

# SIMPLICITY AND INDEPENDENCE: THE BEAUTY IN ISAN PAINTINGS IN THE MEKONG REGION

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## ABSTRACT

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This research article is aimed at studying the beauty and expression of Isan paintings in the Mekong region and appreciating the beauty of the paintings. The study sites are Wat Pho Kham, Wat Hua Wiang Rang Si and Wat Phuttha Sima in That Phanom District, Nakhon Phanom Province. On the study results, it is found that the concept of beauty in Isan paintings in the Mekong region involves simplicity and independence. The simplicity and independence are expressed through 3 elements: executing the painting using lines to create the boundaries of the images, color usage and composition. The simple and free presentation of the paintings is a method beautifying the paintings in a way that does not adhere to the strictness of using lines and colors and the sequential story arrangement in keeping with the style of the Thai traditional paintings of the artisans of the Central Royal Court. This facilitates comprehension of the stories through the images. The objective of this manner of painting is to focus on communicating Buddhist content and community traditions straightforwardly so that it can be understood easily and reach all classes of the population.

**Keywords:** Simplicity; independence; beauty; Isan paintings

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The character of Thai paintings varies by taste, and they probably have the modes or styles that are expressed diversely according to the social conditions, the environment of the area, or the ages and schools of artisans, and also the ideas of the painters. With these dissimilar characteristics, the paintings can be categorized into 2 main types: the schools of royal and folk artisans. It is conventionally thought that artisans will take the royal types paintings as models or masterpieces and the paintings of folk artisans are simply the creation of locals. The folk paintings thus have the character that shows simplicity, free thoughts and deep emotions. They display the traditions of the local folks. They are the evidence that well exhibits the special characteristics of the thoughts and minds of the local people (Fine Arts Department, 1990).

In studying the beauty of paintings, it is necessary to consider 3 elements: the painter, the painting and the viewer. Painters are knowledgeable about the content they create and possess competence in conveying stories through paintings and from the experience they have accrued. The execution of paintings in temples makes it believable that the painters have the faith and intention of producing Buddhist art and the craftsmanship remains to be seen. Beautiful paintings hence reflect the tastes of the artisans and the viewers, who are both parts of society, with common knowledge, experience and imagination.

In paintings, the concept of beauty is based on the form and content, that is, form refers to the concrete element in the artwork as opposed to the content, which is abstract, especially in visual artwork; “form” means the same as “figure”. Content refers to what is expressed in the artwork, or the meaning, the message, that integrates values in terms of wisdom, aesthetics, spirituality and story advancement (Thaothong et al., 2001). What is most important in creation is the intention and attempt to convey the story so as to allow the people in the community to come to understand the messages of the image that appears and to manifest the value of the painting to oneself, the temple and the community. Thus, the comprehension of the story and that of the beauty of the image must be related.

Therefore, this research intends to examine the concept of beauty expressed by the painters through the paintings regarding how the concept is expressed and why the paintings are presented the way they are so that the meanings of the images and their beauty can be comprehended in light of the local context.

The research’s objective is to study the beauty of Isan paintings in the Mekong region in the aspect of the presentation of the images in order to comprehend the local concept of beauty.

## 2. STUDY METHOD

This research is qualitative and completed with an interpretative analysis. The study sites are Wat Pho Kham, Wat Hua Wiang Rang Si and Wat Phuttha Sima in That Phanom District, Nakhon Phanom Province. The analysis is presented through a descriptive analysis method and through illustrations.

## 3. STUDY RESULTS

What is beauty? For beauty to be produced there must be a congruous combination of both the form and the content for the artwork to offer value and benefit for observers. Both are elements of great importance in paintings that are combined to create unity. An image that is eye-catching with the lines, colors and composition makes its content clear and it is able to communicate meaning for the observers. At the study sites, most of the paintings have been painted by local artisans. The appearance is simple, expressed candidly, straightforwardly, and not in conformity with custom (Thaothong et al., 2001). Nevertheless, a major characteristic of the beauty of the paintings studied is the blending with the form of the traditional paintings as well. The researcher has synthesized the data and is of the opinion that the beauty in Mekong region Isan paintings involves simplicity and independence. Simplicity, in this article, refers drawing to present a painting with straightforwardness and clarity with an intention to tell a story. Therefore, the form of expression is not complicated. Independence here means drawing imaginary scenes. The shape or figure of portraits, animals, or events that may not be realistic.

