ERAWAN-SINGHA: THE CREATION OF CONTEMPORARY THAI MYTHOLOGICAL CREATURES

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Abstract - The creation of visual cultural representation has recently become a phenomenon in digital media. In Thailand, cultural identity is insufficiently represented in the digital media of the creative industry. There are two major focuses of this study. The first one is to explore howthe image of Thai mythological creatures, is visually characterized in Thai traditional artworks. This mythical Hindu hybrid animal appears as a Singha or Rajasiha (mythical lion) with the head or trunk of an elephant. It is used as a heraldic symbol in some Southeast Asian countries. In Siam (pre-modern Thailand), the Gajasimha served as the symbol of the Kalahom, (the Ministry of Defense). The second focus is to explore mythological winged creatures of the ancient western worldto create a contemporary visual image of Erawan-simha: a mythological creature.The researcher created three-headed elephant and has figure of a lion. The conceptual framework employed in the creation of the majestic creature is visualization, representation, contemporary culture, and communication. In conclusion, the image is anatomically reconstructed and geographically placed, and the visualization of the mythical creatures are interpreted in contemporary contexts.

Keywords - Erawan, Representation, Visualization, Mystical Creatures.

I. INTRODUCTION

The world of contemporary visual arts and creativity is filled with current trends in visualization and presentation technologies on various digital platforms such as films, 3D, and game animations. Digital visualization, in particular, plays an important role in navigating content communication and increasing the value of symbolic exchanges of digital images in a variety of formats in the media and creative industries (Amato, G., Behrmann, M., Bimbot, F., Caramiaux,…(2019). This study explores the creative process of manipulating realistic images of digital photographs of hybrid mythical creatures from different cultures. The researchers were inspired by the creative process from the experience of traveling to different places and learning about different cultures through photographing and documenting a variety of art forms, traditions and beliefs. All photographs used in the process of creation,had taken by the researcher.

From the study of "Images of animality: hybrid bodies and mimesis in early prehistoric art" (Boric, 2007, p. 90), found that throughout human history, there are evidence indicating that hybrid images acquire symbolic meaning since prehistoric times. In "Animal" (Lindenblatt, 2003), the experience of animal appearances coincides with signs themselves, as if animals were the first inspiration for representation itself.Appearing in paintings, sculptures, statues, architecture and ancient sites, the images create and convey the meaning of visual impact on people living in culture and society.

The depiction of mysterious animals in Thai culture can be traced back to the Sukhothai period (1248-1438 CE) (Wiener 2018) and the Ayutthaya period (1350-1767 CE) (Martins, Kim 2020). The mythical figures of animals-influenced creatures were considerably sacred. For instance, "Rahu (Kirtimukha or Kala, a glorious face), Naga (a great snake), Garuda (a large legendary bird), Singh (a lion), Makara (a sea creature or dragon), and Airavata (a 33 headed white elephant)." (Atthasit, (2007, p.811). These hybrid images of animals were used to represent and symbolize political power, social status, and auspicious objects or places.

In contemporary culture however, the images of mythical creatures may not have had as much of an influence on society as they did in the past. In "Baudrilard, obscenity, and the Intimate Cinema of Saul Levine" Guilford (2013) wrote "within thisrepresentation, postmodern spectatorship comes into relief as a fully disembodies experience of "fascination" that cannot even be described as a process of looking because contemporary images are no longer truly images."

Throughout the history of humanitiesthe images of hybrid or mythical creatures have been profoundly inscribed on our culture and society. Even though political belief, religion and social system today have been altered, these images still represent a powerful source of inspiration and creativity for image makers and communicators.
The hybrid mythical creatures the author explored were created and inspired by the image of elephants, lions and winged creatures. The experience of traveling and photographing the images of mythical creatures in various places and cultures lead to learning and understanding of diverse cultural meanings.

The study aims at exploring how the images of Thai mythological creatures, Gaja-Simha, are visually characterized in the traditional artworks and how to reconstruct a contemporary visual image of Erawan-Simha due to the inspiration of Gaja-Simha and mythical creatures from diverse cultures.

II. REPRESENTATION AND SYMBOLIZATION

The visualization of mythical creatures can be interpreted in both historical and contemporary contexts. In terms of the importance and influence of the use of images for communication, in Visual Impact: Culture and the Meaning of Images, Wright (2009) wrote that the status of visual images has changed dramatically over the past fifty years. People are beginning to realize the power of visual communication to influence audiences. Film technology is used not only as media but also in contributing images for propaganda and creating a change in people's attitudes in society. Wright further explains "human beings have been communicating and representing their world by means of visual images for the last 35,000 years."

