

Retrospectives: Visual Cultures and Identities in Asian Contemporary Arts.

Suppakorn Disatapundhu¹

Patcha Utiswannakul²

Ruengsak Palikupt³

Chakkrit Buakaew⁴

Introduction

The phenomenon of cultural migration or diffusion in the world of visual arts has been recorded since the evolution of art starting in the prehistoric period. However, the evolution has not been widely acknowledged in the past. Art historians claimed that western civilization started between 24,000 and 22,000 years ago. Artifacts of over 100 pieces of the Paleolithic period's Venus figurines have been excavated from many parts of Europe. Most share several attributes in common. All depict female figures with shapes that are almost always obese with tapering points at the top and bottom. The focus is on the exaggerated breasts, abdomen, vulva, hips, and thighs. These contrast with correspondingly scant interest in other features of the body. The head, for instance, is usually small with little detail. Although these Venus sculptures deliberately highlight the similarities of gender and physical female characteristics which invoke issues of fertility, few figures of pregnancy or infant-bearing have been found throughout western, central, and eastern Europe.

The evolution of arts gradually changed from Mesopotamia to Egypt, from Greek to Roman, from Roman to Medieval. The last period of the Medieval movement was the International Gothic style from 1100 to 1400 CE throughout Europe. In the Gothic style, gigantic churches with pointed roofs, windows and towers were built to serve the Christian god and used as landmark destinations for pilgrimages. An elegant and delicate realism, which perfectly suited the decorative needs of the royal courts at that time, was stimulated by the growing cultural rivalry of European royal courts located in Prague, Paris, Spain, and England. The style exerted a strong influence on the Early Renaissance. After the Renaissance came Neo Classicism which echoed the classical Greek and Roman art.

With western societies becoming more independent from royal rule, Romanticism appealed to the stiving of independence for the common man. It idolized the past, the

¹ Professor at the Department of Creative Arts, Faculty of Fine and Applied Arts, Chulalongkorn University.

² Professor at the Department of Creative Arts, Faculty of Fine and Applied Arts, Chulalongkorn University.

³ Associate Professor at the Department of Creative Arts, Faculty of Fine and Applied Arts, Chulalongkorn University.

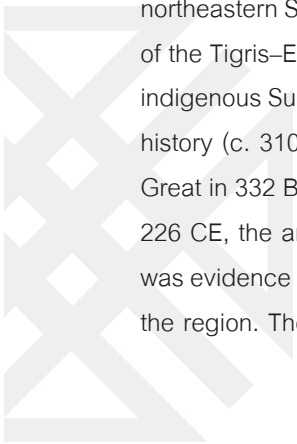
⁴ Associate Professor at the Department of Creative Arts&Graphic Creative, Faculty of Fine and Applied Arts, Burapha University.



supernatural and nature. This brought art into what is considered the era of Modernism of the 19th century. One of the major movements of Modernism was Art Nouveau, a movement that swept through the decorative and fine arts, as well as embracing architecture in Europe. It clearly indicated global cultural interchanges due to colonialism and worldwide trade between Asian and European. Art Nouveau's fresh approach to art generated enthusiasm throughout Europe and spread throughout the world. The movement issued in a wide variety of styles, embracing patterns, flowing lines and stylized florals. Artists drew inspiration from both organic and geometric forms evolving elegant designs that united flowing, natural forms with more angular contours. It is known by various names, such as the Glasgow Style, Jugendstil, Secession. Alternatively, the decorative lithographs of Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, one of the Art Nouveau styles aiming at modernizing art and design, were evidence of an escape from the eclectic historical styles. The later Impressionism, and Post-Impressionist artist employed some of the characteristics in their work; notably in the paintings of Vincent Van Gogh and Paul Gauguin. Then, the style went out of fashion gave way to Art Deco in the 1920s, but it experienced a popular revival in the 1960s. It is now seen as an important predecessor of modernism in the 20th century and later Post Modernism or Contemporary movements which excels in the rapid development of technology and globalization.

