

Conjugating Legacies: Fua Haribhitak (1910–1993) & Bagyi Aung Soe (1923–1990), From Śāntiniketan to Bangkok & Yangon

Sirintorn HARIBHITAK & Yin KER

“Everywhere, at every national/cultural site, modernity is not one but many; modernity is not new, but old and familiar; modernity is incomplete and necessarily so.” ((Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar, “On Alternative Modernities,” *Public Culture* 11 (1999), 18.))

Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar

In the region that became “Southeast Asia” in the Second World War, Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941), Asia’s first Nobel laureate in 1913, was regarded as a beacon. Wherever he traveled in present-day Myanmar, Thailand, Vietnam, Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia during the 1920s, he was warmly welcomed. ((On Tagore in Southeast Asia, see Swapna Bhattacharya, “Rabindranath Tagore in Myanmar and His Perception of Southeast Asia-India Relations,” in *Interrogating History: Essays for Hermann Kulke*, ed. Martin Brandtner and Shishir Kumar Panda (New Delhi: Manohar, 2006), 213-229; Arun Das Gupta, “Rabindranath Tagore in Indonesia: An Experiment in Bridge-Building,” *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde* 158 (2002): 451-477; Chi P. Pham, “The Rise and the Fall of Rabindranath Tagore in Vietnam” (M.A. diss., University of California, 2012); Veena Sikiri, “Rabindranath Tagore Visits Malaya,” in *India and Malaysia: Intertwined Strands* (New Delhi: Manohar: 2013), 276-287; Rabindranath Tagore, *Letters from Java: Rabindranath Tagore’s Tour of South-East Asia 1927*, ed. Supriya Roy (Kolkata: Kumkum Bhattacharya, Viśva-Bhāratī, 2010).)) The Viśva-Bhāratī University in Śāntiniketan, Bengal, which he established as an ashram in 1901 in reaction against the British colonial system of education, was the Mecca of intellectuals and artists from across Asia and beyond. ((Artists and intellectuals from East Asia included Xu Beihong from China and Kampo Arai, Yokoyama Taikan, Shokin Katsuta and Hishida Shunso from Japan. Those beyond Asia included Sylvain Lévi from France, Giuseppe Tucci from Italy, Stella Kramrisch and Moritz Winternitz from Austria, and Charles Freer Andrews, William Winstanley Pearson and Leonard Knight Elmhirst from the Great Britain.)) Even after he retired from public life, it continued to attract students aspiring to an alternative artistic modernity. In the year that he passed away in 1941, Silpa Bhirasri né Corrado Feroci (1892–1962), an Italian sculptor entrusted with developing modern art in Thailand, recommended “one of his first and most beloved students”, Fua Haribhitak né Tongyoo (1910–1993), to further studies in art there. ((There are at three known ways of spelling the name of the Thai artist: “Haribhitak,” “Hariphitak” and “Haripitak.” The first of the three will be used in this essay, although the other two spellings are respected in citation. Other students trained by Bhirasri include Pimarn Mulpramook, Cham Khaomeecheu, Prasong Padamanuja and

Sithidet Sanghiran. See Apinan Poshyananda, *Modern Art in Thailand: Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 31, 68.) Haribhitak would become Thailand’s inaugural National Artist in 1985. A decade later in 1951 when the Indian government took over the University, Myanmar’s literary giants behind the renovation of Burmese literature, Zawgyi (1907–1990) and Min Thu Wun (1909–2004), initiated arrangements for Bagyi Aung Soe (1923–1990) to study art at the same institution under a scholarship from the government of India. ((In this essay, the word “Burmese” is used as a noun and an adjective to mean the culture, language and people of Myanmar, instead of “Myanmar” which is undifferentiated from the country’s name. John Okell’s system of romanization is referenced for the romanization of Burmese words, with the exception of names and titles.)) Aung Soe would become Myanmar’s most exceptional exponent of modern art.

It is to date known for certain that five Southeast Asian artists of the modern period had sojourned in Śāntiniketan around the second quarter of the twentieth century – six, if we are to include the daughter of one of them, who was then a teenager. They are Sutan Harahap (fl. 1922), Rusli (1916–2005), Affandi (1907–1990) and his daughter Kartika (1934–) from Indonesia, Haribhitak from Thailand and Aung Soe from Myanmar. ((The year of 1922 is based on the inventory of Śāntiniketan’s Nandan Museum, whose collection includes 27 prints, drawings and paintings by Sutan Harahap. There is also an ink drawing by Affandi listed under his daughter’s name (N° 389). According to Kartika, she was registered as a student at the University’s art school from 1949 to 1951, instead of her father Affandi whom the Indian instructors considered to be already an established artist upon their arrival. Kartika Affandi, “Kartika Affandi” (talk given at *Talks and Forums: Reframing Modernism* at National Gallery Singapore, June 18, 2016). The authors are grateful to the Nandan Museum’s Curator Sushobhan Adhikary and Digital Collections Manager Amit Kumar Danda for facilitating access to the collection.)) Three occupy foremost positions in their country’s emerging histories of modern art: Affandi who was the first Southeast Asian artist to command international acclaim since the 1950s and remained the only one to do so for decades, Haribhitak and Aung Soe. ((On Affandi, see Sardjana Sumichan, ed., *Affandi*, Vols. I-III (Jakarta: Bina Lestari Budaya Foundation, Singapore: Singapore Art Museum, 2007); Raka Sumichan, ed., *Affandi* (Jakarta: Yayasan Bina Lestari Budaya, 1987).)) Considering their pre-eminence in the chapter of twentieth-century art in their own country, the Śāntiniketan connection across the Bay of Bengal is consequential. Embodying Tagore’s vision of an autonomous artistic modernity and proposing tropes aligned to thought systems closer to home, it is vital for the recalibration of modern Southeast Asian art’s relationships with modern Western art of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as well as its reappraisal. There is otherwise to date no competing model of artistic excellence that is capable of disestablishing the prevailing narrative’s deeply entrenched Eurocentric postulates. ((The curatorial strategy adopted in *Reframing Modernism*, an exhibition held from March 31 to July 17, 2016 at National Gallery Singapore in collaboration with the Centre Pompidou, Paris, is telling of the methodological challenges that continue to preoccupy scholars in the field of twentieth-century Southeast Asian art. An inaugural institutional attempt to address the question of multiple modernities through the

juxtaposition of more than two hundred paintings of the modern period from Europe and Southeast Asia, the curators proceeded by way of contrasting the works, in lieu of inserting them in watertight theoretical frameworks. See *Reframing Modernism*, exh. cat. (Singapore: National Gallery Singapore, 2016).)

Recent research on Aung Soe has demonstrated the thoroughgoing impact of Śāntiniketan on his conception of a modern *and* Burmese pictorial idiom. It provides the most compelling elucidations on some of the most enigmatic aspects of his art. ((See, for example, Yin Ker, “Bagyi Aung Soe: Strategies for an Autonomous Artistic Modernity” (paper presented at *Southeast Asia and Taiwan: Modernity and Postcolonial Manifestations in Visual Art*, Taipei Fine Arts Museum, Taipei, November 21, 2015); “From Santiniketan to Yangon and Beyond: Considerations on an Ashram’s Vision for a Contextualised Narrative of Modern Burmese and Southeast Asian Art” (paper presented at *South-South Axes of Global Art from the Nineteenth Century to Today*, Artl@s of Ecole Normale Supérieure, Paris, June 17–19, 2015); “Modern Art According to Bagyi Aung Soe,” *Journal of Burma Studies* 10 (2006), 83-157)) Expanding on these findings, with Śāntiniketan as a shared locus, comparative studies of fellow alumni are likely to throw into greater relief their oeuvre, practice and artistic modernity, yield fresh insights into their motivations and challenges, facilitate the mapping of correspondences between them as well as within the region, and ultimately, spur fresh perspectives on modern Southeast Asian art. If this essay that is the first installment exploring Śāntiniketan’s import in writing modern Southeast Asian art histories focuses on Haribhitak and Aung Soe, it is because their art and trajectories are unequivocally dissimilar, in spite of their shared avowal of indebtedness to Tagore’s ashram-turned-university. ((For a preliminary study of Śāntiniketan’s viability as a competing model of artistic excellence with respect to modern Southeast Asian art, see Yin Ker, “Śāntiniketan and Modern Southeast Asian Art: From Rabindranath Tagore to Bagyi Aung Soe and Beyond,” *ARTL@S Bulletin: South-South Axes of Global Art* 5 (2016), 8-20.)) Even though Haribhitak did not pen articles on his Indian gurus or sign “Shantiniketan” on his works as did Aung Soe throughout his career, he always acknowledged the impact of his *alma mater*: “I stayed with him [his teacher Nandalal Bose] for only a moment, but it seemed like years.” ((Interview by Pipop Boosarakumwadi, Bangkok, November–December 1977. Haribhitak is said to have made the same confession to his Indian friend and alumnus of Śāntiniketan, Dinkar Kowshik, and his only son, Thamnu Haribhitak, in 1988. Thamnu Haribhitak, oral communication with Sirintorn Haribhitak (Chiangmai, 2000); Dinkar Kowshik, oral communication with Sirintorn Haribhitak (Śāntiniketan, 2001). Like Aung Soe, Haribhitak’s stay in Śāntiniketan was brief: less than a year due to imprisonment by the British between 1942 and 1946 following Thailand’s decision to cooperate with Japan during World War II.)) (Fig. 1)

