

Book Review:

Buddhist Murals of Northeast Thailand: Reflections of the Isan Heartland

Bonnie Pacala Brereton & Somroay Yencheuy. Chiang Mai: Silkworm. 2010. 96 pages

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A straightforward and accessible book replete with rich images, *Buddhist Murals of Northeast Thailand* provides a much-needed look at this regional art form. Deceptive in its relatively small size, to pick up this book and read through is to transport oneself into the heart of Isan, to a world of vivacious energy, playful environments, and religious settings. In addition to the Isan heartland, the primary focus of this book, there are murals throughout the different regions of Isan, each with a style unique to its area, including the Bangkok-influenced Khorat region; and the Lan Chang-Bangkok influenced group along the Mekong.

This book provides perhaps the first English-language examination of these murals, as the ground-breaking work on Isan mural painting that has been carried out by Thai scholars has been published largely in Thai language publications. Brereton, an American art historian living in Chiang Mai, and Yencheuy, a Khon Kaen native with in-depth knowledge of the arts of Isan, are both affiliated with Khon Kaen University. They provide a heartfelt tribute to the late Achan Pairote Somosorn, the “pioneer” of Isan mural painting, on the book’s opening page, and it is clear his research has informed theirs throughout this study.

The book is structured with many short but succinct chapters providing readers with a solid understanding of the context and background of the murals, as well as to develop an appreciation for both style and substance. The first two chapters of the book introduce the foundations of the study, including background on the Lao heritage of the people of Northeastern Thailand and an explanation to help readers understand that the murals reflect local villages and lifestyles. The writers situate the heart of Isan as something that stands in contrast and as a compliment, historically and culturally, to Bangkok.

Not only are the murals themselves unique when compared with other Thai arts, but so are their settings. Chapter 3 explores the *wat* environment in the Isan heartland. This chapter looks closely at the *sim* or ordination hall, a structure that is unique because of its traditionally small size in comparison with other *wat* buildings. The small size reflects the buildings' intended use only by those directly involved with an ordination; women are not allowed inside. Because of the restrictive nature of the buildings, the murals that are the focus of the book are most frequently painted on the exterior walls of the *sim*. The murals are understood to be didactic in nature, and would have functioned as tools for teaching those sitting outside. Importantly, the small size of these *sim* might contribute to their obsolescence and many have been torn down and/or replaced by newer, larger buildings. As pointed out by the authors, this is particularly problematic because the disappearance of the earlier *sim* has made the art historian's job of creating a chronology of Isan painting far more difficult.

The theme of situating the murals into their physical Isan surroundings is continued in Chapter 4. This chapter looks at the details within the murals and argues that the plants and animals, real and mythical, reflect the artists' incorporation of their environments and understanding of the narratives into

their paintings. The authors remind us that Isan was once covered with forest, an environment markedly different from today's Isan. The animals in particular provide a great deal of fun and reveal the artists' imaginations at play as they created the murals.

Chapter 5 begins the "meat" of the book; from this chapter forward, the discussion focuses on the narratives and deeper examinations of the relationship between the style and execution of the murals and their cultural environments. In Chapter 5, a discussion of the narratives, or "Texts, Tales, and Themes" ensues. The life story of the Buddha is well-represented, with three episodes specifically dominant in Isan heartland murals: the departure from the palace; the victory over Mara; and the events leading up to and including his *parinirvana*. The Jatakas are also featured in the Isan murals, and of these most frequently the Vessantara Jataka is depicted. Phra Malai and various hell scenes also are featured in Isan murals. In addition to these Buddhist mainstays, the authors explain that three versions of the Ramayana (the *Ramakian*, *Pha Lam Pha Lam*, and *Pha Lam Sadok*), with the Lao interpretations of the story taking precedence. *Sin Sai*, a lesser known story that is a popular subject of the murals and other arts in Isan, is also featured and discussed in this chapter. The many stories that Isan artists chose from clearly provide a rich selection of characters and settings and add to the variety and diversity of the murals.

Brereton and Yencheuy acknowledge that the murals can present challenges to many viewers trying to get a sense of how to "read" them, and dedicate Chapter 6 to a discussion of the composition and execution of the murals and their large cast of characters. Color of skin and view of face (profile or full face) can indicate a great deal about a figure's status, gender, and character. These aspects are explained by the authors. In addition, the composition may not have an arrangement related to sequence. The composition

of the murals is often in horizontal registers divided by wavy lines, with the divisions seemingly confusing but made clearer in comparison to the Bun Pha Wet scrolls, especially since, as stated clearly in the chapter, the murals and the scrolls have an obvious relationship to each other. This further entrenches the murals as works of art specific to Isan.

The important issue of who painted the murals and how they were painted is the subject of Chapter 7. This further connects the murals to local Buddhist practices and communities, as artists were men who had most likely been novices or monks at some point in their lives. In addition, rather than sponsorship by an individual, many individuals in a community would pool their money together in order to get the paintings done, as evidenced by the lists of names painted on the mural walls.

Further detail is given to the reflection of Isan culture in the murals in Chapter 8. Summed up quite nicely in the introductory paragraph for the chapter, the authors state: “While the stories depicted are based on classic Indic models, they are set in the context of local terrain, foliage, architecture, social behavior, and material culture” (p. 59). Throughout Chapter 8 they detail aspects of Isan culture as they are represented in the murals, pairing text with photos to further assist readers with the details. These include slices of daily life and local takes on Buddhist mainstays.

Chapter 9 is the final content chapter of the book before the conclusion and back matter. This chapter addresses the “eroticism, bawdiness, and buffoonery” evident in the Isan murals. While inclusion of sexual encounters is not unique to the Isan murals, their placement throughout the murals, not confined to the peripheries, is obvious to any viewer and, as argued by Brereton and Yencheuy, intended as fun-loving and bawdy. These interpretations aid directly in communicating aspects of the scenes to local viewers. The inclusion of a variety of explicit depictions of genitalia and lewd behavior

can be interpreted in any variety of ways, but as successfully argued and emphasized throughout this chapter, it is most importantly a reflection of Lao humor and zest for life.

Two appendices are full of maps and directions on how to get to the wats featured in the book. In addition, they likely have helped to generate interest in the murals and therefore contributed to their continued preservation. In the conclusion, the authors detail the efforts to preserve the murals before the publication of the book, and credit Pairote and Wiroj (his frequent collaborator) with initializing the increased awareness of the murals' value.

The time and effort put into the fieldwork component of this book is evident from cover to cover. Brereton and Yenchuey clearly spent a great deal of time visiting the wats in the Isan heartland. Documenting every detail of the murals and interviewing monks and laity, this research comes off as a labor of love from which we the readers benefit greatly. By focusing on seven wats in the Isan heartland provinces of Khon Kaen and Maha Sarakham the authors reveal a convincing connection between the murals in terms of style, iconography, and subject.

Buddhist Murals of Northeast Thailand is an excellent contribution to the understanding of Isan arts and culture. Further research is needed in Thai arts outside of the major cities, and this book is an outstanding example in how to accomplish such a task. In *Buddhist Murals*, Brereton and Yenchuey point out that the murals that are the subject of the book are but one type in a large and diverse region. I find myself hoping that this is the beginning of a series and that the authors will find a way to research and publish subsequent volumes on the many types of murals and mural styles referred to in their introduction.

