

buddhist art Good reading about Thai Buddhist art (long, detailed) ... and Happy New Year !

Posted by orang37 - 2008/11/18 00:06

Friends, Happy New Year ! I hope this doesn't seem pedantic, or unrespectful of the recent tragedy that has occurred. The purpose of these comments is just to share with you some recent good reading, and alert you to the books themselves as a resource for your own study. In part this is sparked off by the appearance (at last) of a major new (well, new in the sense of finally completed after a long delay) book on the Buddha images of Northern Thailand (Griswold's major work on the dated images of northern Thailand is long out of print). In trying to understand the Thai genius in visual arts, you have the interesting paradox that much more is known to western scholars about the Buddhist arts of Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos due to the fine scholarship of the French colonial occupiers, through the L'Ecole francaise d'Extreme Orient, Hanoi, run by Georges Coedes whose library is now in Australia.

<http://www.nla.gov.au/asian/form/coedes2.html> Happily many of these books are rich in pictures, and the pictures can speak to your heart, even if the scholars' technical points don't. The two books listed that are in Thai only (the only English is a translation of the title and location of each of the Buddha images) is a wonderful compilation of pictures of all of Thailand's most major Buddhas beautifully photographed : for me there is no richer testimony to the Thai visual genius in all its great complexity than these two volumes. The comments that follow are probably of interest if you are deeply interested in S. E. Asian art history, particularly Theravadan Buddhist art. These comments are offered with a strong sense of my own inadequacies in understanding the very complex historical interactions of Mon, Khmer, Indic, and Chinese influences which have shaped the visual arts in this part of the world. So I (and perhaps you) will have to rely on the English language writing of these modern interpreters and scholars who reach out to us from the shadows of their great predecessors (Prince Damrong, Coedes, Boisselier, Griswold, Penthe). Je regret, je n'est parlez Francais. The fact that there are profound disagreements between the scholars writing these books on issues of basic fact, such as the very existence of the Mon Queen, Chamathewi, allegedly sent to rule the new Mon Kingdom of Haripunjaya centered around what is now Lamphun in northern Thailand (see below), should be a caveat. Another caveat is the enthusiasm by which Thai scholars have rushed to judgement in their eagerness to see Thailand as a source rather than a consumer of ancient technology : I am referring specifically to the hasty interpretations of archaeological evidence at Ban Chiang in Thailand as indicating that Thailand had a high tradition of bronze artistry in the 4th. millenium and was a source for China's incredible achievements : this interpretation is now completely discredited. This most dramatic of recent un-discoveries serves to highlight the tricky issue of the expropriation of imported artistic and cultural material by indigenous scholars who have a nationalistic sub-text. And of course they would point out the many well-known examples of western intellectual colonialism and bias on the part of western scholars. Thai scholars are particularly unhappy that some of the great interpreters of their culture and arts from the west tended to see Thailand, they feel, in terms of Indian or Khmer arts and culture rather than as ding an sich. Balancing these forces in the scholarly arena out is a growing awareness on both sides of the importance and richness of the Mon heritage and influence on every aspect of Thai culture. Betty Gosling's new book (see below) will make many Thai scholars happy when she states that Dvaravati Khmer art in Thailand was a very independent development from Indian early Buddhist art with a style and artistry all its own : at the same time when she states there is no archaeological or historical evidence for the existence of Queen Chamathevi, so dear to the hearts and traditions of Lanna (intellectuals as well as common folk), she may have made some real local enemies among the psychics and spirit doctors (mor doo, mor phii) who every year go into trance in Lamphun and channel her powers. I'm going to write Gosling and invite her to purchase a stunning Chamathewi amulet I have in my collection for magical protection at a special discount price :) 1. Buddhist Sculptures of Northern Thailand by Carol Stratton Silkworm Books, Chiang Mai, 2004 ISBN : 974 7551 63 2 430 pp., printed in China currently sold in Thailand for 2000 baht. Based on a substantially revised original manuscript co-authored with the late Miriam McNair Scott in the 1980's. Many photographs (many of which were taken in the 1970's, or earlier). About 16 full page color plates in the beginning of the book. Excellent line drawings illustrate other items or visual motifs. I wish many of the black and white photos were bigger, but they are, generally, satisfyingly in focus and detailed. Massive tables listing the very extensive inventory of museum and temple Buddhas and images cataloged and photographed for this book. Some chapters have no references, other chapters have chapter notes not specifically referred to in the chapter body content other chapters have numbered references. Some sidebars. So, a mixture of styles of citation and reference. Lack of an index a very frustrating omission ! imho : a must have for anyone specifically interested in northern Thai Buddhist art, and a wonderful source book with a wide range of coverage of not only the formal Theravadan Buddha images, but also Hindu and Khmer figures, semi-legendary figures, and animist gods, spirits, etc. imho : enough general level material written in a relaxed and not-too-deeply-scholarly tone to be a very satsifying read for the general reader, but enough technical material and scholarly references to be very valuable for the deeper student. Obviously deeply informed by current research by both Thai and foreign scholars. Stratton's long experience as a docent in Bangkok for the National Museum (and a manager of volunteer docents) to me shows through here : she's an educator and strives to present the big picture. imho : an excellent book and one which I will read and re-read many times. 2. Origins of Thai Art by Betty Gosling River Books, Bangkok, 2004 ISBN : 974 8225 99 2 196 pp., printed in Thailand currently sold in Thailand for 1495 baht Excellent color photographs and illustrations (200). Book beautifully graphically designed and executed. Consistent in-line source and reference citations of the form (author, year, page numbers). Has index ! imho : the primary focus of this book is the transition from Thai pre-history to Buddhist period, and it is an ambitious attempt to make sense of and interpolate the multiple cultural vectors, Khmer, Mon, Hindu, Indian Buddhist, Sinhalese Buddhist, Chinese, Burmese that interacted over time in the formation of the Thai Buddhist cultural heritage as expressed in sacred art. imho : the book's coverage of the Dvaravati Buddhist art objects and architectural