Evolutions and visual cultural diffusions

By comparing to the evolution of Asian and European visual culture, the Asian root of visual cultures evolved in almost the same manner and parallels western visual history. Western scholars widely consider the civilizations and visual cultures of ancient Asian as a cradle of civilizations where the evidence of early interchanges and diffusions of cultures, arts, and architectures took place. This is especially true in Mesopotamia, where the manuscripts, artifacts, and objects have been found in the "land of rivers", that are now Iraq, northeastern Syria, southeastern Turkey, and smaller parts of southwestern Iran or the area of the Tigris–Euphrates rivers (Gardner, 1970). Even though this area is in Asia Minor, the indigenous Sumerian and Akkadian dominated Mesopotamia from the beginning of written history (c. 3100 BCE) and fell to Babylon in 539 BCE. Under the reign of Alexander the Great in 332 BCE, this area became part of the Greek and Roman Empire. Finally, around 226 CE, the area was under the control of the Persians (Gardner, 1970); however, there was evidence of similarities and differences in visual cultures of these great empires within the region. The decorative qualities of Assyrian bas-reliefs, Egyptian tomb paintings, the



images found on early Greek ceramics and murals all evidence cultural exchanges and adaptations.

Geographically, the vast continent of Asia extends from West Asia and the Gulf States to the East Asian countries. The southern portion includes South Asia and South-East Asia. In the north, there are the Central Asian Republics, and the northeast covers Siberia and Mongolia. In this large landmass, the great distances are gapped by a multiplicity of races, religions, and cultures. From various records, the roots of Asian cultures and civilizations developed from these two areas: 1) South Asia along the Indus River valley in India and spread southward to Burma, Indonesia, Khmer, Laos, Thailand, and Vietnam; and 2) in the Far East where the massive spring floods of the Yellow River bringing the rich soil to the North China plain proved a superb basis for what has been the largest and most enduring civilization in the history (Lee, 1973).

From the perspectives of many art historians and art critics, Asian civilizations and visual cultures have emerged gradually from farming to courtyards. Thus, scenes of everyday life are often depicted, especially from cave paintings to pottery making which had long been presented and interchanged in the Yellow River region of East Asia (Lee, 1973; Honour and Flaming, 2005). Later, the establishment of the many states and communities gave more political expressions to the creations. The growth of towns and the cities, the trades, the religions, and the most important development of visual languages shared similarities and differences in various occasions and forms.

Diffusions of Asian visual cultures and arts have been developed and have shared similarities and differences progressing along with social development. Much visual evidence and several critics indicate that the roots of Asian arts have been woven from various cultures and religions under circumstances between times and spaces. This concept can be seen through the discovered town ruins, architecture, visual and decorative arts, daily used items such as weapons, bowls, pots, ornaments of bones and shells, potteries, large bronzes, and a few items used in religious ceremonies and belief systems (Lee, 1973; Honour and Flaming, 2005). The development in Asian arts has historically paralleled those in Western arts, in general, for a few centuries. It could be concluded that the arts of Islam, Indian, China, Japan, Korea, and Southeast Asia had a significant influence on one another (Honour and Flaming, 2005).



The Contemporary Arts: Diffusion of Visual Cultures in Thailand and Asia

It is generally understood that the roots of Thai contemporary arts have a strong foundation due to the founding of Silpakorn University in 1943 by Silpa Bhirasri. The European style art program introduced to Thailand included an extensive range of western techniques and concepts. The primary focus was more on seeking to imitate western works to “modernize” local art in Thailand. From the past to present, under the term “Contemporary”, themes of religions, way of life, landscapes, and heroines have been the primary elements of creation that share similarities and differences along with the development of various techniques. These elements have been inspirational for many artists’ creations and aesthetic purposes. This is because Asia is home to various religions of the world such as Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam. With people’s faith in these great religions, these doctrines are still used as guides in living their daily life (Lee, 1973).

Since the early 1960’s, most Thai artists attended Silpakorn university, Poh-Chang academy of Arts, and Collage of fine Arts. These institutions equipped them with the ability to demonstrate new concepts and techniques using Thai subjects; artists presenting “Thainess ” with western percepts and techniques. These factors combined led to the Neo-traditional art and Contemporary art movements in the late 1960’s.

