ISSN 2664-8067 (Print) & ISSN 2706-5782 (Online)
South Asian Research Journal of Arts, Language and Literature
Abbreviated Key Title: South Asian Res J Art Lang Lit

| Volume-7 | Issue-3 | May-Jun- 2025 | **DOI: https://doi.org/10.36346/sarjall.2025.v07i03.005**

Review Article

From Nāri-lāta to Nariphon: Examining the Iconographic Journey of Fruit-Maiden Symbolism in Thai Art

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Article History
Received: 07.05.2025
Accepted: 12.06.2025
Published: 14.06.2025

Abstract: The Nariphon, a legendary fruit-bearing tree rooted in Thai Buddhist tradition, has emerged as a significant motif in Thai cultural expression. This investigation explores the development and importance of Nariphon imagery by tracing its journey from South Asian origins to assimilation into Thai Buddhist cosmology and subsequent modern interpretations. Through the application of iconographic analysis, historical inquiry, and comparative methodologies, this study illuminates Nariphon's function of communicating Buddhist precepts concerning desire, impermanence, and spiritual discipline across various artistic media. Illustrative examples include the *Add MS 27370* manuscript (1824), the 1842 *Lawka-koon-char* Burmese manuscript, mural paintings at Wat Ban Lan and Wat Sanuan Wari in Isan, and Phaptawan Suwannakudt's Nariphon series. These artifacts exemplify Nariphon's versatility as an instructional tool. This research examines Nariphon's incorporation into Thai temple architecture and its evolution into contemporary religious artifacts. Suwannakudt's portrayal of the Nariphon as an allegory of young women's commodification addresses present-day societal issues. This investigation enhances the comprehension of Nariphon's depiction of Thai artistic tradition by connecting ancient mythology with contemporary social commentary. The continuous reinterpretation and adaptation of this motif underline its enduring relevance in Thai cultural discourse and expression, engaging with fundamental Buddhist principles of impermanence, attachment, and spiritual growth while mirroring shifting artistic trends and cultural norms.

Keywords: Nariphon, Iconography, Spiritual Discipline, Thai Buddhist Tradition, Traiphum Phra Ruang, Vessantara Jataka, Makkaliphon.

INTRODUCTION

The iconography of *nariphon* (women fruit: นารีผล, from Pali *nārīphala*), represents a complex intersection of Buddhist mythology, Thai cultural traditions, and contemporary artistic expression. This mythical fruit-bearing tree, also known as *makkaliphon* (มักกะลีผล, from Pali *makkaliphāla*) emerges as a significant motif across multiple domains of Thai cultural production from ancient Buddhist texts to present-day representations.

As McDaniel points out, one of the primary textual evidences of the Nariphon appears in the *Vessantara Jataka* (thai: **มหาเวสสันดรชาดก,** *Maha Wetsandon Chadok*), where it inhabits the mythical *Himavanta* (thai: โลกาหิมพานต์, meaning *The World of Himmaphan*) [[1]]. The *makkaliphon* tree episode within Vessantara Jataka elucidates the themes of divine protection and spiritual trial. In this narrative, Indra plants 16 trees that produce virgin fruit in the Himavanta Forest to protect Maddī, the wife of Prince Vessantara, during her daily foraging.

The trees both protect and morally test male ascetics, as close contact with the fruits leads to the loss of supernatural powers. Maddī's immunity to the fruits highlights her virtue.

This concept of magical trees and their effects on different genders are not unique to one tradition, as evidenced by their presence in various regional narratives.

The Isan literary tradition of Sin Sai (thai: สินไซ), which enacts syntagmatic variation through its homage to the regional shadow theater *nang pramothai* (หนังประโมทัย), presents a distinctive elaboration of *nariphon* mythology within its broader iconographic paradigm.

Sin Sai, a Lao-origin narrative sharing motif with the Thai *Ramakien* and Lao *Phra Lam Chadok* traditions, uniquely reinterprets the kidnapped princess tale. In this account, the Nariphon depiction, as exemplified by the murals at Wat Ban Lan, attains particular significance through the encounter between Bodhisattva prince Sin Sai and a grove of Nariphon trees, surrounded by *withiyathons* (วิทยาธร) —'forest-dwelling magicians known to use meditation for supernatural powers' [2], exemplifying the Buddhist principle of overcoming sensual desires through spiritual cultivation.

Brereton emphasized that this regional interpretation of the *nariphon* motif demonstrates its adaptability to Thai culture and its function as a didactic tool for spiritual discipline (ibid., p. 189).

The 14th-century Buddhist cosmological treatise *Traiphum Phra Ruang* (meaning 'The Three Worlds according to Phra Ruang') further establishes the *nariphon*'s position within Thai Buddhist cosmology, locating these trees on the Jambu continent surrounding Mount Sumeru, as attested in the version edited by Reynolds:

> Beyond this is a forest of trees that have women as their fruit; the fruits of these trees are very beautiful - they are like maidens who have just reached 16 years of age. When men see them, they fall in love with them, and when they drop, the birds flock around to eat them like bears eating honey [3].

Traiphum details the various worlds, beings, and creatures of our universe through metaphysical geography. *Kamaphum*, 'The World of Desires', is the lowest celestial heaven of Mount Meru. Ringis notes that this cosmogony aligns with Thai temple architecture. Despite Traiphum's complexity, villagers understand these principles, allowing them to comprehend the cosmological framework [4].

At Wat Prangmuni in Singburi Province, Luang Pho Charan, the abbot of the nearby Wat Ampawan vipassana meditation center, exhibits two purported *nariphon* maiden corpses. According to McDaniel [5], these artifacts, acquired during Charan's 1972 pilgrimage to Sri Lanka from a local ascetic, measure approximately eight inches in length and display a distinctive grayish, leathery texture. According to the abbot's assertion, ascetics who have attained a high level of spiritual advancement possess the ability to enter the legendary Himavanta Forest, which is said to contain *nariphon* trees [5]. In Wat Prangmuni, artifacts were displayed on cushioned platforms with floral offerings. These artifacts depicted figures resembling juveniles, characterized by protrusions from their heads that bore resemblance to stems. Despite being artificially carved, these objects attract devotees seeking romantic fortune through physical contact with the relics (ibid., p. 174)

While McDaniel's observations emphasize the commercialization aspect, the narrative's incorporation into maritime traditions demonstrates its broader cultural significance, as evidenced by the integration of the *nariphon* narrative into the maritime traditions of southern Thailand, particularly in Phang Nga, as discussed by Ferrari [6].

Drawing on Corbin's concept of the sea as 'territoire du vide' [7], or the territory of nomads who master its elements, Ferrari argues that the sea's wild nature mirrors the power it bestows upon these communities. In this context, Urak Lawoi sea nomads assimilated Nariphon objects into their customs exchange [6].

