

Historical Documents or Colorful Fantasies? Interpreting the Musical Evidence in Thai Temple Murals

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Many of Thailand’s Buddhist temples (*wat*), great and small, urban and rural, have colorful murals painted on the interior walls, often from floor to ceiling. In a style peculiar to Thailand, artists depict epic stories that flow without scene separation. These include the Life of the Buddha and favorite *jataka*, the latter being the lives of the Buddha preceding enlightenment. All are intended to educate and inspire worshippers, either positively by depicting exemplary behavior or negatively by depicting graphically the tortures of hell. Regardless of the story’s origin, the scenes depict the localized Thai world of the artist at the time of the painting, though some artists also engaged in fantasy.

Within these stories may be found numerous depictions of musical activity, including dance, instrumental performance, theater, ritual, and pomp. The majority are found in central Thailand, with far fewer in the north and south, but the northeast—culturally Lao—has contributed some of the most vibrant and whimsical examples by naïve, local artists.

The challenge comes in interpreting this evidence because of difficulties in dating the murals, knowing the artist, or having a record of possible retouching, restoration, or even repainting. Whether historically solid or not, this evidence is nonetheless colorful and intriguing, offering our only visual clues about Thailand’s musical past.