There are many famous contemporary Thai artists, both in Thailand and abroad, but due to the limitations of this article, the author presents a few of the artists who are instrumental in developing contemporary art in Thailand and Asia.

Thai Master Artists, Thawan Duchanee (1939-2014), born in the northern province of Chiang Rai, studied under the late Italian painter Corrado Feroci (Silpa Bhilasri), who is known as the father of modern Thai art at Silpakorn University. Thawan furthered his artistic education in the Netherlands, gaining a deeper understanding of Western artistic traditions at the Royal Academy of Visual Arts in Amsterdam. His paintings interpret Buddhism in a progressive and somewhat unusual light. The works depict his belief and became a case of notoriety that signified a shift in the way Thai art connects with the larger society.

Montien Boonma (1953-2000) is a Thai visual artist who usually based his works on the Buddhist ideal. His belief in Buddhism drew him to the ancient concepts and faith,

through which he found his creative voice. Herbs, incense, and healing practices have played a central role in much of his work since the 1990s when he lost close family members, including his beloved wife to cancer. Many of his works include the metaphors for hope, faith, and healing. They symbolized religious devotion and the possibilities of connection with the spiritual realm. In Buddhist teaching, sacred enclosures are cosmic centers of contemplation and concentration. Montien Boonma's constructions embrace this concept, and viewers are invited to physically enter many of his installations and sculptures. In these tactile and sensuous works, Buddhist spirituality finds contemporary expression. Montien Boonma's works include references to different traditions of faith, and in some cases his works were inspired by his visit to Europe. He also incorporates Christian symbolism alongside Buddhist symbolism and architecture.

Thai contemporary artists Chalearmchai Kositpipat (1955-), and Panya Vijinthanasarn (1956-) clearly demonstrate compositions derived from Buddhist philosophy on 2-dimensional and 3-dimensional surfaces. Their works have been exhibited worldwide, and both are known for their use of Buddhist imagery in their arts. Their early murals include mixing traditional Thai Buddhist temples with contemporary images. These works were controversial as a milestone that firmly established the Neo-traditional movement. A group of artists lead by Chalermchai Kositpipat and Panya Vijinthanasarn from 1984 to 1992, were commissioned to paint murals for Wat Buddhapadipa, a Thai Buddhist temple in London. The murals took many years to complete.

Later, Chalearmchai Kositpipat created a famous tourist destination in Chiang Rai, the Wat Rong Khun Temple that opened in 1997. It is designed as a Non-traditional Contemporary style Wat, and is well-known among foreigners as the White Temple. His traditional contemporary painting style generally uses figures and symbols which are painted as ornamentation in 2-dimensions with the background in perspective. The size of each element and figures in the picture reflects its degree of importance as the result of Western influence in the mid-19th century.

Asian artists not only derived themes from religion but also incorporated themes based on the influences of cultural identities, economics, landscapes, social mores, politics, and a way of life (Perry & Wood, 2004). The subjects of Thai traditional arts usually depict



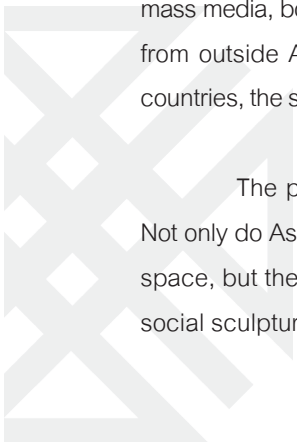


the life of Buddha, heavens, and hells, scenes of daily life, and Thai folklore (Lee, 1973; Honour & Flaming, 2005). However, over the past few decades there has been a developing focus on eight central ideas recurring in Asian art. Those themes are; identity, body, time, memory, place, language, spirituality, and science and technology. During the last decade, the inspirations and creation of arts in Asia are not only directed toward the beauty and aesthetic aspects, but arts and creations have also been used as symbols to voice more cultural, economic, social, genders, migration, political, and security concerns (Poshyannad, 1993, Silipax Art Gallery, 2020).