These items are presented alongside whale blubbers and black coral as gestures of gratitude for their exceptional contributions, highlighting the cultural relevance of *nariphons* to their seafaring traditions. Urak Lawoi women regularly market items that bear a striking resemblance to the severely dehydrated areca nuts. These women contend that the products are remnants of *makkaliphon* fruit, which has been subjected to extended periods of exposure to maritime environments.

This phenomenon exemplifies the way coastal communities transform Nariphon-related objects not only into objects of exchange for merit but also into vehicles evocative of spirituality bordering the Buddhist sphere, as documented by Ferrari:

> La légitimité du contrôle de ces éléments est tout naturellement accordée aux nomades de la mer, ce qui rentre tout à fait dans le cadre du rôle spirituel qu'ils possèdent dans la région [6].

The integration of these objects into spiritual rituals and economic transactions underscores the complex influence of the *nariphon* narrative on maritime customs and interethnic relationships along the southern coast of Thailand. Furthermore, Ferrari elaborates on exchange and relationship dynamics:

> Les nomades sont en effet garants d'une spiritualité régionale qui est «sauvage», car en périphérie du bouddhisme, bien qu'elle soit fondamentale dans la perpétuation de l'ethnorégionalisme. Il s'agit de la spiritualité autour de laquelle sont unies toutes les populations, à travers des objets issus de la mer [6].

The *1996 Nariphon series*, exhibited at Thailand's *Womanifesto* exhibition, demonstrates contemporary Thai artist Phaptawan Suwannakudt's reimagining of the traditional Nariphon narrative as a vehicle for examining contemporary social issues.

Her work recasts the maiden-fruit myth as commentary on gender constraints in today's society. Suwannakudt explains that she 'unconsciously painted a gum tree bearing girl-shaped fruits to tell the story of an incident in a province of Thailand when a 12-year old girl was sold by her parents', as noted by Flores in *The Contemporary Reinvests Tradition* [8].

Suwannakudt's paintings transcend Thai mythology, prompting viewers to contemplate the interplay between desire, gender, and economic disparity. This art positions the nariphon as both mythological and contemporary, linking cultural lore with social critiques (ibid., p.27). The female-fruit motif comments on social issues, showing the relevance of traditional cultural elements in modern art.

Suwannakudt uses *nariphons* as a metaphor for exploiting young girls, creating a visual narrative that engages viewers emotionally and intellectually. This approach highlights the adaptability of mythological symbols to address current societal issues, foster dialogue between the past and the present, and encourage critical reflection.

The widespread adoption of *nariphon* interpretations in contemporary artistic contexts exemplifies the versatility of the motif as a means of examining current societal issues, while preserving links to traditional Thai spiritual and cultural paradigms. This transformation from religious symbolism to modern social commentary exemplifies the capacity of traditional motifs to gain renewed significance when confronted with present-day societal challenges.

Methodology: Investigating the Changing Depictions of Nariphon in Thai Art and Culture

The examination of *nariphon* representation in Thai art uses a multifaceted research methodology that primarily focuses on iconographic analysis of seven curated images. This examination aims to elucidate chronologically the defining characteristics of the Nariphon figure and its artistic and historical evolution. This study's methodology combines various elements to offer a comprehensive understanding of this artistic phenomenon.

This analysis was augmented by an extensive review of historical and cultural artifacts encompassing manuscripts, mural paintings, and carved doors. Significant examples include the depiction of Mount Meru and Buddhist heavens from a Thai Buddhist cosmology (*Add MS 27370*) housed in the British Library [9], the 1842 *Lawka-koon-char* Burmese Manuscript, and an 18th-century *Mahānipāta Jātaka* manuscript [10], which is conserved in the New York Public Library. This study further examines carved doors at Wat Okat Si Buan Ban in Nakhon Phanom, and mural paintings at Wat Ban Lan in Khon Kaen and Wat Sanuan Wari Phatthanaram in Ban Phai. Additionally, this study explores how Phaptawan Suwannakudt, a modern Thai artist, reimagined the traditional Nariphon story to address current societal concerns.

This investigation utilized a comprehensive iconographic analysis to examine historical and cultural contexts alongside contemporary texts and artistic traditions. Comparative studies have identified recurring motifs and differences that connect *nariphon* depictions to other mythological entities in the Thai lore.

Research conducted in the provinces of Chiang Mai, Khon Khaen, and Nan, which included unstructured interviews, yielded valuable local perspectives and cultural insights. In addition, contemporary artistic creations were examined to assess the lasting impact of *nariphon* imagery. This approach, which combines historical research, visual examination, comparative analysis, and fieldwork, sheds light on the evolving representation and importance of *nariphons* within Thai art traditions.

Tracing the Transformation: Sinhalese Nāri-lāta to the Thai Nariphon Notion

The *nariphon* in Thai art demonstrates a significant correlation with the South Asian *nāri-lāta-vela* (from Pali: woman-creeper-fruit), which underwent evolution through the Kandyan period (1477-1815) in Sri Lanka. In Buddhist mythology, *nāri-lāta*, a botanical entity that exhibits floral characteristics reminiscent of a partially anthropomorphic female form, serves as an allegorical representation of aesthetic appeal and seduction. This element serves to challenge and assess the spiritual resolution of individuals engaged in ascetic practices.

Prominent in Kandyan art, this motif appears in wood carvings, ivory, and metalworks, transcending cultural boundaries into Thai representations where the *nariphon* merges Buddhist legends with Thai folklore.

The *nāri-lāta* legend [11] conveys moral teachings regarding desire and detachment, as described in the Coomaraswami story, attributing the iconography to a narrative translated by Paranatella from *Kathāvastu Prakaraṇa*:

> Long ago, when Raja named Bambadat ruled according to the four good rules in *Baranas Nuvara* (Benares) in *Kasiraṭa* on the plain of *Dambadiva*, enjoying regal luxuries, there dwelt a young Brahman in Pasalgama. At the death of his parents becoming master of all their property, as he was living in enjoyment of the comforts of a layman, many hermits during the rainy season came from the Himalaya Forest to Benares to the abodes of men and dwelt in ease in places such as the royal gardens and went to and fro in the city streets. [...] At that time the aforesaid Brahmana Kumara one day entering the city observing the people very eagerly treating the hermits and himself also going near the hermits remained a few days, thinking "I also follow the calling of a hermit and adopt the holy life, I too shall be similarly treated." [...] he adopted the life of a hermit [...]. Having attained *dhyāna* in a short time, and able to travel in the sky, one day when near his cave, he saw in a creeper called *nāri-latā*, a full blown flower having the appearance of a woman, in all wise of perfect beauty, glorious in grace. At that very moment he lost the power of *dhyāna* which he had so long successfully practised by great self control; his *dhyāna* disappeared at the thought of indulgence, his passions were let loose. Feeling very sorrowful thereat (he thought), [...] returning to the abodes of men, taking a wife and thinking to live in comfort, he went to his village, cast off his hermit's robes and became a layman and begot children; [...] at the end of his life died in accordance with *karma*, having forfeited the privilege of birth in Brahma Loka. Thus even for those who have successfully attained *dhyāna* the power of levitation is destroyed by the strength of lust and they are subject to *samsāra'*s woe. To those that heed this fact, that desire is as a thorn in the flesh, like a thief stealing away the holy life, like a great fire to burn the holy forest (of hermits) and reduce to ashes (ibid., pp. 92-93).

