

Chapter I

INTRODUCTORY

BEFORE we can appreciate the beauties of an alien art, it is essential to understand wherein it differs from our own. Fundamentally no doubt all mankind is one, but each branch of the human race has evolved its own system of culture and its own modes of expression, due, in the first place, to its geographical situation and, secondly, to its own inherent strength, whether it can be influenced by exterior forces brought to bear upon it or whether it is strong enough to resist them. And here we are faced with an apparent paradox, for the practical, strong, dominating race may be the most receptive of culture from outside, while the politically weak may be the most resistant to it.

England, the world power, has influenced nobody in the world of art except in the territories which it has colonised: on the contrary it owes its own chief architectural glories to France, its furniture and gardens largely to Italy, while Holland, France, and Italy have all profoundly affected its sculpture and painting. China, on the other hand, which from an early period has been overrun and politically conquered by alien races—Huns, Tartars, Manchus and the like—has never failed to absorb them all, and to turn them culturally into good Chinese citizens, so strong is the inherent force of its culture. In India, while Persian (Achaemenid) and quasi-Hellenistic influences both made a strong attack upon the native art in its infancy and certainly left their mark upon it for a time, yet in the end these foreign influences were thrown off and a purely Indian art appeared, whether Hindu, Buddhist or Jain. India, indeed, once it recovered its independence of outlook about the second century of the Christian era, began to exercise a profound cultural influence on its neighbours to the east and south—Burma, Siam, Cambodia, Java and Ceylon all falling beneath its sway. And this, as far as one may judge, almost entirely as a result of trading and peaceful penetration by missionaries and others, and not by force of arms.

Indian religious art and culture seem naturally to have exercised an extraordinary fascination over the indigenous peoples of all these territories, no doubt owing to the attractions offered by Buddhism and Hinduism, while Chinese art, not bearing any particular religious message, apparently made but little impression, in spite of the fact that the Chinese, too, sailed the southern seas in search of trade from very early times.

Vincent Smith, in the extract quoted in the preface to this work, imagines that the difficulties of tracing the history of Indian influence in south-eastern Asia are largely insurmountable. That was written in 1911. The object of this volume, written a quarter of a century later, is to try and fill the gap as far as one country is concerned, and to present a picture of all the different influences from India, and Ceylon, which have played their part in what is now the Kingdom of Siam in the building up of a national Siamese art.

For reasons as yet unexplained, perhaps too deep for explanation, from the dawn of European history, at least from the time of the beginnings of Greek art more than 2500 years ago, the mental conceptions underlying Western and Eastern art seem to have been as the poles apart. Whereas the European, whether Greek or Roman, was content to cling to the earth in his desire to give expression to his aesthetic tastes, and to lavish all his skill on representations of the animal and plant kingdoms, the aim of the Eastern was to reach out after something unattainable, to try and define something beyond and above himself. Although no doubt in ancient India secular art was not lacking among the general population, yet the highest forms of religious art which have remained above ground for our admiration appear to me to possess a spirituality not to be found in Western art.

This seems to me to be the great inherent difference between Eastern and Western art. In the matter of technique, too, a most important difference is seen. In the Eastern artist (whether Chinese, Indian, or Egyptian) there is an innate feeling for economy of line in delineating his subject. The Western artist, with his intense individualism, wishes the spectator to see the form, or the scene, exactly as he sees it, down to the very last detail, but the Eastern artist is content, in his simplicity, to give just the very essentials of the subject-matter and to leave it to the spectator to fill in the background and all inessential details from the resources of his own imagination and experience. A perfect example of this economy of line, which will explain my meaning better than any words to the true artistic eye, may be seen in a Chinese plate of Ting ware of the Sung period, now in the possession of Sir Percival David.¹ The scene incised on the plate is that of “Two ducks in a lotus-pond”, and the whole picture is accomplished in about two dozen sure strokes of the engraving tool: but the essentials of the scene are there and nothing but the spectator’s imagination is needed to fill in the background. It is, indeed, one of the most finished works of art that I know and can never be forgotten by anyone who has seen it with his “inner” eye. The truth is that the Chinese

¹ Hobson and Hetherington, *Art of the Chinese Potter*, Pl. XLVII. Ernest Benn, London, 1923.