The images were produced and played a role in communication. They were apprehended by the members of the society that created them. The early cave paintings may possibly be an attempt to create a virtual record which may be used as a virtual simulation for hunting training. Additionally, it plays a broader educational role and helps in memory and recall. Wright (2009) assumes that they could have magical significance as 'sympathetic magic' intended to increase the productivity of the hunt, where they may have operated as totemic religious icons.

III. THE ERAWAN



Chaiyarat, R. (2018). Intra and Erawan, [Photograph], the North Gate of Angor Thom, Siem Reap Cambodia.

Lord Intra and Erawan, stonework at the North Gate of Angkor Thom (12th century), Siem Reap, Cambodia, influenced by Buddhism and Hinduism Mythology. Scigliano, (2006) states that "Erawan stretches his trunk back down to the watery underworld, sucks up its water, and sprays them into the clouds so then Indra can make them fall as rain. Thus the great sea elephant joins heaven and hell, or rather turns the latter into the former, and makes life possible on the earth that lies between them." (as cited in Chaiyarat, 2008, p.21)

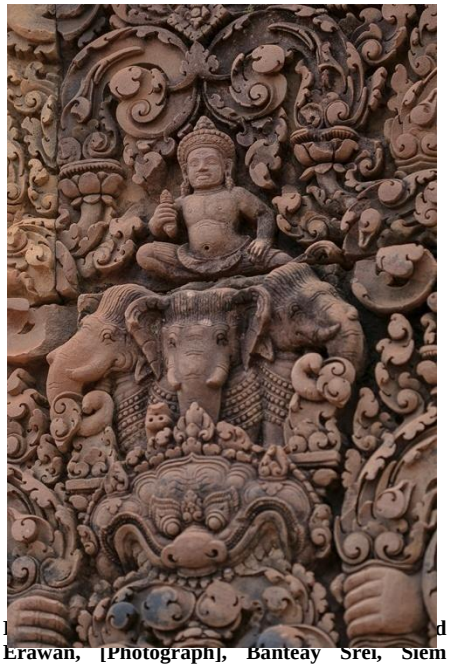
A previous study by Chaiyarat (2008) states that Airavata is the Sanskrit name for Erawan, but it also means a rainbow and a type of lightning. Legend has it that Erawanassisted in the process of making rain (p.21).

The myth of rain making has influenced rice culture and society in Thailand. In the past, agricultural productivity often depended on natural variability. Seasonal rainfall is therefore an important factor for the fertility of agricultural products. Erawan has a symbolic meaning of fertility because it is believed to have power to create rain.

In the traditional Thai beliefs, Erawan, the elephant of heaven and the carrier of Indra. He has magical powers to summon the cloud and the rain. Such features are profoundly transmitted and rooted in the elephant culture of Thailand and in South and Southeast Asia countries. An elephant with distinctive features, for instance, white eyes, white hard palate, white toenails, white hair, white skin or light reddish brown skin, white tail hair, and white skin or light reddish brown testis, consider sacred and a symbol of royal power, because it resembles the feature of "Chang Puak" (white elephant) according to an ancient manuscript. (Klompan, Wootvatansa ,Kanjanapimai, Ariyatugun, and Pantako, 2018),

The Erawan of Intra as it is described by Murthy (1985) in his book Mythical animals in Indian Art.

The sculptures of Amaravati, Sanchi, Nagarjunakonda demonstrate a flying elephant representing the phenomenon of perception. Although it is well known to the Indian sculptor that the portrayal of a winged elephant is not uncommon. As he puts it: "In Hindu mythology Airavata of Intra which is the same as Airavataof the Buddhists is supposed to move high in heaven and this seems to have given the idea to the sculptor of the elephant flying with wings. (p.13)

