

The Ancient Colors of Mural Painting in the Bhuddhaisawan Chapel –

Re-Imaging of Faith

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Abstract

The study of the ancient colors at the Bhuddhaisawan Chapel, one of the most complete and oldest of the Rattanakosin Period, focuses on the wisdom that portrays Buddhism with faith through mural painting. This paper aims to systematically analyze the group of ancient colors found in the mural of the Chapel and depict the value of the work created by the Thais. The study identifies basic colors: red, green, blue and black as the primary group. The other colors found are white, orange and yellow with gold as the specific color used particularly on the body of the Lord Buddha and the structures of the palace. The colors used here are unique and differ from those seen in the Ayuddhaya period or those found today. The base is often featured in dark colors, accentuated by bright colors or hues and high intensity colors such as red and gold from the gold leaves. The coloration has a pattern of high intensity colors over low intensity base colors. This invokes faith, mystique feelings, corresponding with magical elements in the Buddhist stories. In addition, colors are also used as symbols in painting.

Keywords: Ancient Colour, Mural Painting, Bhuddhaisawan Chapel, Early Ratanakosin Art Period

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Introduction

In the past, Buddhist teaching was not done in the form of letters or books as most Thai people in those days were illiterate. To learn Buddhism, literature, traditions or morality was not possible through reading but mural painting, sermons or rote learning. These were important channels to promote Buddhism.

Thai mural painting played a significant role in teaching Buddhism as well as promoting morality in Thai society in the past. These mural paintings not only depict contents but also aesthetic and artistic expressions that can invoke the faith. It is one way of teaching Buddhism.

The mural painting also is a vital part of the Buddhist structures built for the religion and created by the artists' faith. The work depicts valuable contents and artistic expression. In this study, I am interested in examining the colors seen in the mural painting at the Bhuddhaisawan Chapel, one of the most complete and oldest mural paintings of the Early Ratanakosin Period which exemplifies the authentic Thai mural painting before the Thai art was influenced by the western culture during King Rama IV when the country adopted some of the westernized change in society and economics as a means to modernize and counter colonization.



Figure 1. The lower section of the murals depict scenes from the life story of the Lord Buddha based on Buddhist literature, *Phathom Somphothikhatha*. The first scene, whole bay depicts the marriage scene of Prince Siddhadana and Princess Sirimahamaya.

This study is aimed at studying the values of the past Thai mural painting with an emphasis on the use of colors in the painting during the Early Ratanakosin Period (1782 A.D.). The colors reflect the country's uniqueness before being influenced by western influence. It is a study of reviving Thai wisdom and identity.

History of the Bhuddhaisawan Chapel

The Bhuddhaisawan Chapel was situated within the compound of the former Palace to the Front or Wong Nar, which is now the National Museum in Bangkok. It was built in 1975 during the reign of King Rama I of Chakri dynasty by Somdet Phra Bowonrachachao Maha Surasinghanath, the King's younger brother who was the heir to the throne.

Originally, the Chapel was used for royal functions of the Palace to the Front. After he went back from defending the kingdom, he brought the Phra Buddha Sihing image from Chiang Mai, the province in northern Thailand. This Buddha image once belonged to Thailand's former capital of Ayuthaya. He enshrined this image in the Chapel and commissioned mural painting depicting scenes from the life story of the Lord Buddha and Buddhist history based on Buddhist literature, Phathom Somphothikhatha. The other mural painting was the depiction of the gathering of the angels (the gathering of the angels and Hindu gods or the Deva Congress).

The architecture of the Bhuddhaisawan Chapel is featured in a rectangular shape built in the architectural style of the early Ratanakosin period with 3 doors: the front, the back with the middle one the biggest. The interior is a hall of 32.70 x 10.10 meters. Towards the back of the Chapel lies the base of the Phra Buddha Sihing image which serves as the main Buddha image of this Chapel. The walls are decorated with mural paintings from top to bottom depicting scenes of the life stories of the Lord Buddha, the Gathering of the Angels.



Figure 2. The architecture of the Bhuddhaisawan Chapel

There are two main sections of the Bhuddhaisawan Chapel

1. The life stories of the Lord Buddha: The life stories are depicted on the space between the door and the windows. Each painting might have several scenes as seen

in the storytelling of the Thai painting. The stories start from the wall between the main door and the small door behind the Buddha image, marked as painting number 1. The scene depicts the wedding reception of the parents of the Lord Buddha which continues clock-wise until it stops at the other side of the main door in the back which ends with painting number 28, portraying the scenes of the cremation of the Lord Buddha and the collection of his relics.

2. The Gathering of the Angels: The painting lies above the windows and doors of four sides, stretching to the ceiling. The Gathering of the Angels takes place in different levels of heaven according to the Buddhist belief in the universe. There are four level of heavens with angels placing their two hands together around their chests, paying homage to the presiding Buddha image, they had come to listen to the teaching of the Lord Buddha, who is symbolized by the main image in the chapel. Each level of heaven is separated by Lai Nakadan Pachamyum Kampu (the Thai Line). The top level is marked with a zigzag line with pictures of hermits, Vidhyadharas, pilgrims holding flying lotuses to pay respect to the Lord Buddha. The scene also carry symbolism. The scene in this painting is a replica of the universe inside the Chapel, signifying the power of the Lord Buddha that extends across the universe.



