

THAI INSPIRED: THAILAND THROUGH THE EYES OF WESTERN ARTISTS

Dale Konstanz

Fine and Applied Arts Division, Mahidol University International College, Thailand

ABSTRACT

Corresponding author:
Dale Konstanz
dale.kon@mahidol.edu

Received: 12 April 2023
Revised: 19 August 2023
Accepted: 27 August 2023
Published: 28 December 2023

Citation:
Konstanz, D. (2023). *Thai
inspired: Thailand through the
eyes of Western artists.*
*Humanities, Arts and Social
Sciences Studies*, 23(3),
708–720.

Orientalists often focus on Japan and China, and perhaps India and parts of the Middle East, regarding the influence of Asian cultures and Eastern artistic practices on Western art, but few seem to be aware that several prominent artists from the US and Europe have also been inspired by the rich culture of Thailand. Andy Warhol, Robert Rauschenberg, Marina Abramović and her former partner, Ulay, as well as photographers Martin Parr and Andreas Gursky, among others, have traveled to Thailand. The main unifying factor is that during and after their visits each of them produced art that explores concepts related to Thai society, traditions, and beliefs while incorporating a range of classic Thai motifs and other aspects that reference Thai people, as well as Thailand's natural and built environments into their work. The scope of the paper focuses specifically on Thailand with its distinctive culture, heritage, socio-political history, and aesthetics, albeit it would be worth exploring Western artists' visits to other parts of Southeast Asia in subsequent articles. Specific artworks created by these artists during or immediately after their visits to Thailand were analyzed to better understand how the culture has been interpreted. The objective is to determine whether these artworks reinforce stereotypes of Thai culture and rely on clichés and common misconceptions. Since the work was created by highly perceptive artists in the late 20th Century and beyond, Thai culture has generally been portrayed with fresh, new perspectives. Yet, since the visits were short-term, theoretically it was not feasible for some of these artists to express a truly deep understanding of Thai culture through their work.

Keywords: Orientalism; Thailand; Asia; Western artists; late modernism; contemporary art; culture

1. INTRODUCTION

While compiling visual research for another project, references to Andy Warhol's travels in Thailand were discovered. Even more significant in the findings was that he applied what he observed in Thailand into his illustrative work upon returning to New York. Although more details about his experience in Thailand were sought out, few sources seemed to exist. It was difficult to locate references that even mentioned his 1956 visit to Bangkok. This revelation about Warhol traveling to Thailand prompted a search to find out if other well-known artists had come to Thailand and been inspired by their trips.

The criteria for the selection of artists included in the research involves the availability of references, as well as the international reputation and visibility of the artists and their work. This study is not intended as

a comprehensive survey of all Western artists who have visited Thailand and have been influenced by what they observed. Rather, it features an array of Western artists from the late 20th and early 21st centuries at different stages in their careers, with varying intentions and with diverse cultural backgrounds, who have been there and have creatively benefitted from their experiences.

It is curious why the work produced by these artists who visited Thailand is not more widely known. It is also surprising that more art historians within Thailand and abroad have not written about this subject. Perhaps this relates to the nationalistic nature of Thailand and much of its art. According to Thai artist and lecturer, Kata Sangkhae, in his PhD dissertation about what it means to be Thai, the official centric identity of Thailand was developed to transform a diverse local culture to become a single Thai national identity. In his viewpoint, this led to a focus on “bureaucratic, institutionalized art that promoted mass national consciousness” (Sangkhae, 2016). But this does not really explain why others outside of Thailand seem to lack interest in Thai artworks. Perhaps it is because many think of Thailand as a tropical paradise and developing country, rather than a place where prominent artists from the West come to create work inspired by the culture.

It is conceivable that this will continue to change with the Bangkok Art Biennial launched by the Bangkok Art Biennial Foundation. At each biennial, artists from around the world have exhibited their work in locations throughout the city. One of the most well-known artists who participated in the Biennales was Marina Abramović. While she was in Bangkok she gave talks, collaborated with a group of young Thais, and taught her method related to being in the present as part of her Marina Abramović Institute (MAI) at the Bangkok Art and Culture Center (Abramović, 2022).

In addition to bringing attention to the fact that certain prominent artists have been influenced by their visits to Thailand, it is also necessary to look at whether the works are worthy of being recognized as important pieces of these artists. While there are many factors in judging the significance of artworks within the realm of art history and in relation to the careers of individual artists, one factor that should be considered is whether the artists were able to avoid clichés about other cultures in their work.

Specific artworks created by Western artists during or immediately after their visits to Thailand have been analyzed to better understand how they interpreted Thai culture. By examining the work, it becomes clear whether the artists relied on clichés and common misconceptions or if they were able to arrive at new insights about the culture.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

As few sources focusing on the art of prominent Western artists who have visited Thailand are available, the methodology involved working with several gallerists, art dealers, museums, and art foundations to gather more information and to secure copyrights to the images of their work. This included the Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, the Robert Rauschenberg Foundation, the Marina Abramović Institute (MAI), Gagosian Gallery in New York, the Laif Agency in Cologne, and Magnum Photos in London. At the Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, they possess a collection of Warhol's simple line drawings he created in Thailand, as well as his passport stamped upon his arrival to the country. As part of the Rauschenberg Foundation's archive, they are in possession of information about Rauschenberg's visit to Thailand, as well as the collection of prints he made here. MAI provided the video footage and stills from her work created in Thailand, as well as documents focusing on her travels. Other galleries and agencies visited and contacted were able to offer further images of artworks and additional documentation that proved useful in understanding the artists and their work created during or after visits to Thailand.