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artist has realised that no two pairs of eyes ever “see” the same picture, and that the artist’s chief aim should be to give full rein to the spectator’s own imagination.

These ingredients, a spiritual aim and economy of line, combined with an intense feeling for form, make up the reason why the highest forms of Eastern art are to me so immeasurably more satisfying than their compeers of the West. If only the youthful artist of Europe will take these lessons to heart—a spiritual aim, economy of line, coupled with true simplicity and sincerity of heart—what may the future not produce?

It is only because I believe he is striving to do so that I feel the urge to write these words. Why is that great artist, Holbein, so completely satisfying? Because he, too, whether consciously or unconsciously, adopted the Eastern precept of “economy of line”, and because, if one looks at those wonderful portraits of John Fisher or Thomas More, one sees a simplicity, a sincerity and a spirituality which appeal direct to the heart and the mind.

Chinese art has in some respects maintained its simplicity and serenity almost up to the present day, but the later forms of Hindu and Siamese art are entirely decadent, grossly overladen with ornament and, indeed, running riot in an orgy of decoration. I am, however, writing of the earlier periods, up to the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries A.D., and I do not propose to treat of Siamese art after the year 1600, there being little of interest or artistic value after that date, unless we except the temple architecture of Bangkok which, in spite of its lavish and somewhat garish decoration, has in it much to be admired.

An account of my own “conversion” in the matter of Eastern art may be useful to record, especially as I have reason to believe that the modern European artist is coming more and more to realise the truth of what I am about to say. Having been brought up from my youth to admire classical Greek art, I found, when first I went to the East, little or nothing of beauty in Siamese or Indian sculptural art. The general treatment in Eastern art is nearly always symbolical, “natural form” being of little account, while in classical Greek art it is just this “natural form” of the human body that the student is taught to study and that the critic is taught, as a European, to admire. But during a residence of twenty-five years in the East and a constant study of Indian, Sinhalese, Chinese, Cambodian, Siamese, Japanese and Javanese art, I gradually and imperceptibly found myself, so to speak, changing front—and I think now that I know the reason why. It is just the spiritual appeal in Eastern art, to which something universal and deep within one responds, and which is lacking in all Greek art except the very earliest. So that now, when I gaze at the Elgin Marbles, for instance, or the

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sculptures from the altar of Pergamum, although I can and do admire the perfection of the human form portrayed, still I come away with part of me unsatisfied. I see the beauty of the form, but it is a physical beauty of a particular European type, and there it ends. There is nothing universal in its appeal, and it touches none of the deeper chords of one's nature. But when I gaze at the finest examples of Eastern art (for example, at the pottery Lohan of the T'ang Dynasty in the Chinese Exhibition or the similar figure in the British Museum), I find that my spirit is satisfied as well as my more superficial senses. My inner eye sees beyond the form, as it is intended to do, and I experience something more than the sensation of enjoying the sight of physical beauty or, in the case mentioned, of an example of the highest form of the potter's art. It is true that the best examples of Byzantine and also of early Mediaeval European art also satisfy the spirit, but they again owe their inspiration to Eastern forms.

On the subject of "treatment" Coomaraswamy has written words which must surely give the clue to any student wishing to understand the significance of form in Eastern art:

It cannot be too clearly understood that the mere representation of nature is never the aim of Indian art.¹ Probably no truly Indian sculpture has been wrought from a living model, or any religious painting copied from the life. Possibly no Hindu artist of the old schools ever drew from nature at all. His store of memory pictures, his power of visualisation and his imagination were for his purpose finer means: for he desired to suggest the Idea behind sensuous appearance, not to give the detail of the seeming reality, that was in truth but *māyā*, illusion. . . . To mistake the *māyā* for reality were error indeed. "Men of no understanding think of Me, the unmanifest, as having manifestation, knowing not My higher being to be changeless, supreme" (*Bhagavad Gita*, vii, 24).²

