

# Contemporary Sculptures: Decoding the Body of Aesthetic Knowledge Suitable for Public Parks

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ประติมากรรมร่วมสมัย: ถอดรหัสองค์ความรู้ทางสุนทรียภาพที่เหมาะสมกับสวนสาธารณะในประเทศไทย

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## Abstract

The purpose of this research was to examine the background, current conditions, problems and body of aesthetic knowledge of contemporary sculptures suitable for public parks in Thailand. The research area covered Bangkok, Chiang Mai, Phuket, Songkhla, Krabi and Ubon Ratchathani provinces in which there are constructions of contemporary sculpture permanently installed in the public parks. The research procedure used the qualitative research methodology. Data were collected from related literature and field studies using survey, interviews and focus group discussion from a group of 203 informants. The findings were presented by means of a descriptive analysis. The results show that there are 101 constructions of contemporary sculptures permanently installed in 15 parks across Thailand. Saphan Hin Park in Phuket was the first public park to feature a contemporary sculpture in 1969. In Bangkok there are 8 parks containing a total of 40 sculptures, in Chiang Mai there were 2 parks with 43 sculptures (although 1 piece has been stolen and 1 is not at the point of installation), in Phuket there are 2 parks with 2 sculptures, in Songkhla there are 2 parks with 15 sculptures and in Ubon Ratchathani there is 1 park with 1 sculpture. The problems found were generated from a lack of data concerning the background, importance and maintenance of the sculptures and their components. The aesthetics of the contemporary sculptures in the public parks consists of 3 aspects: content, form and relationship with the environment and activities of the people who use the public parks.

**Keywords :** contemporary sculpture, public parks, aesthetics

## บทคัดย่อ

การวิจัยนี้มีจุดมุ่งหมายเพื่อศึกษาประวัติความเป็นมา สภาพปัจจุบันและปัญหาของประติมากรรมร่วมสมัยในสวนสาธารณะในประเทศไทย และถอดรหัสองค์ความรู้ทางสุนทรียภาพของประติมากรรมร่วมสมัยที่เหมาะสมกับสวนสาธารณะในประเทศไทย พื้นที่วิจัยได้แก่ กรุงเทพมหานคร จังหวัดเชียงใหม่ ภูเก็ต สงขลา กระบี่และอุบลราชธานี ซึ่งเป็นพื้นที่ที่มีการจัดสร้างประติมากรรมร่วมสมัยติดตั้งถาวรในสวนสาธารณะ วิธีการศึกษาใช้ระเบียบวิธีวิจัยเชิงคุณภาพ เก็บรวบรวมข้อมูลจากเอกสารงานวิจัยที่เกี่ยวข้องและข้อมูลจากภาคสนาม ใช้วิธีการสำรวจการสัมภาษณ์และการสนทนากลุ่มจากกลุ่มผู้ให้ข้อมูลรวม 203 คน แล้วนำเสนอผลการวิจัยแบบพรรณนาวิเคราะห์ ผลการศึกษาพบว่า ประเทศไทยมีการจัดสร้างประติมากรรมร่วมสมัยติดตั้งถาวรในสวนสาธารณะ 15 แห่ง มีผลงานประติมากรรมรวม 101 ชิ้น สวนสาธารณะสะพานหินจังหวัดภูเก็ตเป็นแห่งแรกที่มีการจัดสร้างประติมากรรมร่วมสมัย ในปี 1969 ในกรุงเทพมหานครมี 8 แห่ง มีผลงานประติมากรรม 40 ชิ้น จังหวัดเชียงใหม่ 2 แห่ง 43 ชิ้น (ถุจการกรม 1 ชิ้น และไม่อยู่ในจุดติดตั้ง 1 ชิ้น) จังหวัดภูเก็ตมี 2 แห่ง 2 ชิ้น จังหวัดสงขลามี 2 แห่ง 15 ชิ้น และจังหวัดอุบลราชธานีมี 1 แห่ง 1 ชิ้น ปัญหาที่พบได้แก่ ปัญหาเกี่ยวกับการดูแลรักษาประติมากรรมร่วมสมัย ปัญหาด้านการดูแลรักษาส่วนประกอบของประติมากรรม และปัญหาการขูดขีดประติมากรรม องค์ความรู้ทางสุนทรียภาพของประติมากรรมร่วมสมัยที่เหมาะสมกับสวนสาธารณะในประเทศไทย ประกอบด้วย 1) สุนทรียภาพของประติมากรรมด้านเนื้อหา 2) สุนทรียภาพของประติมากรรมด้านรูปทรง และ 3) สุนทรียภาพของความสัมพันธ์ระหว่างประติมากรรมร่วมสมัยกับสภาพแวดล้อมในสวนสาธารณะ