In addition to materials from these organizations, some texts were employed that relate to the topic of the positive influence of Eastern culture on Western art. This includes the books, *Smile of the Buddha: Eastern Philosophy and Western Art from Monet to Today* by Jacquelyn Baas (2005); *Grain of Emptiness: Buddhism-inspired Contemporary Art* by Mary Jane Jacob (2010); *The Meeting of Eastern and Western Art* (Sullivan, 1998), published by the University of California Press; *The Third Mind: American Artists Contemplate Asia, 1860–1989* by Vivien Greene, Harry Harootunian, Richard King, Alexandra Munroe, Ikuyo Nakagawa, David W. Patterson, Kathleen Pyne, J. Thomas Rimer, D. Scott Atkinson, Kristine Stiles, and Bert Winther-Tamaki (2009); *Nothing and Everything - The Influence of Buddhism on the American Avant Garde: 1942–1962* by Ellen Perlman (2012); as well as an article by Hwa Young Caruso (2009) focusing on an exhibition about Western art influenced by Asian art curated by the Guggenheim Museum in New York in 2009.

Even though this literature focuses heavily on Buddhist art, there is little mention of Thai art in these texts. Many books concentrate on Japonisme, the 19th century art in France and other parts of Europe influenced by Japanese art, especially Ukiyo-e woodblock prints. One of the best known works on this subject is Frederick Harris's (2012) book, *Ukiyo-e: The Art of the Japanese Print*, published by Tuttle Publishing. In the

20th century, Japanese style continued to inspire many Western artists and designers, including the American architect, Frank Lloyd Wright.

There has also been much written on how Chinese art has been influential in 16th through 18th century European art. In addition to the Chinese influence on Western porcelain and ceramics, many Rococo artists, including Jean-Antoine Watteau, were inspired by Chinese style. One of the best-known sources for this subject is a book published by the Chinese University Press by Thomas Lee and Hongqi Li (1991), entitled, *China and Europe: Images and Influences in Sixteenth to Eighteenth Centuries*.

The few books that feature work created by Western artists during or after their visits to Thailand are photo books. As these titles focus on presenting the photography itself, there is little text besides relatively short introductions that explain the intentions of these photographers. There are several publications focusing on Martin Parr's work, including his photo books, *Life's a Beach* and *Small World* (Parr, 2013, 2007) which both include images taken in Thailand. In *Andreas Gursky: Bangkok* published by Steidl (Gursky et al., 2012), all the work in the book is Andreas Gursky's photos of the Chao Phraya River that runs through the capital city. More recent sources focusing on contemporary Thai art include Brian Curtin's (2021), *Essential Desires: Contemporary Art in Thailand* and David Teh's (2017), *Thai Art: Currencies of the Contemporary*, which also provided some insight into contemporary Thai culture. A chapter entitled, "Curating the Contemporary in Decolonial Spaces: Observations from Thailand on Curatorial Practice in Southeast Asia" in *A Companion to Curation* about curatorial practices in Thailand also proved to be insightful (Galligan, 2020).

In addition to gathering research about aesthetic influences of Eastern culture on Western art, a key source for understanding Orientalism comes from Edward W. Said, the founder of the academic field of postcolonial studies. Although his book, *Orientalism*, was written in 1978, many of the theories can still be applied here, especially as some of the art produced in Thailand by Western artists was created during the latter part of the twentieth century. According to Said,

Unlike the Americans, the French and British — less so the Germans, Russians, Spanish, Portuguese, Italians, and Swiss — have had a long tradition of what I shall be calling Orientalism, a way of coming to terms with the Orient that is based on the Orient's special place in European Western Experience. The Orient is not only adjacent to Europe; it is also the place of Europe's greatest and richest and oldest colonies, the source of its civilizations and languages, its cultural contestant, and one of its deepest and most recurring images of the Other. In addition, the Orient has helped to define Europe (or the West) as its contrasting image, idea, personality, experience. Yet none of this Orient is merely imaginative. The Orient is an integral part of European material civilization and culture. Orientalism expresses and represents that part culturally and even ideologically as a mode of discourse with supporting institutions, vocabulary, scholarship, imagery, doctrines, even colonial bureaucracies and colonial styles... (Said, 1978, p. 9).

Regarding artists adapting what they observe from other cultures in their work, Said wrote, "...cultures have always been inclined to impose complete transformations on other cultures, receiving these cultures not as they are but as, for the benefit of the receiver, as the way they ought to be. Yet the Orientalist makes it his work to be always converting the Orient from something into something else: he does this for himself, for the sake of his culture; in some cases, for what he believes is the sake of the Oriental" (Said, 1978, p. 67). In addition, many have written about Said's theories, critiquing his work, and adding their own interpretations about his ideas on Orientalism. Many believe that no matter how well-intentioned representations of the Orient are, they have always been part of a damaging discourse (Bertens, 2007, p. 79).

To better understand the perception of others toward Thailand and Thais, published studies relating to stereotypes of the country and the people were considered. Some of the research focused on American and foreign notions about Thailand, while one study for the Thai government was created to develop a strategy for changing the negative image of Thailand (Ngampornchai, 2007). As a method of comparison, an investigation on how Thais have tried to create an identity for themselves was taken into consideration. Because the construction of an identity does not always align with the perception of others, it is necessary to look at ways Thais have defined themselves. The first concept that Thais often refer to is *khwam pen Thai*, or Thainess, which relates to loyalty of what is known as the "three pillars of nation, religion, and monarchy". This concept was developed when Thailand formed a constitutional monarchy in 1932. At that time, Siam became Thailand, and all the inhabitants became 'Thai' emphasizing the civic duty of using Thai language and demonstrating the characteristics of 'Thainess' (Simpson, 2007).