To explore the distinctions of these two artists of national stature, whose sites of activity are specifically Bangkok and Yangon – modern art being first and foremost an urban phenomenon –, this essay begins with observations on the state of scholarship on them: the range of materials available for study and the challenges inherent to the enterprise. It is followed by an examination of their practice and oeuvre in light

of Śāntiniketan's lessons on an autonomous artistic modernity conceived in symbiosis with tradition: where do they stand in relation to traditional local arts and modern Western art? Finally, it explores the distinctions and implications of their artistic identities, modernities and legacies. The premise is that modernity is uneven and multivalent, with overlapping and interconnected genealogy, aspirations, agencies and processes whose matrices are prodigious. To situate Haribhitak and Aung Soe in these circumstances, we argue that the concept of multiple legacies – Śāntiniketan, modern Western art and traditional local arts – is hence more incisive than the reductive binary of tradition versus modernity or the East versus the West.

In pursuing these aims, the following are asked: how did Haribhitak and Aung Soe nourished by the same vision of artistic modernity subsequently assimilate it – or not? How might their options have been conditioned by the contexts of Thai and Burmese societies sharing relatively similar spiritual, religious and cultural practices and artistic traditions, but subjected to different systems of government and economic (mis)management? What did they maintain; what did they discard or lose; what did they create?. While the juxtaposition of the two artists lends well to the distillation of their artistic distinction and the recalibration of their artistic merit, the aim is not to pit one against the other. Instead of proposing a set of criteria for comparison from the onset – or even seeking to define one –, this essay sets out to survey the terrain of the proposed research angle, on and from which there are more questions than answers. There is no deliberate attempt to adhere to any established art historical methodology; the formulation of adapted methodologies for studying artistic productions from this part of the world is precisely one of the long-term goals of this pilot study proceeding by way of contrast and inference.

The building blocks of an experiment

A comparative study of Haribhitak and Aung Soe is not scientifically infallible: indeterminate variables abound and control variables are insufficient. Śāntiniketan is the principal binding factor that seals this comparison lacking in symmetry. Beyond the incomparability of their personalities, financial situations and opportunities in a Bangkok alternating between democracy and dictatorship, and a military-ruled and politically isolated Yangon, available research materials and existing scholarship on them are of uneven quantity and quality. Even their contexts of modern Thai and Burmese art are only emerging fields of study. Writings on modern Southeast Asian art have moreover thus far centered on individual artists or narratives of art set along country profiles – most of which are monographs, catalogs and reviews prompted by exhibitions. Attempts at comparative studies have been thin and infrequent, with the exception of John Clark's *Asian Modernities: Chinese and Thai Art Compared, 1980 to 1999* (2010), which is the closest to a prototype for this study. ((See John Clark, *Asian Modernities: Chinese and Thai Art Compared, 1980 to 1999* (Sydney: Power Publications, 2010).)) To begin with, the legacy of Śāntiniketan is complex – even within India! It is nonetheless necessary to start somewhere, and while this essay breaks new ground in

extrapolating the Śāntiniketan model and in investigating the networks of kinship amongst Southeast Asian artists of the modern period, it should be self-evident that the approaches adopted as well as the observations made function more appropriately as stimuli prying open a hitherto unexplored research angle. They must be revised and rewritten in the face of emerging data.

Primary sources include manuscripts, personal letters, official documents, annotated books, notebooks, newspaper cuttings, catalogues, exhibition brochures, postcards, invitation cards, travel brochures, amulets, souvenirs, photographs of the artists themselves or their subjects of interest and other paraphernalia. ((Access to primary materials on Haribhitak is particularly indebted to the generosity of Tira Vanichtheeranont of Bababa Gallery.)) They offer insights into the artists' activities, interests and personality: Haribhitak's scrupulousness in keeping a record of every event and activity, including train tickets, and Aung Soe's incarnations on the silver screen as seen through the many movie posters, for example. For Haribhitak, there are in addition numerous interview recordings dispersed amongst students, amateurs and collectors, of which six have been transcribed for research on this essay. ((The transcribed interviews are by Wanchay Tantiwithyaphithaks (Bangkok, May 1990) Thamnu Haribhitak (Chiangmai, 1988), Nipon Kamvilai (Bangkok, 1982), Tepsiri Sooksopa (Bangkok, 1982), Pipop Boosarakumwadi (Bangkok, November–December 1977) and Sone Simatrang (Bangkok, January–February 1977). For more interviews with Haribhitak, see Boosarakumwadi (2010), 88.)) In the case of Aung Soe, due to hearing difficulties during the last decade of his life, he mainly communicated through writing, resulting in an abundance of notes that provide posterity with the necessary to trace his thought processes very closely. Recollections of Haribhitak and Aung Soe by family, friends, colleagues, collaborators and students constitute another source of information. Prone to distortion as is the nature of memory, they are mostly unverifiable.

With regards to the reproductions and originals of Haribhitak's works known to the authors, there are more than a thousand certified authentic sculptures, paintings and drawings (out of which are three sculptures and more than a hundred paintings) and hundreds of reproductions of Siamese mural paintings. By Aung Soe are around seven thousand works – and counting – most of which are illustrations, from 1948 to 1950 and 1952 to 1990. ((See *Online Database of Illustrations by Bagyi Aung Soe: A (Hi)Story of Art From Myanmar: 1948–1990*, <http://www.aungsoeillustrations.org> (accessed 01 August 2016).)) These monthly dated illustrations lend to the scrutiny of his evolution over more than four decades, which is not possible with his Thai counterpart. Highly prolific artists of unparalleled national repute, neither is known to have documented their own production, and there exists to date no inventory of their works, much less a *catalogue raisonné*. At present, only approximately sixty works by Haribhitak have been itemized in publications, while a documentation in digital format of Aung Soe's illustrations is underway at the website titled "Online Database of Illustrations by Bagyi Aung Soe: A (Hi)Story of Art From Myanmar: 1948–1990": < <http://www.aungsoeillustrations.org> >. Efforts to trace their works are debilitated by the weak appreciation for scholarship, and the preference for anonymity and the inability or unwillingness to disclose the works'

provenance further undermines attempts at cataloguing the oeuvres. Vested interests in highly decorated Haribhitak's works have most certainly also compromised studies on his art. The dispersal of Aung Soe's works in Europe and North America due to exile or migration, and the utter profusion of his production constitute additional challenges.

