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Yin Ker

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Felicitous “Misalignments”:

Bagyi Aung Soe’s *Manaw Maheikdi Dat Pangyi*

YIN KER

In order to arrive at what you do not know
You must go by a way which is the way of ignorance.
In order to possess what you do not possess
You must go by way of dispossession.
In order to arrive at what you are not
You must go through the way in which you are not
And what you do not know is the only thing you know.¹

—T.S. Eliot

Sometime in the 1980s, during the last decade of his life, the reputed fore-runner of modern—and even contemporary—art in Myanmar, Bagyi Aung Soe (1923–90), began using the term “*manaw maheikdi dat pangyi*” to refer to his art. In Burmanised Pāli, this epithet means the painting or art of the fundamental elements of the phenomenal world by way of intense mental concentration attained through assiduous meditation practice.² He stated in no unclear terms that he painted the mind, not matter, and cited Buddhist tenets such as the Three Marks of Existence (Pāli: *tilakkhaṇa*), the Four Noble Truths (Pāli: *cattāri ariyasaccāni*) and the Four Sublime States (Pāli: *brahmavihāra*)

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FIGURE 1: Bagyi Aung Soe, *Untitled*, c. 1988. Felt-tip pen and ink on paper, 32 × 26 cm. Collection of Gajah Gallery. Image: Gajah Gallery

as examples of his works' subject matter (Figure 1). The creative process was described as a spiritual transformation, whereby unwholesome mental states like “greed and anger [were transformed] into a state free from greed, anger and ignorance”. Neither the said subject matter nor process is, however, apparent in *manaw maheikdi dat pangyi*: vibrant felt-tip pen and ink drawings on paper juxtaposing text and image, and displaying a myriad of sources of inspiration from both the ancient and contemporary worlds, the East and the West (Figures 2–8). There is not even necessarily any representation that can be identified as Buddhist. With forms, modes of expression and pictorial strategies derived from fields and disciplines conventionally perceived as discrepant—tantra and physics, eroticism and asceticism, poetry and geometry, for example—*manaw maheikdi dat pangyi* flouts the dualistic mode of thought that is at the heart of the Cartesian worldview, along with art history's form-biased tools that are iconographic and stylistic analyses. In asserting this pictorial idiom to be the sum of “all the traditions of the world” and the “most advanced of modern art”, Aung Soe further confounds by offsetting the dichotomy between the traditional and the modern that underlies modernity's and modernism's putative prerogative to “progress”, which remains widespread though not uncontested.

It would be contrived to elucidate Aung Soe's *manaw maheikdi dat pangyi* using established but largely tangential art historical constructs and frameworks shaped by an Euramerican historical experience and political agenda.

Instead of circumventing or levelling its peculiarities, this article proposes to address the very alterities that have been its genius as well as bane. That is to say, *manaw maheikdi dat pangyi*’s “misalignments” with hegemonic canons of thought, art and art history are here taken as the very site and instruments of its demystification. Akin to physical discomfort that is symptomatic of larger underlying problems begging treatment, these “misalignments” lead the way to their diagnosis and reparation. Just as how the movements of tectonic plates result in the formation of topographic features, the contradictions besieging *manaw maheikdi dat pangyi* have the potential to reshape the narratives of art in which it is inscribed. The current state of flux is, moreover, conducive to open enquiry and the distillation of modes of coherence beyond *logos* that has been the rock of western thought and sciences, including art history. For these reasons, in lieu of trimming and blanching *manaw maheikdi dat pangyi* to fit into the mainstream narrative of modern art modelled after western modernism, whose very inability to accommodate difference betrays the falsehood of its claims to universality, this article takes on, rather than sidesteps, the ostensible incongruities and paradoxes present in or exposed by Aung Soe’s signature works. Allegedly “international” *modi operandi* tending towards the homogenisation of thought, practices and expressions are sidelined in favour of that which defies facile categorisations, established methods and frameworks, and cannot and *must not* be straitjacketed in impermeable categories, lest the singularities be amputated, distorted or suppressed.

Hence with the proposition that the indistinct no-man’s land where *manaw maheikdi dat pangyi* stands alienated—and perhaps safeguarded too—is not an impasse, this article explores some of the systems and forces colliding, sliding past or fusing in it, as well as the questions they precipitate. Three indicative tropes are proposed as points of entry: “modern”, “Burmese” and “Buddhist” art.³ We begin by asking: how did Aung Soe negotiate his *alma mater* Śāntiniketan’s lessons on the modern—which he made the beacon of his practice—with the presiding paradigm of art in Myanmar, which holds western modernism as its irrefutable model?⁴ This article next explores the embarrassments of the nation-centric construct of “Burmese art” with respect to *manaw maheikdi dat pangyi*: what are some of the pitfalls and how might they be counteracted? Last, how might *manaw maheikdi dat pangyi* serve to rethink art historical approaches to the study of Buddhist art and perhaps homologous art forms that similarly elude the formal biases of the modern construct of “art” and trappings of the Cartesian intellectual tradition? The following observations and arguments neither offer a comprehensive study of *manaw maheikdi dat pangyi*, nor address the said concerns in a scrupulous manner. Rather, they throw into relief the most salient “misalignments” that

might entreat one to look, think and write with greater mindfulness of history's as well as one's own oversights and fallacies.

Tagore's "Granary of the Past" and "True Modernism"

The title of Aung Soe's self-published anthology of articles from 1978 translates in English as *From Tradition to Modernity*.⁵ Inscriptions of the English word "modern" and those in Burmese of its transliteration "*mawdan*" and the word "*hkit-thit*", meaning "new times", punctuate his written exchanges, manuscripts and publications. Although he unequivocally and unfalteringly identified himself with the modern, there is no evidence that he was initiated to the theoretical premises and implications of the slippery terms of "modernity" and "modernism".⁶ He used the word "modern" interchangeably to mean modernity and modernist artistic tendencies, as if the conditions of being modern and the avant-garde movement in art in the early 20th century were inextricable parts of a unified experience. Palpably, it is not the same "modern" as that understood in the western world and western art. It was not one known to his fellow artists in Myanmar either, hence his intellectual and artistic isolation.

At the beginning of his career, which took off in the year of the country's independence in 1948 with illustrations in the literary magazine *Taya*, founded by Myanmar's celebrated intellectual and writer Dagon Taya (1919–2013), Aung Soe championed the western naturalistic mode of pictorial representation.⁷ Partaking in the zeitgeist of the Yangonite art world, he regarded the West as the wellspring and possibly sole licensee of art. He venerated Vincent Van Gogh and Paul Gauguin, and his disappointment when offered a scholarship by the government of India in 1951 to study in Śāntiniketan, instead of Europe or North America, is telling.⁸ Subsequently, throughout the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s, as can be seen in his illustrations in the thousands, he flitted from one style to another, as if in abandon to the phantasmagorias of "art", as Charles Baudelaire's *flâneur* to those of Paris' arcades.⁹ To begin with, illustration, the principal site of his practice over four decades, stemmed from the medium of the magazine gathering intellectuals and artists to produce new literature and art—"one of modernism's most enduring legacies".¹⁰

