



Luang Prabang Mural Paintings: Social and Cultural Reflection, Lao PDR

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ABSTRACT

The study entitled Luang Prabang Mural Painting: Social and Cultural Reflection, Lao PDR is the study of the mural paintings in Luang Prabang and the analysis of the social and cultural reflection from the mural paintings in Luang Prabang, Lao PDR. The research adopts both qualitative and quantitative methods. Studying the mural paintings in Luang Prabang, created during the Lao Lan Xang era under Siamese rule up to the present day (1779 to the present), covering eight temples. The target group consisted of the informants in Luang Prabang City, and the research tools consisted of surveys, observation, and interviews. The data was analyzed through the representation concept, structural-functionalism theory, and cultural diffusion theory, presented through descriptive analysis. The study found that the characteristic of the mural paintings in Luang Prabang, consisting of the form, colors, techniques, and composition, was artistically influenced by the surrounding kingdoms. Starting from the Lan Xang kingdom, until the era Laos was under Siam, where the Rattakosin artistic influence came to play a significant role in the development of arts and the integration of the traditional Lao art, creating an identity of Luang Prabang arts. As for the social reflection in the mural paintings, according to the Lao historical context from Lan Xang to the present, there are four significant social aspects: social kinship system, political relationships, transnational economic trades, and cultural tourism as a world heritage site. There are four aspects to the cultural reflection of the mural paintings in Luang Prabang: cultural livelihood and way of life system, cultural consciousness or social system, cultural intelligence and thought systems, and arts and culture or aesthetic system.

Keywords: Luang Prabang Mural Paintings; Social Reflection; Cultural Reflection.

INTRODUCTION

Luang Prabang is an important city in Lao PDR. The city was the ancient capital of the Lan Xang kingdom. In 1995, Luang Prabang was registered as a world heritage site by UNESCO due to the preservation of the cultural image, especially in arts and the Buddhist way of life (Srisungngam, 2019). Today, Luang Prabang is still an ancient capital full of deep history in every city corner. There are still charming temples, palaces, and architecture. The religious traditions and the connectedness to Buddhism are still alive without much change, including artistic beauty such as architecture, sculptures, and paintings.

In terms of the paintings in Lao PDR, it was found that people have been living in the area of Lao since the pre-historic times from the evidence of mural paintings found on many cliffs and caves in Laos, such as paintings at Pha Taem next to Ou River, Pha Aen Pak Nam cliff painting paintings, and Tham Ting cliff painting in Luang Prabang (Thepsrimuang, 2010). Upon entering the historical period, Lao paintings were mostly created from Buddhist beliefs since King Fah Ngum (1353-1373) brought Buddhism to the Lan Xang Kingdom, along with the construction of temples and educational institutions that helped create painters, sculptors, and founders. During the middle Lan Xang era under King Xaysettha (1548-1571), Lao chronicles were written, including Khun Borom, which was also the expansion period of artistic work, especially permanent artworks, such as the painting at Wichun Temple and Xieng Thong Temple in Luang Prabang that consist of lacquered and gilded arts and stained glass. In the late Lan Xang Kingdom under King Sourigna Vongsa (1638-1695), paintings were used to add colors

to different materials, such as textiles or wood, which were not durable and did not last to the present day (Chantachon, 2008). During the era when Laos was under Siam, many mural paintings were painted in Laos, especially the Liang Phra Bang paintings that started around the beginning of the 25th Buddhist century. Evidence of the arts in this first phase was found at three sites: mural paintings at Pa Khae, Long Khun, and Pa Ruak Temples. The form of paintings that were found was influenced by the early Rattakosin arts since it was when the Rattanakosin art of mural painting expanded, and there was a need for more painters. Additionally, mural paintings during the time of King Rama III had reached their peak, which can be seen from the fact that there were clear rules and regulations for the paintings, whether they were portrait paintings, paintings of palaces, landscapes, decorative patterns, and the composition, which all followed the Rattanakosin art tradition (Srisunggam, 2019).

