

การสร้างสรรคงานศิลปะไตรรงค์ในงานจิตรกรรมไทยรัตนโกสินทร์

Creative decoding of Tri-Ongsa art in the Rattanakosin period

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บทคัดย่อ

การวิจัยเรื่องนี้ มีความมุ่งหมายเพื่อ ศึกษาการใช้ไตรรงค์ในงานศิลปะไทยรัตนโกสินทร์ เพื่อศึกษาแนวทางการนำไตรรงค์มาประยุกต์ใช้ในงานศิลปะไทยรัตนโกสินทร์และเพื่อสร้างสรรค์ผลงานด้านงานจิตรกรรมแนวคิด ไตรรงค์ ๓ เก็บรวบรวมข้อมูลเชิงคุณภาพ โดยวิธีการสัมภาษณ์ การสังเกต การสนทนากลุ่ม และการประชุมเชิงปฏิบัติการ พบว่า ศิลปกรรมในวัด 9 วัดมีความสอดคล้องกันจากอิทธิพลของจิตรกรรม ฝีมือชั้นครู ในการนำ สี เส้นและรูปทรง เรื่องราว มาใช้ในการสร้างสรรค์จิตรกรรม ผู้วิจัยได้ทำการสร้างสรรค์งานจิตรกรรมตามแนวคิดไตรรงค์ขึ้นและคัดเลือกผลงาน ที่ดีเด่น จำนวน 10 ชิ้น จัดแสดงนิทรรศการ 3 ครั้ง พบว่าผู้ชมนิทรรศการมีความเข้าใจงานศิลปะด้านจิตรกรรมรัตนโกสินทร์ของผู้วิจัย โดยประเมินจากการตีความหมายของภาพจิตรกรรมได้ใกล้เคียงสิ่งที่ผู้วิจัยนำเสนอ และมีความพึงพอใจ ข้อเสนอแนะเพิ่มเติมคือ สำหรับผู้ชมโดยทั่วไป ควรมี คำบรรยายใต้ภาพสั้นๆ พอสังเขป เป็นแนวทางให้เกิดความเข้าใจ คุณค่า ความงาม และความหมายได้ ด้วยตนเอง สอดคล้องกับรูปแบบศิลปกรรมไทยรัตนโกสินทร์จากบรรพกาล เช่น ลายในรูปสามเหลี่ยม ที่นำไปใช้ในงานจิตรกรรมไทย ได้แก่ กนก นารี กระบี่ คชชะ ตามหลักการเรียนศิลปะไทย การสร้างสรรค์จิตรกรรมไทยรัตนโกสินทร์ ไตรรงค์ จึงน่าจะเป็นที่ยอมรับได้ ฝีมือดี ปัจจุบัน และอนาคต ในแนวทางการสร้างสรรค์งานที่เป็นสุนทรียศาสตร์ และวัฒนธรรมศาสตร์ เพื่อนำเสนอสู่สากล ในด้านคุณค่า และคุณประโยชน์ ด้านอิทธิพล และแรงบันดาลใจจากบรรพบุรุษไทย

คำสำคัญ: ศิลปะทางพระพุทธศาสนา, การสร้างสรรค์, รัตนโกสินทร์, ศิลปะวัด, ไตรรงค์

Abstract

This research study aimed to study Tri-Ongsa art and its application in Thai art and its place in the creation of new art-work. The study was done through qualitative data collection from interviews, observations, group discussions and workshops. Data collected at nine Rattanakosin-era temples shows that Tri-Ongsa was developed for use in paintings, sculptures and architecture. The triangular figures and shapes were associated with morality, wellness, religion and strategies concerning Heaven, the Earth, and the Underworld. The general public may be unaware of the message in the pictures and were aided by short captions that guide them to understand the beauty and meaning. The researchers selected ten outstanding pieces of the Tri-Ongsa method for three art exhibitions. It was found that the audiences who visited those three exhibitions were impressed and understood the Tri-Ongsa Rattanakosin art-work being shown. The researchers feel that the Tri-Ongsa art of the Rattanakosin period should be recognized by the ten ASEAN countries. Thailand would then be acknowledged for the exposure of Tri-Ongsa on the international art stage.

