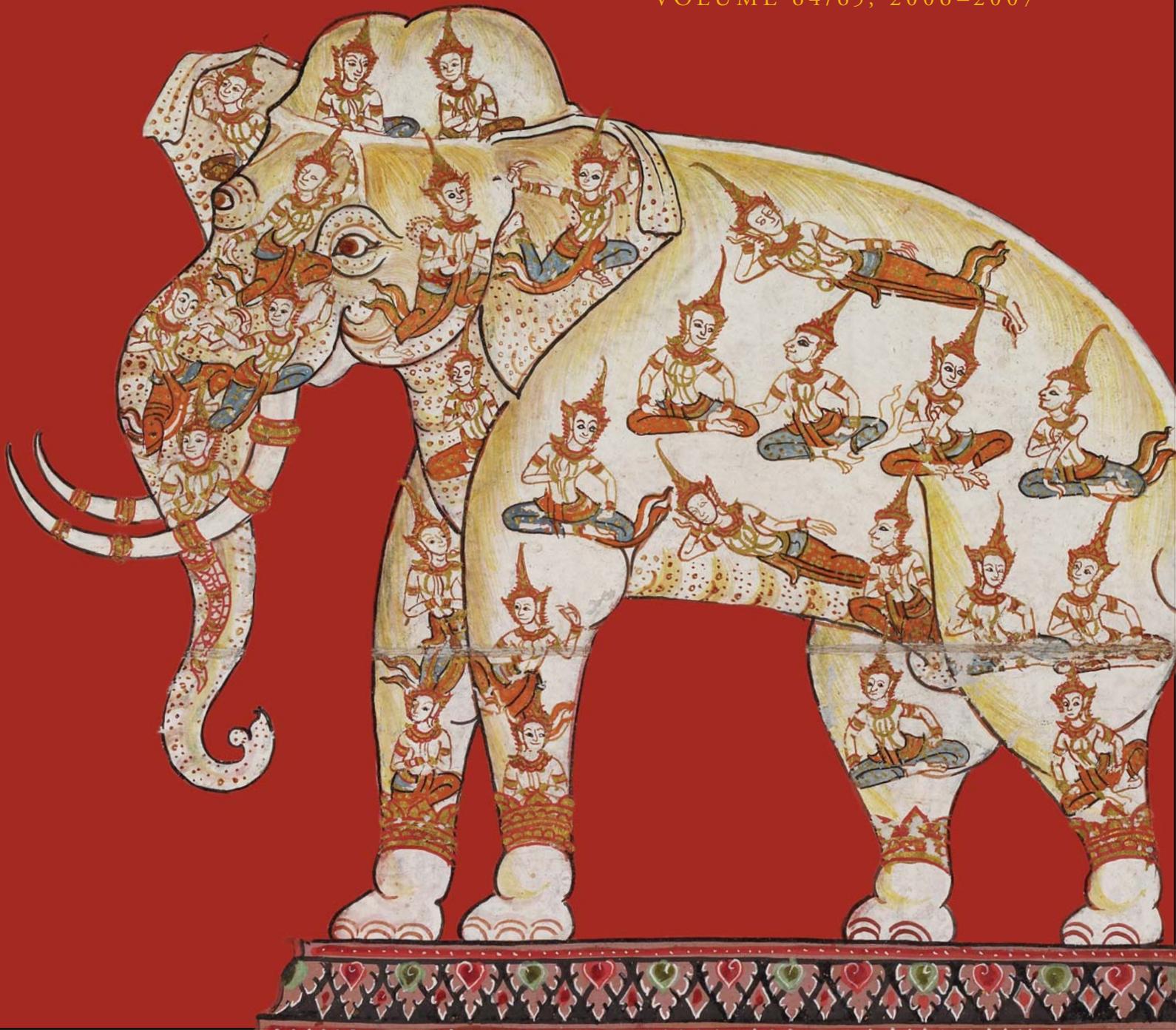


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The *Bun Phra Wet* Painted Scrolls of Northeastern Thailand in the Walters Art Museum

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The gift to the Walters Art Museum from the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation of three of four scroll paintings illustrating the *Vessantara Jataka* acquired by Miss Duke as part of her collection of Thai art and artifacts is an inestimable contribution to the museum's collection.¹ These scroll paintings—the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco owns the fourth—may be the only examples of this art form in U.S. art museums. To my knowledge, only one such scroll painting is preserved in a Thai museum, in the Ubon Rachathani branch of the national museum system (formally named the Ubon National Museum).²

It is unfortunate but symptomatic of the widespread neglect of folk art that such important paintings remain relatively unknown. Even today, almost every village temple in northeastern Thailand owns at least one of these scrolls, rendered in ink and mineral (or synthetic) pigments on cotton muslin. Because of the wear and tear these paintings suffer during their annual use, they must be replaced every few years. Even a scroll in fairly good condition may be replaced with a newer one, since the donation of these paintings is one of the ways by which devout members of a Buddhist temple congregation “make merit.” Over the thirty-five years that I have attended the ceremonies of one temple in northeastern Thailand, I have recorded the successive use of four different scrolls. As new ones are donated, older ones are set aside and eventually discarded, usually by burning. The periodic renewal of the scrolls, while understandable, deprives succeeding generations of the opportunity to appreciate the color, composition, and configurations by which past generations viewed and conceived a story that remains central to Theravada Buddhism.³

Scroll paintings preserve in visual form a story that is read or recited annually in every Thai temple. In mainland Southeast Asia, the scroll form is distinctive to northeastern Thailand and lowland Laos, across the

Mekong River; in central Thailand sets of individual paintings, on cloth or wood, accompany recitations of the *Vessantara Jataka*.⁴ In northeastern Thailand and Laos, the *Vessantara Jataka* is usually recited during the fourth lunar month (February–March), after the harvest and before the heat of summer (April–June). In the kingdom's central plains, the story is recited in the twelfth lunar month (mid-October–mid-November), following the end of the Theravada Buddhist Rains Retreat.

Northeastern Thailand and lowland Laos are inhabited primarily by speakers of Lao (in the Kingdom of Thailand, Thai-Lao) who once formed a single ethnic group, but now are separated by the Mekong River. The area is known geographically as the Khorat Plateau, a gently undulating landscape cut by a few rivers. Growing their crops of wet-rice in paddy fields, the Thai-Lao and Lao depend on annual monsoonal rains, which generally fall from June through September. During the period following the rice harvest, from January through May, the region's farmers engage in supplementary employment, such as taxi-driving and construction work in Bangkok and elsewhere; it is also an opportunity to restore kin and friendship ties.⁵ Most villages comprise a number of related households and a temple complex, or *wat*, in which monks and novices reside. The annual festival of the *Bun Phra Wet* draws on the distinctions between the area outside the village, the collection of houses in which the villagers live, and the *wat* to define the landscape in which the re-creation of the *Vessantara Jataka* takes place. This essay focuses on events in a single northeastern Thai village; however, research conducted throughout the area and in Laos generally confirms these findings.⁶

In each village, temple and village committees organize and manage an extravagant annual festival called *Bun Phra Wet* (Thai, Lao: *Bun*, merit-making; *Phra*, monks, royalty; *Wet*, short for *Wetsandaun*, *Vessantara*).

Village residents devote considerable time to making baskets and thousands of other requisite objects to celebrate the event. For many, the festival is a homecoming: the dispatch of messages (nowadays most often effected through cell phones) ensures that villagers residing and working in distant places are informed of the dates so that they can return. Often returning villagers bring friends and coworkers to participate in the festival—the most important merit-making event of the ritual calendar—to make new friends, and, for the unmarried, to meet eligible partners. This celebration of the penultimate birth of the Buddha provides a focus by which members of a village establish their own importance as merit-makers and the importance of their village on the local, regional and, increasingly, on the national landscape as a meritorious community drawing in sponsors from Bangkok and elsewhere in the kingdom. While this ceremony has been treated in some detail by various observers, those commentaries usually focus on the textual aspects of the event; the scrolls themselves and their role in the ceremony remain largely unexamined.⁷

THE VESSANTARA JATAKA

The *Vessantara Jataka* (Thai, Lao: *Maha Wetsandaun Chaadok*), the birth story of Prince Vessantara, recounts the life of the prince whose good karma, amassed over more than five hundred previous lives, will be reborn as the Buddha. These birth stories, or *jataka*, came into the Theravada Buddhist canon as South Asian tales purportedly told by the Buddha to explain how, in past lives, his karma acquired sufficient merit so that it could be reborn as Siddhārtha Gautama, who would become the Buddha, the Enlightened One.

The tale provides a charter for many activities. It stresses the Buddhist ideal of perfect generosity (giving without thought of self) intertwined with giving in the context of the family, resulting in the donor's inheriting the kingdom. A contrasting subplot, the story of the Brahmin Chuchok, graphically illustrates the reward of immoderate consumption. Finally, the tale provides ways for the members of a community to celebrate themselves as participants in the success of the perfect donor and their community. The *Vessantara Jataka* as recited in the Thai context is composed of thirteen chapters (*kan*) of varying length, totaling a thousand stanzas (*khaathaa*) (see table 1).

The tale begins with Sakka, the king of the gods, offering his wife, Phusatti, about to be reborn, ten wishes. Among others, she asks that she give birth to “a child who will become a generous and respected king.”⁸ She

TABLE 1: THE COMPOSITION OF THE VESSANTARA JATAKA

KAN	ROMANIZED TITLE	TRANSLATION	NUMBER OF KHAATHAA
1	<i>Thotsaphaun</i>	Ten Blessings	19
2	<i>Himaphaan</i>	Himalayan Forest	134
3	<i>Thaannakan</i>	Donations	209
4	<i>Wan Phrawet</i>	Entrance into the Jungle	57
5	<i>Chuuchok</i>	The Brahmin	79
6	<i>Chulaphon</i>	Sparse Forest	35
7	<i>Mahaaphon</i>	Thick Forest	80
8	<i>Kumaan</i>	The Children	101
9	<i>Matrii</i>	Maddi (Vessantara's wife)	90
10	<i>Sakkabap</i>	Indra's Words	43
11	<i>Mabaaraat</i>	The Great King	69
12	<i>Chaukrasat</i>	The Six Royals	36
13	<i>Nakonakan</i>	Return to the Kingdom	48
Total number of <i>khaathaa</i> :			1,000

NOTE: After G. E. Gerini, *Retrospective View and Account of the Origin of the Thet Maha Ch'at Ceremony* (Bangkok, 1892), 19.

is granted these wishes, is reborn a princess, and marries King Sanjaya of Sivi. After a ten-month pregnancy, while traveling in the city, Phusatti gives birth to a son in Vessantara (merchant) Street. When he is twenty, Prince Vessantara marries Princess Maddi, from the country of Ceta, and fathers two children: a son named Chaalii and a daughter, Khanhaa.

