

Shifting Phases of the Art Scenes in Malaysia and Thailand: Comparing Colonized and Non-colonized countries

Noriko Ishimatsu

Introduction

Nowadays, contemporary Asian art is often showcased in international art fairs and exhibitions like biennales or triennales throughout the world. Such art fairs and exhibitions are also held in Asian countries like Singapore, China, Korea and Japan, where they show cutting edge artworks and new art trends. Along with the rise of multiculturalism, this tendency has started to be seen since the 1990s and contemporary Asian art has dramatically increased its visibility in global art scenes.

Until two or three decades ago, however, Asian modern and contemporary art was not given much attention and received very little interest in the international art world. Indeed, modern and contemporary Asian art existing before the 1980s is hardly shown or discussed outside Asia. It could be suggested that there is an imbalance of understanding between Western art and Asian art. Virginia Spate observed:

When audiences are confronted with recent art from Asia, the chasm of knowledge is such that they often experience it in terms of nationalistic stereotypes coloured by the old assumptions that such art is inevitably derivative, merely decorative, or a destructive debasement of “traditional” art...¹

Actually, the West-centric value including the notion of art was introduced in Asian countries through the western modernization and colonialism from the late 19th century to the 20th century. Because of this historical background, sometimes art from Asia is considered as “derivative”, “backward” or “exotic”. In a way, however, such perspectives that are based on the West-centric art value could lead to a biased viewpoint toward Asian art. In order to understand contemporary and modern Asian art, it is necessary to make a “re-examination of Eurocentricism, as well as

conspicuous effort to fairly examine and evaluate the culture and art of the non-Western world, without prejudice or preconceptions”.² While accepting the Western art value, artists from Asia have been producing their own artworks that reflect their society, politics, history and daily lives.

In this paper, I would like to explore the development of art in Malaysia and Thailand by looking at the shifting phases of art scenes from the 1960s to the 1990s. Moreover, by comparing the two countries, I also examined the difference in processes in developing visual art between the colonized and non-colonized countries in order to see how colonialism has or has not influenced the art scenes. To do so, I paid attention to art institutions and systems that played an important role in the development of art in each country.

Basically, I conducted the research by collecting publications, articles, documents and images, as well as by interviewing artists and researchers. The understandings gained through the research help re-examine and reconsider the West-centric art values pertinent to fairly evaluating art values in Asian countries.

Malaysia Toward the Establishment of the National Art Gallery (NAG)

In the 1950s, Malaysian art scene became activated with a new public body called the Malayan Arts Council and several art groups: the Wednesday Art Group (1952), the Selangor Art Society (1954), and the *Angkatan Pelukis Semenanjung* (Peninsula Art Group) (1956). It could be considered that some of these movements were led by support and initiative of the British colonial administration. The Arts Council was formed on April 15, 1952 as the first public body that dealt with fine arts in Malaya and as the main body responsible for addressing the need for a National Art Gallery and National Art Collection.³ Since the Arts Council

of Great Britain was established to promote arts just after the Second World War, it could suggest that the system of the Arts Council was introduced in the Federation of Malaya following the model developed in Britain. Moreover, an Englishman named Peter Harris, who came to Malaya in 1951 was appointed to be the first superintendent of Arts for the Federation of Malaya and the first education officer to engage seriously in arts education in the Federation at that time.⁴ He also conducted evening drawing classes known as the Wednesday Art Group, which produced several acclaimed Malaysian artists.⁵ Particularly, the Federation Arts Council nurtured the idea of establishing a National Art Gallery, which was realized as Malaysia headed toward its independence.⁶

In 1958, the National Art Gallery (now the National Visual Arts Gallery) was established in a government building called the Dewan Tunku Abdul Rahman (now Malaysia Tourism Center) in Kuala Lumpur.⁷ It was the year after the Federation of Malaya gained independence from Britain.⁸ This early establishment of the NAG after independence could suggest that the NAG was expected to play an important role in the newly-independent nation. In the foreword of the first National Loan Exhibition catalogue in 1958, the necessity for and responsibilities of the NAG are mentioned:

The foundation of Independence have been well laid, and it is the responsibility of the present generation of Malaysians to build on them a nation which will gain some of its inspiration from a fine collection of works of art, worthily housed and accessible to all.⁹

Due to British colonial rule, the systems of the museum and arts council were introduced to and adopted by the Federation government in the very early stage of independence. The NAG was expected to form representative art of Malaysia in recognition of the new nation by collecting, exhibiting and promoting artworks in the country. In order to fulfill this responsibility, the NAG, since its opening, organized many exhibitions and competitions showcasing local art, such as Salon Malaysia, the National Art Exhibition, the

Annual Invitation Show, Young Contemporaries and retrospective solo exhibition of local artists. By showing local art through these exhibitions regularly and repeatedly, the NAG contributed to forming Malaysian art as well as introduced it abroad in exhibitions, in cooperation with overseas museums. As there were quite a few art venues in the 1960s and the 1970s, it is clear that the NAG has played an important role in promoting understanding and the development of Malaysian art locally and internationally.