In one sense Eastern art has an advantage over its Western sister in that it is nearly always devoted to religious ends and may therefore be expected to show an attempt to inspire religious feelings, but the same criticism as I have made above would apply with almost equal force to a comparison between Eastern and Renaissance religious art. There is, in my eyes, very little spiritual appeal in the figures of our Lord and of the Madonna that adorn Western churches, in spite of an obvious attempt to endow them with such, and I wonder how many of the artistic souls who admire them are filled with any spiritual inspiration. Indeed, with few exceptions, although they may be works of great artistic merit, these figures fill my spirit with neither devotion nor peace of mind, nor do they give my inner vision any sense of glory. In some cases I feel something almost akin to

¹ The same applies to Siamese art.

² A. K. Coomaraswamy, *The Aims of Indian Art*, p. 4. Essex House Press, Broad-Campden, 1908.

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repulsion, in others the reaction is more physically satisfying than is intended. As an example of my meaning, I personally love the subject of Lippo Lippi's Madonna, Lucrezia Buti, but not, alas, for the reason I ought to do so. I love her for the same reason as that which induced him to carry her off from a nunnery.

Those pictures which inspire in me the most religious feeling are the earliest, and they again are Byzantine or Eastern in origin. The reason for this is not easy to explain. It is not that I lean more towards Buddhism than towards Christianity, for I do not. No, if it is to be explained at all, I think the difference lies in this. The Buddhist artist painted his picture or fashioned his image to represent a Being far more exalted than himself purely for religious edification and not as a conscious work of art, while the Western artist was chosen to adorn the churches of Italy, France, Germany and England because he was an expert painter or sculptor and *not* because he was a man of ardent spiritual feeling who happened to be a skilled artist. I am told that in ancient days in Siam many of the images of the Buddha were made by the priests themselves within closed walls, so that no profane or curious, prying eyes should watch or disturb them at their work. If they happened to be skilful in the art, their images would naturally be of a high artistic order; if they were not skilful, as would probably be the case in many provincial centres, the result would be mediocre or even poor, artistically. But what counted was the spiritual atmosphere in which the image was created, and not the degree of skill that went to its making.

The European, on the other hand, is averse from symbolism and a purely spiritual appeal. He cannot forget that "God created man in his own image", and he prefers to see his own manly form portrayed in all its glory.

However heretical this confession may seem to some, I am not ashamed to admit it, because it gives, I believe, the clue to the fundamental difference between the Eastern and Western outlook, and it is only by an appreciation of what the Eastern mind is striving to convey that the Western mind can come into harmonious contact with it. The late E. B. Havell, who was artistic to his fingertips, strove to preach the same gospel, but he was too fanatical and too bitter in his attacks on what he considered Western Philistinism ever to make much impression upon his hard-headed fellow-countrymen. If one is to bring about an understanding between East and West, it is, first of all, necessary to eradicate from Western minds the feeling, if it still exists, that there is something inherently "heathenish" or unnatural in Eastern religious art.

One has to realise that there are other peoples in the world who have not the same modes of thought as oneself, and to try and understand what is the

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fundamental basis of their thoughts. It is a trite saying, “tout comprendre, c’est tout pardonner”, but it is true nevertheless, and it is my belief that human ideals all over the world are in essence the same, only that different people approach them by different roads and by different forms of conveyance. I therefore wish to plead for an open, tolerant spirit and for a genuine desire to understand the meaning of what is to us an alien form of art.