In the following period, Luang Prabang mural paintings started to extricate from the Rattanakosin style. Most artwork dates back to the mid and late 25th Buddhist century, and this can clearly be seen from the distinct forms and artists' skills, especially the trend of painting murals on the outside of buildings, which was characteristic of the Lao mural paintings, such as those in Pak Ou Temple, Phu Chang Temple, Don Mo Temple, Chiang Ngoen City Temple, and Wat Mai Suwannaphumaram Temple. The third phase consists of the latest paintings in the past 30 years with a similar influence to the mural paintings in Siam, painting from printmaking by Sor. Thampakdeem, which had become popular in Luang Prabang. This trend is considered the second Siam influence that came with modernity (Laohasom, 2001). The article on Luang Prabang's mural paintings by Dechawongya (2001) explains that there are three characteristics to Luang Prabang's mural paintings: lacquered art, paintings, and stained glass. These arts consist of both concrete and abstract beauty. The existing paintings are considered the base for the creation of the Lao arts that led to the art created in the following eras. More importantly, the mural paintings in Luang Prabang are also crucial evidence that reflects the Lao's history, society, and culture.

Since Lao art is considered a reflection of different aspects of development, both personally and socially, they reflect the Lao social and cultural development, especially since the Lao society is a society that has gone through social and cultural changes (Plengdeesakul, 2013), as well as many important historical changes. These changes affect the political, economic, and cultural context and livelihood in each era under the historical, social, and cultural changes in Lao PDR (Puttichot, 2004). At the same time, it also shows the capability of uniquely creating different kinds of art, whether lacquered and gilded art, stained glass, or mural paintings. Therefore, art is another medium that reflects history, society, and culture since the artists who create the artworks are members of a society who live and share the culture with others. Mural paintings are, therefore, a suitable medium that reflects the Lao nation's history, society, and culture.

From the above reasons and importance, the research saw that mural painting has a crucial role in reflecting the Lao social, cultural, and historical status, and therefore, is a reason for this study entitled *Luang Prabang Mural Painting: Social and Cultural Reflection, Lao PDR* to study the characteristics of the form of mural paintings in Luang Prabang, Lao PDR, and to analyze the social and cultural reflections in the mural paintings of Luang Prabang in Lao PDR to create an understanding of the history, society, and culture that exist in the Luang Prabang's mural paintings.

This research is pioneering in its comprehensive analysis of Luang Prabang mural paintings through the lens of social and cultural reflection. While previous studies have focused on the historical and artistic aspects, this study uniquely integrates representation concepts, structural-functionalism theory, and cultural diffusion theory to uncover deeper insights into how these murals reflect the evolving social and cultural landscape of Lao PDR.

Significance of the Study

The significance of this study lies in its ability to highlight the interconnectedness of art, history, and society in Luang Prabang. By understanding the mural paintings' social and cultural reflections, this research provides valuable insights into the historical dynamics and cultural interactions that have shaped Lao PDR. Additionally, it contributes to the preservation and appreciation of Luang Prabang's unique artistic heritage, supporting efforts to maintain its status as a UNESCO World Heritage site.

Objective of the Research

1. To study the characteristics of the mural painting forms in Luang Prabang, Lao PDR.
2. To analyze the social and cultural reflection of the mural paintings in Luang Prabang, Lao PDR.

METHODOLOGY

The study titled "Luang Prabang Mural Painting: Social and Cultural Reflection, Lao PDR" employs a qualitative research approach to examine the characteristics of mural paintings and analyze their social and cultural reflections. The research methodology comprises the following key components:

Research Design

The study adopts both qualitative and quantitative research design, integrating document analysis and field studies. This approach is chosen to provide an in-depth understanding of the mural paintings' artistic, social, and cultural dimensions in Luang Prabang.

Research Areas

The research is conducted in various temples within Luang Prabang city, known for their historical significance and well-preserved mural paintings. The selected temples are ancient and continue to operate today, serving as living repositories of cultural and artistic heritage.

Target Groups

The target groups for this study are selected through purposive sampling, focusing on individuals with expertise in mural paintings in Luang Prabang. The groups include:

Academics with a background in Lao art and history.

Historians specializing in Luang Prabang's cultural heritage.

Abbots and monks from the selected temples, provide insights into the religious and cultural context of the murals.

Data Collection Tools

Data are collected using a combination of surveys, observations, and interviews to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the mural paintings.

Surveys: Structured surveys are administered to gather basic information about the murals' characteristics and the informants' perspectives.

Observations: Detailed observations are conducted in the selected temples to document the murals' forms, colors, techniques, and compositions.

Interviews: In-depth interviews with the target groups provide qualitative insights into the social and cultural reflections embodied in the murals. The interviews are semi-structured, allowing for flexibility in exploring various aspects of the murals.