Yet, the Yangon that Aung Soe lived and worked in was never—and still is not—anything like Baudelaire's Paris. Aung Soe and his fellow artists knew nothing of the bourgeois lifestyle immortalised by Claude Monet, Pierre-Auguste Renoir or Edgar Degas; there was no tradition of decorating domestic interiors with "art" (paintings), much less its collection. In fact, Myanmar

was—and still is—plagued by healthcare problems, education inequity, inadequate civil infrastructure, ethnic conflicts and humanitarian tragedies, which have no place in the Enlightenment's ideal society. Ne Win's purportedly socialist regime did not accommodate what Walter Benjamin referred to as "the phantasmagorias of the marketplace", and religion was—and remains—the most powerful binding factor in Burmese society, as was Christian faith in mediaeval Europe.¹¹ Indeed, the modernity touted by western powers was a mirage that did not and could not materialise in Myanmar—not in 1886 when the country was made a province of British India, not in 1948 when it gained political independence, not in 1962 when the military staged a coup and certainly not in 1988 when countless civilians lost their lives or futures in the streets of the economic capital. As a matter of fact, it would be an affront to the ideals of modernity should the piecemeal introduction of machines and administrative policies in parts of the province to advance British economic and political interests were to be argued as a satisfactory initiation to modernity. One might argue that such is the convoluted nature of modernity and modernism, at times emancipatory and at times destructive, whose asymmetries and ambiguities only accentuate and proliferate when its tenets are appropriated to serve imperialist agenda. What begs reassessment is precisely this unevenness beneath the veneer of "the modern" that has hypnotised many a Burmese artist, and audience and writer of modern Burmese art, whose exponents do not even pay attention to the distinction between modernity and modernism—whether consciously, indifferently or naively. The cause for the lack of criticality towards modernity and modernism in this part of the world must be first acknowledged: its denial was—and is—food for the chimera of the modern that is part of the imperialist civilisation-ing mission.

If neither *mawdan* nor *hkit-thit* Burmese art ensues from and embodies the same reality as modern art in Europe, North America and their satellites in the "South", what and whose modernity and modernism was Aung Soe picturing? When and how did the "modern" begin in Myanmar in the first place? As previously argued, it is not possible to speak of a single artistic modernity in Myanmar; artists espoused competing artistic aspirations, many of which were the offshoot of colonial indoctrination and misinterpretations.¹² In at least the second and third quarters of the 20th century corresponding to what might be Burmese art's "modern" period, at one end were oil and watercolour paintings of floral arrangements, idyllic landscapes, portraits of ethnic minorities and Buddhist temples and *stūpas*, which literary giant Zawgyi (U Thein Han) (1908–90) lamented in 1958 as "uninspired" and of "a rather deadly monotony of theme".¹³ At the other end were avant-garde cubist

and even abstract works by painters like Kin Maung (Bank) (1910–83), who is regarded as Mandalay’s pioneer of modern art.¹⁴ In both cases, while the subject matter is local, the pictorial mode is a largely unmediated transplant from the West, with a faintly discernable attempt at synthesis with home-grown systems of thought and picturing the world. Neither echoed the trials and tribulations of the new nation; neither investigated the finest of the culture’s spirit (*mises en scène* with toddy palm trees do not count); neither resonated the habits and hopes of the common citizen beyond auto-exoticisation (why *mises en scène* with toddy palm trees do not count).¹⁵ Even the occasional paintings denouncing political or social injustice, or expressing existentialist angst similarly appropriated the pictorial linguistic rationale of their western predecessors. How might these works be different from those of visiting European painters? Admittedly, whether in terms of subject matter, media or expression, the works of Aung Soe’s peers—the context for evaluating the distinction of *manaw maheikdi dat pangyi*—are first and foremost interiorisations of the coloniser’s claim to (artistic) superiority, if not its exoticised vision of Myanmar too. While such works may attest to the Burmese artists’ mastery of western techniques and styles, they cannot be regarded as initiators of an autonomous artistic modernity; formal parallels are not necessarily a cogent indicator of artistic modernity or even excellence. The *flâneur*’s model was never questioned; the colonial legacy pervades.

Following his return from the ashram-turned-university around 1952, had Aung Soe not abandoned his earlier emulation of European masters and turned to the study of traditional Burmese art forms both classical and folk, alongside systematic experimentation on the linguistic rationale of pictorial idioms from all over the world—Japanese *ukiyo-e*, surrealism, Egyptian reliefs, children’s art, etc.—his art might have resembled that of his senior Kin Maung (Bank), for whom he had much respect.¹⁶ It would have been ticked off the list for “good” non-western art, whose criteria of excellence uphold originality as a *sine qua non*, yet reserve Euramerican art as its model of reference, hence condemning all non-western works to be either inferior shadows of the “original” (western art) or spectres beyond its cognisance. He would not have improvised *manaw maheikdi dat pangyi*. It was Śāntiniketan’s relativisation of the western model in favour of artistic, intellectual and spiritual traditions from all over the world that ruptured the imperialist matrix, and it is through an understanding of its mechanisms and procedures that the distinction of *manaw maheikdi dat* painting might be extricated, and new spaces of art historical enquiry opened up. For a start, how might Aung Soe have understood the mastery of pictorial *traditions* from the world over to be a prerequisite for the creation of an original *modern* idiom, two domains that are conventionally

framed as contradictory? We begin with Rabindranath Tagore's (1861–1941) interpretation of the modern as synergy between the old and the new, as well as his warning against the dangers of blind faith in the promises of modernity at the expense of the past:

There are some who are exclusively modern, who believe that the past is the bankrupt time, leaving no assets for us, but only a legacy of debts; [...] It is well to remind such persons that the great ages of renaissance in history were those when man suddenly discovered the seeds of thought in the granary of the past. The unfortunate people, who have lost the harvest of the past, have lost their present age.¹⁷

It is not fortuitous that the title of Aung Soe's anthology of articles calls attention to the interdependence between the traditional and the modern: *from tradition to modernity*. What it does not make clear is that it is not a one-way process. Rather, it is a two-way conduit. In an article in the same publication, he refers to the traditional and the modern as the old and the new respectively: "Nature will choose the good traditions out of the old, and sincerity and truth out of the new. Not everything old is decadent, not everything new is revolutionary. We have to search for the soul in the old, and foster the progress of the new."¹⁸

Aung Soe never met the *mahaguru* who passed away a decade before his arrival in Śāntiniketan, but it is certain that the latter's vision permeated every aspect of the ashram's ethos, including the school's pedagogical programme. Nandalal Bose (1882–1966), Tagore's right-hand man and principal of Kala Bhavana, the art school at Śāntiniketan, to whom Aung Soe devoted an entire article in the anthology, saw to its implementation.¹⁹ He analogised Tagore's insistence on the pertinence of tradition to the seed coat protecting the seed:

Tradition is the outer shell of the seed that holds the embryo of new growth; this shell protects the embryo from being destroyed by heat or rain or violence. When it is intact it will come out, break open even this hard shell. Similarly in art, this inner embryo should have the power enough to break tradition open. Then only will new art emerge.²⁰

This interpretation of the past and the present, the old and the new as partners of a constant synergetic process refutes the thesis of modernity as divorced from the past and *ipso facto* superior to it, which rests upon the premise of the Abrahamic construct of time as linear and sequential. In conceiving the

modern as the “new” engaged in a dynamic relationship with the existing or the old referred to as “tradition”, modern art becomes a perennial process of becoming; “modern art from the past is not like the present one”, as explained to Bagyi Lynn Wunna (1973–).²¹ While the interpretation of modernity as the inevitable process of self-reinvention through its earlier avatars was not unknown in the western world—Auguste Blanqui severely critiqued the illusion of newness and “progress” as early as 1872—this progressive take on the modern did not reach the colonies.²² Tradition was tethered to the indigenous framed as antithetical to modernisation conflated with westernisation. Indeed, the binary of modernity and tradition was a necessary political tool of oppression, as was denial to critical apparatuses necessary for the critique of the modern, and therein lies the contextual significance of Tagore’s lesson. Decades after returning to Yangon, Aung Soe aligned this postulation of change as the defining characteristic of modern art with Buddhist teachings on the law of impermanence (Pāli: *anicca*), one of the Three Marks of Existence, whose atemporality not only bolstered *manaw maheikdi dat pangyi*’s emancipation from the historicisation of modern art but also justified its superiority to it. To Lynn Wunna again, he taught: “Modern art stops when there is no progress to be made, but painting with mental energy [attained through Buddhist meditation] progresses.”²³ It was in this way that an art founded upon ancient spiritual technology such as meditation, *mantras* and *yantras*, whose manner of operation is beyond the modern secular world conditioned by logic, reason and empiricism, came to be reasoned as being ahead of our times and more advanced than historicised modern art. In other words, *purposefully*, *manaw maheikdi dat pangyi* formally realised the modern’s immemorial gaze.

