



Sylvia Fraser-Lu

# Burmese Crafts

Past and Present



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Patience Present

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Sylvia Fraser-Lu

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*To the craftsmen of Burma,  
both past and present, who  
have left us an enduring legacy  
of their outstanding artistic accomplishments.  
Long may they continue to serve  
and delight us with their skill and creativity.*

# Preface

---

A visitor to Burma (now called Myanmar) cannot but be impressed by the wealth of traditional arts and crafts still in existence in the country. A casual stroll up the stairway of any of the major pagodas in Burma will reveal a host of local products for sale, such as small logs of *thanakha*, a bark widely used as a cosmetic throughout the country, cakes of fragrant sandalwood and special medicinal soaps, palm-leaf horoscopes, scissors, small gongs, conical hats, gaily painted umbrellas, sturdy baskets, boxes, lacquerware, and brightly coloured papier mâché toys. Closer to the pagoda platform are the vendors selling flowers, *eugenia* leaves, sticks of incense, candles, and miniature paper umbrellas and flags which are purchased by the faithful as offerings.

In adjacent alleys it is possible to see craftsmen at work gilding shrines, carving Buddha and *nat* (spirit) images, sorting packages of gold-leaf, and putting the finishing touches to marionettes. On the pagoda platform, groups of craftsmen, such as gilders, tinsmiths, painters, glass inlay workers, plaster sculptors, and whitewashers, may be seen at work refurbishing various edifices surrounding the main monument.

It is fitting that so many crafts should be found within the precincts of the pagoda, for Buddhism over the centuries has been the prime inspiration for much of Burma's artistic endeavour. This, in combination with a thriving body of pre-Buddhist animistic beliefs, a rich oral and vernacular literature, and a love of detailed surface embellishment, have culminated in the production of distinctive works of art.

The purpose of this book is to introduce the reader to the scope and beauty of Burmese traditional crafts, and to show their importance in the everyday lives of the people. The term 'crafts' has not been strictly limited to 'decorative' arts, for unlike in the West the Burmese do not make a distinction between 'fine' and 'applied' arts. The arts of lacquerware, wood-carving, and metalwork are considered on a par with architecture, sculpture, and painting. Craftsmen in general have always held an honoured place in Burmese society and have taken pride in their creative abilities. In pre-colonial Burma, all sections of the population—from royalty to the monkhood to the common people—used finely crafted objects in their everyday lives. Prehistoric and historic evidence, although sketchy and incomplete, indicates that the inhabitants of Burma have been fashioning objects of beauty and utility for over 2,000 years.

Although Burma has recently changed its name to Myanmar, it was decided to use the former appellation throughout the book. This decision does not imply a lack of respect for the Burmese people, but was made on the grounds that a majority of people outside the country, for whom this book is written, continue to be more familiar with the name Burma, the name which has appeared on maps since the 'Age of Discovery'.

Romanization of the Burmese language is from the standard conventional transcription in John O'Kell's *A Guide to the Romanisation of Burmese*, London, 1907, without the diacritics to indicate tones. However, to avoid confusion, popular place names such as Mandalay, Rangoon, Pegu, and the Irrawaddy River have been left in their familiar English form. Honorifics such as U (Mr), Daw (aunt/Madam), Ko (elder brother), Maung (brother), Ma (Miss), and Shin (title for a monk) in the Bibliography and Index have generally been placed behind the person's name. Exceptions include a few famous literati where the honorific is so familiar as to be almost regarded as part of the name, for example, U Sa and U Pon Nya, and notable craftsmen whose names are prefixed with Hsaya (teacher). Burmese era dates have been converted to Gregorian dates by adding 638, for example, 1114 BE = AD 1752. The numbers and titles of *Jataka* stories mentioned in the text have been taken from Professor E. B. Cowell's *The Jataka or Stories from the Buddha's Former Births*, London, 1895. Pali terms are based on the *Pali-English Dictionary*, edited by T. W. Rhys Davids and William Stede, London, 1921. Sanskrit words follow those found in the Index and Glossary of Susan L. Huntington's *The Art of Ancient India: Buddhist, Hindu and Jain*, New York, 1985.

