

# Murals in Buddhist Buildings: Content and Role in the Daily Lives of Isan People

Thawat Trachoo<sup>1</sup>, Sastra Laoakka<sup>1</sup> & Sisikka Wannajun<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The Faculty of Cultural Science, Mahasarakham University, Khamriang Sub-District, Kantarawichai District, Maha Sarakham Province, Thailand

Correspondence: Thawat Trachoo, The Faculty of Cultural Science, Mahasarakham University, Khamriang Sub-District, Kantarawichai District, Maha Sarakham Province 44150, Thailand. E-mail: ttrachoo149@hotmail.com

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## Abstract

This is a qualitative research aimed at assessing the current state of Buddhist murals in Northeastern Thailand, the elements of society they reflect and their role in everyday life. The research area for this investigation is Northeastern Thailand, colloquially known as Isan. Three ethnic communities were purposively selected to comprise the research populations. These were the Tai Korat of Nakhon Ratchasima Province, Tai Khmer of Buriram Province and Tai Lao of Ubon Ratchatani Province. Data collection tools were basic survey, participant and non-participant observation, structured and non-structured interview, focus group discussion and workshop. Results show that there are two major groups of Buddhist temple murals in Isan: those depicting ancient culture and customs painted prior to 1957 and contemporary murals painted after 1957. For the most part, murals are found on the walls of the *ubosot* and the instruction halls of the temples. The objectives of mural paintings were to worship the lord Buddha, decorate the temples, provide education to community members and maintain historical records. The paintings are often simple depictions of everyday life with holy or important objects and figures drawn at the tops of the walls, the main story in the middle of the walls and the common man or hell at the base of the walls. The disappointing element of mural creation is the common scenario of covering the murals after creation for protection. Also many people do not understand the stories represented in the drawings. The murals continue to play a role in encouraging community discourse and teaching people how to behave appropriately in society.

**Keywords:** content, role, mural, lifestyle, Isan

## 1. Introduction

Murals have been developed in North-eastern Thailand for thousands of years. Some examples are the 3000 and 4000-year-old color paintings at Pa Taem National Park, Kong Jiyem District, Ubon Ratchatani Province and those at Kao Jan Ngam, See Kiew District, Nakhon Ratchasima Province. These serve as traces of prehistoric recordings, depicting stories, thoughts, beliefs, social conditions and the surrounding environment of ancient communities. When people moved from forest communities to town and city societies, they sought new ways to display their faith and worship of sacred objects or gods. This led to the creation of paintings and other works of art that could represent their beliefs. These works were often associated with people in positions of political, administrative, religious and educational power and explain the conflicts of religious leaders, revealing their impact on the politics and religion of the benefactor of the artwork (Leist, 2005). The mural research of Towns (2002) in America shows that murals reveal the beauty of society as well as their own aesthetic qualities. In this way, art is valuable for the education and culture of people in the community and represents the progress of culture.

For the most part, murals in Isan depict the inheritance and transmission of Buddhism by telling stories of the history of Buddhism, individual monks and disciples or by depicting the practice of Buddhist virtues, customs, traditions and lifestyle. These are the valuable themes that have motivated artists to create murals on temples throughout Thailand (Buddasarn, 2003). Aside from containing stories of the history of Buddhism, murals are important works of art that reveal much of past society, including the status of the artist and the position of the temples as centers of economy, culture and politics (Cate, 1998).

The culture of Isan has been accumulated since the beginning of history and Isan people refer to mural art as *hoop taem*. This art is held as an important medium for the teaching of Buddhist values (Samosorn, 1989). The original temple murals were representations of the artists' faith and were also decorations to make the temples more beautiful places. The murals were often descriptive paintings incorporating both art and text. The text was in ancient Isan dialect and other local languages in order to have the greatest possible impact among local communities (Noiwangklang, 1998).

In any case, the current socio-economic status of Isan people has changed from those early days. Many new artisans are highly trained from educational establishments and self-teaching. These artists work as professionals or hobbyists. The new current of artists has led to a development of the traditional paintings that reflect more modern social concerns and deviate from the original concepts (Plengdeesakun, 2011). Although the themes of the murals remain related to Buddhist principles, the style, content and techniques of the paintings are varied. The people responsible for the content of the paintings are the temple abbots, temple council members, community leaders, local people, sponsors and the artists. There is no organized sponsorship from the government, which influences the quality of the murals and their message.

From the information given, the research team realized the importance of studying the current state of murals at Buddhist sites in Isan. Additionally, this investigation was concerned with revealing which aspects of society the murals continue to depict and how great the role of murals is in educating community members. The art of each area should reveal the state and history of its local societies; it is a social mirror. This investigation therefore hopes to uncover the real value of Buddhist murals for the people of Isan, aiding their development and promoting their image as a cultural treasure of the local area.

## 2. Methodology

This was a qualitative research aimed at assessing the current state of Buddhist murals in Northeastern Thailand, the elements of society they reflect and their role in everyday life. The research area for this investigation is Northeastern Thailand, colloquially known as Isan. Three ethnic communities were purposively selected to comprise the research populations. These were the Tai Korat of Nakhon Ratchasima Province, Tai Khmer of Buriram Province and Tai Lao of Ubon Ratchatani Province. Specifically, two temples were chosen from each province for investigation, based on the criteria that they contained either ancient or contemporary Buddhist murals.

