

Book Reviews

Past Lives of the Buddha Wat Si Chum: Art, Architecture and Inscriptions. Edited by Peter Skilling, with contributions from Pattaratorn Chirapravati, Pierre Pichard, Propad Assavavvirulhakarn, Santi Pakdeekham, Peter Skilling. Bangkok: River Books, 2008. 296pp., 390 colour images and 30 plans and maps. Hb. £29.75/US\$75.00, ISBN-13: 9789749863459.

Buddhist Painting in Cambodia by Vittorio Roveda and Sothon Yem. Bangkok: River Books, 2009. 328pp., 630 colour illustrations. Hb. £38.00/US\$80.00, ISBN-13: 9789749863527.

Reviewed by Sarah Shaw, Oriental Institute and Wolfson College, University of Oxford, sarah99@onetel.com

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Perhaps the only way really to get a feeling for the relationship between popular culture, narrative and the devotional traditions of Southern Buddhism is to consider the appearance of the temples and their art. Buddhist temples are full of human activity, both in the way people drop in and out to light candles and incense, chat, chant or sit quietly alone while others move around, but also in the way so many human scenes are depicted all around the temple, balancing the quiet of the shrine itself and the figure of the Buddha, that is also usually shown in various colours, sizes, materials, mudras and poses. Narrative murals, banners, statues, sculptural friezes and, in modern temples, tableaux, present scenes from the Buddha's last and past lives. Such depictions usually fill all available spaces on walls, columns, window-shutters and doors, and sometimes exterior spaces in and around temples, decorating and giving life and meaning to edifices that have historically been the social, spiritual and cultural centres for Southern Buddhists.

The subject of temple art, along with its relationship to its use, is not often addressed in Buddhist Studies with the attention it deserves. Two recent richly illustrated and well-written books on Southeast Asian temples and their pictures and art provide scholarly insight into the whole area of visual representation and raise questions about its relationship to Buddhist practice. This makes them important not only for specialists, but for anyone interested in finding out about the character of Southern Buddhist devotion. Both of these very different works are recommended for their ability to capture the flavour of how the tradition has operated in the areas and periods they cover and give a glimpse of what is and

has been of special interest to Buddhists who built, visited and did artistic work in the temples involved. And both have very good depictions and studies of what is really their main area of interest: the art and architecture of temples intended to be used and enjoyed by practitioners of all kinds. The quite different feel and nature of each book is indicative not only of the different approaches of the scholars concerned but also of the distinctive attitude towards temples and their art that characterize the different localities and historical periods they cover.

Wat Si Chum, at Sukhothai, the subject of the first book, is a temple complex of the Sukhothai period that has posed endless problems to scholars from varied fields ever since the end of the nineteenth century, when it was in effect rediscovered by the French scholar Fournereau, who started the endless debate and puzzling about the site that has continued to this day. Dating of sections of the complex, the puzzle of the 'hidden' *Jātaka* depictions in closed off passages, and the disagreement over apparently contradictory epigraphic and contemporary textual references have all made ascertaining even the simplest facts about its construction, date and the issue of whether it was or was not actually finished, the subject of widely varying opinion.

Under the pervasive editorship of Peter Skilling, all these issues are addressed in this volume with deep scholarship, excellently researched background and well explained argument. *Wat Si Chum* is filled with a mixture of black and white and coloured photographs, ground plans, drawings, maps and explanatory diagrams. The book is delightful to use and look at, with sometimes several pictures on a page, usually illustrating points on that page itself, rather than requiring the endless page shuffling sometimes needed in art books. It provides substantial scholarship on background, historical context and associated texts. The good range of pictures is combined with well referenced sources, accurate analysis of comparable sites and extensive bibliographical citation in a way that is rare in popular art books, that sometimes provide strong visual material and aesthetic commentary but can be weak on historical detail, context and the provision of source materials. Work of this kind is rare in Buddhist Studies in general; I do not know of any such attempt that has been made before on art, history and religious culture of the Sukhothai period in Thailand.