Underlying this dynamic and self-regenerating modern art harnessing a constellation of thought systems and approaches to picturing the world is Tagore’s definition of “true modernism” as a sovereign state of mind enfranchised from subservience to the western model:

Modernism is not in the dress of the Europeans; or in the hideous structures, where their children are interned when they take their lessons; or in the square houses with flat straight wall-surfaces, pierced with parallel lines of windows, where these people are caged in their lifetime; certainly modernism is not in their ladies’ bonnets, carrying on them loads of incongruities. These are not modern, but merely European. True modernism is freedom of mind, not slavery of taste. It is independence of thought and action, not tutelage under European schoolmasters. It is science, but not its wrong

application in life – a mere imitation of our science teachers who reduce it into superstition, absurdly invoking its aid for all impossible purposes.²⁴

Tagore was as staunchly against imperialism and nationalism alike, as he was insistent on embracing the finest of all cultures. What he denounced was imperialism and servility to all things western, not everything and everyone from the West—a posture best understood against the internationalist intellectual climate of the swadeshi movement and Bengal.²⁵ He pursued international alliances and opened the doors of Śāntiniketan's Viśva-Bharati University—whose name makes clear its founder's aspiration to bring the world together—to intellectuals and artists from all over the world: Austria, China, Japan, Italy, Norway, etc.²⁶ As much as Aung Soe continued to be captivated by the myth of the long-suffering and impoverished modern artist in the image of Van Gogh, whom he sought to emulate through a life of penury, his awakening to this distinction between modernisation and westernisation led him to rise above his peers' single-minded pursuit of the western model.²⁷ The considerable latitude in attitudes towards the modern at Śāntiniketan, ranging from Tagore's and Ramkinkar Baij's (1906–80) enthusiasm for western modernism to Bose's and Benodebehari Mukherjee's (1904–80) affinity for the Far Eastern ink tradition, did not contradict the Nobel laureate's exhortation for an autonomous modernity and modernism emancipated from all pre-determined orders, be it formal, chronological or political; it only honed Aung Soe's versatility, and paved the way for the plurality of *manaw maheikdi dat pangyi* mooted as Burmese and Asian in essence, but is also the sum of "all the traditions of the world".²⁸

Aung Soe's interiorisation of his Indian gurus' attitudes to the modern is not without complications in the art world today. Being first and foremost an autonomous artistic consciousness that is deeply ethical, his art does not cater to the culture of commodity fetish. His conscientious application of Bose's teachings, who opined that "[a]n art object cannot be known by discussion and analysis" also limits the success of art history's methods—and those of most, if not all, modern sciences—to *manaw maheikdi dat pangyi*.²⁹ To begin with, he did not adopt a historicised approach to the modern. Rather, it was conceived in terms of a set of qualities outlined by Tagore and extrapolated to suit his purposes hence his estimation of *manaw maheikdi dat pangyi* as "new tradition", "ultramodern", "the most advanced of modern art" and "postmodern" independently of these terms' art historical definitions which have yet to assimilate the ramifications of their colonial dimensions.³⁰ Admittedly, if Śāntiniketan's model emancipated Aung Soe from the mirage of

western artistic superiority, its rejection of the preponderant Cartesian mode of thought as the only means of knowledge-making, as well as its negation of modern art's politicised and consumerist *modi operandi*, now alienates him. In defying western hegemony, Aung Soe has become sidelined in the international circuit and narrative. Regardless, his example demonstrates that the exploration of Tagore's model of the modern with respect to looking at, thinking about and writing (hi)stories of art(s) in this part of the world would be a more feasible option than the perpetuation of a hackneyed model whose transplantation has been indiscriminate and entirely questionable.³¹

A “Burmese” No-man's Land

Aung Soe has been lauded by his fellow countrymen as the pioneer and leader of modern Burmese art. But how “Burmese” is his signature *manaw maheikdi dat pangyi*? The epithet is in Burmanised Pāli; Burmese was his mother tongue; he was born of Burmese parents in Myanmar and he died in the same country. Above all, he identified himself as a Burmese artist and his works as the same. Looking at *manaw maheikdi dat pangyi*, it is, however, impossible to see and to argue how it might be representative of Burmese art. *Manaw maheikdi dat pangyi* is exceptional in all ways and fits into neither the category of watercolour or oil paintings of “innumerable pagodas, innumerable huts, an endless series of river and village scenes” endorsed by the ruling party, nor that of the modernist stylistic experimentations whose most accomplished exponents include Kin Maung (Bank), Aung Khin (1921–96), Kin Maung Yin (1936–2004), Win Pe (1936–) and Paw Thame (1948–2014).³² The artists knew each other, mutually supporting one another at times and locked in rivalry at others. But Aung Soe was not part of any movement or coterie. In isolation, he worked on assimilating Tagore's vision of artistic modernity as, first and foremost, disenthralment from tyranny both imperialist and nationalist—Tagore who abhorred the parochial preoccupation of creating distinctly “Indian” art just as he did the servile adulation of western art.³³ If the pedagogical programme devised by Bose at Śāntiniketan promoted exposure to techniques and pictorial modes from all over the world in spite of his relatively critical stance on western art, it was at least in part to stave off artistic jingoism that would slowly but surely sap art of its vitality. Following his guru's cue, Aung Soe saw no contradiction between his self-image as a Burmese artist, his allegiance to Śāntiniketan and his art as the sum of “all the traditions of the world”. It is in this way that his emphasis on the mastery of one's artistic traditions as the springboard to international recognition must be understood.³⁴ How, then, is he especially “Burmese”?

In addition, the bearer of the title of “pioneer”, “leader” and even “father” of modern Burmese art cannot be said to have artistic progeny in Myanmar. There has been no artist building on the foundations of *manaw maheikdi dat pangyi*, although citations of its signs and symbols may be identified in some paintings. While intelligentsia and common folk alike eulogise his achievements, and artists exalt the inspiration of his persona, art and writings—with some claiming that all Burmese artists owe him their vision and mettle—there is no identifiable artistic lineage.³⁵ It is not even certain that his aims and methods have been understood by his fellow countrymen, including the very literary giants Min Thu Wun (U Wun) (1909–2004) and Zawgyi, who revered Tagore, nominated him for the Indian government scholarship to study at Śāntiniketan and gave impetus to the enterprise of revitalising Burmese art. While he continues to capture Myanmar’s imagination more than a quarter of a century after his death—exhibitions organised in his memory and articles written in his homage, for example—artist Min Zaw’s (1972–) thesis submission for his diploma in painting at the National University of Arts and Culture in 1998 remains the only example of concerted study on his art in Myanmar.³⁶ In spite of the majority of the Burmese being devout Buddhists in a country eager to position itself as the protector of Theravāda Buddhism, few are familiar with Buddhism’s higher metaphysical teachings, let alone their unwonted amalgamation with indigenous esoteric beliefs in conjunction with Mahayanist Zen and tantra, which are at the heart of *manaw maheikdi dat pangyi*. As to how Aung Soe next “activated” these teachings through mental cultivation incorporated into the creative process, as he claimed, is even more unfathomable. Fascination, hero worship and knowledge are different things.