The creations are not limited to any surface or medium (Perry and Wood, 2004). There are many traditional materials and techniques used in the artistic process of making contemporary Asian art – jade, silk, porcelain, lacquer, ivory, bamboo, paper, canvas, gold, stone, wood, inks, colors, and oil, etc (Lee, 1973). The most important techniques and styles are explored from artist to artist and from the most ancient prehistoric to the contemporary.

Contemporary art also reflects the rapid economic growth and development. While the living standard in some countries is increasing, traditional cultural values are gradually being eroded leading to egoism, the breakdown of family and social relationships. Rapid industrialization and migration of the workforce diminished prospects for livelihood in rural areas caused by changing economic systems and demographic landscape of many cities. This change also forces the eviction of rural people to make room for industries and projects. Many traditional values are being threatened by industries. In the same circumstance, financial and economic policies that favor urban development, ignore the rights of the poor. Unplanned urbanization is turning some cities of Asia into large slums where human dignity is being lost. Moreover, new forms of visual culture are the results of exposure to technology, mass media, books, magazines, music, films, and other forms of entertainment. Also, influences from outside Asia are causing vast movements of peoples for various reasons. In some countries, the situation is having a devastating influence on the moral and physical landscape.

The phenomenon of diffusion in contemporary visual cultures continually grows. Not only do Asian artists explore being both an individual and an artist within a cross-cultural space, but their art also relates to a shifting of values. As Joseph Beuys (1921 –1986), the social sculpture theorist, believed that everybody was an artist of the world. He once said,



“Every sphere of human activity, even peeling a potato, can be a work of art as long as it is a conscious act.” This theory indicates that that every decision one makes should be thought out as an attempt to make or contribute to a work of art, which, in the end, is society. This point of view invites followers to humble themselves by realizing that they are an important part of a whole, not just an individual.

The Relational Aesthetics, by Nicholas Bourriaud (1965-), argues for the revolutionary potential of art that generates opportunities for social exchange and collective elaboration of meanings. Bourriaud defines the approach as a set of artistic practices which take as their theoretical and practical points of departure the whole of human relations and their social context, rather than an independent and private space. The artist can be more accurately viewed as the “catalyst” in relational art, rather than being at the center.

With these ideas, the migration of contemporary visual cultures was transmitted to Asian artists through multiple channels. Between the 1980s and 1990s, the transmission of experimental art came from artists who had returned from studying overseas. This pattern of transmission has historical precedents in many countries such as China, Indonesia, Japan, Korea, Thailand, and Vietnam. In the early 20th century, the return of artists from abroad prompted a wide-ranging artistic reformation linked to discussions of modernity and contemporary issues. But perhaps the single most important influence was the international and regional biennial and triennial exhibitions. These events fostered a new sense of regional, contemporary art identities by uniting the work of contemporary artists from different countries into one place. These spaces were created so artists from various countries could meet, see each other’s art, discuss and share issues and concerns (Shioda,1997). Since the 1990s, Asian contemporary art has grown exponentially due to several factors; a flourishing of regional biennials and triennials which draw attention worldwide to Asian cities as art centers, the building of new contemporary art museums, and the international recognition and success of Asian artists (Clark,1998, Shioda,1997).

The following artists are a few examples of contemporary fusion and the international evolution of Asian art.

Chinese-born Cai Guo-Qiang (1957-), from Fujian Province, was trained in stage design at the Shanghai Theater Academy. His work crosses multiple mediums within art;



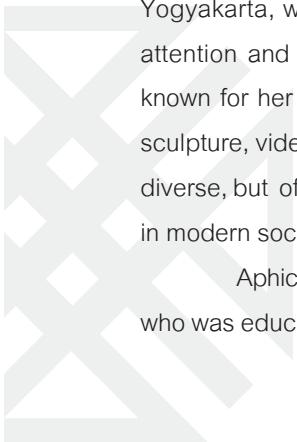
drawing, installations, video, and performance art. While living in Japan from 1986 to 1995, he explored the properties of gunpowder in his drawings. This inquiry eventually led to his experimentation with explosives on a massive scale and to the development of his signature explosion events. Drawing upon Eastern philosophy and contemporary social issues as a conceptual basis, these projects and events aim to establish an exchange between viewers and the larger universe around them utilizing a site-specific approach to culture and history. He currently lives and works in New York.