Part I, entitled 'Towards an Understanding of Wat Si Chum', comprises four articles on different aspects of historical background, textual sources and comparative art history. Pattaratorn Chirapravati provides an excellent survey of the complex of riddles and problems that have always beset scholars trying to understand a site not mentioned in Sukhothai chronicles but clearly extant by the time of the Chronicle of Ayutthaya (*Phongsawadan Krung Sri Ayutthaya*). Chirapravati's account takes us through the varied arguments concerning dates of different parts, possible reasons for the sequestration of the depictions, as well as the various theories about the dating and reason for the choice of the *Jātakas* that have been depicted – oddly enough the first hundred, taken from the *ekaniṣṭhā* section of one-verse stories. Were other depictions planned but not completed? Was this selection made deliberately? Why were the depictions engraved rather than in the more usual Sukhothai style of high relief or stucco? But – a principal cause of concern – when were they executed and why were they secreted away in tunnels? Had they been recycled from elsewhere? Where they kept there for safekeeping? Or were they made for the site, and perceived as offerings, not

intended to be viewed, as a way to generate *puñña*, as seems to be the case at Wat Ratchaburana in Ayutthaya (1424) and burial places mentioned in the *Mahāvamsa*? In this way, they would constitute a hidden expression of the underlying narrative behind the Buddha's last life rather than a recounting of the tales for the others. Chirapravati explores the varied evidence and concludes that they do seem to have been created particularly for the site, with slate slabs, of a type employed in other parts of the compound, apparently designed to fit the spaces on the ceiling, and the series of a hundred tales perhaps preliminary work for later planned depictions. On the basis of varied analyses, such as the work of art historians on details such as monastic fans, ascetic figures and Chinese floral motifs that echo those of Sri Lankan, Khmer and Chinese motifs of the period, she concludes the work on *Jātaka* depiction can reasonably be dated to the period after 1350 and were actually made for the tunnels where they are located, whether intended as hidden expressions of Buddhist ideology or as a basis for further depictions.

Her accounts of architectural, artistic and inscriptional evidence are well explained and comprehensive. Indeed this reviewer would have liked even more general background about patterns of construction during this period. In attempting to set a time frame for the depictions and, in particular, the edifices, that seem to date from different periods, she says, 'Obviously it would not take a hundred years to build the structure'. In fact the author concludes that work was probably abandoned at specific times, of war. Anyone only familiar with the expectations and timeframes of Western Mediaeval ecclesiastical construction, however, would not find the word 'obviously' here quite so obvious. What were the usual procedures, social and economic conditions and expectations that governed temple construction during the period, that make building over a lengthy timescale appear anomalous? Were devotional buildings usually planned and executed as a rule in limited time frames, perhaps within the lifetime of the one who commissioned them? Could a longer time perspective have included a greater range of possible *Jātaka* depictions, part of a Chartres-like plan beyond the lifetimes of those involved? Yet more on such background, even of a conjectural kind, for the less knowledgeable reader would have been welcome. Overall, however, this account provides a scholarly, readable and thoughtful piece of writing, that leads us through all the arguments well, with judicious and well expressed conclusions in the light of the available evidence and scholarly comparative study.

Pierre Pichard's piece on the *mondop* (the small shrine hall usual in temple complexes) at Wat Si Chum deepens the mystery of the *Jātaka* depictions further by his account of Fournereau's excellently executed, but sometimes wrongly located, rubbings, which have provided us with invaluable evidence about many that have now been deeply defaced and eroded in the hundred years since he undertook his work. Pichard argues, primarily on the basis of spatial adjustments made in some of sequentially later depictions of the first hundred tales, that the *Jātaka* illustrations were intended to go to the full 547, but conjectures that the space intended for them, a tower which would have the first hundred right at the base and the others in ascending order up through the design of a large *chedi* on the lines of Chedi Ku Kut at Wat Chamathewi, Lamphun, was never completed. Supports for his arguments are: the fact that some of the depictions later in the series of a hundred seem adjusted to a new perspective, suggesting the builders were running out of space; the wide, solid, three-tiered surrounding base similar

to that at Chedi Ku Kut; the massiveness of the exterior walls and other internal design features. The *mondop* itself, which has been extensively restored in the twentieth century, is not mentioned in epigraphic descriptions and its historical framework is unclear. Apparently contemporaneous accounts by Si Sattha, who appears to have commissioned the edifice and its inscriptions, seem to 'soup up' the extent and range of artistic depictions of *Jātakas*, and cannot be corroborated; Pichard argues convincingly that this may have been part of a public relations exercise to gain support for a larger building, filled with depictions of all the *Jātakas*, that was never completed.

