

Contemporary Aesthetics (Journal Archive)

Volume 0 Special Volume 3 (2011)
*AESTHETICS AND THE ARTS IN SOUTHEAST
ASIA*

Article 6

2011

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Icon and Image in Modern Thai Art: A Preliminary Exploration

John Clark

Abstract

Thai modern art is marked by the actual deployment of religious or august symbolic icons or the quasi-iconic use of images of variable indexicality in otherwise highly secular contexts. What were the sources for such modern uses and have the semiotic functions of icons shifted? What was the epistemological break in the status of icons among the aristocracy from the 1850s, and what were the historical interventions in past symbolic practices? To answer these questions, at least partially, religious functions for images are examined by tracking the use of court images and Buddhist figures.

Key Words

amulets, Ayutthaya, Bodhisattva, Buddha, Cakravartin, colonization, commemoration, court, folk, *honzon*, icon, idol, image, index, indicative, Khmer, King Chulalongkorn, King Mongkut, metaphor, metonym, Pali Canon, Ratanakosin, representation, taboo, Thailand, Theravada, token, sacralisation

1. Introduction

A number of transitions seem to mark the change from a court-centered and essentially decorative or religious mural painting in late eighteenth-century Ayutthaya to the large historicizing narratives and individualized portrait schemes of the Bangkok court in the nineteenth century. How may these transitions be questioned? What art-historical evidence is available to describe them, and what art-historical tools are available or can be devised to explicate their meaning? Can we thereby help to produce a variety of culturally specific and non-Euramerican models for modernity in art and especially its pre-conditions? Thai material may point to changes in the status of the art work and of the re-sacralization of images through their increased availability, which have important and hitherto unacknowledged consequences for the development of modernity in later twentieth-century Thai art.^[1]

The available literature on modern Thai art and its historical development takes modernity in Thai art as having two moments:^[2] the transformation in court taste by the importation of European art and some synthesis with Thai art styles wrought by King Chulalongkorn in the 1880s and 1890s,

which had antecedents in the reign of King Mongkut during the 1850s and 1860s; and the institutionalization of training for artists achieved during the 1930s and 1940s by an Italian who later became Thai, Corrado Feroci, through the establishment of an art school along European lines. There are two further moments I will not take up here: the at times socially prominent, at times repressed political trajectory in some Thai art from 1973-76 to the present, and the post-modern entry of some Thai art onto a transnational stage in the 1980s and 1990s.

This trajectory has not, however, examined as fully as possible the antecedents for such changes in the late Ayutthaya and early Ratanakosin periods, that is from the 1760s to the 1860s, to see what the peculiar characteristics of that pre-modern art may have been, of whether the uses of icons had implications for later notions of art objects, and whether they were carried into the modern period. There has not been any systematic attempt to link various kinds of art object with their social function as encoded in various types of pre-modern ritual practice, or at least systematize a view on what the consequences of these social functions may have been for conceptions of the art objects in the modern period. Some of these pre-modern practices can only be discerned as a trace in folklore records or some local customs found by recent anthropological work and not in mid-nineteenth century documents.

This trajectory can be seen as parallel to a broader intellectual and artistic tendency to interrogate Thai history in ways that are not in the sway of court-centered or royalist constructions, the more so because much of the imagery in question here is directly royal. As Reynolds and Hong put it,

One consequence of Thailand's much-vaunted avoidance of direct colonization is that the royalist and court-centered historiography of pre-capitalist society was never cast aside and devalued by the colonizing process, not even by the semi-colonized conditions, leaving today's historians the task of dismantling that historiography and erecting a new one for the late twentieth century.[3]

Evidence for the necessity of such a survey comes from easily observable art phenomena in Thailand today. One can see portraits of the present King on gasoline stations to celebrate his birthday, and there are royal portraits produced at exhibitions to commemorate completion of a 12-year age cycle that range from the differentially simplistic to the vapidly sycophantic. Portraits of eminent monks may be sold as souvenir posters alongside images of pop stars and pin-up girls or royal and religious portraits placed alongside decorative landscapes on office walls. Royal portraits may be placed in the same domestic space as erotic pin-ups, and royal photographs can be interspersed with family commemoration photographs and graduation photographs in many homes that indeed include the moment of receiving degrees from a royal personage.[4] Photographs are used in protective amulets and commemorative photographs on family cremation urn.

Buddhist narratives or Buddhist ceremonies can be taken as subjects for national painting competition entries, and

decorative motifs having magical functions may be abstracted for non-figurative painting and sculpture. Buddhist conceptions of access to the divine may serve as conceptual references in installation works whose subject is human mortality. There are attempts to mobilize folk narratives as a critical commentary on modern life and the secular hell of urban politics. Clearly there is some kind of socially constructed set of beliefs about images and social practices that deploy them interacting here with various kinds of art discourse.

In the different but analogous world of film that feeds off movie stars' private lives, Hamilton notes that,

this collective fantasy space, opened up by the interpenetration of the movie-world and the real-world, is itself characteristic of subjectivity in modernity. The "public" nature of the lives of these projected others, so alien and distant from most ordinary people, seems to allow a new kind of collective consciousness which is a hallucination of desire in which all can equally participate.^[5]

It is not possible to construct retrospectively any definitive historical series of artistic transformations between such a variety of modern formulations and their pre-modern forbears. What should be an elaborately diachronic series will remain a complex matching of synchronic segments from the past with some near-contemporary strata. But I do hope to show how certain functions, formats, subjects and possibly stylistic formulations rooted in pre-modern art or surviving now in folk religious practices may be connected as elements in a socially situated artistic discourse about and with images that continues and gives specificity to Thai art discourse now.

