

# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

The people of Thailand have a lot of respect and are very loyal to their monarchy. Portraits and monuments of Kings are present and exhibited all around the city of Bangkok. On my last short visit to Thailand, the tourist guides used to praise very highly of the present monarch, which was evident what he did towards his country. This left me with a good impression of those portraiture back then that my instinct grasped the compassion and nobility of the King. One could say it was my karma that led and gave me this opportunity to study at Chulalongkorn University. I was always impressed with King Chulalongkorn and his son King Vajiravudh's portrait in the main building and the bronze statue of both father and son on the premises of the University ground. Most of the students used to pay respect whenever they pass by those portraits and monuments. And spontaneously I also started to pay respect in my own way, filled with respect and adoration which always gave me some kind of relief in my heart.

As my study progressed and I was able to gain more knowledge of Thai history, I came to know that the equestrian monument of King Chulalongkorn in front of Ananta Samakan Throne Hall or Royal Plaza and Chulalongkorn University is somehow connected with its past history. And the truthful fact is that the University was established with the left over money after constructing the equestrian monument of the King Chulalongkorn. Being acquainted with and able to gather new information of these portraits and statues, and also how these incidents and customs has played an important role in my personal life, the history behind these bronze statues gave me insight to study more of these bronze statue and also to know how those statues are actually manufactured.

History of tradition of bronze casting and using bronze in Thailand goes back to the prehistoric period. The endemic technology transformed its artistic ability to the very rich artistic workmanship still prevalent at present. With the modernization process

public monumental arts made of bronze have been the testimony of its artistic achievement to its political and spiritual back force. The viewer's envy on the art piece as well as their inherited traditional belief like animism, Buddhism, Hinduism and ancestor worship towards the past rulers and hero personnel had helped such monuments to get more popular. Among the popular and most revered are the statues of King Chulalongkorn. King Chulalongkorn commissioned foreign artists to make his sculptures in the European styles. The kings and elite then were impressed with realism and technique of creating art objects in the western world. The consequence was, many western engineers and artists were brought by the government to work in Thailand which changed the landscape of the country to the neo classical era. The climax of this reached in 1908 when the first public monument, the equestrian statue of King Chulalongkorn was unveiled on the occasion of the fortieth anniversary of his accession on the throne was celebrated. After this a new chapter in monumental art history had officially began.<sup>1</sup>

Italian sculptor Corrado Feroci (later to take the Thai name Silpa Bhirasri), who became the most influential figure in shaping Thai modern art , was selected by his government and invited to Thailand in 1922 by King Vajiravudh. He is known as the Father of Modern Art in Thailand. Feroci aimed to raise the standard of Thai art to an international level and encouraged Thai artists to appreciate the value of cultural heritage. He promoted western styles and methods including the mastering the nature, and one which freed artists from the duty of illustrating old literature. His duty was to establish trust and gain credibility for western art style with the Thai powers. The statue of King Rama I now located at the memorial bridge was his first contract for which the bronze was casted in Florence and took four years to finish the task. After this he gained fame and government acceptance in Thailand and well established after that.<sup>2</sup> He encouraged

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<sup>1</sup> Wang, Ka F., *Vision of a Nation, Public Monuments in Twentieth Century Thailand* (White Lotus, Bangkok, 2006). pp. 17,18

<sup>2</sup> Henderson, Virginia, *The Social Production of Art in Thailand: Patronage and Commoditization, 1980-1998*, (Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok). 1998, p. 60

the Thai artists and sculptors to study in the European tradition, followed western conventions of drawing and portraiture and most importantly, sculpture. Silpa Bhirasri's initiative succeeded on the establishment of the Silpakorn University. He inspired his students to look for new ways of both classical arts and European art.

Professor Feroci's contribution on Arts in Thailand gave a new dimension in Thai arts. A foundry was made in a warehouse beside the Department of Fine Arts in 1941. In 1987, the office of the Division of Handicraft was moved to Salaya district in Nakhon Pathom where new and modern foundry was built for more capacity. The old foundry is converted to a Museum of models and prototype of the National Statue bearing the name as "Hall of Sculpture".<sup>3</sup>

Students taught by Silpa Bhirasri were having very good performance on producing many bronze statues during and after his death. Because of the public demand and fashion of making statues and monuments of the Thai elites, the Group of sculptors of Thai Traditional Arts Division of The Fine Arts Department had very good reputation until present. Opportunity to meet Professor Silpa Bhirasri's one of the student of 5<sup>th</sup> generation Mr. Boonsong Nootnomboon gave me many insights on the making of bronze and his experiences with Silpa Bhirasri. The interaction with young generation of artists of Silpakorn University helped to differentiate the modern way of learning arts.