The third paper, by Peter Skilling, 'Narrative, Art and Ideology', offers an important contribution to *Jātaka* history and understanding, wide ranging in its scholarship and sources. Tracing what we can divine about the evolution of the tales, their depiction, and issues such as their relationship with *Apadānas* and the role of the reciters in both the performative aspect of *Jātaka* narrative and its transmission, he moves easily between inscriptional evidence, archaeology, artist depiction and comparative textual work on Tibetan, Sanskrit, Pāli, Thai and Chinese sources. He argues that *Jātaka* narrative, as demonstrated by the care and artistic skill involved in their depiction at sites such as Wat Si Chum, was really an ideology in itself in early and later Buddhism. With its roots in the recollection of past lives by the Buddha himself on the night of the enlightenment, the *Jātaka* material, so diverse in range and type of story, provides a kind of 'autobiographical' extension to the figure and teaching of the Buddha, and is intended to demonstrate the highly coloured path that culminates in his last bodily and human form. So in his last birth, equipped because of the experiences of these lives with the thirty-two marks, he is able to teach and show inspiration and guidance to others on their way to awakening. The range of visual material, exploring various aspects of depiction of the tales, is impressive and he includes cloth banners (*phra bot*), Khmer accordion books, manuscripts, door decoration, gilt-lacquer furniture adornment, temple depictions, and comics, in his comprehensive survey of *Jātaka*-related art material. Helpfully, in the fourth paper of Part I, Skilling then undertakes careful and well-illustrated comparative work, giving context, likely counterparts and background to the Wat Si Chum depictions.

After this impressive introduction, Part II of the book moves on to the *Jātaka*-engravings and inscriptions of the site itself, in a collaborative exercise between Peter Skilling, Prapod Assavavirulhakarn and Santi Pakdeekham that forms the bulk of the book. A key at the outset is given to the method for explaining each example, including an indication that each example includes a short summary of the associated story, a feature that proves to be an aid for newcomers and scholars. This is a wonderful formula: the section on slab 24 for instance, on *Jātaka* 4, gives a short translation of sections of this charming tale about a man who finds a dead mouse and, on the Bodhisatta's advice, makes a fortune by a series of astute investments. Accompanying this are the associated slab illustration itself, pictures of other depictions of this tale, at Wat Khrua Wan and the Ananda brick monastery at Pagan, along with photographs of the slab's accompanying inscription, a Thai transliteration and an appropriate explanation. This procedure is adopted for each of the slabs/stories on the site in turn, so offering scholars and newcomers what seems to this reviewer to be both the most comprehensive and accessible survey — one could almost say a visual dictionary — of *Jātaka* temple

depiction compiled to date. The section forms the bulk of the book and is essential reading and browsing for anyone interested in the complex interplay of text and illustration that has historically enacted Buddhist principles for Southern Buddhists. An omnipresent sense of the life of the stories informs Southern Buddhist teaching: most people in the region, historically and in some places even today, really find out about the tradition through such stories, told to them as children and constantly referenced in *Dhamma* talks heard as adults, popular truisms, law-making, meditative manuals such as the *Visuddhimagga*, drama, and now even comic books. Whether or not the depictions were intended for public consumption, the method adopted in this part of the book communicates their appeal and evident significance at this historical period well.

In the end, the question as to whether the depictions were executed for public inspection or intended to be hidden, perhaps the most important from the point of view of the relationship between the private and the public here, remains open, but it does raise interesting issues concerning the purpose and function of *Jātaka* depiction at various times. This reviewer has to admit that most of the interpretations offered were utterly convincing. The possibility that they were intended to be sequestered has its attractions: there is something inherently veiled about personal volition, merit-making and, indeed, the very notion of ‘past lives’, out of reach of the present and conscious memory. Thais to this day associate a special auspiciousness in the *puñña* of placing gold leaf on the back of a Buddha image, where it cannot be seen: the solitary notion that each being is ‘heir to his or her *kamma*’ underlies all *Jātaka* ideology, along with the more companionable associations of the genre. In the end, however, the suggestion that they may have comprised the beginning of a series constituting all of the 547 does seem the most likely. The Buddha’s past lives are intended to inspire through public demonstration, linking, perhaps, to recollections of his qualities, and giving a dramatically varied narrative for lay and monastic practitioners to relate to their own experience. If war did intercede in the construction, one can see compromises may have been made, plans changed, or a larger overall plan rejected, or even an earlier project hidden away and sealed off under an unfavourable political climate. But this issue requires far more historical knowledge than this reviewer can offer: questions the book raises, though, interestingly direct attention to the possibility of a varied nature and role of *Jātaka* depiction, at different times and in different periods.

