

This painting by Dali depicts Christ on the cross, seen from above as from the heights of heaven. Above him is a profound darkness, and below is a beach where a fisherman can be seen pulling in his fishing net. The landscape is peaceful and quiet. Dali called the painting *The Christ of Saint John of the Cross*, a title for which no one can offer an explanation, since Dali himself never offered one.

But in the commentary that follows, he confuses Saint John of the Cross, a Carmelite reformer, with Saint John the Baptist, the cousin of Christ. Evidently, not only was No Na Paknam's scholarship on surrealism, a movement of his own time, seriously lacking, but his knowledge of the Christian religion was also more than a little suspect.

In addition to this painting, No Na Paknam presents two other Dali paintings without giving their names. One, an image of a woman's face (*Mae West*: 1934-5) is simply called Surrealist portrait and is included in his *History of Art and Artists*. The other appears in the last chapter of *Lives of the World's Great Painters* and is a reproduction of a knight floating on the ceiling (*Saint James the Great*: 1957). It is only identified as a work by Dali, but at the time it was painted, Dali had long since been expelled from the surrealist group.

No Na Paknam had a great of admiration for Dali and even provided very specific details about the artist's character, much more in fact than for any other surrealist painter. As a result of his facility with language and his use of powerful verbs, his gift for describing images, and the frequent inclusion of his personal opinions and a Thai sense of religiosity, his articles proved to be extremely popular among readers who shared the same cultural context.

When No Na Paknam refers to Dali as the surrealist leader (despite having already credited André Breton with having founded the Surrealist movement), it is because of his assertion that Dali was instrumental in the promotion of the group. But readers, as we have seen many times before, risked being misled.

It is also interesting to note that despite his remarks on the influence of Freud on Dali, No Na Paknam, for his part, was never tempted to examine the painter's works from a Freudian perspective or within their highly erotically charged context.

In a later chapter on surrealist paintings in *Western Art*, No Na Paknam compares the works of surrealist artists like Dali, Chagall, and Chirico (as well as Odilon Redon, a French painter who preceded the surrealist movement but whom No Na Paknam includes among the surrealists!) and concludes with a positive assessment of surrealism overall:

Each of the surrealist artists mentioned here has his own very personal ideas. Salvador Dali loves to paint from his unconscious, and his intention is frequently satirical. Chagall paints pictures inspired by dreams. Redon has a love for images with musical emotions. Chirico paints as a way to explore life and the antiquity of objects in a parallel world. These painters are all surrealists. In reflecting on their works, we may not see them as having any great value at first, but if we look harder at the major ideas that informed this

movement, we will recognize its tremendous value and the important role surrealism has played in the evolution of human thought and the development of world art. Surrealism is the only artistic movement which forces us immediately to reflect on human thought as the supreme expression of freedom and peace.

Not only did No Na Paknam turn his attention to surrealism and the European surrealist painters, but in a somewhat obscure manner, he also pointed to the influence that surrealism could have had on the works of three contemporary Thai artists: Thawee Nanthakwang, Thawan Datchani, and Kiettisak Chanonnart:

Thawee Nanthakwang is a former surrealist; he began his career by painting still lifes and landscapes before attempting to work in an abstract and surrealist style. But he remained in some small measure a naturalist painter. Most of his paintings are of a very high quality. (*Dictionary of Art*, 1972: 92)

In the same book No Na Paknam also writes of Thawan Datchani:

Thawan's specialty is sketching; he has a great facility in the field of anatomy and the proportions of the human body. He loves painting large, black and white representations of humans and animals that demonstrate superb technique in a surrealist manner. His sketches are very valuable and attest to a superior talent and a good knowledge of art. (85)

No Na Paknam also mentions a painting by Kiettisak Chanonnart, shown at the 20<sup>th</sup> National Art Exhibition in 1971:

It is an abstract painting in a surrealist style without any moral or narrative content; it is merely a depiction of strange movements that blend together to pay tribute to all the beauty overlooked by the human eye because it comes directly from the mind.

In conclusion, No Na Paknam's books had a significant impact on readers in Thailand's artistic and literary communities. In discussions that took place in March-April 1986, two former students of Professor Prayoon Uluchada (Lawan Daorai Oupa-in and Kamchorn Sounpongsri, both famous artists and educators today) expressed admiration for No Na Paknam's works. Lawan stated:

Personally, I don't like reading art books written in a foreign language, even English. I would rather read books that are translated into Thai or written in Thai, especially those by Professor Prayoon.

As for Kamchorn, he swore:

I read Professor Prayoon's books and remember that they made such an impression on me that I dreamed about surrealism. I think that people are particularly drawn to *Western Art* by No Na Paknam.

## 2. Writing on Surrealism after No Na Paknam (1973-1984)

Starting in 1968, art education experienced a period of rapid growth in many schools and universities, as teachers and essayists began to publish books and texts for Western art history courses, and submitted articles for publication in specialist magazines and journals.

Some of the more noteworthy teachers and essayists are: Sa-gnuan Rodboon, Somporn Rodboon, Aree Southipan, Poonsri Wongwitthawat, Wiroon Tangcharoen, Amnat Yensabai, Kamchorn Sounpongsri, Piriya Krairiksh, Santi Isrowuthakul and Rachaneekorn Hatsarangsi (the pen name of Paisan Thirapongvisanuporn).