In terms of published writings on the artists, those in Thai or Burmese by and on Haribhitak and Aung Soe number nine and fifteen, and twenty-two and thirty respectively. ((For a list of publications by Haribhitak, see Pipop Boosarakumwadi, *A Century of Fua Haribhitak: Life and Works* [English and Thai] (Bangkok: Art Centre, Silpakorn University, 2010), 86-89. The English translation is however not free from error. With respect to Aung Soe, two anthologies propose a representative selection of texts on his life and art: Bagyi Aung Soe, *The Legacy of Bagyi Aung Soe: Twentieth Death Anniversary* [Burmese] (Yangon: Swiftwinds, 2010); *From Tradition to Modernity* [Burmese] (Yangon: Khin May Si Sapay, 1978). A selection of forty-two publications by and on Aung Soe in Burmese, as well as a list of recommended readings on Aung Soe and modern Burmese art, may be accessed online at “Texts,” *Online Database of Illustrations by Bagyi Aung Soe: A (Hi)Story of Art From Myanmar: 1948–1990*, <http://www.aungsoeillustrations.org/texts> (accessed 01 August 2016).)) There are in addition notes and manuscripts of varying lengths, magazine and newspaper articles and survey studies on Thai or Burmese art. As is the case of most writings on art in Southeast Asia, anecdotes and embellished recollections of the artists' lives resembling hagiographies more than studies of art dominate. ((This lack of awareness of art history's methods of enquiry across Southeast Asia has to do with the inadequacy of supporting institutions and trained professionals versed in research methodology and the systematic documentation of visual arts. Art history as an academic discipline in most parts of the region, including the financially well endowed Singapore with her deployment of universities, remains non-existent at worst and marginal and inadequate at best. For a personal account of the beginnings and setbacks of art history as an academic discipline in Singapore by the island city state's first and foremost art historian, see T.K. Sabapathy, *Road to Nowhere: The Quick Rise and the Long Fall of Art History in Singapore* (Singapore: National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University, 2010).)) While these romanticized interpretations of art and artists are excellent for analyzing the image of Haribhitak and Aung Soe in popular imagination, they do not offer reliable data and analyses. ((Two examples of popular romanticized accounts in Thai of Haribhitak's life are: Nara, *Young Fua* [Thai] (Bangkok: openbooks, 2011); Rong Wongsawan, “Fua Haribhitak,” [Thai] *Bangkok Readers* (April 1981), 173-178. On Aung Soe, while there is to date no parallel phenomena of romanticization of his private life in spite of his larger-than-life persona, writings on him still tend towards the anecdotal. For examples, see “Texts,” *Online Database of Illustrations by Bagyi Aung Soe: A (Hi)Story of Art From Myanmar: 1948–1990*, <http://www.aungsoeillustrations.org/texts> (accessed 01 August 2016).)) In the case of Haribhitak, exceptionally, Bhirasri's commentaries on his “best painter-pupil endowed with a rare gift for art” suggest how the artist was presented to the Thai public by a figure of authority at specific points in time – even if only in passing in articles dedicated to topics like traditional Siamese painting. ((For Bhirasri's letter of recommendation for Haribhitak dated 1954, see Boosarakumwadi (2010), 38. For examples of Bhirasri's writings offering a glimpse into his ideas and activities, see Silpa

Bhirasri, *Comments and Articles on Art* (Bangkok: National Association of Plastic Arts of Thailand, 1963); *Contemporary Art in Thailand* (Bangkok: Fine Arts Department, 2001 [1959]); *Art in Thai* (Bangkok: Department of Fine Arts, 1949).) There is admittedly no body of critical reviews in these two countries where art criticism is still confounded with personal attacks.

Although Haribhitak appears on no less than twenty-five pages in Apinan Poshyananda's 259-page *Modern Art in Thailand: Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries – the manual on modern Thai art in English –*, the only university submission entirely devoted to him is Pipop Boosarakumwadi's (1959–) thesis submitted to the Silpakorn University's department of applied arts in 1982 when the artist was still alive: "The Life and Works of Fua Hariphitak." ((See Boosarakumwadi (2010); Poshyananda (1992).)) Completed in Thai, it was translated into English and published almost three decades later in the centennial catalogue, *A Century of Fua Hariphitak: Life and Works* (2010). Not even international recognition in the form of the now discontinued Ramon Magsaysay Award in Public Service in the Philippines in 1983 spurred further studies apart from Somporn Rodboon's bilingual *The Life and Works of Fua Hariphitak* in 139 pages published in 1993. ((See Somporn Rodboon, *The Life and Works of Fua Hariphitak* [English and Thai] (Bangkok: SITCA Investment & Securities, 1993).)) In the instance of Aung Soe, the abundant writings on him are essentially biographic, hagiographic, descriptive or anecdotal. ((For examples of these writings, see Kin Maung Yin and Zaw Zaw Aung, "Bagyi Aung Soe," [Burmese] *Knowledge of Art* (Yangon: Shwe Parabaik Sapay, 1997), 43-47; U Paragu, "Bagyi Aung Soe," [Burmese] *Mabaythi* (November 2000), 148-152; Dagon Taya, "A Fleeting Portrait: Bagyi Aung Soe," [Burmese] *Hkemyi* (October 1990), 25-30.)) The first university-level study on Aung Soe was posthumous in 1998 by artist Min Zaw (Zaw Hein) (1972–). ((See Zaw Hein (Min Zaw), "Studies on the Works of Bagyi Aung Soe, A Modern Painter" (Essay in Burmese submitted for Diploma in painting, Yangon University of Culture, 1998).)) In Burmese, it was submitted for his diploma in painting at the University of Culture in Yangon: "A Study of the Works of Bagyi Aung Soe, A Modern Painter." It was followed by two French Masters theses in 2001 and 2006 and a doctoral dissertation in 2013, all of which were defended by the same author at the University of Paris-Sorbonne in France. ((See Yin Ker, "Bagyi Aung Soe's Modern Art" [French] (Masters 1 thesis, University of Paris-Sorbonne, Paris IV, 2001); "The Illustrations of Bagyi Aung Soe: A Popular Modern Art?" [French] (Masters 2 thesis, University of Paris-Sorbonne, Paris IV, 2006); "The Making, Reading and Seeing of the Formless: *Manaw Mabeikedi Dat* Painting of Bagyi Aung Soe (1923/24–1990)" [French] (PhD diss., University of Paris-Sorbonne, Paris IV, 2013).)) The dozen of journal articles, book chapters and conference papers on Aung Soe in English, as well as the two websites showcasing his early works and illustrations are entirely the work of one of this essay's two authors – an output that remains isolated and in need of impetus from within and outside Myanmar and the region. ((For examples of journal articles, book chapters and conferences papers on Aung Soe, see "Recommended Readings on Bagyi Aung Soe (2015): "Texts," *Online Database of Illustrations by Bagyi Aung Soe: A (Hi)Story of Art From Myanmar: 1948–1990*, <http://www.aungsoeillustrations.org/texts> (accessed 01 August 2016).))