**คำสำคัญ :** ประติมากรรมร่วมสมัย สวนสาธารณะ สุนทรียภาพ

## Introduction

Sculpture is a branch of the fine arts created by humans to express appreciation in aesthetic values. Sculptures reflect sensitive emotions and play an important role in connecting matters, beliefs, thoughts and feelings. In addition, sculptures are indicators of human cultural and technological advancements. Thai society is deeply tied to sculptures because of their history as royally-commissioned idealistic media portraying beliefs and religions. Contemporary sculptures in Thailand stem from a scholarly trend of education provision based on the western art academic paradigm, which was introduced to the country by Professor Silpa Bhirasri [1892-1962]. The artform has been developed along a variety of trajectories, leading to abstract art and non-objective art which are different from the traditional Thai popularism. Constructions in public parks exist for people to appreciate the aesthetics of the sculptures and the environment. They are intended to stimulate feelings of relaxation and pleasure from observing beautiful things. Sculptures are chosen for their mental benefits and are regarded as constructions that everyone can come to use and appreciate. These are new things in Thai society and contemporary sculpture

is not yet well known. The knowledge and understanding of contemporary sculpture remain in a limited circle in Thailand. Original artists from the first wave of contemporary art in Thailand are aging, while others have passed away. Moreover, some pieces of contemporary sculpture have decayed and been lost. In spite of this, there is a lack of research impetus to conserve the body of aesthetic knowledge suitable for constructing sculptures in the public park in Thailand. This investigation is intended as a catalyst for greater interest in the conservation of aesthetic knowledge concerning contemporary sculptures in Thai public parks.

### **Literature Review**

Public parks, recreational spaces for communities, were a product of the Victorian age (Morris, 2014). Their history has been one of undulating success, suffering a decline in the middle of the twentieth century but now undergoing a renaissance since the 1990s (Lambert, 2014). Cybriwksi (1999) examined the changing patterns of urban public space by comparing the Tokyo and New York metropolitan areas. His research specifically examined redevelopment projects for examples of trends in the design of urban public spaces and changing patterns in how they are used. Findings indicated that both cities have many new public spaces that enhance the quality of urban life and add aesthetic appeal. Cybriwksi identified a number of common trends: “(1) increasing privatization of spaces that were once more clearly in the public domain; (2) increasing surveillance of public spaces and control of access to them in order to improve security; and (3) increasing use of design themes that employ “theme park” simulations and break connections with local history and geography.” It is this latter feature that gives added interest to the present investigation because the researchers are keen to examine the maintenance of culture in the public parks of Thailand.

In Southeast Asia, the main factors that contribute in successful of the park are good access, comfort, image, activities and sociability (Sakip, Akhir and Omar, 2015). In Malaysian urban areas, it has been found that “the issue of underutilization of public parks persists despite the apparently well-designed landscape” (Ujang, Moulay and Zakariya, 2015). Further investigation has concluded that, despite the meaningful experience with nature and green environment, the function of the park as a social space for the community is still insufficient due to limits of the function of public parks as social integrators. Nevertheless, contemporary sculptures provide “purposeless delight” and add to architecture, leisure, entertainment, and religion in the region (McDaniel, 2015).

