

is meant to “recreate the atmosphere of the colonial era”, in the words of one of its owners. The wicker-look of the Strand Hotel lobby also exemplifies this aesthetic trend in interior design, a style one might dub “raj-chic.” While “colonialism” has earned a bad name in general, it seems, somewhat paradoxically, that colonial décor is in vogue.

The book’s compact format makes it an ideal companion on a walking tour of Yangon. To comfortably cover the majority of the monuments on foot would likely require two full days, perhaps with leisurely lunch-breaks at one of the *biryani* restaurants on Anawrahta Road.

The unsightly glass-faced, high-rise office blocks built in the late 1990s on the west side of Mahabandoola Park are dramatic testimony to the dangers of urban blight. Moreover, Yangon’s core is comprised largely of stately but derelict apartment buildings from the colonial era, now home to everyday Yangon residents. The day may come when these desirable, magnificent older neighborhoods face gentrification, forcing longtime residents to the city’s peripheries in order to make way for Myanmarese elites and expats employed by multinational companies. This phenomenon has occurred in cities worldwide, and there is no reason that Yangon’s trajectory will be any different. Finally, if the government’s abysmal and notorious record of preservation and renovation at Pagan, starting in the 1990s, is a harbinger of the city’s future, then Yangon’s fate is truly sealed.

The hope is that Serindia Press will be encouraged by the reception of this outstanding book to produce other volumes with a similar format, with perhaps a focus on the many other architectural gems in Yangon and also the rich architectural traditions of Myanmar’s other major cities, such as Mandalay, Moulmein and Sittwe.

Donald M. Stadtner

Lacquerware Journeys: The Untold Story of Burmese Lacquer by Than Htun (Dedaye) (Bangkok: River Books, 2013). ISBN 978 616 7339 238

This important addition to the literature on Burmese lacquer will be welcomed both by the enthusiast and those new to the subject. It is well designed and profusely illustrated, with over 650 photographs, the vast majority of lacquer objects, and most of high quality. Adequate space is allotted to the better known centres of manufacture, such as Bagan [Pagan], Kyaukka, and Mandalay. But the book’s particular strength is the author’s documentation and revival from obscurity of a number of neglected and almost forgotten lacquer industries. U Than Htun comes from a family of goldsmiths, but suspects that his great grandmother, a trader in the town of Dedaye, had ancestors connected to Bagan, who may have been lacquer artists. He brings a

deep emotional commitment to his subject, and his book is permeated by respect and affection for the lacquer craftsmen.

We must be grateful to the author for undertaking arduous journeys to reach remote regions in very rough travelling conditions to track down descendants of lacquer masters long dead and relics of almost forgotten lacquer industries. Very few of his readers will have the strength needed to cling to a bucking motorcycle for hours on end. The result is a rich harvest of anecdotal and interview material: we listen in on his conversations with U Sanda “the only living lacquerware artist in Mongnai”, and with “Daw May Lwe Yone, one of the last surviving lacquer artists of Laikha”; we hear him appeal to the owner of an unrecorded masterpiece from the small village of Nyaunglaypin to donate the piece to a museum; and we hope some readers respond to his appeal for news of a family of lacquer distributors who sold Inwa wares on 25th St. in Rangoon in the 1920s. U Than Htun has rescued as many pieces as he can afford, but laments the inability of local collectors to compete with foreign buyers. More generally, and ominously, he fears that unless lacquer trees are planted, which has never been the case, the price of lacquer sap, the raw material of all lacquer crafts, may continue to rise until all lacquer makers are put out of business.

The author poses many questions for further research, but some he investigates himself. He has arranged the exploratory removal of part of the surface lacquer layer on old pieces to inspect the woven bamboo or rattan basketry beneath, and has established that Mandalay makers often used old Bagan pieces as the base for their gilded and glass-inlaid relief-decorated gilt offertory vessels.

Illustrations and Diagrams

The numerous photographs of lacquer objects are a credit to the author, his son Nay Lin Tun, and other contributing photographers; and the book designer has exploited them to produce a visually stunning book. One particularly effective choice is solid glossy black—the colour of lacquer itself—as the background colour for many of the illustrations of lacquer objects. Town gatepost signs to introduce the wares made in each township area are another happy choice. Just as good to look at as the images of lacquer objects are the faces of elderly artists who created them, working in an old tradition, like U Pho Myae of Inle and U Seinda and Daw Pau Nu Han of Laikha.