Navigating between traditional local arts and modern Western art

By the time Haribhitak and Aung Soe headed for Śāntiniketan, the imported construct of “art” had taken roots in many a city of Southeast Asia: Bandung, Bangkok, Hanoi, Kuala Lumpur, Manila, Penang, Singapore, Yangon and Yogyakarta, amongst others. Its universality was unquestioned, and much less the irony of its appropriation: a cultural product of European genealogy employed to challenge European colonialism and to pursue aspirations of national emancipation, if not a nationalist agenda. ((For an overview of nationalism in modern Asian art, see John Clark, “Nationalism and Allegories of the State” in *Modern Asian Art* (Hawaii: University of Hawaii, 1998). For studies on Vietnam, the Philippines and Indonesia where the nationalist cause in art was more pronounced see T.K. Sabapathy, ed., *Modernity and Beyond: Themes in Southeast Asian Art*, exh. cat. (Singapore: Singapore Art Museum, 2006): Joanna Lee, “From National Identity to the Self: Themes in Modern Indonesian Art,” 17-32; Ahmad Mashadi, “Some Aspects of Nationalism and Internationalism in Philippine Art,” 61-68; Susie Koay, “A Preliminary Thematic Survey of Vietnamese Contemporary Art,” 69-83.)) In these Europhile artistic worlds, how did Śāntiniketan, a rural destination in Bengal, come to be perceived as relevant? Both Haribhitak and Aung Soe were sent to Śāntiniketan by established senior figures in their countries under the conviction that it offered the most beneficial, if not indispensable, training then available. In the case of Aung Soe who confessed to initial disappointment at not heading for Europe or North America instead, it was the admiration of his patrons, pioneers of the *hkitsan* (Burmese: “testing the times”) literary movement, for Tagore and their aspiration to see traditional Burmese art revitalized in the image of traditional Indian art through the Bengal School of Art that made Śāntiniketan the undisputed destination. ((See Min Thu Wun (U Wun), “The Beginnings of the Story of Bagyi Aung Soe” [Burmese] (Manuscript, c. 1991). On the School of Bengal’s role in the modernization of Indian art, see Nicolas Nercam, *Peindre au Bengale (1939–1977): Contribution à une lecture plurielle de la modernité* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2005).)) While there is no doubt that Bhirasri’s recommendation of Śāntiniketan to Haribhitak took into consideration the war ravaging Europe, his skepticism of twentieth-century European avant-garde and his wish for young Thai painters to innovate from “the old Thai one” suggest that he probably shared a similar inclination. ((Amongst letters from Florence from around 1947, Bhirasri wrote in a typewritten letter to Haribhitak: “Dear Fua, I believe that we should insist in [*sic*] doing an art [that is] not too much extremist. Here I have seen so many horrible things called surrealism, cubism, esistenzialism [*sic*] etc, etc, that I doubt my mind. I am so old not to understand anymore art? [...] But people who has [*sic*] seen the works of the Thai artists said that in Siam the artists have more sensibility and more mind than the majority of pianter[sic] and sculptors in Europe [...]” Collection of Tira Vanichtheeranont of Bababa Gallery. See also Silpa Bhirasri, “Thai Painting,” in *Exhibition of Reproduction of Old Thai Painting*, exh. cat. (Bangkok: Fine Arts University, 1952), 11.)) Conceivably, both Haribhitak’s and Aung Soe’s destinies were propelled by luminaries who, possibly under the influence of Tagore, Pan-Asianism or

nationalism, dreamt of their protégés formulating a locally apposite artistic modernity that would measure up to the Western one.

On the cusp of a new world order, it can be said that Haribhitak and Aung Soe were torn between two modes of being, seeing and picturing the world. Of Tagore’s legacy, this essay argues that it was his contextually revolutionary definition of “true modernism” as “independence of thought and action, not tutelage under European schoolmasters,” along with his concept of the modern as the result of unceasing negotiations between the old and the new, that spared them from the dilemma. ((In Japan in 1916, Tagore argued for the relativization of the Western model and the distinction between westernization and modernization: “[...] modernizing is a mere affectation of modernism, just as affectation of poesy is poetizing. It is nothing but mimicry, only affectation is louder than the original, and it is too literal. One must bear in mind, that those who have the true modern spirit need not modernize, just as those who are truly brave are not braggarts. Modernism is not in the dress of the Europeans; or in the hideous structures, where their children are interned when they take their lessons; or in the square houses with flat straight wall-surfaces, pierced with parallel lines of windows, where these people are caged in their lifetime; certainly modernism is not in their ladies’ bonnets, carrying on them loads of incongruities. These are not modern, but merely European. True modernism is freedom of mind, not slavery of taste. It is independence of thought and action, not tutelage under European schoolmasters. It is science, but not its wrong application in life, a mere imitation of our science teachers who reduce it into a superstition absurdly invoking its aid for all impossible purposes.” Rabindranath Tagore, *Nationalism* (San Francisco: The Book Club of California, 1917), 93-94.)) While the relationship between the old and the new had already been debated in Western discourses on modernity, the version of “modernity” that reached the colonies was essentially conflated with westernization and highly distorted by imperialist agenda. ((For a succinct overview of the dilemmas between the old and the new in Western modernity, see Gaonkar (1999), 1-9.)) The indigenous was either exoticized, or equated with the old and the traditional framed as antipodal to the spirit of reason, science and progress – the reason for which Tagore’s championship of ancient and indigenous bodies of knowledge sparked accusations of regressiveness. In this context, Tagore’s theorization of a politically, culturally, spiritually, intellectually and artistically autonomous modernity disenthralled from “European schoolmasters” was of immense significance in relativizing Western art, displacing the fallacy of the West as the exclusive originator of modernity and restoring its progressive dimension in symbiosis with tradition – the notion of which is contingent upon that of modernity as the *other*. Using the metaphor of the “granary of the past,” Tagore argued for the synergy of the past and the present in creating the modern:

“There are some who are insularly modern, who believe that the past is the bankrupt time, leaving no assets for us, but only a legacy of debts. [...] the great ages of the renaissance in history were those when men suddenly discovered the seeds of thought in the granary of the past. The unfortunate people, who have lost the harvest of the past, have lost their present age.” ((Mohit

Kumar Ray and Rabindranath Tagore, “An Eastern University,” in *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore*, Vol. IV (New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers and Distributors, 2007), 653.)

Imbued with the spirit of the Swadeshi Movement foregrounding self-reliance, local artistic traditions were accorded an importance unheard of to Haribhitak and Aung Soe. Nandalal Bose (1882–1966), Tagore’s right-hand man and the architect of the school’s pedagogical program encapsulating the laureate’s humanistic vision, prioritized the mastery of traditional arts from Asia, as can be seen in *Vision and Creation* (1999), an anthology of his lessons. ((See Nandalal Bose, *Vision and Creation* (Kolkata: Viśva-Bhāratī, 1999).)) There is no doubt that Haribhitak and Aung Soe would have been urged to build the foundation of their practice upon the same, even though Western art was never systematically shunned or condemned; the practice and oeuvre of the much-esteemed guru Ramkinkar Baij (1906–1980) are a case in point. ((On Baij’s works, see *Ramkinkar Baij: A Retrospective, 1906–1980*, exh. cat. (New Delhi: National Gallery of Modern Art, 2012).)) Before them, Rusli from Indonesia who was in Śāntiniketan from around 1932 to 1937 was even advised to return to his own country to study its ancient sites like the Borobudur. ((Jasdeep Sandhu, oral communication with Yin Ker (Singapore, August 2000); anonymous alumnus of Viśva-Bhāratī University, oral communication with Yin Ker (Śāntiniketan, January 2001).)) Indeed, if both Haribhitak and Aung Soe began studying Buddhist temples, *stūpas* and wall paintings after returning to Bangkok and Yangon from Śāntiniketan, it was owing to the newfound love for traditional arts and the awareness of its significant role in the creation of modern art. ((This was apparently true for Śāntiniketan’s Indian students too, as Satyajit Ray’s testimony attests: “Śāntiniketan opened my eyes for the first time to the splendours of Indian and Far Eastern art. Until then I was completely under the sway of Western art, music and literature. Śāntiniketan made me the combined product of East and West that I am.” Amartya Sen, “Tagore and His India,” in *Nobel Laureates in Search of Identity and Integrity: Voices of Different Cultures*, ed. Anders Hallengren (Stockholm: The Nobel Foundation, 2004), 204.)) The importance accorded to traditional arts should not however be mistaken as formal regurgitation. Originality being one of the three points in Okakura Kakuzō’s (1862–1913) triadic framework for artistic excellence, along with Nature and Tradition, which was adapted by Bose to create the art school’s pentatonic pedagogical program, the cultivation and exercise of individual sensibility was invariably encouraged. ((On Okakura’s thesis, see Bose (1999), 44-45. On Bose’s pedagogical programme, see K.G. Subramanyan, “Nandalal Bose,” in *Nandan: Nandalal* (Kolkata: Viśva-Bhāratī, 1982), 11.)) As reiterated by Aung Soe, while the point of departure was traditional arts, the destination was undoubtedly original creation, with discernment playing a pivotal role in the process of innovation:

“Nature will choose the good traditions out of the old, and sincerity and truth out of the new [modern]. Not everything old [traditional] is decadent, not everything new [modern] is revolutionary. We have to search for the soul in the old, and foster the progress of the new [modern].” ((Aung Soe (1978), 217-222.))