Without surveying the extensive literature on the subject, let me now analytically characterize icon and image for the purposes of this paper. *Icons* are those two- or three-dimensional objects that incarnate or represent forces or planes of being beyond the particular conventions used in the objects' forms. For analytical purposes here, I will use 'icon' in its older religious sense rather than in the sense of a replication of reality, which is found in semiotics,^[6] where the association between message-bearing entity A that conveys information about message B is of the planned resemblance one finds in models, maps and portraits.

As a kind of weak index, the *image* intended but did not always find in its earliest exemplars an exactly planned resemblance, as it would under a theologically ordained or semiotically theorized position as an *icon*. This view is one that accommodates to the historically found theological basis for Buddhist images not serving as icons of worship but as reminders or vestigial tokens for the Buddha. These were originally representations of objects or creatures associated with the Buddha in religious narratives. *Image* thus becomes a floating term for different kinds of visual representation denoting weak or strong indexicality.^[7] Nevertheless, images of human and some animal beings always retain the vestigial qualities of icons, objects of worship. Obviously, when they have become standardized religious images, they often replicate earlier and more prestigious images that may with

time have come to be iconographically prescribed. Yet they are crucially endowed with presence as replicas, and some ritual uses, which some would see as more Hindu and heterodox from a Buddhist theological position, call forth the presence of powers or the godhead itself. This incarnation may be achieved on a temporary or permanent basis by the performance of specified rites, usually involving socially restricted language that serves as a sacred counterpart to physical manipulation of ritual objects or movement in ritually ordained space.

The representation found in the icon is constituted via a code of conventions for natural appearance. These range from idealized modular conventions for physical sizes, through phrenological inferences about character and size of physical parts, especially protuberant cranial areas, to an elaborate series of exchanges in the mind of the viewer between models of how reality is as it appears to the viewer and how such appearance can be physically connoted to mimetically replicate the appearance of the object, person or scene that had been viewed by the artist. Or the representation can be much more denotative and supported by a range of literary or doctrinal references that embed quite casual and minimal image-signs in the material of representation. For them to be interpreted as representations, the image-signs depend on a code that allows that representation to stand for the force of being, or what one may call the visual plane, that bears them.

Images are deceptively simpler than icons in that they pretend to be "of" something or someone; they do not pretend to stand "for" them. They seem to be transfers mediated directly by the technology deployed. Even photographic images that are apparently only indexical are "of" something long before they have been incorporated into further social circuits that construct meaning to stand "for" something. They have already relied on quite complex technical and visually cultured conventions that allowed the viewer to interpret them as if they were "of" and not also "for." In an art culture where realistic portraiture and portrait photography of previously tabooed persons, that is kings, were introduced in the nineteenth century, the social function of all such images was to stand "for" something, and we must be very sure what images were "for" earlier in order to be more precise about what the image may be "for" in, say, 1880 or 1980. We must also be sure what earlier images could not be "of," that is, what kind of subjects for images were tabooed because they might stand in danger of being "for."

That is, the domain of metaphor by resemblance was suppressed or subject to the hegemony of the domain of metonymy by juxtaposition, where to show the king ["of"], an empowered metaphor, would be to control 'THE KING' ["for"], which is a circulatory metonym. We might think such suppression to be a characteristic semiotic defense mechanism of taboo, but any standardized image of the king always metonymically exists everywhere, like the heads on coins, as "THE KING." Paradoxically, when widely distributed graphic and later photographic images seem to reverse this equation, "THE KING," as metonym by juxtaposition through belonging to a type, then dominates the king as metaphor by resemblance to an original, living icon. The metonymy that

results from circulation entirely controls or suppresses any metaphorical repositioning that might have subverted the general or universal order implied by the metonym.^[8] The characteristic function of ideology (and of state public relations offices) is to exercise hegemony over the circulation of images via metonym, which may bring into question the veridical relation between a metaphor and its originating icon. In Thailand this has been the domain of *lèse-majesté* laws as it had been, one deduces, that of the taboos against looking at the king in the Ayutthayan court.

These are complex art historical phenomena for which diachronic evidence is not always available. The approach of this essay is to consider that there was some kind of epistemological break in the status of icons among the aristocracy in the 1850s, and that this may have spread out to the rest of the country over time. Alternatively, what were rarely explicit beliefs about icons and only intermittent uses for them among farmers became a culture of reception for the dissemination of reprographic images, photographic and electronic, during the twentieth century. In the process of their assimilation some of this new imagery may have acquired statuses that were previously those of religious icons. We need to map as broadly as possible what those icons and images were or were considered to be. Unfortunately, the memory of folk practice is embedded in the practice itself, and the only vestige of what may have been an historical structure in the 1850s that survives in the present may be the kind of structural generalizations we can make from recent records of practice, and not contemporary ones. This leaves open the danger of considering as a past practice what is, in fact, the result of an intervening historical variation. In order to adumbrate what follows, this danger must be risked.

2. Religious Functions

By religious function I broadly mean the theological position of an icon within a system of belief, or the kinds of ritual purpose the icon serves within religious or quasi-religious practice. Almost all icons that serve such functions are representations of supra-mundane forces or states of being, some of which they specifically incarnated. In Thailand the use of such icons would appear to go back to the earliest stages of the transfer of Hindu beliefs, with the possibility that animist icons and beliefs earlier underlay them. Despite this longevity, it makes sense to separate court, Buddhist, and animist domains for such icons and practices. This is because of the fusion of Khmer Hindu practices with Buddhist notions for images and practices pertaining to the court or state. It also relates to the more direct Buddhist use of images in domains that are specifically those of the Buddhist institutional religion and its buildings, and to the perpetuation of folk practices involving amulets and substitute models for animist deities in a range of folk practices.