New Tendency in the 1960s and the 1970s

The 1960s marked the progress of art education in Malaysia. In 1965, the Institute of Technology MARA (now Universiti Teknologi of MARA, UiTM), an institution to provide advanced education for Malays, was set up and a school of fine and applied arts ran the first art-school type of courses in painting, graphic design, textile design, fine metal and industrial arts.¹⁰ The Malaysian Institute of Art, a private art college, was established in 1967 by the Chinese artist, Chung Chen Sun, and the Universiti Sains Malaysia became the first local university to offer a Fine Art degree course in 1972.¹¹ This means that those who wanted to take higher education in art before the 1960s had little opportunity to study art.¹² Yeoh Jin Leng mentions the state of the art situation and education before the Second World War:

The arts had little or no role to play in the educational system up to the Second World War. Education then reflected the economic trend of the period. Colonial policy concerning matters of culture was one of non-interference and cultural matters came under the prerogative of the Sultanates.¹³

Because of the British colonial policy, art education and appreciation were not officially introduced in Malaya. In terms of training teachers, however, two Malayan Teachers Training Colleges were established in England to meet the immediate need from the 1950s to the 1960s.¹⁴ Experiences in the college seem to have stimulated some students such as Ismail Zain, Yeoh Jin Leng, Anthony Lau and Redza Piyadasa to pursue further

study of art in the UK. Moreover, some of the local artists received governmental scholarships to study in the UK. This could suggest that the colonial relationship with the British initially brought opportunities for local artists to gain higher education in art and deepen their knowledge. And later, the US and other European countries also became destinations for art studies. Those who had studied abroad returned to Malaysia and became lecturers in art courses or worked in positions responsible for developing the art scene, the museum, or art education. They also started to organize group shows by themselves and showed new tendencies in the Malaysian art scene.

In 1967, the *Grup* exhibition was held by seven artists; Ahmad Jamal, Abdul Latiff, Anthony Lau, Cheong Laitong, Ibrahim Hussein, Jolly Koh and Yeoh Jin Leng.¹⁵ In the exhibition, they introduced Abstract Expressionistic and Expressionistic art. Then, The New Scene exhibition in 1969 and *Experiment' 70* exhibition were held, where participating artists such as Redza Piyadasa, Tan Teong Kooi, Tang Tuck Kang, Choong Kam Kow and Sulaiman Esa showed their works employing hard-edge, minimalism, constructive art.¹⁶ Since these forms and styles, abstract expressionism, hard-edge, minimalism, and constructive art, had been prevailing in the West at that time, the artists in these exhibitions adopted the new forms and styles and brought them back to the local art scene.

In 1972, Redza Piyadasa and Sulaiman Esa organized the two-man exhibition, *Dokumentasi' 72* where they abandoned illusionistic devices and became involved with actual space, actual time and actual light.¹⁷ As an extension of *Dokumentasi*, they also held the two-man exhibition titled *Toward a Mystical Reality* in 1974. Inspired by Taoism and Zen, Sulaiman Esa and Redza Piyadasa simply situated objects that can be found in daily life. Through this exhibition, they criticized previous exhibitions such as *Grup* and *New Scene* in which artists showed the works employing Western art forms and styles, although they had also joined one of those exhibitions. According to Redza Piyadasa and Sulaiman Esa:

The modern Asian artists have by and large opted for a scientific and rationalistic attitude and ignored the mystical religious considerations which helped produce the great artistic traditions of Asia in the past. Clearly, the dilemma of modern Asian art to a very large extent has been the inability of Asian artists to identify themselves with their own cultural and philosophical traditions and values.¹⁸

They rejected the art forms and styles developed in the West and employed the Eastern philosophy like Taoism and Zen. However, in terms of anti-formalism and the use of daily objects for conceptualizing the artist's idea, their works in the exhibition seemed to have some similarities with conceptual art or Arte Povera that took place in the West from the mid 1960s to the 1970s. Rather, this exhibition might imply dual interpretations of Eastern and Western ideas.