Although it is said that “an element of conservatism crept into [Bose’s] pedagogic practice” during the 1940s after Tagore’s death, the vision and curriculum remained unchanged, and it is unlikely that Haribhitak and Aung Soe received different lessons in 1941 and 1951. In spite of stepping down as the art school’s principal in 1951, Bose continued to work with students on campus. ((Siva R. Kumar, “Nandalal: His Vision of Art and Education,” in *Rhythms of India: the Art of Nandalal Bose*, exh. cat. (San Diego: San Diego Museum of Art, 2008), 87. See also Dinkar Kowshik, *Blossoms of Light: Some Reflections on Art in Śāntiniketan* (Kolkata: Viśva-Bhāratī, 1980), 40; Siva R. Kumar, “Nandalal’s Concept of the Artist: An Overview,” in *Nandan* (Kolkata: Viśva-Bhāratī, 1991), 38.)) Yet, the traditional arts feature very differently in the two artists’ oeuvres and practices. Aung Soe was unequivocal about creating a modern *and* Burmese art as rooted in the artistic and spiritual traditions of Myanmar and Asia as it was engaged with the challenges of the contemporary world. ((See Aung Soe (1978), 217-222.)) By the beginning of the 1980s during the last decade of his life, he had embarked on a pictorial idiom baptized “*manaw mabeikedi dat pangyi*”, meaning in Burmanized Pāli the drawing and painting of the elemental constituents of all phenomena through the powers of intense mental concentration (Fig. 2). Possibly fired by Tagore’s universalist and encyclopedic outlook embracing the arts and sciences alike, he amalgamated modern natural sciences with poetry, Buddhist practice and philosophy, amongst other fields of enquiry (Fig. 3). ((For an outline of Tagore’s interest in the sciences and his encounters with Albert Einstein, see Krishna Dutta and Andrew Robinson, eds., *Selected Letters of Rabindranath Tagore* (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 527-535.)) Mostly executed in felt-tip pen on paper no larger than A4-size, these works marked the end point of his quest adopting a two-pronged approach exploring traditional Burmese visual arts alongside pictorial legacies from the world over (Fig. 4). While stylistic comparisons may be made between *manaw mabeikedi dat pangyi* and European cubist or surrealist works of art which Aung Soe did experiment on, the former’s motivations, subject matter and fabrication process steeped in Buddhist thought and practice present a different narrative. ((See Bagyi Aung Soe, *Poetry Without Words* [Burmese] (Yangon: Wun Shway Ein, 1993.)) Notwithstanding the fact that this body of works remains little understood, it is indisputably unified with an unmistakable pictorial idiom.

Haribhitak on the other hand maintained his engagement with traditional Thai and modern Western pictorial traditions as two separate and parallel activities. The few surviving original works between Śāntiniketan and his studies in Italy from 1954 to 1956 such as *Petchaburi* (1948) on handmade paper demonstrate a predilection for the wash technique and a style comparable to his Indian gurus’, especially Bose’s early works under the influence of Abanindranath Tagore (1871–1951). They are unlike his earlier works executed in oil paint, as exemplified by his portraits of Bhirasri and his grandmother from the 1930s (Figs. 5-7). ((For an image of *Petchaburi*, see Boosarakumwadi (2010), 113.)) By the early 1950s however, he had reverted to oil painting – a medium frowned upon by Bose who advocated local materials –, and his production was thereafter split into two distinct categories: reproductions and restorations of Siamese mural paintings which earned him most of his thirteen titles and awards between 1949 and 1990, including the Magsaysay Award from the Philippines, and cubist-accented still-lives, landscapes, portraits and nudes executed in oil, which

reflect in no way his engagement with the former category of painting (Figs. 8-11). ((On Haribhitak's titles and awards, see Boosarakumwadi (2010), 264-265. To see his studies of Siamese art and architecture and oil paintings, *ibid.*, 114-142, 166-168, 172-213. On Bose's ideas on the ethical implications in the choice of media, see R. Siva Kumar, *Śāntiniketan: The Making of Contextual Modernism*, exh. cat. (New Delhi: National Gallery of Modern Art, 1997), unpaginated.)) Awakened to the splendors of ancient art at Śāntiniketan, he took it upon himself to study and restore early Siamese painting – often at his own expense –, and his reproductions of old mural paintings were exhibited at the Royal Thai Legation in London as early as 1948. ((See Rodboon (1993), 33, 39, 61.)) Ostensibly, although Haribhitak advocated Tagore's lesson on the synergy of the old and the new in artistic creation and argued for the study of pictorial traditions beyond those of the modern West and his own country, he did not fully assimilate these approaches in his art. ((Haribhitak is quoted to have said: "An important thing for us to do is to research on our own art in order to learn from the past that is history. History had its styles. Each style was differentiated by its era, school and locality. We need to compare these configurations in order to see the weakness and strengths in the differences. We then select only the good components to innovate the best new thing. This is however not static. It needs to undergo change." Fua Haribhitak, "Art Must Present Its Culture," [Thai] *Pathee* (January 1978), 4-10. For an example of his writings on Indian and Chinese painting, see "Art and Thai Art" [Thai] in Boosarakumwadi (2010), 294.)) His Magsaysay Award reception speech suggests that the influence of Bhirasri was overriding: "It is to the late Professor C. Feroci, or Silpa Bhirasri, an Italian by birth who lived as an Asian and died as a Thai, that I owe more than to anyone else." ((Rodboon (1993), 53.)) That elements of Tagore's vision found echoes in Bhirasri's teachings appears to have been of no consequence. ((See for example, Bhirasri (1952).))

Straddling classical Siamese and modern Western painting, it was as if the artist led double lives. While dual trajectories were not uncommon, it is the absence of coherence and unity in his practice that makes the question of his artistic modernity most controversial. The only category of works that might be interpreted as a synthesis of his appreciation of "Bose's intuitive and Feroci's analytical approaches" and a possible attempt towards a personal pictorial idiom are his drawings of landscapes and monuments in which colors delineate form – a technique observed in the works of not only Aung Soe, but also those of Rusli, Affandi and Kartika. ((("Haripitak, Fua: Biography," *Ramon Magsaysay Award Foundation*, <http://www.rmaf.org.ph/newrmaf/main/awardees/awardee/biography/254> (accessed 01 August 2016). For examples of these drawings, see Boosarakumwadi (2010), 160-164; Rodboon (1993), 32.)) However, while there is no evidence that these highly individualized sketches – which continue to be perceived as secondary in importance to his oil paintings – served as preparatory works for his oil paintings, nothing suggests that Haribhitak regarded them as finished works of art on a par with his oil paintings. ((Boosarakumwadi's thesis proposes only three categories of his works in chronological order, with no attention paid to the drawings: under Bhirasri from 1933 to 1941, from Śāntiniketan in 1941 till his departure for studies in Italy in 1954, and finally his studies in Italy in 1954 onwards. See Boosarakumwadi (2010), 55.

Somporn is more detailed in proposing the periods in Thailand between 1946 and 1954, and 1956 (after his Italian sojourn) and 1973 as distinct phases, but does not address this category of drawings either. See Rodboon (1993, 93.) The distinction is not even clearly made between them and the more conventional drawings executed in pen and filled in with color oil pastels – not by the artist, or the authors Boosarakumwadi and Rodboon (Fig. 12). When Bhirasri wrote in 1959 that he preferred Haribhitak’s “beautiful drawings” for their “expressive power,” it is not clear which of the two subcategories of drawings he might be referring to. ((Boosarakumwadi (2010), 27.)

The range of traditional arts observed in Haribhitak’s and Aung Soe’s oeuvres is also slightly different. While Haribhitak focused on classical Lanna, Sukhothai, Ayutthaya, Petchaburi and Rattanakosin painting and is not recognized for the sustained practice of folk art – although he did argue for their importance –, Aung Soe’s interest in traditional arts extended beyond classical painting to include a variety of folk art which was at the heart of Śāntiniketan’s vision of an alternative artistic modernity: textile design, lacquerware, puppets, dance, theatre, traditional toys in papier mâché, etc. ((For examples of Haribhitak’s writings on Thai folk art, see the relevant sections in “Mural Paintings in Vihan Nam Tam Wat Pratat Lampang Lung” [Thai] and “Art and Thai Art” [Thai] in Boosarakumwadi (2010), 268-277, 290. On the significance of folk art in modern art in Bengal, see Nercam (2005), 19-113.)) He practiced them and wrote on them, and extolled the art of Jamini Roy (1887–1972). ((See, for example, Bagyi Aung Soe, “Burmese Lacquer,” [Burmese] *Pangyi* (November 1959), 87-90; “Batik Painting,” [Burmese] *Sabai Phyu* (February 1987), 59-60. On Aung Soe on Roy, see Aung Soe (1978), 68-73.)) Additionally, in the same way that he studied early Myanmar’s classical painting and architecture – not with reproduction or restoration as an end like Haribhitak, but in order to assimilate their “linguistic rationale” so as to devise his own idiom of modern Burmese art –, he experimented on a diversity of pictorial idioms from across space and time based on Bose’s concept of art “as levels of a visual language linked to a hierarchy of functions and communicational needs” with no attention paid to the hierarchized Western construct of “art.” ((See Siva Kumar (1997), unpaginated.)) This is evident in his illustrations from the 1950s to 1970s leading up to *manaw mabeikdi dat pangyi* (Fig. 13).

