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THE INFLUENCE OF SIGNS—SYMBOLS WHICH IMPACT LOCAL CHRISTIAN ART DESIGN IN THAILAND

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ABSTRACT

Communities have beliefs and culture which influences their identity, including architecture and decorative arts. Among these, religion-based designs, in particular, consist of symbolisms which must be modified to suit the local beliefs of communities, in order to promote unity, and bestow a similar sense of closeness to the prophet of said religion. In order to aid management of information on this topic, this article presents the history, society, beliefs, and culture of communities having influence on signs and symbolisms of Christian art design in Thailand.

This article is part of the dissertation entitled "Decipherment and Interpretation of Graphic, Sign, and Symbolic Design Reference Based on Thailand's Neo-Gothic Faith", in which the researcher has conducted on-site information gathering and key-informant interviews, by applying triangulation in the analysis and interpretation of information on the history, society, beliefs, and faith.

This study revealed that the influence of signs and symbolisms in Thai local Christian art are reflected in the 1) history 2) society 3) beliefs and 4) culture during turnings points in each community. When these influences are applied in communities with Christians, it facilitates their understanding of religious sites, including the development in their community, thus giving them pride in Christian history as well as the history of the community. This coincides with Hans-Georg Gadamer's theory on interpretation, which states that history influences understanding in two ways, the first being in cultural and linguistic adaptation, and the other being in the interpretation of traditions and cultures from the past into the future. Gadamer refers to this as "The concept of effective history", to emphasize the effects of history on understanding. Together with other theories, including "Direct Registration" by James Gibson, "Perceptual Constructivism Theory" by Hermann Helmholtz, and "Gestalt Theory" by Rudolf Arnheim, help the researcher the influence of signs and symbolisms of Christian arts reflected in stained glass arts, paintings, and architecture.

As a result, we can utilize the "Interpretation Cultural Design Method Model" in the interpretation of signs and symbolisms embedded in beliefs and faith, including those which have historically been adapted into the community, and apply this concept to other design cases which may occur in the future. For instance, if there came the need to for religious designs in nearby communities.

INTRODUCTION

Thailand is a country with a lot of diversity blended in together in harmony, whether it be ethnicity, demography, lifestyle, beliefs, language, art, culture, food, traditions, and religion. The beauty of such unity indicates that Thailand has for a long time in its history been acceptive of diversity. The Constitution of the Kingdom of Thailand (B.E. 60), section 31, states "A person shall enjoy full liberty to profess a religion, and shall enjoy the liberty to exercise or practice a form of worship in accordance with his or her religious principles, provided that it shall not be averse to the duties of the Thai people, neither shall it endanger the safety of the State, nor shall it be contrary to public order or good morals." (Constitution Drafting Commission, 2018, p.10). The above statement shows how the Thai population have the liberty to freely practice their religion.

A Brief History of Christianity In Thailand

The emergence of Christianity in Thailand began during the colonial era of imperialism. Apart from political and economic objectives, it was the opportunity to spread the Roman Catholicism church of Christianity. The first records of the spread of Christianity in Thailand were dated back to the Ayutthaya period in 1567, although it was not widespread as it was only limited to foreigners conducting business within Thailand (Historical Archives Archdiocese of Bangkok, 2015). The spread of Christianity increased during the reign of King Narai the Great, when Ayutthaya had good relations with France, which was then ruled by King Louis the 14th.

However, after the reign of King Narai the Great, the spread of Christianity began to diminish due to a series of territorial limitations and prohibitions of the religion in Thailand, continuing until the reign of King Rama the 4th, who bestowed funding to Assumption school in 1877 (Historical Archives

Archdiocese of Bangkok, 2015). The history of Christianity in Thailand shows that it has always been open to diverse cultures, demographics, and religions, the majority of which were consequences of diplomacy and trade. Moreover, the constitution itself upholds liberty of religious freedom, as mentioned above.

