

# “Lao Buddha Images in Thailand”: eBooks compilation homepage

## Wat Pathumwanaram, Bangkok:

Lao Cultural Markers, Long-gone Waterfronts, and Simmering Discontents in the Thai Capital's Glitziest Shopping District\*

In 1857—exactly three decades after the complete razing and forced depopulation of the *Lao Lan Xang* capital, Vientiane, by order of the Siamese King Rama III—his half-brother Mongkut, having ascended the throne as Rama IV in 1851 CE, following a 27-year, increasingly-brilliant career in the *sangha*, erected a Third Class Royal Monastery in the semi-aquatic outlying region populated largely by the descendants of the Lao prisoners of war who had originally excavated along Saen Saeb the canal then still providing the only access to the site, which had earlier seen Mongkut's construction of the Sta Pathum palace; an appropriate wilderness hermitage for a king who had spent his entire adult life theretofore as a monk.

Remarkably—and so painted apparently from the outset—the eye-level (i.e., lower course) interior wall space of the new Wat Pathumwanaram's main image hall was not of murals recounting the miraculous events of the life of the historical Buddha, *Gotama*, nor to illustrating chapters from the re-tellings of the Buddha's preceding incarnations—which collectively comprise those hundreds of *Jataka* tales fully incorporated within the Theravada canon. But instead—quite atypically—was given over entirely to many episodes taken from the completely non-canonical, but vastly-popular literary collection: the *Xiang Miao* or *Sri Thammachari* stories.

Of which the picaresque anti-hero, a “trickster” figure much-beloved amongst the Lao and Isan Thai masses, is a surprisingly-clever, if somewhat-amoral, long-since-defrocked monk; lecherous in his youth, who eventually becomes celebrated, wealthy and well-situated by outwitting, defrauding, and humiliating a host of his social superiors: including his own parents, merchants, landlords, money-lenders, and not least his king and courtly retainers.

The upper-course murals traversing all four walls display a procession of magnificent royal barges, very possibly

depicting accurately the transport down the Chao Phraya River from Nonthaburi to the new royal wat of the three principal Buddha images which today still preside over the main altar at the Pathum within and abset; and which were confiscated from temples in Vientiane, either during the first Siamese invasion in 1778, when the revered *Phra Praso* Marakot, the “palladium” of the present Chakri dynasty, was seized (and also the *Phra Bang*; eventually returned to the Lao king of Luang Prabang, its namesake city); or during the second invasion of 1827, when the Lang Xang era was terminated, and the southwestern Lao provinces incorporated into Siam as Isan.

Much of the rest of the temple décor—including the exterior has reliefs—comprises almost a museum of botanical paintings and sculpture: representing in taxonomically-correct detail the many varieties of plants that grow in the erstwhile lakes and ponds of the Pathumwan district that were “reclaimed” by degrees. Originally for agriculture, and then in due course for spectacular, high-rise commercial development of lands still largely owned by the monarchy; urbanization that was much-facilitated earlier by streetcar lines, and more recently by tollway, bus and skyway rail infrastructure planning. Klong Saen Saeb—while cut off from the Chao Phraya—still exists, and still carries some longtail boat traffic.

In 2010, Wat Pathum made international headlines as one of the venues of the notorious “Red Shirt” uprising(s); and during the wat's subsequent closure to the public, the opportunity was taken to extensively restore the Sri Thammachari murals (evidently undamaged during the riots); which in their deteriorated but original condition, had been conventionally archived in the 1990s by the Royal Fine Arts Department, and in their newly-restored glory, digitally re-archived—in several graphics formats—during 2012 by us for this eBook (still very much under construction).

\* One of a series of contextualized visual repositories of key Thailand Southeast Asian cultural sites and assets produced by the Digital Conservation Facility, Laos as interactive eBooks in PDF for onsite, online, or physical digital media publication.



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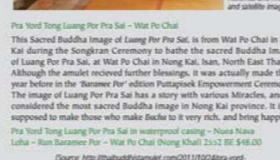
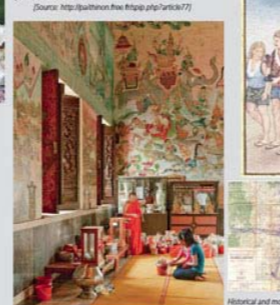
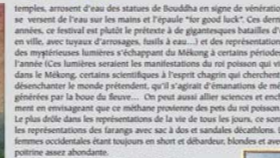
## Wat Po Chai, Nongkhai

### วัดโพธิ์ชัย



The sacred gold Luang Phra Sai Buddha image has been enshrined since the establishment of Nongkhai province. Prince Damrong Rajachulapongkul speculated on its origin in a book called “Fables of Important Buddha Statues”, which was published and distributed in a royal karnha ceremony in the year 1923. According to the legend, three princesses—Chao Chulachetana's daughters, named *Sorn*, *Suk*, and *Sai*—inspired the king's command to create three Buddha images having different statures according to their ages. They were named accordingly: *Phra Sorn* for the oldest (and largest), *Phra Suk* for the middle, and *Phra Sai* for the youngest and smallest. They were to be cast in a difficult-to-melt alloy of gold and bronze, requiring very high temperatures to get the metal liquid enough to pour. Although the Monks and Novices worked full time at the bellows for seven days and nights they still couldn't raise enough heat. On the eighth day the Monks were exhausted when a white-robed figure appeared and offered to take over the bellows. The Monks and Novices gratefully retired. More white-robed figures appeared to assist the first and when the Monks and Novices returned from their rest, prepared to again take up their work, the white-robed figures were nowhere to be seen. They had disappeared as mysteriously as they had arrived, but the metal was melted and ready to pour into the moulds!