Manifestly, Aung Soe adhered more closely to Bose’s pedagogical program, four out of five principles of which he adapted to organize the illustrations gathered in his publication titled *Poetry Without Words* (1978): cultural and artistic traditions, the environment, individual aesthetic sensibilities and experimentation in diverse media, techniques and styles. ((On the first four points of Bose’s program, see Subramanyan (1982), 11. On their adaptation by Aung Soe, see Aung Soe, (1993.)) The last of the five points on the artist’s duty towards society was moreover the motivation behind his anthology of articles, *From Tradition to Modernity* (1978): “If this book has done its bit towards helping people, who have lives so much more noble than mine, so that they march more strongly towards a better society, then I care not for all that I have given.” ((Aung Soe (1978), 217-222.)) On the part of Haribhitak, there is no known engagement with Śāntiniketan’s teachings at such a profound level, although his commitment to the preservation of Siamese art and

architecture for the benefit of future generations can surely be interpreted in the light of Bose’s fifth principle.

Contextually-bound artistic modernities

One artist juggled two distinct media, techniques and styles; the other is known for an unmistakable albeit abstruse idiom founded upon the synthesis of diverse pictorial idioms and bodies of knowledge. If Aung Soe’s artistic modernity has thus far resisted demystification in Myanmar and beyond, it is partly due to the inadequacy of established frameworks of interpretation. ((See Yin Ker, “Felicitous ‘Misalignments’: Bagyi Aung Soe’s *Manaw Mabeikedi Dat Painting*”, *Southeast of Now: Directions in Contemporary and Modern Art 2* (2017).)) In Haribhitak’s case, it is the absence of a distinct pictorial idiom in an oeuvre lacking in cohesion that is problematic. Regardless of his technical virtuosity that has won him the admiration of many of his countrymen, neither his reproductions of Siamese mural painting nor his paintings and drawings bearing cubist accents bespeak a distinguishing artistic modernity. If they are congruent with none of the four basic modes of discourse proposed by Clark for modern Asian art – “conservative modernity reappraising the past,” “heroic modernist innovation,” “modernism as self-referential discourse” and “postmodernism,” –, what alternative mode might they embody instead? ((See Clark (2010), 23-24.)) They certainly echo the pattern of official discourses on art in Thailand which “seem to be motivated by a binary antithesis” between tradition and modernity, as observed by the same art historian. ((*Ibid.*, 116-117.)) Haribhitak’s lauded statements on art do not propound any distinctive vision of artistic modernity that might alleviate the quandary either: “Do and you will see;” “Art must be made with sincerity, not prospects of fame or fortune;” “Art is created through insight;” “I paint what I see;” “I try to seek for the truth;” “The artist must have the temperament of a boxer.” ((In order of sequence of the citations: Sirintorn and Thamnu Haribhitak, oral communication with Yin Ker (Chiangmai, May 2016); interview by Wanchay Tantiwityaphithaks, Bangkok, May 1990; Thamnu Haribhitak, oral communication with Sirintorn Haribhitak (Chiangmai, December 1988); National Library of Thailand, *Discussion of Life and Work of Thai National Artists* [Thai] (Bangkok: Saha Pracha Panich, 1987), 20; Pittaya Woagkul, “Fua Haribhitak,” *Fuang Nakorn Banmairourouy* (January 1986), 93-113; interview by Nipon Kamvilai, Bangkok, 1982.))

While it may be argued that the simplicity of these maxims masks profound lessons, there is no discernible intent to question the given, reappraise *modi operandi* – whether inherited, imported or imposed – or forge new paths in response to the dilemmas of modernity. Neither is there any underlying argument hinting at a distinguishing artistic consciousness. “Art” appears to have been taken for granted: a purely aesthetic expression of universal ideals like “sincerity” or “truth” removed from the context of their articulation. Compared to his Burmese counterpart who explicated his vision inspired by Śāntiniketan as well as his method of consilience binding Buddhist thought and practice, physics, poetry, mathematics, tantra and much more in hundreds of notes and articles, the chasm between the two pioneers of modern art is glaring.

((In addition to the recommended publications, there are more than two hundred pages of unpublished notes and manuscripts in the collection of Aung Soe’s family and students in Yangon.)) As much as it is possible that Haribhitak’s general statements on art were targeted at his audience’s perceived lack of art-historical sophistication and do not reflect the depth of his reflections on the practice of modern art as a Thai artist of the twentieth century, there is no evidence that Aung Soe’s interlocutors in Yangon were better informed. In fact, in want of a systematic training in art spearheaded by an equivalent of Bhirasri who acquainted Thai artists with a methodical approach to art and art theory, the Burmese were even less versed in issues in art history and theory. ((On art education in Thailand, see Clark (2010), 125-130. There is to date no research completed on the same in Myanmar.)) They also had poorer access to international discourses on art due to Myanmar’s political isolation between 1962 and 1988. As such, what might be the reasons behind Haribhitak’s and Aung Soe’s differing approaches to local artistic traditions and modern Western? To propose possible answers to these questions that are fundamental to discerning their artistic modernities, it is necessary to consider their trajectories against the contexts of Thailand and Myanmar.

In addition to their unanimous admission of Bose’s influence, both Haribhitak and Aung Soe rejected formal academic training. ((For an overview of Haribhitak’s and Aung Soe’s early training, see Boosarakumwadi (2010), 41-45; Zaw Hein (1998), 7-10.)) Neither completed any. ((All recollections by alumni of Śāntiniketan, including Aung Soe, point to Bose’s disregard for formalities in art education. There was no entrance examination before 1951 and admission was primarily through a meeting with Bose who would assess the prospective student’s capability based on his or her works. See Kowshik (1980), 73-74. It is hence unlikely that Bose could have been skeptical of Haribhitak’s lack of formal art education, as claimed by the author of the latter’s biography on the website of the prestigious Magsaysay Award. See “Haripitak, Fua: Biography,” *Ramon Magsaysay Award Foundation*, <http://www.rmaf.org.ph/newrmaf/main/awardees/awardee/biography/254> (accessed 01 August 2016).)) During the 1930s, prior to arriving in Śāntiniketan, Haribhitak had only briefly studied under Patiphakphimlikit (Pleng Traipin) (1885–1942), a pioneer of satirical cartoon, and architect M.C. Ithithepsan Kritdakorn (1889–1934), followed by Bhirasri from 1933 onwards. ((On Haribhitak’s early training prior to Śāntiniketan, see Boosarakumwadi (2010), 41-45; Poshyananda (1992), 32-33; Rodboon (1993), 16-25.)) He never graduated from the Poh Chang Academy of Arts after five years of studies due to his rejection of its conventional methods which he found excessively rigid. Similarly, Aung Soe had no academic credentials in art. He had only briefly attended the art school led by U Ba Nyan (1897–1945) under the Japanese Occupation and studied informally under a painter of modest fame, U Hla Bau (1904–1949). As described by Min Thu Wun, before his illustrations in *Taya* magazine created by yet another literary giant Dagon Taya (1919–2013) propelled him into the Yangonite art world in 1948, he was a dilettante assisting painters on study trips in the countryside (Fig. 14). ((See Min Thu Wun (c. 1991).)) In terms of the two artists’ early style and technique, both were inclined to what has been loosely referred to as an impressionistic style, which should be more rightly understood in their contexts as an expressive manner of drawing and painting that

provided respite from both academic Western painting’s emphasis on the imitation of nature and classical Thai or Burmese painting’s formulaic repertoire (Figs. 6, 7, 14). ((On “impressionism” in the context of Thailand, see Poshyananda (1992), 68; Rodboon (1993), 25. For an example of Haribhitak’s early works inclined towards the impressionist style, see Boosarakumwadi (2010), 109.))

