

posal to build a center for higher learning was rejected by high-level KNU administrators, but nevertheless was approved by local education leaders. Spartacus and a few others moved forward with the plan, and subsequently he was taken into custody and placed under house arrest for seven years by the president of the KNU, General Bo Mya. The KNU was strict about following the proper channels and would not tolerate anything perceived as insubordination. Also, General Bo Mya, known for his hot temper, was certainly not a man to be crossed. But when Spartacus appeared before the general about the matter, he did not mince words. "I spoke directly to General Mya. He was so mad that he was slapping the walls," claims Spartacus. He was placed under house arrest at a boy's training barracks located on General Mya's coffee plantation. During his confinement, he instructed students in academics as well as military drill, and he also raised goats. General Mya once again became furious with him after his goats ate some of the general's coffee plants. When asked if he had ever participated in armed struggle while he was a military instructor, Spartacus laughs and claims that he once shot his M-16 in the air to scare away some Burmese troops but states, "I never killed anyone."

In 1989, he moved south to Mulah village in a KNU administered area in Tenasserim district. Still going strong at age sixty-eight, he not only served as a teacher in Mulah but helped build the school there. "I learned masonry and carpentry in agricultural school," he claims. He maintains that building the Mulah school was one of the happiest moments of his life. It is indeed a shame that this school and Mulah village are now abandoned and in ruins, yet another testament to the brutality of the Burmese military dictatorship and a symbol of hopelessness in the nation of Burma.

In February 1997, the Burmese Army launched a massive offensive against a string of KNU administered villages on the eastern side of the Tenasserim River. Mulah was one of those villages (over thirty in all that were destroyed by the Burmese Army in the area). As thousands of Burmese troops, noted for their brutality against Karen civilians, swarmed into the area, the villagers had little time to flee. Yet to the surprise of his neighbors, Spartacus not only released his mature chickens and ducks into the jungle, but euthanized his chicks and ducklings. With the sounds of heavy fighting in the distance, he even took the time to neatly and

respectfully bury them. "He did not want to see any of his animals suffer or be neglected after he was gone," states Nathaniel, a close friend of his.

It was in Mulah village in 1996 that I first met Spartacus, at that time in his mid-seventies. He was chopping the ground with a hoe. He was wearing rubber boots and had on a black knit cap. As soon as he saw me, a foreigner, walking through his village, he beckoned me to come over and chat. I was astonished to find myself conversing with an old man in a remote Karen revolution village who spoke perfect English and was very knowledgeable of international current events.

Today, I look into the deep lines in Spartacus's face. His voice garbles a bit because he has a cold. Yet again we engage in conversation, but this time it is in a bamboo schoolhouse in a refugee camp. Even though Spartacus, now age eighty-three, has spent more than five years within the confines of Tham Hin, he is still Spartacus.

Two weeks ago, while I was walking behind him through the narrow clay trails in the camp and discussing the plight of the Karen people with a few young Karen men, he said to us over his shoulder, "don't say anything to me about this federal union nonsense!" The KNU has been fighting successive Burmese governments since 1947 for more autonomy under a proposed federal union structure. Spartacus, on the other hand, has long been an anomaly among the Karen because of his uncompromising pro-independence stance. He states: "My heroes are the Kayan (Karenni) people. They stick to their principles. They fight for independence." Spartacus sees the Karen nation's participation in a federal union as ultimately submitting to Burman rule. After enduring decades of oppression and abuse at the hands of the Burman ethnic majority, it is almost inconceivable that many Karen will ever view the Burman majority without great suspicion and anger. As one Karen elder informed me, "forgive the Burmese? Yes, it is easy for you say. When you find Karen girls raped and tied to trees— yes, I have seen many— and villages burned, you see, it's not so easy to forgive." Such images of brutality are burned into the psyches of many Karen and perhaps can never be erased, even with the passing of generations. Also, the Karen and successive Burmese governments have been fighting since 1947, and there appears to be no end in sight. So why not go all the way? "Why didn't East

Timor enter a federal union with Indonesia? No, they fought for independence and the United Nations helped them. Now they are independent," claims Spartacus.