Le Wat Po Chai est très célèbre en Thaïlande grâce à la statue de Bouddha qu'il abrite. Il est en or, cuivre et bronze et d'origine incertaine de fabrication. C'est un temple dont l'intérieur est très coloré avec deux rangées de fresques assez étonnantes. Le registre supérieur raconte le vie de Bouddha et l'histoire de la statue du temple. (Cette statue était transportée en radeau sur le Mékong en 1550, un orage fit chavirer le radeau et la statue disparut dans l'eau. Elle ne fut retrouvée miraculeusement qu'en 1575. En Thaïlande les plus fameuses statues de Bouddha ont généralement été portées puis retrouvées miraculeusement. Le registre inférieur représente des scènes de la vie de tous les jours, des scènes du festival de Songkran (le festival célèbre le nouvel an Thaïlandais). Les familles et amis se regroupent visitent des



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## Wat Hong Rattanaram, Thonburi

### วัดหงส์รัตนารามราชวรวิหาร



Wat Hong Rattanaram Ratchaworawiharn is a second grade royal temple dating from the latter Ayutthaya period and originally named Wat Chao Sua Hong or Wat Chao Khua Hong; after Nat Hong, the Sino-Thai notable who built it. Inside the Ubosot, the antique presiding Buddha was originally encased with plaster (probably to hide its actual value from looters). After the covering was somehow broken, the interior golden Buddha was revealed. It is evidently from the Sukhothai period and old Li-Thung inscriptions were found inscribed at its base. The Fine Arts Department registered the temple as a National Ancient Monument in 1949 (B.E. 2492).



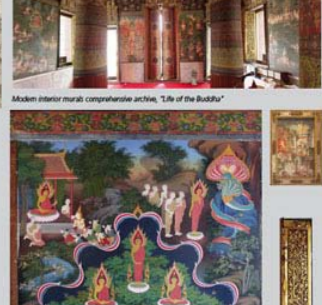
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## Phra Saen Buddha Image



The Phra Saen is a highly revered Buddha image of Lao origin and a key artifact of early modern Lao historiography. In c.1680, Phra Kru Phomsamak—then the senior abbot of the Lan Xang sangha in Wiang Chan (Vientiane)—was party to a failed coup attempt and escaped into exile, after declining the offer of the kingship as incompatible with his monastic vows. He fled south and established as his base the new Lao city of Chiang Treng (Song Treng), on the Mekong left bank at the confluence of the Selong, and now in Cambodia. At that time he began the casting of the important Buddha image now known as the “Phra Saen” which was likely to have served as the palladium of Song Treng, and he famously chose the nine metals that would comprise the alloy. However, before even half of the complete image was cast, Kru Phomsamak departed from Song Treng and withdrew to an unsettled area further upstream on the Mekong right bank, so founding the city of Champasak, where the unfinished casting of the Phra Saen was completed. When the Siamese—whose capital then was still Ayutthaya—asserted suzerainty over Champasak, Kru Phomsamak returned to Wiang Chan, taking with him the Phra Saen. It was seized from there during the Siamese wars against Lan Xang (1784-1827) and borne south, probably by water. “Saen” in Lao means “one hundred thousand”, in reference to the popular myth that when the Siamese tried to subjugate the sunken Phra Saen Buddha image and thence relocate it to Thonburi, even one hundred thousand laborers were unsuccessful in this task until the Phra Saen consciously agreed to the move... after which it took only a handful of men to raise and transport it.

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## Wat Thung Sri Muang, Ubol Ratchathani

### วัดทุ่งศรีเมือง

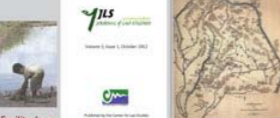
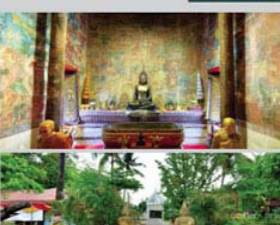
Built by Venerable Chao Khun Phra Ariyawongachan around 1829, in the reign of King Rama III, Wat Thung Sri Muang is an old temple situated in the heart of Ubol Ratchathani Province. Venerable Chao Khun Phra Ariyawongachan originally resided at Wat Srageath in Bangkok. He traveled to Ubol Ratchathani Province and stayed at Wat Pa Kao Mani Wan (presently Wat Mani Wanaram). Every morning and evening, Venerable Chao Khun Phra Ariyawongachan left the temple to meditate at the Dong U Phung Forest, the present location of Wat Thung Sri Muang, realizing that this peaceful area was suitable for serving as a religious center, he brought a replica of the Holy Footprint from Wat Srageath to which the Ubol Ratchathani residents could pay homage, and a hall was constructed to house the replica. The hall was transformed into the Ubosot (main chapel) in 1829 by Ykhuchang, a monk from Vientiane who was expert in construction work.

