Chapter 1
Introduction of Surrealism in Thai Art and Literature Prior to 1964

Of all the countries of Asia, Japan was the first to become acquainted with the French surrealist movement. There are many reasons for this. Foremost among them was the fact that an entire community of Japanese writers and painters had been living in Paris since 1910. Through this group of expatriates, Japan was introduced to all the major art movements that developed in Europe after the First World War. Unlike in Thailand, surrealism in Japan first made its presence felt in writing. By the end of the 1920s, Japanese poets were turning out *haiku* and *renga*, ancient traditional verse forms, with decidedly surrealist traits. As would be the case in Thailand, many of the Japanese artists who took an interest in surrealism were also writers, and it is most likely for this reason that Aragon was translated into Japanese as early as 1925 and that Breton's *Surrealism and Painting* appeared in Japan in 1930 (the first English translation was not published until 1972!). The first exhibition by a Japanese surrealist (Fukuzawa Ichiru) took place in Paris in 1926, and by 1936, Dali was exerting a powerful influence over a large number of Japanese painters, much as he would in Thailand in the years to come. Communism and Freudianism, two of the principal ingredients of European surrealism, were equally influential among Japanese intellectuals of the time. In fact, in 1941, the Japanese government outlawed all forms of modern art and arrested a number of prominent surrealists because of their leftist sympathies. Yet, in spite of this history, Japan would play no role in the introduction of surrealism in Thailand.

Despite an early exhibition in Jakarta in the late 1930s, featuring works by such artists as Chagall, Chirico, Kandinsky and Picasso, it was not until the end of the 1980s that Indonesia, specifically the east coast of Java, would produce native artists whose work could even vaguely be characterized as surrealist. Again, the most discernible influence was Dali. And perhaps not surprisingly, given the importance accorded to women by the European surrealists, one of these artists was a woman, a fact that would be true of Thai surrealism as well. Also, for the same reasons as in Thailand, this influence would be inscribed on a very long tradition of surreal imagery that features in the country's visual arts. Despite the presence of Dutch art teachers, however, none played a role in spreading the arts and ideology of surrealism in Indonesia.

In many other countries in Southeast Asia – the Philippines, Laos, Cambodia, and Malaysia, for instance – European surrealism seems to have made no mark whatsoever. Only in India, usually so open to Western influences, can any trace of surrealist inspiration, however late and however slight, be discerned. Here again, the primary influence was Dali.

For further information about surrealism in Asia, readers are well advised to consult the works of John Clark, Astri Wright, and Krisna Chaitanya, whose names appear in the bibliography.

Paradoxically, it is in Thailand, so famous for its resistance to all manner of colonialism, whether political or economic, that the impact of surrealism has been, if not the deepest

then at least the most enduring. Perhaps this very resistance to European domination has facilitated a freer exchange of ideas and cultural influences. That said, it is now time to begin our exploration of surrealist influences in Thai art and literature of the past four decades.

Surrealism made its first appearance in Thailand a considerable time after its emergence in Paris in 1924. Therefore, the interest given it by certain Thai artists had no connection with its social or political context, as was the case in Europe, but can be traced to the courses in modern art taught by Professor Silpa Bhirasri (Corrado Feroci, 1892-1962, a naturalized Thai sculptor of Italian origin who founded the Faculty of Painting and Sculpture and was instrumental in establishing a program of instruction in Western art Silpakorn University). The sudden availability of European and American art books and magazines during and after World War II also contributed to the interest.

It was Professor Silpa Bhirasri who first mentioned surrealism in his textbook *Art and the Evolution of Modern Art* (1963). But even before this, surrealism had been included in a course he gave on the development of Western art and in another course on art criticism. His teaching made a deep impression on many of his students. One of them, Uab Sanasen, recalls:

> Professor Silpa was an excellent teacher, very intelligent, with a mastery of teaching methods. When he prepared his courses, he always chose examples that were well suited to his students. When it came to surrealism, he chose Dali rather than Magritte or Ernst, who were more difficult to understand.