# Acknowledgements

---

A book of this scope could not have been written without the assistance of a large number of people and institutions both in Burma and abroad and to them I owe a debt of gratitude.

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I am greatly indebted to the editorial and production staff of Oxford University Press for painstakingly converting a cumbersome manuscript, a *mélange* of photographs of varying quality, and scratchy line-drawings into a handsome book. I am especially grateful that despite doubts about the commercial viability of a book on Burmese crafts, the staff has been most supportive of the project and especially tolerant of various delays and missed deadlines.

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It goes without saying that any errors, omissions, and shortcomings in this book are entirely my own.

*Potomac, Maryland*  
*August 1992*

SYLVIA FRASER-LU

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1. Map of Burma showing major towns and other features

# 1 Introduction

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Burma is a young nation judged from modern world standards, but from a historical viewpoint our nation has had at least fifteen centuries of civilization and culture behind us.<sup>1</sup>

## *Setting the Scene*

BURMA, now known as Myanmar, is the largest and westernmost state of mainland South-East Asia (Map 1). Its cultural heartland comprises a 1120-kilometre-long, 160-kilometre-wide structural depression drained by the Irrawaddy, Chin-dwin, and Sittang River systems. The climate is tropical, with the north being distinctly drier than the monsoonal lowlands to the south, a fact which has affected population and land use. This central depression is bounded on the west by the Arakan Yoma (mountains) and the Naga and Chin Hills, while a series of plateaux extending from Tibet to the Tenasserim littoral in the south forms a natural barrier to the east. Part of this system is the Shan Plateau which is deeply dissected by the Salween River.<sup>2</sup>

The country is richly endowed with natural resources. Vast tropical rain forests, formerly teeming with animal and birdlife, traditionally provided a host of important craft materials, such as teak, ebony, bamboo, rattan, fibres for cordage, lacquer, stick lac, dye-stuffs, and various oils, resins, and glues. The dry zone of Central and Upper Burma is suitable for growing cotton, sesame, pulses, and rice under irrigation. Rice is an ideal crop in the delta area to the south where, due to plentiful rainfall, it does not require special irrigation. The sea yields abundant supplies of fish, mother-of-pearl, tortoise-shell, and pearls. Burma has sizeable reserves of petroleum, silver, tin, copper, lead, zinc, tungsten, and tin. Precious and semiprecious stones in the form of rubies, sapphires, spinels, amethyst, jade, and amber have attracted traders to Burma since the earliest times.

The broad physical divisions are reflected in the historical ethnic make-up of Burma. The dry zone bisected by the Irrawaddy was the ancestral home of a number of Stone Age neolithic peoples. These were followed by other inhabitants such as the Pyu and later the Burman. The deltaic lands to the south were settled by the Mon who developed coastal ports and established contacts with neighbouring states.<sup>3</sup> In the east resided the Shan, a branch of the Tai race, whose history has been intimately linked to events in Burma. The Arakanese, a branch of the Burmese race on the coastal littoral facing Bengal, have intermittently played an active role in Burma's history.

Although united by a common religion, ongoing rivalries amongst these four contenders for political hegemony have provided much of the grist of Burmese history.<sup>4</sup>

### Foreign Contacts

Burma shares a common border with India and Bangladesh in the west, China in the north, and Laos and Thailand in the east and south (Map 2). All have made extensive contributions to Burmese artistic traditions through trade, diplomatic exchanges, and interregional conflict.

Burma's earliest and most lasting debt is to India. Economic and technological contacts appear to have begun as early as c.500 BC. Semiprecious stone beads found in association with burials at Taungtha-man, an important late Stone–early Iron Age site near Amarapura, possibly came from South India.<sup>5</sup> Cultural elements such as the Hindu faith and Buddhism in its various forms—Mahayana, Tantric, and Theravada—were transmitted from India around the second century AD.<sup>6</sup> The position of the ruler as an absolute monarch or *devaraja* (godlike king) at the head of a hierarchical administration, principles of astrology, the lunar-solar calendar, and various rituals associated with religious and court ceremonial were also greatly influenced by Indian practices and beliefs.<sup>7</sup> The 'Laws of Manu', part of the *Dhammathat* also from India, continue to be cited as the chief authority for the codification of Burmese customary law.<sup>8</sup> Exactly how, when, and by whom these elements of Indian civilization were transmitted to Burma (and to South-East Asia in general) remains a subject of conjecture amongst scholars of South-East Asian history. Throughout its history, Burma has also had important cultural links with Sri Lanka.<sup>9</sup>