More recently, the notion of Thai DNA has been developed by the Thai Ministry of Culture and applied in numerous ways within various fields of design and in promoting tourism to Thailand (Creative Thailand, 2023). The research conducted by this government agency concluded that Thailand is "fun, flexible, friendly, flavorful, and full of life". Although this seems rather contrived, there is some truth to the choice of these

particular words to represent Thai culture. One concept within the culture that Thais often focus on is “sanuk” which is roughly translated as fun. For Thais, the necessity of having fun can be seen as almost a philosophy or way of life. This is particularly evident in Thai advertising and in various forms of entertainment within the country. The term flexible, on the other hand, relates to the way Thais can skillfully adapt ideas from other cultures for their own needs, as well as to their own tastes. The reference to friendliness matches with the perception of others from abroad, so perhaps this is an accurate description. Flavorful relates directly to Thai food that contains spicy, sour, sweet, and salty tastes. Eating is a huge priority for most Thai people and a common greeting in the culture is, “have you eaten yet?”. Finally, the idea that Thais are full of life relates to the Buddhist philosophy of living in the present.

3. BACKGROUND

In 1956, Andy Warhol and his friend, Charles Lisanby visited Thailand as part of their trip around the world. Warhol was only 28 years old at the time, in the process of developing his early signature style and still focused on creating commercial illustration. As a keen observer of the world around him and with strong influences from American culture and New York, along with his Catholic and Eastern European roots, it is difficult to say how much this trip ultimately helped shape Andy’s aesthetic sensibilities. Regarding the excursion, the list of cities Warhol and Lisanby planned to visit was extensive. Some were just stop-offs where they would stay a night before continuing their voyage. Initially their Japan Airlines flight took them from New York to San Francisco, then to Honolulu where, after a short stay, they caught another flight to Kyoto. From there they traveled to Bangkok (Comenas, 2006).

While in the Kingdom, Warhol made observational line drawings of various aspects of traditional Thai culture, including temples, canals in Bangkok, and traditional Thai performers. One of his drawings features an iconic statue of a Singha (Figure 1), the Thai mythological lion, which he likely witnessed within the grounds of a temple. The Singhas are common symbols in Thai culture and are admired by many Thais. One of Thailand’s most popular beer brands is even named after them. The Singhas have Hindu origins, and the name derives from an ancient Sanskrit word that literally means “lion”. For Thais, the Singhas symbolize strength, power, courage, dignity, loyalty, leadership, and perseverance (Capistrano-Baker, 1994).



Figure 1: Andy Warhol, *Bangkok, Thailand*, 1956, Ballpoint Pen on Laid Paper, 14.1 x 10.4 in. (36 x 26.5 cm). (Artwork © The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, Inc./Artists Rights Society, ARS/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY) (Warhol, 1956)

In another drawing, Warhol focuses on a Thai dancer (Figure 2). Considering that Warhol later goes on to create many portraits, including those of Marilyn Monroe, it makes sense that he would be interested in drawing a figure. The attire of the dancer must have been fascinating to Warhol. As he later uses materials that glisten in his work, including a series with diamond dust (Krauss, 2000), it makes sense that he would have been inspired by the sparkly costumes of traditional Thai dancers. The illustrative style in these contour drawings is typical of his early illustrative style. What is unusual is that he is focusing on Thai culture rather than images that later made him famous: those featuring American popular culture. Warhol’s aesthetic was

most often based in the everyday. He once said, “There is beauty in everything, but not everyone sees it”. Therefore, it makes perfect sense that Warhol was focusing on typical images from Thai culture during his visit.

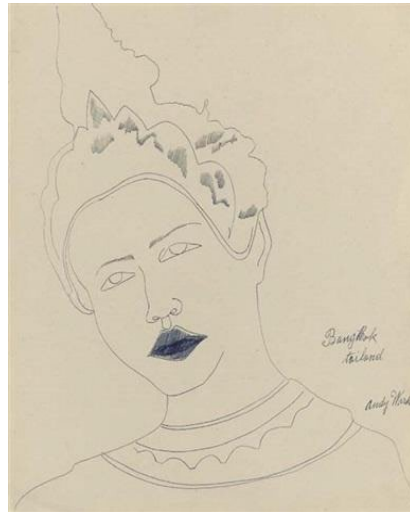


Figure 2: Andy Warhol, *Untitled (Bangkok, Thailand)*, ca. 1957–1958, Ink on Paper, 17 x 14 in. (43.2 x 35.5 cm). (Artwork © The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, Inc./Artists Rights Society, ARS/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY) (Warhol, n.d.)

It seems that few art historians are aware of Warhol's trip to Thailand and the drawings he created there. Granted these are not among Andy's most refined work, but rather merely small and simple line drawings. Most art historians focus on the shoe drawings that he made at that time, such as his illustration, *Legs and High Heels* (Figure 3). In December 1956, the Bodley Gallery showed Warhol's shoe drawings in an exhibition titled “Andy Warhol: The Golden Slipper Show or Shoes Shoe in America.” In the following month, *Life* magazine reprinted some of the works in a two-page spread in their January twenty-first issue describing the shoes as “made entirely of gold leaf ornamented with candy-box decorations” (Comenas, 2006).



Figure 3: Andy Warhol, *Detail of Untitled (Legs and High Heels)*, 1960, Gold Leaf, Ink, and stamped Gold Collage, 30.5 x 23 in. (77.5 x 59 cm). (Artwork © The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, Inc./Artists Rights Society, ARS/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY) (Warhol, 1960)

What is interesting about these drawings is the fact that the technique was derived from traditional Thai art that combines gold leaf and black lacquer. In an interview, years after their trip, Warhol's friend Charles Lisanby recalled how Andy was inspired by Thai art. “This whole thing when he [Andy Warhol] did the whole gold leaf thing. This was also a result of our trip because in Siam or Thailand in one of the museums there, he saw those marvelous pieces of furniture with gold leaf, and then, painting black, leaving areas of gold leaf showing. It is a typical Siamese type of decoration... And that, since he already had the black line, the blotted-

line, he thought of adding the gold leaf. In fact, he did these things, all these things, shortly after that [trip]" (Comenas, 2006).