Spartacus is an uncompromising man, and he has a reputation for being difficult to work with. But when people in the refugee camp refer to his obduracy, there is always a tone of respect in their voices and usually a smile afterwards. Spartacus's rigidity signals something much deeper; he is a principled man. "We must have a strong will. We must never surrender. No deals! We will never go under Burmese rule. We will never be their prisoners."

Spartacus has never married. He lives alone and insists on taking care of himself. Spartacus, the indefatigable and stubborn loner, is in many ways representative of the decades-long Karen struggle. And his will to resist is just as resolute as that of the Karen guerrillas just over the border from the camp, who go into combat with worn-out rifles and only fifty rounds of ammunition. Somehow, he has managed to survive for eighty-three years in one of the most violent and impoverished regions on earth. When asked about the prospect of retirement he says, "I have no time to retire."

Spartacus still teaches. He still raises chickens and ducks. He still cleans his yard and chops firewood. He even takes an accounting class in the camp. Yes, he still makes propositions and arguments that make others uncomfortable. He still is devoted to his people and the revolution. Spartacus still loves God. Spartacus is still unafraid.

In fact, Spartacus is still undefeated.

End Notes

¹ Marukat, Saritdet. "Karen Camp Disappoints Ogata." *Bangkok Post*, 18 October 2000, A5.

² This name has been changed to protect the identity of the informant.

Photo Essay:

The Vessantara Murals of Wat Monkolratanaram, an American Thai Temple

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SYNOPSIS

This article examines the interplay of tradition and adaptation evident in the architectural space and mural paintings of Wat Mongkolratanaram, a Thai Buddhist temple in Berkeley, California. In Thailand, Buddhist temples occupy buildings that are specifically constructed for religious use. They are large, open, heavily ornamented spaces that no one could confuse with domestic architecture. When establishing a temple in a foreign country, often funds are insufficient to build from the ground up, so existing structures must be adapted for the purpose. Wat Mongkolratanaram is an example of how an American residential house may be converted into a site suitable for the practice of Thai Buddhism. The article initially examines the idiosyncrasies of the architectural space, then follows this up with a close examination of the mural paintings in the worship hall.

Introduction

On Sunday mornings in Berkeley, people from all walks of life congregate on the patio of a distinctive house on Russell Street for brunch. The house stands out from its neighbors: porch and gable gleam with gilt arabesques, dazzling the eye with the unaccustomed hue of gold. Visitors file around to the back, where the air is spiced with the fragrance of pungent curries, and long tables invite groups to mix together in an informal repast. Street money must be exchanged for broad silvery tokens before one can partake of the feast. On each ersatz coin is stamped a holy symbol and the name “Wat Mongolratanaram.” The large, highly decorated house is actually a Thai Buddhist temple, offering sustenance for the spirit as well as the stomach.

Wat Mongkolratanaram was established at its present location in Berkeley, California in 1980, and it has developed and expanded continuously. During the 1980s and '90s, three more buildings adjacent to the



*Figure 1.
Portico of
Wat
Monkolrata
naram.*

original one were purchased to expand the property. The temple operated on an informal basis until 1993, when it was granted full status as a religious institution by the City of Berkeley. In 1999, it was renovated to meet the requirements for a functional ubosoth (an ordination hall) (Wongkamchan 2001: 8). The number of resident monks has gradually increased, from the original two up to six in 2005. Known to most locals simply as “the Thai Temple,” it provides cultural services to the community in the form of lessons in Thai language and classical dance, as well as the ever-popular Sunday brunch.