Research was conducted by document study and field investigations. Data collection tools were basic survey, participant and non-participant observation, structured and non-structured interview, focus group discussion and workshop. The research sample was purposively selected in three groups. The key informant group was comprised of experts from the government, private sector and community and totaled 48 individuals. The casual informant group consisted of artists and laborers and totaled 18 individuals. The general informant group was comprised of temple visitors and totaled 48 individuals. All collected data was validated using a triangulation method and analysed by analytic induction and typological analysis. The results are here presented as a descriptive analysis.

## 3. Results

The first murals painted in Isan were from local communities and depicted the workings of local traditions, lifestyle and ceremonies. Examples of these early works can be found at Phra Ubosot Wat Na Phra That, Pakdongchai District, Nakhon Ratchasima, Phra Ubosot Wat Tung Sri Mueang, Ubon Ratchatani (Figure 1), Wat Ban Na Kwai, Mueang District, Ubon Ratchatani and Wat Ban Namkam, That Phanom District, Nakhon Phanom. The other kind of early painting contained genuine traditional knowledge and can be found at Wat Sri Supon, Bua Yai District, Nakhon Ratchasima (Figure 2) and Wat Tha Riyeb, Na Pho District, Buriram (Figure 3). This style was common until about 1957.

After 1957 the murals began to concentrate less on local lifestyle and more on contemporary imagination and designs. The cause for this shift in focus was the education of the artists, who increasingly became trained in Bangkok of other provinces and brought the influence of these new locations into their work. Self-training was common for those artists who did not learn elsewhere and they began to imitate western styles seen in the media. Additionally, artists came to from Central and Northern Thailand, bringing their own cultural influences with them.



Figure 1. A close-up of a mural at Phra Ubosot Wat Tung Sri Mueang



Figure 2. A close-up of a mural at Wat Sri Supon, Bua Yai District, Nakhon Ratchasima



Figure 3. A close up of a mural at Wat Tha Riyeb, Na Pho District, Buriram

Murals in Isan are painted onto the walls of *phra ubosot* or *sim*, instruction halls, scripture buildings and temple halls. At some temples, story-telling murals adorn the pillars, such as Phra Ubosot Wat Tung Sri Mueang, Ubon Ratchatani. Murals created after 1957 are most commonly found on the *ubosot* or instruction hall and rarely on the exterior of the buildings. The aim of murals is to make merit, for it is believed that once painted the artist and commissioner will gain favor. The murals also help to decorate the temples and make them more appealing for worship. They increase Buddhist education and understanding among the community, which was particularly true in the past, when literacy rates were low and images a rare but vital form of instruction.

In the past, natural colors were preferred for the paintings, although some chemical colors were also used. Gold was not used in Isan. Nowadays, chemical colors are common, especially water-based acrylic and water-based plastics. The designs are sketched and painted directly onto the cement. Some artists paint onto fabric and subsequently attach the fabric to the wall using, ideally, latex glue. If the wall space is large, the mural will be separated onto different pieces of fabric paintings and attached in sequence upon completion.

Artists are not limited in their creativity when producing murals. However, it must be remembered that the murals are depicting holy objects and concepts as well as local society. They must be treated with appropriate levels of respect. The upper portion of the wall must be reserved for angels, holy objects and high religious figures. The middle of the wall is for the base story of the mural. The lower part of the wall is for the common man and hell. Many of the murals investigated incorporate writing into their drawings. Blank spaces use little color and outlines are commonly colored blue. The base of the painting is white or ivory. The paintings often overlap and tell one continuous story without being contained in a formal border. However natural features, such as mountains, earth and rivers are used to break up images. Paintings created after 1957 are more likely to be contained in a border for ease of understanding. In these later paintings, the skies are busier and clouds, holy figures and imagery are more frequently painted in the upper portions of the walls. The center of the walls details Buddhsit history and stories, while the lower portions either tell the tales of common man or fill the space with traditional Thai patterns. More modern techniques have been adopted, including the addition of shadows and dimensions.

Local folk tales used for the murals incorporate elements of faith and belief, including the history of the life of the Lord Buddha, the tale of Phra Malai and local instructional literature. In addition, the murals depict images of everyday life, including *Mor Lam* performance, childhood games and occupational activities. The paintings created after 1957 continue to include the Buddhist stories but do not include local tales and instructional literature, with the exception of traditions that are written into the *heet 12 kong 14*, such as Songkran, Loy Krathong and the Bang Fai ceremony. Important religious figures feature heavily.