Keywords: Buddhist art, creativity, Rattanakosin, temple art, Tri-Ongsa

Introduction

Observation is extremely important in the valuation of art because it allows humans to make a subjective judgment on meaning and beauty. Observation permits aesthetics, ‘critical reflection on art, culture and nature’ (Kelly, 1998, p.ix). Understanding of how to observe art is taught throughout school education, from primary level

to higher level. The reason for incorporation of aesthetics and artistic theory into art lessons and curricula is that the value and meaning of art cannot purely be understood without some appreciation and knowledge of art history and the philosophy of art (Kunpisan, 1987). Art education also includes elements of cognitive experience from art critique and art history, which enable the learner to recognize the personal relevance of artistic beauty, value and meaning (Leder, Gerger, Brieber & Schwarz, 2014).

Experience in art critique teaches the individual how to consider the cause and effect of art and how to distinguish between beauty and ugliness (Soep, 2005). It also enables the observer to transfer those feelings and perceptions into spoken or written descriptions and explanations that enable others to understand their cognitive process and conclusions. Another dimension of art history and understanding of art through the ages is its ability to educate people in the evolution of human culture. As art is a reflection of culture (Hatcher, 1999) it can be used to analyze beliefs, the influence of the surrounding environment, the economy, society, politics and lifestyle in different periods of history. In this respect, it is important for art curricula to treat learners and observers as artists, art critics and art historians in order to generate maximum benefit from the subject (Fleming, 2012).

Many theorists have worked on ways to understand the process of art critique. Mittler (1986) considered the teaching and learning of art critique as a perceptual evaluative process. Meanwhile, Broudy (1972) argued that for learners to effectively develop as art critics they must treat art in four areas: aesthetics, art history, art critique and practice. Other perspectives consider art

criticism as the culmination of a series of steps (Eu-anan, 1986). Inclusion of art theory into school art classes enables learners to develop their cognitive processes as well as their practical skill (Kunpisan, 1987).

Triangles are symbols of power in Thai art that signify a greater artistic intention than pure aesthetics (Sutti, 1992). The inclusion of triangular symbols in Thai art encourages the observer to consider the meaning of the artwork more than they would ordinarily do. This art, known as Tri-Ongsa, thus carries a special significance. Consequently, the researchers were interested in analyzing the 'power of three' in Thai art of the current Rattanakosin Kingdom and how artists use it in their creations to attract and engage observers.

Research Methodology

This is a qualitative investigation that incorporates both document research and fieldwork. There were three study objectives: 1) To study Tri-Ongsa art in the Rattanakosin Kingdom; 2) To study the methods for applying Tri-Ongsa principles in Rattanakosin art-work; 3) To analyze observer reaction to art based on Tri-Ongsa principles. The research area was purposively selected as Bangkok because of its place as the capital city of the Rattanakosin Kingdom and the widespread presence of prominent paintings, sculptures and architecture. The research process was divided into three stages. During stage one, the researchers analyzed documents concerning Tri-Ongsa art, art theory and the history of art in the Rattanakosin era. During stage two, the researchers conducted fieldwork to gather data relating to Tri-Ongsa art in the Rattanakosin era and identified thirty pieces of influential Tri-Ongsa art. During stage three,

the researchers organized three art exhibitions to showcase ten of the pieces recommended by informants. The reactions of observers to the art and its meaning were evaluated and analyzed. The investigation took twelve months from 2011 to 2012.

The researchers purposively selected temples in Bangkok for this investigation because temples are the home of Tri-Ongsa art-work. From a possible choice of 69 Rattanakosin-era temples in Bangkok, the nine most prominent temples were chosen as the research sample. The nine temples were: Wat Kalayanamitr, Wat Chanasongkhram, Wat Pho, Wat Phra Kaew, Wat Rakhang, Wat Suthat, Wat Arun, Wat Bowonniwet Vihara and Wat Saket. The informants for the investigation were divided into three groups. The key informants were six national artists: Dr. Prateung Emjaroen, Professor Preecha Taotong, Professor Wichok Mukdamaneem, Emeritus Professor Aree Suttipan, Wichian Kamjaroen and Assistant Professor Padung Sirirat. The casual informants were twenty people responsible for the creation and analysis of Tri-Ongsa art, including artists, teachers and students. The general informants were thirty art observers.