Eight Brahmins from the drought-ridden country of Kalinga come to Sivi to ask for a white elephant, known for bringing rain, that belongs to Vessantara. Vessantara gives away the elephant, to the great distress of the residents of Sivi. They complain to the king, who orders Vessantara into exile. As he and his family leave Sivi for the Himalayan forest, Vessantara gives away all his possessions—seven hundred objects in every category—to the kingdom's people. Another group of Brahmins approaches Vessantara and asks for the two horses pulling his chariot. He gives these away, and they are replaced by two stags (angels in disguise). Further on, another Brahmin asks for the chariot; Vessantara gives this away, and the royal couple proceeds onward on foot, carrying their two children. The family arrives in Ceta and the king, Maddi's father, asks them to stay; after seven days they continue on their way. They eventually

reach two hermitages in the forest built by the gods for Vessantara and his wife and children, where Vessantara can meditate while his wife gathers food for the family.

Meanwhile, an elderly Brahmin in Kalinga, Chuchok, marries a beautiful young girl, Amitthida. Other women tease Amitthida for marrying an old man with no servants; she in turn nags Chuchok mercilessly until he sets out to secure Vessantara's two children as servants for his wife. He goes into the Himalayan forest where he meets a hunter, Cetaputta (from the country of Ceta), who first threatens him then points the way to Vessantara's hermitage. Chuchok continues and meets a hermit, Acchuta, who, after first doubting his story, also directs him onward. Chuchok eventually arrives at Vessantara's hermitage when Maddi is away and asks for the two children. The prince willingly grants the request; Chuchok binds the children's hands with rope and leads them away. When he stumbles, the children escape and return to hide in the pond in front of Vessantara's hermitage. Chuchok accuses Vessantara of renegeing on his gift, an accusation that Vessantara counters by calling his children out of the pond and commanding them to go with Chuchok.

In the meantime, so that Vessantara can fulfill his quest for perfect generosity, Maddi has been detained in the forest by gods, disguised as three fearsome wild animals. She is finally released and returns to the hermitages. She searches for hours for the children and, not finding them, asks Vessantara of their whereabouts. When he does not answer, she faints; Vessantara takes her head in his lap and pours water on her to revive her. When she revives, he tells her what happened while she was gone and "exhort[s] her to repress her grief and put her heart at peace, as immense merit would accrue to her also from that act of supreme abnegation."⁹ Maddi recovers and consents to Vessantara's gift of their children to Chuchok. Shortly thereafter, Vessantara's generosity is put to the final test when another Brahmin (the god Indra in disguise) appears and asks Vessantara for Maddi, a request to which the prince again willingly accedes. As Indra walks away with Maddi, he announces that Vessantara, in giving away all his possessions and all those dearest to him, has fulfilled his destiny of perfect generosity and returns Maddi to him.

Chuchok, leading the two children by a rope, finds his way to the kingdom of Sivi. Vessantara's father, King Sanjaya, recognizes the two children and buys them from Chuchok for an extravagant amount of money and jewels. While the grandparents and grandchildren are reunited, Chuchok uses his newfound wealth to engage in a celebratory orgy—he overeats to such an extent that

his stomach explodes. The citizens of Sivi celebrate his death by using the food prepared for him to hold his funeral. Then, accompanied by the citizens of Sivi, the grandparents and grandchildren go to the Himalayan forest and reconcile themselves with their son and daughter-in-law, father and mother. Accompanied by the welcoming citizens of the kingdom, the six royals—King Sanjaya and Queen Phusatti, Prince Vessantara and Princess Maddi, and Chaalii and Khanhaa—return to Sivi, where a great festival ensues.

CELEBRATING THE *VESSANTARA JATAKA*

In northeastern Thailand the *Vessantara Jataka* is illustrated on a cotton cloth scroll, 20 to 40 meters long by 1 meter high, that is carried in procession into the meeting hall (*sala*) of the village temple and displayed there for the duration of the *Bun Phra Wet*. The scroll's display is in part didactic: it illustrates the virtue of perfect generosity that leads to karmic success and the types of behavior that lead to excess, dissolution, and death. The scroll thus constitutes a material, exoteric counterpart to the monks' transient, esoteric reading and recitation. The dynamic interaction between the text, its recitation, and the pictorial representation is made manifest in the laity's unrolling of the scroll, bringing it into the village and the temple compound in procession, and hanging it in the temple's meeting hall.

The scroll has meaning beyond its immediate function of visually recounting the *Vessantara Jataka*. The act of carrying the scroll into the village and placing it in the meeting hall, which has been decorated and defined as sacred space, brings Prince Vessantara to the recitation, imbuing this location with his presence to commemorate the life of the individual who will be reborn as the Buddha.¹⁰ The scroll itself becomes the prince and his family, invited by the villagers and guided by them from the forest to which they had been exiled into this village, transformed into a city (*muang*), and into the *wat*, transformed into a palace (*wang*). In other words, the scroll provides continuing visual evidence for a core mystery of Buddhism: the means by which a blessed person can achieve merit in order to be reborn as enlightened and assist in the salvation of others.¹¹

THE PAINTING AND ITS CONTEXT

Consideration of the scrolls in their own right, rather than simply as illustrations of the text recited by the monks, sheds light on their meaning. While all the *Phra Wet* painted scrolls that I have examined contain

inscriptions, the scrolls also contain a wealth of visual data that elaborate on the recitation. In other words, while *Phra Wet* scrolls are narrative, because of their visual nature and because of their role in bringing Prince Vessantara and his family to the ceremony, their impact is beyond mere narration.¹²

The text of the *Vessantara Jataka* is made meaningful to speakers and listeners by its annual reading or recitation and commentaries upon it. Similarly, the scroll makes manifest the story that is the focus of the festival and serves as a backdrop so that listeners can make constant reference to the story's important events.

While scrolls follow the chronology of the *Vessantara Jataka*, they elaborate and comment not only on the text but also on the lives of the people who look at the pictures and listen to the recitation. The images on the scroll sometimes depict dress and behavior that are familiar from everyday village life or known to villagers from other stories. As with other forms of Thai paintings, scrolls seek to elicit interactions between the painters, the viewers, and the figures represented. Sandra Cate has pointed out these dynamics in the recently painted murals of the Royal Thai Temple in the London suburb of Wimbledon.¹³ This essay's discussion of the painted scrolls shows that the same kinds of interactions and recourse to multiple interpretations are necessary in order to understand the continuing power of these scrolls.

The scrolls depict the sequence of thirteen sections in a mysterious drama; they also provide a means for this drama to become present in the daily lives of the people. This is not "just" art on a wall, but art that moves in procession and inspires individuals to recognize possible goals as it brings the potential for redemptive action to each person.

A scroll commences its dynamic role and reaches fruition in two short days annually as a community mounts its *Bun Phra Wet*. The movement of this scroll through the community and its subsequent presence as a constant backdrop to the recitation defines the festival. The *Bun Phra Wet* requires extensive planning: the temple and village committees agree on a date a month or more in advance and discuss the amount of monetary assessment to be levied on each household; a contract is signed with one or more performing groups; and the lay head of the *wat* committee (*tayok wat*) contacts monks from outside the community and invites them to participate. At least two weeks before the festival, specific groups of people begin to prepare the requisite accouterments: elderly men weave bamboo baskets; elderly women prepare a thousand betel nut chews, a thousand hand-rolled cigarettes,

a thousand balls of rice, and other prescribed items. The *tayok wat* pulls out of storage the nine long flags that are flown in the *wat* and locates the bamboo poles that hold them. As recently as thirty years ago, men of the village constructed wooden platforms for *Bun Phra Wet* performances and other events; today performers bring their own stages, loud-speaker systems, and curtains. Central to the festival are three ways by which the temple makes money: raffling objects donated by villagers, merchants, and others (*soi daaw*, drawing stars); selling gold leaf to provide opportunities for attendees to perform the merit-making act of applying it to a statue of the Buddha (*tit thong Phra Phut*); and soliciting donations of money for a specific undertaking on behalf of the temple, such as fixing the roof or buying equipment, usually by collecting change in monks' alms bowls (*saay baat*).

As the day of the festival nears, the temple grounds acquire a festive air: the nine flags are raised, one at each of eight points around the *sala* and the ninth near the *wat*'s entrance gate; bamboo stands are erected at the base of each flagpole; display stands are put out to hold the goods to be raffled; the *sala* is cleaned; and the scroll that begins the ceremony is unpacked. Attendees at a service prior to the festival draw names (*yok chalaat*) of those responsible for inviting monks and important people in neighboring villages to the *Bun Phra Wet*. Villagers also vie to sponsor parts of the service.

The *Bun Phra Wet* is also designated as the annual festival for each village, *Bun Pracham Pii*, and in this way becomes a celebration of the village itself. It is a major occasion during which villagers extend invitations to relatives, friends, work associates, and acquaintances to visit and see the village at its best (fig. 1). Houses are cleaned and special foods prepared, especially *khaaw tom*, a sweet made of sticky rice around a core, such as bananas, wrapped in a banana leaf. Gifting of these sweets to visitors is an indication of the generosity of a household. Often guests arrive with small bags of uncooked rice or other gifts, for which *khaaw tom* is given in exchange.

Within the *sala* a floor plan specific to the festival is laid out. A large rectangular space in the center is defined under a scaffold that supports a narrow platform, *haan Phra Phut*, attached to the four central pillars of the hall. The *haan Phra Phut* demarcates a boundary (*kheth parimonthon*) within which things are sacred (*sak sit*); Mara, the devil (*Phra Yaa Maan*) cannot enter (*khaw bau day*). The scaffold and platform are usually permanent structures in the *sala*. Special decorations are prepared and hung from the platform. Many of the



Fig. 1. Village Temple Gate, with a sign, in Thai: “Nay Ngaan Thesakaan Phrachampii— P.S. 2515—Yin Dii Thau Rap Thuk Thaan” (To the annual village festival—B.E. 2515 [C.E. 1972]—All people are welcome)



Fig. 2. *Sra bookkaaranii* and *ang nammon* in the central sacred area of the *sala* with sponsors of a recitation, 12 March 2005

decorations, such as bamboo models of birds and flowers, allude to the forest in which Vessantara and his family reside during their exile. Other items, such as long, dangling strings to which grains of uncooked white rice are glued, are said to be solely decorative. On the day before the festival, each household prepares or commissions a plate on which two conical structures made of banana leaves (*khan maak beng*), thirteen pairs of small flowers and incense sticks (*khan haa* and *khan baet*) and two long candles are arranged.¹⁴ These plates of offerings are placed on the *haan Phra Phut* and define the sacred space within the *khet parimonthon* as the space in which the community comes together.

