

# SAN SOMDET AND THE KNOWLEDGE FORMATION OF THAI ART HISTORY IN THAILAND

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## ABSTRACT

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This research intends to analyze the informing methods of Thai Art Historical knowledge from “San Somdet”, a compilation of letters by Prince Narisara Nuvadtivongs and Prince Damrong Rajanubhab. Both princes held prestige positions in Thai bureaucracy during the reigns of King Rama V-VII. Shortly after the shift of ruling regime in Siam, Prince Damrong left Thailand and stayed in Penang. However, he regularly wrote letters to Prince Naris. Later, these letters were compiled and published as “San Somdet”. This compilation is acclaimed as a highly historically valued document because its content covers historical, social and cultural knowledge of Siam in that time. This research proposes a new perspective that both princes use systematic, western scientific methods, which has never been studied before, in the process of informing Thai arts and historical knowledge. Those methods are: 1) inquiry and examination information from both princes’ memories and others scholars, 2) research from written documents, 3) examination from different sources, 4) data collection from field exploration, 5) analysis based on scientific tool and experiment, and 6) dating by comparison between artifacts’ patterns and materials. Although these methods are not considered an exact criterion in the current Art History’s methodology, these attempts show the transition of knowledge formation of Thai Art History. The knowledge taken from San Somdet is still resourceful to Thai academics until today.

**Keywords:** San Somdet; knowledge formation; Thai Art History; Prince Narisara Nuvadtivongs; Prince Damrong Rajanubhab

## 1. INTRODUCTION

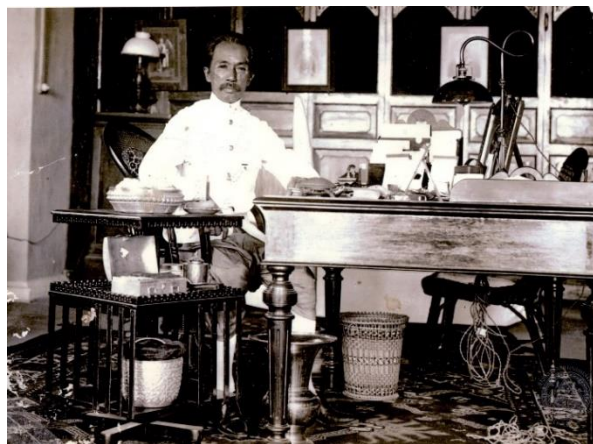
San Somdet is a compilation of letters written by Prince Narisara Nuvadtivongs and Prince Damrong Rajanubhab. As descendants from King Rama IV, both princes were siblings and befriended since childhood. Both were important contributors to Siam’s bureaucracy and received complete reliance from King Rama V to King Rama VII.

Prince Narisara Nuvadtivongs (Figure 1) held important administrative positions, e.g., Chief Commander of War Department, Minister of Ministry of Royal Treasury, and Minister of Ministry of Palace. He also held special positions in bureaucratic affairs, e.g., Privy Councilor, Vice-president of the Royal Academy under Fine Arts Department. Prince Naris’s expertise in architecture and fine arts was acclaimed by Thai artists and craftsmen and was celebrated as “Somdet Khru: The Great Craftsman of Siam”. In the case of Prince Damrong Rajanubhab (Figure 2), his expertise in history, archaeology, rituals and customs also was acclaimed

and celebrated as “the founding father of History and Archaeology”. When he was the Minister of the Ministry of the Interior, he visited many provinces and created a number of journals in which he collected local and traditional knowledge. After leaving the highest position of Ministry of Interior, he continually took many bureaucratic positions and contributed his knowledge to the public. Then the incident of AD 1932 occurred, changing Siam’s regime from Absolute Monarchy to Democracy, followed by Bowondej’s rebel troop in AD 1933. Prince Damrong decided to move from Siam and stayed in Penang in November, AD 1933 Prince Naris remained in Bangkok and held the prestige position as the Regent of King Rama VII when the king was departed to Europe and the United States in AD 1933. The position remained until the end of the reign of King Rama VII.



**Figure 1:** Prince Narisara Nuvadtivongs



**Figure 2:** Prince Damrong Rajanubhab

Being separated in different countries, as well as having free time from bureaucratic business, both princes were missed and wrote letters interchangeably almost every week. At that time, in the age of 70-80, both princes were frail and had chronic medical conditions. On December 1, 1943, Prince Damrong passed away ending the mailing connection. Later, on March 10, 1947, Prince Naris passed away. The descendants of both princes gave their letters to the Fine Arts Departments as a public domain. These letters were kept in the National Library and later were published as a compilation of letters. This compilation is considered a treasure for Thai Study because it contains various branches of Thai knowledge including history, arts, archaeology, literature, music, dance, customs, etc.