The arts of Siam, and sculpture in particular, are only known in England from the objects, either quite modern or of fairly recent origin, brought by travellers, and these in most cases, as might be expected, have been indiscriminately chosen and are decadent in style. The result of this has been that our museums present a very inadequate idea of the sculptural art that has been produced on Siamese soil, though in truth Siam is one of the most attractive and fascinating countries for the student of art history. Cultural influences have invaded it through the centuries from north, south, east and west, and there is still a wide field open for research. Archaeological exploration is in its infancy and it is only within the last few years that Siam herself has begun to show a real active interest in her own arts and crafts. Early in the present century H.R.H. Prince Damrong, who was then Minister of the Interior, began to form tentative collections of sculpture and other objects of Siam’s ancient civilisations within his own Ministry, and to encourage Governors of Provinces to do the same in their respective spheres, but it was not until 1924 that King Rama VI (Vajiravudh) instituted an Archaeological Service, and not until 1926 that his successor, King Prajadhipok, established a National Museum with Prince Damrong at its head, thereby giving a great impulse in Siam to the study of the arts and crafts of the country. This Museum, which is already one of the richest of its kind in the Far East, is housed in the former Palace of the Second King, which was built soon after the founding of the city of Bangkok in 1782 and constitutes a perfect example of a Royal Siamese Palace before European influence insinuated itself into Bangkok. It contains a separate chapel and more than a dozen halls and audience-chambers, and forms a most fitting site for a National Museum.

In architecture the Tai (Siamese) have been more eclectic than in any other form of art, and have borrowed from India, China, Cambodia, Ceylon and Burma at one time or another. Of the earliest forms of architecture erected in Siam, of the period a thousand years before the Tai people came into it, nothing is known, as there is nothing standing above ground on which to form an idea as to its style. Khmer (Cambodian) temples and ruins are still to be seen in certain

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districts of Siam, and demonstrate by their beauty of style and setting the heights to which those master-builders could rise, even in the provinces. The earliest Tai forms in Central Siam seem to have largely followed the Khmer style, but later forms show a certain Chinese influence in the roofing, with an Indian influence in the decoration. The “carpet” roofs of Bangkok, in all shades of blue, green, red and yellow, are one of its most distinctive and beautiful features. The exterior columns of these later temples nearly always incline slightly inwards from the base upwards, and this style has been followed in the gilt-lacquer cabinets kept in most monasteries as receptacles for the Buddhist Scriptures, forming a very distinctive and artistic feature in both cases.

The *stūpa*, or memorial pagoda, as erected in Siam, is of two kinds, either the blunted *p’ra-prāṅ*, a debased form of the Khmer *ṣikhara* or sanctuary-tower, or a *p’ra-jedi*, a sharply pointed bell-shaped memorial in the Sinhalese or Burmese style, whose origin clearly lies in Northern India.

The architectural and decorative features of the temples of Bangkok, i.e. of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, have been fully described and illustrated by Karl Döhring in his *Buddhistische Tempelanlagen in Siam* in three volumes, published by Walter de Gruyter in Berlin in 1920.

In the past a good deal of attention has been paid to the arts of Siam by German, and more particularly French explorers, scholars and archaeologists, and one is always sure of a welcome for Siamese art in France and Germany. Of the writers who have contributed to our knowledge of Siam mention may be made among the German, of Bastian (1867), Carl Bock (1884), Voretzsch (1906), Döhring (1920), and Salmony (1925); and, among the French, of Henri Mouhot (1864), Francis Garnier (1873), the *Mission Pavie* (1892–1902), Lefèvre-Pontalis (1897–1910), Aymonier (1903–6), Fournereau (1903), Pelliot (1904), as well as, more recently, Lunet de Lajonquière, Parmentier, Claeys, and above all Georges Cœdès, who from 1917 to 1929 was Chief Secretary of the National Library and Museum at Bangkok. But, with the exception of W. A. Graham, who has written the standard reference work on Siam (latest edition 1924), England shows a complete blank in all pertaining to the arts of Siam. Colonel Gerini, although he wrote in English, was an Italian. In the present work I am under a great debt of obligation to the French scholars, to Pelliot, de Lajonquière, Parmentier, Claeys, and in particular to Cœdès, which I take great pleasure in thus acknowledging, but unfortunately I have to make one exception.

