

Conclusion

In examining the reasons for the large number of surrealist-inspired works produced by Thai artists, a number of explanations come to mind. One is that, both as creators and spectators, the Thais seemed to recognize common features between European surrealism and their own traditional culture, based as it is on the irrational, on the blending of animal and human elements, and on belief in supernatural powers. But while Thai writers and painters may appear to be critical of their national religion at times, their criticism is never as vehement as the attacks leveled by the European surrealists against Christianity and other established religions (some of whom even suggested replacing the Pope with the Dalai Lama!). Nowhere do the Thais express a wish to destroy the religious underpinnings of the fundamental institutions of society. When they are critical, it is merely over small differences in interpretation or the social implications of certain religious beliefs. Their stated intention is never to overturn the core tenets of Buddhism. The case of Thawan Datchani is a prime example. While the novelty of his early works created somewhat of a scandal, he quickly returned to Buddhist themes, finding in the *Jataka* stories an unending source of inspiration and an outlet for his fertile imagination. The Japanese art collector and critic, Tani Arata, claimed in *Beyond the Borders*, the catalog for an exhibit of contemporary art, that Thawan's works were, in fact, an updating of Buddhism from a Western perspective – something which Japanese artists had not had the courage to attempt.

In addition to the characteristics of surrealist art unique to Thailand, it seems that Thai artists were especially drawn to the esthetic qualities of European surrealist painting, most notably the works of Dali in which they perceived an elegance of form and detail that they found powerfully seductive. This attraction led to a harmonious fusion of surrealist style, based on the strange, and a profound respect for Thai pictorial traditions. Thai artists' implicit recognition of the often provocative nature of European surrealism inspired them to create something entirely new. They were freed to explore new paths, while continuing to respect Thai cultural traditions.

These then are the reasons that Thai-style surrealism has managed to remain vibrant for more than forty years, from the 1960s to the present.

Just as the original movement began to fade in Europe, surrealism was introduced to art students in Thailand chiefly through their teachers and various art books and magazines. They became acquainted with surrealism at the same time as other contemporary movements, such as realism, cubism, impressionism, and abstract art. The techniques and manner of expression that characterized each of these movements were new seasonings to add to the pot of Thai cultural and artistic tradition.

But what was missing from Thai writers and artists' take on the surrealist movement was its basic principles -- its antirational and antireligious philosophy and its valorization of women. Social, cultural and political differences Thais blind to these concepts. In Europe, the surrealists proclaimed themselves enemies of the bourgeoisie and Christianity, which they saw as chiefly responsible for the outbreak of the First World War. They expressed their opposition by adopting values that contrasted sharply with those of the bourgeoisie and traditional Christian morality. In Thailand, however, surrealism made its first impact some twenty years after the end of World

War II, at a time when the war's repercussions were no longer felt, and any possible anti-war sentiment had already evaporated. In addition, because Thai Buddhism played absolutely no part in the war, there was no resentment against the religious establishment. The teachings of the Buddha, which emphasize mastery of the self, non-attachment, and belief in *karma*, served to cool tempers and temperaments. And in spite of the Vietnam War, the struggle against Communism, and the events of October 14, 1973 and October 6, 1976, political opposition in Thailand remained fragmented and less well organized than in France at the turn of the 20th century. In fact, Vietnam and the war against Communism had almost no impact on artists or writers, whereas the First and Second World Wars had a profound effect on the surrealists in France and elsewhere in Europe. Even those artists and writers who employed surrealist techniques to voice their opposition to war and violence were often acting out of a well-meaning desire simply to reflect and critique social conditions. Unlike that of the surrealists in Europe, their work was never meant to destroy society and then rebuild it from the ground up.

Whereas surrealism was a protest against rationalism and naturalism, and sought to undermine the social values and artistic and literary traditions of the French bourgeoisie of the early 20th century, Thai society is heir to a body of ancient traditions. There is an ill-defined middle class; it is difficult to distinguish from other social classes and therefore made for a poor enemy. Thai society attaches no importance to a belief in reality. Thai artists and writers' use of absurd, irrational elements in their work in no way constitutes a revolt against Thai social values. At most, it is seen as harmless mocking of a specific failure of reason rather than an outright revolt against reason itself.

Western society in the age of reason views the mixing of human and animal bodies as contrary to reality. Surrealism takes a diametrically opposed position, often fusing the human body with elements from other realms of nature to produce striking contrasts (as in Magritte's fish/woman, which is not a mermaid) or non-linear narratives. In these ways, the surrealists attempted to protest against reason and rationality. But in Thailand, belief in the supernatural, in spiritualism, in ghosts and in psychic powers is part of the system of fundamental beliefs on which the society is based. A floating rock or a half-human, half-animal creature is part of the world of Thai legends, and so images of this nature do not have the same iconoclastic power for the Thai public as they did for Western audiences viewing surrealist works for the first time.

From an ideological perspective, the father of surrealism posited women as supreme beings and the path to salvation in this life. Part of the rejection of Christian theology, this belief saw in the sexual act a means to access knowledge and the absolute reality that lay beyond all mysteries. It is a belief that flies in the face of the conventional sexual mores of the European middle classes of the time. Yet, in practical terms, only the surrealist poets paid tribute to women in their work, while the surrealist painters made much more provocative use of the female image as an instrument of sensuality. Among Thai painters and writers, however, an examination of their works, both before and after the influence of surrealism, shows no real rebellion against the sexual attitudes prevalent in the society based on Buddhist teachings.