At present, foundry of Salaya specially produces bronze sculptures with lost wax process. There are many similarities and differences in lost wax process in Asia and Europe. The rich cultural heritage of Europe developed various technologies on the casting bronze by the 19<sup>th</sup> century. That contemporary and scientific technology of lost wax bronze casting was introduced in Thailand by Corrado Feroci. Lost wax or *cire Perdue* is French word meaning, a kind of technology in which wax is lost and liquid

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<sup>3</sup>Nildum, Nilwan, *The Architectural Heritage For Wang Tha Phra And Wang Thanon na Phra Lan: From The Palaces of Builders and Craftsmen To the Art And Cultural Centre*, (Silpakorn University, Bangkok, 2003).

metal is poured in the wax lost hollow part of the mould to make an item of art. Item of art are mainly sculptures in this research was made for religious purposes or for the royal and national purposes which required highly innovative process requiring great skill, experience and patience.

Although the modern casting method of bronze was introduced in Thailand, the lack of written documents or text books explaining the process might put in danger the technology in long run. The experts on making bronze image were the individual persons. They were supposed to transmit their knowledge through teacher student relationship and it was done merely by practice. Therefore keeping this problem in consideration an initiative must be done to document all the process of making bronze statue in written form with good illustrations.

### **1.1 Objectives of the research**

The purpose and objective of this thesis was, (1) to study the contemporary Lost Wax casting technique used in Thailand in comparison with the traditional one and (2) to study the beliefs behind making of bronze statues of Thai elites and their spiritual dimension.

The thesis aimed to study the idea behind making of bronze statues of Thai elite. The study was done on the process of making the bronze sculptures. The thesis helped to understand how much effort and contribution is given by the sculptors, casters and their group of artist to make a single piece of bronze sculptures. People appreciate a work of art but how and on what circumstances the art and artisans goes through is less studied. The study for some extent able to justify the hard works of the artisans, spirit behind the techniques, the purpose behind making the art and its emotional and spiritual comprehension by the general public.

## **1.2 Research argument**

Bronze images are very popular and considered as a medium to express the feeling and expression which influence the society in general. This thesis attempted to answer the questions such as: (1) what are the techniques of contemporary bronze casting with lost wax process done in the foundry of Fine Arts Department? (2) Are there any differences between traditional and contemporary bronze casting? (3) What is the history behind the establishment of the foundry of the Fine Arts Department and its functions? (4) Who are the famous figures and elites been casted in the foundry? (5) What is the spiritual and emotional attachment of the sculptors and casters?

This thesis investigated whether the contemporary bronze lost wax casting process lack its value when compared to the traditional process. The popularization of the making bronze statues of elites and national figures reflect the deep rooted Thai belief in ancestral worship, monarchy, Buddhism, Hinduism and animism. These beliefs permeate the public display of such figures with religious and spiritual significance. These figures would therefore be considered cult objects and places of pilgrimage. In technical aspect the reason behind the popularization of the contemporary lost wax process is the use of modern material and equipment which are easy available at present.

## **1.3 Scope, Source and Methodology**

The foundry of the fine arts department was taken as a case study area for my research. This study is based upon the case study of making of a bronze casting with lost wax process in the foundry of the Fine Arts Department in Salaya. The methodology applied in this research consist of interaction with the different experts involved in the foundry, research of different scholarly publication written in English and by the process of participative observation at the above mentioned foundry.

A Thai friend working in the Fine Arts Department Mr. Naruporn Saowanit helped arrange all the meetings with various people in the foundry. Due to the language barrier he had to find a staff who could speak English to be my interpreter. In the foundry Mr. Pongpan Chantanamattha and Ms. Chonlada Srichamrus the sculptors helped to take interviews and interpret in English. At times it was very hard for them to explain what they actually meant. Nevertheless I found all the members of the foundry very kind, cooperative, and hospitable and greeted me as their family while I was looking at all the sculptures and their working processes. They also answered to all my queries. (Appendix 6, 7)

Apart from this the head of the Sculpture Group of Thai Traditional Arts, Mr. Somkuan Oumtrakul gave me permission to observe all the casting process from the beginning till end, to record and photograph progress of the sculptors work from the beginning. The artisans of that foundry provided very detail information of the process of making a bronze image which I was able to give in detail in the research. Likewise, the senior traditional cast master Mr Nikorn Koehapong made a model demonstration of traditional casting method for my study which I had recorded from the beginning to the end of the final procedures. I attempted to acquire the humanitarian ideas, personal views and experiences and background of the individual artisans who are working in the different fields in the foundry.

#### **1.4 Expected Benefits**

From this thesis, the expected benefit is to have better understanding of the process of bronze casting techniques. The study also intends to highlight the mix traditional and modern technology of bronze casting which is very much in practice at present. It will also help those who want to understand the process in detail either for informative, educational or further research purpose. The study will also benefit future research on Thai visual arts in contemporary Thai society.

Apart from this expectations, the study will benefit those who are involved in this research, for example to the sculptors, casters, mold makers etc. who will have a chance to express their experiences of their profession and emotional and spiritual back force by which they are usually guided to overcome their work.