Photographers have had a field day. Large blow-ups of pictures and patterns in yun (incised and colour-filled) work provide the end-papers and spacer pages between major sections of the book. As art work, these are decorative if lavish. But in the main text of a book like this the fine photographs of actual lacquer pieces must combine with their captions: together they should be consistently informative. A few slips are forgivable, but there are too many captions lacking the dimensions of a piece or the letters indicating its location in a collection. The very first full

page illustration (p. 8) shows five splendid lacquer pieces, with a caption stressing their exceptional rarity, but giving neither dimensions nor location. The first double page of illustrations (pp. 10–11) is equally impressive as art photography, as sheer display, but has only a single caption to cover over 50 objects. This is very brief, gives no dimensions, and refers to “short soon-okes with or without lids”, leaving the inexpert reader wondering which these are.

A fine early photograph (p. 20) shows lacquer makers and their tools and materials, but the caption misses the opportunity to identify these and explain their use. A fine colour plate (pp. 40–41) shows the Shwe Sandaw pagoda at Pyay [Prome] in the mid 19th century, but lacks an attribution.

In a book with almost 700 illustrations, it may seem ungrateful to complain of omissions. Both the htanaung tree and the tamar tree are beautifully illustrated, and the role played by the resin of each vividly described. But regrettably and inexplicably absent from this section is any illustration or description of the lacquer sap tree itself. (pp. 32–36)

The text describing some Laikha betel boxes (p. 186) refers to “a false bottom” and to a “secret compartment”, but they are not clearly located nor illustrated, so remain secret. A pity too that a Kyaukka bowl “the largest I have ever seen” is illustrated by one of the smallest photographs in the book (p. 123, pl. 287) and that the relevant descriptive text is seven pages away (p. 130).

Such omissions, though minor, can leave the reader frustrated. “Lacquer saucer and bowl from the collection of Ma Ma Hnit (Plate 206)” is the heading for a paragraph at the top of page 89. We learn of the munificent Ma Ma Hnit, who commissioned super quality pieces in Bagan in the 1900s, confidently inscribing one of the best “If a competitor can find any piece of comparable quality, this piece is yours gratis!” In eager anticipation, we turn back a page to look for Plate 206. But it depicts a betel box by Saya Nwe, and we look in vain for any image of Ma Ma Hnit’s saucer and bowl. Perhaps a competitor claimed them gratis!

The lists of lacquer makers at each of the main manufacturing centres, with the approximate dates when each was active, could be very useful for investigating objects in other collections. But estimated dates offered for pieces without an inscribed date can be open to question. Unfortunately, U Than Htun’s list of Bagan makers is headed by Hsaya Ngwe, maker of a bowl depicting the British deposition in 1885 of the last Burmese monarch Thibaw. U Than Htun claims this was made in 1886. From a study of this piece, its style of drawing and its many inscriptions, I would date it to the 1930s, almost half a century after the events depicted. This was the time of the rise of Burmese nationalism, and the “clear background” style was in fashion. (It is really very “deco”). True, a caption on the bowl records the date of the events depicted, 1885, but other captions name the English Col. Sladen and his Burmese interpreter Maung Ba Than, information most unlikely to have been available to any Bagan lacquer master in 1886. In another caption the lacquer master

Hsaya Ngwe not only gives his name, but names his price—ten units of currency, surely rupees.

Corrections to Published Accounts

The author offers several useful corrections to published accounts of Burmese lacquerware. He proposes Pyay as the place where the great gold-leaf shwezawa panel in the British Museum (see “Visions From The Golden Land: Burma And The Art Of Lacquer”, Cat 102) was made, instead of Bago [Pegu] where it was found and acquired by a British army officer in the 1850s. His argument is based not only on the fame of Pyay for its shwezawa work, but on an inscription at the head of the panel naming the donor’s village: a “Hpo Thein Tan” exists near Pyay, whereas no such village is known near Bago.