Two tubs half-filled with water are placed in the center of the bounded area (fig. 2). One tub, called *sra bookkaaranii*, holds a turtle, fish, and other creatures, as well as lotuses, swamp plants, and mud taken from a nearby pond. It represents the pond in which Vessantara’s two children hide after escaping from Chuchok’s clutches until Vessantara commands them to leave with Chuchok, and alludes to the trials that the royal family undergoes so that Vessantara may succeed in his quest for perfect generosity. The other tub, called *ang nammon*, produces sacred water when candles are burned over it during the recitation of the *Vessantara Jataka*. At the festival’s conclusion, householders dip pitchers and bottles into this water to take home and use while bathing so that they will be assured of good health.

Four preaching chairs are brought out and placed at the four corners of this space. Alternatively, a single canopied pulpit is used. At the four corners of the pulpit space are tied a banana tree (*ton kluey*), sugar cane stalk

(*ton oy*), coconuts (*mak phrau*), and wooden flowers. One villager explained that banana trees and sugar cane, both of which grow rapidly, are planted by the citizens of Sivi to guide Prince Vessantara and his family back home from the forest. The return of Vessantara and his family to this home—the city and the palace—is a core meaning of the festival, established by the villagers as they carry the scroll from their rice fields to the temple.

The first day of the festival, when guests and relatives arrive at the village, is called the day for coming together (*muu hoom*).¹⁵ In the morning the *tayok wat* and laity assemble in the *sala wat* to invite Phra Uppakut, the festival’s guardian, to emerge from a water source and take his place in the *sala* overlooking the sacred space that has been set up in its center.¹⁶ Preparations continue while visitors and relatives arrive at the community’s households, to be welcomed and feted. However, this is a liminal period; the event that begins the festival in the afternoon is the invitation to Vessantara and his family to return from their exile and take up residence in the meeting hall.

As the day begins to cool, monks, older women carrying flowers, laymen and laywomen, the men of the village drum ensemble, and the *tayok wat*, who brings the rolled scroll, make their way to a predetermined spot outside the village, near a water source (an allusion to the pond near the hermitage). There, with monks and audience sitting on mats, the usual Buddhist service begins, with the invocation of the Triple Gems and the receipt of the Five Precepts by the laity. The rolled scroll is placed on a tray with flowers, two candles are lit, and the *tayok wat* gives a short recitation, inviting Vessantara to return



Fig. 3. A rolled *Phra Wet* scroll on a tray with candles, during the ceremony welcoming Prince Vessantara into the village, 8 April 2006

to the village (fig. 3).¹⁷ The monks and the audience rise, unroll the scroll, and form the procession in which the scroll brings Vessantara and his family back to the village, now become a city.¹⁸

The procession is described, in Thai-Lao and Lao, as welcoming Phra Wet and his family (*soen Phra Wet*; Thai: *choen*) back to the kingdom (*khaw nay muang*), from which they were exiled. The humble community in which the villagers live their daily lives is reconceptualized as a major city (*muang*), vibrant and important, and its modest local *wat* becomes the palace of a king who in his next life will be reborn as a Buddha. Usually a row of Thai national and Buddhist flags, the latter bearing the symbol of the wheel of the law, lines the main street on which the procession enters the village. The long banner that hangs near the *wat* gate welcomes the family and signifies that this is the end of Vessantara's exile. Members of the procession hold up the scroll for all to see as they walk into the village; householders put out buckets of clean water so that members of the procession can drink and throw water on each other in celebration (and to cool themselves) following their long walk from the forest. Sometimes a villager has enough money to hire elephants and important members of the community dress up as Sanjaya, king of Sivi, Queen Pursatti, the mother of Vessantara, Prince Vessantara, and his wife, Maddi, and make their grand entrance seated on these elephants. Vessantara and Maddi's two children sometimes appear tied to the wicked Brahmin Chuchok, who carries a stick with which to beat them. The procession thus duplicates major episodes represented in the painted scroll while juxtaposing temporally different

sections of the story. Villagers dance to the lively music of drums, cymbals, and mouth organs (*kaen*) in celebration of their success in welcoming Phra Wet.¹⁹

When the procession arrives at the temple, it circles the *sala* clockwise three times (fig. 4), a standard ceremonial gesture when approaching or entering an important Buddhist structure. The villagers holding the scroll enter the *sala* and hang it on the wall so that the painting is visible within the hall. The scroll is thus the formal signal that Vessantara has entered his palace. Following the hanging of the scroll and extending into the early evening, monks read two sutras, *Phra Malai Muun* and *Phra Malai Saen*. Phra Malai, as he journeys to hell, heaven, and back to the human world, enjoins villagers to listen to the Vessantara story so that they can become better people. It is often said that Phra Malai provides the charter for understanding the significance of Vessantara.²⁰

The scroll's appearance energizes the festival. The glorious conclusion of Prince Vessantara's story—his return to the kingdom—provides the festival's beginning and end points. As we shall see, this is replicated by the paintings on the scroll.

BACKGROUND AND PRODUCTION OF SCROLLS

The gift of the *Bun Phra Wet* scrolls to the Walters Art Museum and the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco is noteworthy in part because of the scarcity of these objects in museum collections. Although little is known of their date and place of manufacture, and their artists are unrecorded, the preservation of these scrolls is important.

This essay is an initial attempt to analyze these scrolls and to place them in the context of their display and the performances that occur around them. The analysis that follows is based on a study of the three Walters scrolls using digital photographs provided by the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation, some of which are reproduced here.²¹ Conclusions based on an analysis made at some remove from the objects are thus somewhat tentative. My study of the Walters scrolls has been supplemented by examination of the Ubon Ratchathani scroll presented in the 1992 exhibition *Textiles and the Tai Experience in Southeast Asia* at the Textile Museum in Washington, D.C., and its accompanying catalogue.²² (The scroll is now on permanent exhibition in the Ubon National Museum.) A Thai scholar, Prasong Saihong, who has taken photographs of several scrolls, shared these with me, as did Dr. Sandra Cate. Over years of research I have



Fig. 4. Procession with the *Phra Wet* scroll circumambulating the *sala wat*, 1982

discussed scrolls with many Thai-Lao and examined and taken photographs of several. Finally, I have had the opportunity to devote intensive study to two scrolls in the *wat* of the village where I have based my research, referred to here by the dates of their donation, Buddhist Era 2537 (1994 C.E.) and B.E. 2544 (2001 C.E.). This material forms the basis of the descriptions and analysis that follow.

My inquiries in northeastern Thailand to ascertain the identities of scroll painters have yielded little information. Recently I attempted to make contact with contemporary manufacturers. The manager of the most important store selling Buddhist paraphernalia in a large northeastern Thai city declined to give me the address of the village family that makes scrolls. Ten or fifteen years ago, he told me, he used to resell scrolls sold to him by itinerant peddlers, but that source has now dried up and he relies on the nearby family-based workshop for the scrolls that he sells. The manager told me that he sells four to six scrolls a year, depending on the strength of the economy, but he noted that demand is steady: every *wat* needs a scroll, the scrolls wear out with use, and artistic styles change. Finally, since this is a way for people to make merit (*tham bun*) publicly, he observed, scrolls are donated even when a *wat* does not need a replacement (such was the case in the village I surveyed). While the local, family-based workshop from which he obtains his scrolls has standardized its production, he does not try to force a particular scroll on a consumer. The scroll that a person buys is determined by what connects with the purchaser or donor's heart (*thit chay*).

Scrolls are donated by a person or persons making merit, as are all *wat* objects. The names of donors are

often inscribed on their gifts to the temple, ranging from sections of the fence to preaching thrones, as well as on buildings. The names of donors are only rarely noted on scrolls, however, although villagers, especially those connected with *wat* business, may remember who gave a scroll and how much it cost. I am aware of only one scroll, the B.E. 2537 scroll currently held in the village *wat* I know best, that bears the name of the donors, prominently displayed in a panel at the scroll's end:²³

Paw Khamphaung Mae Tii
 Khaamphithak
 thawaay Wat Thaaaraat
 29 Tulaakhom 37
 Father Khaamphaung [and] Mother Tii
 Khaamphithak
 donate [this to] Temple Thaaarat [People's Harbor]
 29 October 2537 [1994]²⁴

The donors (a husband and wife) reportedly paid 2,500 *baat* (approximately \$100 at the exchange rate of the time) for a scroll almost 24 meters in length and the standard 94.5 cm wide painted on white cotton cloth (fig. 5).²⁵ This donation was superseded only seven years later by that of another donor, who gave the temple a longer (32 meters long, same standard width), more ornate scroll, bought for 4,500 *baat* (\$112.50 at the current exchange rate). This donor's name does not appear on the scroll.

Scrolls rarely indicate their maker, perhaps because they are apparently most often produced by workshops. In my research on many scrolls, only once have I seen the name of an individual, Naay Suwaan Aanchuu, written on a scroll in a village in Roi-et Province. Since this name is at the lower left of the introductory *Phra Malai*

scene and comes with no further identification, I suspect that it is the name of the head of the workshop that produced the scroll. None of the local villagers recognized the name.²⁶ I have been unable to distinguish any donor's or maker's name on the Walters scrolls.

Within the past ten to twenty years, several aspects of the style of Phra Wet scrolls have changed noticeably. In earlier scrolls, the background of white cotton was left unpainted, throwing the figures and other elements into relief, as in wall paintings documented by Ajaan Pairote Samosorn in his masterful catalogue of extant murals on temple walls in northeastern Thailand.²⁷ Given the striking similarities between temple murals and scrolls in their color, design, and placement around the upper edge of the building's walls, it seems reasonable to posit that scrolls and temple murals had a common aesthetic source. Temple murals were probably always a rare feature in northeastern Thailand, since Lao temple structures were small and often did not have walls suitable for painting.²⁸ The painting of the backgrounds of scrolls (usually made with a broad brush, with blue pigment to represent sky, and brown for earth [see fig. 5]), a trend evident in the last twenty years, has accompanied a reduction in the visual complexity of each panel and an increase in the size of the figures. The older scrolls at the Walters, presumably collected in the early to mid-1960s, fill the panels with actions and scenery; today, completeness consists in filling the background with color.