In 1897 and again in 1909 Lefèvre-Pontalis, who came as French Minister to Siam shortly before the War, was responsible for an historical summary of early

political movements in Siam in the French Journal, *Toung Pao*, under the heading “L’Invasion Thaïe en Indo-Chine”,¹ an event which he placed in the first centuries of the Christian era. His chief sources of information seem to have been the local legendary histories and, as a scientific record, it is almost valueless. Not only so, but the “fantaïses” contained therein have led other scholars and students woefully astray and have caused a serious misapprehension of the history of the country.

To show what ramifications the publication of such “evidence” may have, I have only to mention that Graham appears to have been seriously influenced by Lefèvre-Pontalis in his romantic chapters on the history of Siam, Salmony has based thereon his whole theory of the evolution of sculpture in Siam, while Coomaraswamy in his *History of Indian and Indonesian Art* has in his turn taken Salmony as his guide on the sculptural art of Siam. In addition, O. C. Gangoly, in his study of Siamese Buddhist Images, and E. A. Voretzsch in his article on Indian Art in Siam, both in the Indian Journal *Rūpam*, have been led astray by the same will-o’-the-wisp.

I cannot deal with the works of Lefèvre-Pontalis or Graham in this volume, but I must refer to Salmony, since, apart from the admirable volume by Coëdès devoted to the National Museum of Bangkok,² which is, however, in French, the only specialised work in English on the subject under discussion is a volume entitled *Sculpture in Siam*, by Alfred Salmony, published by Ernest Benn in 1925.³

At that time Salmony was Assistant Director in the Museum for Far Eastern Art in Cologne and was evidently genuinely interested in the arts of Siam, but unfortunately, as far as I am aware, he had no first-hand knowledge of Siam or its history, while the material at his disposal for study was meagre in quantity and, taken as a whole, not of a particularly high quality. Moreover, a glance at the bibliography at the end of his work will show how little of real value was apparently available for the purposes of study of such an intricate problem as the one he undertook to solve, seemingly in rather a light-hearted fashion.

I have no space to discuss throughout in detail this work, which has not lightened the labour of its successors, but I must point out two cardinal errors which appear in it and which I have no doubt are due to the statements of Lefèvre-Pontalis.

¹ P. Lefèvre-Pontalis, “L’Invasion Thaïe en Indo-Chine”, *Toung Pao* (1897), pp. 53–78; and vol. x, 2nd series (1909), pp. 495–512.

² G. Coëdès, “Le Musée National de Bangkok”, *Ars Asiatica* (vol. xii). G. Van Oest, Paris, 1928.

³ A. Salmony, *Sculpture in Siam*. Ernest Benn, London, 1925.

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In the first place Salmony postulates the existence of Tai (Siamese) sculpture at Sawank'alōk and Suk'ōt'ai in North-central Siam in the eighth and ninth centuries A.D. (Pls. 9, 10, 11, 12 A, B, and 13 A), and again in the tenth and eleventh centuries (Pls. 13 B, 14, 15 A, B, 16 A, B, 17 and 18). In chapter IV of his work he begins by stating that "the twin cities of Sawank'alōk (which he translates as 'Sangha-Land') and Suk'ōt'ai (as 'Dayspring of Good Fortune') exert an influence at some distance from the sea, and both serve as capitals to an empire to which Suk'ōt'ai has given its name". This is true of a certain period though, incidentally, Sawank'alōk is the phonetic way in which the Siamese pronounce the Sanskrit *svarga-lōka* ("The Heavenly Region", or, as we should say, "Paradise"), while Suk'ōt'ai means "The happiness of the Tai or 'the free'".¹ But Salmony goes on to say that "the great migration,² which makes the fortunes of Siam full of changes for a thousand years, must be dated as early as the first centuries of our era". And further on: "Politically, from the seventh and eighth centuries the Tai fall more or less under the sway of their neighbours to the eastward. Subjugation by Cambodia follows as early as the seventh century."