The level of folk religious practice must continually be borne in mind, for even though court ritual may invoke non-Hindu, non-Buddhist spirits, court beliefs are supported by the highly regulated use of icons at the centre of Thai culture. How far that central culture actually penetrated villages was a matter of debate until recently, and what in the late nineteenth and

twentieth centuries appears to be a culturally homogenous system is no more than the projection or imposition of the state through its educational system and the mobilization of the King as a national symbol at various times, particularly since 1945. Yet some researchers have pointed to the relative *economic* isolation of Thai villages from the center, despite the opening up implied by the Bowring Treaty of 1855.[\[9\]](#)

How much a *cultural* isolation was there must therefore be questioned, most particularly in the diversity in uses of and beliefs about images, and beyond that, of art works. It is far more likely that the homogeneity we see in the diffusion of royal images or use of poster art, for example, is the product of local heterogeneity coming in contact with a center that produced homogeneity for its own purposes.

3. Court Icons

In Thailand, the status of kings being divine because they were the receptacle of divinely ordained qualities, and at whose coronation became the vehicle of a god or godhead, stems from Khmer practice, which was highly Indianized. But Thai kings were certainly seen from the mid-Ayutthaya period of the seventeenth century as beings of a karmic level higher even than Hindu gods, and were present in this world as Bodhisattvas (saviors who were nascent Buddhas) or Cakravartin (world emperors of the Buddhist Law).[\[10\]](#) Wales must be right in identifying that at Khmer temples images were made to represent ancestral kings.

Such images, although bearing the attributes of the god, had the facial characteristics of the persons they commemorated; and the temples in which they were preserved were also portrait galleries in which the ancestor worship was combined with the worship of the god.[\[11\]](#)

But debates on recent research indicate that the Indic name - *devaraja* may be a translation of a Khmer name for a local god meaning "the god who is the king." An ancestor cult, marked by a sculpture serving as paladin of the kingdom, fits very plausibly with the snippets of evidence that the cult statue displayed features of the current ruler.[\[12\]](#) Some late seventeenth-century Ayutthayan figures of Buddhas portrayed them crowned as a king. The Thai kings did not abandon Khmer practice and kept pantheons with sculptures of their ancestors whose icons were honored daily.[\[13\]](#) As late as the 1680s, these icons were in the form of a deity but also had features taken from a given king. It was only with King Mongkut (reign 1851-1868) that it appears that images were publicly recognized that were made from life of living kings.[\[14\]](#)

Nonetheless, there is some external evidence from Persian sources that the resemblance of living persons was used in making icons. A very early description of by a Persian visiting Ayutthaya between 1685-1687 describes the role of royal statues (below all are my italics):

As soon as the king wakes up, he washes and changes his clothes. Then he goes to the temple and prostrates himself before the idols and the carved images of his

relatives, living and dead. After morning prayers the king leaves the temple and proceeds to a special room where he receives learned doctors.

This text is full of fascinating observations from a monotheistic, anti-iconic Islamic point of view on Thai Buddhism and the role of icons within its rites. Their significance is all the more great when we recall that the mission was received by the Persian-speaking members of a merchant family long in the service of the Thai court, and whose awareness of cultural differences and linguistic competence in Thai is likely to have been far greater than contemporary European visitors. In the section *Idolatry and Superstitions*, it states:

The scholars of Siam exclaim, '*Since we cannot experience direct contact with God in all His glory and perfection, we are obliged to seek Him through substitutes, which we can behold with our own eyes. Therefore we make the idols our masters and gods.*' Thus these idolaters argue in favor of their evil practices and just as the divine scriptures have described them, they declare, '*The idols are our intercessors before God and our means of approaching the Lord of Lords.*[\[15\]](#)

Further, commemorative sculptures would be made for ritual observance, as well as small commemorative Buddha statues each year a king was alive. The Thai kings also surrounded themselves with the aura of local divinities whom were widely invoked in their rituals of loyalty and in ordination ceremonies.[\[16\]](#) In a sense, the kings were tied to their divine status by icons that bore that power.

The practice of regular honoring and, on occasion, public display and ceremonial commemoration of the ashes of kings and some queens did not involve a figurative icon;[\[17\]](#) in a sense, these ashes were assimilated to the power with which other icons were imbued with. The taboo on not looking at the king, as if his eyes would burn the viewer, indicates the residue of an aniconic and denotative notion of representing the king, which was cognate with honoring non-iconic relics.[\[18\]](#) Perhaps we should also see the person of the king itself as an icon, as if it were both the representation of an energy or level of being that was beyond representation but was paradoxically still its incarnation. If the king-in-person was an icon whose existence was premised on prior karmic accumulation, then king-persons-as-icons never lost the constraints that ordained them as such. In a word, if the king was replaced by a person more karmically endowed to become king, the icon could never become a mere image of an historic person.[\[19\]](#)

The taboo on representing the king before the 1850s was certainly not one to the king himself, as we can see in the realistic elements introduced in Khmer divine representations, the presumably similar representations of living relatives in the pantheon at late Ayutthaya.[\[20\]](#) It is also found in the making of portraits of monks and then of kings in King Mongkut's reign. We are told that the statues of the first three Chakri kings were done after recollections by four old people who had known them.[\[21\]](#) It is also plausible, although only as an outside speculation, that in the early nineteenth century

some set of images, possibly graphic ones that had not been made into sculptures, had existed for the King's own commemoration. These may have incorporated the first three Chakri kings' features, which could be verbally pointed out to the artists in reference to the old people's opinion.

Whatever was historically the case, the issue is not the de-sacralization of the King's image by its reproduction from life but its re-sacralization by first being made available to foreigners and more Thais than would normally have seen it in the Royal Pantheon, and then to Thais beyond the court through reproduction.