## 2. METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY

1. Study from San Somdet, printing edition of AD 1962, documents collecting in the National Library and other related documents.
2. Analyze and synthesize textual meanings through the process of collecting, categorizing and interpreting documents about knowledge formation of Thai Arts History.

## 2.1 Scope of the study

This research studied the letters between Prince Naris and Prince Damrong during AD 1913-1943, which were published later in AD 1962 by Kurusapa Printing, in a compilation of 26 volumes without index, attentively on methods of knowledge formation of Thai Arts History.

## 2.2 Summary and discussion of the study

The proposes of analysis and discussion are as follows: 1) the meaning of Art History, 2) Methodology of Art History Study, 3) Art History Study in Thailand, and 4) analysis of the methods implemented for knowledge formation of Thai Art History in San Somdet.

### 2.2.1 The meaning of Art History

History is the subject trying to understand human behaviors, whether success or failure, in the past. It contains the sum from what humans have studied, researched and innovated in every dimension of human activity, e.g., politics and governments, economy, society, law, philosophy, science, cults, religions, and arts. All ideas and activities in the past have passed through time which are called "historical evidence". Historians use historical methods in order to understand the importance of time and stories that have an impact on the society (Bunnag, 2006).

Art is skills; craftsmanship; the ability to embellish things; the expression of emotions through different medium, e.g., sound, line, color, texture, shape (The Royal Society, 2013).

Art History is the study of arts in the past, reflecting on different sources, aspiring for the knowledge of artifacts and the creators who made them (Thammarungrueang, 2008). The study of Art History is not interested only in tangible artifacts made at specific times but also involves the histories of the people who have create the artifacts. It is evidence which allows for recording human's incidences through historical time. Artifacts are not valuable because of its own substance but because it passes on symbols and complex ideas of humankind (Johnson and Janson, 1992).

### 2.2.2 Methodology of Art History Study

Art History, as the study of histories, patterns, aesthetic values, and interpretation of meanings in many aspects, was created in Europe not less than the 18<sup>th</sup> Century (Prakitnonthakan, 2017). This concept appeared in Siam in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century but was not accepted as an academic approach until 1960s (Pellegi, 2015). In 1960s, Silpakorn University began to offer the study of Art History, therefore, it was more academic.

At the present time, methodology of Art History Study has a procedure as follows: 1) questioning, 2) making hypothesis, 3) collecting evidence, and 4) summarizing from discovered evidence (Thammarungrueang, 2008). The most important object in Art History Study is artistic evidence, which are categorized as 1) Artifacts - this kind of evidence helps to trace back how humans live in the past. Intentionally or not, during their lifetimes, in any era, humans always leave their creations through times. 2) Written documents - this type of evidence helps to identify which periods the artifacts were made including their past stories, e.g., inscriptions, chronicles, etc.

Michael Right (2001) points out that Art History Study is not a pure science, such as Mechanics or Chemistry that has the definite meaning without doubt. Art History is a subject of Humanities, like Anthropology, Psychology or Social Science, that intends to study human behavior including artistic activity. Human behavior has more variations making it impossible to offer a definite explanation. In cases where there is no written evidence for support, it needs a presumption upon senses and deduction. Erwin Panofsky (1974) notes that Art Historian is a major tool in Art History Study. The effort in making an explanation of artifacts' true meaning is based on historian's opinions which reveal individual nationality, religion, class, period, and beliefs.

Piriya Krairiksh (1990) suggests Art History Study must contain:

1. Explanation in full detail about the artifact's specific patterns, its meaning, its content, or as known as Iconography.

2. Comparison between the specific patterns of artifacts which built in the same or adjacent culture. It is the process to compare new artifacts to the one which already has periodic identification.

3. Analysis of a study of pattern evolution, developed by Philippe Stern (as cited in Krairiksh, 1990), is a study of transformation of patterns, from the beginning to the last stage of each school art. For example, in study of Khmer art, it has a pattern evolution showing through a decorative lintel and decorative pillars in the door's frame. If these two artifacts contain the same stylish consistency so they are appropriate from the same period. If they are different, the explanation could be that one artifact was in the wrong place, or both were, and a need for re-evaluation occurs. After receiving the exact periodic identification, then a need for pattern comparison with other artifacts, such as pediment in this case. Even if all artifacts contain stylish consistency, it still needs verification with the written inscription for periodic identification (Diskul, 1983).

