

Reading mural

Wednesday, 13 February 2008

Last Updated Friday, 29 February 2008

IF YOU PLAN TO DO THE ROUNDS OF THE TEMPLES IN THAILAND, look out for the murals. Ostensibly, these murals depict religious scenes from the Buddha's life, the Bodhisattvas' lives or the Jaraka tales. But a closer look reveals that there is more than just that.

Under the main theme is a strong sub text showing scenes from daily life and also scenes that are undoubtedly early attempts at humour! Called 'dregs' and normally found at the bottom of the mural, it portrays ordinary people and their lives.

Unfortunately, not many of them are well-preserved as these are the parts most likely to be damaged by dampness, flooding, vandalism or even sometimes, well-meaning cleaners.

For starters, the top most section of a mural depicts the gods, the middle section royalty and the bottom the common people - a rather pithy depiction of their status in real life. The daily life scenes provide a relief to the austerity of the top two sections which depict life as it should be, given all the politically correct ideologies of the time. 'They were meant to entertain rather than instruct,' argue Napat Sirisambhand and Alec Gordon who started a research project to reconstruct life in ancient Siam through the temple murals. This was way back in 1986 at the Social Research Institute in Chulalongkorn University. The "researchers quote no less an authority than King Rama V who suggested that painters should 'focus on how to make it beautiful rather than convey the principles of Dharma.'

In the 1980s, a debate was raging among academicians in Thailand. Did Thai women work or not? One set of academics claimed that women did all the agricultural activities, while another claimed that they did none at all. Frustrated by these conflicting statements about the role of women in ancient Siam, Napat and Alec set out to study the only existing documents about life in ancient Siam - the temple murals. Since no written evidence exists before the 19th century, the temple murals offered the only continuous such record to researchers in the late 20th century. Sadly, today even these records are slowly being obliterated as enthusiastic painters 'repair' the ancient paintings with bright yellow, green, pink and blue oil paints. Some murals were copied into koi manuscript paintings, such as those made during the reign of King Prasar Thong in 1629-1656 AD and preserved in temples and archives.

Researchers found a total of 31 tasks in the murals. The most surprising of these were the women mahouts or elephant drivers, which is exclusively men's task today. There are several panels of women mahouts in the 17th century (Wat Ko Kaeo, Petchaburi) and one even in the 1890s in Wat Phumin in Naan Province.

The Sujata jaraka shows a woman potter, another un-common activity for women in Thailand. Women palanquin carriers, women musicians and dancers and women vendors are other depictions of women. There are some panels showing men involved in child care, proving that loving fathers are not necessarily a 21st century concept! In a depiction of Buddha's last feast at Wat Rakhang, a woman is managing other women in the food preparation, while a man is managing the construction of a sala. The only time men are shown cooking is when they are travelling in carts, probably itinerant traders. This mural dating back to 1670 can be seen at Suan Pakkad palace. Wat Wang in Phattalung also shows men cooking.

Sex and eroticism are also found in some murals. While courtship and flirting are seen in several, Wat Kongkharam in Rarburi is particularly rich in paintings with humorous sexual innuendoes.

Wat Chong Nongsi in Bangkok has a mural depicting the Vidhura Pandita Jataka which shows the Pandit Vidhura bidding farewell to his family before being taken away by an ogre (who is dismounting from a horse). The family members are seen in distress. Dating back to 1670 AD, this painting also has some rather interesting scenes in the sub text: a woman stepping out of a window in distress, her disordered clothes revealing her breasts, At the lower corner of the same scene is a couple - a man and a woman - pounding rice together, probably a preliminary courting scene.