Much of what is known of life in Burma during the first millennium AD comes from Chinese sources in the form of written reports from envoys published in dynastic records such as the *Old Tang History*, the *New Tang History*, and the *Man-shu* [Book of the Southern Barbarians].<sup>10</sup> China's skills in sericulture and silk-weaving, paper production, lacquerware, ceramics, and metallurgy have greatly influenced Burmese crafts. As with India, the time, route, mode, and extent of transmission of various Chinese influences are not yet clearly understood.

The Burmese have a strong military tradition. Wars with former neighbouring states Thailand, Laos, and North-east India periodically brought influxes of prisoner craftsmen, who introduced many innovations in Burmese crafts. Indeed, the prime focus of Burma's numerous internal wars and battles with neighbouring states, appears to have been the seizure of large numbers of people rather than long-term retention and colonization of conquered territory. There was abundant land for settlement throughout Burma, and in local and neighbouring wars whole villages were carried into captivity and resettled in areas where their skills could be put to work in the service of the king.<sup>11</sup>

Much of what is known about Burma from the fourteenth to the nineteenth centuries has come from reports of foreign (mostly European) travellers.<sup>12</sup> While foreigners were undoubtedly fascinated by what they saw in Burma, the Burmese seemed to have been less enchanted by what they saw of foreigners. Apart from long-standing cultural links with India and Sri Lanka, Burma's interest in peoples of



2. Historical sites of Burma and neighbouring countries

foreign lands was largely confined to its relationships with its immediate neighbours. Burma's maritime trade in the port cities was modest and appears to have been largely conducted by foreign merchants (mainly Indian and Muslim), who were subject to a maze of local regulations.<sup>13</sup> The Burmese, however, were not adverse, on occasions, to acquiring the service of foreigners in the art of war.<sup>14</sup> During the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, increasing diplomatic and commercial contacts with European powers also led to the incorporation of Western motifs, techniques, and materials into Burmese art.

### *Foundations of Artistic Traditions*

#### **Buddhism**

Over the centuries Buddhism has been the primary inspiration for Burma's artistic endeavours. It has deeply permeated Burmese life, ideas, manners, and aspirations:

Buddhism has moulded our thoughts, given the substance and channels for our ideas and affected our attitude to life and the material world. It has not merely given us a perspective of ethical values and a philosophy of life and hereafter. It has done more. It has shaped the very nature of our inward selves, and has exercised a curbing influence on the natural exuberances of a virile Mongolian people.<sup>15</sup>

As a popular religion, Buddhism has provided social cohesion. It has enabled the people to participate in a common culture and hold a world-view which was transmitted through sacred texts memorized during universal male attendance at monastic schools and through dramatizations of Buddhist stories widely performed as popular entertainment.<sup>16</sup>

Buddhism in pre-colonial Burma was officially sponsored by the State. Many of the greatest edifices and works of art were created at the behest of the monarch. As 'defender of the faith', the king was designated the secular arm of Buddhism and was charged with creating conditions under which the religion could flourish. He was expected to keep the doctrine pure and use his influence to resolve schisms and enforce monastic discipline. In return, the ecclesiastical authorities supported royal prerogatives and encouraged the population to obey and support the central authority. Although the power of the monarch was absolute, the king as a devout Buddhist was also expected to follow the precepts and could be reproved by the ecclesiastical authorities for unbecoming actions. Buddhism was one of the few restraints on the absolute power of the monarch.<sup>17</sup>