Likewise, despite the influence of surrealism on Thai painters and writers, attitudes toward women have remained relatively unchanged. Nevertheless, one *can* detect a

tendency to use the female image in new ways, chiefly as part of a process of social criticism. Artists are also approaching sexuality in a bolder manner than before (although the fact that sympathy for women existed before and after the advent of surrealism in Thailand makes it impossible to attribute this to the influence of surrealism). But overall, there has been no major change in how women are seen.

There are those who would like to consider any vision that arises during Buddhist meditation as an image from the unconscious, under the pretext that these images appear during a process of self-analysis. But Buddhism sees these visions as illusions that must be cast off immediately if one is to be free of worldly desires and to master the self. Surrealism, in contrast, regards the image as a sexual urge rising up from the unconscious in search of gratification. The surrealists made of this notion a new type of morality, dressed up in the guise of salvation.

Long before Freud, the founders of the world's religions had already tried to analyze the mind or the inner self, but none had done so in the same spirit as Freud. The precept that "the illusion of desire is rooted in the self" shares common ground with Freud's concept of the unconscious. From this perspective, both surrealism and Buddhism are processes for examining the self, but their goals are radically different. One sees the process as a means of subduing the self, while the other claims to glorify it.

That surrealism's influence on Thai artists and writers has generally been limited to form and style may be due to a certain misunderstanding of the ideology of surrealism, which stands in stark contrast with Thai culture's rejection of all types of aggression. Clearly, some teachers had a much better grasp of the tenets of surrealism than is evident in their works (especially with regard to sex). But the Thai predilection for self-control may be one of the reasons that so few Thai artists have shown an interest in the technique of automatism adopted by artists such as Masson and Miró to explore the unconscious. Instead, many have preferred the representational style of surrealists like Dali and Magritte.

Both time and distance separate Thai writers and painters from the origins of the surrealist movement. This and the limited resources available in Thai have contributed to the fact that Thai artists have failed to understand surrealism's philosophical underpinnings. Unlike the Japanese, for example, no Thai artist or writer was directly involved in the activities of the surrealist group. Thai writers lacked direct access to surrealist works, most of which were in French. While a number of teachers had translated several surrealist poems into Thai, their aim was strictly educational, and therefore restricted to a very limited readership. In painting, the discussion in Chapter 3 shows that most Thai artists' impressions of surrealism came from reproductions of original surrealist works or via an acquaintance with other movements already influenced by European surrealism.

Collage, or the free association of images from dreams and reality (a favorite surrealist medium), has been widely admired by Thai painters, but in many cases, this may be little more than imaginative play, without any of the surrealist sense of incongruity, as traditional beliefs have accustomed Thais to such images. Whereas the ideology of European surrealism held little appeal for Thai artists (whose subject matter is always drawn from typical Thai ideas and ways of thinking) the form, style,

technique, process, details and composition they borrow from surrealism (or from other modern art movements) are merely means of expressing certain thoughts and ideas. This borrowing of “foreign things” (especially food) is a common characteristic of Thai culture, but invariably, artists demonstrate a tremendous skill in integrating these elements into their own work, thereby creating a style that reshapes Western and Asian features and applies them to traditional Thai art.

While Thai writers like Suwat and Keo may bear some resemblance to certain European surrealists, their works are less violent and less complex. Only Keo denies having had any knowledge of surrealism before producing works, which, in style, could be seen as examples of surrealist automatic writing. Keo credits this style, however, to a spirit that possesses him and not to some unconscious impulse. Therefore, any similarity between Keo and the European surrealists may in fact be only coincidental. But in the case of the other Thai writers and painters, all had some knowledge, however indirect, of surrealism before setting out to create their works. What remains unclear is the extent to which each of these artists understood the mental involvement that surrealism presupposes. Certainly, painters like Viroj and Somchai exhibit emotional tendencies similar to those of the original surrealists, but unlike their European predecessors, these Thai artists have never had the intention of overturning the social and esthetic conventions of the time. In sifting out those elements of surrealism appropriate to their own work, Thai painters have adopted certain stylistic features but rejected the movement’s original political agenda.

Some people have remarked on Thawan’s use of triangles and circles as structuring elements in his work as characteristic of traditional Thai art and architecture rather than evidence of Dali’s influence. But it is important to remember that in Asian tradition, especially in Thailand, triangles and circles have often been used to frame images. To our mind, in fact, Thawan’s works blend traditional Asian style *and* Dali’s influence, while expressing the artist’s own individual style. Because of their boldness, this style calls to mind early Dali, when he still belonged to the surrealist group. One must not forget, of course, that Dali’s ideas were not always aligned with those of the surrealists. Some of his paintings – particularly the religious paintings that influenced Thawan – were produced after his expulsion from the group.

Thai artists were especially struck by surrealist images because they were able to connect them with what was already familiar to them (legends, frescoes, and murals). They discovered that surrealist works corresponded to their own artistic traditions, and to their religion and culture. This was a misinterpretation, of course, but surrealism’s impact proved to be significant nonetheless. Thai artists’ contact with surrealism, no matter how superficial, sparked their imagination and allowed them to produce a large number of works in which they combined Thai tradition and surrealist style with their own individual thoughts and emotions.

In conclusion, this study has shown that because of vast differences in culture, tradition, and social and historical context, the Thai writers and painters often labeled as surrealist have really only borrowed surrealist style and combined it with techniques and approaches that are entirely traditional. None of these artists or writers is, in our view, wholly surrealist. Evidence of surrealist influence can be seen in the form, technique and atmosphere of their works, rather than the philosophy which informed these elements.

Nevertheless, surrealism has made a significant contribution to artistic and literary innovation and development in Thailand for over forty years. Although the emergence of other newer movements has meant a decline in its influence in recent years, surrealism will continue to serve as a tremendous source of inspiration for Thai visual and literary artists for years to come.