Figure 3. The Interior of the Bhuddhaisawan Chapel. The walls are entirely covered with murals.



Figure 4. There are two main sections of the Bhuddhaisawan Chapel

The Ancient Colors of Mural Painting in the Bhuddhaisawan Chapel

In the study of the ancient colors found in the mural painting in the Bhuddhaisawan Chapel, it is found that the style present is that from the late Ayutthaya Period, emphasizing on the composition of the painting and stories of the Buddhist belief. There is development of colors, making it unique to the mural painting of

the Early Ratanakosin Period. The technique used is the Tempera Color which came from natural materials. Unlike today's synthetic paint, variation of colors was limited. However, the artists were able to make the best use out of the limited colors to create their works. The use of color of this mural painting differs from that of the late Ayuthaya Period when warm white was applied as base, followed by darker shades in limited color scheme. On a contrary, the mural of the Bhuddhaisawan Chapel is found in dark base with bright colors of differing intensity and value of colors, making the work intense, powerful, creating mysterious ambience that leads to faith.

In addition, it is found that the mural titled Gathering of the Angels symbolizes the replica of heaven on earth. When people come to pay respect to the Buddha image, they can feel as if visiting heaven, a way to draw people to Buddhism. The composition of the Gathering of the Gods portrays the position of the Phra Buddha Sihing image that corresponds to the idea of creating heaven with the Phra Buddha Sihing as the center of the universe, surrounded by angels flying from all levels of heaven to pay respect to the Lord Buddha and listen to his teaching. Based on the data collected by using my color kit and pantone as the standard in comparing and recording colors, it is discovered that the main colors found in the mural of the Bhuddhaisawan Chapel are primarily from these groups of colors: red, green, blue and gold. For red, it is featured in bright red with red hue, brightening and accentuating the picture, making it powerful. This color is normally found in painting objects of attention. It also serves as the backdrop or to attract attention of the objects or to lead to the point of attention. In addition, red is also used as the backdrop of the Gathering of the Gods in different levels of heavens. Green and blue groups are found as the backdrop or as part of the composition such as the trees, the river or the architecture to accentuate the group of red and tint colors on the top layers. Gold is the most frequently found Thai murals. It can be guided from gold leaves which are made from real gold. This color is categorized in the group of yellow. However, based on the collected data, it is rare to find yellow in the mural painting within the Bhuddhaisawan Chapel. Therefore, gold is the special color in regards to the unique technique by guiding gold leaves on the mural instead of painting the colors on the surface. The gold color is used on key details of the mural such as the body of the Lord Buddha, which distinguishes from other figures, structures, palaces and other elements that represent the status of the noble, the royal family members or the king. White is normally used in painting the body of people. The light shade of white is used to portray the people of high status in society while darker tones of white are used to depict people of lower classes. The different shades of this group of color are used in some structures. Black is found in the background of the mural and also used to highlight or frame objects. It is also used as the backdrop of the universe or heaven in the dark or at night time and sometimes used along with red to illustrate the different levels of the heaven. Orange is found the least in this mural while purple is never used in the painting of this place.

In addition, the use of the colors in the murals of the Bhuddhaisawan Chapel also convey symbolic meaning. This can be seen from the use of gold in signifying the Lord Buddha, the structures for the king or noblemen. If the structures

are for commoners, they are featured in white or brown as found in wood. Colors are used to classify social status. The colors used to depict figures and characters in the scenes also correspond to those found in the Ramayana, the Thai literature. The characters of this epic consist of angels and demons with different skin colors, for example, Ravana (Thotsakan), the demon King of Lanka, is painted in green as depicted in the literature. The colors used in the murals also match those used in accordance with Buddhism and Brahman beliefs. The use of colors also complies with the tradition Thai beliefs as seen in the use of red that signifies auspicious occasions and the use of black to depict the night time that corresponds to nature.

Conclusion

Although the murals of the Buddhaisawan Chapel received strong influence from the late Ayuthaya Period, the work was developed to adopt its unique styles and reflects the art of the early Rattanakosin Period. It is the last period of the pure Thai art before the advent of western art that deviated the true values of Thai painting. The western culture changed the role and function of Thai art that used to serve Buddhism, to preach, to edify, to education culture and customs of the country. This study is a way to preserve other facets of the ancient art of Thai murals that is fading from modern day recognition. It is a way to revive the past wisdom in Thai art for today's generation to study and apply for their future works. This study is aimed at studying the values of the past Thai mural painting with an emphasis on the use of colors in the painting, there is development of colors, making it unique to the Thai mural painting. It is a study of reviving Thai wisdom and identity.

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