

Below, in the corner is what appears to be a door, but the door is framed above by curved canine teeth and mythical or imaginary creatures, locked in an eternal struggle. This part of the work is similar to *Crisis of the World Today 1* and 2 and *Symbol of the World 1*. The passageway above resembles the gaping mouth of a snake with two pairs of canine teeth in the upper jaw and one pair below. Inside the mouth is a small Buddha statue. The image represents human passion or the worldly life, dominated by the desire to possess things, whereas true salvation lies in the quest for the self or the soul, symbolized here by the Buddha statue. The title of the painting points clearly to the artist's intention, which is to show that there are others ways to achieve salvation.

The Struggle (1981)(Fig.55), also by Panya, depicts the same basic figures in the same color scheme as the four paintings discussed above. But this painting is divided into three parts. Each section is made up of different visual elements, and each has two frames in the corners. The right-hand section has a flat background out of which colorful designs emerge, and in the middle there is a flat two-dimensional surface with two figures, their open mouths brandishing razor-sharp canine teeth, leaning in from the left and right-hand sides. The figure with the inverted head contains a red sky at sunset and tiny butterflies flying up. It is an expression of the Buddhist philosophy, in which living beings who seek to attain religion and free themselves from the suffering of this life, are hindered by their own desires and greed.



Fig.55

Dali's influence on Panya is clear, especially the depiction of empty space and the fluid, mysterious atmosphere completely lacking in clear indications of time and place. The use of doorways to create the illusion of a third dimension, especially in *Crisis of the World Today 2* and *Symbol of the World 1* and 2, recalls Magritte's *Signs of Evening* (1926) and Dali's *The Weaning of Furniture-Nutrition* and *Atavistic Vestiges after Rain* (1934). What's more, the image of sharpened claws rising up from the ground is reminiscent of Dali's *Architectonic Angelus of Millet* (1933).

In addition to the great *naga*, swan and griffin of traditional painting, and to his own imagined creatures, locked in perpetual battle, it would appear that Panya found inspiration in other surrealist works, such as *Luncheon on the Grass* (1935) by Max Ernst and *Anti-Lacoon* (1963-4) by the Viennese painter Ernst Fuchs, a member of the Magical Realism school.

It is interesting to see in the combination of human and animal elements and in the various types of creatures, common features shared by the cultures of East and West. But despite this similarity, the intention behind these creative works and the public's reaction to them are worlds apart. In Asia, and in Thailand in particular, it has always been acceptable to bring together these diverse elements from the world of reality and the world of fantasy. Modern-day Thais would not feel repulsed or disgusted by images of this sort, nor would they trouble themselves with questions about reason or authenticity. In the West, however, the surrealist poets and painters set out to overthrow the social conventions and values of the middle classes, firmly attached to

the values of reason and logic beginning in the 17th century. To achieve their goals, the surrealists created works of art based on contrasts and unexpected juxtapositions of objects and emotions. Western audiences responded to these works with considerable surprise and even shock.

The imaginary creatures in Panya's work, linked as they are with obscure, chaotic elements that are often difficult to identify, differ, therefore, from those found in traditional Thai painting. In Panya's works, they convey an image of power, struggle and conflict.

In adapting surrealism to certain conventions of traditional Thai painting, and in to this his own personal taste and considerable artistic talent, Panya manages to create art that is distinctly different from traditional painting in terms of perspective, atmosphere, design, color and composition. But his greatest strength as a painter lies in his ability to create art that not only presents an interpretation of Buddhism based on an obviously profound understanding of the teaching of the *dharma*, but that is an actual demonstration of Buddhist philosophy at work. And in this way he is among those contemporary artists most deeply committed to putting art at the service of modern spirituality. In conclusion, despite the superficial influences borrowed from the surrealist painters, Panya's ideology is diametrically opposed to the core tenets of surrealism.

- **Thawan Datchani**

Throughout his career as a student in the Faculty of Fine Arts at Silpakorn University between 1958-63, Thawan Datchani, a disciple of Professor Silpa Bhirasri, took an interest not only in Thai art (the subject of the course Research in Traditional Thai Art, which focused on temple mural paintings) but in the history of Western art as well. Yet the attention he gave to Western art seems to have been more a matter of his admiration for Professor Silpa. He tried to paint and draw in a wide range of styles, from academic (Michelangelo) to surrealist (Dali).

From 1964-69, while pursuing his studies at Amsterdam's Rijksacademie Voor Beeldende Kunsten, Thawan gained a much deeper knowledge and experience of Western art. He visited many museums not only in the Netherlands but in France, Spain, Italy, Germany, Austria and elsewhere. Then, after his return to Thailand, he began a deeper study of traditional Thai art and literature. He also had the opportunity to travel and study art in numerous Asian countries, including Indonesia, Burma, India, Nepal, Tibet, China and Japan.