Another American Pop Artist who traveled to Thailand is Robert Rauschenberg. His travels to Asia in the early 1980s were part of a world tour. Rauschenberg spent time in Thailand, Sri Lanka, and Japan, where he created suites of drawings. Later, Rauschenberg exhibited the work as part of what he called "ROCI: the Rauschenberg Overseas Culture Interchange" (Cowart, 1991). At the age of 48, and being in his mid-to-late career, it seems obvious that Rauschenberg was looking for new inspiration beyond American popular culture. During the 1980s, many prominent artists were looking outward embracing a more international approach and mindset.

During his visit to Thailand, Rauschenberg met with artists, academics, and the public to discuss the role of artists as global ambassadors for peace and intercultural understanding. What emerged from this trip was a series of mixed media solvent transfer drawings, as well as photographs and videos (Cowart, 1991). In the drawings that he made in Thailand, he applied iconic images such as elephants, statues of the Buddha, Thai boxers, and local flora and fauna. Each of these works on paper are simply titled *Thai*, along with a Roman numeral that denotes where it fits in the series. Although these artworks are relatively unknown, they are on par with many of Rauschenberg's more famous works conceptually and in terms of overlapping imagery, composition, and color.

In one of his mixed media drawings, entitled *Thai II* (Figure 4), the focal point is an appropriated line art illustration from a Thai educational textbook. In the illustration, two young Thai students are lined up in front of a large Buddha statue. The image also includes Thai writing and the symbol of a dharmachakra, or dharma wheel, the Buddhist symbol that represents the teachings of the Buddha and the Buddhist concept of the Noble Eightfold Path (Bodhi, 2006). Above the illustration of the statue and overlapping with the Buddha's head, is a series of three egg like shapes with what looks like caterpillars inside two of the ovoid forms. In the lower right corner of the work, blurred geometrical elements possibly from architectural sources are included, and above that there is an image of two faceless figures that appear to be embracing. There are also washes of color in some parts and a green brushstroke on one side. This configuration of disparate images montaged together with painterly elements is typical of Rauschenberg's style.



Figure 4: Robert Rauschenberg, *Thai II*, 1983, Solvent Transfer, Watercolor, Gouache, Tape on Japanese Dedication Board, 10.75 x 9.6 in. (26.7 x 24.3 cm). (Artwork © Robert Rauschenberg Foundation/Artists Rights Society, ARS/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY) (Rauschenberg, 1983a)

Another one of his works, *Thai IV* (Figure 5), features elephants and botanical elements. The work contains both photographic images of elephants and a line drawing illustration of an elephant with backwards text spelling "elephant school". Within the illustration is part of a map where the elephant appears larger than North America. In addition, naturalistic elements including a tree and flowers appear in the foreground, and there are also traditional Thai *phuang malai* flower offerings as part of the composition. Furthermore, areas of translucent orange and yellow are applied over some of the images, as well as textured blue brushstrokes.

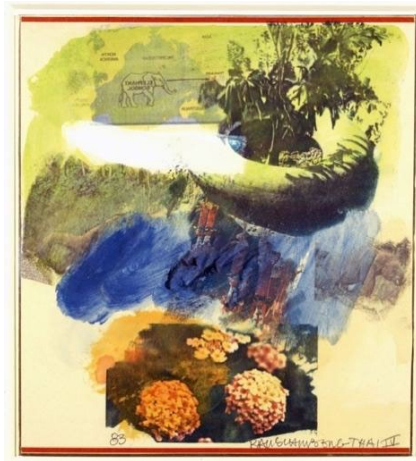


Figure 5: Robert Rauschenberg, *Thai IV*, 1983, Solvent Transfer, Watercolor, Gouache, Tape on Japanese Dedication Board, 10.75 x 9.6 in. (26.7 x 24.3 cm). (Artwork © Robert Rauschenberg Foundation/Artists Rights Society, ARS/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY) (Rauschenberg, 1983b)

In *Thai XII* (Figure 6), Rauschenberg combines images of two Muay Thai boxers, along with a butterfly, part of a topographic map, a detail of a wall mural from a Thai Buddhist temple, a shrine, and a Buddhist amulet featuring the image of a walking Buddha. When combining all these images and symbols together, the viewer can interpret the meaning in multiple ways. In addition, each image has its own meaning in Thai culture. For example, the depiction of the Buddha walking is a distinct feature in Thai art. While earlier Buddhist art had stressed the godly and king-like aspects of the Buddha while in the standing, reclining, or sitting postures, the Thai Buddha was sometimes shown walking. Thai images presented a new portrayal of the Buddha walking among the people emphasizing his earthly attributes and suggesting that Thai kings are close to the people (Fisher 1993).

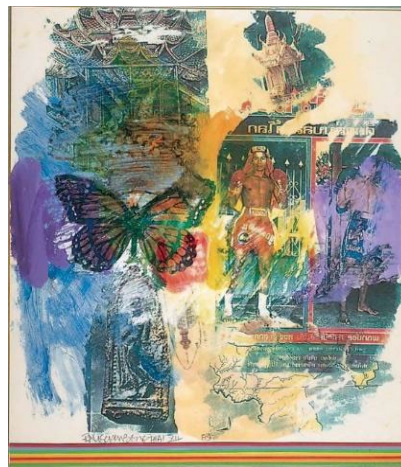


Figure 6: Robert Rauschenberg, *Thai XII*, 1983, Solvent Transfer, Watercolor, Gouache and Tape on Rag Board, 20.9 x 18.9 in. (53 x 49 cm). (Artwork © Robert Rauschenberg Foundation/Artists Rights Society, ARS/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY) (Rauschenberg, 1983c)

Martin Parr, the British photographer, has also been to Thailand a few times during his mid-to-late career in his 40s and 50s. Parr has long been photographing popular tourist destinations around the world, including beaches. In one of his photographs taken in 2012 at the beach at Hua Hin (Figure 7), a popular seaside resort area not far from Bangkok, we see a Caucasian man in light blue swimming trunks and wrap-around sunglasses sunbathing front-and-center in a folding chair on the sand. In the background is a blue-green sea with people involved in a variety of activities. Directly above the man is a woman in a bikini emerging from the water, while a local worker with a banana boat for tourists is crouching down.



