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The Integration of Image and Text for Communication in the Mural Paintings of Potharam Temple in Nadoon District, Maha Sarakham Province

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Abstract

The study related to images and text has typically been changed; that is, those intend to investigate its concurrent semantics and to search for their explanation. Both imagery and literal language on the murals in Isan temples have been deemed and acclaimed as their artistic worth.

The murals in numerous temples appearing in public areas have expressively been told through stories by way of beliefs, including different concepts in existing messages that can be communicated from the painters to the viewers.

This study, specified in Isan, would become an interesting issue for gaining various levels.

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1. Introduction

In the civilization of human race, human life has been related to visual and literal languages through storytelling. Initially, human beings might have used the visual language to narrate the characteristics and history of nature or to record and tell the changing of society, culture, as well as about themselves. Sometimes, it might have been used to express the feelings and thoughts underneath. Later, society has developed and civilization has prospered, human beings have had more complicated ideas; then, they initiated the well-structured language to convey meanings for general communication. Mankind, therefore, has made use of narration and communication through visual and literal languages in different contexts.

Since Aristotelian era, it has been traditionally believed that a tale is an effort of mankind to imitate nature. Having been narrated through the visual and literal languages, tales are the reflection of the real world. The purpose of the elements maintained in both literal and visual languages is to tell ideas and history that happened in society. The belief that human beings are living in a world full of stories and the facts that we perceive, are constructed by humans themselves. This construction is comprised of images and textual languages employed in communication. It

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was stated that what we see -- the ‘physical reality’ or events—means nothing unless the constructor (media or a person) defines it.

In communication, human beings not only use verbal language directly, but may also use images and letters as a carrier to convey messages, tell stories, and express thoughts and feelings from an individual to another or from certain groups of people to the other. From the phrase “A picture says more than a thousand words” or as in a Thai proverb “Ten mouths do not beat up ten eyes (Experience is the mother of wisdom)”, the emphasis is put on the importance of visual communication.

The result of many studies about the human nature of perception, found that humans learn through sight by 75%, hearing by 13%, touch by 6%, smell by 3%, and taste by 3%. In terms of memory it was found that humans could recognize what they have seen by 40% and only 20% for what he has heard. (Saowanee Sikkabundith, 1985: 34)

In contemporary viewpoint, storytelling and both visual and literal languages can interact together to communicate and convey meanings. By this, the changing aims of research in visual and literal languages may focus on the study of coordinated communication. This is done for several reasons: 1) to answer the question of how images and text can be coordinated 2) the combination of the images and text when they are used in a public area 3) and also in what way and how both of them can support each other.

Murals are an art form that can be found in every part of Thailand. Similarly, Isan, the northeastern area of Thailand, also has murals in many places. Not only being found on a cave wall or cliff, but the painting (Hoob Taem) was also found in a local chapel, ‘Sim’ in which archeologists and art academics in Mekong Region have researched with systematic methodology. Mural paintings can be found in various provinces which reflect the prosperity of the Isan civilization (Prayoon Uluchata, 1990 : 96). Those murals are well-accepted and applauded for their artistic value. They also have a strategy of communication result in social beliefs and Thai culture of the local identity.

In many temples, a mural has its particular way to tell stories, beliefs and ideas or convey the truth of which a painter-constructor tries to let the viewers understand. Accordingly, murals in many temples containing both visual and literal languages are a medium to express ideas or to tell stories effectively. In so doing, many people are more interested in those stories.

Images and text in Isan temple murals are well-accepted and praised for their artistic value. They also contain a strategy of communication which locally unique to manifest the folk beliefs of Thai culture and society.

At present, a number of students, either in a formal education system or non-formal one, who study communication through literal and visual languages gradually increase every year. However, the research related to the integration of images and text in the temple murals or in the related fields (as mentioned), is still limited. Thus, the comprehension and ability to explain the method of conveying messages through images and text may not be widely studied.

More importantly, western studies in communication through visual and literal languages in Thailand are still adhered to in Thai studies. Also, the integrated research of communication through images and text in mural painting is not the mainstream idea. Henceforth, in this study, the integration of contemporary connotation between images and text on the mural in local Isan temples will lead us a variety of knowledge and pave the way for people who are interested in current and future studies.