In their writings, one finds more detailed information about the surrealists and the surrealist movement, although it is often presented with less brio and less charm than in the essays of No Na Paknam. Without exception, these writers attach supreme importance to Dali. Kamchorn Sounpongsri, who has written a great many books and articles on Western art, devotes numerous pages to dadaism and surrealism. In fact, it is Kamchorn who provides the most information about the movement, the artists and their works. He also offers a more complete explanation of such concepts as the unconscious, dreams, eroticism and the theories of Freud, all so central to an understanding of surrealism, than any of the other writers. Essayist Santi Itsrowuthakul also stresses, in one of his articles, the erotic content of much surrealist art (especially Dali) and notes that this is a common quality of both dadaism and surrealism.

In contrast, two of the writers avoid any discussion of eroticism entirely. Poonsri, a French literature lecturer, provides reliable information about Breton's career as a poet, but in discussing Miró's painting *The Hunter* (1923-4) she completely ignores the obvious sexual significance of the work. Similarly, Somporn interprets the birds in Magritte's *The Therapist* as symbols of peace, whereas they have clear erotic connotations.

Compared with the books of No Na Paknam, all of the writings by these later lecturers and essayists are much better researched and documented. They provide more accurate details about the names and roles of the artists generally associated with the surrealist movement (Arp, Magritte, Giacometti, Brauner, etc.). Yet, after mentioning the date of the group's founding, none dares to set a date on the group's demise. None makes mention of the constant coming-and-going among the group's membership. In fact, one has the impression that all the artists who took part at one time or another in the activities of the surrealist group remained true to the movement for the rest of their lives. If No Na Paknam convinced his readers that Dali was a surrealist throughout his long career, Santi goes even further, claiming that "all of Dali's works are surrealist." Kamchorn cites one of Masson's paintings as an example of surrealist art, when in fact, the canvas was produced after 1949, the year in which the artist left the surrealist group.

### Connections between Surrealism and Thai Art of the Past

After discussing the links between such precursors of surrealism as Hieronymus Bosch, William Blake, Arcimboldo, and Odilon Redon, Kamchorn

Sounpongsri goes on to explore that connections between surrealism and traditional Thai art:

In fact, it is easy to find instances of this manner of expression in our own traditional art, for example in the *Ramakien*: the demons, giants, monkeys or even the gods and angels that I have dreamed about since childhood were created by a surrealist imagination. The image of Totsakan, the king of the demons with his numerous arms, also belongs to a surrealist universe.

And in the following selection Ratchaneekorn Hatsarangsi (Paisan Thirapongvisanuporn) expresses a similar opinion on the subject:

The surrealist works with their own particular style are in fact not so different from the idealized art of Asian artists. One can find this style of idealized art in temple murals, for example, which contain certain figures and forms similar to what one sees in surrealism: angels, birdmen and women, lions and *nagas* (serpents) or even creatures with the body of a man but the head of a monster, as in the various incarnations of the god Narai.

After the publication of Kamchorn's article, in which he describes the characters from the *Ramakien* as belonging to a surrealist universe, the term *surrealist* began to be used more frequently to characterize Thai traditional mural paintings. For example, in an interview on March 26, 1986, Nipon Khamwilai, a graduate of Silpakorn University, stated: "All of the mural paintings in the gallery at Wat Prakaew are surrealist in style." Likewise, on May 16, 1985, Thawan Datchani said: "Looking at mural paintings, we can see Indra, Brahma, Narai, Vishnu or Hanuman who expels stars from his mouth when he yawns...Our surrealist style began when it was brought by the Indians during the time of Sukhothai, and the magical powers of the hero and heroine of the *Ramakien* are surrealist in origin. I believe that surrealism is common in Nepal, Tibet, and even in Burma, Japan, Indonesia, especially in Bali, and even more so in Thailand and Malaysia."

However, to conclude that Thai or Western art has had a surrealist character for centuries or that surrealism was little more than a new kind of packaging for a long tradition in art would be to forget the specific cultural conditions in which European surrealism was born. In the West, it is also sometimes claimed that Bosch was a surrealist, but this is an anachronism because in Bosch, there is none of the revolutionary ideology that defines surrealism. Despite the long history of art in Thailand, all we can say is that because of certain common attributes that are true across time, it may remind us of surrealism. In terms of content, however, it is clear that Thai traditional art and surrealist art have radically different origins, despite what Breton felt: "Surrealism existed long before me, and I am sure it will outlive me." By making this claim, Breton wanted to highlight the universal aspects of his ideas in order to temper – slightly – the revolutionary nature of the art produced by the surrealist group. Even so, there is no evidence whatsoever that Breton admitted to any Asian artistic influence on surrealism.

While No Na Paknam mentioned only three contemporary Thai artists who he felt had been influenced to some extent by the ideas of surrealism, the teachers and essayists who came after him cited many more examples. In total, they named some

thirty writers and artists, and in the following chapter, we will examine the works of some of the most important among them.