

Abbot faces outcry over restoration

Efforts to repair temple murals might be harming rather than helping them

Published: 27/03/2012 at 02:48 AM

Newspaper section: News

Bangkok Post

A temple abbot is denying residents' claims that precious mural art under his care has been damaged by poor restoration work.



The main hall of Wat Phrathat Lampang Luang is being restored. PATTANAPONG HIRUNARD

The abbot at Phra That Lampang Luang temple is facing down a public outcry over the restoration work, which is funded, planned and supervised by the Fine Arts Department. The Lampang temple hired the Chor Fah company to do the work, but many residents and visitors say the result looks garish and rough.

The abbot, however, is unrepentant.



Much of the artwork of the golden deva mural on the door of the vihara of Phra That Lampang Luang temple has been lost as a result of poor restoration work, some residents say. PATTANAPONG HIRUNARD

"There is not much damage to old art. It's just like you have a new dress that is not washed yet. So it would be a bit hard to touch," Phra Kru Pithan Noppakij said, referring to the restoration work.

Some believe the restoration work has damaged much of the temple's traditional northern art, including gold-painted murals that are over 300 years old.

Phra That Lampang Luang temple houses the most complete collection of the native Lanna art of northern Thailand.

Its prayer halls are famous for Lai Kham, a type of mural art made by a special technique called hai dok that is unique to the northern region.

Using this technique, an artist would coat an object in gold before using a sharp tool to draw or paint on it.

Since the restoration work began, however, some Lai Kham designs on the pillars and the doors of the prayer halls have been painted over with stark golden tints.

This includes the famous two-metre angel drawing on the Viharn Phra Buddha praying hall.

The temple has the only Lai Kham mural art left in the North and there are no contemporary artists who know the technique well enough to help restore them properly, Surachai Jongjitngam, an expert on the traditional mural art of northern Thailand, said.

Phra Kru Pithan said the temple and its mural art have been damaged by the passage of time and needed urgent restoration.

The abbot said he has no problem with the quality of the restoration. The golden tint may come across as too harsh but he would ask the company to correct it, he said.

Anek Sihamat, deputy director of the Fine Arts Department, inspected the temple yesterday and said the work on the mural art is too rough and needs correcting. Experts are discussing the best way to do this, he said.

Defending the Fine Arts Department, Mr Anek said state supervision of restoration work is often compromised by the assertiveness of temple administrators who try to shape their temples in the way they like.

Mr Anek claimed Phra That Lampang Luang temple administrators wanted to brighten the mural paintings, and the craftsmen did as asked.

Following a public uproar, the department has now ordered a halt to the restoration work on the mural art.

While the temple and the department are trying to figure out how best to fix the problem, residents around the temple complained their concerns have been largely ignored.

Bunning Pinkaew, a resident at tambon Lampang Luang, said she wants those undertaking the work to be more careful since the precious artwork cannot be recovered once damaged.

One village head said many residents disagree with the plan but they do not want to take any action as the temple now belongs to the Fine Arts Department.

"I don't know what to do since our temple now belongs to the department, not the community," he said.

One worker on site said most of them have hardly any knowledge of ancient art. They are just doing their best to follow restoration orders and to avoid smashing the historic artwork, he said.