The art history study method as discussed above is based on scientific principle; an approach called Positivism. This positivist historical school of thought emphasizes on examining evidence thoroughly and

reduces the examiner's subjective opinion, especially by dissecting artifacts in parts in order to compare patterns or styles of each part. This process will help the examiner clarifying the pattern's evolution without presupposition (Khrouthongkhieo, 2015).

### 2.2.3 Art History Study in Thailand

However, the method of Thai art history study that has been active in the past, mostly accentuated on Buddhist's faith and the maker's virtue rather than the artifact. For example, In the Inscription of Wat Asokaram, Sukothai, 1956 BE (Sukothai inscription) was narrated about Queen Sri Chulalak, the highest queen of King Li Thai, having faith in Buddhism and making many religious artifacts (Fine Art Department, 2004). In *Jinakālamāli*, in the part of Phra Sihonpatima, written by Phra Rattana Panyathera, which was set around half of the 21<sup>st</sup> century BE, was:

*"...when Lord Buddha had passed away for 700 years...Phrachao Sihon wishes to see the Buddha's image so he goes to the temple's hall and asks the Sangkhathera [chairman of monk]... Our Lord Buddha, when he was alive visited Lanka Thawip 3 times. Those who had seen him are not alive today. Suddenly, with the power of Phra Khinasop [Buddhist saint], the King of Naga, transforms himself into a human form and being as the Buddha's image to discard Phrachao Sihon's doubt...The King orders...get wax for making a model of the image that the king of Naga had transformed and also make a mold for that image; then pour the melting mixture of tin, gold and silver into that mold. That Buddha image, after scrubbing and polishing, is so glorious as if Lord Buddha was alive"*

(Phra Rattana Panyathera, 2007, p. 110)

The example above shows that in the past the artifact mentioned in the passage was dedicated for spreading Buddhist's virtue and showing the maker's benevolent merits, instead of describing to educate about art.

In the reign of King Rama V, AD 1868-1910, early writings about Art History, existed such as *Tiew Mueang Phra Ruang* by King Rama VI (Figure 3), at that time he was entitled the Crowned Prince, in the occasion of his royal visit to Northern county administrative region, AD 1908-1909. His approach of study was to explore the site and description through his well-educated opinions. After seeing ancient roads, old constructions, ruins and artifacts, he researched and examined through written documents such as inscriptions, royal chronicles and legends. He believed that the First Inscription of King Ramkamheng was authentic. So, he referred the ancient site he visited the place that had been narrated inscription, and started searching for mentioned constructions (Thammarungrueang, 2008). The reason he believed Wat Mahathat, Sukhothai was the same temple as mentioned in the First Inscription is it was situated in the center of the city, where a written paragraph in the inscription stated as a "temple with the golden Buddha image" which meant to the main temple hall where once Phra Srisakayamuni, the Buddha image was installed and was later moved to Wat Suthat Thepwararam (Monkut Klao Chao Yu Hua, 1983, p. 55).

Although, in this case, there was an attempt using written inscription as a periodic identification for the artifact, however, it was not considered as the proper methodology because the artifact was not used as the principle evidence. Until schools and colleges for higher education was established in 1953, Silpakorn University had a pre-course Archaeology in School of Fine Art (a preparation school for Silpakorn University), which later elevated as a full curriculum of Archaeology, then Art History in Thailand has been studied academically.



Figure 3: King Rama VI as Crown Prince

Rungroj Thammarungrueang (2008) concludes different approaches implemented in Thai art history study as follows:

1. Focus on historical background – The works using this approach mostly narrate on history of constructions and restorations, i.e., history of making temples, restoration of Buddha's sculptures. Historians in this approach mainly use old written documents as their source evidence, collecting and recounting into a modern historical writing.

2. Focus on social and cultural background – The works using this approach bring social and historical context to analyze artifacts' meanings in each period of time.

3. Focus on artistic patterns – This approach uses western art history theory which is more popular in Thai academics. The works using this approach create a distinctive classification of the objects of study, ancient constructions, or antique artifacts, on artistic patterns.

