

War and Its Art in Southeast Asia

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The arts and culture are an age-old medium for the documentation, interpretation, and reimagining of crises. War has always been a common theme in such uses of arts and culture across civilisations. The author examines the depiction of war in Southeast Asian art and cultural objects and notes the shift from glorification of war to a more critical and realist perspective.

War between, or within, societies, kingdoms, empires, and today's nation-states are critical events in history. They are existential challenges to societies. They are the material for great epics like the climactic battle at Kurukshetra between the Pandava and their Kaurava cousins for the throne of Hastinapura in the *Mahabharat*, which is vividly remembered in the old Javanese poem *Bharatayuddha*. Wars make heroes and heroines like Queen Suriyothai who was killed

in an elephant duel with the Burmese invader Tabinshwehti to save her husband King Maha Chakkraphat in the first Burmese-Siamese War (1547-1549).

Artists have joined bards and scribes in recording the drama of war as an existential crisis for its actors. Visuality, orality, and textuality complement to record, valorise, glorify, honour, and decry war. This essay reviews the art of depicting war in Southeast Asia.

The bas-reliefs of Angkor

The very large bas-reliefs carved on the walls of the third enclosure of Angkor War (le Bonheur and Poncar 1995) rank as one of the most



Figure 1. Bas relief of Arjuna on his chariot leading the Pandavas to battle the Kauravas, Angkor Wat temple. Plate 519 of *Le Temple d'Angkor Vat, Troisieme Partie, La Galerie des Bas-Reliefs, Memoires Archeologiques Tome II*. Paris: Les Editions G. Van Oest, 1932.

impressive depictions of war. As the visitor climbs the steps to enter the third gallery of Angkor Wat, he encounters on his right the wall of the southern wing of the western gallery with a large panel bas-relief. The relief depicts the battle of Kurukshetra. On the left half of the panel near the western entrance to the enclosure, which the visitor has entered, is the Kaurava army. Opposing them on the southern half of the panel are the Pandavas. They engage in battle at the exact centre of the panel. Guided by the moral authority of the four-armed Krishna, the sons of Light, the Pandavas, emerge victorious over the sons of Darkness, the Kauravas.

If the visitor looks to his left, he will see a large panel depicting the great battle of Lanka in the *Ramayana*. Rama, standing ready for battle on the shoulders of the divine monkey Hanuman, and his army of monkeys are all on foot, while the demon Ravana and his troops are mounted on ornate war chariots. The relief vividly captures the melee of battle, with the monkey warriors ripping Ravana's troops with their hands and teeth.

The other three walls of the third enclosure depict on the southern wall a ceremonial procession focusing on Suryavarman II, to whom Angkor Wat is dedicated, leading a victory parade or his kingdom to new glories. The other half of this southern wall shows the procession on the road to heaven or to the thirty-two hells, with the God of Time and Eternal Death, Yama, seated on his mount, the buffalo, passing judgment on whether one goes up to heaven or down to hell. On the wall of the eastern gallery is probably the most well-known bas-relief of Angkor Wat illustrating the Vishnavite myth of Vishnu presiding over the Churning of the Ocean of Milk to create *amrita*, the elixir of immortality. Next to it is a panel about the victory of Vishnu over the *asuras*, a class

of demonic demigods, to regain the elixir *amrita* which the asuras stole after churning the ocean of milk. Finally, on the enclosure's northern wall are two panels about the victory of Krishna/Vishnu over the *asura* Bana as narrated in several texts. The western half of the northern wall is given to an epic battle between 21 great Hindu deities doing battle with the asuras.

Suryavarman's glorification of war on the massive bas reliefs of Angkor Wat was the precedent for Jayavarman VII to similarly valorise his wars with Champa, a kingdom on the coast of south Vietnam, on the walls of the outer gallery of the Bayon, another temple in the Angkor complex. The reliefs show Cham warriors marching or rowing their canoes to battle with the Khmers in a forested terrain. As at Angkor Wat, the existential crisis of war has been elevated to a divine level between the Khmers as *devas*, celestial beings, and the Chams as *asuras*.

The valorisation of war continues to the present. Myanmar's military, the Tatmadaw, installed 10-metre high statues of the country's three great warrior kings: Anawrahta (1044-1077), Bayinnaung (1551-1581), and Alaungpaya (1752-1760) who pushed Myanmar's historic borders to its furthest extent, to overlook the parade square of their headquarters in the capital Naypyidaw. They are a constant reminder to parading Tatmadaw forces of what war and conquest have achieved for Myanmar (Preecharushh 2009, 124-25).



Figure 2. *Painting of the Battle between Queen Suriyothai and Viceroy of Prome/ Pava* by Prince Narisara Nuwattiwong. 1887. Located in Bang Pa-In Royal Palace, Thailand. Image source: Wikimedia Commons.