Figure 7: Martin Parr, *Thailand. Hua Hin*, 2012, Digital Photograph (Artwork © Martin Parr/Magnum Photos, London) (Parr, 2012)

In another Parr photo from 1993, a Thai woman sits closely with a Western man in a restaurant with tall glasses of fruit juice in front of them (Figure 8). The man wears a short-sleeved shirt with a map of the world printed on it, appropriately symbolizing the Western man's desire to explore Thailand and the world. Behind the couple is a framed picture of a large crustacean. Taken in Pattaya, a beach resort well-known for its mischievous nightlife and prostitution, the implication being that the woman in red with the feathers in her hair and gold jewelry has been hired by the Western man to be his date.



Figure 8: Martin Parr, *Thailand. Pattaya*, 1993, Digital Photograph (Artwork © Martin Parr/Magnum Photos, London) (Parr, 1993)

In an interview from 2020, he discusses how his work points out universal truths. Parr explained, "I have a documentary responsibility, because I'm fighting propaganda, which we're surrounded by, constantly, on all fronts, whether it's food, fashion, travels, family life. My job is to show it how I find it, which is obviously very different. I like that on one level my pictures are just quite whimsical, with bright colors, they hopefully look good on the page. And then, there are other things going on should you choose to look; there is a more serious message if you wanted to dig and find that. I make serious photographs disguised as entertainment. I try to point out when I find universal truths. Truth is subjective, but it's the world how I found it" (Mollard, 2020).

Another famous photographer from the West who created a series of work based on Thailand is Andreas Gursky. In spring of 2011 at the age of 56, Gursky, the German photographer known for his large-format photos of architecture and landscapes, visited Bangkok and observed the Chao Phraya River. Apparently, Gursky did not visit Thailand with the objective of creating this series, but rather discovered this during his travels. In an Artmap review of Gursky's 2011 exhibition at Gagosian in New York, it indicates, "It was serendipity rather than intention that found Gursky, one year later, shooting the Chao Phraya that flows through Bangkok and empties into the Gulf of Thailand" (Gursky et al., 2012). In the *Bangkok* series, he depicts the flickering surface of the river in close-ups. The images resemble Impressionistic artworks in terms of the chromatic effects, or American postwar color field paintings. In *Bangkok V* (Figure 9), textured white and yellow lines appear on the surface like the trunk of a tree in a Monet landscape or like the composition of a Barnett Newman painting. Despite the aesthetically pleasing first impression, upon closer inspection the viewer is reminded that the river is a toxic dumping ground for all types of waste and debris (Gursky et al., 2012). From this series, some may perceive Gursky as an eco-activist, but more than anything, these

photographs are an accurate reflection of Bangkok, including its traditions and modern-day problems. The water in this series relates to Thai Buddhist festivals, including Songkran which involves pouring and splashing water to celebrate the Thai New Year, as well as Loy Krathong which is a festival to appease the Thai goddess of water. The theme of Gursky's work can also be linked to the serious problem of flooding in Thailand, the history of canals, or *khlongs*, in Bangkok, and the fact that the city was once called "Venice of the East".

The photographs from this series are now considered to be some of his most important works appearing in major collections and museums such as the Broad in Los Angeles, as well as in exhibitions at Gagosian and White Cube Galleries. The Bangkok photos are also the focus of a book entitled "Andreas Gursky: Bangkok" published by Steidl in Germany (Gursky, 2011).

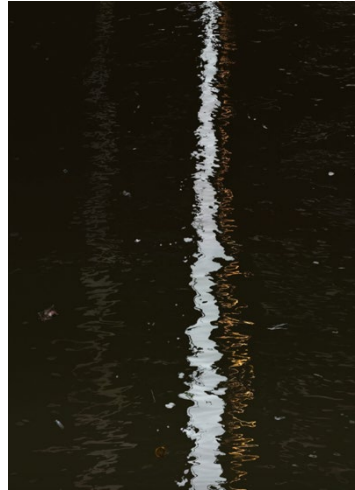


Figure 9: Andreas Gursky, *Bangkok V*, Inkjet Print, 120 7/8 × 89 3/8 in. (304 x 226 cm) (Artwork © VG BILD-KUNST, Bonn.) (Gursky, 2011)

Another artist who has been to Thailand is Marina Abramović. Based in New York, but originally from Serbia, she was in the country for the first time in the early 1980s while she was in her late 30s. Abramović returned to Bangkok in 2005, 2018 and 2023. In each case, she was invited by Dr. Apinan Poshyananda, the creative director of the Bangkok Art Biennale and a Cornell educated curator with an interest in performance art (Galligan, 2020). They first met in Tokyo in the 1980s and subsequently, Abramović, along with her former partner, Ulay, were invited to produce an art video in Thailand entitled *City of Angels* (Figure 10). The video is part of their *Continental Videoseries* that they worked on from 1983 to 1986. It was the first work that Abramović and Ulay made exclusively for video and TV, and the first that employed more complex editing techniques than their earlier works. The video was shot in an ancient Buddhist monastery in Ayutthaya, the former capital city of Thailand an hour from Bangkok. In the video, the spiritual and ascetic dimensions of Eastern culture are represented, while focusing specifically on aspects of Buddhism. The video evokes an atmosphere of meditative focus and is quite theatrical with a series of staged 'tableaux vivants' where local people, including monks, appear. The various scenes are stylized and there is a soundtrack with Buddhist chanting.