In all three Walters scrolls, as in contemporary scrolls, each chapter (*kan*) of the story is demarcated from its surroundings by a border. I have never seen a borderless scroll, painted to the edges of the cloth. Borders in contemporary scrolls are generally red and otherwise undecorated (see fig. 5]). Walters scroll 35.258 is distinctive in its use of light green to define the borders along the scroll's perimeter and between sections. One of the scrolls (35.256) uses a complex flower-and-leaf design, another (35.287) a fretted leaf design. With Ajaan Pairote (personal communication), who noted that extensive use of red was not a characteristic of northeastern Thai-Lao temple murals and that red is extensively used as a background as well as border color in central Thai art, I attribute the recent shift to red borders as evidence of central Thai influence on northeastern Thai-Lao art.

Ajaan Pairote associates the use of frames and a perimeter border in wall paintings with an attempt to imitate cloth scrolls. Behind the main Buddha statue in the hall for monks' ordinations (*ubosot*) of Wat Sanuanwaariiwatthanaaraam, Amphoe Baan Phai, Khon Kaen Province, Pairote photographed a double band of the *Vessantara Jataka*: the first twelve chapters in the upper



Fig. 5. B.E. 2537 *Phra Wet* scroll with a donor panel and portion of last panel

band are oriented left to right; the action in the last scene underneath moves in the opposite direction, from right to left, occupying the entire bottom register. (I will consider the significance of this reversal later.) Most of the painting is executed in shades of indigo, with details rendered in yellow, brown, and green. The border consists of an arrangement of entwined vines similar to those of the Walters scrolls.²⁹

Following the text, both contemporary and older scrolls divide the *Vessantara Jataka* into thirteen chapters, or sections. The title of each section usually appears in the panel or in the lower border, sometimes rendered in a flamboyant script. Sometimes the inscribed titles seem like afterthoughts; sometimes the writing is carelessly rendered, with words misspelled or spelled phonetically and squeezed into available space. Panels are sometimes filled with explanations of the episode depicted, as if the recitation of the text were superfluous or redundant. In Walters scroll 35.256 the title of each section is inscribed in Thai in the borders, as are the identities of the actors and sometimes a description of the activity.

While the Thai-Lao and Lao peoples speak a common language, albeit with subregional differences, the Thai-Lao of Thailand do not have a recognized writing system that accurately reflects their language's sounds. The Thai alphabet, based on central Thai usage, is sufficiently different that some Lao words cannot be accurately transcribed. The Lao alphabet, used on the northern and eastern sides of the Mekong River, contains characters that reflect the spoken language, but it is not taught on the Thai side. The script in two of the Walters scrolls (35.256 and 35.258) is Thai; that of the third (35.287) is Lao. The latter scroll's connection to Laos is unknown; what is known of its provenance indicates only that it was purchased by Miss Duke in Bangkok in the early 1960s.³⁰

Outside observers of the Phra Wet recitation have often remarked that monks add local color as they recite the story.³¹ In recitations I have attended, the name of the village and some of its particularities, which visiting monks might observe while being driven into the village or talking with its inhabitants, were incorporated into the performance. Divergences from the basic story line—local color and sometimes even erotic elements—occasionally appear in the scroll paintings as well.³² In other words, scrolls are a commentary on familiar village life, not simply “paintings on a wall.”

In addition to the depiction of the standard thirteen chapters of the *Jataka*, each scroll standardizes character portrayal. Palaces, elephants, some faces, and figures—particularly figures that appear repeatedly over the length of the scroll or in episodes such as Vessantara’s homecoming in panel 13, generally populated with ranks of soldiers and celebrants—are sketched in using some sort of block printing or stencil technique (see figs. 19 and 20). This becomes clear when examining a scene such as panel 13 on each scroll. Armies of figures and elephants march in the same direction. Indeed, these same stencils or blocks appear to be used in panel 12, in which the populace accompanies Vessantara’s and Maddi’s parents and children to the Himalayan forest to bring them back to the city.

The use of mechanical reproductive techniques is not limited to the depiction of figures. Scroll 35.256 makes copious use of the same block to print the large flowers that appear in some of the trees; another block was used to print the tightly bunched leaves, whereas the tree trunks and branches are drawn free-hand (see figs. 9 and 19). Such techniques appear both within a single scroll and among several different scrolls.

Still another iconic convention has become clear in this study. In the three scrolls acquired by the Walters, as well as the example preserved in the Ubon National Museum, the faces of women and girls, including Maddi, Vessantara’s wife, and Khanhaa, their daughter, nearly always look outward, toward the viewer, while men’s faces are usually represented in profile (see figs. 10, 12–15). Such gendered distinctions are absent from contemporary scrolls, where all principal figures face the viewer.

THE WALTERS SCROLLS

Each of the scrolls given by the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation to the Walters Art Museum (as well as the one given to the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco) contributes to our understanding of the Vessantara story,

even as each emphasizes different aspects. While all scrolls share the standard thirteen chapter (*kan*) format (see Table 1), the differences in their treatment of the story are noteworthy.³³

Introductory Panels

In most of the older scrolls and in all contemporary examples that I have surveyed, the *Vessantara Jataka* is preceded by a series of introductory panels. Such is the case in the three Walters scrolls, although they do not uniformly present the Phra Malai story, which is today considered the requisite introduction. The text and the reading are divided into two sections, Phra Malai 10,000 (*Phra Malai Muun*), and Phra Malai 100,000 (*Phra Malai Saen*.) The scrolls present Phra Malai in two different episodes: in hell, preaching to those who have descended there, and in heaven, at the Chulamani stupa, watching as celestial beings arrive with thousands upon thousands of attendants (the source of the numbers in the titles).³⁴ Both episodes provide inherently picturesque themes. Contemporary scrolls graphically depict the agonies of those who have committed adultery and are forced to climb up thorn trees. Of the three Walters scrolls, only scroll 35.258 shows Phra Malai in hell (fig. 6), where he addresses beings, including animals, in a boiling cauldron. All three Walters scrolls depict the opportunity that Phra Malai offers for release from suffering at the Chulamani stupa when the celestial beings arrive. He is attended by Indra and, at the end of the story, meets Maitteyya, the future Buddha. Maitteyya gives Phra Malai a message for humanity: if humans wish to meet Maitteyya in his rebirth and achieve release, they must listen to a recitation of the entire *Vessantara Jataka* in a single sitting, usually taken to mean a day and a night.

The third panel, which appears in the B.E. 2537 (1994 C.E.) and B.E. 2544 (2001 C.E.) scrolls that I examined in Thailand, but only on Walters scroll 35.258 (fig. 7), is glossed as *Sangkaat* in the panel titles and represents the moment in the Buddha’s achievement of enlightenment when he calls the Earth to witness, *Mahavijaya*. This reading begins in the early morning, about 4 am, following the afternoon and evening in which the scroll was brought into the *sala* and the Phra Malai passages read. The inclusion of this panel at the beginning of the *Vessantara Jataka* foreshadows the tale’s conclusion: Prince Vessantara, because of the merit made during this life, will be reborn as the Buddha. The devotion that Vessantara showed in making this merit will redound to his benefit in the next life, as the Buddha calls the Earth to witness to help him succeed in his quest. In depicting



Fig. 6. Panel. Phra Malai visiting hell, panel from scroll 35,258



Fig. 7. Panel. *Mahavijara*, the Buddha attaining enlightenment, panel from scroll 35,258.

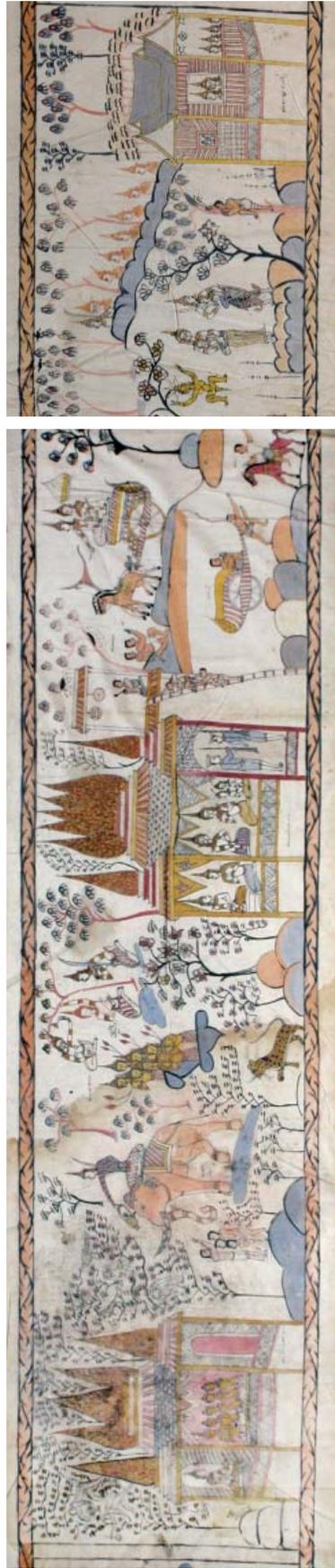


Fig. 8. Panels 1-4, from scroll 35,287

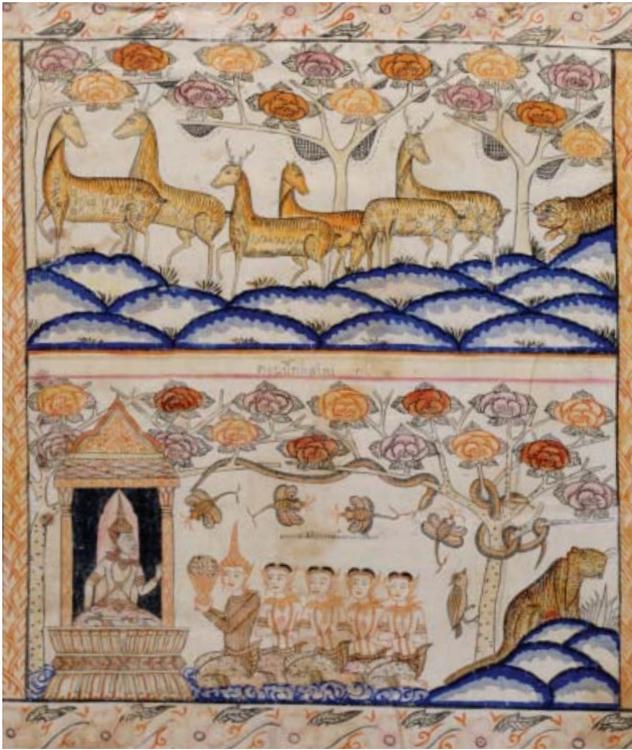


Fig. 9. Panel 2, from scroll 35.256

the end of Vessantara's quest before the *Vessantara Jataka* itself, these scrolls provide the viewer with knowledge of the story's conclusion to reinforce the significance of Vessantara's trials.