Tools used for data collection during field study were interview, observation, workshop and art exhibition. Interviews were conducted in three parts. The first part asked respondents for personal details relating to the interview, the second part covered methods for including Tri-Ongsa principles in the creation of art-work and the third part concerned the creation of new Tri-Ongsa art-work. Observation of existing art and practicing artists was conducted at each of the nine selected temples. A workshop was then held to discuss the findings of interviews and observations at the nine temples. Finally,

the researchers selected ten outstanding pieces of the Tri-Ongsa method for three art exhibitions in Bangkok and Nonthaburi. The first one was at Wat Arun Ratchawararam, the second as at Ban Tri-Ongsa in Nonthaburi, and the third was at the former Nonthaburi City Hall. Observer reactions were recorded and evaluated. All findings were validated using a triangulation method and the data was analyzed according to the three research objectives by analytic induction and typological analysis. The results are here presented as a descriptive analysis.

Results

Tri-Ongsa art is art that includes triangular forms or principles of three. These are often clearly visible, although their deeper meaning may be obscured. Tri-Ongsa was developed for use in paintings, sculptures and architecture. It was found that at least three different colors are used in color line painting. The figures and shapes are developed in triangular patterns, such as with spiral roofs and are associated with morality, wellness and religion. The objective of the art is to present morality to all Buddhists. Rattanakosin art was inspired and influenced by the Tri-Ongsa art that is found in the structures and pictures of the nine temples. Tri-Ongsa art also includes components of cultural studies that can be developed or built upon. These components are often manifested in groups of three, including: 1) stories of the three worlds (Heaven, Earth and Hell); 2) Trailokya (the three realms of desire, form and formlessness); 3) Trailaksana (the three marks of existence); 4) Traiwawarn (the three gates); 5) The Buddhist precepts, concentration and wisdom; 6) Birth, life and death; 7) Movement, sight and hearing; 8)

Moral thought, moral speech and moral actions. The content of the art-work can include letters and symbols as well as images and can be concrete (real), semi-concrete (almost real) or abstract (with no physical representation, such as anger or love). Tri-Ongsa art can also take contemporary form with images from modern society, such as the triangular Eiffel Tower or the Bermuda Triangle. The inclusion of traditional concepts and cultural representations in Tri-Ongsa art allows the meanings to be recognized because they are concepts present in the everyday lifestyle of observers. This cultural aspect also makes the Tri-Ongsa art a distinctive form of traditional Thai knowledge. The paintings, sculptures and architecture of the nine Rattanakosin temples all adopt the patterns of Tri-Ongsa art and are very similar in style.

Despite the clear depictions of cultural concepts in Tri-Ongsa art, the intentions and meanings of the artist may become obscured by a lack of cultural knowledge on the part of the observer. For this reason, short captions or commentaries are required to fully explain the elements of the art and the reasons behind their inclusion and depiction. These descriptions enhance the beauty and value of the art for the observer because they can then fully understand the cause and effect of the piece. With some explanation, Tri-Ongsa art is compatible with modern tastes and can be used to create an identity for the ASEAN Economic Community in much the same way as the triangular kanok pattern has become a feature of Thai contemporary art.

In order to assess the potential of contemporary Tri-Ongsa art, the researchers selected ten outstanding pieces of the Tri-Ongsa method for three art exhibitions in Bangkok and Nonthaburi. The first

one was at Wat Arun Ratchawararam, the second was at Ban Tri-Ongsa in Nonthaburi, and the third was at the former Nonthaburi City Hall. The aim of the exhibitions was to record and evaluate the responses of observers to Tri-Ongsa principles in contemporary art. The ten pieces of art are described below.