Interpretation from Religious Beliefs Into Christian Arts

Stained glass, also known as illuminated wall decoration, is another commonly found component in Christian churches. Its purpose is more than merely for those inside to gaze outwards or for light to shine inside. The medieval mind regarded light as a manifestation of the divine and so the glowing pictures of colored glass seemed overwhelming and utterly compelling illustrations of the word of god (Toman & Bednorz, 1999, p. 469). The murals on stained glass in churches is essentially a journal illustrating stories from the bible, the history, literature, and the life of saints or patrons. These murals are abundantly found in Gothic churches.

During the Middle Age, light from these stained glasses were regarded as the light of god, while its illustrations were an interesting depiction of the word of god. Furthermore, it allowed illiterate citizens to understand the bible through visual arts. Apart from art theory and artistic components, designs are also influenced by other factors including beliefs, language, culture, politics, governance, and religion all blended in together.

This gives the design its unique characteristics, while simultaneously reflecting the identity of each community. This applies to religious places as well, even though on the whole they are inclined towards the depiction of the teachings and arts specific to their respective religions. Even so, there will often be local beliefs embedded in their designs, so as to give the local community a sense of unity with their original beliefs. The Second Vatican Council (Concilium Oecumenicum Vaticanum Secundum) which began in 1962 during the reign of Pope John XXIII to 1965 during the reign of Pope Paul VI was founded with the intention to adapt the Church to the modern world. This is another major modification for Catholic Churches worldwide, not only in internal structuring of external activities, but also a change of their mindset (Jirapa, 2013, p. 11).

The council, apart from addressing ceremonies, also addresses design as well. Design, whether it be architecture, symbolisms, and communication through arts, convey different messages in different contexts and for different audiences (Irina, Yuliya, & Nikita, 2018). For instance, Chinese art has been used to depict faiths of Christianity. Similarly, in Thailand, local art and architecture of some regions such as the North and Northeast will be unique and have more influence on Christian art when compared to that of churches in Bangkok, which is more internationalized. However, churches in Thailand still do not sufficiently represent local or Thai arts. Most of them use Western designs, or attempt to incorporate components of Thai arts in such ways that do not blend in well, becoming unmatching rather than beautiful (Komgris, 2005, p. 17).

Prior to the Second Vatican Council, Thailand already had some influence from Christianity in some communities. These influences were mainly in the form of graphics, signs, and symbolisms, which align with the people in their respective communities. The Church itself had never had its own specific artistic style, but adopted the arts in each era and the surrounding demographics (Subcommittee on Ritual Arts, 2018, p. 36).

Research Objective

To study the influence of signs and symbolisms on local Christian art designs in Thailand.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study is a qualitative research divided into 3 phases as follows:

Phase 1

The researcher has conducted on-site studies of signs and symbolisms in Christian art in 3 main locations as follows:

1. Locations influenced by pristine Gothic design, consisting of 1) Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception, Chantaburi 2) Holy Rosary Church, Bangkok 3) Nativity of Our Lady Cathedral, Samut Songkhram.
2. Locations influenced by pristine Neo-Gothic design, consisting of 1) Chapel of Wat Phra Christ Phra Haruthai, Wat Phleng, Ratchaburi.
3. Locations influenced by contemporary Neo-Gothic design, consisting of 1) Chapel of The Annunciation, Bangkok 2) St. Louis Marie De Montfort Church, Samuthprakarn.

The researcher found that the majority of original Christian art design of churches in Thailand have been influenced by French priests who became parish priests at the beginning of construction. Although the Chapel of Wat Phra Christ Phra Haruthai, Wat Phleng, Ratchaburi—a Christian church built by Parn, who used to be the abbot of Banggluay Temple in Bangkhonthi district, Samutsongkarm province (Phaknoi, 2018, pp. 55-56)—was originally built temporarily on his personal property, the main building was eventually built by French priests, thus becoming under the influence of French Christian design.

Investigation of the tracery of the stained glass in each church showed its Gothic era influence even though the Thai churches visited by the researcher were not constructed during the Middle Ages, r the 13-15th century (Toman & Bednorz, 1999, p. 16-17). Records revealed that the stained glasses observed on-site by the researcher were all imported from overseas between 1890-1914.