Following this early morning recitation, a double recitation takes place that is not presented in any scroll. *Kaathaaphan 1* and *Khaathaaphan 2*, recitations of a thousand stanzas each, are delivered by two junior monks sitting across from each other simultaneously reading as rapidly as possible from their manuscripts. This reading of double a thousand stanzas resonates with and presages the thousand stanzas of the *Vessantara Jataka* itself, as well as the various items specifically produced in quantities of a thousand each to accompany the recitation. Gifts are given to these monks (as they are to every reader), but few people listen to the reading. Since this occurs at about the time of the monks' morning meal, much other activity goes on simultaneously. Next the reading of the *Jataka* commences.³⁵

Sections 1–4: Phusatti, Vessantara, His Family, and Gift-Giving

Following the introductory exhortations, the Walters scrolls take different approaches to recounting the *Jataka* narrative.³⁶ Scroll 35.287 conflates the first four

sections, from the Ten Blessings bestowed on Princess Phusatti to the entry of Vessantara and his family into the Himalayan forest, into a single panel (fig. 8). While these sections use two pieces of cloths for this scroll, no border separates them: Phusatti is granted her wishes; Vessantara gives away the elephant and pours water over the upraised hands of the Brahmins to signal that the gift is complete; he discusses the gift of the elephant and his further obligations for giving with his wife, Maddi; and the couple and their children leave the kingdom, even as Vessantara gives away his horses and chariot. The panel concludes with the family's entry into the forest and their brief visit to Maddi's parents in their palace.

Scroll 35.256, in contrast, presents each of the four episodes separately (as they are most often treated in contemporary scrolls), but its approach is unusual. While the two Phra Malai panels each fill the full height of the scroll, the first panel of the *Vessantara Jataka* initiates a "split screen" treatment that is sustained in horizontally divided panels until the last panel, which again fills the entire height of the scroll.³⁷ In the first *Vessantara Jataka* panel, the lower half illustrates the episode in which Phusatti, with her four attendants, asks Indra to grant her wishes; the upper half, separated by a blank band, depicts stags menaced by a tiger in a grove of trees (fig. 9). The tiger appears in the lower half as well, under a large flowering tree in which two snakes are wrapped around branches and birds and bees play. There is no indication of menace, and whatever the meaning of the upper band, it is a departure from the text.

The second panel of scroll 35.256 continues the divided-panel format as it takes the story from the donation of the elephant through the departure of the family for the Himalayan forest. The third panel begins with Vessantara and Maddi and their children in the palace talking with the king and queen. The remainder of the lower half of the panel follows the story closely, with the family leaving the palace, giving the chariot horses to the four Brahmins, giving the chariot itself to four other Brahmins, and walking further into the forest, as Vessantara carries their son and Maddi their daughter. The upper portion of the panel shows the Brahmins leaving with the horses and then pushing and pulling the chariot; the two stags (gods in disguise) that pulled the chariot now stand idle under great flowering trees.

Panel 4 of this scroll continues the story with an almost exact duplication of the elements illustrated in the third panel. The palace is again on the left, this time with Vessantara and his family seated within; three royals are seated before him, presumably beseeching Vessantara to stay in the kingdom of Maddi's parents.



Fig. 10. Panels 2-4, from scroll 35.258.



Fig. 11. Panel 7, from scroll 35.258

The family leaves and Vessantara and Maddi carry their children as they did in the previous panel (these may not be identical block prints: those in panel 4 seem slightly larger than those in panel 3). The family proceeds and asks directions from Cetaputta, the hunter. (Cetaputta is shown setting out with an associate immediately to the right of the palace.) Since the palace roofs intrude into the upper register of this panel, only half the space is available for additional narrative. It shows two farmers with oxen, figures that do not appear in the conventional story. On the far right of the upper panel, however, Vessantara and his family are seated, clothed in tiger skins and peaked hermit headdresses, Maddi and the children facing Vessantara with hands clasped. This vignette is an indication that the family has arrived at the hermitages where Vessantara's goal will be fulfilled.

Scroll 35.258 takes a freer approach to the depiction of the *Vessantara Jataka*. The boundaries between early panels are somewhat porous. In panel 2, for example, the tusks of the elephant that Vessantara gives away and on which he rides project into the next panel (fig. 10), in which Vessantara pours water on the upraised hands of the Brahmins. There are eight Brahmins here, whereas nine were shown in panel 2 asking for the gift. Five Brahmins are shown dancing in the upper portion of panel 3, as two of them ride the elephant away. The gifts of the horses and the chariot, in which Vessantara rides alone, are depicted in the lower center, while at the upper right, the family proceeds, as if prancing, toward the kingdom of Ceta, where they are united with Maddi's parents in a palace at the extreme right. The function of the structure in the center is unknown. Titles appear in the lower border of both the left and right portions of this combined panel;³⁸ further to the right an inscription in the lower border may name the artist or donor.

Sections 5–7: Chuchok

Whereas sections 1 through 4 of the *Vessantara Jataka* define the work's moral theme, sections 5 through 7 establish the subplot. Section 5 introduces Chuchok and his young wife; sections 6 and 7 describe Chuchok's journey into the Himalayan forest to find Vessantara's hermitage. In each of the Walters scrolls, these sections are depicted in separate panels.³⁹

Scroll 35.256 continues its elaborate double-panel arrangement, crowding significant amounts of "additional" information into the representation. As in several other panels in this scroll, the action does not consistently proceed from left to right. Section 5 begins in the panel's lower-right corner with village women teasing

Chuchok's wife, establishing a right-to-left narrative sequence. Amitthida reproaches her elderly husband in the middle of the panel, while, on the left, the necessary depiction of Chuchok fondling her occurs. The upper portion of this panel initiates Chuchok's quest, in which he is first threatened by the hunter (introduced in the previous section) and then directed by him to Vessantara's hermitage.

Scroll 35.258, in addition to its other peculiarities, is noteworthy for its elaborate depiction of forests and accompanying flora and fauna. The Himalayan forest depicted in panel 7, through which Chuchok makes his way, is a verdant landscape in which Chuchok, Cetaputta, and the hermit Acchuta inhabit the margins (fig. 11), while the forest itself contains an abundance of fauna that dominate the field, including deer, wild oxen, lion cubs, and mythical maned beasts. Perhaps the most startling animal is a blue-bodied, red-ridged snake coiling its way through a quarter of the panel, juxtaposed with a wonderful green tree with a wasp's nest hanging from a leaf. On the right, approaching Acchuta's hermitage, magical plumed birds cavort above multicolored trees. The depictions of Acchuta and Chuchok pale beside the finery of the animals and plants of the forest.

Sections 8–11: Vessantara Gives Away All His Possessions

Sections 8 through 11 bring about the results of Vessantara's quest for perfect generosity with the help of Chuchok and Indra. These sections define the dramatic and emotional crux of the story. During the recitation of these passages the *sala* audience tends to fall silent and the recitations become increasingly focused and emotional. The scrolls, because of their two-dimensional nature, lack the emotional impact of oral storytelling. However, both text and scroll have a problem: because the focus of the action is on Vessantara, Chuchok, and the children at the hermitage, Maddi must not return and spoil the gift. Maddi's role thus becomes relegated to section 9 of the text; however, each scroll deals with this issue differently.

Scroll 35.287, the plainest of the three Walters scrolls, preserves the simultaneity of Maddi's predicament with Vessantara's donation of their children by depicting all the actors in the same panel (fig. 12). The story commences in the panel's lower left, with Chuchok kneeling and saluting Vessantara, seated in his hermitage, as the children look in through a back window. (The title of this section is written in Lao under the hermitage.) Maddi appears above the hermitage, in the panel's upper left, kneeling before three gods disguised as wild beasts



Fig. 12. Panel 8, from scroll 35.287

while carrying baskets suspended from a shoulder pole (a posture difficult to maintain).

The action moves to the lower center, as Chuchok leads the children away, having bound their hands with ropes. To Chuchok's right are three stags, one, with an enormous penis, mounting another. The position of the stags and the tree to their right directs the viewer to the upper half of the panel, where the story continues; however, it reverses movement, going from right to left. Chuchok slips and loses his grip on the ropes. The children escape and hide in a pond, the replica of which, the *sra bookkaaranii*, has been placed in the middle of the sacred space in the center of the *sala*. At this moment the scroll, the objects in the *sala*, and the recitation become congruent, focusing attention on the emotional crux of the story, in which Vessantara's quest for perfect generosity brings about the destruction of his family and the enslaving of his children.

The panel concludes on the far right: Chuchok climbs a tree to sleep in a hammock, holding ropes attached to the hands of the children to prevent their escape. Two gods see the children's predicament, descend, and comfort and protect them while holding the ropes taut so that Chuchok will not realize that the children are free.

The treatment of the same narrative in scroll 35.256 adheres more closely to the text. Interestingly, the position of Maddi in these two panels is almost identical. However, in scroll 35.256, Maddi is shown simply walking and collecting forest products. The threatening beasts have not yet arrived.

Scroll 35.258 deals in a different way with the representation of simultaneous events in a linear narrative. Events taking place at Vessantara's hermitage are treated in panel 8 (fig. 13). In the lower right, Chuchok asks Vessantara for the children, who kneel. Vessantara pours water as a sign of his sincerity in giving this gift. This is not represented in the other scrolls. Above and to the left, Chuchok leads the children away, while Vessantara sits with his hands in a blessing position. In the far upper left, Chuchok is upside down, a clear sign that he has stumbled, giving the children the opportunity to escape. However, the children are not depicted running away; their heads appear in the water of the pond, threatened by a crocodile. Maddi does not appear in this panel. She returns home and discovers the children are missing, addresses Vessantara in her sorrow, and faints. Vessantara "raised her head and held it on his lap, and sprinkled her with water."⁴⁰ All three Walters scrolls show Maddi's head on Vessantara's lap, and two show him sprinkling water to revive her.