4. Focus on faiths and meanings – This approach is not a focus on Buddhism or Brahman-Hindu doctrine, but attends in artistic details, i.e., identify characteristic of gods and supportive reasons, identify Buddhist postures and the related meaning to the Buddhist biography. The method will use religious scriptures as the reference. However, in analyzing architectures, the historians need to understand the system of symbols for interpreting the meaning.

5. Focus on aesthetics and craftsmanship – Although narration of aesthetics and skilled craftsmanship are subjective depending on individual tastes as well as disagreement on periodic identification, these different opinions share useful perspectives, i.e., narrating how artisans work help to understand the expertise of each field of work, or detecting times of restoration by evaluating degree of beauty in each period of time.

Currently, Thai Art History academics use different approaches. Some focus on the historical-archaeological approach while others prefer aesthetic-craftsmanship approach. The reasons depend on the nature of the evidence, artifacts, or the individual interests. However, the basis is the same, which is the effort to explain human's behavior through arts.

#### **2.2.4 Analysis of the methods implemented for knowledge formation of Thai Art History in San Somdet**

From the study of San Somdet, we have found various methods that Prince Damrong and Prince Naris implemented for informing Thai art history knowledge. The methods are:

##### **2.2.4.1 Examination between two princes' memories and inquiry information from others**

Prince Damrong and Prince Naris used dialogue as a method for knowledge formation; the process is one raising a question and the other will find the answer. Often, the answer leads to an argument and more investigation until both princes were satisfied. Another method consisted of inquiry from other experts who were acquainted with the princes, especially the direct, oral stories from those who had firsthand experienced. If the topics were about Buddhism, they gathered information from both Dhammayuttika Nikaya sect and Maha Nikaya sect. If the topic were about craftsmanship or history, they inquired from experts in specific fields, e.g., Prince Worawat Supakorn – a painter, Prince Phraditworakan – a molder, Phraya Boran Rajathanin – a superintendent of Ayutthaya Monthon – the expert on history of Ayutthaya.

For example, Prince Damrong asked Prince Naris about King Rama V's ideas of molding four figures of early kings in Chakri dynasty in 1869 (Figure 4). Although creating memorial objects for prior kings' commemoration has been a tradition in Thai society this was the first-time for the creation of figurative sculptures of real people occurred (Narisara Nuvadtivongs and Damrong Rajanubhab, 1962).

Prince Naris recalled that he witnessed the process of molding four figures of the early kings of the Chakri dynasty for the first time at *sala-rai* [small pavilions] on the eastern side of the entrance to the main hall of Wat Phra Keaw or Temple of the Emerald Buddha. He recalled the process chronologically from molding, installing and transferring the sculptures. He even copied the schedule and letters of command as the evidence. However, he did not know the initial cause for creating the figures. He asked Phraya Mahanivet, the supervisor of molding the figures, and learnt that it was initially the idea of King Rama IV. King Rama IV intention was to idolize Phra Thep Bidon (the founding father) of Chakri dynasty. His initial plan was to install the figures with the other Phra Thep Bidon of Ayutthaya but later King Rama IV thought the space was too restricted, so he built Phra Phutta Prang Prasat to install the sculptures. The process was succeeded by King Rama V subsequently. Prince Naris inquired further about how and when the idea of replicating real human figures was introduced in Siam. He proposed his basic research to Prince Damrong that there were some earliest portraits, e.g., the portrait of Somdet Phra Sanghraj of Wat Rachasittharam. In the same letter, Prince Naris included details of copies about inscription stating the cause of creating, as well as the date and year of creating each portrait (Narisara Nuvadtivongs and Damrong Rajanubhab, 1962).





**Figure 4:** The Sculpture of King Rama I - King Rama IV, Chakri Dynasty, Prasat Phra Thep Bidon (Poshyananda, 1993: pp. 28-31)

An example of Prince Naris inquiring from another expert was sparked by his curiosity about the history of murals in the main hall at Wat Bowonstan Sutthavad. He asked Krommuen Worawat Suphakon and received the answer that Prince Isaraphong was the supervisor in selecting the painters. However, Prince Damrong rejected that information and doubted its credibility. Prince Isaraphong died in AD 186 but King Rama IV had ordered to transport Singhalese Buddha image and had it installed as the principal Buddha image in Wat Bowonstan Sutthavad after Phra Pinklao had passed away (deceased AD 1865). So, it was impossible that Prince Isaraphong would be the supervisor at that time (Narisara Nuvadtivongs and Damrong Rajanubhab, 1962).