The use of Gothic architecture and tall buildings symbolizes their faith in Christianity, and stained-glass murals are one of the outstanding characteristics of Christian churches in the Gothic era (Sanglimsuwan, 1999, p. 74). In general, stained glass murals depict the life of Jesus Christ for citizens to acknowledge.

However, when considering sites influenced by contemporary Neo-Gothic design, such as 1) Chapel of The Annunciation, Bangkok 2) St. Louis Marie De Montfort Church, Samuthprakarn, their stained glass often depicts the founding of Assumption University. Both of these churches are located on the 2 campuses of Assumption University, which is a Catholic university under the St. Gabriel Foundation of Thailand, founded by the Montfort Brothers of St. Gabriel, who were French Catholic priests who came with the intention to spread the Roman Catholic Christianity in Thailand in 1901 (Komolmas, 2013, p. 4).

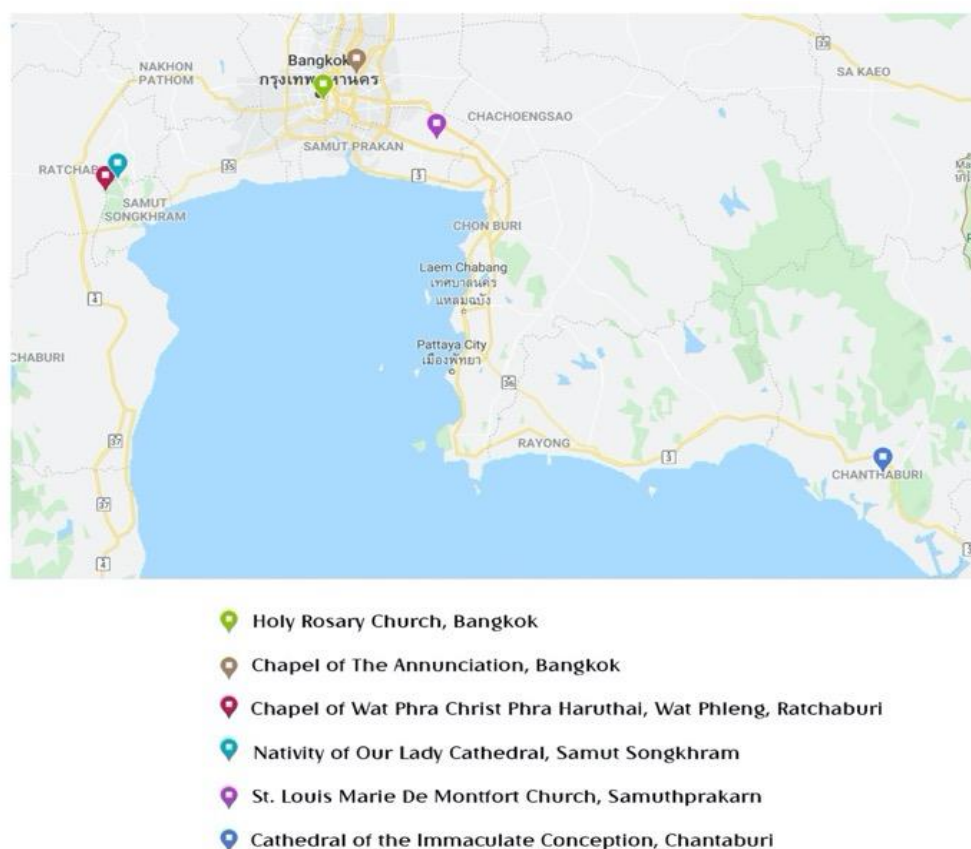


Figure 1: Map Showing Locations Where Christian Art Signs And Symbolisms Were Studied On-Site

Phase 2

After having conducted on-site studies in phase 1, the researcher needed additional information on the history and beliefs of the local communities. To do so, the researcher conducted key-informant interviews (Marshall, 1996, p. 94), which were in-depth interviews with knowledgeable experts, or those with the most relevant knowledge to the study. Some interviewees were chosen in advance by using the snowball sampling technique (Sharma, 2017, p. 752), to find experts with substantial knowledge on history and religion.