It is a feature of structural adjustment to new configurations of power that tabooed objects should be revealed to those who would in the past normally have been forbidden them. In tribal contexts elsewhere, such revelation has also involved a widening scope for the social structure involved in negotiations with other groups about territorial hegemony or possession.[\[22\]](#)

Later, setting out of the King's portrait on tables during festivals and honoring it, which was observed by Wales as early as the 1920s, can only be seen as an extension of such re-sacralization.

One more method of paying homage to deceased kings in Siam remains to be mentioned: the setting of a photograph or lithograph of the particular king on a table, before which are made the usual offerings of lighted candles, flowers, and incense. This is now a very popular custom, both in government institutions and private houses, since every Siamese home possesses at least a cheap lithograph and can thus show its loyalty in this easy and practical manner. But it is of course quite a new custom, since the making of royal portraits only came into fashion after the middle of the last century, after the belief that this was harmful to the person represented had been officially discountenanced. Indeed, the supposition that some part of the royal 'soul' (if one may be permitted to use this loose term) might possibly inhabit the portrait would be an added stimulus to paying homage before it. It is also a modern means of expressing what remains of the worship of the living King, for whenever it is desired to honor him, especially on the occasion of a royal procession, portraits of the King set up on tables may be seen at almost every Siamese doorway on the route.[\[23\]](#)

One could sharply conclude that the invasion of the image by the icon, at precisely that junction in Thai art history when icons might have lost their ability to incarnate transcendent powers, evacuated that faculty for critical discourses in the space between specific images that we might see as one condition for modernity in general, or at the very least a modern notion of images. In such a visual semiotic context, how could art objects critically refer to their own styles or their very status as art objects?

4. Buddhist Icons

Icons of the historical Buddha are the main objects of worship in Thai Buddhism and involve the symbolic placement of a sculptured figure in a building that is suitable to him. While the Buddha figure is deployed as incarnate with power in state ceremonies, such as the Oath of Allegiance,^[24] being physically connected by a cord to the water from which the oath is drunk and into which the Royal sword was inserted, Buddha figures were also seen as imbued with healing powers.^[25] Nevertheless, at another level the Buddha figure remained a human incarnation who may be approached and enjoyed *as if* human.^[26] So far as I know, in Thailand such icons have always been sculptural, and there would appear to be no equivalent of the East Asian esoteric tradition, such as in Japan, where a painting can be a *honzon* or central figure of worship,^[27] incarnate with power on ritual enactment. This overlay of state-related power-enjoinment functions with humanly approachable features, where it is the result of Buddha's austerities and enlightenment that the faithful sympathetically enjoin. This means that there is a kind of unresolved semiotic split latent for any human sculptural representation between the twin domains of secular/sacred power and identification.

This system of relations can be mapped as a matrix as follows:

	(function)	
	sacred	secular
(operation)		
power		
identification		

To anticipate the following argument, if somewhat abstractly, the image of the king moves between the operation of power as a sacred or disembodied function and the operation of identification as a secular or embodied function. The secular, embodied position is that from which the king acts politically. The taboo lies in withholding recognition of this shift, under various regimes characterized by the domain of sumptuary regulation, taboo-sanctioned behavior such as the subject's averting the gaze, and, of course, the modern imprecations of *lèse-majesté* applied according to the designs of contemporary, empowered political actors.

The fact that in Thailand these icons did not become two-dimensional as central objects of worship tends to indicate that this unresolved split in the semiotic function of the image was carried over when there were more two-dimensional images in social circulation from the late nineteenth century. In other words, at least for late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century representations of religious figures, including Buddha, his disciples, or living monks, for quasi-divine persons such as kings, and for persons with real secular power, such as military leaders, images never quite lost their status as icons. This would indicate that images, including art works, found it difficult, if at all, to take on an autonomous discourse of their own, one pre-requisite for the self-questioning through the properties of the discourse itself or its physical practice in properties of works we find in modernism. Or at least if this critical function is to be found, it occurred elsewhere in art discourse. This could come through the questioning of realism in pictorial and literary narrative.

5. Tokens of Buddhas

Another important type of Buddhist religious icon is the depiction of categorically designated attributes of the Buddha. These can be worshipped because they form effective denotations of Buddhahood, and are shown particularly in Thailand in sculptures and diagrams of the zones on the Buddha's feet.[\[28\]](#)

Damrong distinguished the four types of monuments in the Pali Canon:

Relic [*Dhatu*], Memorial [*Paribhoga*], Teaching [*Dhamma*], and Votive [*Udesaka*]. Relic monuments were to house those of physical relics of the Buddha piously believed to have been brought from Sri Lanka like that at Nakonchum, Kambaengbej. 'The Great Emperor, the Defender of the Faith, erects a building in Nakonchum to house the relic, which is not common but real and holy, brought from the far away island called Lanka.[\[29\]](#)

Among memorials was the Bodhi tree brought from Bodhgaya in India during reign of Rama V. The Canon of the Buddhist Teaching itself became a monument after Buddhism was accepted, and monuments for votive worship were mostly of the Buddha but could include the Holy Footprint.

