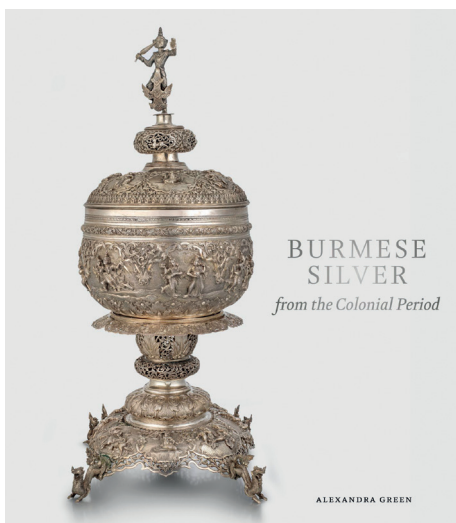


Burmese Silver from the Colonial Period by Alexandra Green (London: Paul Holberton, 2022). ISBN: 978-1-912168-27-9 (hardcover). £60, US\$80.



It is quite usual that the advertising blurb for a new book is more hype than substance. Not in this case. This is a beautiful and a superb book!

Southeast Asian silver aficionados will feel blessed that, after a wait of approximately 100 years, two excellent books have been added to the literature in short order. This latest tome by Alexandra Green, the Henry Ginsburg Curator for Southeast Asian Art at the British Museum and an academic steeped in Burmese art history and iconography, is a highly thoughtful reconsideration of Burmese silverware produced during the late 19th and the early 20th century. Although different in many ways, it is also complementary to David Owens' recent masterful *Burmese Silver Art*

(see *JSS* Vol. 108 Part 2, pp. 230-233).

This book is clear in its purpose. It is first and foremost a catalogue detailing the 120 pieces in the superb collection of the retired banker, Graham Honeybill. In a concise "Foreword", Honeybill explains how he gained the collecting addiction as a child, how and when he began collecting Burmese silverware and why he wished to publish a book on his collection: he recognises that he is only the custodian of these objects, yet wanted to leave a memento of the collection after its dispersal, as well as provide a guide to new collectors (p. 7).

Green then provides a brilliantly concise thirty-page essay titled "Rethinking Silver Objects from Burma". She strips away much of what has previously been written about this subject matter—which has focused on the who, when and where of Burmese silver production—and suggests the weakness of this approach given the lack of reliable information, demanding that readers reconsider the objects themselves, especially the patterns and recurring motifs that provide connections to both historic and contemporary historical trends.

The essay is divided into six sections. In "The colonial milieu", Green recognises that Harry L. Tilly's two publications, in 1902 and 1904 respectively, were considered the major reference works on Burmese silverware for almost a century, but notes that no-one actually considered "the veracity of his information or his analytical methodologies (p. 9)." She then "describes and assesses the colonial ideas invoked by Tilly and counters them by examining silver from other perspectives that places silver within Burmese art history and points towards its global participation" (p. 9).

The impact that colonial ideas about art, craft and design had on Burmese silverwork are considered, in particular the rationale for silversmiths to produce export goods, trinkets for the growing tourist market and to participate in international exhibitions and

fairs, all of which “had substantial ramifications for design and imagery” (p. 12).

The author debunks the myth in “Sumptuary laws and silver” that Burmese sumptuary laws meant that silver was a precious metal inaccessible to the majority of the population. She suggests that, just as in other parts of Southeast Asia, the limited number of silver objects with early dates was more likely due to “the use and reuse of silver within Burmese smithing traditions” (p. 13).

In “Silver production and use”, the author notes that production processes have been adequately covered elsewhere. Rather, she makes good use of exhibition catalogues, censuses and local gazetteers to provide information about the many types of popular utilitarian silver wares produced from the late 19th century to the 1930s, and how new technology facilitated silver production, not only serving the expanding colonial market, but also the continuing need for local donations of silver objects for use in religious rituals.

While acknowledging that dating Burmese silver is difficult, as objects generally are undated, there are few extant objects that predate the mid-19th century, patterns and designs can persist over many years, and there is limited information about specific silversmiths or sites of production, in “Locations, dates, styles and designs”, the author notes that a problem with the existing literature considering these issues is the fact that the authors lacked sufficient knowledge of Burma: she then gives some examples to support this claim. She also undertakes an “examination of patterns, designs, layouts and motifs, as well as the integration of Burmese silver with the artistic, cultural, religious and social milieu from which it emerged” (p. 16). By focusing on the objects themselves, Green has decided to avoid what cannot be proven—date and place of manufacture—but instead concentrates on “understanding the way imagery was transmitted and utilized in production” (p. 26). That said, dating within a broad range is provided for the pieces in the catalogue.