This helps to understand the history of influence bestowed upon graphics, signs, and symbolisms in Christian churches and temples in the location under study. The interviews in this phase were conducted to extract information on design only, without hurting in-depth interviewees feelings. Moreover, the researcher also studied the theory and implications of Christian art for comparison.

The researcher conducted in-depth interviews of key informants, which were those who were high knowledgeable or are most relevant to the area under study. Some interviewees were chosen in advance by using the snowball sampling technique, together with a total of 8 specialists who were chosen because of particular traits, such as possessing in-depth knowledge, up to date knowledge, are intellectually multicultural, and were able to connect their own culture with the outside world. They consist of 1 local from the study location, 6 Roman Catholic priests, and 1 historian, as follows:

1. Roman Catholic Historian
2. Abbot of the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception
3. Abbot of the Holy Rosary Church, Bangkok
4. Abbot of the Nativity of Our Lady Cathedral, Samut Songkhram
5. Rector Emeritus and Founder of Assumption University
6. Rector Magnificus and president of Assumption University
7. Vice Rector for Student Affairs of Assumption University and Consultant of St. Gabriel's Foundation of Thailand
8. Roman Catholicism Activist
- 9.

Key informants must satisfy at least one of the following criteria:

1. Are representative of the study location
2. Are representative of a religious study institution
3. Are representative of a history studies institution

In order to understand the influences on signs and symbolisms in each study location, the researcher verified the content validity of the interview questions. The drafted questions were brought to 5 academic specialists for initial verification. The main set of questions for verification are from the following documentation:

1. How does local community beliefs and cultures influence Christian art (colours, murals, signs, symbolisms etc.)?
2. What do community members understand of the symbolisms in churches representing the local beliefs and cultures?
3. How do signs and symbolisms in Christian art affect the beliefs of community members?
4. Markings, signs, and symbolisms in churches represent the uniqueness and community folklore.
5. Others

Aside from interviews with the main questions, the researcher also inquired additional historical information not included in records or other documents

used within the study. This information enabled the researcher to analyze and gain a better understanding of the influence of markings, signs, and symbolisms in Christian churches in the study location. The information gathering duration consisted only of a single round of open interviews without precluding questions, in order to avoid tampering with the interviewee's thoughts, thus enabling the researcher to use the written and audio information. The researcher determined the reliability of the information by means of investigator triangulation, by sending the compiled information to another specialist for verification.

Methodological triangulation (Denzin, 1970, p.307-308)—whether it be data triangulation, investigator triangulation, theory triangulation—was also utilized in the search of information from different sources, for further analysis and summarization.

Phase 3

Analysis of the information collected in phases 1 and 2 by using Hermeneutics—the interpretation of Christian art—in order to determine the influential factors in signs and symbolisms of local Christian art in Thailand, and their implications in Thai society. The researcher used data triangulation (Mertens & Hesse-Biber, 2012, p.75-79) to verify the correctness of the studied locations. This was done by examining documents and architectural styles obtained from the history line of construction, from people, and from interpretation, to determine the locations for the study of Christian art from stained glass. By interviewing specialists in phases 1 and 2, the researcher was able to summarize the influence of markings, signs, and symbolisms in Christian art, as shown below.

Cathedral Of The Immaculate Conception, Chantaburi

Indochinese attributes were used in Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos, which were once colonies of France during the 18th century, with Chinese cultural influence. This sacred cathedral is where the Vietnamese took refuge during times of religious oppression since 1778 (Prateepsukjit. S., personal communication, July 13, 2019). As a result, its stained-glass murals were influenced by these events. Priests involved in this event were:

- 1) A French missionary who came into duty in Indochina in 1828, primarily tasked with overseeing missions in Vietnam. During 1833-1834, he had moved to Chantaburi, and was appointed abbot of the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception, then bishop. In 1840, he was appointed titular bishop of Mission Cochin (Vietnam), up until religious oppression from Emperor Minh Mạng of Cochinchina, when he was arrested and died in 1861. In this coloured glass mural, he is depicted in purple bishop garments in his honour. He is the first Christian abbot in Thailand to be canonized, having been beatified in 1988 (Wilfred, Felix, ed., p.222-225).