Queen Suriyothai's heroic 1548 elephant duel with the forces of invading Burmese King Tabinshwehti (Bayinnaung's predecessor) to save her husband King Maha Chakkraphat was forgotten for the 350 years until Prince Damrong Rajanubhab recalled it in his account of Thailand's twenty-four wars with the Burmese during 1539 to 1767. Prince Damrong's *Thai Rop Phama* first published in 1917 has made Thailand's wars with the Burmese a defining narrative of Thai history and raised Queen Suriyothai to become a national heroine now glorified in paintings, public sculptures, and more recently, films.

The National Monument in Malaysia is a 15-metre high bronze sculpture depicting four soldiers in battle positions with one wounded colleague and two dead enemies. It is a war memorial to those who died fighting the Japanese in World War Two and the Malayan Communist Party during the Malayan Emergency (1948-1960). All these public sculptures are commemorations of heroes and a heroine by the modern nation states.

Art however not only commemorates and honours war, but also records the tragedy and pathos of war. This tension between romanticising war and mourning it as a tragedy in the art of representing war in Southeast Asia is played out in the 20th century revolutionary wars for independence. The turn in perspectives was enabled in large by the shifts in art education and styles, from the academic realism which the region's pioneering artists represented by Raden Salleh and Juan Luan were inducted into, and the post-impressionism represented by the Mooi Indie paintings, to the social realism of the early 20th century (Flores 2010).

In Vietnam, a generation of L'École des Beaux-Arts d'Indochine trained artists, led by To Ngo Van, and his students like Mai Van Hien, offered their talents to serve the revolution, designing posters supporting the revolution, and documenting through their art the struggle against the French (Taylor 2009, 42-63).



Figure 3. *Seko* by S. Sudjojono. 1949. Image courtesy of the S. Sudjojono Center.

In Indonesia, a generation of artists including Affandi, Basoeki Abdullah, and Hendra Gunawan sought to capture the revolution in paintings of not only its heroes, but also the spirit of the revolution in daily life. The largely self-taught artist S. Sudjojono stands out in this attempt to depict the revolution in an increasingly social realist style of painting. His 1949 *Seko I* foregrounds a guerrilla reconnoitring the ruins of the town of Prambanan set against a background of a dark threatening sky, positioning the heroism of the guerrilla scout against the realism of the revolution (Spanjaard 2003, 73–90).

It is however during the second Indochina War that the tension between art in the service of state valorisation of war, and visualisation of the tragedy and pathos of war in paintings, sketches, and especially photographs and films,

is played out. North Vietnamese artists working in the socialist realism tradition portray in their paintings and posters the heroism of their troops and leaders in an ordered battlefield, sans blood and gore. This contrasts with American artists depicting the chaos and horror of combat in what is for them a senseless war.

The camera and film transformed the depiction of war in Vietnam. The “realism of oil” lost out to the photographic image. Ron Haeberle’s series of photographs of the 1968 massacre at My Lai are a more powerful rendering of the fear and terror of the My Lai villagers as they are being shot than any painting can capture. The art of the photograph transformed our perceptions of state valorisation of war. Film further shifted our understanding of war. Francis Coppola’s award-winning classic 1979 film *Apocalypse Now* (E.

Coppola 1995; F. Coppola 2001) is a landmark portrayal of the mindlessness and madness of the Vietnam war through the film's central figure, the demented Colonel Walter E. Kurtz.

In conclusion, this essay has explored how art has helped visualise war as an existential crisis to those caught up in it.

The reliefs of the Bayon more vividly depict the Chams as the existential threat to Angkor than any Sanskrit epigraphy inscribed in the temple walls could. Similarly, the political messages of today's public sculptures of war heroes define clearly the enemy these heroes died fighting against. But has this glorification of war in public sculptures of war heroes and heroines today rallied us to commemorate war as a rallying point in times of crisis? Or are these political messages of existential threats to the nation state undermined by realist images of the tragedy and grief of war? Do these images of brutality and atrocities of war provoke or enrage us to decry war? For national leaders today, these are significant questions: are the depictions of war rallying or dividing public opinion about the war?

What then should have been the assignment given to war artists and photographers deployed by the US Army to paint the Afghan and Iraq wars, and earlier, Vietnam, or other war artists documenting earlier wars? From what perspective do they paint the war they are assigned to visualise? An earlier generation of war artists despatched to cover the 19th century Anglo-Afghan wars appeared clear on their mission. Their works are exhibited in war museums. Many show the comradeship of the British troops and their bravery in charging into battle against the Afghans.

The choices confronting today's war artist and photographer about what to document and from what perspective are more complex. The carnage and horror that the photographer or artist feels compelled to record may not be what the military who engages him wants recorded. The millennium-old practice of art in support of the state honouring and celebrating its war heroes and the glory of war as rallying points of the state persists, but with what credibility to its audiences? What of documenting the realism of war, the act of being killed and death? Getty Images Inc. has in its archives some 59,000 images of dead soldiers. It suggests that the gore of death in battle sells and can be commodified by war artists and photographers. Is this the future for the art of recording of war? □

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Note: We regret that a number of images were not able to be reproduced for this essay due to copyright issues.

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