Beyond the absence of thematic and stylistic parallels between *manaw maheikdi dat pangyi* and modern art in Myanmar yoked to the Euramerican model, Aung Soe’s signature works cannot be said to embody the joviality identified by the Burmese as characteristic of their disposition either. Contrary to the buoyant tenor of Paw Oo Thet’s (1936–93) immensely popular water-colour paintings representing chubby jovial figures in traditional dress at the market or pagoda, the *mantras*, *yantras* and *maṇḍalas* of *manaw maheikdi dat pangyi* necessitate intellectual enquiry, if not spiritual conditioning; they do not seek to please and they do not entertain.³⁷ As such, if the assessment of Sister Nivedita (1867–1911), a key figure of the Swadeshi movement close to the Tagore family, on what constituted a painting’s “Indian-ness” were to be endorsed—“[a]n Indian painting, if it is to be really Indian and really great, must appeal to the Indian heart in an Indian way, must convey some feeling or idea that is either familiar or immediately comprehensible”—Aung Soe would fail as a “Burmese” artist.³⁸ But what does being “Burmese” mean in

FIGURE 2: Bagyi Aung Soe, *Myawadi*, August 1988. Illustration; medium and dimensions unknown. Image: Yin Ker

the first place? Which and whose Myanmar is it? Is it that of the classical artistic capital of Mandalay, the economic hub of Yangon, or the countryside where the majority of the population ekes out a modest living? How about the blanketed areas of insurgency? How did this notion of a national identity come to be regarded as valid in art? To complicate matters, artists can be identified with more than one locale: Win Pe and Paw Oo Thet originated from Mandalay but carved out their careers in Yangon; others moved between their home villages and Yangon. To disregard the tensions between the two capitals of art is as facile as to position them at opposing ends within an antagonistic framework and to examine one in isolation of the other. Whether it is Mandalay and Yangon or India and Myanmar, sites are shaped and defined by human beings and ideas that travel, as well as the processes of competition, negotiation, adaptation, collaboration and so on.

The most tangible expressions of Burmese culture in *manaw maheikdi dat pangyi* are in representations of traditional arts and crafts like masks, puppets, wooden figurines, papier mâché dolls and tumblers, and dance and theatre (Figure 2), but are these emblems of Burmese arts and culture intrinsically Burmese? Very similar designs, expressions and objects can be found in the

FIGURE 3: Bagyi Aung Soe, *Shumawa*, July 1985. Illustration; medium and dimensions unknown. Image: Yin Ker

region beyond the borders of Myanmar. The *kanut*, the building block of traditional Burmese art and design, which Aung Soe reworked throughout his career, closely echoes its Thai counterpart (Figure 3). The sack of Ayutthaya by the Burmese in 1767 was followed by the deportation of its craftsmen whose skills transformed Burmese arts. Artistic traditions of other countries have similarly left their imprints on what is now regarded as traditional Burmese art: India, Sri Lanka, China, Japan and the European continent. Not even his practice of insight (Pāli: *vipassanā*) and concentration (Pāli: *samatha*) meditation techniques, which have placed Myanmar on the map of Buddhist spiritual practices, or the plethora of esoteric signs and symbols, which are ubiquitous but officially denounced in the country, makes *manaw maheikdi dat pangyi* exclusively “Burmese”, since they have been syncretised with Zen and tantra to constitute a highly personalised form of Buddhist practice and art, as shall be further discussed. Clearly, given how forms and ideas circulate independently of immigration control, modern political divisions of nation-states mask complex histories and realities; the designation of specific forms as unique to a nation or people is, in essence, dubious.

FIGURE 4: Bagyi Aung Soe, *Atway Amyin*, August 1986. Illustration; medium and dimensions unknown. Image: Yin Ker

If we must tag a nation to *manaw maheikdi dat pangyi*, it is to that of Śāntiniketan, whose founder was vehement in his censure against nation-centrism, for it is clear from Aung Soe's writings, drawings and paintings that the teachings he received there were the compass guiding his every step over four decades.³⁹ In spite of being physically in Myanmar, he never left his *alma mater* in spirit. Both the aforementioned *From Tradition to Modernity* and *Poetry Without Words* from 1978 paid homage to Śāntiniketan in either their content or organisation.⁴⁰ More than 30 years after leaving the ashram in the 1980s, he reminisced about Abanindranath Tagore (1871–1951), Bose, Ramkinkar Baij (1906–80) and a special female friend in his writings and exchanges with friends and students. He also signed his works "Śāntiniketan" in Burmese or Latin alphabet, and drew its logo (Figure 4). No doubt he scoured the cultural landscape of Myanmar for content, but the blueprint was Śāntiniketan's, including his decision to immerse himself in Burmese art and culture for the purpose of devising a contextually significant pictorial idiom that might be free from compliance with the western model.⁴¹ Just as Śāntiniketan's heritage, aspirations and legacy extend beyond India, Aung Soe

cannot be confined to Myanmar. Yet, *manaw maheikdi dat pangyi*'s resistance to being tethered to any single nation does not mean that it shares the pretensions and ideologies of the "international" either—the "international" being, in truth, chiefly Euramerican and distinct from Tagore's universalist vision of a world beyond nations. The conditions for *manaw maheikdi dat pangyi*'s fruition in isolationist Myanmar between 1962 and 1988 include being shielded from "international" discourses and pressures such as the culture of market censorship in the first place. If both the nation-centric framework of Myanmar and the convenient label of the "international" precluding debate risk obfuscating *manaw maheikdi dat pangyi*, what might be the ways—if there are any—of mapping artists' trajectories that are truly free from structures of political power?

Aung Soe's very individualistic practice demands nothing less than a mode of reception, reflection and narrativity aligned with its particularities—or "misalignments". To date, the story of *manaw maheikdi dat pangyi* has principally looked to Michael Baxandall's method of "inferential criticism" to allay the many authoritarian narratives of art hampering it from being told on its own terms. Instead of imputing what has been construed as the defining characteristics of a specific nation on a work of art, Baxandall underscores "the attention to a developing pictorial problem in the course of activity in a pictorial medium", which in turn directs the art historian to focus on "the painter's complex problem of good picture-making" as "a serial and continually self-redefining operation, permanent problem-reformulation".⁴² For example, by paying close attention to the pictorial components of lines and colours in a drawing of a seated Buddha, inferences are made on the concept, design and execution: specifically, how have they progressed, evolved and been modified in the course of the drawing's elaboration, and what can be henceforth postulated about the artist's intent, penchants, hesitations and practice (Figure 5)? Next, compared to another work within the corpus, what observations can be made on the same that might advance our understanding of the making and reading of *manaw maheikdi dat pangyi*? If culture must occupy a key position in this investigation, then it must be engaged with on the terms of one that "does not impose uniform cognitive and reflective equipment on individuals", even though the fact that culture does facilitate certain kinds of collective cognitive development cannot be negated.⁴³ There is no denial that Aung Soe is of Myanmar, as is *manaw maheikdi dat pangyi*, but it is ultimately the close and attentive reading of his art within the contexts of its production and reception, rather than abidance by blanket concepts like "Burmese" or canonical but contextually tangential frameworks with clerkly terminology, that will elucidate it.