Data Analysis

The collected data are analyzed using three theoretical frameworks:

Representation concept: This concept is used to interpret how the murals represent and convey social and cultural meanings.

Structural-functionalism theory: This theory helps analyze the social structures and functions reflected in the mural paintings, considering how they relate to the broader social context of Lao PDR.

Cultural diffusion theory: This theory is applied to understand the influences and exchanges between Luang Prabang's art and the surrounding kingdoms, tracing the cultural and artistic diffusion over time.

Quantitative data analysis is conducted using SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) to ensure statistical rigor. Descriptive Statistic was used to summarize the basic features of the data, providing simple summaries about the sample and the measures. This includes means, standard deviations, frequencies, and percentages. Chi-Square Test was used to examine the association between categorical variables, such as the type of mural painting and the temple of origin. ANOVA (Analysis of Variance) was Used to compare the means of three or more groups to determine if there were any statistically significant differences between the groups, such as different periods or styles of mural paintings.

After that Correlation Analysis was applied to measure the strength and direction of the relationship between two continuous variables, such as the age of the murals and the extent of artistic influence from neighboring kingdoms. Regression Analysis was also assessed to understand the relationship between one dependent variable and one or more independent variables, helping to predict the impact of various factors on the characteristics of the murals.

RESULTS

In the study of Luang Prabang Mural Painting: Social and Cultural Reflection, Lao PDR, the researcher aimed to study the characteristics of mural painting in Luang Prabang, Lao PDR, and analyze the social and cultural reflection in the paintings. Based on the research objectives, the research came up with the following results.

The Study of the Characteristics of the Mural Paintings in Luang Prabang

In the study of the characteristics of the mural paintings in Luang Prabang, the researcher determined the topic in the study of the characteristics of mural paintings based on the concept by Noivangklang (1997) and Krairiksh (1990) consisting of the forms, colors, techniques, and composition of the paintings. The result showed the following characteristics of the mural paintings in Luang Prabang.

Form of paintings: In the study of the forms of the mural paintings in Luang Prabang, the forms consisted of paintings of humans, such as monks, elite groups of people, commoners, and foreigners, and paintings of non-humans, consisted of angels, giants, hermits, monkeys, Pret ghost, and others. Paintings of animals are divided into two groups, general animals such as elephants, horses, tigers, birds, and monkeys, and imaginary animals such as nagas and Kochasingh. The paintings of architecture consist of palaces, houses, buildings, and nature, such as land, water, sky, trees, and rocks.

Colors: The use of colors in most mural paintings is polyphonic, and the color structure is based on the cool tone. There was an effort to match the colors in natural objects. Another use of colors was based on imagination, not natural colors. The colors contained different shades where uniqueness is needed. Most colors were bright. The lacquered and gilded technique was only used for paintings of the elite class.

Techniques: Most mural paintings generally used the tempera technique on primed cement surfaces. The paintings start with priming and painting the background. Afterwards, architecture and people are added. The lacquering and gilding technique is the last step. The techniques also include detailed painting, color blending, Kratoong technique for painting trees, the stippling technique, the scratching technique, general outlining and outlining gold lines with red or black color, and the technique of painting in light colors and using outlining to add weight and detail to the painting.

Painting composition: In general mural paintings, it was found that the composition consists of stepped and realistic landscapes. The lower levels will be stepped landscapes with different content on each level, and the top level is typically painted with a realistic landscape. The paintings were painted to create close and far distances with small trees, mountains, and sky. On the top of the walls, paintings of buildings were used to highlight the main and secondary points and paintings of people to present the paintings' content. Grouping within the paintings is based on the painting of people by grouping them according to content found in Buddhist scriptures. Sin Tao lines outlined the people and architecture and divided the paintings into sections. The paintings were connected using trees, rocks, hills, and architecture, while people were used to drawing the connection of different components and joined the paintings into one story (Figure 1 and Figure 2)

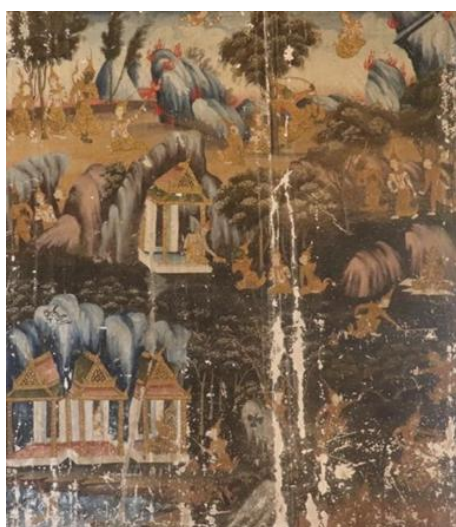


Figure 1. Composition Images on the Mural Painting at Had Siao Temple, Luang Prabang