Gaining knowledge by dialogue, examination and inquiry from the experts could be incorrect in many ways. Prince Damrong admitted that human memory had its limit (Narisara Nuvadtivongs and Damrong Rajanubhab, 1962). It was important that after receiving information, it needed to be re-examined before taking it as a fact, e.g., inquiring from other experts, investigating from written document and inscription or comparing with artistic pattern.

#### 2.2.4.2 Research from written documents

Prince Damrong and Prince Naris both used different written documents, i.e., inscriptions, legends, chronicles, oral stories, *sepa* (lyrical ballad). For example, in his research of the legend of *mae-sue* (god-mother) as appeared in *sala-rai* (small pavilion) in Wat Pho (Figure 5), Prince Damrong used *Thai Sepa Epic Khunchang Khunphaen* (the ballad of Khunchang Khunphaen), in the chapter of the birth of Khunchang, as his reference (Narisara Nuvadtivongs and Damrong Rajanubhab, Vol. 11, 1962, p. 346). In his study of the history of Wat Pho, Prince Damrong relied on a French-made map of Thonburi Fort, as a time reference for the foundation of Wat Pho. In that map, Wat Pho did not exist. So, he concluded that Wat Pho must be built after King Narai of Ayutthaya (Narisara Nuvadtivongs and Damrong Rajanubhab, Vol. 2, 1962, p. 173).



**Figure 5:** Mae-Sue (God-Mother) in Sala-Rai, Wat Pho

However, there is a limitation in using written documents of “inscription” for periodic identification which both princes as noted in Prince Naris’ letter:

“...about inscription, I have heard the French scholars in Cambodia said that we cannot believe where inscriptions were placed because they were movable. They could be on one place and replace to others. However, what was in the written statement is substantial. I totally agree on what they have said...”

(Narisara Nuvadtivongs and Damrong Rajanubhab, Vol. 16, 1962, p. 334)

Apart from using local written documents, i.e., inscriptions, chronicles, oral stories, both princes also used foreign books. Prince Damrong often used a Dictionary of the Pali Language, collected by Prof. Childers. (Robert Caesar Childers was the orientalist in Sri Lanka which was colonized under The British Empire at that time, the first scholar compiled and published the first Dictionary of English – Pali, AD 1862-1865 and the first professor in Pali Language and Buddhist Literature Department of University College, London). Prince Damrong also used *Buddhist India* by T.W. Rhys Davids, first published in AD 1901, for researching the Bodhi Tree where Lord Buddha had his enlightenment (Narisara Nuvadtivongs and Damrong Rajanubhab, Vol. 15, 1962, p. 103). (Thomas William Rhys Davids was the British scholar on Pali Language and Comparative Religions, president and founder of The Pali Text Society and co-founder of the Eastern Study Department of the British Institute). In his research on the history and idea of building Buddhakaya Stupa, Prince Damrong believed this was replicated and that the initial model of chedi was influenced from in the stupas in Bagan and Chiang Mai, respectively. To support his presumption, he also used James Fergusson’s *Indian and System Architecture*, a book in the series of *History of Indian and Eastern Architecture*, first published in AD 1910 (Narisara Nuvadtivongs and Damrong Rajanubhab, Vol. 15, 1962, p. 103).

For this research in the National Archives, it was found that Prince Naris had a large foreign book collection about Indian history and archaeology, e.g., *The Buddhism of Tibet* by L. Austine Waddell, published in AD 1885, *L’ Architecture Hindoue* by Général L. de Beylié, published AD 1907, *Indian Art Delhi* by Sir George Watt, published in AD 1903, *Outlines of Chinese Art* by John C. Ferguson, published AD 1918.

Prince Damrong admitted that from AD 1887 forward, in the reign of King Rama V, he had gained more knowledge from antique samples and archaeological reports that had been sent from India to Siam. (Narisara Nuvadtivongs and Damrong Rajanubhab, Vol. 22, 1962, p. 132). King Rama V visited India in AD 1862 but he did not visit Bodh Gaya (Sahai, 2003, p. 13) probably because the restoration was not completed. However, in AD 1891 when Prince Damrong visited Europe and India, he found that Bodh Gaya was restored properly by Indian’s Government (Narisara Nuvadtivongs and Damrong Rajanubhab, Vol. 11, 1962, p. 275). The information about arts and archaeology from India was published and circulated to a wider audience group. The lists of books both princes used proved their enthusiasm in the progress of arts and archaeology from western academics.

