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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Modernization of Thai Fine Art and Its Reflection in Thai National Monuments 1930s- 1940s

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**Abstract:** The purpose of this study is to determine the impact of the modernization of art in Thailand on the reflection of the construction of the Thai national monument range in the 1930s to 1940s. The method used in this research is qualitative, with data sources coming from direct observation, interviews, and scientific documents. The result of this research shows that, the influx of western influence in Thailand indirectly influenced the modernization of the country's art culture. One of the triggers was the number of national academics who were sent to Europe to study, and returned to Thailand with a new artistic ideology. In addition, the influence of Italian artist Silpa Bhirashi also contributed to the modernization of Thai art. As it is known, he is one of the curriculum designers in Thai art schools and Silpakorn University. On the other hand in the political world, the modernization of Thai art was also influenced by the political policies of Marshall Phibunsongkhram who used art as a propaganda tool to unify the ideology of all Thai people.

**Keywords:** Modernization, Thai Fine Art, National Monument

## 1. Introduction

In the 19th-20th centuries, Thailand experienced a significant dynamic of change with the strong influence of the west, which led to the rapid modernization of the country. This was due to the strong leadership of the two successive monarchs, King Mongkut and King Chulalongkorn (Masahiro, 2020). Both kings were open to western values and knew the importance of modernization for the Thai people at that time. Therefore, since the time of these two kings, Thailand's diplomatic and foreign relations were strengthened. The modernization that was developed finally continued until the 1930s and 1940s. This can be seen in the development of fine arts in Thailand. Fine art is a visual expression of human cultural values, which depicts the views and changes that occur in a society (Paul Guyer, 1994). There are many dynamics that occurred in the modernization of Thai art at that time, therefore this research seeks to investigate it and trace its traces from the monuments made in that year.

This study aims to explore the modernization of Thai art in the 1930s and 1940s, focusing on the Thai art academies that accepted the influence of western culture, the establishment of Thai art colleges, the social, political and cultural changes that occurred during the modernization of Thai art, and its reflection in the construction of monuments as a sign of western modernization (Democracy monument, Victory Monument, King Vajiravudh Monument). The choice of the 1930s and 1940s is due to the fact that the transition of modernization of Thai art occurred in that period of time. The social and academic contributions of this research include; (1) Understanding of cultural heritage, this article indirectly helps the world community or Thailand to understand the development of Thai



art, during this important period. This can enhance cultural appreciation and awareness of national cultural identity. (2) Art education, the information in this article will enrich the curriculum materials in Thai art schools, and trigger the younger generation to understand the roots of their country's art history and further contribute to the development of Thai art learning. (3) Further research, this article can trigger further research on art and modernization in Thailand.

## 2. Research Method and Materials

The research method that will be used in this research is qualitative, which in its understanding, this method emphasizes the analysis of socio-cultural phenomena that occur around in depth and comprehensively (Sugiyono, 2022). In contrast to quantitative research methods that display numerical data, qualitative methods display descriptive narrative-type data. The research this time will use various approaches. First, using literature studies, with this approach researchers will look for secondary sources such as articles, books, papers and historical documents related to the development of art in Thailand between the 1930s and 1940s. Second, using archives, some institutions provide them such as in national libraries or museums. Especially about the modernization of art in the 1930s and 1940s. Third, interviews with art historians in Thailand, which will obtain information about the real events of art development in the previous period. In the interview session itself, unstructured interview techniques will be used, so that some questions can be developed further, according to the data needs of the researcher. Fourth, visual analysis, the researcher analyzes the works of art from the previous period, and will try to interpret them according to the context of art modernization in Thailand. Fifth, digital database, data will be obtained from websites that focus on Thai fine art, where the data is in the form of documentation related to artists. Galleries, exhibitions, and some of the dynamics that occur in Thai fine art. In the data analysis stage, this research will use the theory of Miles & Huberman, which describes data analysis in several stages such as data collection, data reduction, data display, and conclusion (Mezmir, 2020). In the data collection stage, some data will be collected as much as possible related to the research. At the data reduction stage, the data collected begins to be sorted and selected according to the needs of the research. at the data presentation stage, some data begins to be classified according to its characteristics and level of accuracy. In the last stage, the data that has been clearly classified is analyzed together. In the data validation stage, this research uses triangulation theory, in which all data that has been collected in the form of interviews, documents, and archives is sought for the similarity of the narrative, then displayed as valid data.