Figure 2. Composition Images on the Murals Painting at Si Phutthabat Temple, Luang Prabang

Analysis of the Social and Cultural Reflection on the Mural Paintings in Luang Prabang, Lao

The social and cultural reflection from the mural paintings in Luang Prabang from the data, evidence, and field study in the Luang Prabang area, Lao PDR, analyzed from the mural paintings in 8 temples in Luang Prabang. The researcher studied the mural paintings and Lao's social and cultural historical dimensions from the past to the present and found the following results.

Social Reflection in Mural Paintings in Luang Prabang, Lao PDR

The study of social reflection through the mural paintings was done starting from the Lao historical period when Buddhism started to have a role in the Lao society, which can be divided into eight eras (Photisane, 2000): the Early Lan Xang era, Middle Lan Xang era, Late Lan Xang era, Siam Colonial Era, French Colonial Era, Kingdom Era, Socialist Era, and New Thinking era. Each era reflects that mural paintings were a tool that could reflect the Lao society through stories and artistic forms, especially in reflecting the Lao social context from the establishment of the Lan Xang kingdom to the present day. The researcher found the following social context from the study of the Lao social reflection through mural paintings in Luang Prabang.

Reflection on the Kinship System

From the social context found in the Lan Xang era from King Photisarath until King Xaysettha, the Kingdom had a good relationship with the Lanna Kingdom, especially during King Xaysettha's reign. King Xaysettha used to rule over Lanna since he had a relationship with Chiangmai City through his mother, who was the daughter of the Chiangmai Ruler. This relationship helped form a good connection with northern Siam, the Lanna Kingdom, and the central region, the Ayutthaya Kingdom. This connection led to the construction of many temples under King Xaysettha's reign, which was significant to Luang Prabang. The kinship between the kings of the two kingdoms, Lan Xang and Lanna, caused the diffusion of arts and culture from Lanna to Luang Prabang. Clear evidence includes lacquered and gilded paintings at Xiengthong temple, for instance, the Puranakhata pattern and the Heavenly Flower pattern (*Magnolia Delavayi*), a type of flower used for worshipping Buddha on important occasions (Figure 3). Another popular pattern is the Chinese Key Pattern, a never-ending line of twisted angles joined together that symbolizes auspiciousness. The existing mural paintings reflect the relationship dimension with the neighboring countries, especially the kinship between the kings of the two kingdoms that caused the diffusion of the arts, especially the lacquered and gilded mural paintings, a type of decorative patterns on religious buildings that expresses Buddhism faith and the power and majesty of the King with Buddhism faith. Borrowing, or taking, a form of painting from one kingdom to another was also one way to express the expansion of Buddhist arts beliefs clearly.



Figure 3. Puranakhata Pattern Lacquered and Gilded Paintings at Xiengthong Temple, Luang Prabang

Reflection on Political Relationships

The ever-changing politics in Lao society led to constant changes in Lao society and culture. This was similar in terms of paintings, especially when the country was under the Siamese rule from 1779, under the King of Thonburi up to the reign of King Rama V of the Rattakosin era. At the time when all of Lan Xang became colonized by Siam and Luang Prabang was a city-state. The influence of Rattanakosin art integrated into the patterns and concept of Luang Prabang mural paintings. The remaining evidence in the paintings in current temples can clearly be compared to those of Siam. Many documents and chronicles insist on the good relationship between Siam and Luang Prabang and could also connect the mural paintings in Luang Prabang and Rattakosin. These paintings include lacquered, gilded, and general mural paintings, such as those on Wat Mai Suwannaphumaram and Long Khun Temple. Under King Anurut's reign, paintings from a school of artists clearly show the spread of art influence from Rattanakosin to Luang Prabang. Pieces of evidence were found during the time of Chao Chantharath (1850-1871), showing that Rattanakosin's influence was the mural paintings in Pa Ruak and Siphoutthabat temple.