In addition to his immersion in Western art and the works of the European surrealists, he has also devoted time to a profound examination of metaphysics and Buddhism (Hinayana, Mahayana, Zen and Tantra), as well as to Asian art, especially the works of Java and Bali, which the Dutch had assembled for a special exhibition in one of their many museums.

The influence that Western art, especially surrealism, has had on Thawan has not been limited to just pictorial representation but extends to a willingness to shock, his taste in clothes (Fig.56), and his collection of buffalo skulls and horns. His fondness for Dali comes across most clearly in a speech published in a Thai magazine called *Dam Daeng Parithat* and in *Forms of Man* (1974:16), with an English translation by Russel Marcuss:



Fig.56

My whole ambition as an artist is to materialize the image of irrationality (lust) with the most imperialistic fury and precision so the world of imagination and conquered irrationality becomes an object of the same durability and with the same meaningfulness and communicable thickness as the external world of phenomenal reality...

It bears considerable similarity with Dali's statement:

My whole ambition, on the pictorial level, is to materialize irrational images with the most imperialistic fury for precision. (*Conquest of the Irrational*, 1935)

After his return to Thailand, surrealist works, especially Dali's celebrated *Christ of Saint John of the Cross* (which he had loved since his student days) remained etched in his memory. Moved and outraged by the shameless pillaging of Buddhist temples by merchants and businessmen, Thawan began his first series of canvases inspired by the techniques pioneered by Dali. But because public reaction was so violently negative, he quickly modified his approach, making reference to Buddhist mythology and the story of the lives of the Buddha. It was in 1973 that he began to come into his own, a mature artist able to integrate Western and Eastern manners of expression filtered through his own personality.

First series of works (1970-71)

Thawan created a scandal comparable to that of the surrealists in Europe with *Untitled 1* (Fig.57) and 2 (Fig.58), part of a series of black and white paintings shown at the Indra Hotel in 1971. In these canvases the Buddha's head and Buddhist structures (the *bot*, or ordination hall, pediment, pagoda and bell tower) are juxtaposed with naked human bodies (strictly male). Accusations of heresy and iconoclasm were leveled against the artist. But in fact, this was not Thawan's intention. This series of works was meant as a protest against the wrongdoers who had stolen Buddha heads for commercial purposes. Yet, the public response to these paintings was aggressively angry. Journalists, in particular,

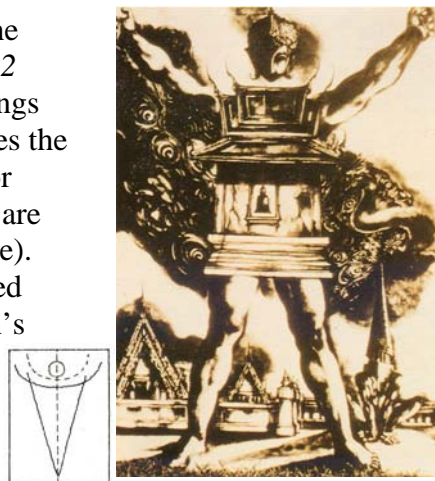
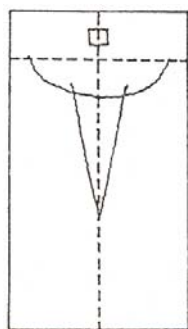


Fig.57

accused him of blasphemy, and a group of high school students was encouraged to invade his studio at the Hua Chang Bridge, where they destroyed a dozen or so of his canvases.

In structural terms, these two paintings, with their round arches and a triangle, were inspired by Dali's *Christ of Saint John of the Cross* (1951) (see diagram). In the first painting, the primary form is an inverted triangle, with other secondary triangles on both the left and right. In the second work, the principal shapes are abutting inverted triangles, the



Sketch of "The Christ of Saint John of the Cross"

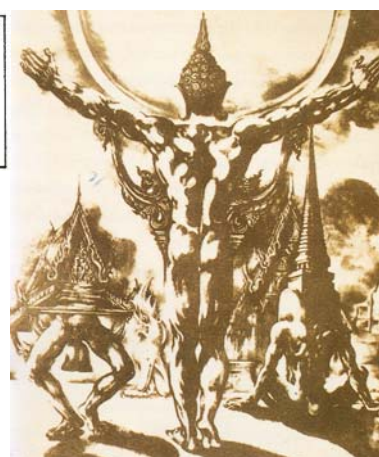
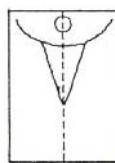


Fig.58

tops of which are hidden behind the bell tower in the middle of the canvas. Most of the surrounding elements are triangular in shape, and there are numerous eyes in the black cloud positioned behind the principal figure. Thawan has a special fondness for this triangular structure, which he has adapted to suit his purposes in many other works.

