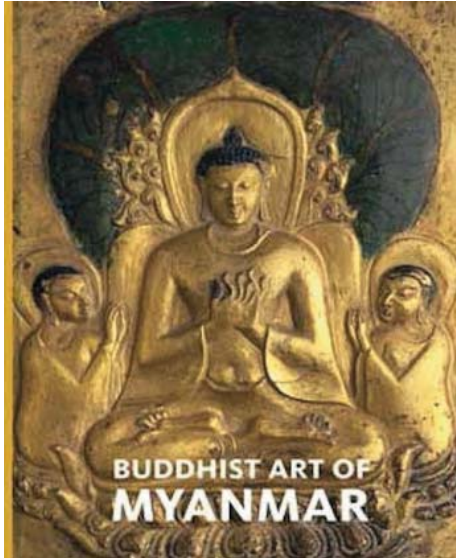


Buddhist Art of Myanmar edited by Sylvia Fraser-Lu and Donald M. Stadtner (New York: Asia Society and New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015). ISBN 978 0 300 20945 7. US\$65.00



This book was published to accompany an exhibition at the Asia Society Museum in 2015. Nine scholarly essays occupy eighty-eight pages, with a catalogue of 139 pages. Of seventy-one artifacts in the catalogue, thirty-one were loaned by the National Museums of Myanmar (13), the Sri Ksetra Archaeological Museum (7), the Bagan Archaeological Museum (9), and the Kaba Aye Buddhist Art Museum (2). Ten American institutions and individuals loaned the remainder. Most of the items from Myanmar date from the Classical period; most of the American items date from the 17th to the 20th century.

The essays average seven pages in length, of which an appreciable proportion is occupied by photographs. Within these restrictions, the authors did an admirable job of distilling Myanmar history. The editors Sylvia Fraser-Lu and Donald Stadtner summarize the history of the Archaeological Survey of Burma, founded in 1902, the Burma Research Society, important foreign collections of Myanmar art, and the progress of archaeology since independence in 1948. The next chapter, on foundation myths of Myanmar by Patrick Pranke and Donald Stadtner, describes the links between legends of Bagan, Inwa, Bago, Raikhine, Shan, and important sites in the country. The next chapter by U Tun Aung Chain complements those beliefs with a summary of Myanmar primary sources, including ancient inscriptions and more recent chronicles. Patrick Pranke provides a summary of Burmese Buddhism, which provides the necessary context for most of the works of art which constitute the main subject of this book. Jacques Leider's essay counteracts the view that Myanmar's main contacts with its neighbors consisted of Indian immigration and warfare with Thailand. Although Myanmar shares borders with India, China, and Thailand, Myanmar's main contact with them occurred in the context of trade. The wars with Ayutthaya in the 18th century may have been incited in part by trading disputes.

Art historians Robert Brown and Donald Stadtner contribute a chapter on the earliest Buddhist art of Myanmar, mainly that associated with the Sri Ksetra site, identified with a culture known as Pyu. The catalogue section begins with ten art works found at Sri Ksetra, a site associated with Pyu culture. The oldest item, a double-sided stele found at Sri Ksetra, is dated in the catalogue to the 4th to the 6th century. Pamela Gutman and Bob Hudson in the *Bulletin de l'École française d'Extrême-Orient* (2014) argued for a date as early as the 1st century. Several items in this section were discovered within the last decade, including a *Mettaya* and a *vajraghanta* which add significantly to our

knowledge of the mixture of Theravada and esoteric Buddhist beliefs in early Myanmar. This chapter also summarizes what is known about the early art of lower Myanmar and Rakhine (Arakan) where an early 8th century inscription records that a king patronized both Buddhist and Hindu monasteries.

The important site of Bagan is represented by thirteen items from Myanmar museums. Three items in the catalogue from American collections may also have come from Bagan. The origin and date of another item, a mold for votive tablets, are uncertain, but it is believed to have been made during the Bagan period or earlier. Donald M. Stadtner, in 'Ancient Bagan: a plain of merit', summarizes the development of the art of Bagan during its florescent period during the 11th through 13th centuries, and the various theories which have been proposed to account for the evolution of its architecture, sculpture, and mural painting.