Scroll 35.258, however, varies the sequence of the narrative in the panels following panel 9. This discontinuity makes apparent the disjunction between the events at the hermitage and the children's story. Following Vessantara's gift of the children to Chuchok, the text and two scrolls (35.287 and 35.256) focus on Maddi's return, her discovery that the children are missing, her fainting, and Vessantara's steps to revive her (fig. 14). The scrolls continue to focus on the couple in panel 10: Indra's determination to ensure that Vessantara gives the ultimate



Fig. 13. Panel 8, from scroll 35.258



Fig. 15. Interpolated panel 9a, from scroll 35.258



Fig. 14. Panel 9, from scroll 35.287

gift, his wife, without the threat of Brahmin interference which might actually result in Maddi's permanent loss. When Vessantara gives him his spouse, Indra "reveals his identity and returns Maddi."⁴¹ Thus, the text and these two scrolls continue to emphasize the sequence of Vessantara's "perfect generosity" and the fulfillment of his goal. In so doing, they neglect the emotional drama of the children.

Scroll 35.258 adheres closely to the text in bringing Maddi back to the hermitage and reuniting her with Vessantara, but it defers the account of the perfection of Vessantara's quest, his last gift, to illustrate the episode of Chuchok and the children. An extra panel joins two apparently distinct actions that are recounted in the same text section (fig. 15). In the upper left Chuchok has climbed into a hammock suspended from a tree branch to evade the forest beasts. He leaves the children below and

ties the rope securely around a branch, making the children (who cover their faces in fear) fend for themselves on the forest floor; two angels come to their rescue, holding the children in their arms. Chuchok's treatment of the children is balanced in the lower right by the appearance of a coffin containing Chuchok's body carried by two men. While a small space exists between the two photographs from which this reconstruction is made, the partially decipherable title in the lower frame conveys some of this interpolated panel's meaning, *mahaa . . . song-sakaan*, "great . . . paying of last respects." Moreover, the treatment by the gods in the left part of the frame visually foreshadows the royal treatment accorded the children when Chuchok sells them to their grandfather. Chuchok's death and the purchase of the children are the themes of this scroll's panel 10. Scroll 35.258 continues this emphasis on the children's journey, thus delaying Vessantara's fulfillment, by reversing sections 11 and 10.

The focus of all three Walters scrolls in panel 11 is twofold: the ransoming of the children and Chuchok's gluttony, death, and funeral. Of the three, scroll 35.256 adheres most closely to the text, in its double-panel arrangement, which moves from lower left to right and then upper left to right (fig. 16) (as distinct from other panels in this scroll, which illustrate the narrative in other directions)

In the lower left, Chuchok sleeps in the tree while the children are below. Next he leads the children by the rope and asks two hunters for directions (they resemble the hunters who showed him the way to Vessantara's hermitage in panel 6). Chuchok is next shown with the children in King Sanjaya's palace; the man on the palace's rear porch may be counting money with an abacus. The right half of this lower part of the panel depicts Chuchok's feast and his ensuing death.

The upper left half of the panel balances the lower right, showing the celebration that ensues following



Fig. 16. Panel 11, from scroll 35.256

Chuchok's death due to gluttony. The panel's upper right treats Chuchok's funeral and cremation. The funeral procession is led by two individuals, one of whom may be a monk, the other a novice, wearing robes that resemble those worn by the Buddha and Phra Malai at the beginning of this scroll.⁴² The men following the coffin hold flags that will be placed in the ground to help the deceased's spirit find its way to the body, while two men, one of them apparently drunk, carry a jar of rice beer. The cremation scene itself is explicit, showing Chuchok's body (including his exploded stomach) on a bed of flaming coals.

The depiction of the episode in scroll 35.287 is not nearly so graphic or detailed. At the lower right the children are presented to the king in his palace, which extends into the upper part of the panel; in the center men supervise Chuchok's funeral; wrestlers compete in the lower left; and, in the upper left, as the funeral procession takes Chuchok to be cremated, birds fly in to partake of the feast of his body.

The depiction of the episode in scroll 35.258 is the least detailed of the three; it includes only two episodes: Chuchok's death and the presentation of the children to their grandfather (fig. 17). (Chuchok's funeral was alluded to in interpolated panel 9A.) Indra's request for Maddi, which one would expect to see represented in panel 9, is represented out of sequence in panel 11. While

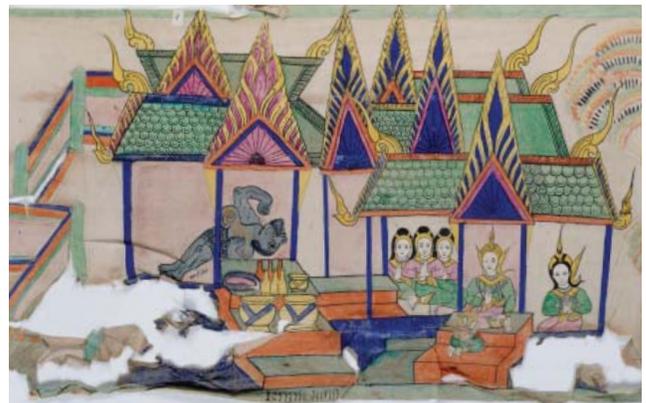


Fig. 17. Panel 10, from scroll 35.258

this leads directly into the two panels of celebration that follow, it also delays the depiction of Vessantara's supreme act of generosity until a late stage in the narrative. Panel 11 in scroll 35.258 represents the episode more economically than do the other Walters scrolls: a Brahmin asks Vessantara for the gift of Maddi, but the Brahmin's identity is not explored, and the consequences of the gift are not alluded to. The barrenness of this depiction accentuates the "left over" position of the scene and this part of the story as far as this scroll is concerned.

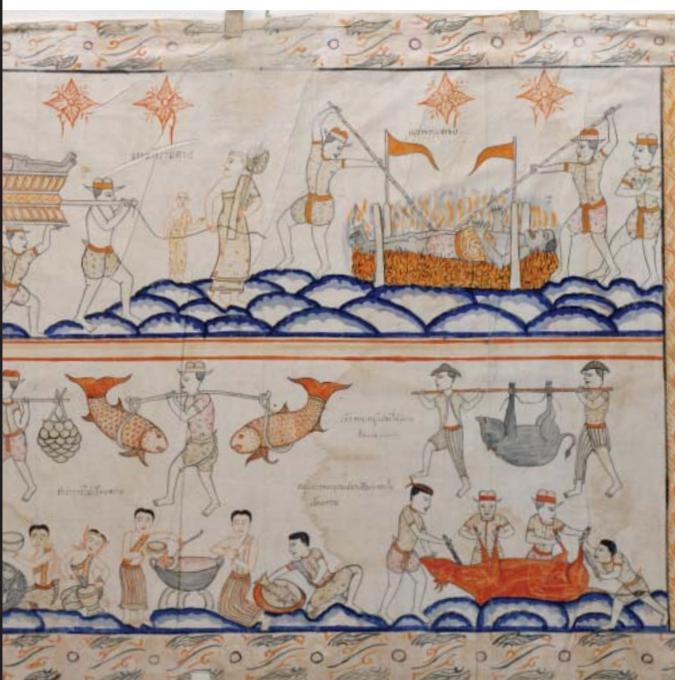


Fig. 18. Panel 12, from scroll 35.256

Sections 12 and 13: Reconciliation

Section 12 of the *Vessantara Jataka* reunites the Six Royals: King Sanjaya and Queen Pusatti reunite with their son, Prince Vessantara, and daughter-in-law, Maddi; Vessantara and Maddi are reunited with their children, Chaalii and Khanhaa. However, in addition and more directly, the text and all of the scrolls describe the reconciliation of the kingdom's inhabitants with their prince. Thus, panel 12 plays an important role in accounting for the presence of the villagers in the procession that follows.

The episode of the reconciliation, at which King Sanjaya asks Vessantara to return to his rightful home at the palace, takes place in the forest at Vessantara's hermitage, to which the grandparents bring the children. While King Sanjaya is at the forefront in two scrolls, paying homage to his son, scroll 35.256 shows four men approaching Vessantara sitting in his hermitage while the royal family—grandparents and grandchildren (and one other unidentified royal)—are seated to the right in the lower half of the frame (fig. 18). The upper half (annotated with indecipherable writing) seems to depict the same four men, half-concealed by indigo rocks representing the Himalayas, presenting their four bouquets to Maddi, who approaches them while Vessantara holds her wrist.

The two other scrolls populate the scene with masses of citizens or attendants of King Sanjaya. Scroll 35.258 shows the citizens massed opposite the hermitage; in scroll 35.287, the citizens are depicted as frenetic dancers, while King Sanjaya's procession with soldiers and four elephants marches toward the hermitage. Scroll 35.287 is the more elaborate of the two representations, depicting a procession led by four elephants entering from the right followed by soldiers and dancers, while on the left, the king and queen bow before Vessantara.

In the final panel, each of the three Walters scrolls depicts elephants carrying royals, soldiers on horseback and marching, and groups of citizens making music, dancing, and drinking. In all three a white elephant is part of the procession.⁴³ In two (35.287 and 35.256), Vessantara rides on this elephant, while in 35.258 the elephant is without a rider. In 35.287 only four elephants are shown, each with one rider (the children are not present in this scroll's final panel). However, 35.256 shows five elephants, the last with the two children on it. Vessantara rides on the middle, white elephant (fig. 19)

In scroll 35.258, the riders are somewhat oddly distributed among the three elephants; the first carries two, King Sanjaya and Queen Pursatti, while the second and third elephants each carry three personages (fig. 20), segregated by gender, as indicated by the form of their crowns. Vessantara and Maddi must have the child of



Fig. 19. Panel 13, from scroll 35.256

their gender riding with them, paralleling their travel to the forest (panel 3) with an unidentified angel.

In all three of the Walters scrolls, the scroll in the Ubon National Museum, the wall painting referred to earlier at Wat Sanuanwaariiwatthanaaraam, Amphoe Baan Phai, and all other scrolls I observed and photographed that were produced between 1970 until approximately 1985, the last panel presents a seeming paradox. The procession in panel 13 reverses the overall direction of the scroll. The procession marches *into* the scroll, that is, right to left, as distinct from the direction of the rest of the painting, which generally proceeds from left to right. This iconographic convention seems to have changed in scrolls produced over the past fifteen years; contemporary scrolls have the procession marching from left to right, “off” the scroll, continuing the left to right narrative of the scroll.