1.1. Research Questions

1.1.1. What are the stories, tales or literature found in murals of Isan temples?
1.1.2. What are the methods by which images and texts are integrated into mural painting?

1.2. Research Objectives

1.2.1. To analyze the ways of communication though visual and literal languages
1.2.2. To study the composition of images and texts in public
1.2.3. To study the coordination of images and texts in communication
1.3. Significance

This study will lead one to the method of conveying messages through images and text, and how they are coordinated and integrated to communicate successfully in public.

Therefore, this study will be beneficial in the academic realm as well as artistic profession. In the academic field, the findings can lead to a new body of knowledge for the integration of images and text in the temple murals. In society’s view, it is a worthy study of the roots of Isan literature and culture as local media and Thai wisdom.

2. Research Methodology

This research, the integration of contemporary connotations between images and text on the murals in local Isan temples, is conducted using content analysis. The researcher makes use of the relevant ideas and theories to approach and solve the problems. These areas of mural study which are Concept of Semiotics, Symbol Theory, Concept of Rhetoric of the image, Composition Theory, Knowledge of Thai and Isan mural painting, Concept of integration of image and text in painting

2.1. Research Settings

2.1.1. The scope of data:
In the communication of images and text, the researcher uses the contents which are the visual language (the temple murals), and image texts. The stories on the murals may vary.

2.1.2. The scope of area:
In the research, the researcher collects the data from the mural from Photharam temple, Nadoon district, Maha Sarakham province

The murals in all of these temples are in almost perfect condition with their images and text. Each of them has its unique and variegated way to combine images and texts in telling stories

2.2. Process

2.2.1. Study the relevant evidence and printed materials related to the murals history, culture, values, arts, and literature.

2.2.2. Study the documents related to the mural texts; for example, the ancient language, local Isan language, and religious scripts in the Isan dialect.

2.2.3. Collect the related evidence about the concept of Semiology, concept of image communication, Rhetoric of image theory, theory of language structure, and concept of local Isan literature and synthesize them into a research framework.

2.2.4. Collect the studies related to mural paintings and texts as well as synthesize them thoroughly.

2.2.5. Analyze the method of text and image communication in terms of structure and language. Study the composition of text and image communication in public areas and the coordination of image and text.

2.2.6. Conclude the research result. Discuss and present the result by descriptive analysis.

3. Results

The integration of texts and images for communication in the Isan murals, of Photharam temple, Nadoon district, Maha Sarakham province, which can be analyzed and concluded as follows
3.1. The Literature found in the storytelling of the mural at Photharam temple

The stories that a painter (Chang Taem) mostly drew on the mural of Photharam temple have some significance as to the present cycle of folk life, the stories that people respected or honored, or with what the painters were impressed. From an analysis of the murals in Photaram temple, the stories can be categorized into 2 groups.

3.1.1. The story of Buddhism

In Photharam temple murals, painters portrayed the history of Lord Buddha, Jataka of Vessantara—the tenth Bodhisatva. In Lord Buddha’s life, Mahapinetsakrom—The Great Renunciation—the painters narrated the story of Prince Sidhratha looking at the parlour maids who were sleeping and he felt pity for them. Then, he decided to enter the monkhood.

3.1.2. The folk literature; Sin Chai

The tale of Sin Chai is very well-known in the local area because Sin Chai, the main character, is clever and cunning, and renders amusement to mural viewers. This tale teaches Dharma and morals, as well as folk life. In general, painters either drew the ways of life to communicate with viewers directly without a main concept, or subtly reflect the cycle of life in the tale.

From the murals in Photharam temple, images, text and their connotations can be analyzed as following:

A. Human subjects:

The painter preferred drawing most of his faces as ‘looking straight on’ which means that the male was drawn as a half face, at an angle of 90 degrees. This was done to portray commoners as well as high ranking people. In so doing, painters obviously could not express the beautiful shape of the face. This, however, was not applied to Lord Buddha as his face looks straight on. All women were drawn with the same style, even though their bodies were turned either way. The images of people can be classified into three levels. 1) High ranking people such as, Lord Buddha, angels, and kings 2) Commoners, such as ministers, soldiers, maids of honor and ordinary people 3) Low class people.