The various sub-types of Buddhist monuments for worship include *cetiyas*, which are reminders or monuments of the Buddha. Among the further sub-categories are *paribhogacetiya*, a *cetiya* by association, which includes places the Buddha visited, the Bodhi tree under which he achieved Enlightenment, and objects he used, such as a seat he sat on, the alms bowl he carried and the robes he wore. Any copy of a *paribhogacetiya* is an *uddesikacetiya*, an "indicative reminder," that is, an object that the general opinion regards as a suitable reminder of the Buddha, deriving its efficacy from the model it is copied from.[\[30\]](#)

Griswold makes the relationship between religious status and artistic qualities of a statue somewhat clearer:

The symbols owe their power to the fact that they are replicas of *reminders by association*; by the same reasoning the statue must be a replica - but of what? The Canon mentions no reminder by association that could possibly furnish the complete model; but legend supplies the omission by relating that certain likenesses of the Sage were made during his lifetime by persons who knew his appearance well'.[\[31\]](#)

Whenever a serious work of art was to be executed, the qualities of the model [an earlier sculptural representation] were transmitted to it indirectly, by means of a *memory-picture*....There was thus a preoccupation with codes of supernatural anatomy....Like the second edition of a book, the copy had to *be* like the original, not necessarily to *look* like it. The content, the iconography, was essential; the format, the sculptural styles, was arbitrary or optional.[\[32\]](#)

There is no doubt a magical engendering of power in a statue is involved, as can be seen from the record of a consecration in Chiangmai in 1937. In consecrating icons, monks are joined to images by a loosely spun cotton cord, *sincana*.

As each monk took his turn in the preaching chair [*dharmasn*], his first act was to slip the sacred cord [*sincana*] over his right arm. He then picked up the palm-leaf manuscript and intoned or recited a chapter; at the conclusion a gong sounded within the temple.[33]

A *sincana* cord had been wound about from one image to another and one end of the string brought to the monk in the preaching chair....The *Buddhabhiseka* Ceremony was spoken of as an ordination ceremony whereby the images entered the priesthood. Prior to this service the images were considered to be simply statues, after the service the images were "*phra*," something worshipful and more than mere metal. They had become sacred and possessed the *mana* or spirit of intelligence.[34]

Tambiah distinguishes the dharma of kingship from the body of concepts of merit and power postulated on the view that,

. . . .Thais tend to see deity, person, or spirit as always gaining or losing merit, and therefore as not rooted in permanent rank, but does not agree with separating out an amoral sphere of power from the ambit of vice and virtue.[35]

Tambiah thinks,

It is only a partial account to substantialize power, to focus on amulets, magical words, tattoo marks, diagrams, and a host of other devices as embodiments of power as though they exist as concrete entities. [For]...these substances get their potency in large part because of the virtues transferred to them by the originator or transmitter [eg. the guru, yogi, *bhikku*] who acquires mystical powers through ascetic practices, special knowledge, or moral conduct.

Tambiah, in a description is of the consecration of a number of Buddha statues in Bangkok in 1971, valuably underlines that the instruments of power take their place within a matrix of transactions. That is, in statue-making there is also a status-exchange involved, for the patron also lends his status to the icon:

...[A]lthough the monks are the chief sacralizing officiants, frequently a famous lay sponsor (or sponsors) is integrally involved, not only as the provider of the material assets to make the statues, but also as a ritual participant himself whose "merit" and achievements are also transferred to the statue.[36]

Not only were icons instinct with power, others could gain power by possessing them. Kings depend on two bases for claiming legitimacy and through it stability of power. One is claim to be a *cakkvati* or *dharmaraja* on the basis of personal achievement and commitment to

Buddhist notions of kingship....A second basis, linked with the foregoing, is the possession of *palladia* and *regalia*, which are enduring sedimentations and objectifications of power and virtue. Thus we are confronted by a dialectic: The Buddha statue as a palladium is a product of the circumstances of its making and the authenticity given it by its makers, sponsors, and patrons. In this sense, history is embedded and objectified in it. It is this very sedimented presence in it that in turn radiates upon and influences human actors and events.[37]

This naming of parts seems like the discursive analogue of the naming of tabooed actions in the monks' disciplinary admonitions, the *Patimocca*. [38] It was surely because metaphor had such power in a gray, metonymically constrained world that the leaps of the monk's imagination had almost entirely to be focused on events in the life of the Buddha. Restriction of the metaphorical was also presumably a reason why monks were forbidden from making icons, [39] in addition to the general Buddhist aversion also shared by some early Mahayanists to colorful forms as conjuring up the world of human desires. [40]

More significant an inheritance for later Thai art, particularly painting, may be the habit of mind that partitions the seen world into known attributes without attempting to grasp, beyond the accepted denotational framework set by a religion, what the structure of religious belief is that links those attributes together. One expects that some kind of transfer of this position to secular political ideology took place in the 1930s. In other words, visual attributes of seen things or persons became a kind of abstraction, however figurative the representational convention deployed.

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Author's note: In order to provide a register of some available materials in this field I have given in footnotes fuller background and some discussion than is usual. Various romanization systems adopted by the authors cited I have preserved as they stand, without diacritics.

This paper was originally written in 1994, but I felt I should not publish it at that time pending further research. I am grateful to Craig Reynolds for some useful critique of the 1994 version. My own work is now published in *Asian Modernities: Chinese and Thai Art in the 1980s and 1990s* (Sydney: Power Publications, 2010). I have added here some further references from material I did not consider in 1994 or which is found in other scholars' work over the last 15 or so years. I decided it was better to add-in these further perspectives rather than try to over-amend the original. This version of the

essay is 50 percent shortened from the original.

Published on November 17, 2011.

Endnotes

[1] The material of this essay does not impinge on debates about historical naming around the specificity of the terms 'Siam' before the 1930s, or 'Thailand' later, and will simply use Thailand and Thai throughout.

[2] For the literature on pre-modern art up to 1977 there is an excellent survey article; Woodward, Hiram W., Jr., "History of Art: Accomplishments, Opportunities, Hopes and Fears," in Ayal, Elizier B., ed., *The Study of Thailand* (Athens, Ohio: Center for International Studies, 1978). Woodward, Hiram W., Jr., *The Sacred Sculpture of Thailand: the Alexander B. Griswold Collection, The Waters Art Gallery* (Bangkok: River Books, 1997), includes a survey of some common ideas about Buddha images. Other bibliography may be found in the Thailand section on the Bibliography of Modern and Contemporary Asian Art which may be found and downloaded from my website www.arts.usyd.edu.au/departs/arthistory/staff/jclark_shtml.