styles is very valuable and illuminating. Her distinguishing of the differing cultural contributions of southern Mon vs. northern Mon very interesting. imho : some of Gosling's most interesting assertions (most novel to me) such as her denial of the existence of an actual Queen Chamathevi would be more interesting to me if accompanied by collateral material that would answer the type of question an informed person would immediately ask when presented with such a variant version of the historical record. In this case that would include asking what Gosling finds inaccurate or wrong about the Jinakalamani Manuscript and other important ancient texts describing the founding of Haripunjaya and Chamathevi's reign. What to make of the burial site of the elephant that fought on the Mon side against the indigenous Lavo inhabitants during their subjugation and who is buried near the railway station in Lamphun. All legend ? If so, why does not Gosling talk about the techniques worked out by Griswold and others that used so-called legendary folkloric materials to achieve important insights into actual historic Buddha images. See Stratton p. 89 and following for a summary of historical texts that mention Chamathewi. On first reading for me this is a difficult book in the sense that the material is so complicated my head spins frequently :) I will re-read this book soon. No doubt it is a very valuable book and provides a wonderful complement to Charles Higham's book on Thai pre-history (Early Cultures of Mainland Southeast Asia, River Books, 2002). 3. Thai Law : Buddhist Law : Essays on the Legal History of Thailand, Laos, and Burma Andrew Huxley, editor Orchid Press, Bangkok, 2002 (first published 1996: based on academic conference in 1993) ISBN : 974 89758 9 4 211 pp., printed in Thailand This is a very specialist book, no photos, no illustrations. I found this second-hand, but I believe it is still in print, but don't know the asking price at this time for a new copy. I bought this primarily to read Huxley's long essay Thai, Mon, and Burmese Dhammathats : Who Influenced Who ?, and Aroonrut Wichienkeeo's essay Lanna Customary Law. Huxley's long introduction (he was the moderator of a conference held in London in 1993 under the patronage of HRH Maha Chakri Sirindhorn of Thailand) ... and his chapter ... are among the richest readings on cultural interactions of India, Thailand, the Mon, and Burma, I have come across. I'm still trying to digest what I can out of the incredibly dense and complex scholarly writing, and I will, I promise, re-read this many times. Local people (and Thai scholars) still like to forget that Chiang Mai (Lanna) was under the domination and control of the Burmese from about 1558 to 1775 and that there is more of a ... read more »

=====

buddhist art Good reading about Thai Buddhist art (long, detailed) ... and Happy New Year !

Posted by Mort - 2008/11/18 00:06

This is a multi-part message in MIME format.

=====

buddhist art Good reading about Thai Buddhist art (long, detailed) ... and Happy New Year !

Posted by orang37 - 2008/11/18 00:06

Thanks, Khun Mort, I didn't realize I posted that in HTML ! I was aware of the Musee Guimet's wonderful collections, and have visited their site, though I have never seen been there in person : thanks for that link. For anyone reading this who wants to see English language pages with pictures and descriptions of some of their superb collection of S.E. Asian artifacts, try starting with : http://www.musee guimet.fr/gb/homes/home_id20407_u112.htm I find it very strange that Coedes' library and papers ended up in Australia rather than France. ~o:37;

=====