Kandyan artists incorporated *nāri-lāta* into decorative panels, featuring a female figure emerging from a flower calyx, holding symmetrical vegetal scrolls, and distinguishing it from deities, such as *śrī* (Lakshmi) [12]. Its presence on temple walls and pottery guides practitioners in understanding the transient nature of desire [13]. This motif is part of the Kandyan aesthetic tradition, which incorporates plant, animal, and human imagery. Decorative motifs adorn the smallest spaces between narrative registers or thematic panels and the surfaces above openings, such as the Kelaniya *vihāra* entrance hall [12].

Kelaniya Temple paintings, completed in 1851 (Buddhist era 2394), maintained pictorial continuity with the Kandyan era, exhibiting thematic, iconographic, and technical affinities with Kandyan artists despite postdating the Kingdom of Kandy [12] [14]. A decorative frieze featuring the nāri-latā motif—a fusion of vegetal scrolls and flower-like half-length female figures—separates the Sāma Jātaka and Vessantara Jātaka on the entrance hall's back wall (ibid., p. 55).

The *nariphon* background demonstrates notable similarities that not only replicate aspects of the *nāri-lāta*, but also reflect its cosmogonic context. This parallel suggests a deeper connection between these two mythical entities, potentially indicating a shared cultural or religious origin. The manifestation of the *nariphon* appears to have profound effects on spiritual practitioners, mirroring those associated with *nāri-lāta*. This similarity in impact could represent a significant 'mytheme' within the broader narrative structure of the fruit woman concept, highlighting the importance of these entities in spiritual and cultural practices.

Cosmogonic Drawing in James Low's 1824 Miscellaneous Album

The cosmological drawing of Mount Meru and Buddhist heavens from the manuscript *Add MS 27370* f.4r [9], commissioned in Penang (1824) by the East India Company to Officer James Low during his mission to Siam, offers a glimpse of Thai cosmogony during the reign of Rama III (1824-1851).

The assemblage amassed by Low, reflecting his strong fascination with Thai artistry, encompasses a wide array of paintings and sketches from southern Thailand. This collection features uncommon fourteenth-century replicas of the Thai Buddhist cosmological manuscript Traiphum. Additionally, it includes artistic interpretations of the Buddha's Ten Birth Tales, Thai texts on astrology and divination, portrayals of Low's welcome in Ligor, scenes from daily life, and an assortment of religious objects [15].

This analysis focuses on a particular detail found in the lower-right corner of f.4r., which encapsulates the symbolism of the Nariphon myth within Thai Buddhist cosmogony. Low's annotations on several drawings indicate that they are copies by a Siamese artist from original manuscripts, with one pencil sketch of three Chinese gods bearing the note -*Boon Khon delin*- (copied by Boon Khon), and described as 'a Siamese' (although evidence suggests potential Chinese origins), demonstrating a certain fusion of artistic traditions in this work [16].

Executed on European paper using a combination of color and pencil, the drawing likely reproduces elements from original Thai manuscripts while incorporating Chinese and Western artistic influences. This stylistic amalgamation

manifests in a delicate line-work reminiscent of Chinese botanical illustrations juxtaposed with an unusual application of Western perspective techniques for early 19th-century Thai art (see Ginsburg, 1989, pp. 89–91).

The scene depicts a tableau focused on the *makkaliphon* tree, with its meticulously rendered trunk and four nude young women-fruits at different maturation stages, and their development from embryonic buds to fully formed figures skillfully portrayed.

The base of the tree depicts a male figure, presumably a *ṛṣi*, a recurrent character noted for his exceptional abilities, which are attributed to rigorous meditative practices. This figure is notably dressed in tiger skin, which, according to Taylor, signifies a hermit [17].

Makers of *Nang Yai* (shadow puppets) use tiger skin for hermit images, believing it offers protection to the troupe and ensures good performance; Steve Van Beek further elaborates that the *ṛṣi* or holy hermit, 'possessing magical powers to protect the troupe and ensure successful performances, must be made from tiger skin to transfer the beast's reputed magical power to leather figures' [18].

The visual representation depicts the *ṛṣi* wielding a sword, which serves as a dual symbol of intimidation and protection, while simultaneously extending the other hand towards the foremost female figure, suggesting an impending interaction or potential harvesting.

The vertical composition was further enhanced by the presence of a secondary airborne male figure adorned with a *khon* demon mask (หน้ากากโขน / Naa Gaak Khon) and *mongkut* (มงกุฎ) crown. This representation of a supernatural entity aligns with the tradition of depicting mythological forest beings in Thai Buddhist art, a practice in Ginsburg that has been examined extensively.

The creatures of the magical forest, frequently included in *Ten Birth* manuscripts, were sometimes themselves the main subject of illustration - the *devas* (minor divinities), hermits and ascetics who gained access to the magic forests by devout practices […] 'magic forest' illustrations all seem to date from the eighteenth century, and we can suppose they were probably made before that as well. By the early nineteenth century all these decorative elements accompanying Buddhist texts ceased to be popular, for some reason, and the transition seems to coincide with the growing production of Phra Malai manuscripts [19].

This artistic tradition extends beyond individual depictions to include scenes from Buddhist mythology: *Trai Phum: Ayutthaya Manuscripts-Thonburi Manuscripts* (1999), a facsimile reproduction in three volumes published by Amarin in Bangkok features a *nariphon* scene on page 185 [20] as noted by Bogle, informed by the Adjhan Wat of the Burmese temple in Chiang Rai Province [21].

The image caption identifies the 'Nareephon Tree' and suggests a narrative involving three interaction phases with this mythical tree, each phase represented by a specific figure (ibid., p. 104).

It examines two brothers, Savvygar and Phattaavigar, and Naaraphatti, who reside in palaces between the terrestrial and celestial realms. These figures, depicted at different stages of the interaction with the *nariphon* woman, illustrate the cyclical process of harvesting and cohabiting with maiden fruit.

Savvygar, in the upper left, abducts a fully formed maiden fruit, representing the final stage of removing the fruit from the tree.

Phattaavigar, to the right, is shown during the harvesting phase using a sword to sever the fruit, symbolizing separation.

Naaraphatti, with its outstretched arm, approaches a maiden fruit in its initial stage, representing the commencement of the cycle. All three *mongkut* crowns showed elevated status. The text notes that despite their celestial nature, they cannot attain nibbana due to past deeds, focusing instead on the cyclical process of appropriating and cohabiting with maiden fruits before their deterioration [21].

Yamano mentioned Bangkok's National Library's publication of color reproductions of illustrated Traiphum manuscripts from the late Ayutthaya and Thonburi dynasties (1776) [22].