From the perspective of an art historian, one of the most distinctive traits of Wat Mongkolratanaram is its ad hoc architectural quality. In Thailand, nearly all temples occupy structures built specifically for religious use, and there is a high degree of consistency in their general features. A typical ubosoth has a spacious, open interior, sometimes supported by columns. The altar supporting the main Buddha image is usually on the far side of the room from the main entrance. Windows may line the side walls, fitted with wooden shutters that can be

opened to let in light and air. When the interior is painted with murals, the most common arrangement is to have scenes from one or more of the thosachat (the collective term for last ten Jatakas) on the side walls, a scene depicting the traditional cosmology behind the Buddha image, and a representation of the manwichai (victory over Mara) episode from the Buddha’s life over the entranceway (Boisselier 1976: 32). Wat Mongkolratanaram is an unusual example of a temple that has adapted existing structures to its needs: the ubosoth is a building that was once a residential home. The white clapboard facade now supports a Thai-style portico complete with chaofa and hanghong finials, sheltering a naga staircase (Figures 1 and 2). A pre-existing gable on the upper roof of the building has been decorated in green and gold with a motif representing the Buddha’s first lecture in the deer park in Sarnath (Figure 3).

The temple interior is one large room that has been made as open as possible by the removal of inside walls. A staircase protrudes into the room, discreetly shielded by carved wooden panels, and a broad square



Figure 3. Gable and bay on the front wall.



Left:
Figure 2.
Naga staircase beneath portico.

Right:
Figure 4.
Staircase in ubosoth.





Left:
Figure 5.
Main altar
of the
ubosoth.

Right:
Figure 7.
Altar to King
Bhumibol
Adulyadej
(r.1946–
present)

column rises up from the center to support a ceiling beam (Figure 4). The main entrance and the altar both occupy the front, southern wall of the building, so the Buddha image is not immediately visible upon entering as it would be in a Thai temple of traditional design. There is also a back door in the corner diagonally opposite from the altar, but the staircase and column create visual obstacles to the immediate perception of the image. Whether entering from the front or back door, one must move completely into the room before the image can be perceived. The tendency for religious architecture to favor symmetry, but for domestic architecture to eschew it, creates a challenge for those who hope to convert a residential house into a place of worship: how can one emphasize the significance of the primary icon if it is denied centrality? Wat Mongkolratanaram solves this problem through the ingenious use of an existing feature, the windowed bay that runs up the front wall of the house. The main altar was placed in the center of the shallow recessed space created by the bay, creating a subtle architectural frame

for the Buddha image (Figure 5). This act of framing, its effect enhanced by the windows on either side that augment the illumination upon the gilded image, creates a sense of visual importance that overrules the asymmetry of the altar's position in the room.

In addition to the main altar, which supports a Buddha with all the iconographic features associated with statues categorized as "early Chiang Saen" or "lion-type," there are two other sites in the ubosoth that enshrine images.¹ To the left of the main altar is a picture of the temple's abbot, formally styled Phra Mongkolthepmoli, but known more simply as Luang Pho Mongkol. The ornamental framing of his picture suggests the accoutrements of an altar, heightening the importance of his image, but without the full extension into three-dimensional space that would demand actual ritual performance (Figure 6). Occupying the center of the west wall of the room, and framed by another shallow windowed bay, is a functional altar beneath a photograph of the reigning King Bhumibol Adulyadej, Rama IX (Figure 7). In an ubosoth in Thailand, it would



Figure 6. Portrait of Luang Pho Mongkol.



Left:
Figure 8.
Guardian
figure on
back door.



Right:
Figure 9.
Murals in-
side the
front por-
tico.

be unusual to find a shrine to the king whose magnificence rivaled that of the Buddha. Its presence here suggests that the veneration of the Chakri dynasty has not waned among Thais living abroad, but possibly increased, and is perceived as a form of devotion that unites the expatriate community, like Buddhism itself. The proximity of the two altars, taken together with the Thai community that built and uses them, symbolically instantiates the phrase, “Chart, Satsana, Phra Maha Kasat” (Nation, Religion, King), that has become the touchstone of Thai nationalism.

Wat Mongkolratanaram uses figural painting in several areas to enhance the atmosphere of Buddhist devotion. The inside surfaces of both the front and back doors are decorated with guardian figures. The front doors have two panels, allowing the guardians to be paired in the usual format. The back door is somewhat more incongruous, and again shows the need for adaptation to a foreign environment: the door has but a single panel, and is outfitted with a horizontal handlebar that bisects the image. However, the colorful figure looks unconcerned by any suggestion that he is trapped in an awkward frame or lacks a companion

figure. His animate pose suggests that he does not find his surroundings stifling, and he holds a different weapon in each hand, affirming that he can do the work of two (Figure 8).

