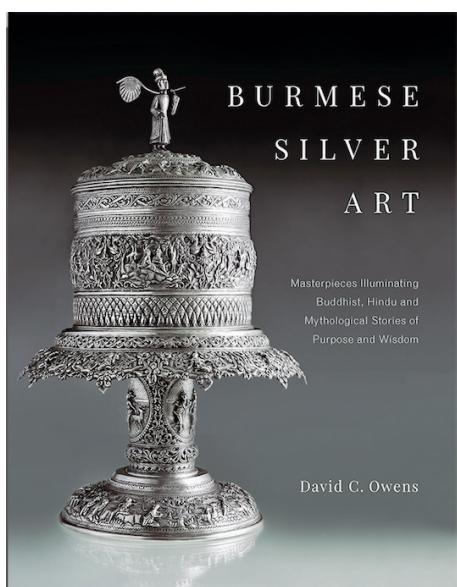


Thailand, he concludes, “should be run by elected politicians and not by courts. Politicians who perform badly should be removed at the ballot box” (p. 218). Yet, it is equally hard to imagine this remedy appealing soon to Thai power brokers who, depending on one’s perspective, believe or delude themselves that they run the country more ably than elected politicians. They will want to continue to hold a metaphorical, if not a physical, key to any ballot box. Nor would McCargo’s remedy appeal to a decisive proportion of the Thai electorate. The take it or leave it referendum in 2016 on the latest constitution and the unfair election in 2019, for all their flaws, showed that many Thais accepted the idea of a semi-appointed prime minister and military-aligned political parties. Presumably, this part of the electorate would also have welcomed the Constitutional Court’s ban of the progressive Future Forward Party in 2020, the most recent major intervention of the judiciary in politics.

In his preface, McCargo wrote that *Fighting for Virtue* was a difficult book to write (p. x). It is also a difficult book to read, but not because its information and analysis are insufficient or obtuse. The information and ideas are clearly presented. It is a difficult book to read because the treasure trove of material McCargo has assembled suggests that a transition in Thailand from ‘rule by law’ to ‘rule of law’—to use old-fashioned but layman-friendly parlance—is still such a remote prospect. Also, this remoteness seems to owe as much to the shortcomings of advocates of justice and human rights as it does to the protectors of the status quo.

James Wise

Burmese Silver Art: Masterpieces Illuminating Buddhist, Hindu and Mythological Stories of Purpose and Wisdom by David C. Owens. Singapore: Marshall Cavendish Editions, 2020. ISBN: 978-981-4868-88-4 (hardcover). £40.00, US\$50.



How often have you examined an artwork without understanding its real meaning or being able to decipher the pictorial narrative? Silverware in Southeast Asia was typically produced to fulfil an utilitarian function although the decorative patterns and iconography silversmiths inscribed on these works had religious, mythical or royal connotations. Focusing on silverwork created during a “Burmese Silver Age”, as he terms the period 1850-1930, David Owens successfully guides the reader through this maze in his masterful and superbly illustrated study of Burmese silverware, *Burmese Silver Art: Masterpieces Illuminating Buddhist, Hindu and Mythological Stories of Purpose and Wisdom*.

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The book comprises a Preface, four chapters, two Appendices, a well-researched Bibliography and an Index. Owens, a retired executive working in the mining industry, has been visiting Burma (Myanmar) regularly since 1993. He explains in the Preface how he and his wife, Kathleen, started collecting Burmese silver in Singapore in 2013, and how they developed their own “Noble Silver Collection”, encompassing some 200 silverworks “from art galleries and private collectors in Singapore, Yangon, Mandalay, London and Hong Kong” (p. 9), in a relatively short period.

In “Chapter One – Prologue” (pp. 9-17), Owens sets out his objectives and motivations for writing the book. While Burmese silverware has long been overlooked – there has been no publication dedicated exclusively to the subject since 1904 – the author makes no bones about the fact that the “primary objective of this publication is to showcase a photographic gallery 100 (sic) alluring Burmese silver artefacts that represent some of the finest-quality work from the Silver Age (p. 9).” To this reviewer, this seems a missed opportunity, which could so easily have been rectified through the inclusion of examples from museums and other private collections (other than the one illustration from the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A) in London on p. 17 and another from Sworders, the English fine art auctioneers, on p. 62). Owens does make reference to other specific examples of Burmese silverware in the V&A (p. 10 and p. 62) and the Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg (p. 116), but none is illustrated by way of comparison with pieces from his own Noble Collection.

The Prologue continues with a brief historical and cultural overview and a review of prior publications on the subject matter, the most notable being two short monographs by Harry L. Tilly in 1902 and 1904 respectively. Owens also pays tribute to more recent work by Sylvia Fraser-Lu and Wynward Wilkinson, in particular, but says that his “efforts to uncover Burmese-language information on silversmithing proved unsuccessful” (p. 13). He then addresses the issue of provenance, a particularly difficult area given the lack of an assay or hallmarking system in Burma, before mentioning the topic of visual narratives, a theme that he subsequently addresses in considerable detail in Chapter Four. Owens next considers, perhaps too briefly, where Burmese silverware sits in the context of “Regional Silverwork”. He states that, in recent times, compared to silverware from China, India and other parts of Southeast Asia, “Burmese silver art by comparison is less familiar to silver collectors, art historians and the broader world of Asian art and culture” (pp. 17-18) due to the country’s extended 50-year isolation from around 1962. While Burmese silverware, like that made in neighbouring Thailand, has often been overlooked, especially in comparison to the silverwork of India and China, Owens notes that it was “arguably more widely recognized and admired in the international art world in the late 19th and early 20th centuries than it is today” (p. 17). This happened due to the efforts of British colonial authorities to support and promote local craft industries resulting in strong domestic demand as well as a growing export business.