Apart from those exhibitions, the informal artistic community called Anak Alam was formed for young artists, poets and thinkers in 1974. It was led by the artist and poet, Latiff Mohidin with Mustapa Ibrahim, Zulkifli Dahalan and others. In their 1974 manifesto, they called for a respectful and harmonious multicultural co-existence and celebrated nature and the artist's imagination as states of purity and inner truth.¹⁹

Lee Kian Seng and Nirmala Shanmughalingan are also important artists who brought new styles in the 1970s. Nirmala Shanmughalingan produced research-based works employing documentary photographs and newspaper articles and dealt with social issues like environmental problems or slum people in Malaysia. And Lee Kiang Seng is one of the pioneering artists who produced installation to Malaysia. Since the term "installation" was not yet common, it was called "mixed media" at that time.

Exploring Cultural Identity

Due to the racial riot on 13 May 1969 that caused great damage and left many victims, political and

cultural anxieties rose in Malaysian society. After the riots, the New Economic Policy was introduced and set Malay's racial-preference policy called *Bumiputra* (Son of the Soil). Moreover the National Cultural Congress convened at the University of Malaya in 1971 in order to discuss the grounds for the national culture. Consequently, three principles of the National Cultural Policies were set as follows:

- 1) The National Culture must be based on the indigenous culture of this region.
- 2) Suitable elements from the other cultures can be accepted as part of the National Culture.
- 3) Islam is an important component in molding the National Culture.

The need to set up this policy seems to indicate that there are no established or unified traditions and cultures in Malaysia. Since Malaysia is a multiethnic country consisting mainly of Malay, Chinese and Indian people, each ethnicity has its own tradition and culture. Actually, British colonialism comes into the background of this situation. During the British colonial rule, the British pursued a "divide and rule" policy whereby the different ethnic groups were systematically separated by a divisive network of vernacular language schools, making cultural interaction more difficult.²⁰ That is why there is no established tradition and culture for a unified nation in Malaysia. The government therefore attempted to form the national culture through its Cultural policies.

After the Congress, it became important and significant for artists to search for a cultural identity. The artists directed their attention toward their own culture and tradition. Redza Piyadasa mentions that

On another level, the self-conscious need to rediscover Malay and Islamic roots might be viewed as a belated research against the impact of Westernization and colonization. The need for many creative Malay intellectuals to rediscover their cultural

values, forms and aesthetic principles was very real. In the visual arts, Malay artists began to incorporate influences derived from traditional architecture, woven and printed textiles, silverware and jewelry, folk art and Malay myths and legends.²¹

In fact, through the *Toward a Mystical Reality* exhibition in 1974, Piyadasa and Suliman criticized the Western-centric notion of visual art. The exhibition was their reaction or response to the Congress. After this exhibition, Sulaiman Esa started to create works based on Islamic art and Piyadasa produced portraits of Malaysian people. Like them, many artists shifted their styles or subjects of work after the National Cultural Congress. It is clear that the Congress influenced some artists to search for their own styles.

Experimental Art and the Artist Initiative in the 1980s and the 1990s

In the late 1980s and the 1990s, experimental art employing media or performance and artist initiative groups became visible. This could be because equipment like video cameras or editing machines became available from the late 1980s (although they were still very expensive at that time) and young artists exposed to international art tendencies had increased. In the earlier art scene, most of the artists mounted a group show as a single event, but the younger artists became collective working together continuously and showing their works by themselves. I would like to introduce some of the examples.

In 1988, Ismail Zain's solo exhibition called *Digital Collage* showed artworks of Macintosh-based digital prints, which heralded new media art in Malaysia. This exhibition inspired younger artists like Husnul Jamal Saidon who now leads the local new media scene by making and researching new media art, as well as curating exhibitions like the *1st Electronic Art Show* at the National Art Gallery in 1997.

In the late 1980s, Tan Chin Kuan and Zulkiffi Yusoff were awarded for their theatrical-stage installation art in the Young Contemporaries

Exhibition. This marked a new wave of young generation artists. The activities of young artists became outstanding from around that time onward.