FIGURE 5: Bagyi Aung Soe, *Untitled*, c. 1988. Felt-tip pen and ink on paper, 27.5 × 17 cm. Collection of Gajah Gallery. Image: Gajah Gallery

An Art of “Neither Nor”

The fabrication of *manaw maheikdi dat pangyi* is steeped in the culture of mental cultivation and Buddhist practice. Its Buddhist vocation is beyond doubt. Yet, it demonstrates faint visual parallels with the categories of Buddhist art featured in museums and art history publications; Aung Soe’s topsy-turvy Buddha images resemble none of the masterpieces of Buddhist art classified according to style: Gandhāra, Amarāvātī, Pala or Sukhothai, for example. It is not preoccupied with the depiction of the life or previous lives of the Buddha, contrary to *The Illustrated History of Buddhism* (1954) by U Ba Kyi (1912–2000), Aung Soe’s distant relative and celebrated artist. In fact, it does not even necessarily figure the Buddha image or any Buddhist symbol (Figures 6 and 7). When aniconic symbols like the footprint, the lotus or the *stūpa* are featured, they are not presented in the same configuration as in conventional Buddhist images either. Neither does *manaw maheikdi dat pangyi* represent *stūpa* complexes like mere decorative landscape features perched on hilltops, or Buddha images before which pious devotees in

FIGURE 6: Bagyi Aung Soe, *Untitled*, c. 1985. Oil on canvas, 53 × 30.5 cm. Collection of Kelvin Chia. Image: Kelvin Chia

traditional dress prostrate themselves. Rather, Buddhist symbols and Buddha images are embedded in a network of *mantras*, *yantras*, “magical” letters of the Burmese alphabet, numerals and even signs and symbols of the modern world (Figure 5). The abundant representations of the *yoni* and the female body, at times undressed with the erogenous zones foregrounded, and often alongside *mantras* addressing the Burmanised Hindu goddess of knowledge, Sarasvatī, further defy expectations of Buddhist art (Figure 8). While the sensual as a path to spiritual transformation and liberation is not unheard of in tantric practice, it is not a tradition that is known to have survived in modern Myanmar.⁴⁴ Indubitably, the Buddhist art historical frameworks of the icon versus the narrative and the anthropomorphic versus the aniconic are impuissant with respect to *manaw maheikdi dat pangyi*. In the first place, iconographic analyses go only as far as identifying a specific representation or episode; it does not shed light on the representation’s manner of operation, functions and meanings.

FIGURE 7: Bagyi Aung Soe, *Untitled*, c. 1988. Felt-tip pen and ink on paper, 15 × 23 cm. Collection of Maung Maung Soe, Bagyieain Foundation. Image: Yin Ker

To begin with, *manaw maheikdi dat pangyi* does not function entirely as religious images, unlike Buddhist paintings and sculptures, including those leading a second life as “art” in collections. *Manaw maheikdi dat pangyi* was created as art—not necessarily for the museum or art gallery—but nonetheless as art to be circulated widely in printed matter, given away or exchanged for as little as the equivalent of a few dozen eggs or even tea. The works were not meant to be displayed on an altar or as images of devotion in a liturgical context—although Aung Soe did not object to them being used as such. Second, no elaborate purification ritual involving the maker, instruments and site was included in their making, as is mandatory in the fabrication of images vested with sacred power.⁴⁵ Although meditation was part of the fabrication process, Aung Soe is not known to have engaged in extensive rituals involving chanting, physical prostration and the making of offerings. This corpus of works is likely to be better understood as the result of personal spiritual practice: their creation was the artist’s means and site of spiritual transformation; the end products are akin to mind maps echoing the image-maker’s mental vagaries and spiritual transformations. For Aung Soe, who came up with the subcategory of “zero theory” in *manaw maheikdi dat pangyi*, both its goal and path can be interpreted as the primordial state of emptiness (Pāli: *suññatā*), whose embodiment in Zen is the *ensō*.⁴⁶ Full and void at the same time, this

FIGURE 8: Bagyi Aung Soe, *Untitled*, c. 1988. Felt-tip pen and ink on paper, 18 × 14 cm. Collection of Gajah Gallery. Image: Gajah Gallery

“O” encapsulates the state of “neither nor” beyond one and many, the good and the bad, or the beautiful and the ugly. It does not matter if it were the moon, the sun, the world, a ball, the numeral zero, a face or the letter “*wa*” of the Burmese alphabet—all of which Aung Soe listed as possibilities—for all generate dependently originated sentient experience (Pāli: *paṭiccasamuppāda*) and are empty of inherent and impermanent substance.⁴⁷ While *manaw maheikdi dat pangyi* does not necessarily go as far as to strip the mind of all false consciousness, it does jolt it and hence the viewer’s impression of perturbation. It is as such an art beyond the grasp of the conceptual mind, and should not be confused with the surrealist’s induced temporary suspension of the conscious mind or the conceptual artist’s attachment to the chattering mind; the same positivist methods of art history cannot possibly lead to a breakthrough in making sense of *manaw maheikdi dat pangyi*.

Aung Soe wrote in no unclear terms on the back of a drawing: “I do not paint matter; I paint the mind.” (Figure 1) The sources and objectives of *manaw maheikdi dat* painting writ large in his manuscripts pose relatively little mystery as compared to the reading of its components. If *yantras* and *maṇḍalas* cannot be fully understood through concepts, and *mantras* have

sounds with no intelligible meaning, it is because imprecision, ambiguity and concealment serve to preserve that which is not directly expressible in form and, even less so, language.⁴⁸ The occlusion of meaning is, in fact, the defining factor of the image-maker's genius in this case, as Oleg Grabar argues with respect to the very comparable examples of Kabbalistic Jewish and Islamic art.⁴⁹ *Manaw maheikdi dat pangyi's* creative and fabrication processes pose yet another set of challenges. Amongst the unresolved questions, the most urgent one would be: *how* did Aung Soe transform greed to non-greed and anger to non-anger by rendering manifest Buddhist ultimate truths such as the Four Noble Truths through pictorial means, as he claimed to do in the same aforementioned text? Or rather, how does drawing a *yantra*, writing a *mantra* or simply outlining a form and filling a surface with colour usher in spiritual transformation and awakening to the ultimate truths taught by the Buddha? Likewise with regard to its reception, how might seeing its forms, colours and words trigger specific cognitive processes, leading to an experience of a different order? On tantra—which Aung Soe emphasised time and again in his written exchanges—Philip Rawson proposes the analogy of a rainbow: “A rainbow only appears when sunrays, atmospheric processes and the optical activity of an observer come together in a certain relationship in space and time.”⁵⁰ In other words, making, seeing and experiencing tantric images is contingent, subjective and exclusive. As Aung Soe remarked, “those who know can appreciate and benefit from [*manaw maheikdi dat pangyi*]; those who don't pass by without seeing anything.”⁵¹

Although Aung Soe rationalised his artistic practice using terminology and concepts of Burmese Theravāda Buddhism—*vipassanā* meditation which is endorsed by the country's religious authorities, and the extinction of the Three Unwholesome Roots (Pāli: *akusala-mūla*), for example—he drew on an array of spiritual technologies and instruments outside Burmese Buddhist orthodoxy: runes, letters of the Burmese alphabet and numerals derived from indigenous esoteric practice, Zen practice, tantric methods for accelerated spiritual transformation, *mantras* of the Mahayanist world like “*gate gate pāragate pārasaṃgate bodhi svāhā*” from the *Prajñāpāramitāhṛdaya Sūtra* and “*Oṃ maṇi padme hūṃ*” associated with the bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara, etc. He even claimed to communicate with superior beings when in advanced states of *jhānic* absorption and demonstrated an appreciation for skills such as telepathy and extrasensory perception associated with the *weikza* path of pre-Buddhist origins—which are adjudged, by the political and religious authorities, as inferior to Theravāda Buddhism.⁵² There is manifestly more than one form of Buddhism in his works, just as there are multilayered and multifaceted Buddhisms in reality. This assimilation of multiple Buddhist

practices is certainly not unlike the way he synthesised various pictorial styles and techniques to serve a diversity of ends in *manaw maheikdi dat pangyi*. If this aspect of *manaw maheikdi dat pangyi* is deemed aberrant, it is also due to stereotypes perpetuated of "pure" Buddhism. Unresolved issues in modern Buddhist studies, such as the contradistinction between Theravāda and Mahāyāna, undermine the complexities in Buddhist ideology and practice, and have been increasingly challenged in buddhology.⁵³ The New Age movement's reduction of Buddhism, a body of ethics and technics of mental betterment whose benefits are to be reaped on this very earth, to spiritual materialism further travesties the understanding of *manaw maheikdi dat pangyi*.