Contemporary Tri-Ongsa art used during the exhibitions

Image one (Figure 1) was a Tri-Ongsa cockerel, which emphasized the relationship between red, black and white and how the colors range from strong (black), faded (red) and weak (white). The size of the image was 50x65cm and it was created using black, white and red spray-paint on canvas. Triangles were used to create the eyes, mouth, feathers and comb of the cockerel. The picture caption read: "Cockerel – a symbol of light, good, truth and beauty (people in the East believe that a cockerel's crow is a signal for the sun to rise and that it banishes darkness and inauspicious spirits). Light, shadow and darkness are a trinity in Tri-Ongsa art."

Figure 1. The Tri-Ongsa Cockerel



Image two (Figure 2) was an abstract painting of repeating triangles. The painting incorporated small, medium and large triangles that could be used limitlessly, according to the imagination of the observer. The size of the image was 100x150cm and it was created using red, yellow and white acrylic paint. The picture caption read: "Three sizes of shapes, large, medium and small, superimposed upon one another convey meaning of the Buddhist precepts, concentration and wisdom, according to the experiences of the observer."

Figure 2. Abstract Repeating Triangles

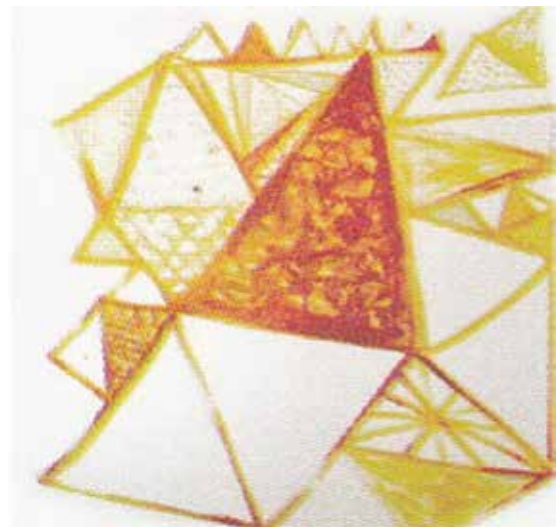


Image three (Figure 3) was a composition of Tri-Ongsa triangles that focused on three sizes of line, small, medium and large in a similar pattern to a set of weighing scales. The size of the image was 25x36cm and it was created using white, grey and black ink on paper. The picture caption read: "Triangles connected to form a set of balanced scales that reveal the nature of too much, too little and just enough."

Figure 3. Balanced Scales

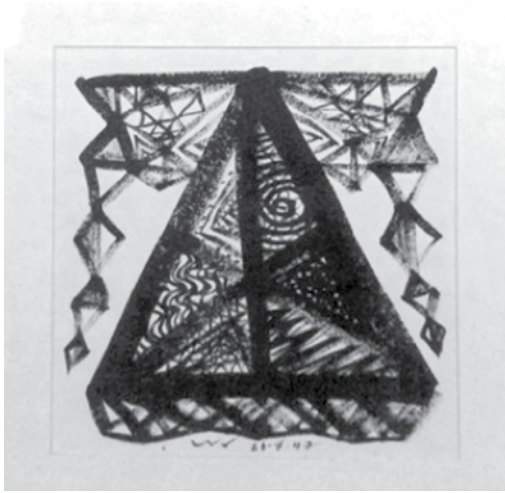


Image four (Figure 4) was a Tri-Ongsa bell based on the bells in the hall of a temple and created using a composition of different-sized triangles. The different sizes of the triangles refer to the variation of sounds a bell can make, from loud to quiet. The size of the image was 22x26cm and it was created using acrylic paints on canvas. The picture canvas read: “A bell that resonates clearly when struck. This reveals the three grades of volume: loud, quiet and just right.”

Figure 4. The Tri-Ongsa Bell



Image five (Figure 5) was a three-dimensional triangle created using acrylic paints on Papier-mâché. The size of the image was 22x26cm. The caption read: “Triangles colored according to the artist’s mood and creative imagination.”

Figure 5. Three-Dimensional Triangle



Image six (Figure 6) was an abstract painting of different sized white and red Tri-Ongsa triangles. The size of the image was 100x150cm and it was created using spray-paint on canvas. The picture caption read: “Harmonious connection of triangles and a variety of forms and blends convey the meaning of good, evil and neutrality.”