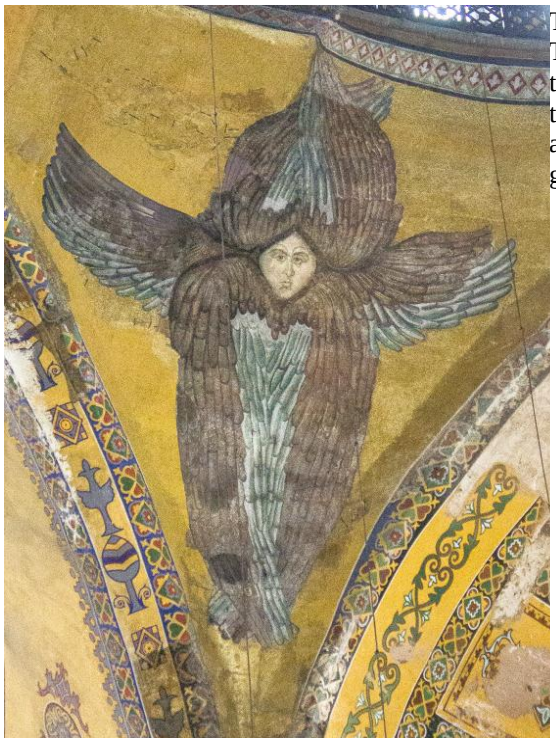


Erawan, [Photograph], Banteay Srei, Siem Reap, Cambodia.

According to the worship of the Intra god, a Hindu-Buddhist has its roots in India. The practice of devotion has been firmly embedded in Thai society since the late Ayutthaya period (A.D. 1630 – 1767) and early Rattanakosin (A.D. 1782-1873) to the present (Srifar, 2018, p. 77-78). In Thai culture, Erawan is profoundly influenced by Hindu and Buddhist belief. Although the image of a heavenly elephant does not have wings, it is very apparent that this creature can fly. The image of Erawan and Indra is a common sight in temples and important architectures in Thai society.

For instance, it's the symbol of the City of Bangkok, The statues at Phra Prang, Wat ArunRatchawararam, (the temple of Dawn) and mural paintings along the galleries at the Emerald Buddha Temple, etc.

IV. WINGED CREATURES: SERAPHIM



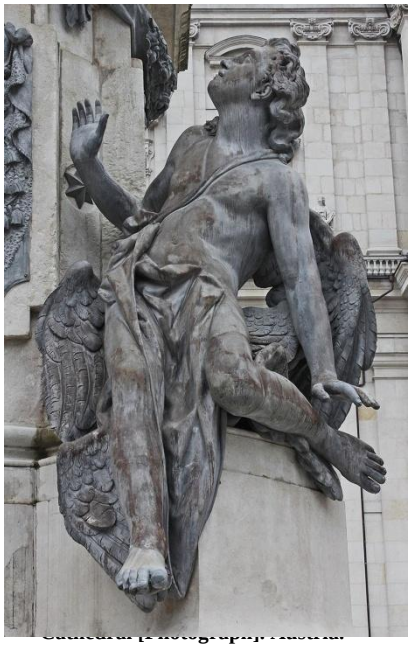
The first mention of Seraphim within the Christian New Testament is in the Book of Revelation Chapter 4, verses 6 through 8. This verse goes on to describe them in more detail than the first mention of them in the Old Testament, and has allowed scholars to understand them more. The description goes:

"Above him were Seraphs, each with six wings, with two wings they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they were flying." (Herbert Lockyer, 1968, p. 33)

In his book "All the Angels in the Bible" Lockyer wrote: each seraph has six wings, the three pairs of wings used in different ways and positioning. First pair of wings: to cover his face. The use of wings to cover the face demonstrates unworthiness and inability to see or discern to worship the glory of God. It also shows deep respect, as well as not to interfere with the secrecy and counsel. Second pair of wings: to cover his feet. Service consists of reverent waiting more than actively serving God. Covered feet represent profound humility. And the third pair of wings: he uses this pair to fly. Only two of the six wings were immediately stored for flight. They are quick to carry out the will of God. (Lockyer, 1995).

In A.D. 537, HogiaSopia was built and completed by Byzantine Emperor Justinian as a basilica in Istanbul, however, when the Ottomans Turks conquered and occupied Constantinople in 1453 (Britannica, (2021, August 18), the conqueror using plaster covering the cross and other Christian symbols to turn the building into a mosque in 1609.

Seraphim mosaics are decorated around the central dome of the Hagia Sophia. During that time these four six-winged angels were covered with several layers of plaster and metal masks on their faces because they represent the seraphim. Until 2009 the face of a seraph angel mosaic was uncovered after the building turned back and forth between the mouque and the museum several times. Currently, in 2020, HogiaSopia is turned into a mosque after being converted to a museum in 1934 (BBC, 2020).



"The seraphim are in the first rank of angelic beings in the presence of God" (David, 2014). The influence of religious beliefs and appreciation about Seraphim, the appearance of these six-winged angels, spread across the European cities.