B. Animals

Most animals found on the murals are patterned after real animals, and a few come from their imagination. In the Photharam temple, there is a mythological powerful and enigmatic lion with a collar the (Kraisorn Ratchasri or Sri Ho). Local artisans adapted the convention from the court artists. The postures of the animals vary, depending on the story.

C. Habitation

Artists imitated local structures such as palaces with their pavilions, mansions, and houses. They also enlarged the scale so that the item could be a center of interest.

D. Landscape

A landscape is a part of the setting in the stories. The landscapes found on the murals in Photharam temple can be categorized into 1. Trees, which are an imitation of nature. 2. Land and mountains 3. Sky

3.2. The composition of image and text communication on the murals in Photharam temple

Having been combined with images in the mural, it is clearly seen that the text, as a tool, attracts, teaches and helps viewers recognize, as well as believe in what they see. Using the text to communicate on the mural, the painters intended to embed text to narrate the activities on the mural. Sometimes, the drawing of the painters who are local artists, is so complicated to convey the underneath meaning to locals, the text is needed to make it easier to understand morals in the stories.

One of important factors of textual communication on temple murals is the drawing of the painters. They did not apparently manage dividing spaces for certain stories. That means they just drew on the empty spaces on the wall. In so doing, many stories were mixed, leading to the need of text to describe each story so that local visitors could understand it more easily.

Every image is potentially polysemous or has multiple meanings in which readers can choose some and deny others simultaneously. This causes many interpretations and leads to ambiguous meanings in communication. As a
result, many techniques have been developed to lead one to the correct meaning in order that it will not be too ambiguous. Here, text is the effective device applied in mural painting.

It is the main responsibility of text to support the meaning of the drawing according to Barthes (Pracha Suweranon, 1995: 118-120). Therefore, the reader can ignore and banish some spurious meanings. Using text to convey the meaning will lead the readers indicated meaning. Consequently, the text is used to clarify and select the best possible interpretations. It must be an explanatory text which is specific to certain signifiers. All in all, according to the painter’s purpose, applying text with the images on the murals is to limit the potential of the image to convey multiple meanings.

A mural with the title contains a message in its own way, in addition to the description of the image. This is because the image and text help clarify the story to be comprehensible. Image can explain situations found in the story and make them more tangible, helping illiterate people to be able to understand. Text helps describe the details of the image which cannot convey any meaning. For example, a person’s name and the setting where the event taken place, are in the text that may successfully fulfill and convey the meanings in the murals.

The textual position is also an important part to determine the scope of image communication. There are various unorganized stories on Photharam temple murals; so, the position of text will determine the communication of images as well.

The text was well used as reference to elements of the mural and it could effectively convey meanings. The text indicates these elements such as 1) characters, 2) names, 3) setting, and 4) their origins on the murals have their own significant explanations. In other words, text and image as seen in the painting are important to interpret paintings. Even though both text and images can be linked to combine and convey the coordinated meaning, in communication, there is no clear-cut sequence which should be interpreted first or later.

4. Conclusion

A painting and mural are the communication between the painters and viewers via storytelling which utilizes the image and text as a medium. The concept of the Isan mural tells one that drawing on the wall was originated from a religious ceremony, and it mainly came from the motivation of locals. The painting story imitated real life -- the ceremony, and lifestyle of people at that time. The presentation of stories in mural paintings is a communication with symbolic meanings. Isan painting culture does not wholly inherit from cave painting and inscription culture, which emphasizes beauty. More importantly, the concept of making mural paintings on the Sim is also about teaching, and the beliefs of people at that period.

The drawing on Sim is the storytelling communication which is comprised of images and text as a medium of Dharma and moral teaching, the adherence to Buddhism, the portrayal of folk life, and public amusement. In so doing, it renders people more delightful flavor and imagination through sight rather than hearing only.

The method of coordinated communication with image and text in the temple mural is explained by the theory of Semiotics which aims to find the relevance of signifier and signified to study how the meaning is to be meant and expressed. The composition of the image and text in communication is the constructed symbols in the social system which must be of three aspects: 1) Understandable by individual learning, 2) Variable to societies, 3) Interchangeable within an individual or similar society due to contexts.

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