The most extensively painted surfaces in the temple are the inside walls of the front porch. The side walls flanking the staircase are decorated with a thepchumnum pattern, a horizontal row of kneeling celestial beings that would normally occupy the upper reaches of the interior walls of an image hall. A person exiting the temple from the front doors would pass under two more paintings as they descend the naga staircase (Figure 9). The first shows the Buddha lecturing to devas in a heavenly realm. Indra and Brahma are present, easily identifiable by their characteristic traits of green skin and four faces, respectively. This is a scene of the Tavatimsa heaven, where the Buddha ascended to preach to his mother after her death; it is likely that she is one of the female divinities on the left. The mural one encounters next shows the Buddha descending from this heaven on a ladder, accompanied by the aforementioned gods and other celestial beings. The

scene of the Buddha's descent from the Tavatimsa heaven has been a mainstay of Thai temple art since at least the fourteenth century, as evidenced by the stucco carving that still survives on the south face of the mondop at Wat Traphang Thong Lang near the old city of Sukhothai (Gosling 1991: 91). Here, the preaching scene and the descent, although painted on separate surfaces, are put into the appropriate chronological relationship by the order in which they will be experienced by the viewer who exits the temple.

The most significantly placed murals in the ubosoth of Wat Mongkolratanaram are the scenes from the Vessantara Jataka that cover all four sides of the central column. These paintings are an excellent example of the blend of tradition and adaptation that characterizes the temple as a whole. One might first wonder why it is the column that is so adorned, rather than the white walls of the room which would also provide an adequate surface for mural painting. Close examination reveals the texture of cloth beneath the paint, demonstrating that the colors were not applied directly to the architectural surface, but on an intervening canvas medium that was first painted and subsequently pasted into place. The mediation of canvas was less a matter of choice than of necessity, since the artist who created the paintings never visited the Berkeley temple. In 2002, Phra Maha Manat Suksa-ad, the head of the monks currently residing at the temple, commissioned the artist Pailauch Laungpairin of Nakhon Chaisi to

create the paintings.² The artist is a layman who specializes in an array of arts suitable for decorating temples: mural painting, woodcarving, lacquer, and the fashioning of Buddha images. For Wat Mongkolratanaram, in addition to the Vessantara murals, he carved the outer frame for the door-panels screening the staircase (Figure 4). The paintings and carvings were both fashioned in Thailand, then shipped to California to be installed at Wat Mongkolratanaram.

