Burma to Myanmar: A Recent Exhibition at the British Museum, London (2 November 2023–11 February 2024)

Figure 1: View of the exhibition © The British Museum

Since its 1962 military coup, Myanmar has become a country focused on itself. This isolation connected with the "Burmese path to socialism" and seemingly endless civil wars. Yet, historically, isolation has not been the norm for this landscape as, culturally and artistically, Myanmar's many peoples engaged with the world around them from early times.

The exhibition, *Burma to Myanmar*, held recently at the British Museum in London from 2 November 2023 to 11 February 2024 **[Figure 1]**, and accompanying book of the same title,[1] both produced in conjunction with scholars and communities from Myanmar, explore the region's history through the lens of cross-cultural encounters and their material impacts. However, the project sought to do so without privileging the Burman Buddhist majority; both the book and exhibition were experiments in

[1] Edited by Alexandra Green and published by the British Museum Press, 2023. For product details, see: https://www.britishmuseumshoponline.org/burma-to-myanmar.html.

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presenting Myanmar's histories in a balanced way. The region is historically diverse, home to different kingdoms, empires, principalities, chiefdoms, and kinship networks that, until independence from British colonial control in 1948, had never been a single political entity. In both the exhibition and book the histories of the five main areas—Arakan (Rakhine), Shan States, the highlands, central Myanmar, and lower Myanmar—were assessed separately. It was particularly appropriate to launch this study in 2023 to mark the 75th anniversary of Myanmar's independence from British colonial control. Although Myanmar was an important colony for the British, it is little known in the United Kingdom today, with news focusing on conflict, poverty, and former State Counsellor and Nobel Peace Prize Laureate Aung San Suu Kyi (b. 1945). To counterbalance these emphases and lack of general knowledge, both the exhibition and book begin with a panoply of objects to demonstrate Myanmar's many sources of wealth.

Rich natural resources, such as teak, jade, gems, ivory, rice, cotton, silver and gold, and an excellent location connecting trade routes via land and sea along the northern curve of the Bay of Bengal and between China, India, and Thailand made the polities of Myanmar wealthy. Kingdoms, principalities, and kinship networks based in the Shan States, lower Myanmar, Arakan, the highland regions, and central Myanmar traded, taxed, fought, and collaborated over the resources and strategic locations that facilitated the movement of this wealth. Since Southeast Asia has historically been underpopulated, such resources included people; the forced relocation of people was a common phenomenon during warfare and raids, enhancing cultural exchange, though at significant human cost. In this notice, I focus upon connections with present-day Thailand.

The kingdom of Ayutthaya in what is today central Thailand (Siam) was sacked by the central Burmese army in the 1560s and 1760s. Lan Na (now northern Thailand) was colonized by the Toungoo and Konbaung dynasties of central Myanmar for over 200 years from the late 1500s until the end of the 1700s. Even after that, military incursions by central Burmese armies into Lan Na took place in the early 1800s. Warfare at the time was not about claiming territory, but about forcing other polities to pay tribute and removing people back to the conqueror's land. This forcible movement of people was particularly important in cultural transfers and is visible in Burmese art. Siamese theatrical troupes were relocated to central Myanmar in 1767 and resettled in their original profession, in this case performing for the Konbaung court, where they became extremely popular. Their fame rapidly spread around the country, in part through itinerant troupes. Michael Symes (1761–1809), who worked for the East India Company, recorded that "the best actors were natives of Siam [central Thailand]" in his publication recording an embassy from the Governor General of India to King Bodawpaya's court in 1795 (Symes 1995 [1800]: 176–177). Siamese performers were also incorporated into displays of state power and demonstrations of the extent of Burmese conquests, as visible in numerous *parabaik* (ပုရပိုက်; folding-book) manuscripts

Figure 2: Crowned buddha image, central Myanmar or the Shan States, approx. 1800–1880, British Museum, H.: 82.50 cm, W.: 30 cm, wood, glass, gold and lacquer, inv. no. 1919,0717.1, purchased in 1919 from Rev. William Kidd, who was a Presbyterian pastor in Rangoon in 1881–1887 © The British Museum

showing court processions. In such images, Siamese troupes are dressed for performance, including with masks on top of their heads (the usual placement) and sometimes almost completely hidden under lion costumes.[2]