#### **2.2.4.3 Examination from different sources**

In San Somdet, examination from different sources is another method in knowledge formation of art history study. For example;

Prince Naris noticed that initially Phra Thep Bidon sculpture was an idol but later was transformed into a Buddha image; however, he did not know which Buddha image it was (Narisara Nuvadtivongs and Damrong Rajanubhab, Vol. 13, 1962, p. 214). Prince Damrong researched from at least three sources to answer this question. From the Written Royal Chronicle of Chakri Dynasty in King Rama I, collection by Chaophraya Tiphakonrawong (Kham Bunnag), in the story of Phra Thep Bidon, under the section of constructing Wat Phra Kaew.

“...Ordered to bring Phra Thepbidon, which is the image of Somdet Phra Ramathipbodi (U-thong), the founder of the old capital [Ayutthaya], and transform into silver-and-gold-gilded Buddha image, establishing in viharn [the hall]. The hall was entitled by the king as Hor Phra Thepbidon...”

(Narisara Nuvadtivongs and Damrong Rajanubhab, Vol. 13, 1962, p. 229).

From that statement, Prince Damrong thought that Phra Thep Bidon was initially an idol then later was made into a Buddha image. When being transported to Bangkok, the Buddha image fell apart and needed a restoration. After restoration, King Rama I ordered the construction of the Hall of Phra Thep Bidon in Wat Phra Kaew (Figure 6).

Prince Damrong found another source to support his opinion which is a draft on a restoration of Wat Phra Kaew in King Rama III. He found relating content in the draft; as well as other useful description

about constructions during King Rama I reign. He also used evidence from field exploration and informed Phraya Boran Rachathanin, the expert on Ayutthaya's art, to support his opinion (Narisara Nuvadtivongs and Damrong Rajanubhab, Vol. 13, 1962, p. 229). However, both princes realized that "knowledge can be changed" from new discoveries. Prince Naris admitted that "*what I have not known is infinite...*" (Narisara Nuvadtivongs and Damrong Rajanubhab, Vol. 18, 1962, p. 205).



**Figure 6:** The Image of Buddha that Believed to Be Phra Thep Bidon in Prasat Phra Thep Bidon (Sukhasvasti, 1992, p. 318)

These examples show that both princes conducted examinations from many sources, i.e., documents, legends, oral stories, excavations. They were also open-minded to accept new discoveries to produce further knowledge.

#### **2.2.4.4 Collecting information from field exploration**

Both princes visited many places in Siam due to their bureaucratic business which allowed for opportunities to receive empirical information. For example, Prince Naris went to Ayutthaya to observe the real place and collect data for analyzing architecture. He speculated about the outline of Viharn Somdet Throne Hall in Ayutthaya that it was between *prang style* (a form of architecture is adapted from Angkorian architecture) and *prasat style* (the building is stacked with cascading spiers). He discovered that in the middle space of the hall there was *hor phra* (Buddha pray hall) with an elevated floor, as well as many piles of bricks and mortars around. The excavation found four pillars and crystal Buddha image's knees in the pile of bricks. Prince Naris assumed that the space was the Buddha pray hall and Viharn Somdet Throne Hall initially was in a *prang style*. The pile of the remains implied that it could not be the *prasat style* (Narisara Nuvadtivongs and Damrong Rajanubhab, Vol. 23, 1962, p. 122-129).

Prince Damrong had more opportunities gaining knowledge from field exploration due to his position as Minister of Interior Ministry, 1882-1915, allowing him to conduct civil service business around the country. He recorded historical and archaeological information at every place he visited (Diskul, 1963). This journal was called "*Rai ngan kan doen thang sam ruad*" (Reports on exploration) and was marked as one of the civic servant's duty.

Even after he left from his administrating position, Prince Damrong continually wrote his journals as the responsibility of his position at the Vachirayana Library until AD 1933. Working with George Cœdès, he went for archaeological exploration in major cities examining, recording and analyzing as later explained in the San Somdet. For example, when he visited *Pha-yap Monthon* (subdivisions of Siam at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century) administrative region, he explored three old temples in Lamphun: Wat Phrathat Haripunchai, Wat Phra Yuen and Wat Kukud (Figure 7). He suggested that Chedi of Wat Phra Yuen imitated Jetiya vihara from Ananta Chedi in Bagan. He noted on Wat Kukud at that time it was empty that