Tales from the Life of the Buddha, the *Jataka* stories or the Five Hundred and Fifty Former Lives of the Buddha, and various *sutra* or teachings of the Buddha have provided much of the subject-matter and outlets for expression in the arts and crafts.<sup>18</sup> Theravada Buddhism as practised by the Burmese emphasizes the need for every man to seek his own way to salvation by following the precepts, meditating, and performing acts of charity to improve his karma in future existences.<sup>19</sup> Charity in the form of religious donations has traditionally been the most popular way of accruing merit and atoning for past misdeeds. Merit-making was shared collectively with all sentient beings, and considerable effort was spent at all levels of society on this activity. The king, with vast resources at his

disposal, generally led the population in making pious donations.<sup>20</sup>

Buddhist art, unlike that of the post-Renaissance West, was not generally conceived as a vehicle of self-expression for the artist. Craftsmen were anonymous and were expected to follow various rules and formulae originally derived from Indian concepts of artistic expression. In creating a Buddhist icon such as a Buddha image, failure to observe the established norms would be deemed sacrilegious and render the object unsuitable for use in worship.<sup>21</sup> The artist and the donor, propelled by a spiritual urge and the desire to perform a meritorious deed in their work of art, aimed at creating something 'symbolic' over and beyond the object, to embody the compassionate tranquillity of the Enlightened One.<sup>22</sup> While at first imported models were closely copied, over the course of time Burmese craftsmen have shown a genius for assimilating foreign influences and blending them with local artistic canons so that works of art became unmistakably 'Burmese' in spirit.<sup>23</sup>

### The Supernatural

While Buddhism is the religion followed by the majority of the populace, pre-Buddhist animistic beliefs, which centre on the propitiation of a host of spirits called *nat*, continue to have a hold on the people. These spirits may be divided into two types: nature spirits and mythical-biological guardians. Nature spirits, originally derived from guardians of local phenomena such as the earth, sky, trees, and mountains, were associated with inexplicable natural calamities, such as droughts, floods, and earthquakes. Biological or mythical *nat* include guardians of the household, towns, cities, and former humans who had died unnatural deaths.<sup>24</sup> Although known for their beneficence on occasions, *nat* have a reputation for being easily offended and vindictive if aroused. Ceremonies to propitiate *nat* have traditionally been associated with every phase of life, from birth to death, from ploughing to harvesting, and before any important undertaking such as building a house or embarking on a journey. Until recently, few Burmese would pass through a forest without first propitiating You-kha-zou, the tree or forest *nat*, as a precaution against getting lost or being attacked by wild animals (Colour Plate 1).<sup>25</sup> Most Burmese acknowledge Mahagiri, the guardian *nat* of the household, who is regularly propitiated at the south-east post of the house with offerings of a coconut tied with white and red cloth (Plate 1).<sup>26</sup> Despite the official disapproval of Buddhism, effigies of *nat* are conspicuously placed on the platforms of Theravada shrines alongside orthodox Buddhist icons.

Many villages, pagodas, and temples have a shrine to Hpo-hpo-gyi, the Grandfather *nat* of the locality, who is regularly propitiated with flowers and *eugenia* leaves (Plate 2). Some districts also have a number of *nat* peculiar to their locality. For example, Nakayain (the Pegu Mother Royal), a patron *nat* of the Mon, is popular in Lower Burma (Plate 3).<sup>27</sup> Many social customs are designed to appease the spirits, and in some areas *nat-pwe* (*nat* festivals) are important annual events.<sup>28</sup> A belief in the *nat* has greatly enriched Burmese literature and the performing arts of music, dance, drama, and song. Some of the *nat-chin* (songs honouring the *nat*) are among the finest literary works in Burma, rich in drama, pathos, and tragedy.<sup>29</sup>

There is a special group of *nat* called 'The Thirty-Seven' which is associated with royal personages of Burma's legendary and historical



1. The Mahagiri *nat* Nga Tin-de, the blacksmith, who is also known as Mr Handsome, Lord of the Great Mountain, and guardian *nat* of the household. Here he is seated in his shrine at the Tharabha gate in his capacity as joint guardian of the city of Pagan. The statue of painted brick and plaster is regularly propitiated with sprigs of *eugenia* leaves and floral offerings.



2. Hpo-hpo-gyi, guardian *nat* at Shweinyaung-bin, on the route between Rangoon and Pegu. In local lore, this particular *nat* is credited with power to avert road accidents. Drivers from Rangoon and Pegu are known to bring their newly acquired vehicles to this shrine to receive the *nat*'s blessing.



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