Additionally, adaptations from Siamese theatrical costumes became part of formal Konbaung court dress. New elements included the cloud collar, epaulette-like additions to jackets modelled on the Siamese *kranok* pattern (ลายกระหนก) or flame motif, and elaborate swag elements worn at the front of an outfit. Siamese embroiderers and other skilled craftspeople were incorporated into court workshops to facilitate these additions. Since clothing at the central Burmese court was governed by sumptuary laws, the use of such additions was carefully regulated. People coming to present tribute were also required to wear outfits with similar elements. This new style of court dress also began to appear in other media, such as the representations of kings, deities, and high-ranking figures in wall paintings of the late 18th and early 19th centuries, as well as on crowned buddha images (referencing the close connection between kingship and Buddhism that emerged during the Bagan period of the 11th to 13th centuries). A lacquer image in the British Museum's permanent collection **[Figure 2]**, acquired by the Reverend William Kidd in the 1880s while he was pastor of the Presbyterian church in Yangon (Rangoon, 1881–1887), displays the new style clearly. Instead of a pronged crown with extensive ribbons flaring to each side, smooth robes, and necklaces hanging in a loop, the buddha wears a Siamese-style crown with a broad base surmounted by a *stūpa*-like form with a tapering finial. Flanges, pointed above the ears, curve upwards in a flame shape, and the buddha's robes are embellished with wing-like projections at the knees, cuffs, elbows, and shoulders; all of these features come from Siamese models. Silver-wrapped

[2] See for example the Bodleian Library Burmese MS 7: https://digital.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/objects/38fdf59a-4f37-4a37-95e8-54915403d625/.

Figure 3: *Shwe-chi-doe* (*kalaga*) illustrating scenes from the *Rāmāyaṇa*, possibly Mandalay, approx. 1900–1930, British Museum, H.: 53.5 cm, L.: 290 cm, cotton, flannel and sequins, inv. no. 1999,1103,0.2, donated in 1999 by Henry Ginsburg, former curator of the Thai, Lao and Cambodian collections at the British Library © The British Museum

buddha images produced for less-wealthy people did not necessarily show such features but were often embellished around the base with Siamese motifs seen on lacquer and textiles, as well as paintings.

At the Ayutthaya court, theatrical performances of the 18th century focussed on the *Rāmāyaṇa* epic, an Indian tale that arrived in Southeast Asia many centuries earlier and was adapted to suit a wide variety of local contexts. While the narrative was known in Myanmar prior to 1767, it blossomed after the popularization of the Siamese theatre and was replicated in many formats. Itinerant troupes travelled around the region performing the *Rāmāyaṇa*. It was illustrated on *shwe-chi-doe* (ရွှေချည်ထိုး; lit. "gold and silver thread"), also known as *kalaga* (ကန့်လန့်ကာ; lit. "curtain") textile hangings. Scenes of the epic appeared on silver items and lacquerware, and other objects. The length of the epic meant that only select scenes could be portrayed, but on textile hangings a greater variety could be shown as they often came in sets displaying events over several pieces. Two parts of a set are in the British Museum collection; they illustrate some of the exploits of the white monkey Hanuman, present the activities of demons including those of Rāvaṇa (Dathagiri), and show Prince Rama demonstrating his martial prowess, holding court, and fighting a demon **[Figure 3]**.

Yet, Ayutthaya was not the only source of inspiration for the varied art forms of Myanmar. The colonization of Lan Na for over 200 years saw the incorporation of new motifs and narratives into art in central Myanmar. For instance, an important motif seen in both regions is a dense floral patterning, called *zinme* (ဇင်းမယ်), the

Figure 4: Betel box with the *zinme* design, Chiang Mai, Lan Na (northern Thailand), ca. 1890s, British Museum, H.: 19.4 cm, diam.: 23.2 cm, bamboo and lacquer, inv. no. 1998,0723.153, donated by Ralph H. Isaacs and Ruth Isaacs in 1993, acquired by exchange at Mata Hari, Tanglin Centre, Singapore, in Feb. 1992 © The British Museum

Burmese name for Chiang Mai. It is found on lacquer objects and was also replicated on textiles in a layout that resembles Indian trade textiles (*patola*) and Siamese textiles. In the British Museum, a black betel box displays the zinme pattern in red and, although this example was probably produced in northern Thailand, strong links between central Myanmar and Lan Na are apparent in the shape and size of the box, as well as the coloring, pattern, and the incised production method **[Figure 4]**. Connections between central Myanmar and northern Thailand were intensified when the British established lacquer schools in Myanmar and encouraged the exploration of new patterns, including those from northern Thailand, during colonial times.