*"...the body of Kukud was prang in Bodh Gaya style, made from laterite. There are two laterite buildings I have found in this region, which are Phrathat Haripunchai and Kukud. Others buildings are made of bricks. Therefore, this Kukud is no doubt an authentic one...next ruins is also ku resembling as Kukud but smaller and made of bricks"*

(Narisara Nuvadtivongs and Damrong Rajanubhab, Vol. 2, 1962, p. 69)





**Figure 7:** Chedi Kukud, Wat Kukud, Lamphun

In the King Rama V's era, when Prince Damrong was the director of town hall's construction in Nakhon Pathom county, he found a silver coin with a conch shell on one side and a fish on the other under mandapa. He investigated and found some more in U-thong city. He doubted that they were currency used in Nakhon Pathom, at the time it was a capital, or they were taken from other places. He took photographs of them and sent them to the British Museum in London for more information. The reply noted that these coins were also found in Bagan (Narisara Nuvadtivongs and Damrong Rajanubhab, Vol. 10, 1962, p. 122).

The examples above show that both princes received empirical knowledge, e.g., artistic pattern, building plans, material from visiting real places and exchanging information for examination.

#### **2.2.4.5 Analysis with scientific tools**

From his study of imprinted Buddha votive tablets, Prince Damrong suggested that *-pancha antarathan* (five deteriorations prophecy) was the initial reason for creating votive tablets. When the British soldier Colonel Oswald Bailey, an expert on Tibet and Asia study, visited Bangkok, Prince Damrong escorted him to the National Museum and inquired about raw-dirt, imprinted Buddha votive tablets in Mahayana. The explanation he received was that was a custom in Tibet. After respectful monks deceased and cremated, the remains were brought to mix with dirt and pressed with image of Buddha or Bodhisattva. Prince Damrong tried to prove the authenticity of raw dirt by sending samples of votive tablets to Ministry of Transport and Ministry of Shipping of United Kingdom for scientific examination. The result of the tested votive tablets contained plain dirt as well as a mixture of phosphate element which was probably bone extracts. The scientific-proved evidence supported his assumption on the creation of imprinted votive tablets that the mixture ingredients including the remains of monks' bone was intended for their merits and would transcend the fulfillment of Bodhisattva state in the future (Narisara Nuvadtivongs and Damrong Rajanubhab, Vol. 10, 1962, p. 111). In this study of San Somdet, this is the only time that scientific investigation was used. However, it could be difficult for that time in Thailand because the new scientific method i.e., radio carbon, thermoluminescence, had just been initiated (Krairiksh, 1990).

#### **2.2.4.6 Dating of artifacts**

Dating of artifacts is important in art history study. It is used when there is a lack of written documents or the remaining written documents are not accord with artistic evidence. Both princes used dating of artifacts as follows:

##### **1) Dating relating through legends, chronicles or inscriptions**

For example, Chedi Phu Kao Thong at Ayutthaya (Figure 8), Prince Naris suggested that *"...Phra Chedi Phu Kao Thong...I have noticed that lotus under the southern base is foreign lotus not Thai, however the body on the southern base is Thai chedi..."* (Narisara Nuvadtivongs and Damrong Rajanubhab, Vol. 12, 1962, p. 186). Prince Damrong agreed with Prince Naris about the different artistic patterns and wrote back *"...Phra Chedi Phu Kao Thong at Ayutthaya, I believe strongly that initially it must be built in Mon style because the base was more spacious than Thai chedi..."* (Narisara Nuvadtivongs and Damrong Rajanubhab, Vol. 12, 1962, p. 189). and *"...the base line was broad like Mon chedi..."* (Narisara Nuvadtivongs and Damrong Rajanubhab, Vol. 26, 1962, p. 90).



**Figure 8:** Chedi Phu Kao Thong in Ayutthaya

Prince Damrong conducted research in the Written Royal Chronicle Vol. 2 and found that King Borommakot had ordered to restore Wat Phu Kao Thong for 11 months until it was finished. After seeing the remains of Chedi Phu Kao Thong, Prince Damrong thought that King Borommakot ordered to disassemble the old body of Mon style down to the base; and then used that base to be the southern base and had built a new Thai chedi in the middle. Prince Damrong also analyzed King Borommakot's reconstruction as an intention to eradicate Mon's power by transforming Chedi Phu Kao Thong into a Thai chedi (Narisara Nuvadtivongs and Damrong Rajanubhab, Vol. 12, 1962, p. 189).