The number of people who play a role in the creation of temple wall murals varies depending on the readiness of the individual location. Mural creation is an expensive project. The cost will vary according to the skill of the artist and the intricacy of the design. Reasons for developing murals include worship, merit making, education and imitation of other temples. Related personnel are the abbot, temple council, local people, community leaders and village heads. Most often, the abbot is the leader of the project and makes executive decisions regarding designs, mural content, employing artists and securing funds. The entire process can be very lengthy and take over a year. When the work is complete, the murals are invariably covered. They are not made accessible to the general public for study, apart from rare occasions and religious events. This significantly reduces the potential benefit to be had from the murals. The vast majority of interview respondents indicated that when they look at the murals they get little or no understanding of the intended message and only appreciate the aesthetic quality of the piece (Figure 4).



Figure 4. A close-up of a mural at Wat Sri Phradu, Ubon Ratchatani

Imagery concerns the family. There is instruction in the murals for new mothers, pictures of the elderly raising grandchildren and images of couples courting. There are also economic references, with trade a prominent feature. Entertainment and recreation can also be found in the temple murals. There are depictions of *mor lam*



performances, the playing of musical instruments (Figure 5), local cockfighting and children playing with kites. In addition, there are further paintings depicting occupational pursuits, the creation of culinary dishes and clothing styles. Overall though, the most prominent content for the temple murals are images of belief and faith.



Figure 5. A close-up of a mural at Wat Sri Phradu, Ubon Ratchatani

Modern Isan people can learn from the peace and amusement of the societies depicted in Buddhist temple murals. These murals have their own identity, even though they have been influenced by artists from outside the area. They reflect the lifestyle of Isan communities. This lifestyle has been imitated in some way by artists from one generation to the next and is always rooted in the principles of Buddhism, which ensure and encapsulate its value for human society. Specifically, there are eight roles for Buddhist murals in modern society. First, the murals are examples of how lifestyle and society should be, encouraging good deeds and the pursuit of righteousness. Second, they are historical records and accounts specific to the local community that combine the opinions of many individuals. Third, they showcase a specific ethnic identity in each location. Fourth, they are media for explaining the past. Fifth, they are media for educating young people. Sixth, they are pieces of artwork for the aesthetic pleasure of the viewers. Seventh, they display respect and faith in their message and the principles of Buddhism. Eighth, they reveal the progress of art and society. Ninth, they increase the value of Buddhism. Tenth, they reveal people's trust in their religion (Figure 6).



Figure 6. An example of a Buddhist mural revealing the importance of religion

#### 4. Discussion

Murals have been a part of human culture since pre-history, when people painted representations of their beliefs. The original paintings were created with natural colors. Over time, people began to adorn religious structures with murals depicting lifestyle and religion and chemical colors were incorporated. Nowadays, there are more Western influences, newer techniques and newer materials that have enabled more colors, greater variety, shadows and dimensions. It has been a continuous evolution of styles. This is in agreement with the research of Hurst (2009), which investigated the 2500-year-old murals of the Mayan people of Guatemala. Hurst concluded that the creative process, content, style and materials had been adapted in line with technological advancements, social evolution and generational politics. There were clear periods of Mayan murals, such as pre-classic and classic.

The murals of Isan are different to murals from other areas. They are painted onto the outside of the *ubosot* as well as the inside, allowing people who are denied access to the inside of the *ubosot* the opportunity to view and study the artwork. There are a number of different parties involved in the creation of Isan murals, which create a sense of affiliation with the artwork. Sumalee Ekachonniyom (2005) found that Isan images were painted on the exterior of the *sim* because the interior space was limited. This also allowed all people to see the paintings.

The content of Isan murals are rooted in Buddhist principles and teach people to steer clear of evil and perform good deeds. The aims of the murals are to teach and benefit society in order to create harmony and raise the level of the community. They are agreed depictions of appropriate and inappropriate behavior. This corresponds to the findings of Suchat Sukana (2010), which showed that murals were products of belief and faith that aimed to educate people in Buddhist philosophy. They explain the teachings of the Lord Buddha whilst serving a secondary purpose of decorating the temples. Pitak Noiwangklang (2000) also noted that the murals explain the laws of heaven and hell. In addition, the murals reveal political and administrative philosophy and the reverence of important political and social figures. As Tsuchikane (2009) noted, temples are more than places of holiness and sacred thought. They disseminate and educate in a number of other spheres, including politics, society and culture.

#### 5. Conclusion

There are two major groups of Buddhist temple murals in Isan: those depicting ancient culture and customs painted prior to 1957 and contemporary murals painted after 1957. For the most part, murals are found on the walls of the *ubosot* and the instruction halls of the temples. The earlier murals were also painted on the external walls to be accessible for everybody. The objectives of mural paintings were to worship the lord Buddha, decorate the temples, provide education to community members and maintain historical records. The earlier paintings used natural colors but chemical colors became more common after 1957, when paintings were also made on fabric and subsequently attached to the walls. The paintings are often simple depictions of everyday life with holy or important objects and figures drawn at the tops of the walls, the main story in the middle of the walls and the common man or hell at the base of the walls. The disappointing element of mural creation is the common scenario of covering the murals after creation for protection. Also many people do not understand the stories represented in the drawings. The majority of stories in the murals are Buddhist tales, especially after 1957 when local culture was less often incorporated due to artists being influenced by their education away from Isan and western media. The murals continue to play a role in encouraging community discourse and teaching people how to behave appropriately in society.

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