By collaborating with visual artists, Five Arts Center established around the mid 1980s showed experimental art mixed with dance, performance and artworks. Hong Hoy Cheong and Liew Kung Yu showed video installations combined with performance, which were presented by Five Arts Center around the early 1990s. Five Arts Center also presented “Skin Trilogy” and “Warbox, Lalang, Killing Tools” which showed installations, sculptures and paintings along with performance in the National Art Gallery. These cross-disciplinary collaborations created a distinctive and unique style.

In the 1990s, artists’ groups such as *MATAHATI* (eye of the heart) and *Rumah Air Panas* (house of hot spring) appeared and organized exhibitions and projects by themselves. *MATAHATI* consists of five artists – Bayu Utomo Radjikin, Ahmad Shukri Mohamed, Ahmad Fuad Osman, Hamir Soib @ Mohamed, and Masnoor Ramli Mahmud who were students of University Technology MARA, which was founded in 1989. And *Rumah Air Panas* formed by several artists like Chuah Chong Yong and Phuan Thai Meng was initially an independent artist-run space with studios and venues for exhibitions, talks, music concerts and projects. Now it is known as the *Rumah Air Panas Art Society* without the space and keeps activities as a loose and organic artist group. Since 2000, artists’ groups have increased and they work as a collective, as well as independent artists by supporting each other.

Thailand

Silpa Bhirasri & Silpakorn University

The School of Fine Arts (*Rongrien Praneetsilpakorn*) was founded in Thailand in 1933, with the Italian sculptor Corrado Feroci (who later took the Thai name Silpa Bhirasri) as the first principal and in the following year, a constitutional monarchy was established in the wake of a coup d’etat, marking the start of the modern Thai state.²² Behind the establishment of the School of Fine Arts, the government-commissioned works to produce

memorial sculptures increased and the need to train local artists was identified to meet the demand, along with modernization and the promotion of cultural nationalism. In 1943, the School of Fine Arts was upgraded to the status of the university, called Silpakorn University. It is important and necessary to mention Silpa Bhirasri, who initially came to Thailand to train craftsmen and artists to work for the government and later devoted himself to art education in Silpakorn University, in order to understand visual arts in Thailand. Considering his contribution and influence, I would like to mention Silpakorn University specifically.

Silpakorn University started with only one faculty, the Faculty of Painting and Sculpture and Silpa Bhirasri became both its inaugural Dean and Director of the teaching program. He adopted the Western-style curriculum in which students study art history and anatomy for drawing. Since most of the Thai pioneering artists learned from Silpa Bhirasri, he is regarded as “the father of modern art” in Thailand. There is no doubt that he built up a foundation for fine art in Thailand. His ideas about art influenced his students. Silpa Bhirasri discusses modern art below:

Modern art was born from scientific discoveries, from knowledge and education, and principally from the reciprocal influence of ideas and arts of all the races of the world. Asia and Europe, America, Africa and Australia, all these cultures fused together in creating the new artistic expression. There should be no prejudice against it, since it does not represent any particular race. Indeed, modern art has no national style; it is the individual expression of the artist, and it will impress his work with the peculiarities of his race. An Indian will always think as an Indian, a Thai as a Thai, an Italian as an Italian and so on. We may all speak the same language but the thought will always be individual.²³

While he considers modern art as fused expression of other cultures, he promotes vernacular culture that can infuse works with artistic individuality or originality. Indeed, he introduced both Western

and Eastern art styles in his textbook titled *A Bare Outline of History and Styles of Art* (1959) as well as his books called *History of Art: Chinese, Japanese, Oceanic and Australian, Old America, Africa & Technique* (1965). *An Appreciation of Sukbothai Art* (1962) is about Thai traditional art.

Through his teaching and writings, he encourages students to learn not only Western art, but also Thai traditional art and other cultures. He also emphasizes the importance of academic trainings to gain a sound foundation in order to express the artist's individuality:

Once the young student has finished his art training he may express himself better in whatever style he likes because it becomes a personal matter and each artist has the right to express himself individually.²⁴

Silpa Bhirasri respects individual expression or the individualism of each artist. His attitude toward art has been established in Silpakorn University where students gain a sound foundation for making artworks.

Furthermore, Silpa Bhirasri initiated the 1st National Exhibition of Art to develop the local art scene and to promote understanding of visual art to the public in 1949. This exhibition first organized by Silpakorn University has continued to be a gateway to success for artists' careers until today. It was not until the 1980s that other universities where students can study fine art appeared. Therefore, Silpakorn University has played an important role in forming and developing visual art in Thailand.