The difference between them lies in their exposure to and relationship with modern Western art. Aung Soe arrived in Śāntiniketan as an empty slate, imbibed all that the university had to offer and returned to Yangon where there was no leading figure for the avant-garde – a position he filled in fact. His only direct encounter with original works of modern Western art was in the then Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, which he visited as a member of an official delegation in 1956 after his studies in India. ((Several dates between 1952 and 1956 have been proposed for the Russian trip. Given that Min Yu Wai, previous editor of *Myawadi* magazine recalls meeting Aung Soe for the first time a month after he returned from Russia in 1956 and that an exhibition catalogue of Indian miniatures in the Soviet collections found amongst Aung Soe’s possessions is dated 1956, it is most likely that he was part of the delegation led by U Htun Tin, the minister for education and culture, in fall 1956. See “Burmese Cultural Mission to USSR,” *Burma Weekly Bulletin* (6 octobre 1956); Min Yu Wai, oral communication with Yin Ker (Yangon, November 2005).)) Haribhitak on the other end had already been initiated to the methods of Western art and art theory at not only Poh Chang but also under Bhirasri who was at the helm of the Thai art world and whose mentorship was resumed after his return to Bangkok. He was thus likely to have arrived in India with relatively specific ideas on art and even some knowledge of theories of Western art, aesthetics and art criticism. ((See Rodboon (1993), 25.)) Furthermore, he subsequently spent two years studying art in Italy and toured England and France. Indeed, few if any Southeast Asian artist of his generation worked directly under the guidance of a European teacher over an extended period as did Haribhitak. As compared to Aung Soe, it is not impossible that it was his immersion in modern Western art that caused his lack of distance to relativize it and to exercise greater discrimination over its part in his oeuvre. In truth, neither did he relativize Siamese painting.

In the first place, these two men of starkly different personalities began with divergent motivations. Aung Soe had been tasked to modernize traditional Burmese art based on Tagore’s lessons; his scholarship to study in Śāntiniketan was for this exact purpose. As successful as he was in creating a space in which he could pursue his objectives with minimal interference and disruption, he bore on his shoulders the vision of some of twentieth-century Myanmar’s most influential thinkers. Haribhitak, on the contrary, was free from any similar mission. His studies in India were sponsored by his first wife of royal lineage, M.R. Thanomsak Kritdakorn (1915–2004), whose faith in his talents was unshakable, and his principal duty was to nurture his own artistic impulses. ((This understanding is based on M.R. Thanomsakdi Kridakorn’s letters written in impeccable English to Haribhitak when he was in India. Collection of Tira Vanichtheeranont of Bababa Gallery.)) His restoration projects of old Siamese paintings at no less than ten sites between 1960 and 1982, and reproductions of more than fifty sites were not due to pressure exerted by any figure of

authority – although his eminence as a conservator and even art historian in the eyes of Bhirasri and other prominent figures in Thailand later meant that he was bound to expectations. ((Temples whose mural paintings were restored by Haribhitak include Wat Yai Suwannaram (Petchaburi, 1964, 1974), Wat Rakhang Kositaram (Bangkok, 1969–1982), Wat Suwannaram (Bangkok, 1966–1967) and Wat Prasad (Nonthaburi, 1961–1962). See Boosarakumwadi (2010), 170–208. Of these many sites, the restoration of Wat Rakhang Kositaram has been deemed the most “exemplary in restoration disciplines, serving as Thailand’s architectural trough as well as a model significant to Southeast Asia” by the Magsaysay Award Foundation. Rodboon (1993), 57. On the reproductions, see for example, Nor Na Paknam and Pitsamai Intarachat, *Reproductions of Phra Bot Banner Paintings from Wat Tung Ka, Lampang Province* [Thai and English] (Bangkok: Payounwong, 1983).))

In terms of the environments they lived and worked in, there is no doubt that Myanmar’s political isolation under military rule stifled development on multiple fronts. This said, could such a climate of oppression and curtailed options have been ironically opportune to the undistracted application and elaboration of Śāntiniketan’s lessons? In a space frozen in time, they were Aung Soe’s lifebuoy for close to four decades; his oeuvre and writings wholly attest to that. Haribhitak on the other hand benefitted from many more options and stimuli – too many and too overwhelming for him to be able to concentrate on his art perhaps. After returning from India in 1946, he went on to study at the Accademia di Belle Arti di Roma in Italy, visiting the museums and inspecting their collections in detail; he toured Austria, England, France and India again; he exhibited on national platforms in Thailand; he was promoted and received an honorary degree from the Silpakorn University; he served on committees; he was entrusted with the restoration of national heritage sites, etc. ((For an overview of Haribhitak’s achievements, see Boosarakumwadi (2010), 254, 265.)) But accolades and promotions come with responsibilities and obligations, and opportunities are temptations and distractions too. In addition to his many conservation projects, Haribhitak was saddled by full-time teaching and administrative duties at the Silpakorn University from 1947 until his retirement in 1970, after which he taught at the College of Fine Arts from 1974 to 1990. Most importantly, Haribhitak was Thai art’s official face – the first National Artist –, and as Clark argues, “all art activity occurred under the proviso of state intervention as to the method, content and displays of representations;” art was “not an autonomous domain of discourse that may have [...] bracketed or even subverted the nation-state’s domination of the past and its claim to realize different futures.” ((Clark (2010), 251))

Aung Soe the *enfant terrible* of modern Burmese art, on the other hand, was unfettered by similar functions. Resolute in preserving his independence and freedom, he refused to be attached to any association or institution – not even art galleries –, and did not entertain obligation relations. ((Aung Soe famously turned down Colonel U Ba Than’s repeated invitations to be a member of the historical Lokanat Gallery, Myanmar’s very first in 1971, of which he was the principal patron. If Aung Soe participated in a few shows at the Peacock Gallery between 1982 and 1985, it was due to the persistent appeals of his student and friend Sonny Nyein, a co-founder of the gallery.)) He did not even attempt to make his art understood to his

benefactors from the literary world. He only taught part-time at the University of Rangoon and the Rangoon Institute of Technology, and focused on practicing art the way he believed was right: away from the art market as enjoined by his Indian gurus who condemned the commodification of art, and mainly through illustration so as to bring art to all strata of the Burmese society. ((On Śāntiniketan’s concept of art as spiritual pursuit, see Siva Kumar (1997), unpaginated.)) Incarnating the myth of the eccentric and impoverished genius artist, he neglected duties towards his family, drank heavily during much of his life, dressed in defiance against conventions of good taste, and paid heed to neither the ruling party’s nor any of his peers’ notion of good art. Unsurprisingly, unlike Haribhitak, he never won the authorities’ approval. One was the esteemed inaugural National Artist decorated with numerous awards; the other died the poets’ and artists’ beloved leader of modern Burmese art, but bereft of official patronage and recognition. ((In spite of Aung Soe’s stature as Myanmar’s leader of modern art, the National Museum does not collect his works. If an undated oil painting titled *Myanmar’s Toys* with his signature style and subject matter is part of the collection, it is because it bears the signature of Nan Waii (1926–2009). The two artists often drank and painted together, and it is most likely that Nann Wai signed what Aung Soe painted during one of their carousals.)) This said, if the Burmese authorities’ disinterest in art and dismissal of Aung Soe did nothing to boost his career, it demanded just as little of him, leaving him the scope – as marginal as it was – for some form of initiative and freedom of action. Indeed, art in Myanmar, while being subjected to arbitrary censorship, was not systematically and consistently harnessed by the authorities to promulgate specific visions, narratives or policies.