This book is an exemplary model of the kind of book one would like to find in many other areas of Buddhist Studies. Throughout, one feels a sense of collaborative purpose from those working in specialisms in different fields. Such multi-disciplinary endeavours not only provide helpful resources for particular scholarly interests. This substantial piece of scholarship also offers a fascinating slice into a whole cultural orientation, in this case of the Sukhothai period, that is impossible to find elsewhere. It will provide a good resource both for serious scholars of Southeast Asian temple construction and art, scholars of other fields of Buddhist Studies and the general reader, as an introduction to the complexity of issues concerning in Buddhist temples and their construction and specifically, to the role of story and art in Thai devotion and practice.

Buddhist Painting in Cambodia is a very different kind of book. It shows us the evidence of one living artistic tradition, Cambodian mural art, as it is demonstrated and still practised in temples, primarily in the twentieth century. The parameters of the book have been set by a very different set of conditions and it offers us a quite contrasting visual landscape that has so far excited far less academic interest. Vittorio Roveda notes that few scholars have really worked on the field, and cites carefully the limited sources on the subject. The book provides a comprehensive overview of the background: Cambodian history, the kinds of narrative depicted, local temple design, and a step-by-step visual record of this living tradition as it is enacted, with pictures of artists, working notebooks, descriptions of artistic techniques, and the various stages involved in painting a mural all included in the photographic record and the text. A student, Sothon Yem, has provided summaries and explanations of the associated stories, scenes from the Buddha's life, canonical *Jātakas*, and importantly, post-canonical *Jātakas* too. All of these provide a picture to us of how temple art has been viewed recently in one Southern Buddhist region. Subjects covered include ritual associations, the continued practice of making cloth-banner paintings as expressions of lay devotion, and the various functions of Buddhist narrative art as it is placed and arranged in Cambodian temples.

What is most immediately striking about the book is its demonstration of the brightly coloured and cheerfully buoyant art of a region whose twentieth-century history would suggest a far more unhappy and darker palette, with a far more gloomy choice of subject matter than actually is the case. Darkness and hellish torments are depicted, though contained within the underlying Buddhist narrative of the infernal regions of the *Nimi Jātaka* (J. 541), for instance, or through the traditional Buddhist spatial hierarchical arrangement of placing such hells 'below', or in areas contained within panels carefully distinct from other realms. Politics does intrude, in, for instance, the successful farmers who plough heavenly realms clearly created and implemented by ideologically sound harvest targets; soldiers carry the Angkor flag and wear modern uniform. The underlying impression though is not that the temple has been politicized, as one might expect from recent history in this area, and indeed around the world, but rather that the flexibility and universality of Buddhist narrative, along with the basic formats of traditional temple design and the strong cultural support for sustaining the temple as a social, cultural and spiritual entity at the centre of people's lives and daily practice, have been rather good at assimilating and even transforming the political. Strong political and social agendas, so powerful in Cambodia in the last century, seem in these pictures integrated within a larger Buddhist perspective, with no social doctrine or group in the end undermining the overall usage of the temple, its arrangement of traditional narratives and their relationship with the shrine, or the ancient Buddhist understanding of cosmology and meditative psychology that governs the way Buddhist stories and themes are presented.

