

Lefferts, Leedom, and Sandra Cate with Wajuppa Tossa. *Buddhist Storytelling in Thailand and Laos: The Vessantara Jataka Scroll at the Asian Civilisations Museum*. Singapore: Asian Civilisations Museum, 2012 [pp. xv-163; Hb. 24.7cm x 30.7cm; full-color illustrations, map, glossary, bibliography, index]. ISBN: 978-981-07-2478-8

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This monograph is an extensive study of one mid-century Thai cotton-cloth scroll that features the *Vessantara Jataka* (Thai: *Phra Wetsandon/ Phra Wet Chadok*). The study displays the 31-meter long scroll in rich detail, while also elaborating on the scroll's broader socio-cultural context within the Thai-Lao and Lao communities of Northeast Thailand (Isan) and lower Laos People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR), addressing, in particular, the annual *Bun Phra Wet* festival, a religious merit-making ceremony that honors Prince Vessantara. The miniscule shortcomings of this book are outweighed by the holistic and innovative treatment of the scroll, which is held at the Asian Civilisations Museum in Singapore, rendering this 163-page volume a noteworthy publication of Thai/Lao Buddhist art and ritual.

This book may serve as: an introductory text for students curious about Thai scroll painting or Thai-Lao Buddhist ritual; a source of comparison regarding the narrative of the *Vessantara Jataka* for scholars of manuscript or literary studies; and an essential resource for scholars of cultural anthropology, art history, and religious material culture, especially those appreciative of materiality as more than merely art, but also agency, shaping the socio-economic and ethical relations among artisans, clergy and lay community. Furthermore, with its tri-lingual (Lao, Thai, and English) analysis of the scroll's *Vessantara* account, the book may also serve as a self-guided reader.

The *Vessantara Jataka* is regarded among Theravada Buddhist cultures as the most significant (even though the last) of the 547 *Jatakas* (Birth Stories of the Buddha's previous lives). This last *Jataka* relays the story of Buddha's penultimate birth as Prince Vessantara, who perfects the Buddhist virtue of *dāna* (generosity), relinquishing everything dear to him, his wife and children included. Its popularity in Southeast Asia is evident in its frequent re-telling and re-enactment during religious ceremonies. For Leedom Lefferts and Sandra Cate, the parable of the *Vessantara Jataka* serves as edification, and the communal ritual use of these scrolls, known as *pha yao Phra Wet* (literally "long *Vessantara* scroll"), further reinforces social and moral values among the communities where such scrolls are produced and employed.

In their innovative work, Lefferts and Cate address the aforementioned in two ways: (1) by analyzing in great detail the factory-produced white cotton-cloth scroll, painted in 1959-1960 by Thai artist Sopha Pangchat (1909-1960); and (2) by analyzing the broader socio-cultural context surrounding this scroll through an account of the *Bun Phra Wet* festival (in which the scrolls play a significant role), while also comparing

this Pangchat scroll with other *pha yao Phra Wet* as well as *Vessantara* mural paintings in *wat-s* (temples).

Their data was collected from their ethnographic research across the Isan and Lao PDR regions (where the *Vessantara Jataka* often takes precedence over the life story of the Buddha), surveying over 200 *wat-s*, 100 *pha yao Phra Wet-s*, and two towns (Ban Samrong Tai, Ubon Ratchathani, and Ban Kau, Mahasarakham) where these scrolls are still in production today (p.70).

An extensive treatment of Pangchat's scroll is addressed in chapters 1, 4 and 5. The surrounding context of the scroll is covered in the remaining chapters, 2 and 3.

Chapter 1 completely illustrates the entire 31.43-meter long scroll, from start to end, spanning over thirty pages of the book. Each page features an image of the scroll extending roughly two-thirds of the page's height (20.5 cm) and the entire length of the page (approximately 24 cm across). Beneath each image is recounted the general story of the *Vessantara Jataka* as described in the captions found in the particular "panel" of the scroll depicted on the page.

Chapter 4, thanks to the significant contributions of Wajuppa Tossa, reproduces, verbatim, all written text, including the dedication panel at the beginning of the scroll. Each page of this chapter is meticulously laid out. It includes three columns of text for the Lao, Thai (both written in Thai script) and English languages; and an inset image of the particular panel under analysis, annotated with numbers corresponding to the scroll captions addressed in the three columns of text. This 46-page-long chapter, so minutely detailed, renders this book as the next best thing to a facsimile edition.

The fifth and final chapter shares biographical information of the artist, Pangchat, who learned about scroll painting techniques while he was a youth, ordained in the monkhood.

Chapter 2 documents the three-day grand affair of the *Bun Phra Wet* festival. Day one marks preparations, including the selection of members of the community to play Prince Vessantara for the parable's re-enactment, and the transformation of the *wat* into the royal city where Prince Vessantara returns. The climax of the festivities is on day two, the re-enactment. The community parades the *pha yao Phra Wet* (which ranges between 18-75 meters in length) into the forest, mimicking Prince Vessantara's banishment. Before Prince Vessantara can return to the city, a religious ritual is conducted in the forest to invoke Prince Vessantara's spirit into the scroll, thus providing an opportunity for participants to "connect with the *saksit*, the spiritual power of the blessed scroll, [as well as] connect with each other, making merit together, and further binding the community together" (p. 56). On the third and final day, monks perform an oral recitation of the *Vessantara Jataka*. While previous scholarship of the *Bun Phra Wet* has focused mainly on the monks' chanting, Lefferts and Cate, instead, emphasize the significance of the scroll and its material agency.

Finally, chapter 3 explores the telling of the *Vessantara Jataka* found on other scrolls in the region, as well as on temple murals. Some general comparisons are made, and individual stylistic differences are also noted, alongside a further showcasing of the artistic details and production techniques involved in the making of the Pangchat scroll.

As evident in the book's title (*Buddhist Storytelling in Thailand and Laos*), Lefferts and Cate offer an interesting leitmotif: narrative. The authors present the *Vessantara Jataka* through various agents of "tellings": as told by the Buddha (within the *Vessantara Jataka* itself); as visually depicted by the Pangchat scroll; as chanted by the monks; as ritually performed by the community. Apart from a typo on the back cover ("exception detail" instead of "exceptional detail", referring to the scroll's illustration), I have no major criticism of this monograph. Given the theme on narrative, however, it would have been beneficial to include a chapter (or even an appendix) on the narrative of representation and reception -- that is, how is/was the scroll exhibited at the Asian Civilisations Museum? Just as the physical dimensions of a scroll limit the visual telling of *Vessantara's* story, museum galleries, having a particular constrained space, determine a certain narrative of their own that influence the reception of their displayed objects, framing them into certain imagined ascetics. Such an addition (i.e., a telling of the ACM's own exhibition [read: "telling"] of the scroll) would have distinguished this book as more than merely a museum catalogue, further enriching the study for scholars of material culture, art historians, and museumologists. Overall, Lefferts, Cate and Tossa's innovative study is an essential resource for students and scholars of Thai Buddhist art and ritual, and may serve as a model for future monographs dealing with Buddhist visual and material culture.