[3] This is a position which all modern historians of Thailand, Marxist or otherwise, including those of cultural phenomena, need to respect. See Reynolds, Craig J. & Hong, Lysa, "Marxism in Thai Historical Studies," *Journal of Asian Studies*, XLII:1 (November 1983), 96. See also what in some respects is the continuation of this perspective, Hong, Lysa, "Warasan Sethasat Kanmu'ang: Critical Scholarship in Post-1976 Thailand," in Chitakasem, M., and Turton, A., eds, *Thai Constructions of Knowledge* (London: School of Oriental and African Studies, 1991).

[4] The image of the king (and other members of the royal family) is thus not merely implicated and then disseminated by the entirety of Thai educational and religious/valuational systems; it is actually emplaced within the very lived time of family structure itself.

[5] See Hamilton, A., "Family dramas: film and modernity in Thailand," *Screen*, 33:3 (Autumn 1992). See also her paper, "The Unforgotten Kings: Icons and Modernity in Thailand," a reading of which suggested some approaches here.

[6] See Leach, E., *Culture and Communication* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), p. 12, for a summary of some semiotic positions and for the basic distinction of metonymy from metaphor, into the latter domain of which iconic signs fall. For a fuller discussion see Eco, U., *A Theory of Semiotics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976), p. 191 and infra, "Critique of Iconism." On some Buddhist meanings of icon, image and indexical reminder, see note 26 below.

[7] Indeed, as Freedberg, David, *The Power of Images: Studies in the history and theory of response* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1989), repeatedly shows, *image* is

the more inclusive term and *icon* the special case. What concerns him, and in many ways what also concerns this essay, is the nature and function of responses to images, not just their theological or semiotic underpinnings. Freedberg also cites Mitchell's illuminating gloss on Lessing, "Religion fetters painting by removing it from its proper vocation, the representation of beautiful bodies in space, and enslaves it to a foreign concern, the expression of 'significance' through 'symbolic' representation, concerns that are proper to temporal forms like discourse or narrative," Freedberg, p. 374, citing Mitchell, W. J. T., *Iconology, Image, Text, Ideology* (Chicago and London; Chicago University Press, 1986), p. 106.

[8] On the highly problematic relations between metaphor, metonym and photographs, which are composites of iconic and indexical signs, see among others, Mitchell, pp. 54-63.

[9] See Lysa, Hong, *Thailand in the Nineteenth Century* (Singapore: Institute of South East Asian Studies, 1984), mentions on pp. 167-8, and Chatthip Nartsupha, *The Thai Village Economy in the Past*, tr. Chris Baker & Pasuk Phongpaichit, (Chiangmai: Silkworm Books, 1999). Some would hold that villages were never as isolated as Chatthip suggests.

[10] Quaritch Wales, H. G., *Siamese State Ceremonies, Their History and Function* (London, Bernard Quaritch, 1931), p. 29.

[11] *Op. cit.*, p. 30.

[12] See Mabbett, I. & Chandler, D., *The Khmers* (Chiangmai: Silkworms Books, 1995), pp. 89-90. Even before Ayutthaya at Sukhothai, according to Andaya, B., "Statecraft in the Reign of Lü Thai of Sukhodaya (ca. 1347-1374)," in Smith, B., ed., *Religion and Legitimation of Power in Thailand, Burma, and Laos* (Chambersburg: Anima Books, 1978), p. 13, quoting Griswold as authority, the fourteenth century Phya Lithai, who was to become one of the most dynamic early Sukhothai kings, not only proclaimed a Bodhisattva vow, he seems to have sponsored several portraits with himself as Buddha. On the functions of Khmer images see Roveda, Vittorio, *Images of the Gods: Khmer Mythology in Cambodia, Thailand, and Laos* (Bangkok: River Books, 2005), pp. 22-43.

[13] In Thailand statues of former kings are kept in the royal pantheon, Ho Brah Debpitara, but paying respects to relics of former kings takes place in Amarindra Hall or Ananta Samgama Hall.

"Candles are also lit before the altar on which are the images of Buddha cast for the reigns which are being honoured. These images are cast merely as an act of merit, and as symbolizing the royal devotion to Buddhism. They do not represent the kings as incipient Buddhas, and are therefore not to be confounded with the statues in the pantheon and the Brahmanic conception. Similarly, small images are cast for every year of a king's age, and are kept in the Chakri Palace during his lifetime, and afterwards placed in the Chapel Royal." Quaritch Wales, H. G., *Siamese State Ceremonies, Their History and Function* (London, Bernard Quaritch, 1931),

p. 171.

The Royal Chronicles for 11th to 14th February, 1864, describe the carrying out of urns containing ashes of the royal ancestor, the three earlier Chakri kings, late queens and others, thirteen in all, out of grand palace and their placing on four cardinal points of an artificial hill. They describe the king's distribution of alms to monks, of lottery tickets, and of wish-fulfillment trees *kanlapaphryg* and gold ingots to members of the royal family and to noblemen. The festival continued for four days and four nights. See *The Dynastic Chronicles, The Bangkok Era, The Fourth Reign, B. E. 2394-2411 (A. D. 1851-1868)*, 4 volumes, translated with annotations and commentary by Chadin (Kanjanavanit) Flood (Tokyo: The Centre for East Asian Cultural Studies), 1965 [I], 1966 [II], 1967 [III], 1973 [IV].

