

HEADLINE: Art lovers without borders

SUBHEADLINE: Restoring sites of national heritage in Thailand often does not get the attention it deserves _ but a Thai-French collaboration has been working to change the focus and to ensure that major and minor cultural icons will live on

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There is no doubt the Internet revolution and the Information Age have dramatically altered the fabric of society. There seems to be no end to the discovery of new sociological impacts brought about by modern telecommunication technology.

But on the long list of unexpected by-products brought about by the high-tech revolution, there is a change worth looking at more closely, one which affects the concept of world patrimony.

The much-talked about global village, hastened by the Internet and the increasing number of air-travel companies, has drawn not only people together but also nations, cultures, religions and, surprisingly, historical monuments.

This understanding leads the eminent sculpture and mural painting restorer, Robert Bougrain Dubourg of France, to say:

``There is a new appreciation of world patrimony. Surely the Internet has changed the notion of distance, as has the increase in the number of air links between countries. The `other', the foreign, becomes part and parcel of ourselves.

``Nowadays, one tends to feel as much concerned about the conservation state of Thai temples, for example, as about the deterioration of the Chateau de Versailles. Conservation becomes an issue that is not limited to your own backyard."

At the click of a mouse button, you can catch a glimpse of the colourful brilliance of Thai temples.

And before you can say ``Jack Robinson", you can pack your bag and be right there, marvelling at the beauty of Thai stupas.

Driven by their passion for art and historical monuments, French experts packed up recently to attend the ``Conservation and Management of Ancient Monuments and Works of Arts" seminar, organised by the Fine Arts Department and the French Embassy in Bangkok.

The three-day seminar was held last month in the compound of the National Archives building, on Samsen Road, attended by a handful of specialists and practitioners from the Fine Arts Department, scholars from Silpakorn, Thammasat and Chulalongkorn universities, and representatives of the Tourism Authority of Thailand and the Spafa (the Regional Centre for Archaeology and Fine Arts).

It was the first seminar ever organised on museology, concentrating on the techniques of conservation, restoration and management of cultural patrimony. Senior specialist in ancient monuments, Uraiwan Tantiwong, from the Fine Arts Department, Group Captain Aryuth Ngeonchuklin, director-general of the Fine Arts Department, and Guy de la Chevalerie, cultural counsellor of the French Embassy, presided over the opening ceremony.

The seminar secured the participation of prominent French specialists such as Robert Bougrain-Dubourg, coordinator of the restoration section at the School of Arts, Avignon, and president-founder of Restaurateur Sans Frontières (Restorers Without Borders, or RSF), Jean-Christophe Simon, regional conservator of ancient monuments and memorials in the Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur region (South of France) and Bernard Le Guen, specialist in the conservation of paper heritage.

The seminar also called on the expertise of Bangkok-based Pierre Pichard, director of the Bangkok Centre of the Ecole Française d'Extrême-Orient Efeo, who has been involved with numerous renovation projects in Thailand.

“This seminar was the result of an already established collaboration between the Fine Arts Department and the School of Arts, Avignon, for the conservation of mural paintings. French experts realised that countries in the Southeast Asian region are rich in cultural heritage sites. Appropriate conservation and management of these sites should be undertaken in order to maintain them for future generations,” Uraiwan said.

“This is a good example of authentic cooperation. A few of us took part in an exchange programme and went to Avignon. We shared the same vision and could exchange ideas. This collaboration was a big step forward. The excellent synergy and interaction between countries, helped greatly by the flawless simultaneous translation, could be witnessed in the dynamic question-and-answer sessions, devoted to establishing the criteria for registering a site as “historical”, for example.

“We are already very close to European legislation but sometimes not up to the details,” Uraiwan said. “For example, a 500-metre radius is supposed to delimit historical sites. In Thailand, for minor sites, we may not have more than 20 metres, although we may have 1,000 metres for historical sites such as Sukhothai.”

She added there was an inequality in the treatment between major historical sites in Thailand _ mostly temples _ on which funds are readily secured and expert craftsmanship deployed, as compared to minor sites, which are mostly left to the resident monks to preserve.

This disparity was the cornerstone of the whole project.

“In Thailand the gap between sites that are considered to be of major patrimony and those which are considered secondary is very apparent. All efforts are made for a major building, with competent and multidisciplinary teams engaged in the work. But it's unfortunate that on minor sites, work is sometimes carried out without preliminary analysis of existing materials, and studies on compatibility of products,” commented Pierre Pichard from the Efeo, basing his speech on a series of slides illustrating the poor quality of restoration work undertaken in a few temples of the Southeast Asian region, resulting in damage often more serious than the natural deterioration.