Figure 2: Glass Mural Of Saint Étienne – Théodore Cuenot

2) A French missionary who came to spread religion in China in 1851, but was arrested and tortured in a pillory, because Christianity was banned in China at that time. Therefore, his mural is depicted as wearing a Qing dynasty clothing (Wilson & Thomas 1990., p.80-81), with his hands on a pillory.



Figure 3: Glass Mural of Saint Auguste Chapdelaine



Figure 4: Image of Qing Dynasty Clothing In 1869 (Thomson.1869)

3) Saint François – Isidore Garelin A missionary who came to Vietnam in 1820, when there was religious oppression in Vietnam. He was executed for spreading Christianity, and therefore achieved Martyrdom. He was the first French to die in Vietnam. In the mural, he is depicted as wearing Vietnamese clothing to symbolize his final resting place.



Figure 5: Mural Of Saint François – Isidore Garelin



Figure 6: Vietnamese Clothing

Holy Rosary Church, Bangkok

On-site studies showed no attributes of faith or folklore of this community. However, the vaulted ceiling in front of the altar contained the inscription 至玫瑰之后 為我等祈 “Queen of the rosary, pray with me”, inferring that the church is located in a Thai-Chinese community with faith in Christianity (Pramualprom. P., personal communication, July 8, 2019).



Figure 7: Chinese Inscription On The Ceiling Vault

Latin phrases on the ceiling vault:

TURRIS	DAVIDICA,	which	means	“Tower	of	David.”
SEDES	SAPIENTIAE,	which	means	“Throne	of	Wisdom.”
STELLA	MATUTINA,	which	means	“Morning	Star.”	
VAS	HONORABILE,	which	means	“Vessel	of	Honor.”

ROSA MYSTICA, which means “Mystical Rose.”
 IANUA CAELI, which means “Gate of Heaven.”
 VAS INSIGNE DEVOTIONIS, which means “Vessel of Devotion.”
 TURRIS EBURNEA, which means “The ivory tower.”



Figure 8: Latin Phrases
Nativity Of Our Lady Cathedral, Samut Songkhram

The glass murals, in addition to depicting the biography of Jesus Christ and of saints, also contain the names of patrons in Roman characters, as well as the year 1903 in which the murals were crafted. From the altar, a mural on the left is of a female saint, and of a male to the right, signifying where males and females were to be seated. This cathedral contains more murals of female saints than others, coinciding with its name (Damnernsaduak. S., personal communication, July 19, 2019). Moreover, some of the saints depicted in the murals came from personal saints of the Christians.



Figure 9: Example Of A Mural And Its Patron HIA PHANG (SE LAO)

Chapel Of Wat Phra Christ Phra Haruthai, Wat Phleng, Ratchaburi

The murals in the chapel depict the biography of Jesus and notable saints, although incomplete, since most of the murals depict the autobiography of Mary, mother of Jesus. Although many signs and symbolisms about the community were absent from the glass murals, they were instead depicted in other components of the church, such as the altar, which uses Thai tracteries (Wongprachanukul. K., personal communication, July 18, 2019), in order to connect with the local community and instill a sense of intimacy. Furthermore, gold and yellow colours were used in the decoration even though most Christian designs use white. This is because Thais are more familiar with the yellow and gold of Buddha statues in Buddhism, which can be seen in the images for comparison.



Figure 10: Painting Behind The Altar, Where There Is Marian Shrine And A Jesus Shrine, Decorated With Thai Bas-Relief Patterns



Figure 11: Jesus Shrine Decorated With Thai Bas-Relief Patterns



Figure 12: Entrance Arch Of Wat Tan, Ratchburi

Chapel Of The Annunciation, Bangkok

The glass murals, apart from depicting the biography of Jesus as typical of churches, also illustrate the birth of the first two biblical humans Adam and Eve, and also the Montfort Brothers of St. Gabriel, the first group to spread Christianity in Thailand. The glass murals also depict the different phases of establishing Assumption University, as well as the coat of arms which the symbols of each faculty (Komolmas. P., personal communication, October 14, 2018).