Berlin's Museum für Asiatische Kunst houses a comparable *Thonburi manuscript - Inv. Nr. II 650-*.

Terwiel's detailed analysis of the Thonburi Manuscript in Bangkok's National Library, *Samutphāp traiphūm samai Krung Thonburī lek thī 10*, reveals anomalies and inconsistencies, casting doubt on its 'originality' [23].

These examples illustrate potential variations in the visual representation of Thai cosmology across different manuscripts. The scene described on page 185 [20], may be subject to diverse interpretations and stylistic adaptations depending on the specific manuscript in question.

This variability highlights the complexity in determining the primogeniture of the visual and stylistic structures adopted in these illustrations. While a comprehensive investigation of this subject matter would provide valuable insights into the evolution and transmission of Thai cosmological imagery, such an extensive study falls beyond the scope of the current research. Nevertheless, these observations underscore the importance of considering multiple sources and versions when studying historical manuscripts and their visual representations.

A cosmogonic illustration of James Low's 1824 *Add. MS 27370* [9], specifically the *nariphon* myth on f.4r, demonstrates the intricate convergence of cultural, artistic, and religious elements in early 19th-century Thai Buddhist cosmology. This manuscript encapsulates the symbolic intricacy of Thai cosmogony, while reflecting the amalgamation of indigenous, Chinese, and Western artistic traditions. The meticulous depiction of the *makkaliphon* tree, *ṛṣi* adorned in tiger skin, and the airborne male figure donning a *khon* demon mask accentuates the vertical profundity within these visual narratives.

The diversity of Thai cosmology representations across various manuscripts presents challenges in tracing the origins of imagery. Instances from the Traiphum manuscripts and contemporary works illustrate how stylistic variations complicate attempts to establish definitive origins or interpretations.

This complexity enhances our comprehension of the adaptability and fluidity of cosmological art in response to evolving contexts and intercultural exchange. This examination emphasizes the necessity of an interdisciplinary approach when analyzing historical manuscripts such as Low's. Consideration of textual annotations, material culture, and comparative analyses yields profound insights into the transmission and evolution of cosmological imagery. While concentrating on a particular detail in Low's album, this investigation paves the way for exploring broader artistic exchange networks and the enduring legacy of Thai cosmogonic tradition.

Cross-Cultural Interplay in the Burmese Parabaik Lawka-Koon-Char (1842)

Lawka-koon-char (from Burmese *lawka*: living world, *koon-char*: network) is a Burmese foldable manuscript (a *parabaik* comprising 46 mulberry bark paper sheets, each measuring 21 cm by 53 cm) from King Tharrawaddy Min's reign (1837-1846).

Originating from Upper Burma during the Konbaung dynasty (1752-1885), its significance is highlighted by a rare colophon on the second opening, crediting its creation to 'the good merit of Upazin Wizareintasaryi in the Burmese year 1204' (1842 C.E.) [21].

The creation of the manuscript, occurring just 75 years after the Burmese conquest of Ayutthaya in 1767, prompts inquiries into possible Thai artistic influences. Although researchers such as Herbert have elucidated the differences between Thai and Burmese cosmological depictions, the existence of common models and sources indicates a more intricate cultural interplay [24].

Herbert notes that Burmese and Thai Buddhist cosmologies share elements, but exhibit distinct styles. The *Traiphum*, compiled in 1345 C.E., progressed from hells to *nibbāna*, while illustrated cosmologies in both cultures arranged realms from heavens to hells with minimal text [3-24].

No completely illustrated version predates the eighteenth century, although earlier partial manuscripts exist (ibid., p. 93). The Burmese conquests of Ayutthaya in 1569 and 1767 led to the relocation of Thai artists to Burma, implying their possible influence.

The analysis of opening 34 reveals a tableau centered on the *nariphon*, which the Burmese identifies with the term *thu-yong-thee*, as clearly stated in the Burmese inscription in Pali at the bottom right of the scene, fully translated by Bogle:

> The maiden fruit (*thu-yong-thee*) tree is rare and grows wild in the deep, remote areas of *Himavanta*. It bears fruit resembling the shape of human beings. The male fruit is of a boy of 20 years and the female fruit has the beauty and shape of a 15-year-old girl. All are well clothed and when they ripen they fall to the ground and are eaten by birds leaving only an inner core which resembles a human skeleton [21].

This tableau concludes the cosmos series and introduces *arhats* following the depiction of the seven Cakravāla trees and the destruction cycle. This positioning likely ties back to the cosmographic presentation of the mythical trees. The bottom-right transcription notes that the *nariphon* tree situated in the remote Himavanta is discussed in texts from the Jumbudvīpa continent:

> Beyond this is a forest of trees that have women as their fruit; the fruits of these trees are very beautiful-they are like maidens who have just reached sixteen years of age. When men see them, they fall in love with them, and when they drop, the birds flock around to eat them like bears eating honey [3].

The tree bears anthropomorphic fruits, depicted as young men and women, at various stages of maturation. Interestingly, the representation in this manuscript differs from that in the traditional Traiphum description. Typically, the *nariphon* is described as bearing fruit-shaped sixteen-year-old-maidens when men fall in love.

However, this manuscript depicts male fruits as twenty-year-old men and female fruits as fifteen years old girls, all suspended from the tree by their heads, and different from Thai representations because they are covered by robes. This variance extends to the fate of the fruits; while the traditional narrative states that the ripened maidens fall to the ground to be consumed by birds, leaving only a skeletal core, the current illustration and accompanying text present a more complex scenario.

Unlike in *Add. MS. 27370 f.4r* [9], the *ṛṣi* shows no intention of stealing a virgin fruit from the tree. Instead, he gestures upward with his right hand, holds wooden staff on his left, and, following representational conventions, is clearly dressed in tiger skins. The two figures depicted above, suspended in flight, are identified as celestial beings of semi-divine nature, analogous to the group of *vidyādharas* (from Sanskrit: 'holders of wisdom').

The *vidyādharas*, similar to *gandharvas*, are semi-divine celestial beings often depicted as foreigners who can traverse the air. Despite their wisdom, they remain susceptible to their desires and conflicts with women [25]. In Hindu epics, *vidyādharas* are described as semi-divine entities inhabiting the space between the earth and sky, serving Indra while maintaining their own monarchy [26].

The first figure on the left encircles the *nariphon*, with both arms engaging in dialogue, whereas the latter gestures with two fingers towards the tree. The second character on the right, at the same height, wields two swords and flies into the tree crown. The hermit acts as a spiritual overseer at the base of the tree by adding potential instructions of significance.

This scene combines a hierarchical figure arrangement, spiritual loss due to passion, and the hermit's spiritual admonishment. The stylistic elements of the manuscript, characterized by a delicate line work and vibrant colors, align with Burmese manuscript-painting conventions, marked by bold colors, elaborate details, and harmonious composition.

However, possible Thai influences, especially on hermit figure and anthropomorphic fruits, indicate a blend of artistic traditions that reflects the period's complex cultural interactions.