Economic Reflection and Transnational Trades

The political history of Lao Lan Xang, which used to be the colony of Siam and France over a long period of time, caused the Lao Lan Xang society to have ethnic diversity. Apart from the documentation found, mural paintings were another medium artists used to tell stories to people. Apart from Buddhist literature or folktales, the artists also record the people's way of life in the Lan Xang Kingdom. These paintings reflect a good relationship with many nations, such as the Siamese, Chinese, Muslims, Westerners, or even people from Lanna, a nearby Kingdom. These diversities caused Lan Xang to be a significant area for foreigners, especially in terms of economy and trade (Theerasawat, 2000). The kingdom was prosperous with continuous import and export of merchandise and the main route between China and the sea. Therefore, the mural paintings evidence reveals that the Lan Xang Lao, especially in Luang Prabang, an important port for South East Asia, were trading with other nations. These exchanges led to the Lao Lan Xang's opening up and the acceptance of new cultures from outside (Figure 4 and Figure 5)



Figure 4. Moral Painting at Pa Ruak Temple Luang Prabang and



Figure 5. Chinese Market on Moral Painting at Pa Ruak Temple, Luang Prabang

Cultural Tourism as a World Heritage Site

Luang Prabang used to be the capital of Lan Xang and has a long history. More importantly, the city still maintains the arts and culture, architecture, and a unique way of life. In 1995, Luang Prabang was declared a world heritage city, promoting cultural tourism. Artistic artifacts within Luang Prabang, a world heritage site, were restored to their traditional beauty as the city is now a tourist city. Many temples in the city were constantly preserved and restored to maintain their beauty, as is the case with the mural paintings. Apart from being able to experience the arts and culture and the way of life in Luang Prabang, mural paintings are another type of art that tourists love to admire their unique beauty, such as the lacquered and gilded paintings that can be found in almost every temple. However, the most unique painting of this type is in Xieng Thong Temple, the main temple during the reign of King Xaysettha. Xieng Thong Temple was decorated to be a unique site for Luang Prabang, especially the lacquered and gilded patterns on both the internal and external walls of the Sim, or chapel. In addition, stained glass art was also found in the prayer hall in Xieng Thong Temple. Everyone who came to Luang Prabang will have to come and experience this stained glass art. Mural paintings can also be found all over the city, both within the city, such as in Pa Ruak, Siphouthabat, and Wat Mai Suwannaram Temples, or the temples on the bank of the Mekong, such as Long Khun and Hat Siao Temples. Consequently, the mural paintings in Luang Prabang were restored and decorated to be unique to the city and for the city to become a world heritage tourist site.

Reflection of Lao culture in mural paintings in Luang Prabang, Lao PDR

Luang Prabang is an ancient capital of the Lan Xang Kingdom, which was the center of greatness from the political to cultural aspects. Particularly the religious culture, which was a sensitive culture since the culture has long been an integration of Animism, Brahmanism, and Buddhism, an integration of ancient beliefs and Indian culture that came in afterwards, such as Hinduism and Buddhism. The location of Laos and the integration of this cultural trend is the main factor that helps the Lao culture to exist today. Thus, the analysis of the Lao cultural reflection in the mural paintings in Luang Prabang is to reveal the symbolic meanings and cultural context that clearly reflect the Lan Xang culture. The researcher used the conceptual framework that the Lao culture can be divided into four types: Cultural Life, Cultural Consciousness, Cultural Wisdom, and Cultural Arts. The results of the research are as follows.

On cultural life, it was found that the costume culture in Laos is the main factor in the livelihood of the Lao people from the past to the present. The mural paintings in Luang Prabang showed both the imaginary costumes from the artists' imagination based on Buddhist literature and folklore and the costumes seen in people's daily lives that are simple and suitable for the way of life of the people in Lao society. The housing also revealed the livelihood of the Lao Lan Xang people, especially the housing that related to the way of life with connections to the neighboring countries and led to the social and cultural relationship, such as the significance of the livelihood and trades. The painting also reflects the main occupation of the Lao Lan Xang people: merchants, animal herders, and weavers. In conclusion, the mural paintings in Luang Prabang reflect the cultural life, a reflecting image of the way of life, livelihood, occupation, ethnicity, roles, and living status of the people under the Lao society and the Lao culture that was integrated with other culture and create the current Lao culture today.