As far as I know, there is no evidence, historical, epigraphical, architectural or sculptural, which can warrant either the first or the two latter statements. The history of Siam in the first millennium of the Christian era is still very obscure, but, even if there were isolated Tai settlements in Central Siam at that early date, it is practically certain that they were not producing sculpture of the types shown in the plates above mentioned. What evidence there is goes to show that, before the annexation of the valley of the lower Menam to the Khmer dominions at the end of the tenth century A.D., this part of the country was peopled by the Môn or Talaing race from Lower Burma, or at least that this race exercised a dominating part in the religious, and presumably therefore political, life of the kingdom. And this influence extended, as early as the eighth century A.D., as far north as Lamp'ūn, 17 miles from Chiangmai in the north of Siam.

The Tai race, it is believed, comes from the Chinese provinces of Szechuan, Yunnan, Kweichow and Kwang Si, south of the Yangtze Kiang, and at one time were in occupation of a kingdom there called by the Chinese Nan-Chao, or "the Southern Lord", until the country was finally conquered by the Mongols under Kublai Khan in the middle of the thirteenth century. No doubt bands of

¹ Lefèvre-Pontalis finds that Suk'ot'ai means *sroc-tai* or "the Land of the Tai" (*Toung Pao* (1897), p. 74). Why, I do not know, when the meaning is clear.
² I.e. of the Tai race.

Tai had been penetrating into Burma (the land of the now extinct Pyu), the Shan States and the *Sip-song Panna* (a no-man's land to the north-east of Siam) for many centuries past, but, according to the *Pongsāwadān Yōnaka* (the standard Siamese history of the North of Siam),¹ the first Tai settlement of any importance to be made in Siam itself is recorded as taking place about the year A.D. 860, when a strong Tai prince named Brahma crossed the Mekōng and founded a principality at Chai Prakā in the district of Chiengrai, in the furthest north of Siam.

Now the historical aborigines of Siam were a race called Lawā, and the resulting fusion of Tai and Lawā (together with Môn) is clearly seen to-day in the racial characteristics of the modern Lao, or northern Siamese, who have never received any immixture of Khmer blood and are consequently to be clearly distinguished from those of their southern brethren who have. So far from there being people of the Tai race occupying a position of importance at Sawank'alōk or Suk'ōt'ai in the seventh century, it may be recorded that the earliest Tai inscription from that centre is dated 1214 of the *Mahā-Sakarāt*, or A.D. 1292.

In this connection it is interesting to note that Harvey in his *History of Burma*² says that the Shans, who are a kindred race to the Siamese (the Shans being called *Tai Yai* or "Great Tai", and the Siamese, *Tai Noi* or "Little Tai"), did not enter the plains of Burma until the twelfth century. This coincides in a remarkable manner with the history of the Tai in Siam.

Secondly, Salmony lays it down that subjugation by Cambodia follows as early as the seventh century, and that from this time "the Tai fall more or less under the sway of their neighbours to the eastward".

As the rise of the Khmer race to sovereignty in the delta of the Mekōng does not *begin* until towards the close of the sixth century,³ and their eventual capital at Angkor was not established until the beginning of the ninth century, it seems scarcely likely that their power could have reached the heart of Siam during the seventh and eighth centuries, even if the Tai had been there to submit to it.

Parmentier says that the Khmer kingdom was formerly a vassal state of the ancient Hinduised kingdom of Funan until the second half of the seventh century, when she broke the power of Funan and became mistress of the whole country. Even so, until the eighth century Cambodia (Chên-la, as it was called by the Chinese) was split into two kingdoms.⁴

¹ P'ya Prajakich Korachakr (Jēm Bunnag), *Pongsāwādān Yōnaka* (in Siamese). Bangkok, 1907.

² G. E. Harvey, *History of Burma*, p. 4. Longmans, Green and Co. London, 1925.

³ P. Pelliot, "Le Founan", *B.E.F.E.O.* vol. III, pp. 248-303.

⁴ H. Parmentier, "History of Khmer Architecture", *Eastern Art*, vol. III (1931), pp. 141-79, Philadelphia.