There are more examples about using legends for dating of artifacts. When Prince Damrong visited Wat Phratat Haripunchai in Lamphun, he saw a building called *viharn lavo* (Lavo or Lavapura is an ancient Thai kingdom) legend said that it was once where a Buddha image, brought by Queen Chammadevi, was installed. However, Prince Damrong had heard that the Buddha image that was placed there was not the authentic as told by legend. To prove his doubt, Prince Damrong followed the Prince of Lamphun to see the real one hidden in Tripitaka and Buddhist texts collecting hall.

*"...have found the real Phra Lavo which is a molded sculpture, same height as a human, the face was in the Khmer-Lavo style, vitarka mudra in the same style as Buddha images in Phra Pathomchedi. Unfortunately, the torso is missing, what is left are the head, the bosom, two hands and two feet. All parts molded with the same allied gold metal [bronze]. No doubt it is a Lavo Buddha image. If Queen Chammadevi had installed the Buddha image as they have said, so it must be no other but this one."*

(Narisara Nuvadtivongs and Damrong Rajanubhab, Vol. 2, 1962, p. 68)

The example above shows Prince Damrong's analysis of the artistic style of that Buddha image as Khmer-Lavo style; the style also matched to the legend of Queen Chammadevi who conquered Haripunchai (old capital of Lamphun) and brought a Buddha image which Prince Damrong believed to be the same one.

## **2) Dating by comparison artistic patterns**

Both Princes agreed on the notion that Ramayana sketching book (Figure 9) was prepared for the major restoration of murals in the corridors around Wat Phra Kaew. Prince Naris studied the drawing lines in that book and suggested there were from a collection of a few artisans *"...however, I know they were from King Rama III's era because kao-mai [mountain-and-tree backgrounds] were drawn in Chinese style, the city had some Chinese buildings, prasat were drawn in wiman-style. All were popular in that time..."* (Narisara Nuvadtivongs and Damrong Rajanubhab, Vol. 2, 1962, p. 112). His opinion proved that he used artistic patterns for periodic identification, i.e., drawings of Chinese-style mountain-and-tree background, the mix between Thai wiman-style buildings and Chinese-style buildings.



**Figure 9:** Ramayana Sketching Book (Matchon, 2016)

Another example is the time when Prince Damrong visited Suphanburi, he suggested Palilayaka Buddha image as follows:

*"...I had a closer look and am certain that the Buddha image was very ancient. It should have been made prior or at least at the same time as the beginning of Ayutthaya's capital. The Buddha's face was in Dvaravati style, like the central Buddha image in Wat Phra Pathom"*

(Narisara Nuvadtivongs and Damrong Rajanubhab, Vol.26, 1962, p. 88).

His opinion shows that he compared between artistic patterns as a method to analyze dating of artifacts.

### **3) Dating through artifact's materials**

An example of dating through artifact's materials is when Prince Damrong visited Chiang Saen, he noticed that two kinds of materials were used for making the Buddha image, which were metal and crystal. He believed crystal was brought by Haw wandering traders from Hunnam, Southern China and then it was made by local Chiang Saen sculptors before spreading these products to other cities according to his explanation:

*"...Notice the characteristics of the crystal Buddha images since Phra Puttabutsayarat, I see that they were imitated Lanka style, so I assume the making of crystal Buddha images in Northern region happened after accepting Lankawong [Buddhist sect from Lanka] to this country, not before 1800 or 1900 B.E. ..."*

(Narisara Nuvadtivongs and Damrong Rajanubhab, Vol. 12, 1962, p. 109).

This statement shows Prince Damrong's belief that crystal Buddha images were made in the same time Siam accepted Lankawong sect which passed their influence through Chiang Saen. However, dating through artifacts' materials might be incorrect, because materials are just one factor. Materials also were restricted by artists' selection. In dating, the comparison of art styles is more important than materials.

## **3. CONCLUSION**

As seen in San Somdet, both Prince Naris and Prince Damrong used various methods to inform Thai Art Historical knowledge as follow: examination from their memories, discussion or inquiry from other scholars, research from written documents as well as sources, field exploration, analysis through scientific investigation and tools, dating of artifacts by studying legends, chronicles, inscriptions, by comparison of art styles and by materials of the artifacts. Although these methods are considered not an exact criterion in present Art History's methodology, these attempts show the transition of knowledge formation of Thai Art History. The knowledge taken from San Somdet is still powerful to Thai academics today.

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