

all photos by Flaudette May V. Datuin

Details from a mural in a private residence in Tak Province, Thailand, painted by Phaptawan Suwannakudt

The Queen, the Goddess and the



uring my journey with mural painter Phaptawan Suwannakudt in March 1996, one of the figures that struck me most was that of Queen Mayadevi, the mother of Bodhisattva who would eventually become Buddha. She was part of a mural in an ordination hall (*bot*) in Thonburi, Thailand, which was her father's first attempt to revive the dying art of mural painting in the country back in the seventies.

FATHER'S AND DAUGHTER'S SPACE FOR THE WOMEN

Queen Mayadevi is painted on a wall facing the principal Buddha image, the last panel the believer sees before leaving the temple. Most mural painters opted to depict the story of the Bodhisattva's triumph over the forces of Mara, the symbolic king of evil and temptation. Representing the conquest of evil by virtue, it is a scene meant to fortify the believer against the profanities and temptations waiting for him/her outside the sacred space. Instead, Paiboon Suwannakudt painted the birth of the Bodhisattva, and foregrounded the woman considered just an accessory to the unfolding of a male-dominated tale.

Paiboon's predecessors would also customarily depict Queen Mayadevi in a standing position, extending her right arm towards a tree that "bends to greet her." Just beside her is the Bodhisattva as a fully grown toddler, standing on a lotus flower "with the look of a great man."

In Paiboon's reconstruction, however, the mother occupies a strategic site at the lower center in the panel. She is in a reclining, mermaid-like position, probably recalling that night, when in a dream, she saw a white elephant penetrate her side—a sign of the birth of a son who would be either a Universal Monarch, or, if he renounced the world, a Buddha. Straining to spring out of Queen Mayadevi's womb, Bodhisattva emerges from her right side without injuring her.

Through this unorthodox interpretation, Paiboon asserted the significance of one of the most important points in Buddha's life—his exit from Buddha heaven and the beginning of his historical existence as the One who would later attain enlightenment and ultimate liberation from the endless and unavoidable cycle of rebirth that marked the pre-Buddhist Vedic belief system. Through his life and teachings, the Buddha "provided the long-hoped-for resolution to the question of a being's

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Mural Painter

by Flaudette May V. Datuin

future”—a path of salvation that provided an alternative to the the eternal cycle of retribution that an individual is doomed to live (Boisselier: 24).

For Phaptawan, however, the turning point in Buddhist history is the story of the Bodhisattva subduing Mara. In her reconstructions, she would place the Bodhisattva at the apex of the painting, right hand on his knee, fingers pointing to the ground, summoning Dharani, the Earth Goddess, whom he called upon to bear witness to his right to Enlightenment. Dharani is painted just below him, in the same spot Queen Mayadevi occupies in her father's first mural.

The Bodhisattva in Phaptawan's renditions appears to occupy the more dominant position, his inert, meditative stance set in striking contrast with that of Dharani, who is shown nonchalantly, even sensuously, wringing her hair, thus unleashing a deluge from the forces of Mara located just below her. The Buddha connotes tranquility, while Dharani comes across as the the embodiment of Nature's capacity for creation and destruction.

The entire scene is an example of how a woman, by virtue of her physical features, can be reimaged into a publicly obedient one whose potentially destructive energies must be contained and rechanneled by male supervision and intercession. The father glorified motherhood and its nurturing role in the perpetuation of a male line. The daughter reinserts Na-



"Buddha Subduing Mara" (detail) Wat Jaksa Phottaram, Uthai Thani, 1992-93, by Phaptawan Suwannakudt

ture's chthonic powers—sometimes passive and therefore safe, but at other times like in the mural just described, destabilizing.

Rendered in flat, unmodulated solid colors, these women seem to reinforce the stereotypes of femininity and the binarisms that form the basis of women's inferiority: Culture/Nature, Head/Body, Intellect/Emotion, the One/The Other. Yet, within the context of a belief system that offers a path of deliverance accessible to all, Queen Mayadevi stands out as the woman without whom, in the first place, Buddhism would not have come about. And, as Phaptawan puts it, "Buddhism may not have happened," if the scene where Dharani plays a central role had not at all transpired. Within the limiting walls of their stereotypical feminine constructs, these

women suggest other possibilities that simultaneously affirm and transcend the boundaries of their predetermined existence.