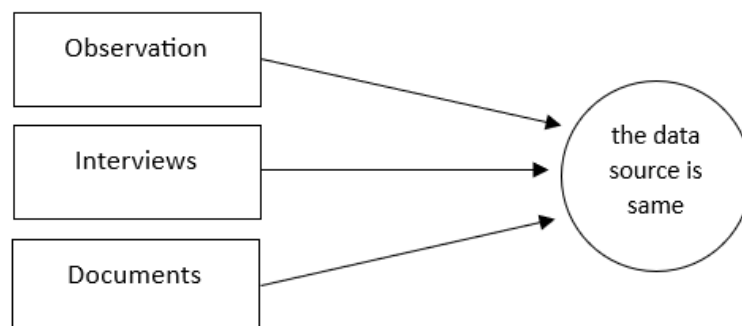


Fig 1. Triangulation concept. Source: (Thurmond, 2001)

## 3. Results and Discussion

### 3.1. *The Dynamics of Thai Fine Art in the 1930s-1940s*

At the time of the Thai revolution which occurred on June 24 1932, marked by the overthrow of the influence of the absolute monarchy in Thailand was replaced by democratic ideology (Subrahmanyam, 2020). It also indirectly affected the development of art in Thailand itself. Some western academics who overthrew the absolute monarchy

system also brought western art ideology to Thailand. Some western painting styles and techniques have flourished in Thailand. As we all know, traditional Thai art was originally dominated by religion and images of the king. Some classical Thai art is very closely related to Buddhist images and temple architecture in religion, followed by murals of stories from previous kings. The arrival of western art influences seemed to bring a breath of fresh air with many art styles present such as naturalism and realism (Taylor, 2007). The flow of naturalism and realism can be seen in the paintings of Thai kings who are depicted as closely as possible with an authoritative and dashing impression. This style may have been inspired by the painting style of Napoleon Bonaparte, which was very popular in France, considering that some of the court painters at that time came from Europe. In sculpture, one can also see its influence in the realist statue of King Vajiravudh standing holding a sword and wearing a hat, which was made by an Italian artist.

As Thailand was experiencing unstable political dynamics in the 1930s, some Thai revolutionaries initiated a new idea of unity, in which art was used as a unifying tool. One of the pioneers was Luang Wichit, an intelligent and respected politician at the time. Luang Wichit was inspired by an Italian figure named Benito Mussolini who used art as a successful tool to unify the nation. This possibility is even more likely, given that Luang Wichit was the managing director of Thailand's fine art department (1935-1942). Not only in the field of fine arts, Luang Wichit's propaganda also took the form of many other arts such as plays, songs, and books (Jory, 1999).

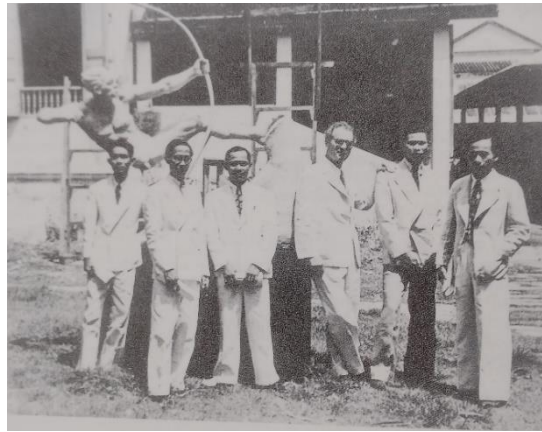
In addition to political interests and modernization, it was also realized that it was important to develop a school of artists in order to adapt to the times and learn art theory, so that revised art education could be easily delivered to the public. Even politician Phraya Anumarajadhon often urged the government to immediately establish a specialized university of fine arts in Thailand. Before the establishment of the university of fine arts, it turns out that the development of art science at that time had produced several new art studio buildings and various kinds of art ideas in the form of written works. In 1937, an art journal called *Silpakorn* was published that discussed international art and Thai indigenous art.