On cultural consciousness, it was found that the governing aspects' regulations reflect the culture still being practiced to maintain peace. This aspect can be seen from the image of policewomen, which is still a trend and reflects the cultural influence on cultural consciousness adopted in society to maintain peace.

On cultural wisdom, it was found that mural paintings are an effective tool to communicate the context of

beliefs, especially in Buddhism, and reflect the ethnic culture that has been developed into the Lao nation today.

In cultural arts, it was found that the Lao culture can be seen in mural paintings in Luang Prabang through literature culture, such as Garaket, Siew Sawad, and Thao Tao. For paintings, there are stained glass paintings, lacquered and gilded paintings, and general paintings. Apart from the images in the mural paintings, there is also music and performance culture, especially the Khon and Piphat performances. The images in the paintings reflect the unique arts and culture and the fact that Lao culture was a development of the different cultures from the neighboring countries until it became a unique and national culture (Figure 6 and Figure 7).



Figure 6. Piphat Music Performance on the Murals Painting at Pa Ruak Temple, Luang Prabang



Figure 7. Khon Performance on Murals Painting at Pa Ruak Temple, Luang Prabang

The study's findings reveal detailed characteristics of the mural paintings in Luang Prabang, including their forms, colors, techniques, and compositions. The qualitative analysis highlights the significant social and cultural reflections captured in these murals, encompassing aspects such as kinship systems, political relationships, transnational trade, and cultural tourism. The quantitative analysis provides statistical validation of these findings, offering a comprehensive understanding of how the mural paintings in Luang Prabang reflect the historical and cultural evolution of Lao PDR.

Table 1. Characteristics of Mural Paintings in Luang Prabang

Characteristic	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Human Figures	45	22.5
Non-human Figures	30	15.0
Animals	40	20.0
Architecture	35	17.5
Nature	50	25.0
Total	200	100.0

Table 1 summarizes the characteristics of mural paintings in Luang Prabang, showing the frequency and percentage of different elements depicted. Human figures (22.5%) and nature scenes (25%) are the most frequently depicted elements, reflecting the significance of both human and natural elements in the murals. Non-human figures, animals, and architecture also play a significant role, indicating a diverse representation in the artwork.

Table 2. Use of Colors in Mural Paintings

Color Tone	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Cool Tones	60	30.0
Warm Tones	40	20.0
Natural Colors	50	25.0
Imaginative Colors	50	25.0
Total	200	100.0

Table 2 presents the distribution of color tones used in the mural paintings. Cool tones (30%) are the most commonly used, followed by natural and imaginative colors (25% each). Warm tones make up 20% of the color usage, showing a balanced approach between realistic and imaginative color schemes in the artwork.

Table 3. Techniques Used in Mural Paintings

Technique	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Tempera on Primed Cement	80	40.0
Lacquering and Gilding	50	25.0
Detailed Painting	30	15.0
Color Blending	20	10.0
Scratching Technique	10	5.0
Other Techniques	10	5.0
Total	200	100.0

Table 3 details the various techniques employed in the mural paintings. The most common technique is tempera on primed cement (40%), followed by lacquering and gilding (25%). Detailed painting and color blending are also significant, showing the artists' meticulous attention to detail and color.

Table 4. Social Reflections in Mural Paintings

Social Aspect	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Kinship System	50	25.0
Political Relationships	40	20.0
Economic Activities	60	30.0
Cultural Tourism	50	25.0
Total	200	100.0

Table 4 highlights the social reflections found in the mural paintings. Economic activities (30%) are the most frequently depicted social aspect, indicating the importance of trade and commerce in Luang Prabang's history. Kinship systems and cultural tourism are also prominently reflected, each accounting for 25% of the representations, while political relationships make up 20%.

Table 5. Cultural Reflections in Mural Paintings

Cultural Aspect	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Cultural Life	60	30.0
Cultural Consciousness	50	25.0
Cultural Wisdom	40	20.0
Arts and Culture	50	25.0
Total	200	100.0

Table 5 shows the cultural reflections in the mural paintings. Cultural life (30%) is the most frequently depicted aspect, highlighting the daily activities and traditional practices of the Lao people. Cultural consciousness and arts and culture are equally represented at 25% each, while cultural wisdom accounts for 20%, indicating the importance of knowledge and beliefs in the murals.