Tokyo-born Mariko Mori (1967-) studied fashion in Tokyo in the late 1980s where she had her first exhibitions, then she moved to London to study in 1989. After her graduation in 1992, she moved to New York City. Mori's early works, such as her photograph *Play with Me*, uses her own body as the subject. She costumes herself as a sexualized and technological alien woman in everyday scenes. The juxtaposition of Eastern mythology with Western culture is a common theme in Mori's works. This theme can be found often through layering photography and digital imaging as exemplified in her 1995 installation *Birth of a Star*. Later works, such as *Nirvana*, present her as a goddess transcending her early roles via technology and image, and abandoning realistic urban scenes for more alien landscapes.

The Thai artist, Rirkrit Tiravanija (b. Argentina, 1961-), offered a new methodology for critiquing contemporary artworks on the basis of the "inter-human relations which they represent. This is artworks involve himself preparing and serving traditional Thai food *Pad Thai* in which the ingredients are not authentically Thai for his audience to convivially consume at gallery openings.

Indonesian female artist, Arahmaiani Feisal (1961-) a Bandung native based in Yogyakarta, was educated in Europe. Through her work, she has brought international attention and acclaim to her native contemporary art concepts. Although Feisal is best known for her performances, she also employs many types of media; painting, drawing, sculpture, video, poetry, dance, and installation works. The thematic material of her work is diverse, but often focuses on the oppression of women's bodies by men, the role of religion in modern society, Western commercial imperialism, and global industrialization.

Aphichatpong Wirasetthakun (1970-) is a Thai contemporary filmmaker, producer, who was educated in Chicago, USA. His feature films *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His*



Past Lives, won the prestigious Film Festival in 2010. Another film Memoria was the joint winner of the Jury Prize, the third-ranked prize in the best film category at the Cannes Film Festival in 2021. Their themes reflect include dreams, nature, sexuality, and Western perceptions of Thailand and Asia. Moreover, his films display a preference for unconventional narrative structures and include working with non-actors.

Conclusion

With the sudden rise and international popularity of Asian contemporary art, many questions have been raised by art critics. How does one currently define Asian contemporary arts? Are there any differences in Contemporary Asian art and those produced in other parts of the world, such as New York or London? If there is a difference, how does it differ? Are there any distinctions in the works of Asian artists living in the West to those living in Asia? These are important questions yet the answers should not be definitive.

Masters, Thawan Duchanee , Montien Boonma, Chalermchai Kositpipat, Panya Vijinthanasarn, Cai Guo-Qiang, Mariko Mori, Arahmaiani Feisal, Rirkrit Tiravanija, Aphichatphong Wirasethakun, are seen as the pioneers of Asian Contemporary art. Their works are in response to the growing influence of globalization and modernization. Each artist seeks a middle way between global art trends, traditional or local concepts and values. They clearly establish new visual dialogues of communication and presentation that reflect self-expression, the current socio-cultural phenomenon, along with surrealist and realist ideas. Although their methods, techniques, and contents may vary from artist to artist, the elements of cultural identity and religious philosophy still exist.

The ideas of various contemporary concerns are transmitted through many presentations. No matter how the globalization of art is expanded, artists will continue working on their indigenous inspirations through various materials and techniques. From using traditional, simple tools to using new media such as installations, digital photography, prints, video art, and performance art, artists document significant social phenomenon (Murphie & Potts, 2003, Clark 1998).

It is now a trend that artists, who work in experimental media and contemporary issues, tend to address cultural diffusion through their work. They exhibit more in the international art world. While some artists, who specialized in more internal issues, and who use traditional



established media, choose to remain in the local and national arenas. No matter the artistic choices, all artists will reflect some cultural diffusion. The essence of these creations will connect with contemporary audiences. The phenomenon of cultural migration or diffusion in the world of visual arts can easily be seen in the works by contemporary Asian artists.