“Chapter Two – A Frame of Reference” (pp. 18-41) provides a brief overview of silverwork in Burma, dating back to the Pyu Period (3rd–11th centuries). The author then describes why the period 1850–1930 merits the description “The Burmese Silver Age”, an age during which “Burmese silversmiths handcrafted an exceptional and important body of artistically and technically high-quality silverwork” (p. 22). This was

all the more impressive for Burma not then being “an economically and artistically sophisticated country” (p. 22), not to mention a country in crisis having been at war with the British until 1885.

After a brief review of the silversmithing centres, Owens turns to the more controversial topic of trying to categorise the silverwork. He posits that: “Burmese silverwork can be broadly classified into ‘domestic’ and ‘export’ categories based on the principal sales market for the work” (p. 27). He then adds a third category, “Competition” silverwork, comprising a small number of mostly magnificent or high-quality items made for domestic or international expositions. These categories seem generally sensible, although it is worth pointing out that while some silver objects were ordered by foreign residents or purchased by international visitors in local emporiums, many ‘domestic’ silverworks must also have been exported—most likely as keepsakes—given the abundance of traditional Burmese silverware still to be found for sale in Britain. Thus, the lines of what is ‘domestic’ and what is ‘export’ silver remain somewhat blurred.

The remainder of Chapter Two focuses on silver sources utilised, mainly from local mines and silver specie, silversmithing techniques and the relationship between the silversmiths and their patrons. In particular, the author is to be commended for his lucid, concise and well-written overview of the silversmithing techniques, accompanied by explanatory photos.

In illustrating 100 of the finest works from his own Noble Collection, Owens provides in “Chapter Three – One Hundred Silver Artefacts from the Noble Silver Collection” (pp. 42-123) a cogent overview of the forms and variety of silverwork produced during the Silver Age. Unsurprisingly, the section on ceremonial offering bowls – perhaps the most common silver object produced in Burma – is the standout although I also found the section on “Silversmiths’ Marks” to be fascinating. Owens has divided the marks found on Burmese silverware into seven groups: textual; name of silversmith; characters from Jatakas and the Ramayana; mythological and astrological animals; faunal; human figures; and floral and geometrical. Well illustrated, this taxonomy will definitely prove an invaluable guide for would-be collectors.

Also included in this chapter is a section highlighting the known “Master Silversmiths (c. 1880-1910)”. While the vast majority of Burmese silverware does not appear to have been inscribed with the silversmith’s name, either in Burmese or English, Owens provides interesting biographical background information and examines some masterpieces in his collection produced by those master silversmiths who did identify themselves on silverworks produced for competition at international trade expositions.

“Chapter Four – Understanding the Decorative Narratives” (pp. 124-196) is the beating heart of this book. The author has lucidly managed to explain the religious and cultural relevance of the 547 Jataka tales—the birth stories of the Buddha—and has even summarised the final ten Jatakas, which are the best known and most commonly cited. Accompanied by profuse illustrations, Owens brings these stories to life while explaining the complex and often confusing iconography found on many Burmese silver wares. It is perhaps an understatement to say this is no mean feat. In addition, five subsequent sections in this chapter, “Therigatha Scriptural Poem”, “Ramayana Epic – The Deeds of Rama”, “Legends and Mythology”, “Konbaung Royal Family”

and “Floral and Fauna”, provide further interesting and informative details about local iconography, all supported with lavish illustrations.

At the back of the book are two Appendices. The first, “Silver – A Precious and Noble Metal”, is a very helpful explanation of the chemical and physical properties of silver, i.e. what makes the metal attractive as well as useful for industrial purposes. Owens also provides excellent advice on how to handle and store silverware and sensible tips on cleaning and polishing silverware so as not to damage the patina. The second, “Charting the Collection”, analyses data relevant to the Noble Collection. The author notes that “the 210 silver artefacts … are a statistically small sample of the entire body of work from the mid-19th to early 20th centuries” (p. 208), which leaves the reader to wonder how representative or necessary this particular Appendix is.

The author claims: “This book does not profess to be a scholarly work. It is a general interest publication by a private collector to showcase Burmese silver art to the widest possible audience.” (p. 9) However, I would suggest that the two are not mutually exclusive. The depth of the author’s research and the accessibility of his writing mean that he has produced a tome that will appeal to academics, collectors and newcomers/general interest readers alike. Sadly, however, the book is let down by having no footnotes to allow the reader to verify data provided or evidence supporting the author’s hypotheses. Apart from this criticism and the previously mentioned lack of comparative pieces illustrated, one other minor annoyance, at least to this reviewer, is the mixture of US and UK spelling and grammar throughout. The text would have benefitted from a final edit to standardise language usage.

Marshall Cavendish is to be congratulated on designing an innovative layout in which the superb photographs of the silverware, taken by Charlie Lim, literally shine – no easy feat as I can attest. There are numerous close-up shots, that supply the requisite level of detail to allow the reader to appreciate fully the diverse techniques, forms and designs utilised in the production of these utilitarian wares that double as works of art. David Owens can thus feel proud of producing this beautiful book and the fact that he has manifestly achieved his second stated objective, “to elucidate the captivating visual narratives that adorn much of the silverwork” (p. 9).

Paul Bromberg