Munier-Gaillard notes that the earliest known depiction of the *thu-yong* tree in Burmese murals is in Ananda Ok-kyaung in Pagan, with later appearances in 19th-century murals at Amyint, Myitche, Pakhangyi, Salingyi, and Sinbyugyun [27].

The author suggests that this iconographic motif may have originated from Siam. Both the Ananda Ok-kyaung (1786) and Sinbyugyun (early 19th century) examples show the vertical and hierarchical arrangements of the figures. Although the dialogic relationships between characters are maintained, the hermit figure at the base of the tree is missing (ibid., p. 287).

Celestial and Terrestrial Dynamics in Nariphon Iconography: The Mahānipāta Jātaka Manuscript (Thai MS. 6, New York State Library)

The final section of the *Ten Great Birth Tales of the Buddha* (*Mahānipāta Jātaka*) *Thai MS. 6* [10], preserved in the Spencer Collection of the New York State Library, provides illuminated variation in the iconography of the *nariphon* myth. The scene features two primary figures interacting with the Nariphon: a celestial figure, likely a *vidyādhara*, hovers above a hermit with a pegged staff resembling a ladder, reaching towards one of the virgin fruits. The *vidyādhara*'s ornate attire, including a golden *mongkut*, stylized ear *kanckiek* (กรรเจียก), and jewelry, denotes his divine status. He reaches out to pluck a naked maiden fruit, embodying the act of 'stealing and cohabiting with it', as described in the Traiphum book [3-20].

Women appear at various stages of development, illustrating the maturation of these mythical fruits. Below, a terrestrial figure, possibly a hermit, gazes upward at the tree, his tiger-skin-patterned attire aligned with earlier depictions of *ṛṣi* in Thai iconography. He held a long stick with pegs, possibly intended to harvest the lower fruit [17, 18].

The upper register features a celestial being, identified as a *vidyādhara*: his divine status is emphasized through opulent attire: a gilded *mongkut*, a tiered crown traditionally reserved for deities or royalty; *kanckiek* (กรรเจียก); and intricate jewelry adorning his neck, wrists, and ankles. The *vidyādhara* hovers in a dynamic posture, with one arm outstretched to pluck a *nariphon* fruit, while the other gestures upward, perhaps alluding to the celestial realm's role in harvesting these ephemeral maidens.

Below, a terrestrial figure—likely a hermit (*ṛṣi*)—stands in contrast to a celestial figure. The clad in a tiger-skin loincloth, a motif recurrent in Thai depictions of ascetics, embodies the archetype of the forest-dwelling sage. His upward gaze and the pegged staff he wields suggest an intent to access the *nariphon*'s fruits, although his terrestrial limitations confine him to lower branches. The tiger-skin pattern, symbolizing mastery over primal forces, aligns with the hermit's role as a mediator between the human and supernatural realms.

His presence introduces ambiguity: while hermits in Jātaka tales typically personify detachment, his engagement with the *nariphon* hints at unresolved sensory attachments, thus complicating the narrative of ascetic purity. Pegged staff may metaphorically evoke spiritual ascent and juxtapose material pursuit with transcendent aspiration.

This scene's iconography aligns with Traiphum's hierarchical cosmology, which delineates the realms of desire, form, and formlessness. The *nariphon*, situated in the sensual Himavanta realm, becomes a locus of moral and metaphysical inquiry, reflecting the entanglement of human conditions with desire. The manuscript's visual narrative invites the contemplation of ethical boundaries and the paradoxical nature of ascetic practice. The inclusion of both celestial and terrestrial actors underscores the permeability of spiritual realms in Thai Buddhist thought, in which divine and human agency coexist within a shared karmic framework.

The New York State Library manuscript illuminates *nariphon* myth as a multifaceted allegory, interweaving doctrinal themes from the Jātaka and Traiphum with indigenous animist sensibilities. Through its intricate iconography, the scene captures the duality of desire and renunciation, cyclicality of existence, and enduring dialogue between celestial and terrestrial realms in Southeast Asian Buddhist art.

The Nariphon in Isan Temple Art: Didactics, and Visual Syncretism

The *nariphon* image, a striking artistic element in Thai temple design, is seamlessly woven into the architectural fabric of wats appearing on external surfaces through elaborate wood carvings and vibrant wall paintings.

This intricate visual narrative is especially prevalent in Northeastern Thailand's Isan region, as evidenced by the artistic displays at temples such as Wat Okat Si Buan Ban in Nakhon Phanom, Wat Ban Lan, and Wat Sanuan Wari Phatthanaram in Khon Kaen.

These representations serve a twofold purpose: they act as educational tools for conveying Buddhist principles and moral lessons while also complementing traditional manuscripts visually, ensuring that religious education remains accessible and engaging in a wide range of people.

This multifaceted approach highlights the sophisticated blending of artistic and architectural components within Thai Buddhist practices, particularly in Isan's unique cultural context. A closer examination of the *nariphon*'s imagery reveals a syncretic fusion of folklore, Theravada Buddhist teachings, and regional artistic traditions, reflecting the dynamic and adaptable nature of religious expressions in this area.

Laotian Elements in the Relief Carvings at Wat Okat Si Buan Ban

The assembly hall *viharn* (วิหาร) of Wat Okat Si Buan Ban features carved wooden *nariphon* scenes in its panels. Wat Okat in Nakhon Phanom Province, Thailand, houses two identical Buddha statues, Phra Tio and Phra Thiam, measuring 39 cm in height and 60 cm in width, constructed from ironwood.

According to local tradition, Phra Tio, associated with a guardian spirit, was carved from tio (ติ้ว) wood in 784 CE during the Si Khotrabun Kingdom era (12th-16th centuries), while Phra Thiam was subsequently created as a replica. These Buddha images are venerated as sacred icons of the city.

The intricate artworks are dispersed across six panels, comprising three entrances *pratoo* (ประตู), 16 doors *yong* (น้ำตัง), and 8 windows *naatang* (ไม้น้ำตัง), which together constitute 11 apertures (this configuration avoids the number 9, deemed inauspicious in Thai culture because of its association with 9 human body orifices) [28]. The panels feature a red-painted background with gold leaf relief inlays, serving an apotropaic purpose [25-28].

Wooden reliefs depict scenes from Himavanta Forest, including *nariphon* trees, celestial beings, monkeys, birds, lotus blossoms, and fruits. Each panel's narrative was arranged vertically, showing progressive ripening of the fruit.

Vidyādharas interact with pristine fruits, resulting in their separation from the tree through a sword, symbolizing the significance of their presence. Fully mature virgin fruits exhibit a complete anatomical structure. Their attire comprises an understated coronet *mongkut*, pectoral collar *krong so* (ครองโซ) that partially covers the exposed breast, and broad belt *rataphat* (รัตนากัทร). They also wear armband *phahu rat* (พะหุรัด) and wrist adornments *thongkon* (ทองคอน), exemplifying the classical dance and painting iconography. In contrast to females, male characters don stylized ear ornaments *kanchiek*, lower garments *phanung* (ผานึง), and ankle rings *thongbat* (ทองบาท), facilitating the identification of the hero.