While "the highest truth is without image", "if there were no image, there would be no possibility for truth to manifest itself"; while "the highest principle is without words", "if there were no words how could the principle be known?"⁵⁴ This tightrope between Truth (content) and expression (form) has preoccupied Buddhist image-makers across space and time, with each epoch proposing adapted solutions ranging from aniconic symbols to new media installations targeted at transmitting or performing the teachings more effectively. The task of the art historian of *manaw maheikdi dat pangyi* is hence also linguistic: to manipulate vocabulary and grammar in a way that renders this pictorial idiom's seemingly mysterious and even magical manner(s) of operation in a logical manner in line with scientific thinking without abbreviating its complexity. In order to remedy art history's ineptitude with respect to that which transcends form and negates logic, this article proposes the tools of thought devised by Claude Lévi-Strauss and André Leroi-Gourhan. In *La pensée sauvage* (1962), the former wrote:

[...] the first difference between magic and science is therefore that magic postulates a complete and all-embracing determinism. Science, on the other hand, is based on a distinction between levels [...]. One can go further and think of the rigorous precision of magical thought and ritual practices as an expression of the unconscious apprehension of the *truth of determinism*, the mode in which scientific phenomena exist.⁵⁵

Dissociated from Judaeo-Christian eschatology underpinning modern linear time, Lévi-Strauss's mode of enquiry on "magical thought" is the first step to accessing *manaw maheikdi dat pangyi* situated in spaces and times of a different coding, and to revolutionising the framing of Buddhist art and other "unscientific" imagery whose locus lies beyond form. What Leroi-Gourhan refers to as "radial" and "mythical thought" applied to prehistoric

images preceding the linearisation of symbols, the subordination of the graphic to the phonetic and rationalisation similarly has the potential to revise the reading and writing of this art of “neither nor”, whose grammar and vocabulary are ancient methods and means of expression and communication such as *yantras*.⁵⁶ Neither thinker offers a step-by-step framework for the study of art in the likes of Panofsky’s three-tier method of art historical analysis, which has been systematically dispensed to undergraduate students to be systematically applied in their assignments; they only offer ways of seeing and thinking *differently*.⁵⁷ The passage from comprehension to expression and communication is precarious, and their value lies precisely in the fact that they are not straightforward. Incisive but not instructional, they resist strait-jacketing, demand thoughtful adapted application and deter the formulation of further authoritarian frameworks and narratives. These conditions are, in every way, what might allow *manaw maheikdi dat pangyi*, as well as other art forms sharing comparable aims, to be heard, seen and understood. In the absence of readymade theoretical frameworks, the eye, wit and skill of each art historian or, rather, storyteller of art, regains precedence.

The reading, writing, teaching and curating of Buddhist images has remained entrenched in the fixation with form since the inception of Buddhist art and archaeology as an academic discipline in parallel with the colonial discovery of ancient sites in India.⁵⁸ What spell has been cast on the study of Buddhist images and sites to make it a sleeping beauty oblivious to the vertiginous transformations in “Buddhism” as well as “art” and “art history” over the last 200 years? There is no beauty in the exoticised. The need for new ways of thinking, seeing and writing beyond a formalist art historical imagination is real. Thought precedes writing, and it is through the conscientious and judicious application of hitherto unexplored ways of seeing and thinking such as those of Lévi-Strauss and Leroi-Gourhan that novel and hopefully more scrupulous ways of writing on *manaw maheikdi dat pangyi* might issue. As Baxandall argues:

A first task in the historical perception of a picture is therefore often that of working to a realization of quite how *alien* [author’s highlight] it and the mind that made it are; only when one has done this is it really possible to move to a genuine sense of its human affinity with us.⁵⁹

If little progress has been made in making sense of Aung Soe’s art, it is not only due to its enigmatic content and abstruse expression. It is also because of art historians’ hesitation in exploring the expanse beyond the modern construct

of “art”, assimilating open-ended modes of thought that are free from master narratives, and developing an experiential proficiency in Buddhism, from which corresponding theoretical tools and terminology ensue. With *manaw maheikdi dat pangyi*, it is, furthermore, by way of the concurrent practice of meditation and the study of the functions of the mind according to the Pāli *Abhidhamma Piṭaka*, psychology and the neurosciences, that its mechanisms and processes of spiritual transformation might be laid bare.

Manaw maheikdi dat pangyi’s welding of diverse bodies of knowledge, disciplines and pictorial traditions from the past and the present from all over the world represents a hurdle for not only the Burmese, but also the international audience prone to stereotypes. The art historian is no exception. In purposefully assimilating “all the traditions of the world” to be “the most advanced of modern art”, *manaw maheikdi dat pangyi* undermines the rarely questioned hegemony of the Euramerican aka “international” model of “art” as well as nation-centric framework. In so doing—albeit the unevenness in the endeavour due to his inclination towards visual and spiritual references closer to home—Aung Soe formulated a third path that is neither for nor against; it simply draws on all that serves its purpose and synthesises them: the past and the present, the East and the West, the spiritual and the mundane. It partakes in manifold dimensions and straddles worlds, some of which it bridges. Those which it does not, expose a gulf that stares back with questions, and it is these uncertainties that will continue to unsettle, stimulate and expand perspectives on the ways of seeing, interpreting, picturing and writing about *manaw maheikdi dat pangyi* as well as “art”, a construct bequeathed by the European Renaissance and colonial legacy in this part of the world. The ironies brought to the fore by its “misalignments” with “modern”, “Burmese” and “Buddhist” art expose the extent to which our assumptions, tools and frameworks of art and art history beg auditing. To begin with, to situate Aung Soe in the history of modern art in Myanmar and Southeast Asia, the modern must first be rethought and rewritten in relation to that which is considered the “premodern”, with time refracted through local notions of space and time in place of the Gregorian calendar.

Be it “art”, “modern”, “Burmese” or “Buddhist”, they are variable constructs akin to fingers pointing to a moon whose visibility is dependent on the sun—none of which is static and absolute. These three nodes of enquiry open up multiple cans of worms, whose imbroglio is only surpassed by that of their conjugations: “modern Burmese”, “modern Buddhist”, “Burmese Buddhist”

and “modern Burmese Buddhist art”. Within the framework of “modern Buddhist art”, for example, *manaw maheikdi dat pangyi*’s relativisation of form as per the Buddhist perception of an image as a means and not an end disputes the prioritisation of formal properties as a defining factor in modern art. The tensions give rise to questions as to whether “art” is necessarily limited to the visual and the formal, whether “art” can simply be a state of mind or the process of nurturing a state of the mind—none of which is problematic once they move out of modern art into the contemporary. The practice of Marina Abramović is an example of the relatively untroubled interiorisation of Buddhist philosophy and practice in contemporary art, for which the artist is recognised rather than marginalised, contrary to the case of Aung Soe. What is the rationale for these two sets of rules, one for the modern and another for the contemporary, an equation compounded by the Burmese artist’s “outsider” location? What determines *manaw maheikdi dat pangyi* to be “modern” rather than “contemporary”? Might the modern and the contemporary not be a matter of the aggregate of politics, circuits and attitude instead of chronology?