Figure 13: Glass Mural Illustrating Chevalier De Chaumont Presenting A Letter From Louis XIV To King Narai At The Hall Of Sanphet, His Majesty *King* Mongkut (King Rama IV) And Jean-Baptiste Pallegoix, Apostolic Vicar Of Eastern Siam



Figure 14: Chevalier De Chaumont Presents A Letter From Louis XIV To King Narai At The Hall Of Sanphet On 18 October 1685 – A Drawing By Jean-Baptiste Nolin.



Figure 15: Glass Mural Depicting The Healthy Relationship Between The Thai Royal Family, The Montfort Brothers Of St. Gabriel, And Assumption University.



Figure 16: Examples OF GLASS MURALS SHOWING THE COAT OF ARMS, WHICH SYMBOLIZES EACH FACULTY IN Assumption University.

St. Louis Marie De Montfort Church, Samuthprakarn

The church entrance is decorated using bas-relief Thai patterns to portray 14 sectors of the Passion of Jesus and the Crucifixion of Jesus. Thai gilded black lacquer, composed in the Thep Phanom style, can be found in Thai Buddhist temple entrances both in the form of Lai Rot Nam and bas-relief. This is the church of Assumption University, denominated as St. Louis Marie de Montfort to honour The Montfort Brothers of St. Gabriel (Fonseka. S., personal communication, June 14, 2019), even though there is not much detail about the founders or patrons on the glass murals. However, behind the altar of the Virgin Mary, the glass mural *Legio Mariae* or The Legion of Mary, which is a Catholic group approved by the Roman Catholic Church, and is full of Christians of multiple ethnicities, indicative of the multinationalism of Assumption University (Saenghiran. B., personal communication, June 20, 2019).

Furthermore, the glass mural to the right of the altar depicts a man in a suit, Mr. Francis Michael, who founded *Legio Mariae* (Martin, Diarmuid, et al. 2014. P.VI), and is holding the flag of the organization. On the other side, another suited man holding a flag was void of any identification, but the image itself borrows compositional elements from the poster of *Leg Mariae*. Up above the glass mural is a painting depicting both Thai and Christian angels showing their respects to Jesus Christ, harmoniously decorated with Thai patterns. Another point is the Dome of the church, with a painting of the vision of heaven, depicting the priests who established Assumption University, as well as deities, showing their respects towards the Virgin Mary altogether.



Figure 17: Church Entrance Decorated With Thai Patterns And Bas-Relief, Depicting The Passion Of Jesus.



Figure 18: Close-Up Of Church Entrance Decorated With Thai Patterns And Bas-Relief, Depicting The Passion Of Jesus.



Figure 19: Thep Phanom Thai Pattern



Figure 20: Glass Mural Behind The Altar Of The Virgin Mary



Figure 21: Glass Mural At The Base Of The Altar Of The Virgin Mary

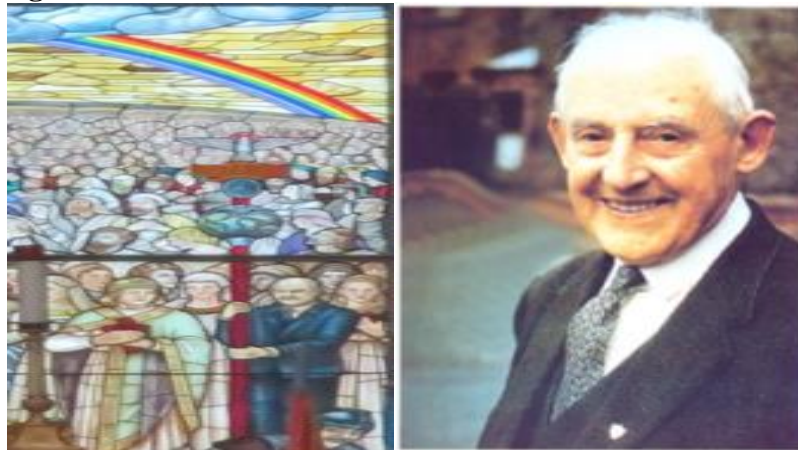


Figure 22: Mr.Francis Michael, The Founder Of Legio Mariae And The Symbol Legio Mariae