Art for Art's Sake and Art for Life and People

During the Vietnamese War, the US army was stationed in Thailand, to which it brought foreign exchange. Under the circumstances, many commercial galleries such as Bangkapi Gallery and the Fine Arts Gallery appeared and so the business went well in the 1960s. Around the same time, artists who studied abroad returned to Thailand and brought new forms like abstract and semi-abstract paintings to the local art scene. While some artists

pursued the new forms that were considered as art for art's sake, other artists appealed to art for life and people movement initially triggered by the Vietnamese War. In the 1970s, this tendency of art for life and people expanded because of the unstable political situation and increasing poverty in the villages.

In 1973, pro-democracy students protested against the military government and it was overthrown. But, in 1976, the military reassumed power with bloodshed. Inspired by the publication of Chit Phumisak's (1933-66), *Art for Life and Art for the People* (1957), some artists produced works for the people and for their lives. It became a movement called Artists' Front of Thailand that initially protested against the Vietnamese War and later supported the Thai students' protest against the military government. Kamchorn Soonpongso, who joined the movement, mentions that the Thai people did not have freedom under the dictatorship at that time and the people's situation was expressed in artworks.²⁵ The Dharma Group founded by Pratuang Emjaroen in 1971 also expressed its views about the unstable social conditions.

In 1979, artists such as Kamchorn Soonpongso, Pratuang Emjaroen, and Sompote Upa-in organized Art Exhibition of Thailand, which was open to all artists regardless of their age and education. This meant that any artist who wanted to show his works could participate in the exhibition without any screening. This exhibition was held in opposition to the National Exhibition of Art, where most of the participating artists were from Silpakorn University and pursued formalism. On the other hand, the works in the Art Exhibition of Thailand depicted the poverties of the people and labor exploitations. This exhibition was held in five locations including Bangkok and other provinces. Since the art scene was centered in Bangkok at that time, it was meaningful that the exhibition provided an opportunity for artists to show their works as well as for the local people to see artworks. While the National Exhibition of Art presents "art for art's sake" or academic art that is supported by Silpakorn University, the Art Exhibition of Thailand shows "art for life and the people".

It should also be mentioned that a number of

artists have produced artworks inspired by Thai traditional art, local culture and the Buddhist philosophy. In particular, after the Department of Thai Art in which students study Thai traditional paintings was formed at Silpakorn University in 1976, artists like Panya Vijinthanasarn have been developing neo-traditional styles of Thai painting.

Bhirasri Institute of Modern Art and support by the private sectors

In Thailand, university-level art education was set in 1943, but it was not until 1974 that an art institution for the display of Thai art appeared. Carrying out the late Silpa Bhirasri's wish, the Silpa Bhirasri Foundation was formed in 1963 to establish a non-profit art gallery in Bangkok. It was a private foundation consisting of his friends, colleagues, former students and art lovers. As part of the fund-raising campaign, the foundation organized the 1st International Art Exhibition at the National Theatre in 1965 and Thai artists and foreign embassies donated their works for selling.

As the result of donations and efforts of the foundation, the Bhirasri Institute of Modern Art was established near South Sathorn Road in 1974. The building was newly built with facilities including temporary and permanent exhibition rooms, an auditorium and a library. The institute aimed to encourage patronage of art and promote contemporary art in Thailand with a distinctive character of its own.²⁶ It provided opportunities for local artists to present their works and exchange ideas among themselves. Moreover, in cooperation with foreign cultural organizations like Goethe Institute, the institute showed exhibitions of German, British and Japanese artists. The institute hoped to close the gap between art and the people of Thailand through programs that attempted to spread knowledge and appreciation of art.²⁷ For the public, therefore, the institute organized not only exhibitions, but also music concerts, film screenings, theater plays, workshops, art classes and lectures.

In 1979, the Bhirasri Institute of Modern Art co-organized the Contemporary Art Exhibition with the support of Thai Farmers Bank and the International Association of Art (IAA) to promote

contemporary art in Thailand. The institute also presented the Bua Luang Painting Competition for Thai traditional paintings and contemporary art, which was sponsored by the Bangkok Bank. Thus, art competitions sponsored by private corporations have increased since the 1970s. Since most of them acquired works through competitions, the private corporations became not only good sponsors but also collectors of Thai art. By co-organizing and providing venues for the competitions, the institute fulfilled its role to encourage as a patron of the arts.