We may ask, beyond the inspiration as selfless artists above the pursuit of material and personal gain that they have been, what models of modern art or consciousness of artistic modernity might Haribhitak and Aung Soe have – unintentionally – bequeathed to Thailand and Myanmar? ((For representations of the two artist’s persona, see Ker (2013), 355–371; Rodboon (1993), 133.)) The cogency of Aung Soe’s *manaw mabeikedi dat pangyi* can be posited as its transcendence of dualistic thought: it is both universal *and* Burmese, contemporary *and* ancient, of the East *and* the West, sensuous *and* cerebral, spiritual *and* scientific, etc. It relativizes the Western artistic model whose hegemony has been assumed to be natural and brings ancient and non-Western thought systems and art forms into the folds of modern artistic practice in this part of the world. Whether his peers and successors that revere him are alert to the import of this contextually-specific artistic modernity or not, his insistence on *freedom* against any form of authoritarian framework has no doubt empowered many of them. ((On Aung Soe’s ambiguous legacy, see Yin Ker, “Unpacking the Legacy of an Exceptional Artist from Myanmar: Bagyi Aung Soe (1923–1990),” in *Essays on Art in Southeast Asia: Charting Thoughts* (Singapore: National Gallery Singapore, 2017).))

Haribhitak, on the other hand, is reputed for a divided production whose artistic identity remains elusive, if not questionable from the point of view of modern art’s exaltation of originality as the cornerstone of artistic excellence. He is honored in Thailand for having “unfailingly made significant contributions to Thai arts [as well as] for his creativity and unsurpassed devotion to traditional Thai arts preservation,” but where do his

artistic innovation, identity and modernity lie? ((Rodboon (1993), 10.)) He moved back and forth between two distinct practices, as if an outsider to both. This said, *if* we were to reinterpret his art through Tagore’s definition of “true modernism” as “independence of thought and action, not tutelage under European schoolmasters,” *if* a modern non-Western artist’s merit were to lie in his or her emancipation from the diktat of Western artistic conventions, would the lack of synthesis and originality still be problematic? Indeed, might Haribhitak’s distinction not rest precisely upon his simultaneous practice of classical Thai painting and modern Western art, rather than their fusion; might this unusual practice not be actually a purposeful response to the challenges faced by Thai art at a specific juncture? Even before he studied in Rome, it was already observed that “his activities focused on fulfilling his desire to be both a traditional artisan and a modern artist.” ((Poshyananda (1992), 69.)) This is merely one conjecture based on the reasoning that there must be a good reason for his acclaim in Thailand – as opaque as it might be to outsiders.

One thing is certain: both Haribhitak’s and Aung Soe’s artistic modernities are tied to the demise of one world and the rise of another. Within the space of this transition, worlds overlap, collide, merge, etc.; none of the constructs of “tradition,” “modernity” or “nation” in modern art are static and without contradictions, not to mention their complex matrices. As seeds of the same fruit fall on different soils and sprout or wither depending on variable conditions, Haribhitak’s and Aung Soe’s trajectories and oeuvres are the result of negotiations between personal aspirations, weaknesses and strengths, legacies of divergent origins and circumstances both individual and national. Each understood the challenges of transition in relation to the needs and expectations of their communities differently, and responded likewise based on the resources at their disposal. Their oeuvres have been in turn interpreted and framed differently by the local audiences. In all probability, it is the *reasons for* the reception and interpretation of their works that subsequent research should examine. For example, what led Thai art historian Poshyananda to posit that an understanding of modern Thai painting is “incomplete” without taking into account Haribhitak’s achievements: “an inspirational figure to numerous students and artists” possessing a “potential genius, which lay [*sic*] in his authenticity and difference from other Thai painters”, even if some considered “that by assimilating modern art from the West, [...] his work lacked the Thai spirit”? ((*Ibid.*, 68, 71.)) The modern construct of “art” did not enter and come to be established in Thailand and Myanmar the same way; it is also in the history of its inception that these two artists’ contextual significances might be retrieved and further differentiated.

The Śāntiniketan model has been indispensable for interpreting Aung Soe’s art. It is however less so for Haribhitak. What might one conclude on its potential in rethinking and rewriting the narratives of modern Southeast Asian art? One only has to consider the oeuvres of fellow alumni like Rusli and Affandi from Indonesia alongside that of their Indian colleague K.G. Subramanyan (1924–2016) to realize that the begotten artistic consciousnesses and expressions are steadfastly multifarious. This paper concludes that in

a climate of homogenization dominated by an authoritarian narrative, the significance of Śāntiniketan in the reinvigoration of modern Southeast Asian art history resides precisely in its open-endedness propitious to diversification. While it is indisputable that Śāntiniketan has barely any echo in contemporary Southeast Asian art today, there are legacies that fallow or are less tangible in their manifestations. They also transform. In the case of Haribhitak in Thailand, his retirement from the Silpakorn University was followed by a revision of the curriculum, heralding a new phase in artistic creation in Thailand. Regardless, as faint as his presence in contemporary Thai art might be, the connections between his work on Siamese mural painting and neo-traditionalist painting are definitely worthy of investigation. ((The question as to whether Haribhitak should be regarded as a restorer or an artist in this respect is unfortunately one for which this paper has no answer. For a critical analysis of neo-traditionalist painting in Thailand, see Clark (2010), 140-144.)) As for Aung Soe in Myanmar, it is less the formal attributes of his *manaw mabeikedi dat pangyi* than his untrammelled spirit against all forms of tyranny that has inspired successive generations of artists, including those working in new media, installation and performance art. ((On the exceptional legacy of Bagyi Aung Soe, see Yin Ker, “Unpacking the Legacy of an Exceptional Artist from Myanmar: Bagyi Aung Soe (1923–1990),” in *Southeast Asian Art from the 19th Century to Now* (Singapore: National Gallery Singapore, 2016).))

There are artists whose legacy lies in their function as catalysts, agents or vehicles of transformation; the absence of direct quotation does not constitute proof against the persistence of their memory. What is noteworthy is that as agents working through the dilemmas between the old and the new, the East and the West at a specific historical juncture, Śāntiniketan, Haribhitak and Aung Soe widened the scope of artistic possibilities beyond these dichotomies. Confronted with an imported artistic modernity to be unpacked and remodeled before it could be made their own, they could withdraw into neither one nor the other. If there is anything essentially “Thai” or “Burmese” about Haribhitak’s and Aung Soe’s art, it is the conditions specific to Thailand and Myanmar that led them to be perceived as such, and not necessarily the formal properties of their works. The resultant artistic consciousnesses and modernities are hence *context*-specific, which is not the same as being nation-specific. The practice and art of Aung Soe, for example, cannot be explained independently of Śāntiniketan that lies beyond the borders of Myanmar. Even though the rationale of Haribhitak’s significance is more intimately tied to the politics of his country’s art world, his art cannot be fully understood without an awareness of the complications of modern Western art in Thailand and Southeast Asia, and Śāntiniketan’s vision of “true modernism” in reaction against the widespread conflation between modernization and westernization either. Ultimately, neither exclusively nation-, nor region-centric approaches to modern art in Southeast Asia does justice to the connections within and beyond this part of the world, and hence the viability of a trans-territorial node of enquiry like Śāntiniketan. Besides, not unlike the constructs of “art,” “tradition” or “modern,” those of “Thai,” “Burmese” and “Southeast Asian” mutate over time. These labels are especially spurious against the context of globalization with increased cross-border and cross-continental movements. As can be seen in the examples of both Haribhitak and Aung Soe, an artist born in one country does not even necessarily participate in the culture

of the dominant group or produce works that conform to stereotypes of the nation's art: they are exceptional because they do not conform; they are esteemed by their fellow countrymen precisely because they are appraised as out of the ordinary.

The authors are grateful to T.K. Sabapathy for his insightful comments on both the content and form of this essay. They are similarly indebted to Thath Chanuhacha, Thamnu Haribhitak, Sukontikar Jinapengkas, Sopapun Nijathaworn, Vanvadee Suvatanashaw, Tira Vanichtheeranont, Sansanee Wannagkun and the Sathirakoses-Nagapra Foundation for their support and assistance in research on Fua Haribhitak. As always, research on Bagyi Aung Soe owes to the support of Sonny Nyein, Ma Thanegi, Maung Maung Soe, Bagyi Lynn Wunna and the many friends that continue to keep his memory alive.