But similar concentration is required when reading published literature. Again, the object is an important example of shwezawa work, a fine flat betel box acquired by the National Trust from Lord Curzon and described and illustrated in “Visions From The Golden Land: Burma And The Art Of Lacquer” (p. 125, Cat 69). U Than Htun notes that the authors “do not mention whether the name of the lacquer master was inscribed on his pieces”. But the authors (p. 125) specifically state that (apart from the story caption on the top lid) “there is no other inscription, and thus no maker’s signature”.

U Than Htun doubts if fine quality yun lacquerware was ever made in the town of Salay, some 100 km downriver from Bagan. A lacquer water bowl in the Munster Museum in Germany described and illustrated by Dr. Uta Weigelt in her “Birmas Lackkunst in deutschen Museen” (object No 17, pp. 51–52) is inscribed with the name of the town of Salay. Is this, as U Than Htun believes, “the only known lacquerware piece with the word ‘Salay’”? He illustrates this bowl (p. 94, plate 224), and assumes it is the same as that in the British Museum, illustrated in “Visions From The Golden Land: Burma And The Art Of Lacquer” (p. 119–20 Cat 62) where its inscription is transcribed and translated “The craftsmen who made this article are Hsaya Ba and Ma Ma Aung”. U Than Htun argues that it may not have been made in Salay itself, but in Bagan, and simply shipped downriver to Salay by Hsaya Ba and Ma Ma Aung, a couple resident there. But comparison of two books, both listed in his bibliography, shows there are two lacquer objects carrying the place-name “Salay”, not just one; they differ in size and in the subject matter of their story-scenes. (The British Museum bowl measures 23.4 cms in height by 28.3 cms in diameter, that in the Munster Museum 22.5 cms by 28.7 cms. The story scenes on the bowl in the British Museum are from the Mahodhata Jataka, those on the Munster Museum from the Vessantara Jataka.)

So the name of the town of Salay appears not on “a single bowl” but on at least two similar bowls, which bear the names of the same makers, the married couple Hsaya Ba and Ma Ma Aung. This suggests, but does not prove, that quality lacquer

was indeed made in the town of Salay. Further research might establish whether in fact the makers lived and made lacquer in Salay, or in Bagan as U Than Htun thinks more likely. A case for Bagan may still be made, but without using the argument that only a single lacquer object exists inscribed with the name of the town of Salay.

Some names given to lacquer objects are confusing. U Than Htun uses the term “soon-oke” very freely in the book text and picture captions, without adequate explanation for the non-Burmese reader. In the index the term is defined by its use alone, as a carrier of gift food to the monks. So tall vessels with pinnacle shaped lids, tiered rounded vessels with an upturned cup finial, and smooth flat bowls with a low smooth lid are all “soon-okés”. This makes it hard to identify some vessels in groups. Can a domestic “meal-carrier” also be a “soon-oke”? The English term “tall tray” (p. 211) may puzzle the native English speaker, before he works out that it probably is meant to mean “dumb-waiter” (Burmese “kalat”).

Useful Additions to Knowledge

The great strength of this book is the author’s dedication to charting and illustrating many of the neglected and often virtually forgotten lacquer manufacturing industries. Some, such as those of Bago and Pyay, went into decline after World War II, others like Gadu-Ganan were probably defunct even before the Burmese monarchy.

The author confesses in his introduction that his book had its genesis in his chance acquiring of a strangely shaped box with incised work of incredible complexity. He later traced this kind of artefact to the remote Banmawk / Monyin / Wuntho region whose people are called Gadu-ganan. They produced thick-walled, very durable vessels, with convex base and lid, and distinctive style of decoration; and they did so a very long time ago. A few hoary old examples turn up at the Inle Lake markets, where the present reviewer purchased in 1991 a box (now in the British Museum) practically the same as a much better preserved specimen bought by Herr Blume in the 1840s at Moulmein, and now in Berlin. For lacquer objects that is a long life. But although these pieces have endured, the industry that made them may have been extinct for more than a century.

The author hopes his book will “encourage local lacquer enthusiasts” from several regions of Myanmar “to discover new information about old lacquerwares and forgotten lacquer masters”. It ought also to lead collectors of Burmese lacquer and foreign museum curators to reassess many pieces previously vaguely assigned to the lacquer industries of Bagan, Kyaukka, or Shan States. They will be grateful to U Than Htun for the dedication, the hard work, rough travel and careful study which have produced this splendid book.

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