



Rural Plein Air in Northern Thailand

TEXT AND ILLUSTRATIONS BY Stephen Harby



“The Kingdom of a Million Rice Fields,” is the 13th-to-18th-century epithet for what is now the Lan Na or Lanna Kingdom region, encompassing Burma, Northern Thailand and Laos. A visit to the Northern Thai city of Chiang Mai and its surrounding area offers a chance to discover this traditional and noble civilization, sustained by rice cultivation. The distinctive terraced, watery landscapes and simply

Ruen Bua Kitchen Pavilion (graphite and watercolor on paper, 13¼x19) shows the south side of the house, where the separate cooking pavilion is located. The traditional kitchen uses charcoal braziers set in a frame filled with sand. Because of the heat, cooking smells and fire risk, the kitchen is always situated in a discreet structure, away from the rest of the house. To the right of the house is one of the farm’s four rectangular retention ponds or tanks. These collect rain water during the rainy season to be stored for irrigation of the rice paddies during the drier growing season. Water moves throughout the farm by means of gravity; the individual rice paddies are set at descending heights and separated by earthen dams and dikes.

DRY SEASON, WET SEASON

Changing seasons often give rise to palette changes, as seen in my watercolor paintings of the rice fields.



My five-minute sketch, **Preliminary Study for Ruen Bua Rice Fields: Dry Season** (graphite pencil on paper, 6x10) captures the lights and darks of the scene and lays out the compositional bones for a watercolor painting. It portrays the principle landscape elements viewed from the lower level of the house. (Working with this protection from the direct sun is an absolute must!)



Ruen Bua Rice Fields: Dry Season (left; graphite and watercolor on paper, 10x19) shows the major portion of the rice field to the west of the house (seen in the distance on the left side), which is bounded at the edge of the farm by an irrigation canal lined with banana palms and other larger trees. On the right, a barbed-wire fence and stands of tall bamboo and teak trees line an adjoining property. These elements establish a compositional horizon line in the mid-distance and offset the mountains in the background. My partner and I introduced the curving grass causeway flanked by large clay water jars. The overall ochre hue reflects the conditions of the dry season after the harvest, awaiting the summer monsoon rains, which will prompt the next planting.



Ruen Bua Rice Fields: Wet Season (left; graphite and watercolor on paper, 12½x20) is similar in composition to its *Dry Season* counterpart (middle left). The greener hue in this piece reflects the wetter conditions in late summer and fall as the rice matures and is ready for harvest. At that point, irrigation is reduced and the fields turn golden yellow, as is the case with the neighbors' land in the distant middle ground. The division of fields into smaller plots helps control irrigation and also reflects the former landholdings of separate farmers.



Wat Nong Bua (graphite on paper, 5½x7) depicts a Lanna-style temple. It houses the many images of the Buddha revered by the local population and provides a place for them to pray before him and give their respects. Materials and construction techniques are similar to those of dwellings, but the form differs, with steeper and multiple roofs—and no understory. Access is along a straight axis via masonry steps flanked by dual Nagas—sacred beings in the form of a cobra. The focus of my art—telling the story of form revealed by light—is well served by the deep shadows produced by the strong sun and overhanging roofs.

elegant teak-wood structures, always framed with a backdrop of mountains, are the hallmarks of this unique corner of the world. An elevation of 1,600 feet insures cooler temperatures and lower humidity compared to much of the rest of the country.

My artistic and cultural exploration of this region began several years ago when my lifelong partner, Kritsada Buajud, and I acquired a working 17-acre rice farm and set about restoring and recreating the landscape, adding buildings in the traditional Lanna architectural style. What has emerged is Ruen Bua or Lotus Villa, a network of terraced rice paddies, ponds and structures. The ponds retain the seasonal rains for later irrigation of the paddies through a system of earth dams and canals. Dwellings and service buildings, constructed of reclaimed teak timbers, doors, windows and fittings, are furnished and decorated with traditional Lanna pieces picked up for a song as older generations relinquish a lifestyle for which their descendants have no interest. We've already completed one growing season resulting in enough rice to feed 1,000 families for a year!