The main culprit is the cement used as a binding agent, which has been held responsible for major deterioration on numerous sites. Because of its high salt content _ found in all brands available in Thailand _ the cement attacks the bricks it is used on. And because of its impermeability, humidity resurfaces at a higher level, usually at the cost of the temple's mural paintings.

Many buildings in Thailand have paid dearly for this error, Pierre Pichard said, showing slides of damage in Wat Dusit in Thon Buri, in Wat Klong in Samut Prakan and a stupa in Nakhon Pathom.

But far from posing themselves as critics, the team of experts work hand in hand with the Department of Fine Arts and consider themselves as humble servants and assistants.

``In no way are we here to spread the good word or impose a Western vision of restoration. In each case, we are willing to learn, share, exchange and if need be, draw up a restoration draft which can be reproduced after our departure," explained Dubourg .

``Humility, respect and solidarity direct our actions. The stones and art pieces that reflect the soul of a place are the result of the sensitivity of those who have conceived it, in association with those who have loved it, used it, worshipped it but sometimes also, abandoned it," the eminent restorer said.

``To try and restore some works means engaging in a real, deep and essential communication."

``In no way are we thinking that we know best. On the contrary, we try to understand the way Thai experts work and possibly suggest small changes. Most of the time, we discover that existing traditions of restoration are more effective and relevant than external know-how."

Thus for the last 15 years, RSF has been weaving links around the world, mobilising professionals working for the conservation or restoration of built and non-built patrimony. Their main concern is the minor, or secondary sites, not protected by Unesco's world patrimony list _ the ``third world" of culture, and not necessarily humanity's masterpieces, but which still influence popular culture.

Often forgotten and neglected, such historical places constitute to the RSF the most valuable and truthful representation of a society's cultural identity.

``Hopefully Unesco is there for major sites, but we believe minor sites are just as important for the wealth of a country and display essential cultural diversity," Dubourg explained.

``I struggle constantly against the temptation to freeze things. To me it is a primordial urge to leave behind some proof, some testimony ... The past is very valuable in the sense that it helps us understand reality. It is important to be able constantly to refer to the roots."

Some of the religious authorities who rule over Thailand's historical monuments are sometimes more prepared to raze to the ground an old, dilapidated temple, rather than engage in the burdensome task of renovation.

``Monks are the users and decision-makers in temples. They are the financial and ideological power. This is unique to Thailand," he said.

Over the past few years of this French-Thai collaboration, abbots and monks have been integral to the decision making process.

As part of a project to celebrate the start of the millennium, RSF, the city of Avignon in France, and the French Agency for Artistical Action (Afaa) committed themselves to restoring several religious sites throughout the world.

One was the temple of Kok Srisaket, 40 kilometres from Korat, which was selected as a symbol of Buddhism. Others included a synagogue in Cuba, an orthodox monastery on Mount Sinai and a Christian church in Guyana.

The restoration work on Kok Srisaket, which focused heavily on the temple's mural paintings, was undertaken and financially supported in conjunction with four experts from the Fine Arts Department, and was completed in December 1999.

``Wat Kok Srisaket is located in a small village _ 500 inhabitants at the most. We could have chosen to participate in more prestigious renovations but we are not doing this for the advancement of the tourism industry. We enjoyed doing this minor site knowing that surely no one would have done it in our place," Dubourg explained.

Again, and without anyone's knowledge, the RSF team came to Thailand last year for another round of fun, touring over three weeks to numerous sites across seven provinces under the guidance of four restorers from the Fine Arts Department. Wat Kalaya in Bangkok, Wat Tonson and Wat Nen Suthawas in Chon Buri, Wat Mahathat, Wat Ratburana and Wat Chang Yai in Ayutthaya, Wat Bangkung in Samut Songkhram, Wat Koekaew-Sutharam, Wat Yai Suwan-Naram in Phetchaburi, Wat Mahathat in Ratchaburi and the famous Wat Umong Theraja in Chiang Mai were thus put under the microscope.

Renovation suggestions ranged from laying electrical heating wires level with the ground to help humidity evaporate, to erecting piles to help support heavy structures, or pumping salt content out of spoiled bricks using paper pulp imbibed with water, as well the use of lime or even fish glue.

In November and December 2001, RSF experts, together with the Fine Arts Department, will again collaborate on the renovation of minor sites.

Wat Mahathat in Ratchaburi will be the first on the list.

In France, the culture industry currently employs some 400,000 people, representing 1.7 percent of the total workforce, or as much as the trade in cars.

Thailand might be inspired by such numbers to promote its own cultural industry.