Dumas, Burrus Jr., Diener, Payne and Rose (2007) argue that sculptures in public parks are a positive benefit to local society, particularly in their amelioration of the general park ambience. However, they concede that there are financial obstacles to the commission and maintenance of public sculptures. Their study “presents methods to help local officials effectively estimate the non-market value of local recreation projects.” This is an important consideration when examining the real value of public artwork. Indeed, Stalker and Glymour (1982) are very critical of the pressure put on public funding by the artwork created by contemporary sculptors, who generally have no “intention of commemorating or representing people or events associated with the site.” However, Ashley (2015) found that temporary sculptures in Seattle, commissioned through a joint private-public venture, were well-received and added to the sense of togetherness and pride in the local community. This reinforces the need for continuous public participation in the planning and management of artwork in public parks.

### **Research Methodology**

The purpose of this research was to examine the background, current condition, problems and body of aesthetic knowledge of contemporary sculptures suitable for public parks in Thailand. The research area was purposively selected and covered Bangkok, Chiang Mai, Phuket, Songkhla, Krabi and Ubon Ratchathani provinces, in which there are constructions of contemporary sculpture permanently installed in the public parks.

A qualitative research methodology was used for this investigation. Data were collected from related literature and field studies. The research was conducted using a primary survey form, a non-structured interview form and focus group discussion with a group of 203 informants. They included a key informant group of 13 sculpture experts, a casual informant group of 40 sculptors and caretakers and a general informant group of 150 park users. The collected data were checked for correctness and completeness using a methodological triangulation technique. The research findings were checked by experts in visual arts and subsequently presented by means of a descriptive analysis.

### **Results**

In Thailand there are constructions of contemporary sculptures permanently installed in 15 parks in 5 provinces. In Bangkok the works are spread across 8 parks. Chatuchak Park is home to 6 pieces of work; 5 pieces were constructed according to The 2<sup>nd</sup> ASEAN Sculpture Symposium Project in 1983 and an additional piece was constructed in 1987. Thonburirom Park has 1 piece of work, constructed in 2009 as part of the sculpture Installation Project

in cooperation with Bangkok Metropolitan Administration and Silpakorn University. Benchakitti Park has 1 piece of work, constructed in 1994 in commemoration of H.M. Queen Sirikit's 60<sup>th</sup> Birthday. Bangkok Forest Park in Commemoration has 1 piece of work, constructed in 2009 as part of the same Sculpture Installation Project as in Thonburirom Park. The commemorative forest park at the foot of the Great King Taksin Bridge [on Thonburi bank] has 2 pieces of work, also constructed in 2009 as part of the Sculpture Installation Project. Lumpini Park has 8 pieces of work spanning 5 times of construction: the first piece was constructed in 1985 for The Youth for Sculptural Works Project according to the slogan of International Youth Year; the second period of construction was from 1991 to 1994, also for the Youth for Sculptural Works Project under the meaning of nature and environmental conservation. Three pieces of work were created; the third time of construction was in 2007 on the occasion of the 30<sup>th</sup> year of Dichan Magazine, when 1 piece of work was commissioned; the fourth occasion of construction was one piece for the 80<sup>th</sup> Birthday of H.M. King Bhumibol Adulyadej the Great and the 120<sup>th</sup> year of Thai-Japanese diplomatic relationship; and the fifth time of construction was one piece in 2009 for the Sculpture Installation Project. Wachirabenchatit Park has 3 pieces of work from 2006 for The CPAC Design 4 Parks Project (1 sculpture) and 2009 for the Sculpture Installation Project (2 sculptures). Benchasiri Park has 18 pieces of work, which can be divided into 3 eras: 1992, when 11 sculptures were selected from masterpieces of famous sculptors in commemoration of H.M. Queen Sirikit's 60<sup>th</sup> Birthday, from 1992 to 1997, with 6 sculptures for the Youth for Sculptural Works Project, and in 2006 for the CPAC Design 4 Parks Project.

In Chiang Mai there are 2 parks. Lanna King Rama IX Park has 42 pieces of work. The construction was divided into 3 stages. Stage 1, from 1990 to 1995, saw the construction of 11 sculptures for the Youth for Sculptural Works Project. Stage 2 from 1994 to 1995 saw 22 pieces of work carved from sandstone and stage 3 in 1997 consisted of 9 sculptures created for the Youth for Sculptural Works Project in Lanna King Rama IX Park in commemoration of H.M. King Bhumibol Adulyadej's 72<sup>nd</sup> Birthday. Buak Hard Public Park in Chiang Mai is home to 1 sculpture, constructed in 2005 for the Sculpture Contest Project of Chiang Mai Province.