In the 1980s, the institute's director, Chatvichai Promadhattavedi and assistant director/artist Chumpon Apisuk organized a series of events called "Wethi-Samai", an experimental theater and art workshop where artists exchanged their ideas on art, drama, poetry and music.²⁸ The institute became a place to show new ideas and styles like video art, performance, happenings and installations by Thai artists such as Chumpon Apisuk, Kamol Phaosavasdi, Apinan Poshayananda and others.

The Bhirasri Institute of Modern Art played an important role not only in promoting Thai and foreign art, but also in stimulating artists by showing cross-disciplinary events like "Wethi-Samai" and experimental arts such as performance installations or happenings. Unfortunately, however, the institute was closed down in 1988 because the principal donor, Princess Pantip Chumbhot, passed away.²⁹ Actually, because it was run by a private foundation, the institute experienced financial problems from the very beginning. Its closure caused disappointment and despondence among artists and the people related to the institute. But it also led to a campaign for the establishment of a new art center, which started in 1995. As a result of the campaign, the Bangkok Arts and Cultural Center (BACC) was established near Siam Square in 2008. Having learning from the experiences of the Institute, BACC now obtains funding from the public and the private sectors to ensure stable revenue sources.³⁰ BACC also organizes not only Thai and foreign art exhibitions, but also workshops, talks and screenings. It has become an important center for the Thai art scene and the public.

The National Gallery, Bangkok was established in 1977, which was later than the opening of the Institute. It has acquired Thai artworks and presented mainly local art exhibitions including solo, group and retrospective shows of important artists. Although the gallery is funded by the government, it may need to be improved in terms of the facility and the number of its staff. In Thailand, it seems that the private sector is more enthusiastic about promoting Thai art.

Social Involvement in the 1990s

Like in Malaysia, artists in Thailand exposed to international art tendencies increased in number starting in the 1990s. Some artists produced artworks related to the environment and social involvement and showed them outside the gallery space. I would like to introduce some of these examples.

In 1990, a workshop jointly organized by Silpakorn University and Goethe-Institute Bangkok debated artistic approaches and responses to the environment. An outcome of the workshop, an exhibition titled *Art and Environment*, was held in 1991. Participating artists like Kamol Phaosavasdi, Vichoke Mukdamanee, Pinaree Sanpitak, and Surasi Kusolwong had explored and developed their styles concerning their own surroundings.

By using natural objects and local materials like clays, woods or pots, Montien Boonma who was a teacher in the Faculty of Fine Arts, Chiang Mai University produced works reflecting his ideas from the various ways of life. His works and ideas stimulated many students. Since the 1990s, the art scene centered in Bangkok also extended across Chiang Mai. In 1992, a landmark project called the *Chiang Mai Social Installation* was initiated by Navin Rawanchaikul, Kosit Juntaratip, Uthit Atimana, and Mit Jai Inn who were then art students and teachers in Chiang Mai University. In the annual project that took place until 1998, artworks were displayed in temples, cemeteries, sidewalks and other places in town so that local people could easily see them. In 1992, another project called the Land Project was initiated by Rikrit Tiravanija and Kamin Lertchaiprasert in Chiang Mai. This was an experimental project

intended to cultivate rice fields and build houses by involving artists and local people. Through these artists and projects, Chiang Mai gained international attention for its participatory art whereby the people and the local community were involved in the process of project or art-making.

In Bangkok, there are also socially engaged projects. For example, in 1996, by involving the community, Manit Sriwanichpoom organized a site-specific exhibition in deserted shop houses near Huay Kwang - Ratchada. Then, in 1998, Jakapan Vilasineekul curated the Book exhibition with other artists in a closed publishing house in which had been printed the first school textbooks in Thailand. The importance of the building for Thai education history became known in the community through the exhibition.

Comparing the Colonized and the Non-colonized countries

By looking at the shifting phases of art scenes in Malaysia and Thailand and comparing these countries, the similarities and the differences between the colonized and the non-colonized countries can be seen.

In both Malaysia and Thailand, mainstream art was constructed through art institutions in the past. While many artists adopted Western art through modernization or by studying abroad, they explored their own expressions, ideas, or identity by reflecting their society, politics, history and daily lives in their work. Younger artists are now actively looking for opportunities to show their works by initiating projects and exhibitions even outside galleries and museums, or by making alternative art spaces. Lately, a wider range of mediums and styles such as installation, video art, and participatory art are getting more popular and common in each country. While these similarities could be seen, there are differences in terms of art institutions and systems as well as in attitudes toward art.

