

*Burmese Painting: A Linear and Lateral History* by ANDREW RANARD (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Press, 2009). ISBN 978 974 9511 76 3 (hard)

Few gaps in our knowledge about Burma are as wide as the history of painting in the 19th and 20th centuries. Indeed, perusing the ever growing list of books and articles devoted to Burmese art, one would almost conclude that indigenous painting ended with colonial rule. This new ambitious book by Andrew Ranard throws fresh light into this rich and varied world that has been in the shadows for too long.

The earliest artist Ranard explores is the famous Saya Chone (1866-1917) who straddled both the world of the Mandalay Palace and British Burma; the book concludes with works by Aung Soe (c. 1924-1990) and a host of young painters, such as Myo Win Aung (born in 1971). Thus the net has been cast widely, encompassing the entire range of painting beginning from the late 19th century. The book offers a little something for everyone interested in Burma's recent history, inasmuch as the lives of the highlighted artists intersect with the social, political, and intellectual currents that swept the nation during the past two centuries.

Ranard's interest in the subject stemmed from paintings acquired by his parents in Burma in the mid-1960s. However, it was not until the mid-1990s that the author re-visited Burma, with the aim of learning more about the artists whose works he inherited. It was then that his genuine passion

for modern Burmese blossomed. This passion took him in subsequent years to Burma numerous times and around the globe where he tracked down scores of unknown works. Some of the uncovered treasures Ranard sold to museums, notably the Singapore Art Museum and the Fukuoka Asian Art Museum; these two collections, together with those in the National Museum, Yangon, now form the largest corpus of modern Burmese paintings.

Much of the author's information surrounding individual artists was tucked away in a few secondary sources compiled by Burmese authors, foremost were Ah Mar's *Modern Burmese Painting* (1997) and Nyein Shein two-volume, *On Burmese Painters, Sculptors and Architects* (1998, 2000). These two works, translated for Ranard, were among his primary sources. The book also shares interesting tidbits based on interviews with the families and friends of the important deceased artists. Naturally, not all of the 'facts' drawn from these diverse sources were in agreement, but the evidence is carefully sifted to form his fresh conclusions. Also, old black-and-white photographs of many of the early artists create a fuller picture of these colorful personalities.

The text does not make clear whether the titles for many of the earlier paintings were chosen by the artists or if they were assigned by Ranard or others. This distinction may seem trivial, but a painting's title can slant our reaction to a work of art and thus mould our interpretation. For example, one work is entitled *Startled Chaperone*, while

another is named *Suitor at Swing*. Unless the artist himself specified these titles, the intended subject matter of these works must remain in some doubt. Perhaps italicizing only those works whose titles were securely established would have avoided this confusion.

Ranard was able to track down in Yangon long-lost Saya Chone works, some of which were illustrated in the famous *Mandalay and other Cities of the Past in Burma* by V.C. Scott O'Connor. Saya Chone was a graphic artist for the famous Tiger Balm company based in Rangoon. Another artist featured is Saya Aye, (1872-1930), a pupil of Saya Chone, who was commissioned by the famous hermit U Khanti to furnish religious paintings on thin metal sheets for restored pagodas in Mandalay. Ranard states that some of his works are hanging at the Eindawa Pagoda in Mandalay but these appear to be those of Saw Maung and others.

One chapter is devoted to the 'Rangoon School' which sprang out of the Burma Art Club, founded in 1913 by Europeans. Its principal Burmese pupil was Ba Nyan (1897-1945) who studied in London at the Royal College of Art and then later with Frank Spence in his private school known as the Yellow Door. Another British painter to influence Ba Nyan was Sir Frank Brangwyn. Ba Nyan returned to Burma in 1930 where he became the vice-chairman of the Burmese Artists and Handicraftsmen's Association. He knew G.H. Luce and found mention in Maurice Collis' *Into Hidden Burma*. During the war he became principal

of the Institute of Art, begun by the Japanese. One of his paintings, a night view of the Shwedagon, was sent to Emperor Hirohito. Many of his works today are on view at the National Museum.

Ba Nyan's most famous student was Ba Kyi (1912-2000) who studied in France at the end of the war and later received an MFA at the University of Pennsylvania. His best known works, from 1956, are in the departure lounge in Yangon's domestic terminal. Other well-known works, oils on canvas, hang in the entrance corridor of the Botataung Pagoda; these are attributed by Ranard to c. 1975-1980s, but a small date in the Buddhist Era painted on the first of the series suggests that the series belongs to the late 1960s. His greatest legacy was *The Illustrated History of Buddhism* (1953); paintings based directly on Ba Kyi's *Illustrated History* are ubiquitous in Burma today.

Other chapters are devoted to developments in Mandalay and the works of key artists. One master based in Mandalay was Saw Maung (1900-1969) who specialized in religious subjects. Ranard was unable to trace the whereabouts of Saw Maung's celebrated series, 'The 16 Dreams' (Jataka 77), but the metal panels, dated to 1968, are found in the entrance corridor to Mindon's Kyauk-taw-gyi Temple. One of Saw Maung's pupils was a Shan named Kham Lun (1915-1985) whose most important commission were religious paintings covering the interior walls of the Yadana Man Aung Temple in Nyaung-shwe, near Lake Inle, dated

by inscriptions to 1965; oddly, this series was overlooked by Ranard.

The book's long first chapter encompasses the entire pre-modern era, that is, from Pagan's mural art to wall painting belonging to the Konbaung period (1752-1886). The wisdom of including such a chapter must be questioned, since modern painting signals such a break with earlier traditions. Moreover, lumping ancient art with that of the modern period reflects an all too common view that Burmese art and cultural form a grand monolith, failing to appreciate the vast differences marking each period. In the same way, a book on 19th-century French painting beginning with a review of painting starting from Carolingian times would be poorly received.

Ranard asserts that Pagan painting "appeared, ghost-like and sepulchral, out of the fog of time" (p. 1) and then mistakenly looked to ancient Indian painting at Ajanta as "the generic source for Pagan painting" (p. 3). A full-page illustration from the Ajanta caves (dated incorrectly) opens the chapter, but 5th-century Indian painting has no connection to Burma. This amateurish chapter reflects the appealing but misleading notion that all Asian artistic traditions are branches of the same tree. Several murals are incorrectly attributed. One from Pagan, fig. 18, is identified as *Siddhartha Leaving the Palace*, but it is Jataka 22; another, fig. 23, is said to be from the Monywa area but it is from Pagan (monument no. 62). There are other similar errors.

The book is handsomely designed, with hundreds of color illustrations, an invaluable bibliography, and a handy nine-page annotated list of important Burmese artists. The new material uncovered by Ranard represents groundbreaking research, told in a lively, if not informal, prose style. Despite the flawed opening chapter, this book on modern Burmese painting is long overdue. Ranard's volume fills a huge gap and has significantly expanded our understanding of modern Burmese art.

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