

The open-ended, one might say fluid, quality of this book makes it an elegant teaching tool. For masters and even doctoral courses, students could be tasked with a number of exercises, such as identifying the dialectic between the main body of the text and sources in the footnotes, producing alternative themes that might also explain the events and relationships in each section, critically analysing the connective tissue between one section and the next, considering the benefits and potential pitfalls of drawing from multiple disciplines, and discussing how history informs the present.

Jayde Lin Roberts

School of Built Environment, UNSW Sydney, Anita B. Lawrence Building, Kensington, NSW 2052, Australia. Email: j.roberts@unsw.edu.au.

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Decoding Southeast Asian Art: Studies in Honor of Piriya Krairiksh. Edited by Nicolas Revire and Pitchaya Soomjinda. Bangkok: River Book Press. 2022. 423 pp.

This *festschrift* honours Dr Piriya Krairiksh, a celebrated and, at times, controversial art historian, curator, artist and professor. The book comprises articles written by an impressive group of international contributors from the disciplines of art history, archaeology, religious studies and more. The topics addressed in their respective essays range from pre-historic bronze drums to ancient Buddhist and Hindu arts and architecture of South and Southeast Asia. In addition, several articles discuss material culture, including ceramic, decorative arts, photography, and contemporary art of Southeast Asia. Overall, the articles are all insightful in content and analysis. Some of the essays update readers with new and revised interpretations of previous scholarship on familiar works of art. In general, the articles are all equally high calibre, which is a challenge in an edited book and highly commendable. Moreover, this richly illustrated book includes many sumptuous colour plates and clearly benefited from the financial support of the Piriya Krairiksh Foundation. River Books did an excellent job with the layout of this felicitous volume. For the

benefit of Thai readers, the abstracts are written also in Thai. One also appreciates the hard work and effort invested into translating some of the chapters into English, such as the chapter titled “The So-Called Sukhothai Hindu Bronzes: An Overview and Critical Assessment”, originally written in French by Pierre Baptiste. In sum, this is a beautifully produced book, and the articles provide new and revised research and insights into Southeast Asian art and histories.

Kessara Srinaka’s essay, “Piriya Krairiksh: Untying Thai Art History from Convention”, is based on the author’s interviews with Krairiksh and outlines succinctly the trajectory of Krairiksh’s career. As a young man, Krairiksh studied painting and drawing with Oscar Kokoschka, a well-known Austrian artist. Subsequently, he spent one year on the Greek island of Corfu, where he contemplated the idea of portraiture and painted portraits, especially self-portraits. More importantly, Srinaka explores the idea of *Veritas*, which Krairiksh has held dear to his heart since his childhood. However, *Veritas*, a Latin term for “Truth”, was not realised as a guiding principle for Krairiksh’s research and writing about Thai art history until after he had obtained his doctoral degree in art history from Harvard University. It was at Harvard that he was introduced to this notion of “Truth”. According to Srinaka, Krairiksh claims that there is no absolute “Truth” in art because meanings embedded in Thai art are never fixed; they keep shifting according to changes in time, space and political regime. While Srinaka’s essay is helpful in providing readers with a summary of Krairiksh’s methods, arguments and contribution to Thai art history, it would have been helpful for readers to have an edited transcript of the interviews with Krairiksh, either in the chapter or in an appendix. The published interviews would have allowed readers to trace how this eminent scholar’s perspectives on *Veritas* have evolved and where he currently stands on the notion. This discussion about the problems with “Truth” is timely because interpretations of and writing about art, history and the history of art around the world have become highly politicized. One of the many questions that I would like to ask relates to Krairiksh’s conclusion that the interpretation and narration of Thai art history are not bound by an “Absolute Truth”. Would Krairiksh entertain a more pluralistic

perspective, that is, the possibility of multiple “truths”? And, dare I say, multiple “perspectives”?

Another shortcoming in the book (perhaps more aptly, a missed opportunity) is in the framing of the *festschrift* as addressing Krairiksh’s methods and practices of interpretation. Clearly, the *festschrift* is intended to celebrate Krairiksh’s life and career as an artist and an art historian. Surprisingly, there is no introductory essay to make sense of how the included chapters weave together different topics and historical moments that engage with his methods and intellectual legacy. The title of the *festschrift*, *Decoding Southeast Asian Art*, needs to be elucidated. It would have been helpful had the editors provided an explanation about how the term “decoding” in the title of the book reflects or engages with the method and approaches that Krairiksh pioneered in the study of Thai art history. Venturing beyond the literal meaning of the term, what is “decoding” as a method and theory in Thai art history? Is “decoding” similar to Erwin Panofsky’s (1939) iconology and iconography? It is possible that the original meaning of “decoding” in Thai is lost in translation? Perhaps the *festschrift* could have been more appropriately titled *Piriya Krairiksh: Portraits of the Artist and Art Historian as a Decoder*, which would have reflected his dual professional identities. I see these shortcomings as more of missed opportunities and possibilities for future conversations about the trajectories of art history and theory in Southeast Asia.

In conclusion, the essays included in this engaging volume are *phuang malai* (flower garlands) from Krairiksh’s friends, colleagues and students; they celebrate the life and illustrious career of a remarkable scholar of his generation.

Boreth Ly

Southeast Asian Art History and Visual Culture, History of Art Department,
University of California Santa Cruz, California 95064-107, USA; email: Bjly@ucsc.edu.

REFERENCE

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