While reflection on these nodes of enquiry’s genealogy and genesis, along with the nature and mechanisms of their antibiosis or symbiosis, can activate many a meaningful investigation into the ways of seeing, thinking about and discoursing on not just *manaw maheikdi dat pangyi* but also the constructs of “modern art”, “Burmese art” and “Buddhist art”, an exercise as such does not yield exact calibrations, and the validity of this article’s observations and interpretations calls for regular revision. The production of adapted narratives of art in parallel to the praxis of introspection and cross-examination, beginning with the assumptions, thought habits and terms taken for granted, is a long and tedious process. It demands attentiveness to multifaceted and interconnected factors and their subsequent transformations in tandem to each other. Moreover, in emerging fields such as Burmese art in which Aung Soe remains confined, whereby rigorous scholarship has yet to be consolidated, how can there be accountability, how can checks against the imputation of *idées fixes* be put in place? Logic plays tricks on the mind too, which is how arguments in favour of the senseless seduce—the hypothetical application of gender studies to the all-important female figure in Aung Soe’s oeuvre, for example.

It is the *dernier cri* to conduct interdisciplinary, transdisciplinary or cross-disciplinary studies. But in consulting adjacent disciplines to nourish the perspectives, methods and tools of art history—Buddhist studies and ethnology in the case of *manaw maheikdi dat pangyi*, for example—is the attempted cross-fertilisation respectful of the demands of the disciplines in

question? Such an endeavour is only successful when the ensuing narratives of art transcend general citations and do not flounder as orphans in the margins between these disciplines. The rethinking of art history outside of Euramerica into which *manaw maheikdi dat pangyi* thrusts the art historian—looking back while projecting forward, and scrutinising what is at home while surveying disciplines near and far for insights with the potential to rejuvenate art history’s methodologies—is, in addition, a self-interrogation on the motivations for writing histories or, rather, stories of art. For what and who are art historians really writing? Do art historians identify themselves as arbiters or students of “art”? Last, what does it mean to say that one writes to contribute to a field of study? This article can only claim to have been written to satisfy the author’s desire to make sense of that which she, a mere storyteller of “art”, wished someone else had written on.

BIOGRAPHY

Yin Ker’s research interests include “art” and “art history” as variable constructs, the intersections of ancient and modern methods of knowledge- and image-making, and ways of telling (hi)stories of art. In parallel with theoretical research within and beyond the discipline of art history, she explores image-making through drawing and painting.

NOTES

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- ¹ T.S. Eliot, *Four Quartets: East Coker*, in *Collected Poems and Plays 1909–1950* (New York, NY: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1971), p. 127.
- ² The English language offers no equivalent for the Burmese word “*pangyi*”, pronounced as “*bagyi*”. Strictly speaking, it means “painting”. In general usage, however, especially in modern Burmese art, whereby painting is the principal medium of expression, it means “art”. Given that the activities of drawing and painting are not necessarily perceived as distinct from the Burmese point of view, “*pangyi*” can, in addition, mean drawing.
- ³ In this article, the word “Burmese” is used to mean the language, culture or people of Myanmar, instead of “Myanmar”, whose spelling is undifferentiated from the country's name. John Okell's system of romanisation is referenced for the transliteration of Burmese words, with the exception of names and titles.
- ⁴ The name “Śāntiniketan” is usually written as “Santiniketan” without diacritics. To capture its phonetic content more accurately, the author has chosen to write it using the diacriticised transliteration for the Sanskrit word meaning “abode of peace” that it is. This is customary in studies of premodern South and Southeast Asian studies.
- ⁵ Bagyi Aung Soe, *From Tradition to Modernity* [Burmese] (Yangon: Khin May Si Sapay, 1978).
- ⁶ For a succinct discussion on alternative, multiple and uneven modernities, see Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar, “Afterword: The Slow Burn of Modernity”, in *Behind the Masks of Modernism: Global and Transnational Perspectives*, ed. Andrew Reynolds and Bonnie Roos (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2016), pp. 241–50.
- ⁷ To view Aung Soe's early works, see Online Database of Illustrations by Bagyi Aung Soe: A (Hi)Story of Art from Myanmar: 1948–1990, <http://www.aungsoeillustrations.org> [accessed 3 Feb. 2016].
- ⁸ See Bagyi Aung Soe, “Burmese Fabric Dyeing, Painting and Printing”, in Bagyi Aung Soe, *From Tradition to Modernity* [Burmese] (Yangon: Khin May Si Sapay, 1978), pp. 42–3.

- ⁹ On the modern experience of Paris, see Walter Benjamin, "Paris: Capital of the Nineteenth Century", in *Perspecta* 12 (1969): 163–72. For examples of works from this period, see Online Database of Illustrations by Bagyi Aung Soe: A (Hi)Story of Art from Myanmar: 1948–1990.
- ¹⁰ On the magazine and modernism beyond Euramerica, specifically in Africa, see Eric Bulson, "Little Magazine, World Form", in *The Oxford Handbook of Global Modernisms*, ed. Mark Wollaeger and Matt Eatough (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 267–87.
- ¹¹ See Walter Benjamin, "Paris: Capital of the Nineteenth Century".
- ¹² See Yin Ker, "Kin Maung (Bank) (1908–1983) and Bagyi Aung Soe (1924–1990): Two Models of 'Modern' Burmese Art and the Question of its Emergence" [Chinese], *Modern Art Quarterly* 173 (June 2014): 62–75.
- ¹³ U Thein Han, "Contemporary Burmese Art", in *Perspective of Burma: An Atlantic Monthly Supplement*, ed. U Myat Kyaw and James Laughlin (New York, NY: Intercultural Publications, 1958), p. 45.
- ¹⁴ On Burmese painting in the 20th century, see Andrew Ranard, *Burmese Painting: A Linear and Lateral History* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2009).
- ¹⁵ It was cartoons that filled these functions before 1962 in Myanmar, and it is said that Aung Soe initially aspired to be a cartoonist. On cartoons in Myanmar, see Ginette Guillard, "Essai sur le dessin humoristique birman" [Essay on Burmese Cartoon], *Diplôme des études approfondies thesis* (Paris: Institut national des langues et civilisations orientales, 1990).
- ¹⁶ For an overview of Aung Soe's experimentations on the linguistic rationales of pictorial idioms from across space and time, see Online Database of Illustrations by Bagyi Aung Soe: A (Hi)Story of Art from Myanmar: 1948–1990.
- ¹⁷ Mohit Kumar Ray and Rabindranath Tagore, "An Eastern University", in *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore*, vol. IV (New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers and Distributors, 2007), pp. 653–4.
- ¹⁸ Bagyi Aung Soe, "The End of the End", in *From Tradition to Modernity*, [Burmese] (Yangon: Khin May Si Sapay, 1978), p. 217.
- ¹⁹ See Bagyi Aung Soe, "Professor Nandalal", in *ibid.*, pp. 95–116.
- ²⁰ K.G. Subramanyan, "Nandalal Bose", in *Nandan: Nandalal* (Kolkata: Viśva-Bhāratī, 1982), p. 20.
- ²¹ Bagyi Aung Soe, written communication, c. 1985, Yangon. Collection of Bagyi Lynn Wunna.
- ²² See Auguste Blanqui, *L'éternité par les astres* [Eternity by the Stars] (Paris: Librairie Germer Baillière, 1872). For a succinct overview of the dilemmas between the old and the new in western modernity, see Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar, "On Alternative Modernities", *Public Culture* 11 (1999): 1–9.
- ²³ Bagyi Aung Soe, oral communication to Bagyi Lynn Wunna, c. 1985, Yangon.