The concept of simplicity and independence being beautiful refers to the clear and straightforward presentation of paintings employing lines and colors, the presentation of figures, and also composition, creating images that are distinct in presenting the information to narrate the stories. The mode of expression shows no complexity. The simplicity and independence are caused by the use of local material and the community’s taste, perception, and understanding of the content of the images. The painters are free to paint according to their imagination. The figures, shapes, sizes of the images of humans, animals, or occurrences may make the Isan paintings by the Mekong physically unrealistic. The use of colors that are not vivid, distinct like in the traditional paintings is due to the fact that the Isan paintings by the Mekong focus on presenting images that convey the meaning of the subject. Simplicity and independence are the hallmarks of the beauty of the Mekong region Isan. They are produced via the following elements.

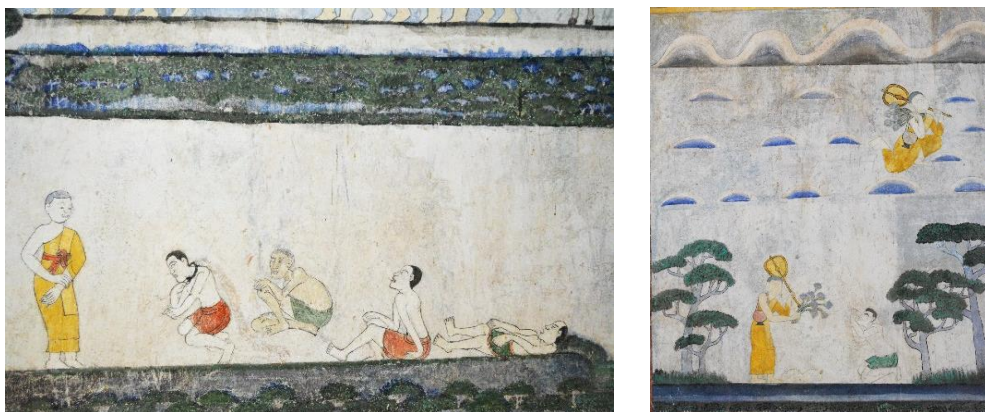
1) The most obvious characteristic of the simplicity and independence involves using lines to create distinct figures, which are called “outlines”. Most of the paintings present two-dimensional images aimed at communicating the stories straightforwardly, with the lines and the images of humans, animals and plants.



**Figure 1:** A Painting at Wat Hua Wiang Rang Si

Figure 1 shows the simplicity of drawing lines that use clear contours. Drawing elephant and people with black lines on a light brown background shows a 2D image that aims to communicate the story straightforward and uncomplicated manner. From the sample painting presented here, one can see the feature, that is, drawing lines with dark, distinct colors contrasted with a cream or light-colored background, allowing the shapes of the images to be clearly seen, straightforwardly revealing the characteristics of the humans, animals and plants, serving to narrate the story. As observers see the painting, they can immediately recognize the appearance, character and mood of the image. The painter used black or dark colors to draw the picture in order to make the outlines distinct, using fine lines. The use of fine lines with the characters is in order to present the delicacy and movement while thick lines are used to paint the plants or mountains.

2) The simplicity and independence in color and tone usage are for the purpose of focusing on the expression of the content. The special functions, which are the most important, of colors are to render the mood by themselves directly, to render value and volume to the shape and to render feeling and emotion through the combination of the colors and tone themselves. Tones have the 2 dimensions of width and length (Nimsamer, 2014). For the colors used in Mekong region Isan paintings, largely involve light colors used for the background. The outline of the figures are drawn with dark colors to present clear two-dimensional images. On the coloring of the images, importance is given to contrasting them with the cream or dust-colored backgrounds, and the colors used to express the content of the images are realistic ones: green represents plants and blue represents clouds, for instance. The colors used are a few essential ones. On the shapes of the painted images, there are both realistic and unrealistic proportions of size. The color usage is congruous with realistic, natural conditions. When the lines and colors are together, they render simplicity to the images, communicating the content in a clear, straightforward manner.