The establishment of the Democracy Monument in 1939 on the orders of Prime Minister Marshall Phibunsongkhram became a good start of the development of Thai art. Phibunsongkhram who was impressed with the work of artists in making the monument finally decided to inaugurate the first university of fine arts in Thailand as a forum for creativity, known as Silpakorn University (Dokphrom, 2013). The learning curriculum at Silpakorn University was designed by Italian artist Cerrado Ferrocio or Silpa Bhirashi, whose basic concepts and techniques may be heavily influenced by western culture, but the objects or overviews of his works do not forget local Thai culture and traditions. This is done by Silpa Bhirashi so that local Thai artists have their own character in their work not following western artists, as well as to strengthen national identity.

### *3.2. National Monument as a Reflection of Thai Fine Art 1930s- 1940s*

#### *3.2.1. Democracy Monument*

Democracy monument or commonly known as Anusawari Prachathipatai is a monument that stands in public space, precisely in the center of the capital city of Bangkok. This monument was established in 1929 and was used as a marker of memory of the Siamese revolution that occurred in 1932. The making of this monument was certainly initiated by Marshal Phibunsongkhram who was very focused on modernization and unification of Thai society (Dovey, 2001). The monument was built by the cooperation of many people. Some of the prominent ones are Chitrasen Aphawong a renowned architect, Khuang Aphaiwong a member of the phibun government and an Italian builder named Corrado Feroci or Silpa Bhirashi.



**Fig 2.** Silpa Bhirashi with the team from the Department of Fine Arts Thailand,  
Source: Thai Modern Art Book.

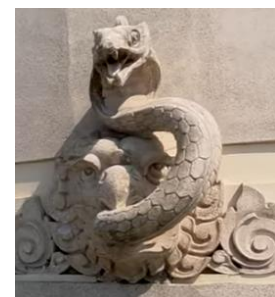
When reflecting on the design elements, in picture one and the main building in this monument, is a round tower that bears two golden mangles on it with a height of 3 meters. It can be interpreted that this building is a picture of the glory of the building which is represented as the sacredness of the revolution that occurred in Thailand in 1932. And on the outer side of the monument which is shaped like the wings of four buildings, 24 meters high (picture two) is a protective image of the main building, which can be interpreted as the four armed forces of Thailand (army, navy, air force and police). The third image is the two wings of the fountain in the shape of a dragon statue, which is a creature from Hindu and Buddhist mythology with a protective meaning. In Buddhism, which is the majority religion in Thailand, the dragon is said to have appeared during Gautama Buddha's meditation under the bodhi tree. The dragon encircled the buddha's body and protected him from heavy rain for days. Since then, the dragon has been symbolized as a protective symbol of wisdom and enlightenment. The fourth picture is a relief with the image of warriors fighting for democracy. The relief will generally depict how the soldiers struggle and sacrifice themselves to achieve the desired democratic ideology. The fifth picture is a relief of the personification of the people, in this relief there is a clear picture of the general life of the Thai people. Some of the figures in this relief are a man at work, a mother taking care of her baby, a child playing, and a teenager herding goats. All the previous figures are symbolized to be protected by the tantara figure in the middle of the relief. The sixth picture is a relief personifying balance and good life, which is a description of the ideology adopted by the government at that time. There is a figure in the center of the relief like an allegory of the Buddha holding a sword and scales (Turingan, 2020).



**Fig 3.** Boxed representation of the 1932 Constitution of Thailand, Source:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5Jglj6ishNI>



**Fig 4.** A depiction of the four wing-like structures that guard the Constitution, Source:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5Jglj6ishNI>



**Fig 5.** One of the dragon fountains under the two wing buildings, Source:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5Jglj6ishNI>



**Fig 6.** Relief panel entitled "Soldiers Fight for Democracy", Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5Jglj6ishNI>



**Fig 7.** Relief panel entitled "Personification of the People", Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5Jglj6ishNI>



**Fig 8.** The relief panel is entitled "The Personification of Balance and the Good Life" Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5Jglj6ishNI>

### 3.2.2. *Victory Monument*

Victory monument is an important monument that stands in the center of Bangkok province precisely in Ratchathewi district at a major crossroads. The monument was erected in June 1941 to commemorate Thailand's victory in the Franco-Thai war (Raymond, 2018). Since its establishment, the Victory monument has often been the location for demonstrators to protest against the incumbent government. In the design picture, Victory Monument is very influenced by western style compared to Democracy Monument which is still thick with local Thai architecture. In general, the Victory Monument was designed by Mom Luang Poom Malakul and Silpa bhirashi, its creation was inspired by various elements. These include; the operation of the four forces (land, air, sea and police forces) in a heroic style as in western countries, which is also common in fascist and communist countries.