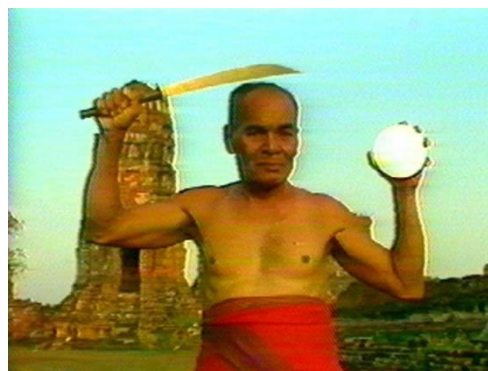


Figure 10: Marina Abramović, Ulay, *City of Angels*, 1983, (Video Still), Video 00:20:07, PAL, Color, Sound (Artwork © ABRAMOVIC LLC) ("City of Angels: Marina Abramovic/Ulay, 1983, 20'05'", 1983)

In 2005, Marina was invited to create a performance piece in Phuket, Thailand inspired by the 2004 tsunami which devastated several coastal areas in Thailand. The piece, entitled “Sea Punishing” was a public “healing event” that was performed in the water with her arms whipping and chopping the waves. The work was documented and is now the subject of a video installation. During her most recent visit, she produced a new video in collaboration with prominent Thai artists at Wat Po with the support of Poshyananda and the Bangkok Art Biennale. It will be screened in Switzerland at the St. Moritz Art Festival (Galligan, 2020).

Unlike Warhol, Rauschenberg, Parr and Gursky who apparently viewed Thailand as one location among many in the world, it is obvious that Abramović was focused on Thai Buddhism in her research and in executions of her work. It is clear through viewing work produced after her trips to Thailand that Abramović has continued to apply Buddhist philosophies into her art practices. In an interview for *Art in America*, she confirms that she has turned to Buddhism and Buddhist practices in her work and personal life (Ebony 2009). Many of her performances are based on concepts relating to meditation and stillness, and the MAI that teaches The Abramović Method around the globe (and that was part of the Bangkok Art Biennale in 2018) incorporates these ideas into what it taught. According to the MAI website, “The Abramović method developed over decades of research on performance and immaterial art. Created by Marina Abramović, the method is an exploration of being present in both time and space. It incorporates exercises that focus on breath, motion, stillness, and concentration” (Abramović, 2022). Abramović seems to have been influenced on a longer-term basis than the other artists previously discussed, especially considering that she has made multiple visits to Thailand and has directly and indirectly referenced Thai culture in more than one of her works over a longer period.

4. DISCUSSION

When considering the styles and mediums utilized by these artists to create their work, Said’s theories stating that Orientalists transform other cultures into something else for the benefit of the receiver seems to hold true. Both Warhol and Rauschenberg apply their American Pop Art sensibilities, and Gursky’s photos reflect Western art styles. Despite this, the artists have attempted to reflect Thai culture through their work to the best of their ability. But according to Hans Bertens (2007), a literary theorist (p. 204), “Even those Orientalists who are clearly in sympathy with Oriental peoples and their cultures — and there are a substantial number of them — cannot overcome their Eurocentric perspective...”.

Considering the studies on others’ perceptions of Thailand, it turns out that many of the artists alluded to the same aspects of the culture that are considered typically Thai in the research: beaches, elephants, Muay Thai boxing, and Buddhism. In many ways, these references accurately represent Thailand. Regarding beaches, Thailand has 23 coastal provinces with a coastline stretching 2,000 kilometers on the Gulf of Thailand and 1,000 kilometers along the Andaman Sea (Bangkok Post, 2018). Many of these beaches are popular tourist destinations and are internationally well-known. Regarding elephants, they have long been represented in Thai art, mythology, religion, and history. Elephants in Thailand have been utilized in transportation, religious and civil ceremonies, and war. The elephant was even on the national flag until the 1940s. Today, riding elephants and visiting elephant conservation centers are popular attractions among foreign visitors to Thailand (Chatkupt et al., 1999). Considering the popularity of Muay Thai internationally, it is foreseeable how artists creating work about Thai culture would refer to this national sport. In Thailand, government ministries and universities characterize Thai boxing as an indispensable part of royalist national history and is registered as intangible cultural heritage (Vail, 2014). In the artworks of the visiting artists, depictions related to Buddhism are inevitable as Buddhism is well-integrated into Thai culture and politics (McCargo, 2004). Although no Thai constitution has ever specified that Buddhism is the state religion, all have declared that the king professes the Buddhist faith. The bureaucratic order resembles the official Buddhist hierarchy, and the religion is closely tied to the Thai state (McCargo, 2004).

In further analyzing these artists’ pieces inspired by Thai culture, there is a range of approaches to their creative processes and to their interpretations of the culture. Some of the artists chose to respond to what they experienced in Thailand in more direct ways, including Warhol who made drawings from observation. Rauschenberg’s solution for making work about Thailand also seems somewhat straightforward, involving iconic images of Thailand. This work, however, parallels the style that made him famous: mixed media artworks focusing on aspects of popular culture. In the work he produced in the US, he often uses national images that symbolize the national psyche. In *Retroactive I* from 1963 (Figure 11), for example, Rauschenberg applies images of President John F. Kennedy, an American astronaut, an apple, bloody vein-like forms, and a black cloud. Unlike the work about Thailand, this piece is political. However, the technique, use of blurry images, and symbolism such as fruit, are similar. Taking this into consideration, it could be concluded that since Rauschenberg’s work produced in his studio in New York typically involves symbols from everyday life, then his work produced in Thailand is an extension of that.