Another former student, Prayoon Uluchada, remarks:

> My favorite course with Professor Silpa was art criticism because Professor Silpa had a great sense of humor and went on teaching until 6 p.m. The students were usually asked to evaluate works of art that the teacher showed us. He even encouraged us to exchange opinions. Two of the works he chose to show us were Dali's *The Persistence of Memory* and *The Flaming Giraffe*.

Nevertheless, Prayoon also recalled that Professor Silpa did not really encourage his students to take an interest in the surrealist movement, claiming that it was "too modern" and not appropriate to students with a limited exposure to Western art. According to Prayoon, Professor Silpa did not really like modern art; he preferred classical art, especially that of the Renaissance.

This appears to be a valid observation. But there was another reason for Professor Silpa's reluctance to promote surrealism. He was concerned that his students would become too interested in Western art and, as a result, neglect their own traditional art, as this statement clearly shows:

> I would like to state that even though Western art is full of variety, one

> should not pay it too much attention. Thailand, like every other country in the world, has received this European influence, and a number of artists have fallen victim to modern art. Magazines are full of this type of art, with pictures of sculpture that people enjoy looking at. Young people get the idea that this is art that is truly of its time, and they risk abandoning traditional art and everything of value in their own country.[1]

The Thai art community prior to 1964 was familiar with many of Salvador Dali's works, more so than with those of any other surrealist artist. Even if it could be proven that Professor Silpa did indeed introduce his students to artists like René Magritte, Max Ernst, Yves Tanguy and Joan Miró in his art criticism classes, the only name that appears in his textbook is Dali. It is likely that he wanted to make surrealist ideas more accessible and that he considered Dali as more representative of the surrealist camp. Dali's highly polished representational style also corresponded more closely to Professor Silpa's own. As an academic sculptor himself, he always expressed a preference for the art of the Renaissance.

This may explain why the surrealist, automatic, abstract works of painters such as Miró and Masson have received so little attention in Thailand, despite their pervasive influence on modern art in the US. And it is also almost certainly the reason that for most Thai students, the only surrealist artist they know is Dali. Some consider Dali's canvas *The Christ of Saint John of the Cross* (1951), painted after the artist's religious conversion and subsequent expulsion from the surrealist group, to be a surrealist work of art. In fact, the painting presents an idea in stark contrast with the beliefs of the European surrealists, who violently objected to religious themes in their art. And because Professor Silpa gave no importance to the group's attitude of revolt against the established values of the time, nor especially to the role of Freud's psychoanalytic theories, the result was a Thai-style interpretation of dreams and the unconscious, free of all sexual connotations.

Originally, surrealism grew out of the aftermath of the First World War and the social context of the period. But in Thailand, conditions were entirely different. Although the Second World War, the Japanese occupation, and especially the military governments of General Plaek Piboonsongkram (1941-1944; 1949-1957) and General Sarit Thanarat did have an impact, artists working prior to 1964 made no attempt to portray these hardships. On the contrary, General Pleak's plan to transform Thailand into a modern nation meant that art and literature were subject to official influence. Art was given an importance it had never had before. The School of Fine Arts became Silpakorn University in 1943, and in 1949, the government provided funds for the first National Art Exhibition and publication of the Thai translation of Professor Silpa's writings on art. General Plaek even gave a sizable sum of his own money to help organize the 5th National Art Exhibition. For its part, Silpakorn University provided the State with statues and the period's major monuments, including Democracy Monument (1939-1940) and Victory Monument (1941).[2]

Later, during the time of General Sarit, Thailand received economic and military aid from the US in exchange for agreeing to serve as a logistical base for the American war against

Vietnam. Foreign businessmen streamed into the country in the wake of the GIs' arrival. This new state of affairs brought the art community a certain cachet, and beginning in 1961, the country witnessed the opening of several new art galleries, featuring works by avant-garde artists from Silpakorn University and Poh Chang Art College.

