are a veritable catalogue of portraits of pre-modern village life and practices, including childbirth customs, clothing and hair styles, livelihoods, weaponry, and other facets. Interpreting the scenes, however, is challenging, for the walls are divided into meandering registers

in which every available space is filled. While much of the drawing is fine and even delicate, the quality is uneven and appears to be the work of several hands.

The postures or perspectives of the figures are generally similar to those at the second site, Wat Sanuan Wari, in that female figures — even those walking — are drawn full face, while their feet are pointed in the direction in which they are moving. Male figures, however, are portrayed from a variety of angles, depending on what they are doing, and therefore appear more natural in style (figure 16). The painters seem to have been aware of conventions used elsewhere, but apparently were less concerned with following them than with creating lively, expressive narratives. In so doing they invented their own unique style.

Conclusion

The present tour of mural paintings at three temples in northeastern Thailand has revealed some defining characteristics of an Isan heartland style of painting. The most telling are the

1. Location on the outside of *sim*, where the murals completely cover the surface of the walls.
2. Creative use of a limited, blue-dominated palette against an off-white background.
3. Highly decorative quality achieved through the use of borders around corners, doorways, and windows.
4. Composition based on horizontal movement around the building.
5. Artistic freedom in drawing the postures of the human and divine figures.
6. Use of brief captions.
7. Incidental inclusion of bawdy scenes as entertainment as well as moralistic reminders.

At the same time, the murals at the three sites differ from each other significantly so that each *wat* offers a totally different experience. This uniqueness is itself one of the most important characteristics of the heartland school and Isan painting in general. The sum of these features establishes the creativity and uniqueness in mural painting of the region. They are manifestly not inferior copies of Central region originals but distinctive works of art reflecting the local Buddhist imagination and way of life.

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Figure 1. *Sim* at Wat Ban Lan



Figure 2. Old and new *sim* at Wat Sanuan Wari



Figure 3. *Sim* at Wat Sa Bua Kaew



Figure 4. *Sim* at Wat Sa Bua Kaew, east wall, stairs flanked by *singha* figures



Figure 5. Wat Ban Lan, south wall



Figure 6. Wat Ban Lan, west wall (partial)



Figure 7. Wat Ban Lan, forest scene with *withayathorn* and *nari phon* trees



Figure 8. Wat Sanuan Wari, exterior, Sinsai epic, three brothers



Figure 9. Wat Sanuan Wari, scene from Sinsai epic; Sinsai comes upon a grove of *nari phon* trees, surrounded by *withiyathon*.



Figure 10. Wat Sanuan Wari, scene from Sinsai epic; people watch in horror as the princess is abducted by the giant (upper left corner).



Figure 11. Wat Sanuan Wari, interior; depictions of *Vessantara Jataka* (Lao: *Pha Wetsandon Sadok*)



Figure 12. Pha Phra Wet scroll, housed at Wat Ban Lan.



Figure 13. Wat Sanuan Wari, interior; detail of figure 11, scene from the Jataka's final chapter, the return to the city. Note the inclusion of bawdy elements in the lower right.



Figure 14. Wat Sa Bua Kaew, interior, Life of the Buddha: Four Sights



Figure 15. Wat Sa Bua Kaew, exterior, *Pha Lam Sadok*, Nang Sida being sent down the river on a palace-like raft.

Figure 16. Wat Sa Bua Kaew, exterior, *Pha Lam Sadok*; procession in honor of Hapmanasun. Note that here, as in the Pha Wet story, the procession scene includes scenes of blatant flirtation between the dancers.