Figure 11: Robert Rauschenberg, *Retroactive I*, 1963, Oil and Silkscreen Ink on Canvas, 84 x 60 in. (213 x 152 cm).
(Artwork © Robert Rauschenberg Foundation/Artists Rights Society, ARS/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY)
(Rauschenberg, 1963)

Abramović also incorporated traditional Thai symbols in her video that she made with Ulay, including a Thai temple and a Buddhist monk. However, there are several shots in the video that do not rely on commonly recognized symbolism in Buddhism and Thai culture. Also, the chanting in Thai can only be understood by those who know the language. As a result, the video feels genuinely Thai, rather than work produced by foreigners about Thailand.

On the other hand, Martin Parr's photos depict real individuals and situations in Thailand. Rather than avoiding clichés and stereotypes of people and places, it is almost as if he is pointing out how there is some truth to what we already think. In any case, he is dealing with contemporary aspects of society using humor and irony. In the photos he took in Thailand, he does not avoid the negative perception of Thailand related to prostitution and to the typical tourist spots within the country. As he takes photos around the world, he seeks out national characteristics and international phenomena to find out how valid they are as symbols (Parr, 2007). In his "Think of England" series, for example, he zooms in on figures being very British, or at least doing what we imagine the English to be doing. In one photograph from this series (Figure 12), a woman's head is transformed by a Union Jack flying in front of her. The irony of the title and this image is that it relates to the famous quote from Queen Victoria, "Just close your eyes and think of England" (Rappaport, 2017).



Figure 12: Martin Parr, *Think of England*, 1999, Digital Photograph (Artwork © Martin Parr/Magnum Photos, London)
(Parr, 1999)

Other artists were able to be more indirect in their approach, referencing elements of Thai culture without using typical images. Gursky, for example, was able to represent Thailand metaphorically. Rather than relying on overused Thai iconography, he focused on one aspect of the environment and a specific location that

relates to Thai history and culture. As a result of his choice of subject matter, Gursky's work is far from cliché. He could have just as easily focused on iconic Thai architecture or beach landscapes. Rather, he chose to represent Thailand using the symbol of water which is appropriate on many levels.

5. CONCLUSION

Representing other traditions and societies besides one's own in art can be problematic. Artists who appropriate images from other cultures are often criticized for not truly understanding the other culture. Granted there is a long history of Western artists who have taken advantage of others for their own benefit. Furthermore, attitudes regarding non-Western cultures as exotic and "primitive" have long been prevalent. But what's the alternative? Should artists refrain from appropriating images and ideas from other cultures in their work altogether?

Regardless of these issues, many artists are genuinely inspired by other cultures and are aware of the need to be sensitive toward those different than themselves. For the most part, the well-known Western artists who traveled to Thailand and were influenced by what they observed accurately represented Thailand. To share what they learned about Thailand with the world, some chose symbols that viewers could recognize as being Thai. Those artists who relied on stereotypical images of Thai culture applied similar types of symbolism and cultural identifiers in their other work. While it is true that Western artists have often viewed Eastern culture from a Eurocentric point of view, some of the artists have been able to overcome this by adapting ideas into their work inspired from their trips to Thailand and by looking for fresh and innovative ways to represent Thai culture.

If we look at this from another perspective, perhaps part of the issue lies in the fact that the way others see Thailand is based on its own carefully conceived creation of its identity. As a result of Thai institutions and individuals stereotyping Thai culture and Thai people, others, including Western artists, are left with a series of stereotypes that then might be reflected in their work.

Regardless, if stereotyping and being influenced by those stereotypes can be avoided, creating art about other cultures is a way to show appreciation for other people and places around the planet. This approach may even be a way to preserve certain cultural heritages. In our 21st century globalized world, perhaps it is time to move beyond West versus East. Ideally, artists should be able to draw ideas and inspiration from rich cultures across the globe, including Thailand.

REFERENCES

- Abramović, M. (2022). A possible island? The Bangkok Art Biennale 2018. *Marina Abramovic Institute*. <https://mai.art/projects/apossibleisland>
- Baas, J. (2005). *Smile of the Buddha: Eastern philosophy and Western art from Monet to today*. University of California Press.
- Bangkok Post. (2018, March 22). Tourist cap set to hit marine parks. *Bangkok Post*. <https://www.bangkokpost.com/thailand/general/1432699/tourist-cap-set-to-hit-marine-parks>
- Bertens, H. (2007). *Literary theory: The basics*. Routledge.
- Bodhi, B. (2006). *The noble eightfold path: Way to the end of suffering* (3rd ed.). Pariyatti Publishing.
- Capistrano-Baker, F. H. (1994). *Art of Island Southeast Asia: The Fred and Rita Richman collection in the metropolitan museum of art*. Metropolitan Museum of Art.
- Caruso, H. Y. (2009). Asian aesthetic influences on American artists: Guggenheim Museum exhibition. *International Journal of Multicultural Education*, 11(1). <https://ijme-journal.org/index.php/ijme/article/view/228>
- Chatkupt, T. T., Sollod, A. E., & Sarobol, S. (1999). Elephants in Thailand: Determinants of health and welfare in working populations. *Journal of Applied Animal Welfare Science*, 2(3), 187–203. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327604jaws0203_2
- City of Angels: Marina Abramovic/Ulay, 1983, 20'05" [Video]. (1983). LIMA. <https://www.lima.nl/lima/catalogue/art/marina-abramovic-ulya/city-of-angels/3>
- Comenas, G. (2006). Andy Warhol pre-pop. *Warhol Stars*. <https://warholstars.org/warhol1/7tedcarey.html>
- Cowart, J. (1991). *Rauschenberg overseas culture exchange interchange*. National Gallery of Art.
- Creative Thailand. (2023). *5 Cultural DNA That Can Be Used for A Business*. www.creativethailand.net
- Curtin, B. (2021). *Essential desires: Contemporary art in Thailand*. Reaktion Books.
- Ebony, D. (2009). Marina Abramović: An Interview. *Art in America*. <https://www.artnews.com/art-in-america/features/marina-abramovic-david-ebony-62791/>