The section, “Silver in Burmese art history”, is of interest as Green compares Burmese silverware, and the designs and patterns used thereon, historically with other Burmese art forms, such as wall paintings, lacquerware, wood carving and textiles. She concludes that Burmese silversmiths “did not work in isolation and that a body of designs, patterns and layouts was utilized across media” (p. 29).

In the essay’s concluding “Summary”, Green rightly notes the influence on Burmese silver of other forms of material culture, including lacquerware and textiles, and the impact of work from other countries, particularly after the fall of Ayutthaya in 1767, which led to an influx of artisans (who had been captured as prisoners of war).

I particularly appreciated the “Introduction to the Catalogue” (p. 37) and the Catalogue Structure (p. 38), which provide clear instruction as to how the catalogue has been compiled and where to find objects with specific features or designs despite the fact that objects with multiple imagery likely fit into multiple categories. Interestingly, but not surprisingly, unless there is clear evidence, the author has chosen not to “associate pieces with cities or regions”, but has instead decided to group silver objects into “families based on their combination of features” (p. 37), acknowledging that silversmiths were mobile and not just fixed to one location.

The author again addresses the difficulty of dating given the lack of information available, also noting that dates, names and inscriptions might have been added later

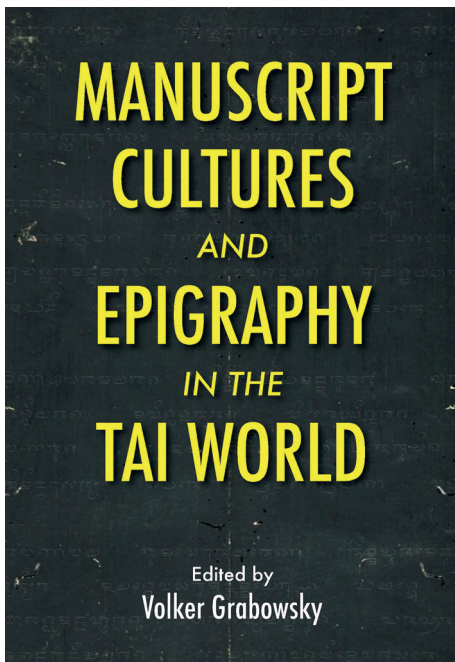
to enhance value. She concludes that while dating remains problematic “based on traditional connoisseurship”, silverware can still be “situated within the substantial corpus of Burmese art”, which “draws heavily on artists’ encounters with the world around them” (p. 37).

The catalogue itself—comprising a presentation plate, numerous bowls of different sizes, purposes and designs, a tea set, a trophy cup, cups, a centrepiece, letter cylinders, a picture frame, a belt buckle, various betel and cheroot boxes, *Dha-lwe* ceremonial swords and figures—is a delight. Each picture is large, clear and detailed, and located directly opposite the author’s erudite description and explanation of the item. It is well known how difficult silver is to photograph, yet Richard Valencia’s photographs of the collection are absolutely stunning. Indeed, the layout of the book is very ‘clean’ and modern; and the text also sufficiently large that it really is a joy to read.

Overall, this is a ground-breaking book. Although it is a catalogue detailing just one collection, albeit a very fine one, Alexandra Green has provided some thought-provoking ideas during her “initial foray” into this fascinating subject as to how we might today reconsider Burmese silverware produced during the British colonial period.

Paul Bromberg

Manuscript Cultures and Epigraphy in the Tai World edited by Volker Grabowsky (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2022). ISBN: 978-616-215-172-9 (hardcover), 978-616-215-188-0 (paperback). 895 Baht.



Manuscript Cultures and Epigraphy in the Tai World is an edited volume that gathers together papers presented in 2017 at the 13th International Conference on Thai Studies at Chiang Mai University. Edited by Prof. Volker Grabowsky (University of Hamburg), this book is made up of three thematic parts, each of four chapters: “Scripts, inscriptions, and manuscripts”; “Buddhist and classical literature”; and “Tai manuscripts and cultural revival”.

As its title suggests, this book addresses topics that concern the written culture of the Tai-speaking areas in Southeast Asia and beyond. In this regard, the wide geographical scope of focusing on the broad “Tai world” constitutes the book’s first originality. Most works in the social and human sciences stay within the