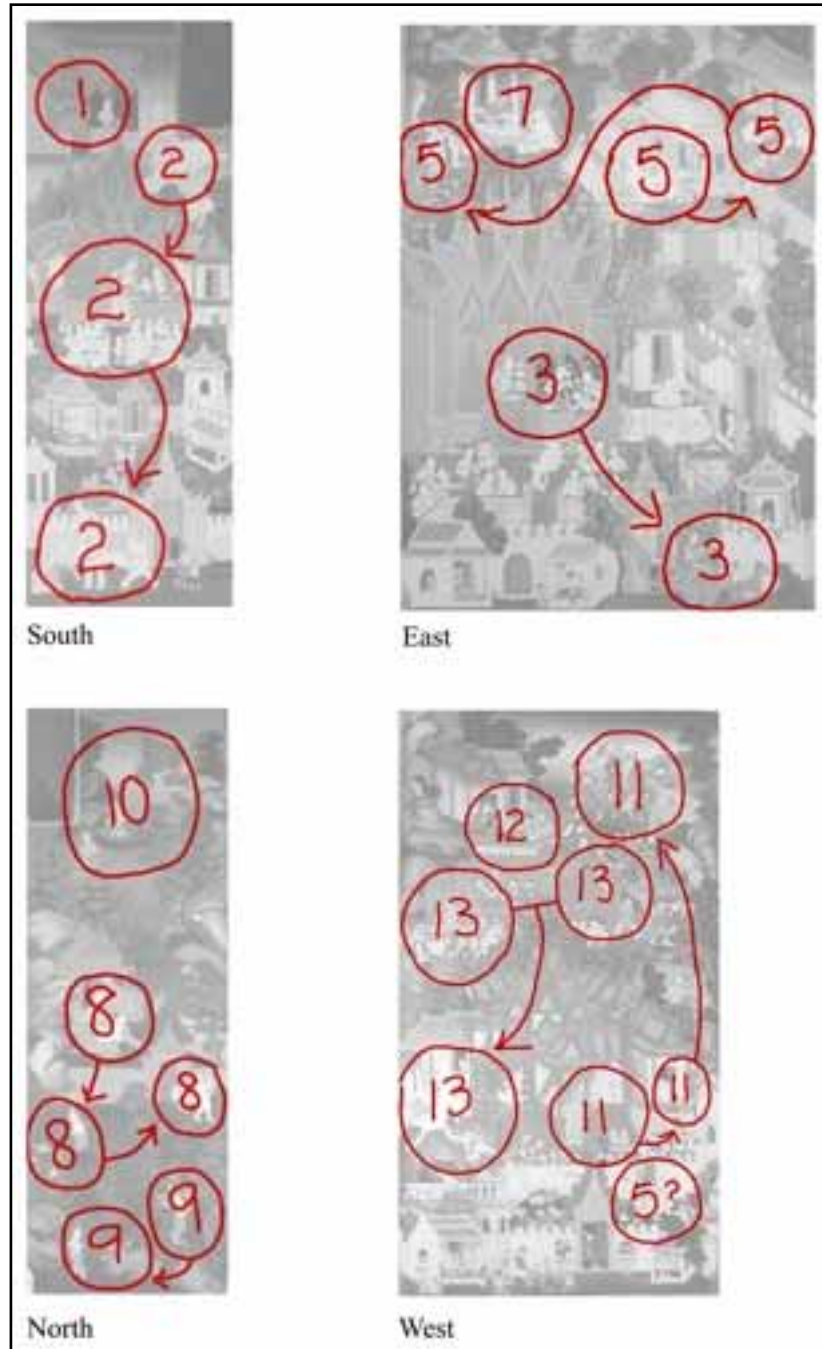


Figure 10. Order of major scenes in Vessantara mural, numbered by chapter.

When questioned why he chose the Vessantara Jataka as the subject of the murals, Phra Maha Manat Suksa-ad informed me that it was for the sake of the Thet Mahachat festival held at the temple annually, during which this jataka is recited. This festival has been widely practiced in Thailand since at least the early Bangkok period, perhaps even in the former capital of Ayutthaya, and was enjoyed by commoner and aristocrat alike (Jory 2002: 46). In the past, most temples owned at least one set of such paintings, usually consisting of thirteen individual scenes, each separately sponsored and representing one of the thirteen stanzas of the Thai version of the story (Lyons 1990: 7). These sets were often done on highly portable materials such as cloth, paper, or panels of wood, and would be displayed only temporarily during the festival period. Sometimes they bore inscriptions that identi-

fied the donors (McGill 1997: 195–217). The tradition of commissioning thirteen separate paintings for the Thet Mahachat is gradually becoming obsolete, and the Vessantara paintings in Wat Mongkolratanaram do not observe these conventions. They are uninscribed, and the composition observes the more general tendencies of Thai narrative mural paintings, which typically privilege topographical over chronological order in the arrangement of scenes (Wray 1972: 133–34).

The Vessantara Jataka is the story of the Buddha's penultimate birth, in which he perfects the virtue of generosity. So selfless is Prince Vessantara that he cannot refuse a request. When he gives away his kingdom's precious white elephant, his father the king becomes so angry that he banishes Vessantara and his family to the forest. As they travel there in a horse-drawn cart, they encounter wayfarers who ask for all their horses and finally the cart itself, so they are forced to make the rest of the journey on foot. After they have lived in their forest hermitage for some time, a greedy man named Jujaka who has heard of Vessantara's leg-

Left:
Figure 11.
South face of
Vessantara
mural.