EVOLUTION AS ARTIST AND LEADER

Although Dharani and her potent locks would be the recurrent theme in Phaptawan's murals, her first painting, at the age of eight, was in fact Queen Mayadevi's hair. Without parental knowledge and consent, she had persuaded Paiboon's assistants to let her climb that scaffolding whenever her father was not around. This act of disobedience serves as a milestone for Phaptawan, as it characterizes her publicly subservient but privately subversive ways of breaking down the barriers of traditionally male territory. She would be climbing one scaffolding after another to

reach heights previously unthinkable and off-limits to women. But like Queen Mayadevi and Dharani, she would do so both within and outside the bounds of what was deemed "feminine."

Although she began her career as her father's youngest, though unofficial, apprentice, Phaptawan would eventually become Paiboon's legitimate assistant and after his death, his successor. But as her later projects illustrate, she would gain her own stride.

Paiboon was the charismatic visionary, he was not an organizer. He left many unfinished projects, Phaptawan says, and Queen Mayadevi's mural was one of them. Her father had done this for free,

Phaptawan's turn to head the project, she resolved, along with her siblings, to avoid their father's mistakes by striking a balance between the artistic and managerial demands of mural painting. Proof of their success is the Putta Monthon Buddhist Center, their latest project, which reunited for the first time in 10 years, five teams of seven members each. Together, they had to paint, over a one-year period, 86 panels, each measuring 8 by 1.8 meters, in an area totalling 1,300 square meters. The project was finished without the usual clash of personalities that prevail in such individualist settings as a gathering of several artists for an extended period—testi-

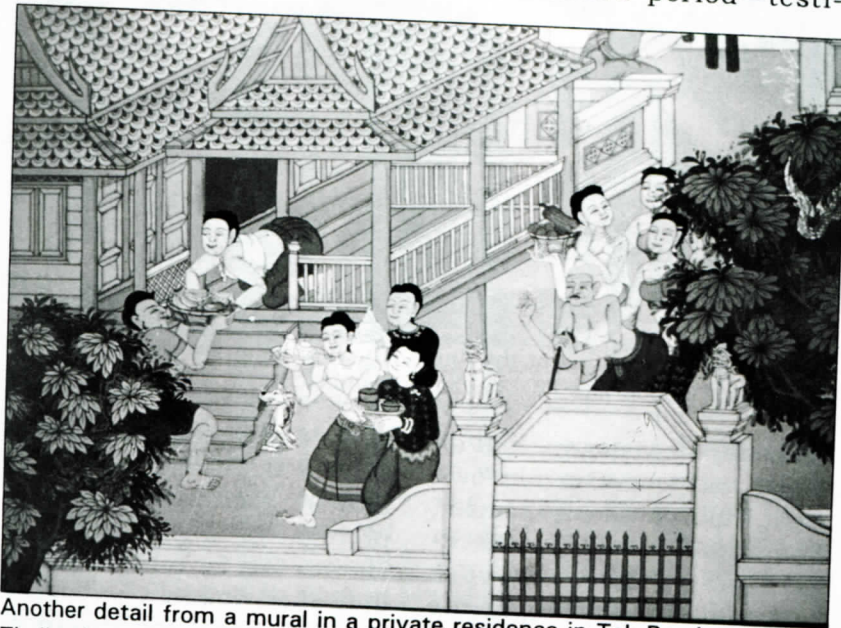
There was even a time she had to shuffle between her duties as special teacher at the royalty-initiated Support Foundation and as muralist, which brought her to far-flung provinces and remote areas. When travelling alone, she would often disguise herself as a man. Most of the time, she had to camp out at improvised shelters and survive on very little sleep.

For the Putta Monthon Buddhist Center, however, Phaptawan was able to focus on the overall artistic supervision. And since she was working with an experienced team, she allowed space for each group's artistic preferences, expertise and temperament. The result is a polyphonic chorus, where each team's distinctive styles are unified by, and complement each other through, one underlying theme.