Figure 6. Abstract White and Red Triangles



Image seven (Figure 7) was a representation of platapiensan, a type of ornamental fish created using traditional Thai knowledge. The image was created using lines in groups of three and three colors: red, white and black. The structure of the painting allows the observer to visualize a platapiensan or any other image that they may see in the formation of the triangles. The size of the image was 100x150cm and it was created using red, white and black spray-paint. The picture caption read: “Harmony of three-colored triangles of three sizes, small, medium and large. This conveys the image of the platapiensan, a traditional Thai cultural handicraft that reveals the essence of being Thai.”

Figure 7. The Platapiensan



Image eight (Figure 8) was a painting of Tri-Ongsa stars to represent space. The stars were painted in three sizes (small, medium and large), three intensities of color (bold, normal and faint) and at three levels of distance (near, medium and far). The stars were created by combining triangles. The size of the image was 44x62cm and it was created from a mixture of spray-paint and ink. The picture caption read: “In the sky, there are stars

made of triangles. This painting shows the trinity of distance: near, medium and far.”

Figure 8. Tri-Ongsa Stars



Image nine (Figure 9) was a collection of triangles and lines in black and white using different intensities of shading to create a third color, grey. This was an abstract image created by combination of concrete forms (triangles and lines). The size was 100x150cm and it was created using spray-paint. The picture caption read: “A composition of three levels of triangle to reflect the past: near, median and far.”

Figure 9. Triangles and Lines in Black and White



Image ten (Figure 10) was a collection of triangles, circles and squares in black, red and green and laid out artistically. The size of the image was 44x62cm and it was created using red, green and black spray-paint. The picture caption read: "A combination of lines, colors and spots to form an artistic structure that emphasizes the nature of three."

Figure 10. Tri-Ongsa Triangles, Circles and Squares



Results of observer evaluation

Incorporation of Tri-Ongsa principles in contemporary art is a combination of fine arts and culture that can, at the very least, reveal the essence of being Thai. The Tri-Ongsa art emphasizes the importance of the trinity, or three, whether in the form of shapes, colors or concepts. The arrangement and blend of Tri-Ongsa principles create aesthetic beauty, abstract feelings and personal meaning beyond the original intentions of the artist. They are relevant to contemporary art.

From the art exhibitions, observers commented that the Tri-Ongsa art is a collection of different shapes and colors that can be difficult to interpret. They recommended that there should

be a format for helping observers to understand Tri-Ongsa art. The observers felt that the images encouraged artistic thinking and critique, which helped them to relax. Each picture incorporated triangles, which is the essence of Tri-Ongsa art. Observers noted that this helped them realize the art-work was Tri-Ongsa and suggested that any projects concerning Tri-Ongsa art should be based upon the foundations of triangular shapes. The observers concluded that Tri-Ongsa art delivers an unclear meaning, which is open to interpretation. The observers realized that most of the pictures carried an underlying meaning (although they were not necessarily able to ascertain the intentions of the artist) and they commented that each of the images was interesting in its own right. The aesthetic beauty of the Tri-Ongsa art varied from piece to piece and observer to observer. Some pieces were described as beautiful, while others were described as chaotic and undecipherable. The images that attracted the most positive comments were images with clear representations of mathematical shapes. Below is a selection of comments from observers at the art exhibitions regarding the contemporary Tri-Ongsa images:

1. They showcase the beauty of Thai art.
2. In order for Thai artists to develop, they must include Thai identity in their work, as these paintings have.
3. The contemporary Tri-Ongsa paintings bring the art of the past into the present.
4. The meanings of the paintings should be easier to understand so that they appeal to all age groups in society.
5. The mixture of art and religion gives the paintings an added importance.
6. These paintings would have great

effect if they were printed onto products and fabrics because they would be an everyday way of promoting Thai culture.

7. The commentaries next to the paintings are vital for the understanding of the observer.

8. There is very little presence of this kind of painting online. If there really is an intention to bring the art of the past in line with modern society, artists must use modern media to do so, not only paints and canvas.