Right:
Figure 12.
East face of
Vessantara
mural.



endary generosity finds the prince and asks for his children to take home as household slaves. Even a gift so great, to a person so vile, Vessantara cannot refuse. His final test occurs when the god Indra disguises himself as an old man and demands his wife Maddi. Vessantara is at the point of relinquishing her when Indra reveals his true identity. Meanwhile, his father the king has discovered and ransomed the children's freedom, and the whole royal family is soon happily reunited.

The murals at Wat Mongkolratanaram do not depict the Vessantara Jataka chapter by chapter, or scene by scene, in a linear sequence, although each of the column's four sides follows a loose progression through time (Figure 10). The images depart from the text when necessary in order to show things where they are spatially appropriate: for example, the god Indra appears in two scenes, and in both cases he is situated at the very top of the composition, a position appropriate to his location in the heavens. The Vessantara Jataka begins with the departure of Phusatī, the bodhisattva's mother, from Indra's heaven, so this provides a clear starting point for the narrative at the top of the south face of the column (Figure 11). As the gaze travels down, it encounters the flying white elephants that manifested at Vessantara's birth, then the bodhisattva as a child with his royal parents and myriad wet nurses. Below this is an ambiguous scene in which Vessantara sits in an open pavilion watching a couple who are opening a box; although the contents of the box are impossible to discern, it is possible that this

represents one of the many gifts of largesse he made during his youth. The lowest scene in the painting is the critical episode in which Vessantara gifts the white elephant to the Brahmins of a neighboring kingdom. From the middle scene in which the bodhisattva is shown as a child in the palace, each successively lower scene occurs in a walled area that suggests a courtyard, and chronologically denotes the passage of time. The

artist places the scene in which Vessantara gives away the white elephant entirely outside the city walls, precisely the location in which it is said to have occurred in the text. The text specifies that the gift took place near the city's southern gate. There is a gate depicted in the mural, and it seems no accident that this sequence has been affixed to the column's southern face.

The east side of the column carries on the tale (Figure 12). Here, the sequence of events begins neither at the very top nor the very bottom of the compositional space, but in the middle. The reason for this is easy to discern, and again it derives from spatial logic: in the upper areas of this section are wilderness and small town regions; the palace occupies the center, and at the very bottom, again, is an area just outside the city walls. During this phase of the story, Vessantara is first exiled, and then leaves for the wilderness. Subsequently there is a shift of perspective and a new character, the Brahmin Jujaka, is introduced. To accommodate

these elements of the story, the mural shows Vessantara's sorrowful parting from his parents in the palace in the center of the pictorial frame, then his departure



Figure 13. North face of Vessantara mural.



Figure 14.
West face of
Vessantara
mural.

with Maddi and the children at the very bottom, outside the wall. The latter scene is enlivened by the presence of deer, rather than horses, pulling the carriage, and the presence of a Brahmin kneeling to request a gift. These details clearly identify the moment in the story: Vessantara has already given away the horses that were pulling his carriage, inspiring deities to come assist him in the shape of deer. But now another Brahmin has come and requested the carriage, so the bodhisattva's family will soon be obliged to walk for the remainder of their journey. Through the clever use of visual clues, though the image is static, the artist is able to inform the viewer both what has already happened in the narrative, and what is soon to come. This strategy relies on the assumption that the viewer has prior knowledge of the story derived from a source outside the painting itself. The upper reaches of the painting on the east face compress three chapters worth of material into an abbreviated space: we see Jujaka acquiring his wife, the new wife being beaten and reviled by the village women, and several stages of Jujaka's jour-

ney to find slaves for her, in which he is first treed by dogs and then asks a hermit for directions to Vessantara.

The north face of the column is painted entirely as a wilderness, the setting for the climactic episodes in which Vessantara gives away both his children and his wife (Figure 14). Because the human figures stand out markedly against the background of vegetation, the repetition of individuals to designate changing moments in the story, a technique that may be classified as 'synoptic narration,' is particularly vivid here.³ By now, the pattern will be familiar: the chief architectural structure, in this case Vessantara's hermitage, occupies the center of the composition, and the scenes are arrayed around it with less regard for their temporal sequence than their spatial relationship to this building.