A thorough examination of Siamese iconographic elements was undertaken by Bosselier and Sri-Aroon, focusing specifically on the *mongkut*, necklaces, and attire that indicate the status, rank, and nature of the individuals portrayed. Their study provides an in-depth look at how these visual attributes are used to convey information about the figures depicted in Siamese iconography [29].

In her 2011 work, *Les fleurs de la Dévotion: Ethnobotanique Culturelle au Laos*, Vilayleck proposes that this compositional arrangement, potentially stemming from Laotian cultural practices, exhibits similarities to the ‘bouquet compose’ [30].

This structure serves to elevate pagoda panels by incorporating a harmonious blend of plant, animal, and human components along with other worldly figures. Characters suspended from lianas or branches are accompanied by mythical or real animals, adding visual dynamism to the foliage. The recurrent presence of both stylized and naturalistic lotus flowers was notable.

Vines often end in stereotyped or indistinguishable leaves, known as *kandok* (ก้านดอก) or ‘fleur matricielle,’ which can be part of more intricate compositions. Vilayleek identified stylistic features, including rounded and interwoven forms, spatial saturation without vacant areas (ibid., pp. 136–37), and graphic virtuosity [31].

The panels exhibit a consistent vertical structure, dividing the composition into two distinct sections. The upper portion shows dense forest arrangement. In breathless thickening of elements, the lower section features an architectural arch. The frame beneath the botanical imagery depicts a scene from the Vessantara Jataka. This episode belongs to the chapter *kan* (กัฌฑ์) describing the exile of the prince and his family in Himavanta, where his wife Maddī encounters 16 *makkaliphon* trees cultivated by the deity Indra, bearing miniature female forms that safeguard her by diverting male attention.

The *nariphon* tree scene in the *viharn* panels of Wat Okat Si Buan Ban aligns with the didactic purpose seen in the manuscripts, while adding a decorative function.

These carvings replicate the scene with variations in composition, enhanced by Laotian influence and Buddhist literature. The intricate design of these panels demonstrates the synthesis of artistic and narrative elements that reflect the cultural and religious heritage of the region. The vertical structure delineates natural and architectural realms, establishing a visual hierarchy that guides the viewer through its composition.

The dense forest arrangement in the upper portion likely represents the lush, mystical environment of Himavanta, where Prince Vessantara and his family are exiled. This verdant setting provides a backdrop for supernatural events, emphasizing the transcendent nature of narratives.

The architectural arch in the lower section functions as a framing device for a specific scene in Vessantara Jataka. This element provides a visual anchor and serves as a symbolic threshold between the mundane and sacred, inviting the viewer into the narrative.

The depiction of *makkaliphon* trees, with their miniature female forms, exemplifies the integration of Buddhist literature and local beliefs in visual art. These trees, cultivated by Indra, protect Maddī by diverting male attention while illustrating supernatural interventions in Jataka tales.

The inclusion of this scene in the *viharn* panels of Wat Okat Si Buan Ban underscores the significance of Vessantara Jataka in Theravada Buddhist teachings.

The panels serve a didactic function, rendering moral lessons accessible to a broader audience, including those who may not be literate.

The variations in composition across panels suggest a dynamic approach to storytelling, allowing for multiple interpretations and emphasizing different aspects of the narrative.

Cultural Amalgamation and Censorship in Wat Ban Lan's Vessantara Jataka Murals

The mural paintings at Wat Ban Lan, also known as Wat Matchima Withayaram, showcase a diverse array of visual narratives and cultural fusion representative of the early 20th century Isan region art.

Wat Ban Lan is a rural temple in Khon Kaen province, and on its origin we know the note from the national *Institute of Fine Arts* which states:

> The temple was established in 1869 because it was located in the middle of the village. The villagers called it Wat Klang Ban Lan. It received the royal charter of the boundary on September 10, 1884. The ordination hall or *sim* was built in 1927 during the time of Ajahn Po Chanthasaro as the abbot. Later in 1961, Phra Ajahn Lun Sujitto, the abbot at that time, renovated the *sim* and built a new temple fence (cited by Brereton, 2010, pp. 186-87).

The sidewalls of *sim* (สิม**)** showcase a three-register Isan heartland mural layout depicting Prince Vessantara's familial journey, whereas the backwall features a central region-style continuous forest scene. The murals employ an expressive, limited-color palette of indigo, brown, and aquamarine, highlighted by white and black. This palette, combined with versatile brushwork, particularly feathery strokes illustrating tree canopies, produces a captivating dreamlike ambiance [2].

In central and southern Thailand, wall paintings show a spatial hierarchy: celestial beings at the top, important humans in the middle, and lower-status individuals, including 'the dregs' *kak* (กัก), at the bottom. Those with low spiritual aspirations or sensual conditions were also depicted at the bottom. Brereton and Yencheuy noted that this hierarchy is not present in the Isan heartland, where figures are Brereton and Yencheuy noted that this hierarchy is not present in the Isan heartland, where figures are distributed more evenly across the composition [32].

Our examination centers on a scene in the lower left quadrant of the central bay on the north facade beneath the upper register [33]. It depicts mendicants awaiting alms in front of a chariot, a crucial part of Prince Vessantara's ‘Gift of Seven Hundred’ episode, which dominates the leftmost panel.

Brereton indicated the presence of a *withayathon* in the scene, recumbent, and gazing concupiscently at *nariphon* figures suspended from a tree (see Brereton, 2010, pp. 187-88). These female figures are typically portrayed as wearing jewelry only, as noted in the previous examples.

Brereton and Yencheuy points out to us that ‘a closer look at the somewhat voyeuristic portrayal of the concubines, we cannot help but notice their exposed breasts and genitalia, a convention used to identity the figures as persons unworthy of respect’ (see Brereton *et al.*, 2010, p. 69). The viewer can readily infer censored erotic details. Another instance of this licentious imagery is found in the portrayal of Brahmin Chuchok, a dark male figure whose pelvic area exhibits signs of intentional abrasion, likely an attempt at post-execution censorship [2].

Deliberate obliteration of certain anatomical details through abrasion or other forms of censorship provides valuable insights into evolving sociocultural norms and the ongoing dialogue between artistic expression and religious orthodoxy in Thai society. This interplay between explicit imagery and subsequent censorship efforts reflects the complex relationship between traditional religious values and liberal artistic interpretations of Thai culture.

Brereton and Yencheuy posit that these spirited scenes are attention getters that sustain viewers’ interests. The element of surprise is always present; when perusing a mural, one is never sure when such details might occur’ (Brereton *et al.*, 2010, 72).

Wat Ban Lan mural artists combine traditional Thai elements with naturalistic features, depicting divine beings and royalty like Prince Vessantara and Maddī with delicate features, elongated *mongkut*, and poses that merge stylized and natural stances. Unlike the exaggerated postures in Isan and Central Region dance drama (*lakhon*), these figures exhibit more naturalistic postures, although their graceful curved fingers reflect a hybrid style (ibid., p. 45).