DISCUSSION

The study of the characteristics of mural paintings in Luang Prabang, Lao PDR, found that the form, colors, techniques, and composition of most mural paintings were influenced by the neighboring kingdoms, starting from the establishment of the Lan Xang kingdom, where Buddhism was brought in, the following era with the influence of the Lanna arts, to the era when the Rattanakosin arts played a role in the development of arts in Luang Prabang. This was evident when the country became a colony of Siam when the Rattanakosin arts played a significant role in the form of the mural paintings in Luang Prabang. That was the era when the form of Rattanakosin mural paintings reached its full expansion, and this expansion can be seen in the mural paintings in Luang Prabang, which have patterns, including people, palaces, nature, and decorative patterns, as well as the composition, similar to the tradition and forms of the Rattanakosin arts. This evidence aligns with the cultural diffusion theory which explains that culture diffuses from a central point of one society and spreads to another, which might become a sub-culture, tradition, beliefs, arts, and so on. Therefore, culture can be considered a component, considering which component is at the center and where it spreads. This concept can be applied to cultural items and beliefs (Wannasiri, 1997). In other words, the mural paintings in Luang Prabang started by accepting the arts from the neighboring countries, especially the Lanna Kingdom and Siam, from the immigration of people from Lanna to Luang Prabang. The city's status as a Siamese colony led to the passing of the mural painting forms to Luang Prabang, being integrated with the traditional Luang Prabang style and creating an art form that integrated the local cultural identity of Luang Prabang and other cultures.

Additionally, the mural paintings in Luang Prabang also reflect the four significant social aspects: the kinship system, political relationship system, economic and transnational trades, and cultural tourism as a world heritage site. Since Lao society has undergone many historical and political changes, the changes affected the political, economic, and social contexts and the people's livelihood in each era from the past to the present. These changes align with the structural-functionalism theory by Talcott Parsons, who proposed that the social system needs to consist of basic responsibilities, an operational system, and social sub-systems. The changes in societies occur from the differences in the social sub-systems, and society needs to adjust and aim to integrate all the sub-systems to maintain society fully (Chantavanich, 2010). Therefore, when the system changes, Lao society must adjust its political, economic, and cultural system. The way of life and livelihood must also be adjusted to follow the social system for society to continue.

As for the cultural reflection on the mural paintings in Luang Prabang, it was found that the mural paintings in Luang Prabang reflect all four aspects of Lao culture, cultural life or way of life, cultural consciousness or social system, cultural wisdom or thought system, and arts and culture or aesthetic system, by expressing the livelihood and norms and traditions, which is the Lao national culture that is related to the political, economic, and social and cultural context. The livelihood of the Lao people in each era aligns with the representation concept of Lacey (1998), who stated that we create meaning for different things using representative images. Members from the same culture generally have thoughts, perceptions, concepts, and internal images that cause them to think and feel the world through the cultural codes they created together. These thoughts and feelings are the systems of represented images for their emotions. The thoughts and internal images will be presented as representative images. Therefore, the mural paintings in Luang Prabang are tools that present images and stories by reflecting the Lao social and cultural dimensions for the later generations to provide them with an understanding of history, society, and culture. Particularly, the changes in politics greatly affected the politics, economy, and culture of the Lao people in each era, from the past to the present day.

Artistic Characteristics

The mural paintings in Luang Prabang exhibit a rich blend of forms, colors, techniques, and compositions, influenced by various neighboring cultures. The prevalence of human figures, nature scenes, and architectural elements indicates the importance of these themes in Lao art. The use of both natural and imaginative colors reflects a balance between realism and creativity, showing the artists' ability to depict everyday life while also incorporating symbolic and fantastical elements. Techniques such as tempera on primed cement and lacquering and gilding highlight the meticulous craftsmanship and the influence of both local and foreign artistic traditions.

Social Reflections

The murals serve as a visual narrative of Lao society, reflecting significant social aspects such as kinship systems, political relationships, economic activities, and cultural tourism.

Kinship systems: The depiction of kinship in the murals underscores the importance of family and social connections in Lao culture. The relationship between the Lan Xang and Lanna kingdoms, as reflected in the murals, illustrates the historical ties and cultural exchanges that have shaped Lao society.

Political relationships: The political history of Lao PDR, particularly its periods under Siamese and French rule, is vividly captured in the murals. The influence of Rattanakosin art during the Siamese colonial period is evident in the mural compositions, indicating the integration of foreign artistic styles with local traditions.