The most elaborate example of this apparently older style occurs in the Ubon scroll, in which the procession reverses at panel 12, as King Sanjaya and Queen Pursatti ask Vessantara to return to Sivi. The Ubon scroll has no formal panel 13; rather the whole scroll becomes panel 13. The procession wends its way beneath the scroll’s

upper border back to the city and palace where the story began. The procession is led by Chuchok’s funeral cortege, which continues back through the gates of Sivi so that the cremation can be held outside the city walls (as would normally take place) under trees marking the beginning of section 2. Above and behind them the royal elephants, military forces, and celebrating citizens follow. Mattiebelle Gittinger has interpreted this feature of the Ubon scroll as an indication that it was intended, like most scrolls, to be mounted around the meeting hall of the monastery; in this instance the initial and concluding scenes would be joined in a single panel.⁴⁴

The current display of this textile, high on the wall of the central room of the old Ubon provincial headquarters, permits this effect. While I have never seen a scroll completely encircle the inside walls of a *sala*, Gittinger’s observation that the scroll and the story end where they begin is an apt observation. Steven Collins notes, “In the abstract perspective of Buddhist systematic thought the real tragedy of everyday happiness is simply to be in time, to be in a story at all.”⁴⁵ The circularity in these scrolls emphasizes that. To follow through on the implications of Collins’s point, nirvana does not occur in the



Fig. 20. Left half of panel 13, from scroll 35.258

Vessantara Jataka, either in the story or in any scroll. However, while the people present at the end (except for Chuchok) are the people that began the story, they have changed and the potential for humanity's future has changed. Some scrolls allude to this possibility by depicting the Buddha's calling the earth to witness in the panels that precede the *Vessantara* story.

The representation of one element of the procession seems to have changed recently. The last scenes in the two most recent scrolls used in the village in which I work depict the celebratory procession oriented to the right, marching off the scroll, thus continuing the linear thread of the painting. If these scrolls were mounted so that the end joined the beginning, the Phra Malai and Sangkhaat panels would intervene. I am unsure of the implications of this reversal and do not wish to over-read the evidence, but this change alters the way in which these scrolls are carried in the welcoming procession. My photographs taken during the 1970 and 1982 processions show the scroll held by the paraders on their left side as they bring it into and through the village. Thus, the Phra Malai panels and those of the ten boons lead the procession; panel 13 depicting celebratory procession that marks the end of the story, is last, and the participants move in the same direction in which the scroll is carried. Stationary viewers would see the story unfold in front of them as the scroll was carried in the procession. Today, the scroll is carried by the paraders to their right, with panel 13 at the front; the procession on the scroll thus marches directly ahead, leading the way to the *wat*. Viewers now see the story in reverse, with the story's beginning coming at the end of the procession.

When I asked about this, I was assured that scrolls had always been carried as they are now. Unfortunately, I did not have the photos of earlier years to show my friends how they have changed. In one sense the villagers haven't changed: the procession on the scroll continues

to march forward, regardless of whether it is on the old or new scrolls. In another sense, however, the circularity of the story apparent in the village procession has been broken.

CONCLUSIONS

As monks recite each section of the *Vessantara Jataka*, a layman retrieves and lights long candles contributed by the households in the community, which had been placed on the *haan Phra Phut*: the platform within the *sala*. He also lights shorter candles, each made with wicks composed of strands equal in number to the number of *kaathaa* in each *kan*. The lay sponsor of the section sits nearby as the recitation takes place (fig. 21). When the reading ends, another attendee strikes the temple's gong and the sponsor gives gifts to the reader. That monk steps down and a new monk takes his place for the next section. Usually one person, household, or kin group sponsors a chapter, and its representatives give gifts to the monk at the conclusion of the recitation.

When the recitation, sometimes taking as long as twenty-four hours, is finished, either in the short or long version, the audience is exhausted. Elements associated with the recitation of the *Vessantara Jataka* are eagerly sought as souvenirs, relics, or charms. Foremost among these is the water that has been sanctified by the candles burning above it; sometimes there is competition among the audience to see who can get the most. Members of the laity also remove some of the dangling decorations. They take these home as decoration and, in the case of the strings of rice, feed the rice to chickens and tie the string around the wrists of family members as good luck.

The next morning Phra Uppakut is returned to the water source from which he came. The *tayok wat* leads a small procession of attendees at the morning service to



the water source from which he called Phra Uppakut. He delivers a short blessing as he and others place the disposable items that were kept with Phra Uppakut's things in the water. His non-disposable items, such as monks' robes, bowl, and umbrella, remain in the *sala*, kept for next year. At one *wat* a short funeral service for Chuchok is conducted; I have not heard of this elsewhere. After the morning service, the painted scroll is taken down, rolled up, and stored until next year. No special ceremony is connected with this. Sooner or later the flags and other outside material are retrieved and stored. Very quickly, the *sala* and *wat* grounds return to their normal state, ready for the next major ceremony, usually Songkran, the Thai and Lao mid-April New Year, when the *wat* will again be the center of attention. Life in the village continues.

With the exception of the three scrolls now at the Walters Art Museum, the scroll at the Asian Art Museum in San Francisco, the two European scrolls, and one scroll at the Ubon National Museum in Thailand, little attention has been paid to the Vessantara Jataka scrolls of northeastern Thailand and lowland Laos. They are rarely collected and, apparently, rarely preserved. Moreover, while they may be part of a great tradition of narrative painting in scroll format extending throughout Asia, no recognition of this association seems to have been made.⁴⁶

However, the Vessantara scrolls have great meaning in each village's annual celebration. They "act" in this performance; the pictures painted on them provide an essential charter for welcoming Prince Vessantara back into the city/village that holds the festival in his honor. At the same time, the cloth scroll draped around the *sala* walls provides proof of Vessantara's presence during the telling of his story. The materiality of the scroll is reinforced through the other objects in and around the *sala*, such as banana and sugar cane stalks, flags, and decorations which signal the villagers' welcome to him and his family. The communal nature of the decorations, with contributions from every household, allows all citizens to participate in his achievement, even as they reflect on the difficulty of "perfect generosity." Finally, the pond with turtle, fish, and lotuses, which becomes a place of refuge for Vessantara and Maddi's children, illustrates that the artifacts, not just the story's telling, have an impact on everyone, parents and children, and especially on parents who have seen their children mature and move away.

The Jataka story is complicated. Its recitation deserves to be understood and analyzed as performance. The artifacts that accompany the festival and, in the case



Fig. 21. Sponsors attending *Hok Krasat* presentation, 9 April 2006

of the scroll, bring it about, should be understood in this context. Their purpose is not to "recite" the story, but to bring Vessantara, his times, his success, and his family, to the celebration. The close examination of these scrolls, together with the close examination of the text and its recitations, give us a more accurate understanding of the role of Theravada Buddhism in the lives of the inhabitants of northeastern Thailand and lowland Laos. The Walters Art Museum and Hiram W. Woodward, Jr., are to be congratulated on having initiated this exploration.

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NOTES

My deepest thanks go to the members of the northeastern Thai village in which I live—monks, novices, *tayok wat*, and laity—who have so generously shared their lives and knowledge with me and assisted in this and other research. I also wish to thank the National Research Council of Thailand, which granted research permission. Thanks also are due to the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation for providing digital copies of photographs for analysis and publication, Dr. Hiram W. Woodward, Jr., for sharing his notes of the scrolls, the editors of this journal, who have paid close attention to the argument of this paper, and Dr. Forrest McGill for his close reading of the text.

1. The Duke scrolls have been described briefly in Nancy Tingley's presentation of the collection: N. Tingley, *Doris Duke: The Southeast Asian Art Collection* (New York, 2003), 61–62.
2. At least two others exist in Europe: Henry Ginsburg sent me pictures of one in the British Museum (inv. no. 1926.0217) and Christine Hemmet has sent photographs of three fragments of another now held by the new Musée du Quai Branly in Paris (inv. no. 71.1978.23.172–74).