Cultural transfers also occurred when numerous people were forcibly relocated from Lan Na to central Myanmar. This is particularly seen in Burmese wall paintings that have incorporated events from the life of the historical Buddha Gotama found in a text called the *Paṭhamasambodhi* in Pali (ปฐมสมโพธิ or *pathomsomphot* in Thai), which is not found in central Myanmar. The most prevalent scene was the representation of the eve of Buddha Gotama's enlightenment when he called the earth goddess to witness his good deeds and she wrung all the water that he had poured on the ground to mark his good deeds in previous lives out of her hair. As a marker of merit, the image of the earth goddess squeezing her long hair became a common representation in narrative scenes, but also at the entrances to temples where she indicated the meritoriousness of the donors. She was further integrated with a pillar that symbolized the spread of Buddhism. Originating in India around the 3rd century BCE, the practice of raising pillars among Buddhists in central Myanmar developed later into an ornamented column called a *tagundaing* (တံခွန်တိုင်). These pillars were constructed on a large-scale in temple compounds as well as reproduced in miniature

for use inside temples. In some instances, the earth goddess was represented on the base, emphasizing the centrality of the Buddha Gotama's enlightenment, but also marking the good deeds of donors to the religion. The example at the British Museum is studded with glass mosaics that became a major element of religious art from the mid-19th century **[Figure 5]**.

Yet, the kingdoms based in central Myanmar were not the only ones that interacted with those in present-day Thailand. Bago (Pegu) in lower Myanmar was attacked by Ayutthaya in the late 16th century and had trade connections with Lan Na. One of the examples of such links in the exhibition is a crocodile-shaped zither. Associated now with Mon peoples, who call it the *kyam* (ကျံ), the form is also found in other parts of Southeast Asia, but the crocodile-shaped string instrument is primarily found in lower Myanmar, central Thailand, and Cambodia. While in Thailand and Cambodia the instruments are both called "crocodile" (known as *chakhe*, derived from *chorakhe* จระเข้, and *krapeu* กระเพี, respectively), they are highly stylized; only in lower Myanmar do these zithers have clearly zoomorphic appearances. The crocodile-form zither was used in musical ensembles, and it was popularly collected, as seen in museums around the UK. A painted example was gifted as part of an ensemble to Queen Victoria

Figure 5: *Tagundaing* (standard), approx. 1800–1899, British Museum, H.: 185.8 cm, wood, lacquer, glass and gold, inv. no. 1915,1020.1, bequeathed in 1915 by Mary Sale © The British Museum

Figure 6: Zither in the form of a crocodile, probably central Myanmar, approx. 1860s–1890s, British Museum, H.: 15.5 cm, W.: 25.5 cm (widest point), L.: 106 cm, wood, lacquer, glass, metal, animal gut, inv. no. As1901,0605.29, donated to the museum in 1901 by the Indian Section, Paris Exhibition 1900 Committee © The British Museum

by the residents of "Margai" (probably Mergui [Myeik]) upon her Golden Jubilee celebration in 1887. The British museum's zither, which arrived after display at the Paris World Exposition in 1900, is gilded and inlaid with glass **[Figure 6]**.

The British colonized Burma in three phases over the 19th century. Colonization caused radical cultural, religious, social, political, and artistic changes, which are revealed through new art forms, designs, technologies, and materials. The advent of the colonial period and expanding industrialized trade networks brought synthetic dyes, which were enthusiastically adopted by local craftspeople. The rapid expansion of synthetic dyes across the highlands indicates that such places, although considered remote today, were once closely connected with global trade, a situation facilitated by markets that rotated around villages and towns. A series of six Karen textiles produced over the course of the 19th century were tested for synthetic dyes and fibres by the British Museum's Scientific Research Department. One tunic, probably made by a Pwo Karen woman between the late 1880s to the beginning of the 20th century, combines natural dyes, such as indigo blue, and synthetic ones, including diamond green B and chrome yellow. The piece displays circular embroidery that became a feature of tunics produced by Karens in Thailand in the 20th

FIGURE 7: Tunic (*hse*), Myanmar or northern Thailand, approx. 1880s–1920, British Museum, L.: 75 cm, W.: 84 cm, cotton, coix seeds, inv. no. As1966,01.481, purchased from the Church Missionary Society in 1966 © The British Museum

century, indicating interactions among Karen peoples across modern borders **[Figure 7]**.

The imposition of different forms of rule over varying parts of the region by the British, coupled with the British categorization of peoples, led to a solidification of ethnic boundaries and territories that had not previously existed; these ideas helped set the stage for 20th century conflicts. World War II and the Japanese occupation hastened the end of colonial rule, but left the region devastated.

In 1948 came independence. After a brief democratic and international period, the military stepped in, putting the country on the "Burmese path to socialism". This entailed severe isolation to prevent foreign meddling. Lack of exposure to the outside world and extreme repression have affected the country at all levels, including the artistic. Yet, at the same time, many

of Myanmar's prominent personages have loomed large on the international stage. From General Aung San (1915–1947), who negotiated independence from the British, to UN secretary-general U Thant (in office 1961–1971), who negotiated with US President Kennedy (in office 1961–1963) and Soviet Leader Nikita Khrushchev (in office 1953–1964) to resolve the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962, to Aung San Suu Kyi. Ethnic divisions and repression remain extreme, but, in the 21st century, social media has enabled a much greater engagement by Myanmar's many peoples with the world around them.

Reference

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