



Sylvia Fraser-Lu

Burmese Crafts

Past and Present



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KUALA LUMPUR
OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS
OXFORD SINGAPORE NEW YORK
1994

OXFORD

UNIVERSITY PRESS

4 Jalan Pemaju U1/15, Seksyen U1, 40150 Shah Alam,
Selangor Darul Ehsan, Malaysia

Oxford University Press is a department of the University of Oxford.
It furthers the University's objective of excellence in research, scholarship,
and education by publishing worldwide in

Oxford New York

Auckland Bangkok Buenos Aires

Cape Town Chennai Dar es Salaam Delhi Hong Kong Istanbul
Karachi Kolkata Kuala Lumpur Madrid Melbourne Mexico City Mumbai
Nairobi São Paulo Shanghai Singapore Taipei Tokyo Toronto

and an associated company in Berlin

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Published in the United States
by Oxford University Press, New York

© Oxford University Press 1994

First published 1994

Second impression 2002

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
Data available

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Fraser-Lu, Sylvia.

Burmese crafts: past and present/Sylvia Fraser-Lu.
p.cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-19-588608-9 (boards):

1. Art objects—Burma. 2. Art objects, Buddhist—Burma.

3. Art, Burmese. I. Title.

NK1052.6.A1F73 1994

709'.591—dc20

93-33770

CIP

*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.

In Rangoon, I would like to thank U Thaw Kaung, Chief Librarian of the Universities Central Library, who over the years has attended to my requests for references and has been a wonderful and supportive friend. He also very kindly arranged introductions to knowledgeable people in the field of Burmese art. Daw Amy Nyunt Myint, formerly of the United Nations Library of Rangoon, has also been instrumental in providing me with research materials. U Maung Maung Tin of the Myanmar Historical Commission served as an inspiring teacher in answering my numerous questions over pickled tea and has kept me abreast of the latest finds in Burma's prehistory. Dr Than Tun, formerly Professor of History at the Mandalay Arts and Science University and now with the Myanmar Historical Commission, whom I met while living in Tokyo, kindly made his published works available to me. Daw Tin Hla, former Director of the Cultural Institute and energetic devotee of the dissemination of Burmese culture to foreigners, has for many years bullied and cajoled my willing spirit but badly conditioned body into visiting remote places in order to see little-known gems of Burmese art and architecture. The late U San Tha Aung, former Director of Higher Education, introduced me to the glories of Arakan and arranged an unforgettable trip to Mrauk-u. Members of the Department of Archaeology, such as the former Director, U Aung Thaw, and U Nai Pan Hla, U Than Shwe, and U Nyunt Han always made me welcome by patiently attending to various requests and providing many of the photographs which appear in this book. U Maung Maung Lay of the Religious Affairs Department assisted with his excellent translations of important Burmese works into English. The writer Daw Khin Myo Chit has always been an inspiration and an inexhaustible source of information on Burmese folklore. Daw Hla Than, too, was a fount of knowledge on Burmese astrology and animistic beliefs. The late Sao Sai Mong and his wife, Daw Mi Mi Khaing, in addition to their warm friendship and generous hospitality over the years, provided me with a model and standard of scholarship difficult to emulate. Special thanks also go to Mrs Winnie Chang for her unfailing encouragement and introductions to artists, such as U Aye Myint and U Tin Win, who helped me look at art from a 'Burmese viewpoint', and to former and present members of the faculty of the International School

Rangoon—Julia Aung, Thi Thi Ta, Ivy Tin Maung Aye, Diana Vum Hao, Mabel Win, Shirley Sai Hark, Gladys Tin Aung, Daphne Thaug Din, Rosanna Chang, Daw Tin Tin Yu, Jean Win Hlaing, Mya San, and Saw Tun—who, knowing my penchant for things Burmese, often accompanied me to various pagodas, exhibitions, and theatrical performances and so increased my knowledge of and appreciation for Burmese culture.

In Pagan and Mandalay, a number of people have also been most generous with their time and knowledge. The late U Bo Kay, former Conservator of Pagan Monuments, was a most patient teacher over the years and he is sadly missed. His former pupil, U Aung Kyaing, of the Department of Archaeology, has ably helped fill the void by keeping me informed of the latest finds and developments at Pagan. U Aung Kyaing's parents at Min-bu have also extended hospitality to me while I was studying monasteries in the area. The success of my numerous trips to Pagan has in large part been due to Tourist Burma guides U Aye Thwin and April Tin Tin Aye who accompanied me to out of the way places on many occasions. The late U Tin Aye and U Thaug Tun, former Principals of the Lacquer School, and the proprietor of the Royal Golden Tortoise Lacquershop, have kept me abreast of trends and developments in Burmese lacquer. In Mandalay, special thanks go to Mr and Mrs William Wu and family who arranged schedules and transportation, often at very short notice, and have accompanied me on difficult excursions with unfailing good humour and enthusiasm. The artists U Win Maung of Tampawadi and U Sein Myint of Mandalay have always been happy to answer numerous queries and to give me the benefit of their knowledge. Daw Mi Mi Gyi, formerly of Mandalay and now of Rangoon, has patiently answered questions on objects relating to religious manuscripts.