- Fisher, R. E. (1993). *Buddhist Art and Architecture*. Thames & Hudson.
- Galligan, G. (2020). Curating the contemporary in decolonial spaces: Observations from Thailand on curatorial practice in Southeast Asia. In B. Buckley & J. Conomos (Eds.), *A companion to curation* (pp. 206–231). Blackwell.
- Greene, V., Harootunian, H., King, R., Munroe, A., Nakagawa, I., Patterson, D. W., Pyne, K., Rimer, J. T., Atkinson, D. S., Stiles, K., & Winther-Tamaki, B. (2009). *The third mind: American artists contemplate Asia, 1860–1989*. Guggenheim Museum.
- Gursky, A. (2011). *Andreas Gursky. Bangkok V, 2011* [Photograph]. Museum of Modern Art. <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/290242>
- Gursky, A., Irrek, H., & Yau, J. (2012). *Andreas Gursky: Bangkok*. Steidl.
- Harris, F. (2012). *Ukiyo-e: The Art of the Japanese Print*. Tuttle Publishing.
- Jacob, M. J. (2010). *Grain of emptiness: Buddhism-inspired contemporary art*. Rubin Museum of Art.
- Krauss, R. (2000). *Andy Warhol: Diamond Dust Shadow Paintings*. Ursus Books, Ltd.
- Lee, T., & Li, H. (1991). *China and Europe: Images and influences in Sixteenth to Eighteenth Centuries*. The Chinese University Press.
- McCargo, D. (2004). Buddhism, democracy and identity in Thailand. *Democratization*, 11(4), 155–170.
- Mollard, M. (2020, May 6). Interview with Martin Parr. *The Architectural Review*. <https://www.architectural-review.com/essays/profiles-and-interviews/interview-with-martin-parr>
- Ngampornchai, A. (2007, May 24–28). Exploring Americans' knowledge, perceptions, and stereotypes about Thailand and Thai people [Paper Presentation]. *The annual meeting of the International Communication Association*. San Francisco, CA. http://citation.allacademic.com/meta/p169793_index.html
- Parr, M. (1993). *Thailand. Pattaya* [Photograph], LiveJournal. <https://merry-go-round.livejournal.com/199972.html>
- Parr, M. (1999). *Martin Parr | Think of England, 1999* [Photograph]. Sotheby's. <https://www.sothebys.com/en/buy/auction/2020/made-in-britain-2/martin-parr-think-of-england-1999>
- Parr, M. (2007). *Small world*. Dewi Lewis Publishing.
- Parr, M. (2012). *Martin Parr. Thailand. Hua Hin* [Photograph]. Nicola von Senger. <https://nicolavonsenger.com/works/thailand-hua-hin/>
- Parr, M. (2013). *Life's a beach*. Aperture.
- Perlman, E. (2012). *Nothing and everything - The influence of Buddhism on the American Avant Garde: 1942–1962*. Revolver Editions.
- Rappaport, H. (2017). *Victoria: The heart and mind of a young queen: Official companion to the masterpiece presentation on PBS*. HarperCollins.
- Rauschenberg, R. (1963). *Retroactive I* [Photograph]. Robert Rauschenberg Foundation. <https://www.rauschenbergfoundation.org/art/art-context/retroactive-i>
- Rauschenberg, R. (1983a). *Thai II, 1983* [Photograph]. Artsy. <https://www.artsy.net/artwork/robert-rauschenberg-thai-ii>
- Rauschenberg, R. (1983b). *Thai IV, 1983* [Photograph]. Artsy. <https://www.artsy.net/artwork/robert-rauschenberg-thai-iv>
- Rauschenberg, R. (1983c). *Thai XII, 1983* [Photograph], Robert Rauschenberg Foundation. <https://www.rauschenbergfoundation.org/art/artwork/thai-xii>
- Said, E. W. (1978). *Orientalism*. Vintage.
- Sangkhae, K. (2016). *Being Thai: An exploration of the hybridity of Thai identity through contemporary art practice* [Doctoral dissertation, RMIT University]. RMIT Research Repository.
- Simpson, A. (2007). *Language and national identity in Asia*. Oxford Press.
- Sullivan, M. (1998). *The meeting of Eastern and Western art*. University of California Press.
- Teh, D. (2017). *Thai art: Currencies of the contemporary*. MIT Press.
- Vail, P. (2014). Muay Thai: Inventing tradition for a national symbol. *Sojourn: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia*, 29(3), 509–553.
- Warhol, A. (1956). *Bangkok, Thailand, 1956* [Photograph]. Artnet. <https://www.artnet.com/artists/andy-warhol/bangkok-thailand-ta7hZefHWOEhMH1l-me4gw2>
- Warhol, A. (1960). *Untitled (legs and high heels), 1960* [Photograph]. Monsoon Art Collection. <http://monsoonartcollection.com/andy-warhol/untitled-legs-and-high-heels/>
- Warhol, A. (n.d.). *Untitled (Bangkok, Thailand), ca. 1957–1958* [Photograph]. Artnet. <https://www.artnet.com/artists/andy-warhol/untitled-bangkok-thailand-jted99wMfZ5rTRsJb9vgfw2>