In Phuket, there are 2 public parks containing contemporary sculptures. The 100-Year Commemorative Park contains one installation, which was constructed during 2005–2006 as a memorial of the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami. Saphan Hin Park was the first place in Thailand where a contemporary sculpture was constructed and permanently installed. This was in 1969, when one piece of work was created in remembrance of Captain

Edward Thomas Miles [1849–1944]. Captain Miles was the man who pioneered offshore tin mining in the Thung Kha Gulf. In Songkhla, there are two public parks containing contemporary sculptures. The Sculpture Park in Commemoration of H.R.H. Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn’s 50<sup>th</sup> Birthday is home to 14 pieces of work, constructed in 2005 for The International Symposium of Monumental Sculpture in Celebration of the Auspicious Occasion of H.R.H. Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn’s 50<sup>th</sup> Birthday. Seri 1943 Park contains one piece of work, constructed in 2008 for the first International Contemporary Sculpture Project. Ubon Ratchathani Province is home to one public park, Thung Si Muang Park, with one piece of work, constructed in 1995 under The Youth for Sculptural Works Project. A selection of the sculptures in the five provinces are illustrated in figure 1, below.



**Figure 1.** A – “Red structure” by Chanvit Yeamprapha, 1990. Material: iron. Height: 350 cm. Location: Lanna King Rama IX Park, Chiang Mai; B – “The Milestone” by Chaovalit Hatsaphong, 1969. Height 600 cm. Location: Saphan Hin Park, Phuket; C – “Participation, Development and Peace” by Chakaphan Vilasinikul, 1985. Material: bronze. Height: 250 cm. Location: Lumpini park, Bangkok; D – “Protector” by Khien Yimsiri, 2009. Material: bronze. Height: 395 cm. Location: The commemorative forest park at the foot of the Great King Taksin Bridge [on Thonburi bank], Bangkok; E–“Growth” by Nonthiwat Chandhanaphalin, 1992. Material: bronze. Height: 400 cm. Location: Benchasiri Park, Bangkok.

#### **Current conditions and problems with contemporary sculpture in the public parks of Thailand**

Currently, 39 pieces of contemporary sculpture appear in the public parks of Bangkok. One piece of work in Lumpini Park has disappeared. In addition, one component of one

sculpture from the CPAC Dsign 4 Parks Project in Wachirabenchatat Park is broken and it has been left outside the area of the sculpture installation. In Lanna King Rama IX Park, Chiang Mai, there is a lack of maintenance due to problems hiring private companies to improve the landscape. In addition, one piece of sculpture was stolen, one piece of work was taken out of the point of installation and two pieces of work (one made from iron, one made from wood) are in states of much erosion. Also, the surrounding areas have been left wild with plants.

In Saphan Hin Park in Phuket, the area around the sculpture has been converted from a fountain pond to a grass lawn, enabling people to come and appreciate the piece of work. The sculptures in the other public parks are in complete condition and are well taken care of.

The forms of the sculptures are abstract and semi-abstract. They express beauty of form through different visual elements. In terms of the environment around the pieces of work, there are adjustments and decorations for enhancing the aesthetics of the sculptures and environments. It is an exception for Lanna King Rama IX Park, Chiang Mai, that the area is full of wild plants. Aesthetics of the sculptures can also decrease. The people who use the public parks indicated that contemporary sculptures are positive additions to the public parks. However, they rarely understand the premise and form of each sculpture. The problems of contemporary sculptures generate from the lack of clear understanding about the methods of sculpture maintenance. Moreover, there is a lack of information concerning construction, importance and maintenance, causing the general public to lack understanding. Additionally the sculptures are abstract art and are personal representations of the characteristics of each artist. There is not any explanatory media attached to the sculptures, so people are not able to appreciate the aesthetics as they were intended.

