



# Early Burmese Painting

- From a Private Collection



**Saya Thaung  
Saya Chone  
Saya Aye  
Saya Myit  
U Ba Nyan  
U Ngwe Gaing  
U Ba Thet  
U Hla Shein  
U San Win  
U Ba Kyi  
U Mtat Kyaw  
Aung Khin**



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# Myanmar Visual Art History

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## **Ancient Art**

The foundation of art in Myanmar (formerly known as Burma) is Buddhism.

Since the 11th century Bagan era when Theravada Buddhism began to flourish in Myanmar, this Way of Life as taught by the Buddha Gautama has been spread through the medium of art: on the walls of temples, in sculpted images, and stone or glazed clay tablets with scenes of Buddhist themes in high relief work.

The earliest temple with murals on the wall or as termed locally, yoke son or illustrated temple, is the Pahto Thar Mya Temple of the late 11th century, believed to be the merit of King Sawlu (r.1077-1084), heir to King Anawrahta (r.1044-1077) who was a strong supporter of Buddhism and who made Bagan a great kingdom.

The other illustrated temples of Bagan are Wetkyi In Gubyauk Gyi, Myinkaba Gu Byauk Gyi, Abeyadana, Thambula, Sulamuni, Paya Thonzu, Nanda Manya, Kondawgyi, Alodaw Pyi, Lawka Hteik Pan and Pe Natha Gu Temples; the Winihto and Lay Myet Hna Pagoda Complexes; Kyansittha Umin Monastery and U Pali Thein Ordination Hall; they all share the Buddhist theme of Buddha Gautama's Life Story or scenes from the 550 Jataka Tales.

The only place with a secular theme is the Ananda Oke Kyaung Monastery, with 18th century wall paintings.

Other places of worship with Buddhist-themed decorations in stone or clay are the Ananda Temple, Mingalar Zedi and Hpet Laik Pagodas in Bagan as well as uncountable pagodas or monasteries all over the country.

Until the late 18th century with the arrival of paper brought in by western travellers, the visual arts were represented more strongly in wood or stone carvings. There was a long and strong tradition in the written language but the texts, usually Buddhist in nature, used to be inscribed on dried and prepared palm leaves; the brush and ink usage of eastern Asia did not exist in Myanmar, otherwise silk paintings might have been part of the art legacy. The one rare exception was a painted piece of cotton discovered inside an arm of a broken image in Bagan, which was restored in Rome and is now at the Bagan Archaeological Museum. Perhaps there used to be more, that were lost to the ravages of time.

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## Art in the Palace

'Books' of the past were stacks of palm leaves with inscribed texts are called paysar parabeik, the word paysar referring to the use of palm leaves and parabeik meaning book.

When paper became more readily available, court artists began to use it in almost the same shape as the palm leaves: rectangular in shape but larger. The convenience of gluing paper together allowed long sheets to be created, sometimes as long as 20 ft. The length is then folded in accordion pleats to resemble the stacked palm leaves.

When unfolded, the long length mean a series of scenes could be painted on both sides to tell a story such as of the Life of Buddha. Bushes, trees or filler scenes of animals in the forests marked the timeline. The figures were drawn usually one third sideways, with a solid colour filled between thin and neat lines; the use of perspective was unknown, as was light and shade. However, two Italian artists were hired to do some interior decoration work for the new Mandalay Palace when the royal capital was moved from Amarapura to Mandalay in 1859; from them and from other artists who came with western emissaries, court artists during the reigns of King Mindon (r 1853-1878) and King Thibaw (r 1878-1885) began to experiment with some western ideas but not to the extent of doing art in the western style.

These folding books are called yoke son parabeik. Perhaps some of them could be called the earliest Burmese newspapers as they recorded startling news of the day such as a pair of giraffes presented to the king by foreign envoys or a mermaid washed ashore. U Kyar Nyunt was the master court artist leading a team of 20; they produced illustrated folding books as text books for the royal nursery, or for the king to present as gifts to monks or western envoys, and for the amusement of the extensive royal family. Many books were records of court life such as the twelve annual ceremonies or journeys taken by king and retinue.

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## Western Influences

There was no tradition in Myanmar of paintings hung on walls until 1885 when the whole kingdom was annexed by the British and the Burmese king exiled to India. The team of court painters led by Sayar Sar, son of U Kyar Nyunt, were left bereft of patrons. They moved to Mandalay, the city outside of the palace walls, to set up studios where they continued accepting commissions for the illustrated folding books. Some moved away to Yangon (formerly known as Rangoon), Pyay (formerly known as Prome), or Mawlamyaing (formerly known as Moulmein) to set up studios and take in apprentices.

