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SERVING THE SACRED AND SECULAR: THE ARTS OF BURMA

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Over the centuries Buddhism has been the primary inspiration for Burmese artistic endeavors. Its tenets transmitted through universal male attendance at monastic schools, regular visits to pagodas and the watching enactments of *Jataka* stories presented as popular entertainment, have promoted a large measure of social cohesion enabling participation in a common culture. Most Burmese believe that their current standing in the present life is the sum total of past deeds. At the same time this life also presents an opportunity to rebalance the karmic bank account and improve a person's lot in future existences through acts of generous giving by building pagodas and monasteries and supplying the highly revered monkhood with their daily necessities.

Buddhism in pre-colonial Burma was officially sponsored by the State. As 'defender of the faith' the king was the secular arm of Buddhism responsible for nurturing conditions within the realm under which the religion could flourish. With vast resources at his disposal, as 'donor in chief' the king and his family generally led the population in making pious donations to the religion. Many of the great Buddhist monuments in Burma were built at the behest of royalty and their retainers. In return, the *Sangha* (monkhood) were generally supportive of the monarchy and encouraged the population to obey the central authority. Members of the monkhood were also known to intercede with the civil authorities on behalf of the oppressed to obtain remission of taxes in times of famine and disaster and to rectify travesties of justice. Intercession by the monkhood was the only brake on the authority of an absolute monarch in pre-colonial Burma.

This lecture aims to present an overview of Burmese art from the prehistoric period up to the present, while at the same time, it will attempt to show the historically close relationship between the monarchy and major works of Buddhist art.

The lecture will open at the **Neolithic (4000-300 BCE)** to briefly apprise the audience of some of the most exciting recent archaeological discoveries in pre-Buddhist Burma and then move onto the **Pyu and early Mon peoples (200 BCE -900 CE)** who through early contact with India, had acquired brick-making technology and developed urban centers. At the same time they had become adherents of the Buddhist faith as may be seen in the remains of temples and sculpture.

We will then focus on the art of the 'classical age' of **Pagan (1044-1287 CE)**, the formative period in the development of the Burmese state. In addition to blessing posterity with the remains of over 2,000 religious edifices, this period developed institutions and set up various practices and precedents, which with minor changes, remained remarkably intact until the British conquest in the nineteenth century.

The **Ava period (1287-1752)** an approximate 500 year swath of history, which followed the decline of Pagan, has traditionally been portrayed as one wracked by political disintegration, endemic warfare and cultural decay. The realities and accomplishments of the period, however, are much more complicated, nuanced and considerably less pessimistic. The subsequent kingdoms of **Pegu (c.1287-1539)** **Arakan (1404-1785)** and **Taung-gu/Ava (1531-1752)** despite their turbulent inception were all destined at one time or another to experience periods of individual greatness and to function as notable cultural centers. Building on the achievements and innovations of the Pagan period, artistic traditions during the Ava era gradually become more 'Burman' in spirit. The *dramatis personae* of religious painting came to be depicted in contemporary dress rather than in Indian-style clothing. Buddha images and temple architecture also developed distinct regional styles, some of which are still evident today. Westerners anxious to establish trading relations, also began visiting the country around this time.

The expansionist policies of Alaung-hpaya, founder of the **Kon-baung dynasty (1752-1885)** and that of his sons led to the capture of many artisans—Thai, Manipuri, Mon and Arakanese which brought about much

innovation in Burmese art and theater. It also brought the kingdom up to the eastern border of British India. Disputes with that super-power were to lead to the dynasty's eventual demise. Despite 'being under siege' from this powerful aggressive neighbor, the Kon-baung kings in an effort to demonstrate power and piety, continued to build, decorate and refurbish many religious monuments.

The **conquest of all of Burma by 1885** led to overwhelming change. As a province of British India, the country became administered on the Indian model. A formerly self-sufficient economy was swiftly converted into an extractive one primarily dependent on foreign markets. The British advocated strict neutrality where religion was concerned and had no wish to assume the mantle of the Burmese kings in sponsoring and promoting Buddhist works of merit. Their reluctance, coupled with the refusal of many expatriates to remove shoes when visiting pagodas, aroused the ire of many Burmese and the protection of Buddhism became closely linked with nascent desires for Independence. A new class of wealthy lay Buddhist with encouragement from the monkhood, filled the void left with the abolition of the Burmese monarchy by embarking on an orgy of temple building around shrines formerly the preserve of royalty.

With the coming of **Independence in 1947**, much was done to promote Burmese culture which many felt had been in eclipse under an alien regime. Successive governments, both civil and military, sponsored works of merit, but nothing like the scale of the former Burmese kings until the mid-90s when in the interest of promoting tourism. the SPDC (State Peace and Development Council) embarked on recreating ancient palaces and the refurbishment of historic site on a massive scale. Lay Buddhists continue to be generous supporters of the religion.

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