The story concludes on the column's west face (Figure 14). Here, the artist has undertaken the challenge of depicting two important scene-settings in the same composition. The wilderness and hermitage where Vessantara endured his exile occupies the upper half of the total area, while the lower half contains his native city of Jetuttara, dominated by the royal palace. In such a complex pictorial space, the order of the scenes is particularly nonlinear, forming a rough circle. In the city, Jujaka ransoms the children to Vessantara's father, who subsequently travels to the wilderness to return them to Vessantara. The whole royal family is united in the remote hermitage. After this happy reunion, depicted in the upper left hand corner, they all return together to the urban palace. Although the text describes Vessantara's place of exile as lying a considerable distance from Jetuttara, here the two areas are shown as adjacent, and only the elephants and palanquins of the royal procession suggest the rigors of traveling between the two. One might also observe that the hermitage on this face of the column has a very different appearance from the one depicted on the north face. Since the story leaves no room for doubt that they are the same building, the artist felt free to play with the structure and details, rather than tediously repeating himself. There is one scene in this composition that does not correlate to the text, or at least the Pali version. In the lower right corner, just inside the city wall, Jujaka is attacked by the residents of Jetuttara (Figure 15). According to the Pali text, after ransoming Vessantara's children back to the king for an enormous for-

tune, the villainous Brahmin dies peacefully of sensual over-indulgence. The only time he suffers violence at the hands of the city residents occurs much earlier in the story, at the beginning of his journey in Chapter 5, an episode that might be included with greater narrative congruity in the cityscape on the east face of the column (Cone and Gombrich 1977: 45). However, the moral effect of seeing Jujaka beaten late in the story is much more satisfying because he has by this time earned our ire by acting despicably toward the defenseless children. It is possible that this scene was shifted in the visual narrative to increase its dramatic impact.

The Vessantara murals of Wat Mongkolwatanaram do not assiduously follow the textual narrative on which they are based. Some chapters are represented by multiple scenes while others go unrepresented. A literary narrative has the freedom of introducing new topography on a whim, but a pictorial narrative, like a play, operates in a fixed space, and must wait until the curtain falls to shift the scenery. The set of paintings in question, because they wrap around a column with four sides, enjoy the liberty of four separate "acts" to narrate the tale. They accomplish this by repeating as nec-

essary key figures within a static environment as appropriate to different moments in the story. As much as this diverges from a linear translation of the text, it proves to be an effective strategy that renders the composition legible to viewers who possess basic knowledge of the jataka.

Like the paintings in its ubosoth, whose composition has been tailored to the dimensions and the four faces of the column that they adorn, Wat Mongkolratanaram characterized by the simultaneous appeal to tradition and through adaptation to an existing architectural space. Wat Mongkolratanaram is not a literal translation of a Thai temple on American soil. However, it is easily recognizable to anyone who has seen such a temple before.



Figure 15. West face of mural, detail of Jujaka receiving a beating.

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End Notes

1. The terms "early Chiang Saen" and "lion-type" are both problematic. The categorization as "early Chiang Saen" relies on a periodization that is now widely questioned, so the term is used with less frequency. "Lion-type," on the other hand, is just a gloss of "Sihing," an image type of which three different statues claim to be the original. Unfortunately, the three have very little in common iconographically, so the term "Sihing" itself can be ambiguous as a designator of style. Of the three Sihing Buddhas in Thailand, located in Bangkok, Nakhon Si Thammarat, and Chiang Mai, the Buddha image in Wat Mongkolratanaram appears to have the most iconographic features in common with the last.
2. Phra Maha Manat Suksa-ad, personal communication, December 11, 2005.
3. Both synoptic narration and continuous narration are terms that designate the repetition of figures and motifs in a single composition to demonstrate temporal change. The former differs from the latter in that it does not follow a simple linear progression through space. See Julia Murray, "Buddhism and Chinese Narrative Illustration in China," *Archives of Asian Art* 48 (1995): 23.