

HEADLINE: A princess and an artist

PROFILE: M.C. Marsi Sukhumphand Paribatra, who recently presented one of her surrealist paintings to Her Majesty the Queen, talks of her passion for art and how it feels to live as part of two distinctly different cultures

WANPHEN SRESHTHAPUTRA

Thanying Marsi, your art work is very meticulous and rich in detail, do these attributes emanate from Thai art?

It comes from the Thai nature in general. Thai people like minute details and precision. But I get inspiration from 16th century European art. It is the style of painting I love most, a style that has never been equalled particularly in its representation of nature and of fantasy worlds. However, artists like Dali have also shown me the way. You live in France, surrounded by many different animals, which often appear in your paintings. How did this love of animals start?

My love for animals dates back to my early childhood. When I was two, I had a chow-chow dog that my nanny carried with me in the push chair. I always thought of it as my brother! I never really made a distinction. Since then, I have always made a distinction. Since then, I have always lived in the company of animals. In Annot, I have nine cats, one Saint-Bernard, two Labradors -- two basset-grands just died -- I also have two parrots and little birds that fly free in my workshop. I gathered them all on one of my paintings The Ark of Noah -- Moah, that's me.

How do you start and finish a painting?

A painting usually takes me about a year to complete. Others which are teeming with detail might take two years. At the start of my career, I

was afraid of white canvas so I covered the canvas with colours at random, later I interpreted them, transforming the colour little by little. But that was not very satisfying because I could not really master the construction of my work.

Later I proceeded in a different way, by doing the whole drawing on paper and then transposing it onto canvas. It is a very long and tiresome work, but in this way the drawing is better distributed on the canvas.

While painting I usually listen to classical music, it enchants me, especially when I am completing a boring piece of work. Not everything is exciting when one paints!

I think a painting always starts with a dream; images combine with each other, get transformed sometimes. A painting can also start with a poem, or from the images it conjures up. I always think over my paintings for a long time before starting. Sometimes you lead your painting sometimes it leads you.

Are the surroundings in which you live important for your work? And what does it mean to you to live in Europe?

The tranquillity, the loneliness are needed. It is not always pleasant, but it is necessary for creativity. Bangkok has many good sides, but it is almost too social. To be able to paint I need time that I never have here.

To be a painter is not a profession, it is a vocation. Modern times do not favour artists. Sometimes you have to be violent with yourself to get to work, and not to be distracted by anything. When living alone, the work itself entertains you.

Culturally I need the West, I feel secure knowing I can go and visit any museum if I need to imbibe myself with any particular work. I take this

risk of living alone. I don't feel I could be as productive here as I am living abroad.

Somehow I sneak away from my duties as a princess to devote myself to my painting and my art work.

Can we compare Western art with Thai art?

Thai painting is still very traditional. In France, I am rather close to musicians, closer than to many of the other modern artists. Musicians need to have a real professional technique and background. It seems to me they are more serious and don't claim as much as many modern painters who, for want of technique, have only pretentiousness.

For instance, think of the recent art exhibition in London featuring a display of rotten meat, or of the Italian artist who put faeces in a box! These kinds of artistic expressions cannot in any way be compared with paintings that require one year of work.

How do you cope with the conflict of belonging to Thai and European culture?

It is like a dream. My two lives contrast so much. In Annot I lead a very simple life. I work around six hours a day and keep myself busy a lot of the rest of the time by gardening. Here in Thailand, due to my rank, it is a life of luxury. In the palace it is like the 18th century!

On top of that, you have to face the cultural shock of Europe and Asia, the shock of Bangkok on the edge of the 21st century. But I am lucky to have been trilingual from childhood and to have a predisposition for Europe.

All the different sides of my character are equally real to me. Whether I am a princess or an artist, Thai or European, each state of being is in my blood, nevertheless sometimes you don't know who you really are any more.

Do you find yourself when painting?

No, when painting I forget myself!

A mass of influences

The great-granddaughter of King Rama V, M.C. Marsi Sukhumphand

Paribatra was born in 1931 in Bangkok, in Suan Kularb Palace.

Her mother was M.R. Pantip Paribatra. Her father, Prince Chumbhot of

Nagara Svarga, was the grandson of King Rama V. He passed away in 1959.

Prince Chumbhot owned Suan Pakkad Palace, situated on Si Ayutthaya Road.

The palace, which is now open to the public, is owned by the

Chumbhot-Pantip Foundation.

M.C. Marsi, 66, has lived in the southern French village of Annot for

more than 25 years. She returns to Thailand for a few weeks every year,

usually around New Year.

She lived in England between the ages of two and eight, later moving to

Switzerland and then finishing her school at Mater Dei in Bangkok.

By the time she was 20, M.C. Marsi was teaching foreign languages and

the history of art at Chulalongkorn University. She later left Thailand

to pursue her studies at the Sorbonne University in Paris, before

teaching Eastern Civilisation at Madrid University.

She has lived in France since 1965. Painting became her passion after

the Museum of Modern Art in Paris welcomed some of her early paintings.