With nostalgia for the lost king artistes and artists in their own ways showed their remembrance, the former with songs and plays and the latter with decorative scenes of the leisurely, luxurious court life of a prince or king surrounded by wives, babies and attendants. With the rule of the British came things they had not seen before such as trains and sea going steamships which they incorporated into their paintings. Meant for public display at monks' funerals which were lavish affairs, they were done on squares of fine cotton, framed and hung. British society discovered them and the artists began to make a better living. Renowned artists of this genre were, Saya Chone, Saya Nwei, Saya Myoe, Saya Thaung, Saya Mya, Saya Myit, Saya Aye etc. although both Saya Myit and Saya Aye became famous for their portraits in oils, the western style, commissioned by the members of the royal family and the nobility of Mandalay.

The introduction of the western style of painting together with new medium such as gauche, watercolours and oils also resulted in the panels of painted Buddhist scenes lining the upper parts of pagoda walkways, a legacy of the murals in 11th century Bagan.

By the early 20th century wealthy landowners had settled in Yangon to escape the unrest of rebellions against the British in their regions such as Rakhine, Shan States and the south. Their sons and even daughters were educated in England or India and they were the ancestors of Yangon aristocracy while the Mandalay aristocracy was made up of royal family members or the nobility that served at court.

Art lovers of Yangon society and members of the British administration founded the Burma Art Club in 1918 and in 1930 the Myanmar National Art Association was formed. Both places became gathering places for young men interested in art. Two State School of Fine Arts were opened in 1939, one in Mandalay and one in Yangon. Up to the present they exist as the State High School of Art but as always, with low funds. However the dedication of the teachers and students is commendable. Many of the most successful artists today are proud to be the alumni of these two schools, whether they attended full time day classes or part time evening classes.

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## Western Influences

In 1921 24 year-old Ba Nyan became the first painter sent by the State to study art in England; his travelling companion was 22-year-old Thar Tun, who was also a painter but on a grant to study architecture. Ba Zaw was the second art student sent to England. U Ba Nyan as he came to be respectably addressed is considered to be the father of the new western style trend of art in the country. This inspired masters liked U Ngwe Gaing, U San Win, U Thein Han, U Hla Shein, U Myat Kyaw, U Ba Thet, U Ba Kyi to continue to paint using western style technique, coupled with rich cultural scenes of Myanmar. Up to the present, peaceful pastoral scenes remain a strong theme in Myanmar art.

Late water-colourists such as Saya Saung, known as the Prince of Watercolours, and others like U M. Tin Aye, U Min Naing, U Ba Aye, U Ba Kyi and U Ba Thet mastered the sensitive art of watercolours so well that their works are still in demand today. Their tradition is carried on by many excellent young water-colourists.



**SAYA THAUNG**  
(1865 – 1940)  
**Court Scene**  
Oil on Canvas  
44 x 52 cm



**SAYA CHONE**  
**(1866 – 1917)**  
**Court Scene**  
Oil on Canvas  
28 x 37 cm



**SAYA AYE**  
**(1872 – 1930)**  
**Old Lady**  
Oil on Canvas  
65 x 49 cm





**SAYA MYIT**  
**(1888 – 1966)**  
**Monks Ceremony**  
Oil on Canvas  
51 x 76 cm



**U BA NYAN**  
**(1897 – 1945)**  
**Farm Scene**  
Oil on Board  
22 x 35 cm



**U BA NYAN**  
**(1897 – 1945**  
**Two Ladies**  
Watercolor on Paper  
23 x 28 cm



**U NGWE GAING**  
**(1901 - 1967)**  
**Burmese Man**  
Oil on Board  
90 x 72 cm



**U NGWE GAING**  
**(1901 - 1967)**  
**Burmese Lady**  
Oil on Board  
90 x 72 cm



**U NGWE GAING**  
**(1901 – 1967)**  
**Scene from the Town**  
Oil on Board  
27 x 38 cm



**U BA THET**  
**(1903 – 1972)**  
**The Girl on the Tree**  
Oil on Board  
65 x 46 cm



**U BA THET**  
**(1903 - 1972)**  
**The Girl bathing in the Lake**  
Watercolor on Paper  
17x 15 cm





**U HLA SHEIN**  
**(1904 - 1979)**  
**Pagoda and the Waterfall**  
Oil on Canvas  
45 x 49 cm  
1963



**U SAN WIN**  
**(1908 – 1979)**  
**Bagan**  
Oil on Canvas  
41 x 56 cm  
1972



**U SAN WIN (1908 – 1979) Tharaba Gate** Oil on Canvas 39 x 78 cm 1979



U BA KYI (1912 – 1989) General Nyit Win Oil on Board 37 x 64 cm



**U MTAT KYAW**  
**(1918 - 1977)**  
**A Drop of Water**  
Oil on Canvas  
78 x 56 cm  
1973



**AUNG KHIN**  
(1920 – 1996)  
**Untitled**  
Oil on Canvas  
61 x 92 cm  
1994