The art form of the Ubosot is, therefore, a mixture of the early Rattanakosin and Lan Chang styles. The lower structure of the Ubosot is in the northeastern style and the roof is of the Rattanakosin art form. Inside the Ubosot are the old presiding Buddha image in the posture of Subduing Mara (measuring 2.39 meters at the lap), the replica of the Holy footprint, and fine murals on the four walls. These murals depict the Lord Buddha's former life, as well as the livelihood and costumes of northeastern residents in those days.

One of the well-known religious structures at Wat Thung Sri Muang is Ho Phra Traipidok (Triptaka), the hall for storing the Holy Scriptures. At Wat Thung Sri Muang, Ho Phra Traipidok is generally referred to as Ho Trai Klang Nam because it is located in the middle of a pond. It is a mixture of three types of craft, namely Thai, Burmese and Lao. The building is of the central Thailand architectural style while the roof is a mixture of Thai and Burmese art forms. This structure is made of hard wood, and its gables are engraved with intricate designs on both sides. This is in the Lao classical art style, and is regarded as the most beautiful of its kind in northeastern Thailand. The hall is the place where Triptaka, the Holy Scriptures, are kept so they can be saved from destruction caused by insects. Such a hall is usually built in the middle of a pond or other safe area...

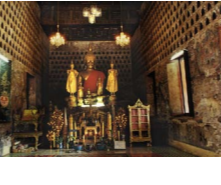
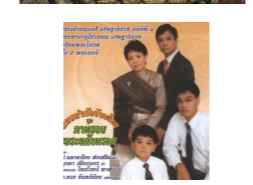
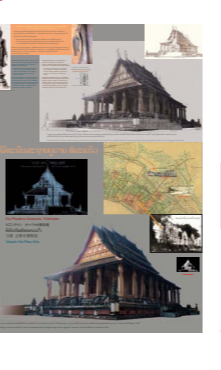
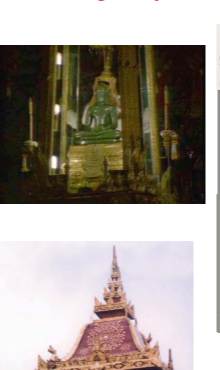
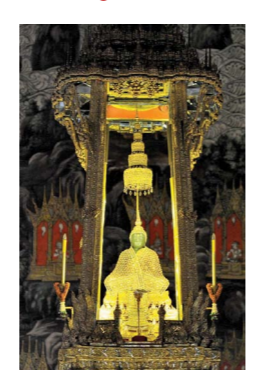
Wat Thung Sri Muang: the major chapel, 200 years old, was constructed during the early Chakri dynasty. Interior walls were beautifully painted, showing the culture and history of the ancient Ubol people. Some paintings, are somewhat erotic. Ho Trai, a scriptural repository made of teak, built in the middle of the pond, contains holy Buddhist books, inlaid with gold leaves.

Source: <http://www.encyclopediatthai.org/sunthai/ueast/ubon/ubonwat1.html>



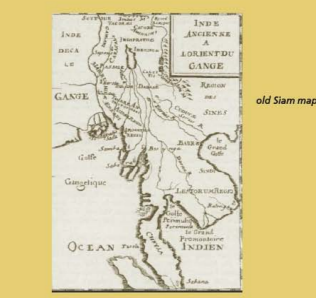
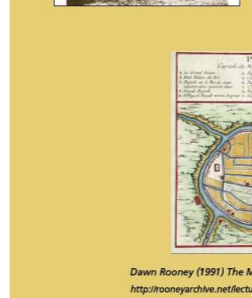
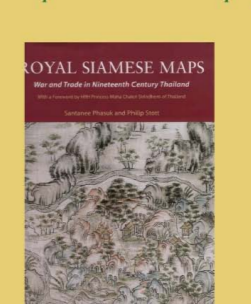
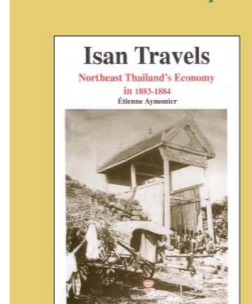
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## Phrakeo Morakot and Phra Bang Buddha images and temples in Wiang Chan (Vientiane), Krung Thep (Bangkok), and Phnom Penh + Vat Sisaket



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## Historical maps compilation homepage



Dawn Rooney (1991) The Mapping of Thailand: an introduction [http://rooneyarchiv.net/lectures/lec\\_maps\\_introlec\\_maps\\_intro.htm](http://rooneyarchiv.net/lectures/lec_maps_introlec_maps_intro.htm)