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Journal of Burma Studies, Volume 25, Number 2, December 2021, pp.
i-ii (Article)

Published by University of Hawai'i Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/jbs.2021.0014>

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The Journal of Burma Studies

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Cover: High fired earthenware plate, glazed; obverse is transfer printed in red and green over a cream background. The reverse side has maker's marks in red: "PEGU" above a large oval containing the image of a bell and the words "TRADE MARK", around the edge of which is written: "J & M P B & Co. Ltd.". Below this is a cartouche containing "Rd. No. 129..." Alongside these surface printed marks is the imprinted outline of a bell with clapper containing a large "B". Dimensions D: 8", H: 1". Burma Art Collection, NIU. BC2020.04.02. Gift of Richard M. Cooler.

The cover of this volume highlights the importance of elephants in the history of Burma. Often encountered in traditional Burmese artwork, elephants were also of interest to British artists during the colonial period. An excellent example is the surprisingly animated and dramatic image that appears at the center of this plate. Shown here is an aggressive encounter between two noblemen who mounted on elephants, with their umbrella attendants behind them, indicative of the noblemen's status. The nobleman on the left has succeeded in breaking the umbrella of his adversary with one spear and has struck him in his side with a second. Concluding this encounter, the wounded rider falls into the arms of his attendant, initiating an imminent retreat as indicated by the elephant who has turns his head to withdraw. Although this scene of combat on a riverbank could illustrate a number of the confrontations in Burmese history, it most likely was meant to illustrate the clash between two kingdoms: that of Ava, controlled by the Burmese in upper Burma, against Pegu, the Mon capital in the South. This identification is strongly suggested by the pattern name "Pegu" which appears on the reverse of the plate. Although some scholars question the correlation between the locations of the scenes illustrated on these plates with their pattern names, in this case the name "Pegu" immediately recalls the renowned encounters on elephants that occurred between the kingdoms of Ava and Pegu.

During the second half of the 19th century, transfer-printed tableware became quite popular among Europeans as well as Southeast Asians. The industrial city of Glasgow, Scotland was also a major center for the production of this ware. Two brothers, John and Matthew Perston Bell, established their factory in 1842 which would later specialize in transfer-printed ceramics. Of the two brothers, John Bell focused on exporting ceramics to the Far East, particularly Southeast Asia. He became a ship owner and established a firm in Rangoon, which became the primary distribution point for Bell Brothers ceramics in Southeast Asia. Their factory produced an array of patterns that employed multi-color transfer-printing. New patterns combined local scenes and traditional Asian motifs, and gave them Southeast Asian place names, often those found in Burma and Indonesia. These new patterns were officially registered between c.1887-1905. Those with names from localities in Burma included "Akyab" (Sittwe) in Arakan, "Bhamo" in Upper Burma, and "Pegu" in the South.

Catherine Raymond, curator of the Burma Art Collection at North Illinois University with special thanks to Dr. Richard Cooler