- ²⁴ Rabindranath Tagore, *Nationalism* (San Francisco, CA: The Book Club of California, 1917), pp. 93–4.
- ²⁵ See, for example, Kris Manjapra, “From Imperial to International Horizons: A Hermeneutic Study of Bengali Modernism”, in *Modern Intellectual Theory* 8, 2 (July 2011): 327–59.
- ²⁶ For the list of foreign visitors at Śāntiniketan, see Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, *Rabindranath Tagore: 1861–1961 (A Centenary Volume)* (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1961), p. 480.
- ²⁷ See B. Han Sein, “Modern Artist Bagyi Aung Soe”, *Pan* [Burmese] (June 1984), p. 157.
- ²⁸ On the leading artists of Śāntiniketan see R. Siva Kumar, *Santiniketan: The Making of Contextual Modernism*, exh. cat. (New Delhi: National Gallery of Modern Art, 1997).
- ²⁹ Nandalal Bose, *Vision and Creation* (Kolkata: Visva-Bharati, 1999), p. 36.
- ³⁰ Illustrations in *Hkyeyi* of November 1987 are signed “*manaw maheikdi*” alongside “*ultara [sic] modern*”, for example. See Online Database of Illustrations by Bagyi Aung Soe: A (Hi)Story of Art from Myanmar: 1948–1990.
- ³¹ For two attempts at evaluating the relevance of the Śāntiniketan model with respect to modern Southeast Asian art history, see Yin Ker, “Conjugating Legacies: Fua Haribhitak (1910–1993) and Bagyi Aung Soe (1923–1990), From Śāntiniketan to Bangkok and Yangon”, *Collection Asie* 2 (2017), *Revue Asie* 2 (2017b) and “Śāntiniketan and Modern Southeast Asian Art: From Rabindranath Tagore to Bagyi Aung Soe and Beyond”, *ARTL@S Bulletin: South-South Axes of Global Art* 5 (2016): 8–20.
- ³² U Thein Han, “Contemporary Burmese Art”, p. 45.
- ³³ On the international sources of inspiration for Tagore’s art, see Sushobhan Adhikary and Ketaki Kushari Dyson, *Tagore of Colours: A Study of the Use of Colour in the Writings and Art of Rabindranath Tagore* [Bengali and English] (Kolkata: Ananda Publishers, 1997).
- ³⁴ Bagyi Aung Soe, *From Tradition to Modernity*, pp. 217–22.
- ³⁵ On the legacy of Aung Soe in Myanmar, see Yin Ker, “Unpacking the Legacy of an Exceptional Artist from Myanmar: Bagyi Aung Soe (1923–1990)”, in *Charting Thoughts: Essays on Art in Southeast Asia*, ed. Patrick D. Flores and Sze Wee Low (Singapore: National Gallery Singapore, 2017a), pp. 278–9.
- ³⁶ Zaw Hein (Min Zaw), “Studies on the Works of Bagyi Aung Soe, A Modern Painter” [essay in Burmese submitted for Diploma in Painting] (National University of Arts and Culture, 1998).
- ³⁷ See Ma Thanegi, *Paw Oo Thett: His Life and His Creativity* (Yangon: Swiftwinds, 2004).
- ³⁸ Santana Mukherjee, “Art and Its Spiritual Message to Humanity”, in *Sister Nivedita in Search of Humanity: A Study in Social and Political Ideas* (Kolkata: Minerva Associates, 1997), p. 103.

- 39 See Yin Ker, “Modern Art According to Bagyi Aung Soe”, *Journal of Burma Studies* 10 (2006): 83–157.
- 40 See Bagyi Aung Soe, *From Tradition to Modernity*.
- 41 This corresponds to the second of the five areas covered in Śāntiniketan’s pedagogical programme. See Subramanyan, “Nandalal Bose”, pp. 1–22.
- 42 See Michael Baxandall, *Patterns of Intention: On the Historical Explanation of Pictures* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1985), pp. 73–5.
- 43 Ibid., p. 107.
- 44 Practices as such associated with the Ari monks are believed to have been suppressed in favour of Theravāda Buddhism since the 11th century by the founder of the Bagan Empire, King Anawrahta. For a popular account of the Aris, see Maung Htin Aung, *Folk Elements in Burmese Buddhism* (London: Oxford University Press, 1962), pp. 125–39.
- 45 For two examples of the fabrication of sacred images in Myanmar, see Alexandra de Mersan, “The ‘Land of the Great Image’ and the Test of Time. The Making of a Buddha Image in Arakan (Burma/Myanmar)”, in *The Spirit of Things: Materiality in the Age of Religious Diversity in Southeast Asia*, ed. Julius Bautista (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2012), pp. 95–110; Thomas Patton, “In Pursuit of the Sorcerer’s Power: Sacred Diagrams as Technologies of Potency”, in *Champions of Buddhism: Weikza Cults in Contemporary Burma*, ed. Alicia Turner et al. (Singapore: NUS Press, 2014), pp. 143–63.
- 46 In Myanmar, there is no parallel for the supremely important “*śūnyatā*” (Sanskrit) from Mahayanist teachings. Although the word “*suññatā*” (Pāli) is found in the Pāli scriptures, it almost never features in *dhamma* talks by Burmese monks. Possibly as influential as *śūnyatā* is the *paṭiccasamuppāda* (Pāli) in Myanmar. Diagrams illustrating the 12 links of dependent origination are common.
- 47 Bagyi Aung Soe, written communication, c. 1985, Yangon. Collection of Bagyi Lynn Wunna.
- 48 On the manner of operation of *mantras*, see John Blofeld, *Mantras: Sacred Words of Power* (London: Unwin Paperbacks, 1977).
- 49 See Oleg Grabar, “When is a Bird a Bird?”, *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 153 (Sept. 2009): 252–3.
- 50 Philip Rawson, *Tantra: The Indian Cult of Ecstasy* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1973), p. 15.
- 51 Bagyi Aung Soe, written communication, Yangon, c. 1985. Collection of U Sonny Nyein.
- 52 On the *weikza* in Myanmar, see Turner et al., *Champions of Buddhism*.
- 53 For a succinct presentation of this deceptive divide, see Richard S. Cohen, “Discontented Categories: Hinayana and Mahayana in Indian Buddhist History”, *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 63, 1 (Spring 1995): 1–25.

- ⁵⁴ Dietrich Seckel, *Before and Beyond the Image* (Zurich: Artibus Asiae, 2004), p. 54.
- ⁵⁵ Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1966), p. 11.
- ⁵⁶ See André Leroi-Gourhan, *Gesture and Speech* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press 1993), pp. 17–22, 187–216.
- ⁵⁷ See Erwin Panofsky, *Studies in Iconology: Humanistic Themes in the Art of the Renaissance* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1939).
- ⁵⁸ See Janice Leoshko, *Sacred Traces: British Explorations of Buddhism in South Asia* (Aldershot, Hants and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2003).
- ⁵⁹ Baxandall, *Patterns of Intention: On the Historical Explanation of Pictures*, p. 115.

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