Figure 23: Poster And Scepter Of Legio Mariae



Figure 24: Glass Mural Behind The Altar Of The Virgin Mary

SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

On-site studies revealed that signs and symbolisms have influential roles on beliefs. Signs and symbolisms can connect imagination to reality. Signs and symbolisms exist in the form of symbolic languages, postures, and movements, and can be found in buildings, places, clothing, equipment, utilities, decorations etc. (Catholic Commission for Liturgy, p.34), which, apart from depicting the biography of the Virgin Mary, Jesus Christ, and the saints, contain influences from the history of their respective communities, as reflected in designs and glass murals. This is yet another pristine depiction of society coinciding well with Hans-Georg Gadamer's theory of interpretation that history impacts comprehension in two ways, including cultural assimilation and linguistic education, and interpretation of inherent traditions and customs to be passed along to future generations. Gadamer refers to it as "The concept of effective history", to point out how history impacts comprehension (Phonsiricharoenphan, S. 2016., p.247-248). The Direct Registration theory by James Gibson also states that visual senses need not be interpreted, since visualization is a direct experience and therefore intrinsically evident (Gibson, J. 1966), allowing local residents to understand the historical ties between their community and their Christian faith directly through glass murals without having to interpret them. The Perceptual Constructivism Theory by Hermann Helmholtz states that information perceived through sensations are all ambiguous and the perceiver must speculate based on their past experience and unconscious mind (Pichayapaiboon, P. 2018., p.118).

Although some churches do not depict the local characteristics through their glass murals, there can be other components which utilize Rudolf Arnheim's Gestalt Theory, which states that well-organized murals and apparent geometrical structures are easier to comprehend than those which are dispersed and disorganized (Pichayapaiboon, P. 2018., p.122). Viewers can thus perceive the identity of the local community as a whole, prior to examining in detail the Christian arts with which to correlate and interpret from their past experiences. These three theories, whether it be the Direct

Registration Theory, Perceptual Constructivism Theory, or the Gestalt Theory, in combination can help the researcher grasp an in-depth understanding of the meaning behind signs and symbolisms within glass murals, paintings, and architectures as intended by the artist; therefore, the viewer should have prior knowledge and understanding. The researcher was thus able to summarize the process of studying the influence of signs and symbolisms in Christian glass murals as shown below:

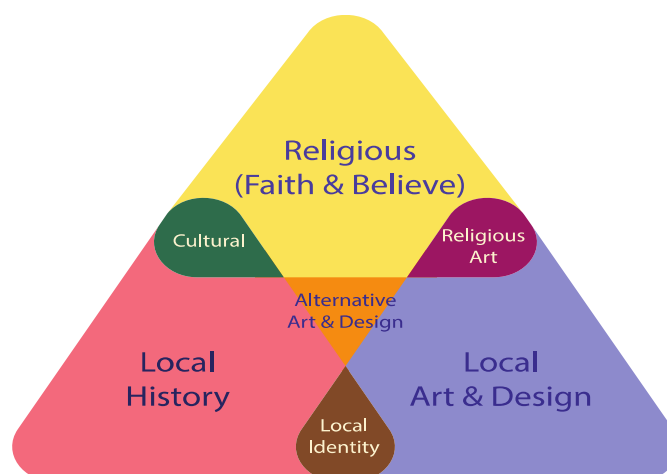


Figure 24: Interpretation Cultural Design Method Model

The Interpretation Cultural Design Method Model shows how the intersection between religious faith and community history gives rise to cultures, that religion and local arts give rise to religious art, and that community history and their local art gives rise to the community identity. All three fundamental factors combined give rise to three secondary factors, which pave way for a variety of arts and designs. The usage of signs and symbolisms in Christian glass murals conform to the Interpretation Cultural Design Method Model, facilitating the systematic study of design influence on history, beliefs, and faith. Moreover, it gives the recipient an increased sense of attachment to the design, for they can comprehend the intention of the creator, as a result creating greater value in the design, both directly and indirectly.

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