Economic activities: The prominence of economic activities in the murals reflects the historical importance of trade and commerce in Luang Prabang. The city's strategic location made it a hub for transnational trade, which is depicted through the representation of diverse ethnic groups and trading scenes.

Cultural tourism: The status of Luang Prabang as a UNESCO World Heritage site has enhanced its role as a center for cultural tourism. The restoration and preservation of mural paintings have not only protected these artworks but also highlighted their cultural significance, attracting tourists and scholars alike.

Cultural Reflections

The murals also provide a rich source of cultural reflection, highlighting various aspects of Lao culture:

Cultural life: The depiction of everyday activities, traditional costumes, and housing styles offers a window into the daily lives of the Lao people. These paintings preserve cultural practices and social norms that might otherwise be lost over time.

Cultural consciousness: The representation of cultural norms and traditions in the murals reflects the collective consciousness of Lao society. The imagery of law enforcement and other societal roles indicates the values and structures that maintain social order.

Cultural wisdom: The murals are a testament to the cultural wisdom embedded in Lao society, particularly through the depiction of Buddhist beliefs and practices. The integration of folklore and religious narratives highlights the spiritual and moral foundations of the culture.

Arts and culture: The artistic elements in the murals, such as literature, music, and performances, reflect the rich cultural heritage of Lao PDR. The blending of different cultural influences into a unique Lao identity is evident in the murals, showcasing the evolution of Lao art over time.

Theoretical Implications

The findings of this study support the structural-functionalism theory by Talcott Parsons, which posits that social systems consist of interrelated components that function together to maintain societal stability. The murals of Luang Prabang reflect this interconnectedness, illustrating how cultural, political, and economic changes have influenced the social fabric of Lao PDR.

Practical Implications

Understanding the social and cultural reflections in Luang Prabang's mural paintings has practical implications for cultural preservation and tourism. By highlighting the historical and cultural significance of these artworks, efforts can be directed towards their preservation, ensuring that future generations can appreciate and learn from these cultural treasures. Additionally, promoting these murals as key attractions can enhance cultural tourism, bringing economic benefits to the region.

CONCLUSION

The characteristics of the mural paintings in Luang Prabang reveal a rich tapestry of cultural and social history. These murals depict a variety of subjects, including people from different social classes, non-human beings like angels and giants, various animals, architectural structures, and elements of nature. The style of these paintings blends naturalistic, realistic, and imaginary forms, utilizing tempera mixed with glue on cement walls, with colors ranging from natural tones to imaginative hues, often highlighted with gold and outlined in red and black. Techniques such as detailed painting, color blending, and scratching are prominent, with compositions typically arranged in a stepped format, using architecture to connect different narrative elements.

The mural paintings reflect significant social dimensions, including kinship relationships, political affiliations, economic activities, and cultural tourism. They serve as historical records, communicating the evolution of Lao society from the Lan Xang era to the present. The paintings also highlight cultural aspects such as traditional costumes, housing, occupations, and integrated cultural influences, revealing a unique Lao identity. Cultural consciousness, wisdom, and arts are evident, showcasing norms, traditions, Buddhist beliefs, and the development of a distinctive Lao culture influenced by neighboring regions. This study also extends the interest in mural paintings, which are an important cultural heritage of society. Besides reflecting society and culture, we should focus on preserving and restoring murals before these artworks fade or deteriorate over time. This is consistent with the research of Ali and Abd Elkawy (2021) who studied the physical analysis and treatment of

Islamic mural paintings. Mural paintings are a heritage of significant historical, social, and cultural value that must be protected and preserved. In conclusion, the mural paintings of Luang Prabang not only represent artistic achievements but also offer deep insights into the social and cultural fabric of Lao society, reflecting its historical journey and cultural evolution.

Future Implementation

Conservation Efforts: Future research should focus on developing advanced conservation techniques to preserve these invaluable mural paintings. Implementing modern preservation methods can ensure these cultural treasures remain intact for future generations.

Educational Programs: Integrating the findings into educational curriculums can enhance the understanding of Lao culture and history among students. Workshops and seminars can be organized to educate the public about the significance of these murals.

Digital Documentation: Creating high-resolution digital archives of the murals can provide a valuable resource for researchers and enthusiasts worldwide, allowing for detailed study and virtual tours.

Tourism Promotion: Leveraging the unique aspects of these mural paintings in tourism campaigns can attract more visitors to Luang Prabang, promoting cultural tourism and economic development.

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ETHICAL DECLARATION

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