Thawan took from the surrealists their use of the free juxtaposition of disparate objects in illogical contexts to create striking and powerful works of art. The most surprising element in these early works can be found in the first of the paintings – a bell. Commonly used in religious contexts, here the bell hangs not just from the foundation of the bell tower but from between a man's legs, in the exact position of his penis. This use of sexual allusion to provoke a public response is certainly reminiscent of the surrealists. Later the artist looked for other means of treating religious themes that did not involve combining religious structures and naked men.

Mature works (1973-76)

Thawan's unique interpretation of Buddhism and his use of a variety of artistic techniques were put to good effect in the works of this period. He produced oil paintings, drawings, canvases based on traditional Thai designs, and black and gold or stained lacquer, all of which share a

tremendous sense of unity. Four of the series completed by the artist during this period are *Ten Lives of the Buddha*⁸, *Cosmology*, *Three Gems*, and *Confronting the Demons*⁹.

From the series entitled *Ten Past Lives of the Buddha*, we have chosen to analyze seven: *Temiya Jataka*, *Mahajanaka Jataka*, *Nimi Jataka*, *Bhuridatta Jataka* (two versions), *Narada Jataka* and *Vessantara Jataka*.

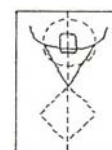


Fig.59

In *Temiya Jataka* (Fig.59), the painter depicts this Boddhisatva, who embodies the ideal of silence, in the form of a nude half-human, half-animal figure. The top part shows the head and back of the wing of a cricket; its mouth is hidden to symbolize silence. With its arms raised, its legs bent, and its feet together, the figure is in an identical pose to that of the dancing Shiva destroying the world. The bottom of the picture is dominated by intense colors that represent the earth and the sea, and make for a powerful contrast with the boisterous animals, such as the tiger, symbol of the thirst for power, and the grasshopper and the cricket, symbols of greed and foolishness. Other creatures found in the lower section of the painting include shellfish, butterfly larva and the bat, all symbols of silence and serenity. At bottom left is an exhausted half-human, half-elephant figure, its legs extended, a symbol of royalty's lack of need. Overlooking this scene is the sun, almost entirely veiled by a shadow, a symbol of wisdom or intelligence almost completely swallowed by ignorance. Structurally, the figure of *Temiya* is composed of three overlapping triangles, joined at the bases and the tops. Behind the inverted triangle at the top of the painting is a circular form, a symbol of the artist's technical development and a form also found in *Untitled 1* and 2. Further signs of development are the bent legs and the face of the tiger, which recall the figure found on the left side of the painting *Untitled 1* (see diagram).

The painting *Mahajanaka Jataka* (Fig.60) depicts a Boddhisatva with the head of a hammerhead shark with fins on its back and legs. It is a symbol of the greed that drove this Buddha-to-be to set to sea where he lost all his belongings in a shipwreck. Surrounding the central figure are menacing fish, symbols of desire, the struggle for power, and the quest to recover his wealth. Fossils symbolize the death of the crew, and the unclothed man emerging from a doorway represents an attempted rescue.

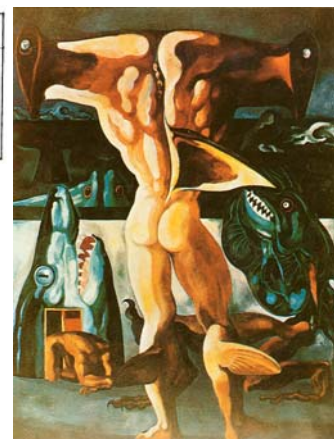
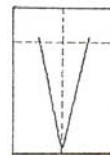


Fig.60

In this painting, as in *Temiya Jataka*, Thawan omits the role of the angel who is supposed to help the hero. This omission reflects the artist's belief in the Buddha's teaching that we are the sole source of our suffering and only we can help ourselves to escape from the cycle of birth and death. Structurally, there are still triangular motifs in the painting. Overlapping triangles point to both the top and bottom of the canvas. The base of the lower triangle is less wide. Fish eyes, in the form of small circles, appear almost everywhere. It is an adaptation of the usual structure inspired by Dali's *Christ of Saint John of the Cross*, in which the arches have been shortened or removed (see the diagram).

Thawan's use of a concave shape in this painting recalls *The Sleeper* (1957) by the Czech surrealist, Toyen, while the appearance of human/fish elements is evidence of the influence of Magritte's painting *Collective Invention*. In addition, the hole that resembles a door and the naked man near the head of a fish at the left of the canvas recall Dali's painting *Birth of Liquid Desires* (1932).



Fig.61