Due to the British colonial policy, the arts had little or no role to play in the Malaysian educational system up to the Second World War, which fact could have led to less attention's

being paid to the foundation of fine art courses and schools, even after the Independence was achieved. On the other hand, however, the colonial administration provided opportunities to study art in the UK and supported the formation of the Arts Council which, in turn, led to the establishment of the National Art Gallery the year after the Independence was attained. It was because the NAG was expected to form Malaysian art through exhibitions and collections in recognition of the new nation. Later on, because of the racial riots, the National Cultural Policies were set and artists were encouraged to create artworks based on the vernacular culture. While artists learned styles and ideas from Western art, they also tried to resist or react against Western-centric art values. Because of their colonial experience, artists seem to have complicated feelings, mixed with positive and negative attitudes toward the West. Because of the absence of Malaysian identity, the government attempted to form one as symbolizing the unified nation through the NAG and cultural policies. But if the NAG and the cultural policies emphasized the national art and culture too much, it could become a burden for artists who then had to represent or be concerned about national art or the Malaysian identity, rather than merely pursue individual expressions and creativities.

Compared with Malaysia, it was not an urgent requirement to form national art by establishing an art museum in Thailand. This could be partly because Thai traditional art was readily recognizable. Rather, in Thailand, artists or craftsmen were needed to work on governmental commissioned works. To meet the need, the School of Fine Arts was formed in 1934 and later became the Silpakorn University in 1943. Through the efforts and contributions of Silpa Bhirasri, university-level art education has been offered since then. While the art school was set up in the early period, it was in 1977 that the National Gallery was formed by the government. Before that, the need to establish a gallery or museum was brought up by the people. Consequently, the Bhirasri Institute of Modern Art was established by a private foundation. But the fact that this first art institution was closed and abandoned implies the weakness of the foundation for the museum system in Thailand.

While Silpa Bhirasri adopted Western-style art education, he showed his attitude of respecting Thai traditional art, as well as encouraged his students to pursue individual expression and creativity. Unlike Malaysian artists, Thai artists, who were without complicated feelings about the West, could pursue their individual expressions and originality and consider the Thai identity and Western art in their work.

Conclusion

Whether the country was colonized or not, it had advantages and disadvantages in terms of founding art institutions or art education. Actually, the development of the art scenes is related to art systems and institutions as well as to social and political situations. As can be gleaned in the art system, institution and education were not sufficient until around the 1970s in Malaysia and Thailand. It could also be said that art criticism and history were not enough discussed enough at that time. Although the art history of each country has been developed, there are still a limited number of researchers. While increasing the visibility of contemporary Asian art in the global art world, the discussion and debate on art history and scenes in the past are limited to the local scene and hardly produced outside Asia. Given that contemporary art has progressed and evolved from previous artworks or movements, the discussion and debate should have increased at the global level. It is also important and inevitable to re-examine the West-centric art value in order to fairly evaluate contemporary and modern Asian art.

NOTES

¹ Virginia Spate, "Preface", ed. John Clark, *Modernity in Asian Art (The University of Sydney East Asian Series)*, Wild Peony Book Publishers, 1994

² "Foreword", *The Birth of Modern Art in Southeast Asia: Artists and Movements*, Fukuoka Art Museum, 1997, p. 7.

³ Sarena Abdullah, "Absenteeism of Malaysian Identity in Art in The Early Years of Independence", *Jati*, Volume 15, December 2010, p. 137.