**Figure 2-3:** Paintings at Wat Pho Kham

Figures 2 and 3 illustrate the simplicity of using few colors on a light background. Each character has only one color to represent the status of monk or villagers. Trees and clouds also show only one color, making the picture natural and distinctive. From these sample images, one can see simple color usage, that is, the realistic rendering of colors, such as the white and blue colors of the clouds, the color of the plants, and the color of the monks' robes, and the colors were used only in small quantities as necessary in order to convey the meanings of the images. The color usage that is in line with the experience and perception of the viewers not only makes the images beautiful with the colors but also allows the stories of the images to be understood clearly.



**Figure 4:** A Painting at Wat Phuttha Sima

Figure 4 shows the use of only black color with partly dark green paint in framing the Earth Goddess. Animals are also painted in black to portray evil. However, the dominant color is the yellow of the Buddha's robe. From this example, colors are used only in small quantities. Black lines are used in drawing outlines distinctly. Most of the colors are monochromatic colors, that is, colors with close values, or maybe with many shades. In the image, one can see a characteristic of Isan native paintings, that is, the use of light cream as the background color, for the drawing of the characters with black and indigo to be executed with distinctness. The contours and shapes of the characters are asymmetrical, according to the artisan's imagination, which was focused on conveying content rather than realism. Also, for the content element, animals found in the local area are commonly seen.

A scholar commented on this image by saying that almost no colors are used in it. It is like a drawing. Maybe there were not enough colors, or it was the painter's intention to use only few colors while making the aesthetic value apparent with lines instead. For the outlines that are forms designating the shapes of the characters, plants, palace, and the images of animals symbolizing great demons, the painter uses black. As for the lines that represent the water in the ocean, which the Earth Goddess squeezes out from her hair to the point that the great demon is in turmoil, the painter uses light grey or light blue. Colors will not be apparent because they almost blend in with the white wall. The primary colors contributing to rendering brightness and conspicuousness to the image, cassumunar ginger green is employed for the faces of ogres and demons, bird's wings, grass and also the color of the orchids.

3) The simplicity and independence in composition are of great importance, enabling the viewers to understand the stories clearly. For example, the presence of the empty spaces that present an eye-soothing image with dark lines contrasting with the cream background, renders conspicuousness to the image, and the use of only small quantities of colors renders a realistic and eye-soothing appearance, and this is combined with lax composition. For some images, although the events are major ones, the persons and incidents are not separated by colors or partitions (stripes or lines between images that separate them into compartments), or if they are, the separation is done to a rather small extent. This characteristic is a major trait of Mekong region Isan paintings, which mostly employ a method of using empty spaces to narrate and define stories and characters in order to make them conspicuous.

Pairoj Samosorn (1989) explains that the overall composition of Isan paintings is similar to a *nang talung* performance. The wall inside and the image outside the ordination hall are the performance screen. The characters in postures are puppets that accord with the story through which the painter decorates the wall. Between one scene and another the painter uses striped lines as a substitute for the separation of each part of the story. If not, he leaves the spaces around the image compositions empty to prevent confusion regarding the content of one part and that of another. The empty space thus has value, being like an area for eye rest, such as



spacing sentences or starting a line of an article in writing. To embellish the coloring of the attire and ornaments, the outlines are made distinct and the details executed in some parts for to create the contours of the characters. Thus, the focus of the composition is the characters, and the mood of the images seem bright and cheerful.



**Figure 5:** A Painting at Wat Hua Wiang Rang Si

Figure 5 shows the composition of the image by providing spaces or emptiness for eye comfort which makes the picture easy to understand. Between the images, there is a proportional separation to indicate camouflage a close-up view. From the sample painting at Wat Hua Wiang Rang Si, it is noticeable that the painter composed the picture with empty spaces between images with few to no partition lines to separate them. Nonetheless, upon contemplating the painting, the story can be comprehended with no need of partition lines. Otherwise, rows of small plants are used as story-dividing lines. Besides rendering simplicity and an eye-soothing quality, in one respect, this also renders a light, comfortable feel and movement to the image in accordance with the order of appearance. The painter was free to execute the painting with free positioning, using empty spaces as separating boundaries. The empty spaces also inspire the observer's imagination in relation to the story sequentially without much restriction of thought.

