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**Silpakorn University**

Silpakorn University was officially inaugurated in Thailand in 1943 as a raising of the status of the School of Fine Arts, which had been founded in 1933. The first director of the university was the Italian sculptor Corrado Feroci (Silpa Bhirasi, 1892-1962), who led the institution until his death. He had been employed in 1924 as official sculptor to the government under the reign of King Vajiravudh (1880-1925), or Rama VI, who had initiated a number of programs to preserve Siamese craftsmanship and respond to modern foreign influence, of which Silpakorn University was an outgrowth. Feroci remains a revered figure among Thai artists and his portrait can be regularly seen in local artists’ studios. He had led the creation of Democracy Monument on Bangkok’s Ratchadamnoen Road – to commemorate the 1932 coup d’etat which established a constitutional democracy – and this convinced the Department of Fine Arts that an art university could be used to produce major national works. Feroci created three strands for Silpakorn University’s education: styles specific to the nation, the fashions of contemporary art and the influence of international modern art. Training in painting and sculpture was initially provided and then architecture, archaeology and decorative arts were added. The backbone of the university was to reconcile tradition and Western modernism.

In 1966 Silpakorn University began diversifying its programs to accommodate a range of majors in the humanities and sciences. Currently the university has 13 faculties, a graduate school and a college across four campuses, the oldest is on Tha Prachan Road in the Phra Nakon district of Bangkok. The first public ranking of universities in Thailand by the Office of the Higher Education Commission in 2006 named Silpakorn University as the highest in the areas of humanities and decorative arts. There are 30 public universities in the Bangkok area.

Silpakorn University remains an august institution for art and design. Its relationship to the art world at large in Thailand has been intermittently controversial as critical questions of the dynamic between local identity and foreign influence hold sway. The extent of the institution’s influence on the contemporary art world of Thailand is an open question. Feroci founded the National Art Exhibition in 1949 as a nominally autonomous realm for artistic expression but a salon-like orthodoxy emerged that favoured a decorative conservatism. Awareness of Western modernism began in the 1960s and Chalood Nimsaner, Acting Dean of the Faculty of Painting and Graphic Arts, introduced modernist design practices into the program. However, this development had little impact on the selection for major art exhibitions.

The Thai political landscape inevitably impacted teaching and the type of art produced. The popular uprising of 1973 and the 1976 massacre of protestors opposing the return of an exiled dictator produced a schism within Silpakorn’s faculty and a number of instructors were threatened with expulsion. The Bua Luang Art Prize introduced a category in traditional Thai painting in 1974 and Silpakorn established a Department of Thai Art in 1977-78. Both developments are considered a response to the crises of national identity that was engendered by the protests. Graduates of the department include the celebrated Chalermchai Kositpipat and Panya Vijinthanasarn.

The rise of artist-led and privately funded art spaces in Bangkok during the 90s, such as About Studio/About Café, Project 304 and Tadu Contemporary Art, provided an alternative to the civic codes of religion, country and monarchy that dominated the Thai education system. And so-called social discourses emerged more steadfastly away from the patronage of an elite. The Thai sculptor, Thana Lauhakaikul, who graduated from Silpakorn University in 1968 and taught in the US for over two decades, was appointed Dean of the Faculty of Painting, Sculpture and Graphic Arts in 2003. His tenure was short and reported as unhappy due to the traditional Thai method of instruction, where a student copies the example of the *acharn* (teacher).

**References and further reading**

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