Salzburg Cathedral is the seventeenth century Baroque cathedral al of the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Salzburg in the city of Salzburg, Austria, dedicated to Saint Rupert and Saint Vergilius (Wikipedia, 2006). In 774, Saint Virgil built the first cathedral, throughout the centuriesmany fires hit Salzburg and damaged the Cathedral.

Cathedral [Photograph]. Austria.

It became the first baroque church in Austria and consecrated it in 1628. For centuries the Cathedral regarded as a masterpiece was left untouched until devastating damage was done during the second world war (Reus, 2023).
The Lion



The lion, royal animal and divine attribute, was an inhabitant of the 'paradise,' the enclosed hunting ground of Persian and Assyrian monarchs.The Frieze of Lions, easily visible in the first court of the palace, is adeclaration of royal power, here embodied inthe king of beasts. In its iconography and composition, this decorative brick was once one of the most markedly Mesopotamian elements in this Persian palace.

Louvre Museum, Paris, France.



This mosaic depicts an animal. Originally, the winged horned.Legend has it, tiger ranged over most of Eastern Mediterranean and Anatolia. It is believed that this creature has gone extinct sometime during the imperial period. The last known specimen is believed to have been slaughtered in the Flavian Amphitheater during the reign of Domitian (81 - 96 CE)inmodernTurkey. (pages.pomona.edu/ istanbul_byzantine.html)

Chaiyarat, R. (2022). The winged horned tiger, [Photograph]. Istanbul, Turkey.

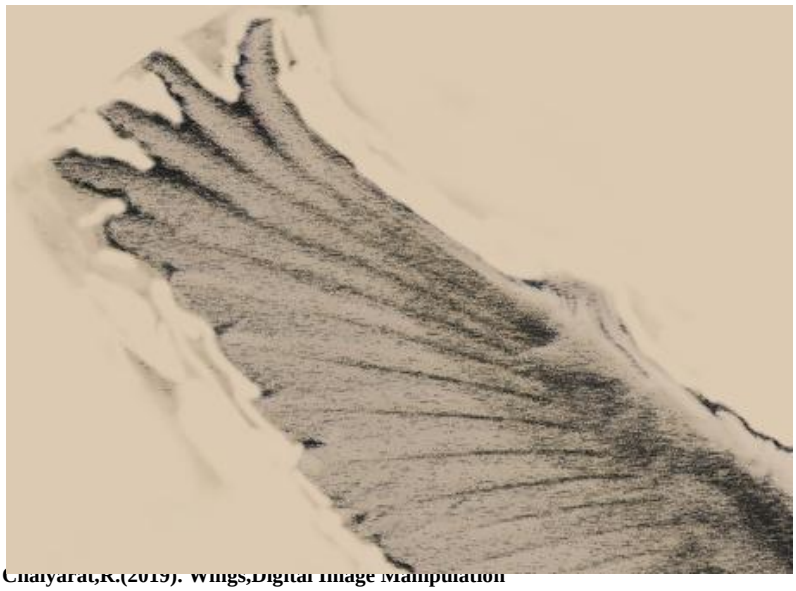
V. CREATIVE PROCESS: ERAWAN – SINGHA



As a consequence, theresearcherisbe able to create digital imagery new characters of three headed elephant - influenced creatures by composing cross-cultural figures and characteristics of several animals. These characters respond visually to the process of creating images of contemporary mystical creatures in our visual world.

Manipulation.

Therefore, there are varieties of physical appearance issues to considered, for exampleif a lion has wings, what type of its wings shape. How big would an lion's wings have to be to fly? And how many wings should it has?



According to "Wing Loading" by Science Learning Hub, "Bats are the only mammal that can truly fly, for every gram of the bat, there is 5 cm^2 of wing area, an elephant of mass 3500 kg, it need a wing area of 1750 m^2. If researcher apply this to a lion of mass 300kg, itneed a large wing area of 150m^2. Even if the lion had enormous wings, it would have to be supported by strong bones, and muscles.The weight of these would increase the wing loading.

Chaiyarat,K.(2019). Wings,Digital Image Manipulation



Chaiyarat, R.(2022) Erawan-simha (head), Digital Image Manipulation.

The researcher created an image of Erawan-Singha. It looks like a three-headed elephant. It has the body of a lion and has six wings, inspired by the Erawan, the image of lion and the Seraphim.The themythical creature is also placed the into an environment that resembles a rainforest landscape.

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