Discussion

The art-works in the nine temples share similar characteristics and all display the traits of Tri-Ongsa art, which are a combination of aesthetic beauty and cultural meaning. The stories told in the art place importance on the nature of the trinity, or three. These findings support those of Yammuang et al. (2008), who recognized the importance of combining simple shapes, such as triangles, circles and squares, to signify deeper meaning and cultural understanding.

The number three has a continuous and immovable presence in nature and its relationship with Buddhist and Thai culture is the foundation for Tri-Ongsa art. This is a strong foundation that will enable further development of Tri-Ongsa art and aid its acceptance in the contemporary art scene and by wider society. Three is recognized by the Pythagorean school of philosophy and mathematics as the noblest of the numbers because it is the first prime number, the only number to equal the sum of those numbers before it and the only number, when added to the numbers before it, that equals the product of those same numbers (Hemenway, 2005). Importantly, when considering the significance of Tri-Ongsa art in the

wider community and specifically the ASEAN community, the number three is significant in many world religions, including Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism and Taoism. Padung Sirirat (2006) actually found that many of the artistic interpretations in the Rattanakosin temples were influenced by foreign concepts during the reign of King Rama IV, so using these works of art as the basis for a contemporary revival of Tri-Ongsa may be well-received outside Thailand. Nevertheless, this foreign influence does not detract from the representation of Thai nature because much of the Tri-Ongsa art was based on art created during the reigns of Rama I-III (Chanonarat, 1981).

Aesthetic theory highlights the importance of experience in understanding the value and significance of art because the art is a reproduction of that experience. Current society is driven by technology and many of the experiences in peoples' lives involve technology in some way. It was interesting to note that observers at the exhibitions identified a lack of Internet presence as a factor holding back the progress of Tri-Ongsa art and the researchers feel that greater emphasis must be placed on the use of modern media by artists and the Fine Arts Departments of the government and universities to promote Tri-Ongsa art. Art historians argue that there is no specific path for art and that all art is part of a much larger and limitless canvas. The same can be argued about the direction of Thai art and the place of Tri-Ongsa principles in shaping the future of Thai art. Interactive multimedia is certainly a direction that contemporary Tri-Ongsa art could take to be developed in the future.

Theories of art criticism highlight the importance of reading about art and learning from

the written and spoken word about the meaning of art and the philosophies behind it. Many of the observers at the exhibitions found the art difficult to understand without the accompanying captions. This highlights the importance of language in understanding art and also in conveying the message of art accurately to other people.

To enable the general public to understand and realize the value of Tri-Ongsa art, descriptive statements or captions should be shown to describe the pictures and the story. The researchers feel that the creation of Thai art, especially the Tri-Ongsa art in the Rattanakosin period should be recognized by the ten ASEAN countries, which may create contemporary art inspired from the original style. Thailand would then be recognized as one of the stimuli for the exposure of Tri-Ongsa on the international art stage.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Tri-Ongsa was developed for use in paintings, sculptures and architecture. The triangular figures and shapes were associated with morality, wellness, religion and strategies concerning Heaven, the Earth, and the Underworld. The general public may be unaware of the message in the pictures and are aided by short captions that guide them to understand the beauty and meaning. The researchers selected ten outstanding pieces of the Tri-Ongsa method for three art exhibitions. It was found that the audiences who visited those three exhibitions were impressed and understood the Tri-Ongsa Rattanakosin art-work being shown. The researchers feel that the Tri-Ongsa art of the Rattanakosin period should be recognized by the ten ASEAN countries. Thailand would then be acknowledged for the exposure of Tri-Ongsa on

the international art stage.

The findings of this investigation have led the researchers to make a number of recommendations for future research. Firstly, there should be a comparative study of the impact of different forms of Tri-Ongsa art on observers, such as paintings, sculptures and architecture. Secondly, future research should consider methods for development of Tri-Ongsa art into handicraft products that can be identified with Thailand and used to boost tourism and local cottage industries. Thirdly, further research should consider the impact of Tri-Ongsa art on people with different educational, socio-economic and geographical backgrounds to better understand the ways in which traditional Thai art affects different people.

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