



## Buddhism

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Buddhism is a religion that originated in India, founded on the teachings of Buddha. Theravada Buddhism, which spread southward, is known to have preserved the teachings of Buddha in the purest form, and is practiced by approximately 90 percent of the population in Thailand, Myanmar and Cambodia. Historically, Buddhism has been deeply linked to the arts in these countries. In the contemporary art world, Thai artist Montien Boonma (1953-2000) is internationally recognized for his works that incorporate Buddhist philosophy and thought. Buddhism and art are still closely related in Thailand, as exemplified by the construction of a real temple by a currently active artist. However, the relationship between Buddhism and art has not always been amicable in nature. Compared to countries such as China, Japan and Vietnam where Mahayana Buddhism flourished, in the south, the divinity of temples, Buddhist statues and priests are higher and social sanctions are imposed upon those who violate their divinity. For example in Thailand, there was an incident where a student from a rural art school painted an "Ultraman Buddha," which sparked great criticism on social media as being sacrilegious (2019). While some have claimed that the face of Ultraman was initially inspired by a Sukhothai-style image of the Buddha, this radical "reverse borrowing" continues to stir much controversy, prompting every time the fundamental questioning of people's religious beliefs. Younger generations in particular find themselves in anguish over their inability to accept faith in Buddhism wholeheartedly. The Japanese concept of *ikigai*, or "reason for being" (which has no direct translation in Thai), is also recently becoming a subject of discussion.



A mural inside the Wat Phra Kaew in Bangkok depicting the “Ramakien” epic (partial image)



Montien Boonma, *Zodiac of Houses* (1998-1999)  
(Installation view of the Bangkok Art Biennale, 2018)



Wat Rong Khun, also known as the White Temple, designed and constructed by Chalermchai Kositpipat (Chiang Rai, Thailand)

Source: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/jlascar/50333655672/>



The Ultraman Buddha painting that stirred controversy in Thailand

### Related Links

- Wat Phra Kaew (English · Thai) <https://www.royalgrandpalace.th/en/home>
- Montien's atelier (Thai) <https://m.facebook.com/MontienAtelier/>
- Wat Rong Khun (Thai) <http://www.xn--22cj2bwa1cwa8b3a2euie.com/>

- Ultraman-Buddha Controversy (example)

<https://www.bangkokpost.com/thailand/general/1745544/>