The inter-relation between State, King, and Monks is analyzed more fully in Ishii, Y., *Sangha, State, and Society: Thai Buddhism in History*, [r. Hawker, P. (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1986), being the translation of his *Jōza Bukkyō no Seijishakaigaku* (Tokyo: Sōbunsha, 1975), and Tambiah, S. J., *World Conqueror and World Renouncer: A Study of Buddhism and Polity in Thailand against a historical background* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976).

[14] On the specifically Thai aspects of royal statues Quaritch Wales states,

"The only difference between the statues of the Bangkok kings and the deified kings of the Khmers is that instead of being represented with the attributes of gods, they are true portrait statues; but this is an innovation of the Bangkok period, indeed the first three kings never allowed themselves to be portrayed, and their statues are based on the composite ideas of four old people who had seen all three kings and were ordered by King Rama IV to instruct an artist." Quaritch Wales, H. G., *Siamese State Ceremonies, Their History and Function* (London, Bernard Quaritch, 1931), p. 170.

[15] See Anonymous, *The Ship of Sulaiman*, tr. from Persian by O'Kane, J. (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul), 1972, pp. 139-140, from the section *The form of worship in Siam*.

The section *Divine Incarnations* includes the statement:

"Some Siamese maintain that God manifests Himself in the form of various persons. In fact if one examines this question with the eye of truth it is possible to complete their deficient doctrine with the fuller statement, 'Though God's full beauty is hidden from our sight, it is partly visible in everything we behold. Praise be to God for the noble and lofty truths which men have uttered.'

The king himself is considered to be a benevolent god who has entered mortal flesh and since the fiery sun is also held to be a god, the natives have brightened the king's heart by conferring on him the title, "Brother of the Sun." pp. 114-115.

[16] The mixture of Buddhist, Brahmanical and Animist beliefs is seen in sharp focus in the Oath of Allegiance itself See Wilson., C. M., *State and Society in the Reign of Mongkut*,

1851-1868: *Thailand on the Eve of Modernization* (Ann Arbor: University Microfilms, 1971), pp. 287-8.

There is a longer version in Quaritch Wales, H. G., *Siamese State Ceremonies, Their History and Function* (London, Bernard Quaritch, 1931), pp. 194-195. Such customs were the bane of Christian missionaries for whom they were idolatrous. See the [1775] *Lettres Edifiantes*, letter from M. Condé, missionary to Siam, which was quoted in Bowring, J., *The Kingdom and People of Siam* (1857), reprint with foreword by Wyatt, D., Kuala Lumpur (London: Oxford University Press, 1969), pp. 359-60. Tambiah notes that, from the late 1960s the "old ceremony of 'taking the water of allegiance,' at which the king's officers took a loyalty oath to the king, has recently been transformed, so that now the king, followed by his officials, takes the first oath of fidelity and loyalty to the nation. Tambiah, S. J., *World Conqueror and World Renouncer: A study of Buddhism in and Polity in Thailand Against a Historical Background* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), p. 502.

[17] There is a description and analysis of such honoring of the ashes in Wilson., C. M., *State and Society in the Reign of Mongkut, 1851-1868: Thailand on the Eve of Modernization* (Ann Arbor: University Microfilms, 1971), pp. 295-296.

[18] The taboo on looking at the King, from Laws of Manu, is given in Quaritch Wales, H. G., *Siamese State Ceremonies, Their History and Function* (London, Bernard Quaritch, 1931), p. 35: "Like the sun, he burns eyes and hearts; nor can anybody on earth even gaze on him." But such taboos in private practice were not always what they should have been in ritual prescription or social ideology: ". . .it was always of the greatest importance that these taboos should be strictly observed *in public*, since it was then that they were of the greatest sociological value. In private life, when they were in danger of becoming mere useless burdens, they might, and perhaps always were, considerably relaxed." Quaritch Wales, H. G., *Siamese State Ceremonies, Their History and Function* (London, Bernard Quaritch, 1931), p. 42.

[19] The position of Kings was by no means one of monolithic stability. While Heine Geldern's interpretation of kingship in exclusively Hindu terms, without acknowledging assimilation of kingship notions to prior and parallel Khmer beliefs and practices, has been overthrown, Heine Geldern notes that ". . .the theory of divine incarnation could be used not only as a means to exalt the position of the legitimate king, but equally well as a justification for usurpation of the throne." See Heine-Geldern, R., *Concepts of State and Kingship in Southeast Asia* (Ithaca: Data Paper no. 18, South East Asia Program, Cornell University, 1956), pp. 7-8.

The contemporary Thai public space of images elides between oral, written, ritual and visualized spaces. A general understanding can be found in Mulder, Neils, *Thai Images: the Culture of the Public World* (Chiangmai: Silkworm Books, 1997), particularly in relation to ideological propagation through the educational system. The early twentieth century manipulation of spectacular appearance is analyzed by Maurizio Peleggi in his *Lords of Things: the Fashioning of the Siamese Monarchy's Modern Image* (Honolulu: University of

Hawai'i Press, 2002), and also in the chapter "Mnemonic Sites" in his *Thailand: the Worldly Kingdom* (London: Reaktion Books, 2007).