STAMP OF PERSONAL AND WOMAN'S INDIVIDUALITY

In her first temple project, the Wat Sri Khorn Khan in Phayao, 400 kilometers north of Bangkok, Phaptawan had to take over, with extreme reluctance, from a male master who, for some reason, was unable to complete the project. Though she tried to be faithful to the original intention, Phaptawan could not help insert her own team's distinctive voice. This is apparent in the clash of colors between the upper and the lower panels, and the differences in the Buddha's figuration: the earlier one was flat and static while Phaptawan's was three-dimensional and modulated.

In the royalty-sponsored Wat Tha Suthawat in



Another detail from a mural in a private residence in Tak Province, Thailand

"because nobody was interested in murals at that time." Halfway through the project, however, he ran out of logistics. Members, no matter how dedicated, dropped out of the project "because there were times when there was nothing to eat." When it was

mony to the group's cohesiveness and its leaders' efficiency.

Phaptawan credits this accomplishment to the division of tasks between her and her brother, a teamwork that was not available to her during those years when she was still sending her siblings to school.

Angthong, about 100 kilometers from Bangkok, the muralist had to manage a group of students and co-teachers from the Support Foundation, some of whom were men whose individualist leanings often got in the way of teamwork: "I was busy setting down rules, they frequently broke them. They smoked, drank, and their hearts were not in the project. They were more preoccupied with their canvases and the art competitions back in Bangkok."

Phaptawan would eventually win out, but not without some compromises. "I predicted from experience that the colors they were mixing would change after some time, but they did not listen. I was proven right."

When she was looking for a space to exhibit the productions of the Tan Kudt group, the team her father founded, she was confronted by a remark that defines her in negative and derivative relation to her father: "You are Paiboon's daughter," the hotel manager said, "but you are not Paiboon." You are, in other words, the assistant but not the master himself, the copy and not the original, the successor but not the inventor.

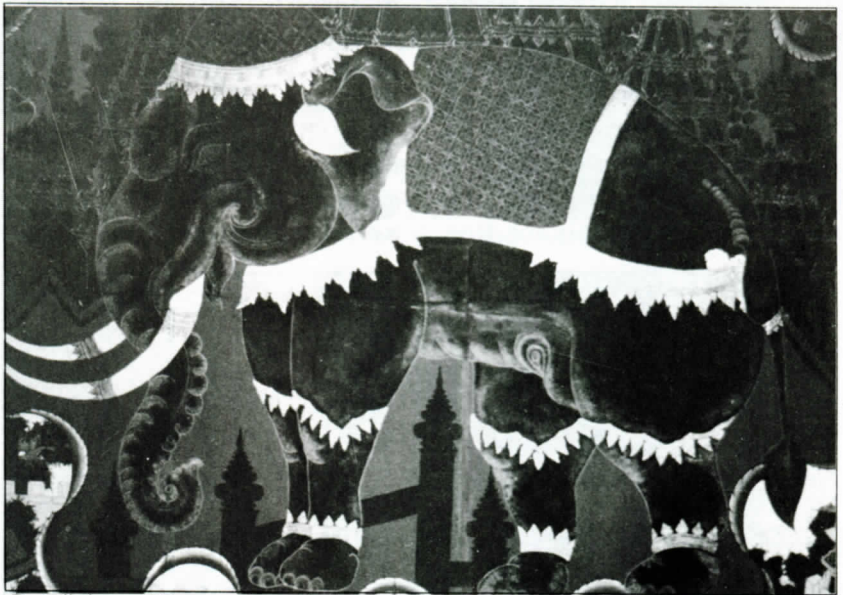
BIASES AGAINST (WOMEN) MURALISTS

Tan Kudt was rejected not only because of Phaptawan's perceived inferiority but also because of the marginal status of its artistic practice. Operating outside the framework of the "fine arts," mural productions are dismissed as "craft," products of skilled artisans or "copiers," not works

of art inspired by the genius of an individual creator. When the group attempted, through Phaptawan's initiative, to enter a setting reserved for solitary contemplation, the hotelier contended that its works "are not appropriate for the space." (Phaptawan eventually found that exhibition space.)