References

- Clark, J. (1998). *Modern Asian Art*. Sydney: Craftsman House.
- Gardner, L. (1970). *Art Through the Ages*. Harcourt, Brace and Jovanovich, Inc. NY.
- Honour, H. & Fleming, J. (2005). *A world history of Arts*. Laurence King Publishing, UK.
- Lee, H. (1973). *The history of far eastern art*. Prentice Hall. Englewood. CA.
- Murphie, A. & Potts, J. (2003). *Culture and Technology*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Perry, G. & Wood, P. (2004). *Themes in Contemporary Arts*, Yale University Press. New Haven.
- Poshyannad, A. (1993). *Thai MODERNism and (Post?) Modernism, 1970s and 1980s*, In *Tradition and Change: Contemporary Art of Asia and the Pacific*, edited by C. Turner, St. Lucia, Queensland: University of Queensland Press.
- Silipax Art Gallery (2020), *Evolution of Thai art throughout ages*. Retrieved from <https://silapix.com/Evolution-of-Thai-art-throughout-ages-c34395771> on 13th May 2022
- Shioda, J. (1997). *Glimpses Into the Future of Southeast Asian Art: A Vision of What Art Should Be*, In *Art in Southeast Asia 1997: Glimpses Into the Future*, Tokyo: Museum of Contemporary Art Tokyo and the Japan Foundation.



Appendix

Movement of Art from 1950s-2000s

1950s	1960s	1970s	1980s	1990s	2000s
Abstract	Abstract	Arte Povera	NAMES Project	Art intervention	Altermodern
Expressionism	expressionism	Ascii Art	AIDS Memorial Quilt	Body art	Classical
American Figurative	Abstract Imagists	Bad Painting	Appropriation art	Bio art	realism
Expressionism	American	Body art	Culture jamming	Cyberarts	Cynical
American scene	Figurative	Artist's book	Demoscene	Cynical Realism	realism
painting	Expressionism	COUM	Electronic art	Digital Art	The Kitsch
Antipodeans	Art & Language	Transmissions	Environmental art	Hyperrealism	Movement
Bay Area Figurative	Bay Area	Environmental art	Figuration Libre	Information art	Pseudorealism
Movement	Figurative	Feminist art	Fractal art	Internet art	Remodernism
COBRA (avant-garde movement)	Movement	Froissage	Graffiti Art	Massurrealism	Renewable
Color Field	BMPT	Holography	Live art	Maximalism	energy
Generación de la	Chicago Imagists	Installation art	Neue Slowenische	New Leipzig	sculpture
Ruptura	Chicano art	Land Art	Kunst	School	Street art
Gutai group	movement	Lowbrow (art movement)	Postmodern art	New media art	Stuckism
Lenticular prints	Color field	Mail art	Neo-conceptual art	New European	Superflat
Les Plasticiens	Computer art	Papunya Tula	Neo-expressionism	painting	Superstroke
Lyrical Abstraction	Conceptual art	Photorealism	Neo-pop	Relational art	Urban art
(Abstract lyrique)	Fluxus	Postminimalism	Sound art	Software art	Videogame art
Modern traditional	Happenings	Process Art	Transavantgarde	Toyism	VJ art
Balinese painting	Hard-edge	Robotic art	Transgressive art	Tactical media	Virtual art
New York Figurative	painting	Robotic art	Transhumanist Art	Taring Padi	
Expressionism	Lenticular prints	Saint Soleil	Vancouver School	Western and	
New York School	Kinetic art	School	Video installation	Central desert	
Serial art	Light and Space	Video art	Institutional Critique	art	
Situationist	Lyrical	Funk art	Western and	Young British	
International	Abstraction	Pattern and	Central desert art	artists	
Soviet Nonconformist Art	(American version)	Decoration			
Red Shirt School of	Minimalism	Warli painting			
Photography	Mono-ha	revival			
Tachisme	Neo-Dada	Wild style			
Vienna School of	New York School				
Fantastic Realism	Nouveau				
Washington- Color	Réalisme				
School	Op Art				
	Performance art				
	Plop Art				
	Pop Art				
	Postminimalism				
	Post-painterly				
	Abstraction				
	Psychedelic art				
	Soft sculpture				
	Systems art				
	Zero				