One should note also the tactical use of conventions of "giving the sight of one's presence" and "allowing one's silence to magnify the impact of one's presence," which appear to be devices mobilized by the contemporary Thai monarchical institution to increase its worldly wealth and ritual impact since the 1960s. See Gray, Christine E., "Hegemonic Images: language and silence in the royal Thai polity," *Man*, 26 (March 1991), 43-65; Gray, Christine E., "Royal Words and Their Unroyal Consequences," *Current Anthropology*, 7:4 (1992), 448-463;

Gray, Christine E., "Buddhism as a Language of Images, Transtextuality as a Language of Power," *Word & Image*, 11:3 (July-September 1993). The notion that Thais inhabit an image space greatly swayed between non-Buddhist ideas, some Hinayana concepts and practices, and the mediation of sacralized (that is, taboo-governed) institutions, including the visualized monarchy, for the sake of secular power and ideology, including the allocation of gender roles, has been carefully examined by Peter A. Jackson, in particular in his papers "The Thai Regime of Images," *Sojourn*, 19:2 (2004), 181-218, and "The Performative State: Semi-coloniality and the Tyranny of Images in Modern Thailand," *Sojourn*, 19:2 (2004), 219-253.

Any number of theses have been written on why the Thai monarchy functions as it does including: Gray, Christine, *Thailand: the Soterological State in the 1970s* (unpublished, PhD dissertation, Department of Anthropology, University of Chicago, 1986); Taw, Harold, *The Modern Thai Monarchy: Myths, Appropriations, and "Silences,"* (unpublished MA thesis, Department of Anthropology, University of California at Berkeley, 1992); McCargo, Duncan, "Network Monarchy and Legitimacy Crises in Thailand," *The Pacific Review*, 18:4 (2005); Ünalı, Serhat, *Modern Monarchs: A Comparison of the Democratic Roles of Thailand's Bhumibol Adulyadej and Juan Carlos of Spain*, (unpublished BA thesis, Department of Southeast Asian Studies at the Institute of Asian and African Studies, Humboldt Universität zu Berlin, 2008).

[20] *The Ship of Sulaiman*, see note 11 above, is possibly the earliest documented one.

[21] See Quaritch Wales, H. G., *Siamese State Ceremonies, Their History and Function* (London, Bernard Quaritch, 1931), p. 170, and Poshyananda, A., *Western-Style Painting and Sculpture in the Royal Thai Court*, 2 vols, (Bangkok: Amarin Printing Group, 1993), vol. 1, p. 342.

[22] See Morphy, H., "Now You Understand," in Pearson, N., and Langton, M., *Aborigines, Land and Land Rights* (Canberra, AIAS, 1983).

[23] Quaritch Wales, H. G., *Siamese State Ceremonies, Their History and Function* (London, Bernard Quaritch, 1931), p. 173. Wales cautions against over-generalization, stating that respect for an "abstract conception of kingship" in the Royal Pantheon is not the same as "loyal and spontaneous show of

affection" seen on Chakri Day and Chulalongkorn Day. *Ibid*, p. 174.

[24] See note 47 below on the uses of substitute images in worshipping the Rice Goddess.

[25] In order to achieve the expulsion of disease, the Emerald Buddha and precious relics were paraded around city at time of cholera epidemic in 1820. Quaritch Wales, H. G., *Siamese State Ceremonies, Their History and Function* (London, Bernard Quaritch, 1931), p. 310.

[26] Early inscriptions on a number of monuments and statues give a fairly wide range of the beliefs surrounding images. See Griswold, A. B., Na Nagara, Prasert, *Epigraphic and Historical Studies*, (Bangkok: The Historical Society, 1992), p. 199.

[27] From time to time two-dimensional images were made as a way of representing a three-dimensional icon. Mongkut's letter about the Emerald Buddha of 7. 8. 1854, is quoted by Bowring, *ibid*, p. 319.

[28] See Prince Damrong Rajanuab, *A History of Buddhist Monuments in Siam* (Bangkok: The Siam Society, 1962, second revised and annotated edition, 1973). For a brief survey of the iconography of Thai Buddhist images, see Fickle, D., *Images of the Buddha in Thailand* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1989).

[29] *Op. cit.*, 1962, p. 10, p. 21.

[30] Griswold, A. B., Na Nagara, Prasert, *Epigraphic and Historical Studies*, (Bangkok: The Historical Society, 1992), p. 758.

[31] Griswold in Bowie, T., ed. (essays by Griswold, Lyons, Subhadradis Diskul), *The Arts of Thailand: A Handbook of the Architecture, Sculpture and Painting of Thailand (Siam)* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1960), p. 32.

[32] *Op. cit.*, p. 32, p. 37.

[33] Wells, K. E., *Thai Buddhism: Its Rites and Activities* (1939), (Bangkok: Suriyabun Publishers, 1975), p. 127.

[34] *Op. cit.*, p. 127, p. 129.

[35] Tambiah, p. 484-6, in discussion of Hanks, L. M. , "Merit and Power in Thai Social Order," *American Anthropologist*, 64 (1962) 1247-1262.

[36] Tambiah, S. J., *The Buddhist Saints of the Forest and the Cult of Amulets* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), p. 248.

[37] *Op. cit.*, pp. 241-242.

[38] On the role of the *Patimocca*, see Aoki, Tamotsu, *Tai no Sōin nite* (In a Thai Monastery) (Tokyo: Chūkō Bunko, 1979), pp. 176-209. A number of these rules seem designed to inhibit refinement of perception through the physical senses, such as the *Rules of Training*, see Ven. Nanamoli Thera tr. , *The Patimokkha*, (Bangkok: King Maha Makuta's Academy, B.

E. 2512/1969), p. 122.

[39] European Christians, given their over-preoccupation with the idolatry they thought implicit in Thai Buddhist use of icons, were peculiarly sensitive to this, and that the making of images is forbidden to priests is mentioned by Bowring, 1856, *ibid*, p. 326, citing the French seventeenth-century visitor La Loubère, and by Leonowens, p. 203.

[40] A number of early Mahayanist attitudes to painting in particular can be found in texts preserved in Chinese and translated by A. C. Soper, "Early Buddhist Attitudes Toward the Art of Painting," *The Art Bulletin*, XXXII (1950) 147-151.