In a sense, however, the hotelier's remarks were on the mark. Phaptawan is not

collective in execution, traditional guilds, specially those organized in Euroamerican contexts, have extremely stratified and hierarchical relations of production. Workshops are typically identified with the authority, inspiration and virtuosity of a named male artist, the source and locus of creativity (Chadwick: 1990). Under Phaptawan's more egalitarian leadership, the nodes of crea-



Detail from "Coronation of the King", The Regent of Bangkok Hotel, 1982-83, Paiboon and Phaptawan Suwannakudt

Paiboon, the visionary, but an artist and leader in her own right. Paiboon was the pioneer, Phaptawan would be the organizer. It is a teamwork reminiscent of that scene where the Buddha meditated on the profundities, with the efficient Dharani by his side. Through hard work, determination and diligence, Phaptawan would succeed in perpetuating her father's vision, with her own re-vision.

She has moreover redefined the mode of production of mural painting. Although

activity are decentralized and dispersed. At the same time that she exercises the leader's prerogative and control, she allows room for each member's individual voices.

In Phayao, for instance, she gave a local boxer almost blanket freedom to paint the hell scene in one of the lower panels. Initially resistant to her authority, he was later quoted as saying: "I will follow no orders except from Phaptawan." This repositioning of power relations decentralizes male dominance,

thus creating space from which women could launch more strategic interventions.

Phaptawan has also been branded a "court painter," alluding to her service at the royalty-initiated Support Foundation, from which she is now resigned. Still others indict her for "earning money from her temples." Perhaps it is because her mural projects straddle what usually are conflicting aims of religion (temple murals) and those of tourism and commerce (hotel and office murals).

Thus, when a muralist who happens to be a woman succeeds in negotiating these contradictions, society is quick to coopt, categorize and dismiss her in recognizable, and therefore acceptable, parameters: a success story propped up by parental influence and royal tutelage.

PROCESS AND PILGRIMAGE

I asked Phaptawan where she derives strength and grace to face her detractors, but she could not pinpoint one single source. Instead, she showed me blueprints of her sketches. Meditative refuge is found in drawing those waves and those leaves again and again and again. She also recalls a time when her father ordered her to draw thousands upon thousands of leaves in pursuit of that one perfect leaf that would best embody not only its essence, but also the sketcher's discipline and moral fortitude—the very virtues that made the Buddha triumph over the forces of Mara.

As we progressed through the various project sites, I began to comprehend that Phaptawan's continuing devel-

opment as an artist is at once a pilgrimage as well. She was all along on a trajectory, from being an obedient though obstinate child who resolved to follow the Buddha's life, fired by her father's devotion, to becoming an accomplished person in her own right. She recalls those times when her father would recite—from the heart and in a loud, clear voice—the sutras of the Buddha's 500 lives while his apprentices were up on the scaffolding, filling in his sketches of scenes that were to touch his daughter. From the time she was old enough to tag along her father's projects, Phaptawan led a constantly mobile and unorthodox existence.

She traveled from temple to temple, while other children her age led, for the most part, sheltered lives.

This peripatetic life, combined with Paiboon's non-conformist ways of raising his children, not only shaped Phaptawan's intense spirituality but also gave her the courage to enter doors barred to women. At the age of 16, she wanted to be a monk. In her twenties, she was challenging, in nonconfrontational ways, the very institution she dreamed to be a part of. When her team was completing the Phayao temple, which is in a traditional community, some elders lodged a protest at the sight of women (among them Phaptawan and her younger sister) painting right in the middle of a sacred, male ground, at a height where the soles of their feet soared above the monks' heads. Finding an unexpected ally in the abbot himself, Phaptawan and her

team rallied on, winning in the process, the hearts and minds of the community—from the abbot down to the local boxer who would take no orders except from her.

Though Phaptawan's dream of becoming a monk remains an impossibility, the different facets of her life—as breadwinner, older sister, devout Buddhist, woman and mural painter—interphase each other in ways that open up other spaces for women in an intensely patriarchal belief system. Like the Queen and the Goddess, the Mural Painter continues to resist formulaic depictions and the flat, unmodulated pigments that often color women's roles. With mural painting as her prayer, sutra and mantra, Phaptawan unleashes women's. Other possibilities as agents of change and as shapers of more liberative practices and empowering interventions. ♪

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