

Bhirasri — a haven for artists

THE best buy at Chavalit Soemprungsuk's exhibition of prints and drawings at the Bhirasri Institute of Modern Art is a catalogue of his works. Actually a book of art, each copy of the 26-page catalogue is signed by the artist, who, after his exhibition, will be returning "home" to the Netherlands.

"It is a common practice in the West to print books of art," says Chavalit, "but for Thailand it's a new concept." The book comes in a limited edition and follows the system of graphic art, with each copy numbered, thus making it a valuable collector's item.

"Sold at only 50 baht a copy, Chavalit had it specially printed, with the proceeds going to the Bhirasri Fund, to help his fellow artists. "We artists should help one another," he says, "as the Government has no budget and is not interested enough to support artists. Other countries allocate budgets for their artists so they can do their work without worrying about financial matters."

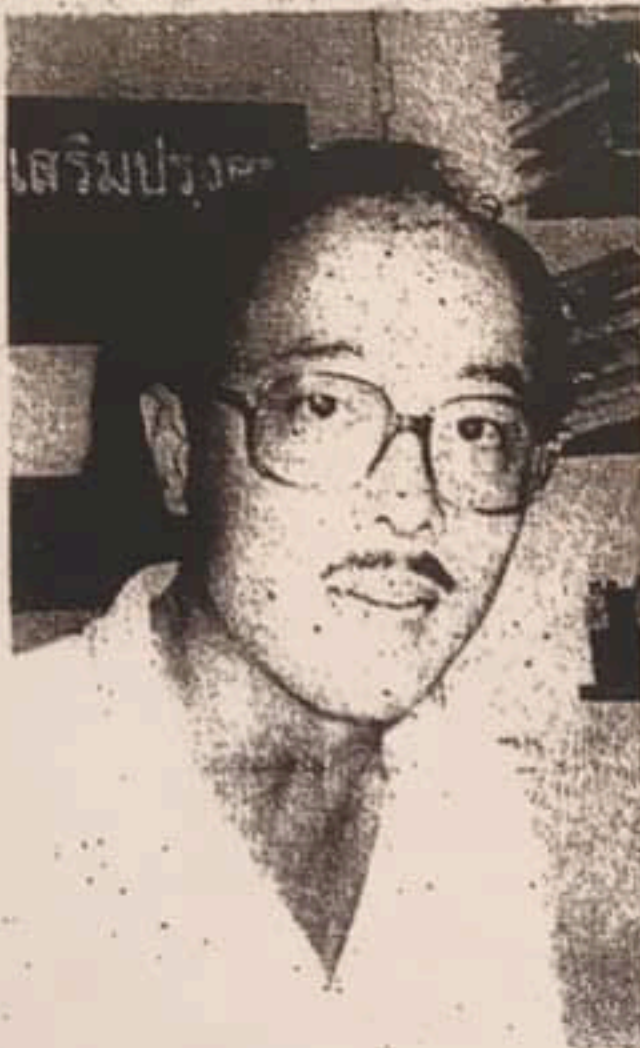
Chavalit himself is supported by the Dutch Government under the Beeldende Kunstenaar Regering scheme, in which each year he is given a sum of money in return for a number of his works. There are 1,500 state proteges under the scheme, says Chavalit, who is the only Thai among them.

"Modern art started in Thailand only 20 or 30 years ago, while other countries already have it for more than a hundred years," Chavalit says in defence of the Thai Government, "that's why they have a better understanding of the importance of modern art in everyday life."

"Schools in the Netherlands regularly take their pupils to museums of modern arts as part of their extra-curricular activities, so even when the children take different professions when they grow up, the understanding of art is already deep-seated in their hearts."

Thailand cannot use the same system, says Chavalit. "It is too time-consuming; if we want to progress we must use shortcuts."

The Bhirasri Institute of Modern Art can only be grateful for Chavalit's support. A non-profit



CHATVICHAI PROMAHATTAYEDI... art patron.

by
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making organisation with a limited number of staff. It has been giving artists a chance to show their works at no expense on the artists' part.

"Thai artists who show their works get every kind of assistance," says the Bhirasri's director, Chatvichai Promahattayedi. "We provide a sponsor for the opening reception, print posters and invitation cards for the opening, and do promotion work for him. If he sells a painting, we get 20 per cent, which is used to subsidise the next exhibition."

"But we don't want the artists to feel that paintings shown at the Bhirasri must be sold," he says. "Our objective is to support art and the art circle for the sake of art. We want to show artists' works, whether they will sell or not."