Various members of the United States mission in Rangoon have provided me with visa assistance and hospitality during my numerous sojourns in Burma. Special thanks go to former Ambassador Patricia Byrne, Mr and Mrs Ted Grenda, Steve Hourigan, and Matthew and Linda Chin. Australian Ambassadors Frank Milne and Christopher Lamb and their wives, and United Nations personnel such as H. K. Kuloy and Mr and Mrs Erling Dessau have also been most helpful and supportive of my work.

In Bangkok, Cherie Aung Khin of Elephant House has frequently brought unusual and superb examples of Burmese art to my attention. Joan and Alex Fedoruk, in addition to providing me with hospitality, have accompanied me to Bangkok's Sunday Market to view the the latest offerings in Burmese art, ranging from fifteenth-century Mon pottery from Lower Burma to the 'latest' lacquerware, wood-carvings, and embroidered wall-hangings produced in Chiang-mai. Francis Sherry has always been happy to show me his latest finds in Burmese silverware. John Shaw of Chiang-mai has kindly provided photographs of Burmese pottery.

In England, special thanks go to Noel F. Singer and Terence Blackburn who very kindly read the manuscript and made numerous excellent suggestions for improvement. I have also learned much from Noel Singer about Burmese art. Patricia Herbert, Head of the Southeast Asia section of Oriental and India Office Collections, has also been most helpful in bringing various publications on Burmese art to my attention. Ralph and Ruth Isaacs of the British Embassy,

Rangoon, made me welcome in their home and shared with me the joys of collecting Burmese lacquer. Anna Allott, formerly of the School of Oriental and African Studies, in addition to offering me hospitality while in London, arranging interviews, and providing me with transportation, also helped in the transcription of Burmese terms into English. Dr Janice Stargardt also provided me with the fruits of her research on Pyu culture. Dr Deborah Swallow, ably assisted by Frances Franklin, made the Burmese collection at the Victoria and Albert Museum available for study during visits to England.

In Japan, special thanks go to Mrs Teruko Saito and Mr Ryuji Okudaira, both of the Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, who very kindly provided me (often at short notice) with hard to find articles and books on Burmese culture.

In the United States, special thanks go to Daw Khin Htway of the Burma section of the Library of Congress, and other members of staff who tirelessly searched the stacks for obscure references pertaining to Burma. Paul and Lisa Taylor at the National Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian Institution, have always been encouraging of my work in South-East Asian studies and have made facilities at the Museum available to me. Special thanks also go to Felicia Pickering of the same institution for patiently opening and shutting drawers and pulling out objects from the Burmese collection for me to study and photograph. Dr Richard Cooler, Dr Sarah Bekker, Dr Michael Aung Thwin, and Daw May Kyi Win of the Burma Studies Group have always been gracious with their time and knowledge. Gloria and John Lannom of San Francisco, in addition to providing me with five-star hospitality, have introduced me to collectors from the Society for Asian Art such as Patsy Lee Donegan and Mr and Mrs James Connell. Joel Greene, also of San Francisco, made his collection available to me. Art dealers, such as John Fairman and Tim Mertel of Honeychurch Antiques Seattle, Haskia Hasson of Manhattan Beach, and the proprietors of Sanuk Gallery, San Francisco, also brought interesting Burmese objects to my attention. Robert Retka of Chevy Chase reviewed the manuscript and unravelled points of syntax. His wife, Carol Kim Retka, provided photographs of Burmese ceramics.

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.

Finally, special thanks go to my husband George who has suffered from long-standing benign neglect with characteristic good humour during the book-bearing process.

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

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.¹

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.²

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.³ 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.⁴

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.⁵ 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.⁶ 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.⁷ 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.⁸ 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.⁹

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].¹⁰ 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.¹¹

Much of what is known about Burma from the fourteenth to the nineteenth centuries has come from reports of foreign (mostly European) travellers.¹² 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.¹³ The Burmese, however, were not adverse, on occasions, to acquiring the service of foreigners in the art of war.¹⁴ 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.¹⁵

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.¹⁶

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.¹⁷

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.¹⁸ 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.¹⁹ 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.²⁰

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.²¹ 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.²² 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.²³

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.²⁴ 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).²⁵ 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).²⁶ 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).²⁷ Many social customs are designed to appease the spirits, and in some areas *nat-pwe* (*nat* festivals) are important annual events.²⁸ 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.²⁹

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.



ISBN 0-19-588608-9



9 780195 886085