3. For Burma, see M. Spiro, *Buddhism and Society: A Great Tradition and Its Burmese Vicissitudes* (Berkeley, 1971), 107–8; for Sri Lanka, see M. Cone and R. F. Gombrich, *The Perfect Generosity of Prince Vessantara* (Oxford, 1977), xxxv–xliv; for Thailand, see C. F. Keyes, *Thailand: Buddhist Kingdom as Modern Nation-State* (Boulder, Colo., 1989), 179–81.
4. Songsri Praphatthaung, *Moradok Sing Thau Nay Phraphuttasaatsanaa* (Heritage of woven things in the Buddhist religion) (in Thai) (Bangkok, 2537/1994), 19, in a comprehensive listing of Thai textiles used in Buddhism, notes that long scrolls are a northeastern Thai phenomenon, while individual Vessantara paintings, on cloth or wood, are characteristic of central Thailand. Forest McGill, “Painting the ‘Great Life,’” in J. Schober, ed., *Sacred Biography in the Buddhist Traditions of South and Southeast Asia* (Honolulu, 1997), 195–217, has written an important article on four Vessantara paintings held by the Phoenix Art Museum, including an appendix listing the locations of “several scenes from the *Vessantara Jataka* dating from the seventeenth through the nineteenth century.” Henry Ginsburg, in *Thai Manuscript Painting* (London, 1989) and in his essay in this volume, wrote extensively on Thai painting. None of the works cited by these authors, however, are about painted scrolls.
5. While many things have changed in the past fifty years in northeastern Thailand, the basic distinction between the rice-growing season and the festival/kin-strengthening, money-making season persists. W. J. Klausner, “*Nak aw, Bao si*: The Work Cycle in a Northeastern Thai Village,” in *Reflections on Thai Culture: Collected Writings of William J. Klausner* (Bangkok, 2509/1966; reprinted 1993), 53–69, presents a succinct description of this distinction.
6. S. J. Tambiah, *Buddhism and the Spirit Cults in North-east Thailand* (Cambridge, 1970), 160–75 and pl. 3; W. J. Klausner, “Ceremonies and Festivals in a Northeastern Thai Village,” in *Reflections on Thai Culture*, 46–48; W. J. Klausner, *Reflections: One Year in an Isaan Village circa 1955* (Bangkok, 2000), 96–101
7. Tambiah (*Buddhism and the Spirit Cults*, 160–75 and pl. 3), and Klausner (“Ceremonies and Festivals 46–48, and *Reflections*, 96–101) describe the scrolls as paintings, giving the impression that they are discrete panels. The photographs that accompany the descriptions show that these are scrolls.
8. S. Collins, *Nirvana and Other Buddhist Felicities: Utopias of the Pali Imaginaire*, Cambridge Studies in Religious Traditions 12 (Cambridge, 1998), 503.
9. G. E. Gerini, *A Retrospective View and Account of the Origin of the That Mahà Ch’at Ceremony (Mahà Jàti Desanà): Or, Exposition of the Tale of the Great Birth as Performed in Siam* (Bangkok, 1892; repr. 1976), 25.
10. Robert Brown shows that the visual representations of *jatakas* on South and Southeast Asian architectural monuments are intended to “locate the Buddha and his teaching, not to tell a story,” but he does not consider contemporary northeastern Thai/Lao scrolls in his argument. The present essay contends that the behaviors of villagers with and toward the Vessantara scrolls in the context of village and temple, “even [as] the visual images are organized to reflect the narrative nature of a verbal text [events related through time],” are primarily meant to make Vessantara and his achievements locatable and manifest, not simply to retell the story. R. L. Brown, “Narrative as Icon: The Jataka Stories in Ancient India and Southeast Asian Architecture,” J. Schober, ed., *Sacred Biography in the Buddhist Traditions of South and Southeast Asia* (Honolulu, 1997), 80.
11. P. Lévy, *Buddhism: A ‘Mystery Religion’?* (New York, 1968; first ed., 1957).
12. This formulation agrees with that of M. I. Cohen, T. E. Behrend, and T. L. Cooper in their discussion of “The *Barikan* Banner of Gegecik,” *Archipel* 59 (2000), 97–144. “There was said to be a ‘power’ (*pribawa*) attached to the banners, and, once they were put up, the space they demarked” (107).
13. S. Cate, *Making Merit, Making Art: A Thai Temple in Wimbledon* (Honolulu, 2003).
14. These thirteen pairs of objects do not seem related to the thirteen sections of the *Vessantara Jataka*. The number thirteen is used on many other occasions in northeastern Thai-Lao ritual.
15. The day prior to *muu boom* is termed *muu khaaw tom*, the day for making *khaaw tom*, but this is often abbreviated because most festivals today accommodate a two-day weekend. I have previously discussed how this festival has changed over the more than thirty-five years during which I have been in attendance: H. L. Lefferts, “Evolving Rituals: Globalization and the Cycle of Festivals in a Northeast Thai Village,” paper presented at *Crossroads and Commodification: A Symposium on Southeast Asian Art*. Center for South and Southeast Asian Studies, University of Michigan, 25–26 March 2000; H. L. Lefferts, “Problematising Traditional Ritual in a Modern Northeast Thai Village: Transformations in the Bun Maha Chat,” paper presented at the *Annual Meeting of the International Association of Buddhist Studies*, Bangkok, 2002. In the present essay, I focus on the festival as it now takes place over a weekend. Villages in a small area attempt to rotate their festivals between February and April, so that they do not overlap. However, because the Thai work week is becoming increasingly standardized on a European-American model with Saturday and Sundays “off,” the choice of days on which to hold the festival is becoming increasingly narrow.
16. For further information on Uppakut, see Tambiah, *Buddhism and the Spirit Cults*, 168–78; and J. Strong, *The Legend and Cult of Upagupta: Sanskrit Buddhism in North India and Southeast Asia* (Princeton, 1992).
17. The *tayok wat* reads from a published volume of collected invocations.
18. Patrick Jory has written insightful articles on some of the political meanings behind the act of welcoming the person who will become a Buddha in his next life into the village. “The *Vessantara Jataka*, *Barami*, and the *Bodhisatta*-Kings: The Origin and Spread of a Premodern Thai Concept of Power,” *Crossroads: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 161(1) (2002), 152–94; and “Thai and Western Buddhist Scholarship in the Age of Colonialism: King Chulalongkorn Redefines the *Jatakas*,” *Journal of Asian Studies* 61(3) (2002), 891–918. Certainly these meanings persist in the northeastern Thai celebrations that I have attended.
19. Sandra Cate (personal communication) coined a felicitous phrase, “murals on the move,” for this grand procession, in which the actions of people duplicate the painted pictures. She was moved to this description as she saw a *Bun Phra Wet* procession held in Roi-et City in northeastern Thailand’s geographical center. In this procession villages cooperate and compete, each village illustrating a section of the *jataka*. The villagers use floats, thus providing active, moving stages that duplicate the progression of the cloth scroll.
20. B. P. Brereton, *Thai Tellings of Phra Malai: Texts and Rituals Concerning a Popular Buddhist Saint* (Tempe, Arizona, 1995).
21. Each scroll is identified by a number from the Duke collection and a Walters accession number: Duke 30.36.1–5 is Walters 35.287–291 (this scroll is in five pieces but one continuous scroll), Duke 30.65 = Walters 35.256, and Duke 30.76 = Walters 35.258; Walters numbers are used in this paper.
22. M. Gittinger and H. L. Lefferts, *Textiles and the Tai Experience in Southeast Asia* (Washington, D.C., 1992), 124–29.
23. Note that although this donation information is at the “end” of the scroll, given that the scroll is carried with the end of the story at the front, the donation panel would have been first; see below.

24. This donation was made in October, probably part of a *Bun Katin* at the end of the Rains Retreat as one of several important gifts by this couple. It would not have been used then, but kept until the next *Bun Phra Wet* before it was carried in procession.
25. This donation parallels those noted by McGill, "Painting the 'Great Life.'"
26. This situation is unfortunate and deserves further research. Recent work on Bengali scrolls has made comparative work potentially quite productive. See P. Ghosh, "Story of a Storyteller's Scroll," *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 37 (2000), 166–85; idem, "Unrolling a Narrative Scroll: Artistic Practice and Identity in Late-Nineteenth-Century Bengal," *Journal of Asian Studies* 62(3) (2003), 835–71; B. Hauser, "From Oral Tradition to 'Folk Art': Reevaluating Bengali Scroll Paintings," *Asian Folklore Studies* 61 (2002), 105–22. However, even Sharma in his comprehensive introductory chapter, "Scroll Painting in Ancient India and Asian Countries," in *The Indian Painted Scroll* (Varanasi, 1993), does not mention the Thai-Lao or Lao painted scroll. For his information on Thailand he relied on S. Diskul (see *ibid.*, 9–10). Unlike Indian practices, there is no indication that northeastern Thai-Lao or lowland Lao scrolls have been used as backdrops for itinerant storytellers (although it might be said that Theravada Buddhist monks fulfill that role).
27. Pairote Samosorn, *Chitrakaam Faa Phanang (E-sarn Mural Paintings)* (in Thai and English) (Khon Kaen, Thailand, 2532/1989).
28. Few of these older buildings remain from the push to modernize and for individuals to make merit by donating new and more ostentatious structures, often in imitation of central Thai temple buildings. This was a major reason for Ajaan Pairote's research and his handsomely illustrated book.
29. Pairote, *Chitrakaam Faa Phanang*, 202–3.
30. Tingley, *Doris Duke*, 15–16.
31. See above, note 6
32. Even the most colorful of the Walters scrolls does not equal a scroll photographed by Ajaan Prasong Saihung, which is also the scroll referred to earlier with copious amounts of writing.
33. I also use the word "panel" to describe a section's scene in a scroll.
34. B. P. Brereton, *Thai Tellings of Phra Malai*, 54–55.
35. The recitation of the story can be in either a long form in which monks read the complete text, or a shortened form, called *Hok Krasat* (Six Royals), with three to six monks reciting and singing (*lam*). This shortened form, which can take place over the course of an afternoon, seems better suited to the busy lives of many northeasterners who must return to work, sometimes as far away as Bangkok, the next day. This shortened presentation is called *thet siang*. Wajuppa notes that this assists in preserving forms of old Thai-Lao language and oral recitation. Wajuppa Tossa, "Isaan Storytelling," in C. Borden and P. Seitel, ed., *1994 Festival of American Folklife* (Washington, 1994), 52. Audio-tapes and CDs of famous monks reciting and in *lam* are available. Whether the short or long recitation is used, the welcoming of Phra Wet and his family to the kingdom remains an essential act carried out to initiate the festival.
36. While I pay detailed attention to each panel of the three scrolls in this section, it is possible to assert that the most important aspect is not these details, but rather the "iconic" nature of the scroll as an aspect of the total festival. See Brown, "Narrative as Icon." While I agree with that approach, having seen the lack of attention accorded the scrolls during the recitation but noting the acknowledgement of Vessantara's presence throughout the performance, it is also important to note the artistic conventions that seem to prevail in the Vessantara scrolls. This essay attempts to begin that discussion. My analysis follows the text in emphasizing some sections—those with greater emotional impact—over others that are given more emphasis in the scrolls themselves.
37. Plate 3 in Tambiah, *Buddhism and the Spirit Cults*, opposite page 160, shows a scroll split in three.
38. Neither of these titles is clear. The title on the left is *Thaannakan*, but it is spelled without its concluding, unsounded consonant, which would be an indication that this is a borrowed word. The title on the right includes *kan*, meaning a chapter of the Jataka and, on the right, *Phra Wet*. However, it is unclear what is between these.
39. There is a possibility that this is not true for all scrolls. The photographs for scroll 35.287 do not overlap.
40. Steven Collins, *Nirvana and Other Buddhist Felicities*, has focused on this section of the story, especially on the evolution in the relationship between Vessantara and Maddi and Vassantara's increasing "humanness."
41. *Ibid.*, 516.
42. This is a seeming contradiction, because Buddhism could not have been founded until Vessantara had died and his karma had been reborn. This same paradox occurs in both of the more recent scrolls.
43. Collins, *Nirvana and Other Buddhist Felicities*, 519–20, observes that the text gives the age of the white elephant that goes to receive Vessantara as sixty years. He notes that this could not be the white elephant that Vessantara gave away at the beginning of the Jataka. No scroll depicts a white elephant in panel 12.
44. Gittinger and Lefferts, *Textiles and the Thai Experience*, 126–29.
45. Collins, *Nirvana and Other Buddhist Felicities*, 554.
46. See note 28.

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