Chatvichai realises that Bhirasri has to find other sources of income. "The salaries of the staff are paid by the chairman of the foundation, Princess Chumbhot of Neger

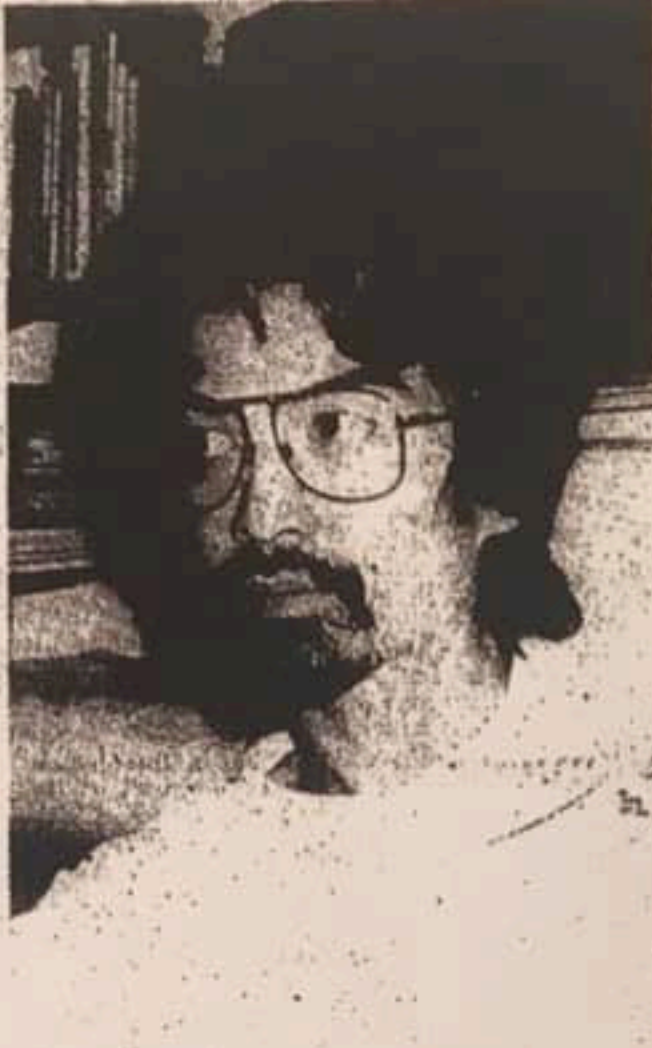
Svarga, from her own pocket," he says. "Other than that, Bhirasri tries to be self-supporting."

And that, he says, can be fulfilled only if the theatre is kept busy. "The rent of the theatre will subsidise the gallery, and if there are more people coming to the Bhirasri, we can have a cafeteria or a shop and the Bhirasri can function as an art centre in the full sense of the word."

CATCH

Here again, there is a catch because only if professional theatre groups does the Bhirasri charge the full amount of 2,500 baht per night. For student groups, it charges only half the amount, "to encourage the youths to do creative work."

To bring creative artists together, Chatvichai's assistant, Chumpon Anisuk, thought of Wethi Samai, a new concept in stage presentation. "It is an experimental theatre for artists of



CHUMPON APISUK... created Wethi Samai.

all disciplines — painters, writers, poets, photographers, dancers, actors," says Chatvichai of his assistant's brainchild. "They come to perform on stage spontaneously — musicians come to try new ideas which they can use in their future shows — and even us do not have a preconceived idea of what kind of show they will present during the night."

So far, Bhirasri has organised Wethi Samai (there is no English word for it, says Chatvichai, but it means new innovations, or experimentations, or experimental) four times. And each time has been successful, drawing big names in the creative art and music circles.

This month is soul-searching time for the organisers, to analyse past achievements and find new directions for the presentation of Wethi Samai. "But we will resume beginning February," promises Chumpon. A friend has offered him an island off Pattaya to stage Wethi Samai, and he has recently been assured assistance if he ever thought of presenting it in Chiang Mai.

The Wethi Samai pro-

vides a forum for artists of all disciplines to exchange ideas, and maybe point out one another's mistakes and join together to create new scenes, says Chatvichai.

The performances also draw in the crowds, and that's when the Bhirasri earns some money, from the sales of tickets and food. But the performers do their things rent free, and are even given assistance in transporting their instruments in the case of musicians, and that's where the money earned from the sales of tickets goes.

"It's hard work to organise Wethi Samai every month," says Chatvichai, "but it's fun. And if we lose 2,000-3,000 baht each time, it is still worth the effort."

Meanwhile, he is keeping his fingers crossed that more professional theatre groups will be using the Bhirasri theatre for their plays, so that Bhirasri doesn't have to depend forever on donors for financial assistance.

For those who have yet to see Chavalit's exhibition or get a copy of his book, you'd better hurry as the exhibition ends this Sunday.