Issues of the function and practice of the art are also raised in this book. As the author explains, Cambodian art is distinctive in Southeast Asia for the fact that almost all from the period from the fifteenth century to the nineteenth century has been lost, through such factors as the passage of time, neglect, and the ravages of the climate, but more particularly, as Roveda demonstrates, through a local understanding of merit-making, whereby the creation of the new and the fresh is valued over any perceived benefit of preserving the old. Amongst

Cambodians, the predominant Buddhist ethos is that *puñña* is to be derived from doing something lively, modern and obviously relatable to the daily life and mores of the contemporary people. Roveda shows this has a dual aspect: from a negative point of view, anything past its prime has been overlooked, and there has been little sense of the importance of conservation work, of retaining artistic heritage and the consequent historical perspective this allows. Thus, graciously elegant and beautiful painted depictions, such as the scenes of Rāma (apparently from Wat Babaur, seventeenth to eighteenth centuries, p. 16) finely painted on wood, and from the Buddha's life on a mural at Wat Kompong Tralach Leu (p.18), come from contexts where little regard has been taken to preserving the whole. Roveda notes that some change in the understanding of the working of *kamma* — a sense perhaps that merit can be derived from preserving the cultural heritage of the past as well as initiating new building, painting and sculptural work — would be needed for future generations in Cambodia to guard their extraordinary artistic heritage.

But from a positive point of view, this inventiveness does mean that events from the Buddha's life, the canonical and post-canonical *Jātaka* stories are depicted in a gloriously animated picture world of twentieth-century life, with landscapes, market towns, monsters, mythical animals and the everyday domestic and woodland animals, in localized Cambodian natural landscape, all depicted in bright colours reminiscent of naïve painting and even some modern animation. Costumes showing traditional Cambodian textile, the formal dress of many cultures, folk design, dance, scenes involving market stalls, bartering and exchange of goods, along with some very 'modern' features, such as fast cars and characters in contemporary army uniform bearing modern flags, are set naturally in traditional stories. Such flexibility is a feature of all Southeast Asian temple art, certainly that dating from the eighteenth century onwards: Southeast Asian Buddhist temple murals are not 'located' in ancient India and most incorporate features of the landscape that artists would see around them. So Thai eighteenth-century paintings have European clippers (Wat Suthat, Bangkok) and European travellers amidst traditional scenes from Buddhist stories. 'Farangs' are admittedly often consigned to mildly villainous or unsuccessful roles, such as the European sailors amidst the armies of Māra on a wall mural (Wat Saket, Bangkok), or doomed sailors in a boat about to capsize in a *Mahājanaka-Jātaka* depiction (Wat Yai Intharam, Chonburi). Cambodian art, perhaps because so much of it is twentieth century, seems particularly universal, and is filled not only with different types of Cambodians, Europeans, Chinese, but also Arabs (again doomed sailors in the *Mahājanaka-Jātaka*, pp.90–91). In a scene depicting the distribution of the Buddha's relics, African tribesmen, Chinese dignitaries and, oddly, Europeans in eighteenth-century dress (p.169) are shown: here the overriding message seems to be not that other races and nationalities are less successful, but that they can all be seen as part of the larger Buddhist narrative too. Southern Buddhist temple art in general is characterized by a sense of the contemporary; in Cambodia, where so much of the art is recent, murals and banner painting provide a fascinating record not only of ways this particular culture has adapted and translated Buddhist narrative into visual form, but also of all kinds of features of Cambodian life, imaginary and 'realistic', over the last hundred years, from markets, to domestic life and architecture, machines, dream images, modern monks, political leaders and local figures.

The book also shows examples and discusses earlier Cambodian art, in the very well preserved and intricately carved stone relief narratives of pre-fourteenth-century temples. Despite the complex and difficult challenge involved in a culture where new expression is valued over old, recent art of Cambodian temples, Roveda indicates, shows some continuity from these early temple depictions. Painters follow an artistic lineage that seems always to have drawn heavily upon past models with regard to spatial arrangement, artistic composition and choice and emphasis of subject matter, even though the absence of patronage and care means that from the fourteenth to the nineteenth century there is little left for later generations to enjoy.