⁴ *Ibid.*

- ⁵ Ibid.
- ⁶ Syed Ahmad Jamal, "National Art Gallery 1958 – 1988", *Balai Seni Lukis Negara 58-88*, National Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, 1988 (unpaged)
- ⁷ Ibid.
- ⁸ In 1963, Malaysia was formed with the inclusion of Sabah (Borneo), Sarawak and Singapore, but Singapore became independent from Malaysia in 1965.
- ⁹ Syed Ahmad Jamal, "National Art Gallery 1958 – 1988", *Balai Seni Lukis Negara 58-88*, National Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, 1988 (unpaged)
- ¹⁰ Yeoh Jin Leng, "Malaysian Art Today", *Yeoh Jin Leng: Art and Thoughts 1952-1995*, National Art Gallery, 1995, p. 111.
- ¹¹ "Education", *An A-Z Guide to Malaysian Art*, RogueArt, 2012, p.10
- ¹² In 1938 The Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts which was founded in Singapore by Lim Hak Tai was the first art education institution in Malaya, but it was for Chinese.
- ¹³ Yeoh Jin Leng, "Art Education in Malaysian", *Yeoh Jin Leng: Art and Thoughts 1952-1995*, National Art Gallery, 1995, p. 103.
- ¹⁴ T.K. Sabapathy, "The Long, Winding Road to Chelsea", *Yeoh Jin Leng: Art and Thoughts 1952-1995*, National Art Gallery, 1995, p. 14.
- ¹⁵ *Grup* exhibition catalogue, 1967
- ¹⁶ "New Scene", *An A-Z Guide to Malaysian Art*, RogueArt, 2012, p. 20.
- ¹⁷ *Towards A Mystical Reality: a documentation of jointly initiated experiences by Redza Piyadasa and Suleiman Esa*, 1974, p. 8.
- ¹⁸ Ibid., p. 7.
- ¹⁹ "Anak Alam", *An A-Z Guide to Malaysian Art*, RogueArt, 2012, p. 4.
- ²⁰ Redza Piyadasa, "Early Modern Art Developments in Malaysia and Singapore, 1920-1960", *The Birth of Modern Art in Southeast Asia: Artists and Movements*, Fukuoka Art Museum, 1997, p. 229.
- ²¹ Redza Piyadasa, "Modern Malaysian Art – An Introduction", *Today's Malaysia Seen Through Art: Contemporary Malaysian Art*, The Japan Foundation ASEAN Cultural Center, 1992, p. 12.
- ²² Masahiro Ushiroshoji, "An Introduction: The seed will grow into a great Garuda with mighty wings that will bear you heavenward", *The Birth of Modern Art in Southeast Asia: Artists and Movements*, Fukuoka Art Museum, 1997, p. 219.
- ²³ Silpa Bhirasri, "Contemporary Thai Art", ed. Japan Cultural Forum, *Modern Art of Asia: New Movements and Old Traditions*, Toto Shuppan Co., 1961, p. 77.
- ²⁴ Ibid., p.79

- ²⁵ The writer interviewed Mr. Kamchorn Soonpongsri on 8 December 2011
- ²⁶ A Message From the President, Bhirasri Institute of Modern Art, 1974
- ²⁷ Damrong Wong-Uparaj, *The Bhirasri Institute of Modern Art*, Bhirasri Institute of Modern Art, 1974
- ²⁸ Apinan Poshyananda, *Modern Art in Thailand: Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*, Oxford University Press, 1992, p. 184.
- ²⁹ Ibid.
- ³⁰ The writer interviewed Mr. Chatvichai Promadhattavedi on 18 February 2012

REFERENCES

- Abdulla, Sarena. 2010. Absenteeism of Malaysian Identity in Art in The Early Years of Independence. *Jati* Volume 15.
- Bhirasri, Silpa. 1961. Contemporary Thai Art. In *Modern Art of Asia: New Movements and Old Traditions*, ed. Japan Cultural Forum. Tokyo: Toto Shuppan Co.
- National Art Gallery, ed. 1988. *Balai Seni Lukis Negara 58 – 88*, Kuala Lumpur: National Art Gallery.
- Grup* (exhibition catalogue). 1967.
- Piyadasa, Redza and Esa, Suleiman, eds. 1974. *Towards A Mystical Reality: a documentation of jointly initiated experiences by redza piyadasa and suleiman esa*.
- Poshyananda, Apinan. 1992. *Modern Art in Thailand: Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Sabapathy, T.K. 1995. *Yeoh Jin Leng: Art and Thoughts 1952 – 1995*. Kuala Lumpur: National Art Gallery.
- Spate, Virginia. 1994. Preface. In *Modernity in Asian Art*, ed. John Clark, Sydney: Wild Peony Book Publishers.
- Ushiroshoji, Masahiro and Rawanchaikul, Toshiko, eds. 1997. *The Birth of Modern Art in Southeast Asia: Artists and Movements*. Fukuoka: Fukuoka Art Museum.
- Wong-Uparaj, Damrong. 1974. *The Bhirasri Institute of Modern Art*. Bangkok: Bhirasri Institute of Modern Art.
- Yong, Beverly and Ooi, Adeline et al, eds. 2012. *An A-Z Guide to Malaysian Art*. Kuala Lumpur: Rogue Art.