Human and divine drawings follow Northeastern Thailand's shadow puppet conventions (*nang pramo thai*), with heroic males in a profile to suggest movement, and females and spiritually advanced males, such as the Buddha, showing full face or three-quarters to convey tranquility.

Standing figures often adopt *tribhanga* poses from Indian sculptures, with shoulders parallel to the picture plane, torsos twisted to show the waist and hips three-quarters, and knees and feet facing forward.

Analysis of this scene contributes additional details that generally corroborate the previously described iconographic structure, which is predicated on male interactions with anthropomorphic *nariphon* fruits.

In this specific instance, the salient details pertain to the exposed genital parts (evidently censored) of Brahmin Chuchok, who immediately succumbs to his primal urges upon viewing the ripening virgin fruit.

This representation likely constitutes a local variation with vernacular connotations intended to elicit the viewer's attention within the context of didactic purposes, consistent with the cosmogonic narrative previously translated by Reynolds and Reynolds [2-32].

Ethical Dualities: Mural Paintings at Wat Sanuan Wari Phatthanaram and Their Regional Parallels

Wat Sanuan Wari, a rural temple in Khon Kaen province, is renowned for its murals depicting scenes from the Vessantara Jataka and the Lao Sin Sai epic. Created by local artist Nai Yuak in the late 19th-early 20th centuries, the murals included his signature and self-portrait on the north outer facade.

According to the Fine Arts Department, the temple was founded in 1867, the *sim* was constructed in 1923, and the murals were painted in 1953, likely referring to restoration due to visible repainting [2].

The captions in the Thai *noi* (ลายมือไทยน้อย / Lai Mue Thai Noi) and Central Thai scripts indicate later renovations. The murals at Wat Sanuan Wari Phatthanaram feature a noteworthy composition in the upper-left section of the eastern fenestration on the exterior of the northern partition. The episode depicting Sin Sai's encounter with the groves of *nariphon* trees is particularly significant.

The murals at Wat Sanuan Wari Phatthanaram feature a noteworthy composition in the upper-left section of the eastern fenestration on the exterior of the northern partition. The episode depicting Sin Sai's encounter with the grove of *nariphon* trees is particularly significant [34].

This scene merits examination not only for its narrative content but also for the enhanced impact of its additional iconographic elements when compared to the aforementioned contemporary example at Wat Ban Lan.

The compositional structure of the image exhibited a horizontal orientation and bifurcated into two distinct groups positioned within the fruiting arboreal specimens. The scene depicts 11 *nariphon* fruits at various growth stages, with three fully mature fruits.

Female figures, similar to those in Wat Ban Lan, were shown to wear only jewelry and display accurate sexual characteristics. At least seven male characters were present, including five *withiyathons* characterized by dark blue skin, rough features, sexual excitement, and actions causing *nariphon* fruit displacement.

Additional male figures, such as two celestial beings, competed for attention. One *vidyādhara* flew towards a hermit at the top of the tree, while another held a virgin and observed a different hermit approaching with a sword.

In contrast to the sensual atmosphere, Sinsai maintained his composure and spiritual strength, reflecting his advanced bodhisattva status. His dignified interaction with a *nariphon* figure, resisting base urges, exemplifies his exceptional virtues.

The mural art at Wat Sanuan Wari is noteworthy for its judicious use of colors such as indigo, brown, and aquamarine, which evoke the regional artistic conventions seen in other Isan temples, such as Wat Ban Lan, as detailed by Brereton [2-32]. These hues are used to depict natural and spiritual worlds.

The open space of an off-white background contributes to the mural’s expansiveness and clarity in contrast to the more densely packed compositions found in other regional murals.

This stylistic choice allows figures and narrative elements to stand out more prominently, thereby creating a visually and thematically impactful scene. The figures are portrayed in a simple manner, reflecting their expressive power.

Male figures, excluding giants, are primarily shown in the profile, adhering to artistic conventions that lend a sense of movement and dynamism to heroic characters.

By contrast, female figures are depicted frontally; their poses are more static and serene, embodying the tranquil and stable qualities associated with femininity in Southeast Asian art.

This approach to depicting figures is reminiscent of the shadow puppet theater traditions prevalent in the region [32], where profile views are used to animate male characters and female characters are presented in more composed frontal stances.

The eastern side of the southern facade of Wat Photharam *sim* in Maha Sarakham Province, which is contemporaneous with Wat Sanuan Wari, displays a comparable tableau in its central register [35]. The horizontal composition shows a *nariphon* tree with 16 maidens, of which 11 are fully grown and adorned, mirroring the previously examined scene.

The *withayathon* figures, totaling eight, are divided into distinct categories: those attempting to climb the tree to capture the mature maidens, exhibiting signs of arousal; a dismembered individual on the ground, split in half with exposed genitals; two airborne figures wielding axes and donning *mongkut* crowns and tiger pelts, reminiscent of the flying character in the manuscript *Add MS. 27370* f.4r [9], and a pair of centrally placed *vidyādharas* on a cloud, seizing two maidens. The facial features of the male figures resemble the demons of the *khon* masks. The scene escalates in both pace and explicit content, emphasizing the juxtaposition of physical desire and spiritual resilience.

The scene at Wat Sanuan Wari is layered with thematic complexity, and blends moral, spiritual, and cultural elements into a cohesive narrative. The presence of the *withayathons*, with their exaggerated arousal, introduces provocative tension between the sacred and profane.

These figures, which typically revered to their ascetic discipline and spiritual power, succumb to earthly temptations and moral and spiritual weaknesses. This depiction challenges the conventional portrayal of ascetics in Buddhist art, in which such figures are usually depicted as a state of serene detachment from worldly desires.

By contrast, Sinsai's interaction with the maidens-fruit serves as a counterpoint to the *withayathon*'s moral failure. As a Bodhisattva, Sinsai's ability to remain unshaken by the sensual allure of the *nariphon* underscores his spiritual superiority.

This dichotomy between Sinsai and the *withayathon* is not merely a narrative device but a moral lesson embedded within the mural. This reflects the Buddhist ideal of mastering one's desires as a path to enlightenment, a theme that resonates deeply within a region's religious culture.

Contemporary Feminist Reinterpretation of the Nariphon Myth in Phaptawan Suwannakudt's Nariphon Series (1995–1996)

The *Nariphon* series by Phaptawan Suwannakudt, created in Australia from 1995 to 1996 and showcased at the inaugural *Womanifesto* art exhibition in 1997, offers a contemporary interpretation of the Nariphon myth from Thai Buddhist tradition.

Suwannakudt presents a first-person narrative that elucidates the contextual framework of the exhibition.