Some areas warrant further comparative investigation. The whole issue of perspective in traditional Southeast Asian temple murals is an interesting one and does not seem to have been fully addressed anywhere for the relationship between the art and practice. Traditional narrative perspective, still evident, is, as Roveda points out, mixed with some modern notions of perspective. The book shows a number of murals where scenes in one large picture constitute a kind of ongoing narrative, so that the space is used not to show depth of perspective in the Western sense, but a range and depth of time. The scenes are shown arranged around the space to follow a temporal pattern, and perhaps six sequentially related incidents are arranged so the eye follows a loose chronological thread in a kind of cycle, with the beginning of the story starting perhaps, in the left-hand middle part of the painting, and the eye following the story down to the base of the picture, up through the right hand part of the painting so that the last scenes are in the top and top left-hand part of the painting. This cyclical effect, found anticipated in temple stone relief murals in Bharhut for instance in India, offers a strong contrast to the linear sequence that one finds in say, eighteenth-century Sri Lankan frieze *Jātaka* depiction, where the narrative is shown rather as in modern comic books, moving from left to right in descending registers. A more rounded movement makes for quite a different feel to the organic shape of the stories and the sense of perspective in the picture as a whole: it has historically characterized much mural art in Thailand, and to this day in Cambodia. The author could address this very interesting difference between Southeast Asian and Western expectations further: he discusses what he calls the synoptic mode, in which the sequence is not necessarily temporal, and also notes a sometimes clear narrative thread that does follow a circle round the picture, as, for instance, scenes from the longer stories, such as that of Vessantara. It would have been interesting, though, to have had more exploration of the aesthetic implications of this difference, and perhaps more discussion of the relationship between narrative art and its function in this regard. The author gives a useful and interesting classification of some varied functions of the Buddha's life story/ies: how does this relate to the pictures he shows us? Sometimes a prominent scene is shown centrally at a higher register, and other scenes grouped around it in a non-sequential but perhaps emotionally logical manner. Would the fact that people might be hearing the stories told and chanted help the eye follow the course of the story on the picture?

These stories are, as Peter Skilling notes in the other book, really the 'autobiography' of the Buddha, and some sense of the way spacing, in *jātaka* depictions and in scenes from the Buddha's life, highlight certain features of the tale or

the life story and bring it to the practitioner's attention would be worth further exploration. Ordered through a cyclical chronology, or with key moments picked out for emphasis, the pictures seem to be presented to us as a kind of ongoing narrative, not subject to the same rules of time or space that govern Western art: indeed Western notions of space can sometimes spoil this curious effect. But this issue is raised here really as a debating point. The book itself opens up all these areas for us, and one hopes it will encourage more discourse and discussion on the subject. It provides a vibrant, human and well-contextualized introduction to the popular art of a region, which, as the author notes, has received far less attention for its art than other Southern Buddhist countries. The paintings do not have the artistry, poise and dignity of earlier Cambodian art or the other depictions in *Wat Si Chum*; they do nonetheless show an exuberantly active folk art tradition, still capable of taking the events even of the twentieth century in its stride.

Much of the material in both these works is entirely outside the expertise of this reviewer. Realistically, this is now likely to be the case for anyone who works on a particular area of text, inscription, art, archaeology, history, anthropology or ethnography in the field. Both these books, by placing what is to many familiar text alongside depiction and inscription, helps us understand the extent to which it is *Jātaka* tales, the means by which the Buddha developed the perfections and the skills of his final lifetime, that really nourish the interior life and a sense of a gradual, diverse path for most lay and perhaps monastic Buddhists in these regions. This is of course why such works are of so useful, for bringing to a larger academic audience material and expertise that represent years of study, brought to play through discussion of a particular site or region: both help an understanding of how such temples worked and how they fit into a larger picture of Buddhist practice.

On a rather down-to-earth note, both these books make good 'coffee table' reads. I have found students and visitors, both those with knowledge of Buddhist history and those with none, diverted from conversation by the graceful beauty and fluidity of line of the pictures in the first book, and the engagingly colourful and even childlike vignettes of the second. They are also affordable and are the kind of book one would be happy to give or receive as a present. This last feature is not to be underestimated if the cultural heritage of Southeast Asian Buddhist art is to be made available not only to scholars of Buddhist texts, who will enjoy and profit from excursions into the ongoing and endlessly creative narrative of *Jātaka*/Buddha life story temple art and mural depiction, but also the general public too. River Books, and the authors of these two recent publications, are to be congratulated for their formula in linking good photographic record, the best scholarship available and an easily accessible narrative thread that holds together the various important lines of research for scholar and newcomer.