The number of Bagan's residents has not been ascertained. Little research has been devoted to the study of remains of daily life at the site. One important clue is the record of the period of time needed to build some of the major monuments. The largest stupa in Bagan, Dhammayazika, for instance, was recorded in inscriptions as having been built in only two years (p. 62), suggesting that a large workforce was available.

Bagan's role as a political capital came to an end in the 14th century, but the site continued to be relevant to Myanmar society and politics. Later chronicles purport to record events and situations during the Bagan period, and the patronage of later kings. Out of the seventy-one items featured in the catalogue, the majority (44) date from the post-Bagan era. Three chapters of the book deal with this phase.

Sylvia Fraser-Lu covers the period from 1287 to 1900. She denotes the 465 years from 1287 to 1752 in Upper Myanmar the 'Ava-Taunggu Period', since the center of political power and artistic patronage was located at Ava (Inwa in modern orthography) near Mandalay during most of this time. The later part of this era is represented by seven Buddha images, two in a distinctive style with enormous crowns or head-dresses, possibly related to a tradition about a vainglorious ruler named Jambupati whom Buddha converted by appearing in the form of a world ruler.

At the head of the Ayeyarwadi nmar between 1369 and 1537, including glazed plaques, three of which are shown in the catalogue. Mrauk-U in Rakhine produced major works of architecture and sculpture, represented in the catalogue by a single small bronze Buddha.

The early Konbaung period which began in 1752 is represented by a glazed tile from Mingun, across the river from Mandalay, where the famous Mingun Bell still rests. Myanmar was progressively annexed by the British between 1826 and 1885, when the Konbaung Dynasty came to an end, and court artists had to turn their skills to other ends. Some sculpture of this period in the catalogue is almost heart-rendingly beautiful. The last item in the catalogue is a covered box decorated all over with a depiction of the *Vessantara jātaka*. The photographs in the catalogue are excellent; the box is so interesting that one wishes that photographs of all sides of the box including close-ups had been included.

The last two chapters deal with general topics. Adriana Proser ingeniously uses the biological concept of the 'meme' to explain why the production of certain Buddhist

images has waxed and waned in Myanmar. Heidi Tan discusses the various semi-didactic situations where Buddha images are found in Myanmar, such as the collections of assorted objects exhibited at pagoda complexes which combine images of Buddha with a wide range of other artifacts, the Archaeology Museum and other ancient sites in Bagan, and the National Museum in Yangon.

This book contains essays and a catalogue condensing a large proportion of the gamut of Myanmar art history. It is a necessary reference for any general reader interested in acquiring familiarity with the broad scope of Myanmar art, and can be read with enjoyment by the advanced student of the field.

John N. Miksic

The Siamese Trail of Ho Chi Minh by Teddy Spha Palasthira (Bangkok: Post Books, 2015). ISBN 978-974-228-285-1. 400 Baht.



Subject and style set *The Siamese Trail of Ho Chi Minh* apart. The subject is the Vietnamese leader, Ho Chi Minh, who under various aliases spent much of 1928 and 1929 living in the northeast of Siam recruiting allies among the “Viet-Kieu”, the Vietnamese minority who settled there as the French moved into Vietnam in the late 19th century. As such, the book is a straightforward biography about a mysterious period of Ho’s life. To find out “the facts” during this period, Palasthira does the ordinary detective work of the historian: consulting primary and secondary sources, as well as revisiting the known sites of Ho’s time in Bangkok and, most particularly, in the northeast.

But such historical method has limitations for writing a biography of Ho in Siam, which is why none of his many biographers devoted more than about four pages to his Siamese sojourn. This is largely because before, during, and after his time in Siam, Ho was on the run from the French secret police (*Sûreté*) who sought Vietnamese rebels like Ho, who took refuge just across the border from their French Indochinese colony. In this context, Ho became a chameleon, changing identities, names, costumes, and donning disguises that make it difficult for historians to trace by conventional means. Nevertheless, from what Ho later told his official biographers, it was in Siam that he first became a master of the jungle lore which he later used as the basis for the guerilla wars in Vietnam against the Japanese, French, and Americans.