### **The body of aesthetic knowledge of contemporary sculptures suitable for public parks in Thailand**

There are three aspects concerning the aesthetics of contemporary sculptures in the public parks of Thailand. The aspect of content deals with subject matter including goodness, love, unity, philosophy of life, human intentions, beauty of nature, lifestyle and local culture (Lowell et al, 2009). This is the aspect of aesthetics that is easiest to perceive and understand because it is not influenced by the artist's personal interpretation. One example is the sculpture "Participation, Development and Peace" by Vilasinikul, C. in Lumpini Park, Bangkok (Figure 1C).

Concerning the aspect of a sculpture's form, people will more easily appreciate semi-abstract aesthetics than abstract art (Awomeso et al, 2010). The use of simple and

uncomplicated forms using the principles of arts composition can reveal beauty and make the sculpture unique. Consideration of mass, planes, lines, texture, materials and colors that can respond to the content and environment generally helps the artist make a more popularly aesthetic sculpture. Nonetheless, aesthetics still depend on good conditions, as generated through maintenance. This is evident with the sculpture “Protector”, which displays the love of man to child through the gesture of an adult carrying a child in her arms, fully-curved, displaying no pain (Figure 1D).

The aspect of the environment consists of designing, adjusting and decorating the environment to be appropriate, to relate to the sculptures and activities of the people who come to use services in each local area, enhancing the general aesthetics of the sculptures (Yee & San, 2011). There must be a beautiful vision and good caretaking for people to enjoy relaxing around the sculptures and to generate pleasure and joy to see aesthetic things. The sculpture that was constructed and permanently installed in Benchasiri Park, Bangkok was planned to enhance the various elements of the park. The contemporary sculpture and environment of the park are in harmony. The park maintenance department is also responsible for maintaining a beautiful garden surrounding the sculpture.

## **Discussion**

Contemporary sculptures in the public parks are constructions for the open air. They are installed in open areas outside for people of all genders and all ages. They are convenient to interact with and appreciate. Sculptures of this type will provide more value and natural feelings than the pieces of work installed in museums with a confined and airless surrounding area. Good sculptural works, if presented in an inappropriate climate, will also increase the value and beauty of their surroundings (Lowell et al., 2009). The sculptures of this type occur in large cities, where living conditions are rather crowded. One method to help people relax is through art (Awomeso et al., 2010). Contemporary sculptures have been created in abstract art and non-objective art styles. They communicate meanings and feelings in similar ways to traditional popular art styles because contemporary sculptures are based on similar content, which artists want visitors to appreciate, such as the love of a mother holding and protecting her baby. Content is greatly important, beside forms, materials, processes and technique of presentations. These components generate appreciation and joyful pleasure. It is the use of sculpture to generate mental benefits. The sculptures are art media related to the society, generated from that every artist is a member of the society, who has higher aesthetic gifts or special abilities than any other people. Artists usually can express aesthetic emotions into art

works which society member who have common emotions can perceive and appreciate and support further creation. They show satisfaction and pleasure in the way of life to live together. Therefore, sculptures are useful to respond to the needs of the society. People have happiness in life with common aesthetic emotions. The society which cooperatively perceives and promotes artists to create sculptural works until they become properties and heritages of that society, which may be longer than the lives of creators and consumers of the pieces of work in the contemporary period (Yee & San, 2011).

### **Conclusion**

This research aimed to examine the background, current conditions and problems and to seek the body of aesthetic knowledge of contemporary sculptures suitable for the public parks in Thailand, specifically in Bangkok, Chiang Mai, Phuket, Songkhla and Ubon Ratchathani provinces. These 5 provinces were the area with constructions of contemporary sculptures permanently installed in the public parks during different periods of time and on different occasions for more than 40 years. The contemporary sculptures were in semi-abstract art and abstract art style. The aesthetics of the contemporary sculptures in the public parks consists of 3 aspects: content, sculpture's form and environment to be relate to activities of the people who use services in the public parks to be able to appreciate aesthetics of the sculptures completely.

### **Acknowledgements**

My sincere thanks go to the commission on higher education for providing a scholarship according to the Strategic Scholarships Fellowships Frontier Research Networks in 2008. This dissertation received a sponsorship for the fiscal year 2010 from Maha Sarakham University and the Research Institute of Northeastern Art and Culture, Maha Sarakham University.

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