The Lanna style of architecture is characterized by pole construction: massive columns fashioned from teak trees rising from the ground to the eaves of the roof. A single floor for habitation stands above the ground level to provide protection from flooding (a holdover from when all houses were built near rivers). The raised living quarters provide a shaded, cool place on the ground to escape the afternoon heat—a place for the dwellers to perform daily crafts such as weaving and basket-making. Steep, tiled roofs with generous overhangs protect the unglazed openings from sun and abundant rain. Continuous openings where the walls meet the roof ensure airflow and cooling

WARM-UP AND KEEPER

A quick study of a subject may serve as a “practice” piece to what may seem a daunting subject. It’s undertaken without expectation that the result will be one’s best work. There may be insufficient time devoted to a pencil sketch, so inaccuracies may abound. No worries. The study brings familiarity with the subject and can lay the groundwork for a more considered piece.



1 An initial watercolor wash of cadmium red and cerulean blue establish reserved highlights.



2 The second wash of cobalt and ultramarine blue sets the sky tone and defines the subject.



3 The third wash of quinacridone gold and ultramarine blue establishes the mid- and backgrounds.



4 Subsequent washes approaching the completion of the sketch define the form and detail of the structure.



5 Layered values define the background, and the dark shadows of details and openings give further veracity and vividness to the composition of **Preliminary Study for Ruen Bua Main Dwelling** (above; graphite and watercolor on paper, 5x9).



With lessons learned from the preliminary study, I went on to paint **Ruen Bua Main Dwelling** (left; graphite and watercolor on paper, 12½x20), following the same process of layered washes. This half-sheet watercolor captures the main dwelling as it nears the completion of its construction. It’s comprised of two rectangular pavilions (one for living and sleeping, the other for cooking) separated by an open deck—both sections raised one story above ground. Smaller lower roofs mark an open entry porch and an ancillary space for bathing.



Ruen Bua Porch (above; graphite and watercolor on paper, 4x6¾), inspired by late afternoon raking light, describes the progression through space as a visitor enters a typical Lanna-style house. A dwelling will typically have two entrances, one for everyday and familiar use, the other, seen here, for use by honored guests, ceremonial arrivals and first-time visitors. Entering involves stepping through a series of movements—a sort of minuet. First one ascends a few stairs to an intermediate platform dominated by a small roofed structure that houses a water-filled clay pot. The thirsty traveler uses a bamboo ladle to partake of the refreshing water. The visitor proceeds toward a bench (on which I sat while doing this painting), then reverses direction to climb another few steps to a covered porch that's a step below the main entry to the house.



Wat Ton Kwen (graphite and watercolor on paper, 12½x16¾) is a temple, located not far to the south of Chiang Mai in what remains a rural undeveloped area. It's one of the best preserved of all Lanna-period temples. The rectangular structure is surrounded on three sides by a U-shaped, columned prayer hall that's raised on a platform and open on all sides. I painted the watercolor with layered washes, completely covering the paper except for the areas of light to be reserved—bringing the detail into relief with each application.

ventilation. Even in April, the warmest part of the year, the dwellings are comfortable without fans or air conditioning. Porches and decks, both covered and open, provide a variety of spaces suitable to different times-of-day and weather. We find ourselves moving around the house to be in whatever space is most hospitable at the particular moment. One of Thailand's successful younger architects, Chulapron Nandhapanich, of Forest Studio, assisted in the realization of these dreams.

My efforts to document this environment often take the form of plein air pencil sketches and relatively fast watercolor paintings, as seen throughout this article. ♣

Stephen Harby is an architect, watercolorist, faculty member of the Yale School of Architecture and founder of Stephen Harby Invitational, which organizes travel opportunities for small groups.