The next year, I completed the Nariphon series, which portrayed the girl sold in front of the temple. I sent the painting from Australia to participate at the first Womanifesto exhibition, held in 1996 at the Baan Chao Praya building in Bangkok. There was one review by a male art journalist commenting on the overall exhibition, which reported the work was from a bunch of women. It was referred to as merely an exercise in rhetoric [36].

Pearson's review of Suwannakudt's 2017 exhibition *Retold-Untold Stories* traces the artist's development from his beginnings in Chiang Mai.

Although a well-established artist in her own right, Suwannakudt is frequently introduced in relation on her famous father, Thai mural painter Paiboon Suwannakudt (Tan Kudt). He supported his daughter's artistic interests, and, as a child, she often accompanied him to the Buddhist temples that were his workplace. However, her gender precluded her

from entering certain parts of the temple grounds, and she became increasingly cognizant of the barriers of participation in Thai society: “I was made aware since I was a child that I certainly belonged of a different category and almost different species [...] in the community. There was a different code of conduct for me and the boys during the daily routine at the site the temple where my father worked”. After Tan Kudt's death, Suwannakudt broke with tradition by leading her father's all-male team of mural painters on a number of high profile projects in temples and hotels, before deciding that she no longer wanted on work with her back on the world. This decision was prompted by the troubling discovery that, beyond the temple walls, young girls were being sold into brothels, sometimes by their own parents. Suwannakudt's heightened awareness of the role gender plays in shaping the personal experiences of women prompted her Nariphon series, first exhibited in 1997 at *Womanifesto* [37].

This body of work delves into the issues of gender, economic disparity, and exploitation. Through the two images[1] from the series, Suwannakudt contrasts the symbolic appeal and exploitation inherent in the *nariphon* myth with the contemporary Thai societal reality.

The artist, significantly influenced by her observation of a young girl being sold to a brothel during her work on a mural project [8], incorporated her heightened awareness of gendered power dynamics in these compositions. The artist's depictions emphasize the commodification of young female bodies, as well as the entrapment of women in systems of economic and gender oppression.

In the *Retold-Untold Stories* exhibition, curator Veal analyzed the portrayal of gender in Phaptawan's artistic works, which span both individual and collective aspects.

Drawing from her own experiences as a woman in the art world, Phaptawan's creations shed light on gender-related issues across Australia, Thailand, and the broader Southeast Asian region. Her approach prioritizes specific, contextual experiences over proposing a generalized theory of gender [38].

The first image, *Nariphon I 1996* [39], portrays a tree adorned with female figures as the fruit. Each female figure appears suspended and intertwined with the tree, embodying both aesthetic appeal and vulnerability associated with the Nariphon myth.

The red background and vibrant blue and gold foliage create a visual contrast that directs the viewer's attention towards the figures, reflecting the tension between attraction and exploitation.

The tropical foliage and earthy hues evoke the lush Himavanta Forest, a symbol of transcendence, while simultaneously grounding the composition in a sense of confinement, paradoxically highlighting the lack of agency of female figures depicted as fruits.

Suwannakudt's powerful visual narrative serves as a scathing critiques the exploitation and objectification of women in contemporary society. By reimagining the ancient *makkaliphon* myth, the artist draws parallels between mythical fruit girls and the vulnerable position of young women in modern economic systems. The violent imagery and repetitive nature of the scenes underscore the pervasive and cyclical nature of this exploitation, compelling viewers to confront uncomfortable truths regarding gender dynamics and power imbalances.

The second image, *Nariphon II a 1996* [40], depicts a narrative scene of heightened intensity. In this representation, *vidyādharas* wield swords as they approach fruit girls, with each figure captured in mid-motion during violent confrontation. The figures expressions and postures convey unbridled male desires juxtaposed with the vulnerability of *nariphon* figures that they seek to possess.

The structured repetition of scenes along the top edge of the image reinforces the cycle of desire and consequence inherent in the myth, suggesting that the fate of *the nariphon* is not an isolated event, but a continuous process of objectification and consumption.

Suwannakudt's reinterpretation functions as a critical commentary on societal issues, employing the *makkaliphon* myth as a metaphor for the commodification of young women within the structures of economic inequality.

This visual narrative serves as a powerful allegory for contemporary social dynamics, in which the exploitation of vulnerable populations persists under the guise of economic progress. Suwannakudt's artistic choices, such as repetitive

motifs and stark contrast between aggressors and victims, underscore the systemic nature of this exploitation. By reimagining ancient mythology through a modern lens, the artist invites viewers to reflect on the parallels between mythical narratives and present-day social injustices.

Through the presentation of the *nariphon* tree as both a literal and symbolic manifestation of gendered oppression, Suwannakudt elucidates the paradox of beauty and danger inherent in young women's experiences. The imagery serves to illuminate the perpetuation of these dynamics through traditional beliefs, while simultaneously establishing a platform for discourse on exploitation and resilience within Thai and broader Southeast Asian societies. Her deliberate choice to depict rubber trees rather than traditional *nariphon* trees or tropical species further accentuates the economic underpinnings of her critique by establishing a connection between natural imagery and industrial exploitation as well as highlighting the vulnerability of individuals within global economic systems.

CONCLUSION

This analysis of *nariphon* representations in Thai art reveals a complex and evolving iconography spanning centuries, and diverse artistic media. From ancient Buddhist texts to contemporary artwork, the *nariphon* motif has served as a powerful symbol for exploring themes of desire, temptation, spiritual discipline, and gender dynamics in Thai culture.

This iconographic analysis traces the transformation of the *nariphon* concept from its South Asian origin as *nāri-lāta* to its localized Thai interpretation. Early depictions in manuscripts and temple art emphasized the role of the *nariphon* in Buddhist cosmology and moral teachings about overcoming sensual desires. Detailed representations in works such as James Low's 1824 [9], manuscript and the 1842 Burmese *Lawka-koon-char* manuscript provide insights into regional variations and artistic interpretations of the myth.

The temple murals and carvings in Isan further demonstrate how the *nariphon* motif has been integrated into broader Buddhist narratives and local artistic traditions. The scenes at Wat Okat Si Buan Ban, Wat Ban Lan [33], and Wat Sanuan Wari Phatthanaram [34], reveal nuanced depictions that combine religious symbolism with vernacular elements, often pushing boundaries into their portrayals of sensuality and desire.

The contemporary reinterpretation of the nariphon myth by artist Phaptawan Suwannakudt marked a significant shift, using the traditional motif to critique modern social issues such as gender inequality and exploitation. This demonstrates the enduring relevance and adaptability of the nariphon concept in addressing contemporary concerns.

Throughout its evolution, *nariphon* iconography has consistently engaged with core Buddhist principles of impermanence, attachment, and spiritual cultivation. Its representations have served didactic purposes while also reflecting changing artistic styles and cultural values.

This study highlights the *nariphon*'s role as a versatile cultural symbol in Thai art capable of conveying complex philosophical ideas, moral lessons, and social commentary across different historical periods and artistic media. The ongoing reinterpretation and adaptation of this motif underscores its continued significance in Thai cultural expressions and discourse.

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