In July 1963, for example, there were seven exhibitions, five of them opening in the same week. At the end of the year, five more exhibitions were staged, two of them on the very same day. Among the works on display, some showed evidence of the influence of the European surrealists, among them *The End* (1960) by Pichai Nirand, as well as *Marine Forms* and *Two Fishermen* (1962) by Thawan Datchani. Thawan would go on to produce a large number of canvases, which are discussed at the start of Chapter 3. Included in the 15th National Art Exhibition, held one year before Professor Silpa's death, was a canvas by His Majesty King Bhumibol Adulyadej entitled *Querelle* (1963). With its nightmarish atmosphere, free play of fantastic images, and spontaneous lines and colors, it is a strange, surreal painting that is similar in style to the surrealists and the expressionists.[3]

Yet even in an environment more or less open to surrealism, Thai artists and writers have never formed a cohesive group dedicated to this particular style of art. This is different from France, where the surrealist group was founded and presided over by Breton and his poet and artist friends.

In the Thai literary community prior to 1964, the influence of surrealism was negligible. Perhaps the government restrictions on freedom of expression, especially under General Sarit, were to some extent responsible for this. A number of writers such as Seni Saowapong wrote articles only sporadically, hardly often enough to ensure the survival of the country's literary community.

Chit Phumisak (1930-1962), an avant-garde writer who took a great interest in various issues related to language, culture and politics, expressed his views on art, including surrealism, in "Art for Life, Art for the People" (published under the pseudonym Teepakorn):

> The clearest example of art called 'pure art' or 'art for art's sake' is abstract art or surrealism. Artists interested in the abstract set out to show the beauty of colors or the harmony of the composition, or, simultaneously, the converse. The emphasis is on technique or idea – art for art's sake….When art of this kind is excessively elaborate and no longer has a connection with the things that matter in life, it begins to distance itself from people. As it addresses more and more complex technical matters, only artists are able to understand it.

And despite his familiarity with Pablo Picasso's surrealist period, Chit considered it a low point in the artist's career. In *Picasso: His Life, His Works* (circa 1957), he wrote:

> "As well as a painter, Picasso was an amateur poet. He enjoyed writing poetry in a surrealist style, describing surreal things as the poet imagined them."

Author Seni Saowapong (pen name of Sakchai Bamroongpong, an official at the Royal Thai Embassy in Paris during the Second World War) also expressed his understanding of surrealism in a novel called *Wallaya's Love*[4], specifically in a conversation between a young student named Janet and a surrealist painter named René:

> **Janet**: First of all, in going beyond what's real, the surrealists present a false definition of nature and truth. Some people confuse the naturalist and realist movements. Realism isn't merely a copy of nature since it adds a certain energy and emotion. The naturalists are interested in the tiny details, but the realists are interested in what is essential. They are interested in details only when these details are meaningful to essence.
>
> **René**: Well! Miss Professor…he said, laughing.
>
> **Janet**: But it's also very hard to arrive at the truth, and the presentation which reflects the truth is also difficult. That's why artists look for a way out. Because they're unable to show the true nature of things, they resort to mystery, which is only one side of realism. How can other people understand what you paint if your imagination isn't grounded in reality?

Janet appears to express the thoughts and point of view of the writer, who clearly prefers realism. In the novel, Janet asks René to change his approach to art. René suffers because no one understands his work, but in the end he decides to give up his surrealist style in favor of realist art. He begins work on a mural called *The Dove*, which functions as a symbol of his search for peace and all that is wholesome in his relation with life. It is possible that Seni based the character of René on the life and work of Louis Aragon and Pablo Picasso.

Chit's and Seni's dislike of surrealism could be explained by their belief that art should only be conceived in terms of people and society.

In conclusion, European surrealism, which arrived relatively late in Thailand, was invested with the generally unfavorable views of the people who introduced it. Influential art instructor, Professor Silpa, worried that his students would be seized with such enthusiasm for this ultramodern form of art that they would turn away from their traditional art. In literature, Chit and Seni were distrustful of surrealist art, believing that it failed to respond to the needs of the public.