Furthermore, on using spaces to divide the narration, the painter is free to focus on executing a painting to tell stories giving more space to the story he wants to communicate than other stories, for instance, giving more space to *Nemirāja Jātaka* than other *jātakas*.



**Figure 6:** A Painting at Wat Phuttha Sima

Figure 6 shows the free arrangement of the story. The narrative's space does not have to be the same amount. In addition, the painter also wrote a mix story telling between the Jataka stories in the Tripitaka and the folk Jataka. However, the local allegory is played in a lower position than the Jataka in the Tripitaka. From the sample painting at Wat Phuttha Sima, it is noticeable that the painter gave much importance to the story of Nemirāja traveling to hell, giving more space to this story than other *jātakas*. This shows that the painter was free to paint an image of the story he wants to freely communicate, without an obligation to give equal space to each of the stories in *Daśa-jātakas*.

The mixture of the elements of line, color and composition for simple and free presentation renders naivety, clarity and straightforwardness to the images. The simplicity and independence are also presented through the content of the images, such as the images about the context of the community, animals and humans, which show a painting style that is not complex, in line with simple cultural landscapes.



**Figure 7:** A Painting at Wat Phuttha Sima

Figure 7 shows a simple drawing which are easy for the eyes by drawing buffaloes in thin black lines. Simplicity and independence are the elements that render conspicuousness to Isan paintings. They are caused by the use of lines and colors and the composition. The unrealism of the proportion of the images does not cause the beauty to be less. Instead, it is with a certain charm that shows the painters' style that is focused on the content and ideas, rather than the paintings themselves. The composition with empty spaces also allows for a better understanding of the images. "Spacing with balance" is a simple technique that provides entertainment, a sequence and regions for eye focus, and it enables gazing at a certain spot freely, inducing the imagination fully. As the stories and thoughts are communicated clearly, images will be clearly be formed in the minds of the observers.

#### 4. SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION OF THE STUDY RESULTS

The creation of Mekong region Isan paintings is focused on both beauty and content. From the examples of the study on the beauty in Mekong region Isan paintings, it is noticeable that the painters tried to create paintings to convey the meaning to the observers through various techniques, in terms of drawing, color, space and composition. For all these, the main elements of the beauty in the Mekong region Isan paintings are the simplicity and independence of creation, which results in unique artistic local identity. The primary objectives are the understanding of the content and the appeal to the community's taste in accordance with its common understanding, knowledge and experience. As Kirati Bunchuea says, "The primary value or function of art is affording mental health to those capable of having aesthetic experiences. Artwork is humans' creative work that can fulfill the needs of the viewers on each occasion" (Bunchuea, 1979). Although the Mekong region Isan paintings that were studied lack the exquisiteness as characteristic of Thai traditional paintings, they can communicate clearly, straightforwardly the style of local art, suiting the needs and understanding of the people in the community and can generating knowledge and emotions in the people in the community through the beauty of the local paintings.

For the paintings studied, the most perceptible feature of beauty is simplicity. The expression of Isan paintings is focused on straightforward communication. In terms of images, this is apparent in the use of lines to draw figures, the use of colors in accordance with nature and drawing clearly with black or dark lines to create distinct figures. Despite the absence of realistic or symmetrical proportion, in the researcher's view,

there is a certain charm that renders character to the paintings in the Mekong region. The simple and free composition is a method of rendering beauty to Isan paintings without adherence to the strictness in sequential story arrangement. Instead, lines and image division by natural elements or empty spaces can be employed to allow observers to comprehend the images without confusion and inspire their imagination. Thus, most of the eye-soothing paintings look simple and gentle. Nevertheless, all the creation arose from the desire to communicate worldly and spiritual ideas for observers to comprehend unity, meaning the combination or organization of the parts to form oneness which is the organized and balanced integration of the story, story line and shapes (Nimsamer, 2014). The Mekong region Isan paintings appear to have dull rather than beautiful colors, and have the local characteristics that are simple, uncomplicated, free, and in line with the emotional, intimate and artistic experience of diverse observers. The unity is produced by the straightforward, simple expression with a focus on the content.

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