The most prominent feature of this monument is the obelisk that stands proudly in the center, if traced from its history, the obelisk is an Egyptian culture that has also been adapted in Europe and the United States. In order to commemorate national and military moments, because the meaning of the obelisk itself is permanence and eternity. On the walls of the monument are also written the names of 656 civilians and soldiers who lost their lives during the Franco-Thai war (Noobanjong, 2011). A brief history of this monument is that the war of money took place precisely in 1940-1941. Thailand was in conflict with the French colonial nation which at that time also controlled many areas of Indochina. As a result of this war, Thailand managed to annex some areas in Western Cambodia and some parts of Northern Laos and the southern region.

### 3.2.3. *King Rama VI Monument*

The statue was originally planned to be built only by alumni of the College of Vajiravudh, as a mark of respect to Thailand's sixth king. However, due to the public's love for King Vajiravudh, and their desire to donate and contribute, the construction also involved funds from the public. Marshall Phibunsokhram as the Prime Minister of Thailand at that time also approved the construction of the King Vajiravudh monument in 1939.

In the initial plan, the completion of this monument was scheduled for January 1, 1940, equated to the date of King Vajiravudh's birth (Mcgrath, 2013), but later there was a slight

delay in the inauguration due to various things, one of which was due to the war. The funds needed to build this statue at that time was 60000 baht. With the argument that, if the money that comes in later exceeds the cost of constructing the statue, the money will be donated to other places in need, while still being a symbol of respect for King Vajiravudh. However, if the money needed is less, the government will find other funds so that the construction of the statue will not be stopped.



**Fig 9.** Operations of four forces (army, air, sea and police), Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EshJ6fd22Rw>



**Fig 10.** 656 civilians and soldiers who have lost their lives, Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IwCuqMkqbjQ>



**Fig 11.** An obelisk that stands proudly in the middle, Source: <https://www.bkkmonument.com/victory>

Silpa Bhirashi is the designer and sculptor of this monument, as for the stages carried out in preparing this monument are first, make a dike and provide a base for the statue to stand on, second make a statue base and decoration around the monument area, third remove the finished statue and complete the details and then finishing. The process of making the statue itself is done by casting from the head first then proceeding to the torso and finally the legs. The uniqueness of this statue is that the casting process is done in Thailand itself, unlike previous statues that were made abroad, especially Europe. This is certainly due to the presence of European artist Silpa Bhirashi who worked with the Thai government at that time (Nithirattapat et al., 2013). The celebration of the King Vajiravudh statue

monument was held on March 27, 1942. The celebration was not too lively due to the situation at that time the Thai state was still at war, and this also caused the construction of this monument to be hampered, as mentioned earlier.

Visually, the statue of King Vajiravudh is twice the size of his real body. This could be because the visibility of the statue must be maintained, not too small, so that people can see it more clearly even from a distance. The pose of this statue is standing tall, wearing a wild tiger-themed corps uniform and a hat. The left hand of this statue holds a long sword, until it touches the ground and the left hand holds a scepter, as a symbol of a king. The statue is mounted on a two-tiered square base, with the ends forming lotus buds.



**Fig 11.** Statue of King Vajiravudh, Source:  
[https://www.bkkmonument.com/rama\\_6](https://www.bkkmonument.com/rama_6)



**Fig 12.** statue bases and decorations, Source:  
<https://www.encirclephotos.com/image/king-rama-vi-monument-in-bangkok-thailand/>

#### 4. Conclusion

In conclusion, the influx of western influence in Thailand indirectly influenced the modernization of the country's art culture. One of the triggers was the number of national academics who were sent to Europe to study, and returned to Thailand with a new artistic ideology. In addition, the influence of Italian artist Silpa Bhirashi also contributed to the modernization of Thai art. As it is known, he is one of the curriculum designers in Thai art schools and Silpakorn University. On the other hand in the political world, the modernization of Thai art was also influenced by the political policies of Marshall Phibunsongkhram who used art as a propaganda tool to unify the ideology of all Thai people. This can also be seen from the construction of Democracy Monument and Victory Monument as symbols of the revolution and modernization that occurred in Thailand at that time

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