

Painting Myanmar's Transition

Edited by
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Note on usage

In 1989, the ruling junta changed the English-language name of the country explored in this book and the names of many places within it. Burma became Myanmar, Rangoon became Yangon, Irrawaddy became Ayeyarwady, Arakan became Rakhine, Karen became Kayin, and so on. Although the changes were registered with the United Nations, they were rejected by leading opposition figures inside the country and supporters of their cause around the world. As the nation began to transition away from direct military rule in the 2010s and the historic opposition was brought into the formal political process, the ‘Burma versus Myanmar’ debate became less contentious and the two sets of names were often used interchangeably. In speeches delivered in English, for instance, State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi tended to refer to both Burma and Myanmar. In the introduction and conclusion to this book, we mainly use the set of names codified under British colonial rule for the period before 1989 and the set of names introduced by the junta for the period thereafter. In the four core chapters reporting interviews with artists, which were conducted in Burmese, we mostly translate everything into the new system introduced in 1989. No political statement is implied by any of this practice.

Honorifics remain part of everyday life in Myanmar. In the dominant language of the Bamar majority, respect for successively older males is denoted by *Maung*, *Ko*, and *U*. *Saya* (teacher) is also used as a mark of esteem and need not indicate an actual teacher-pupil or master-apprentice relationship. *Bogyoke* (major general) is the military rank attained by Aung San, father of Aung San Suu Kyi and indeed of the nation. It is used either alone or in conjunction with his name as a token of affection and approbation. For successively older females, respect is indicated by *Ma* and *Daw*. In this book we rarely make use of honorifics, though when introduced by artists in brief biographies and interviews we retain them. Aung San Suu Kyi is often known as Daw Suu and we also employ that version of her name. Her party, the National League for Democracy, is uniformly called the NLD and we too use that acronym. Some artists refer to the school standard they were in at a given point in time. Typically, students enter the first standard at age six, the second at age seven, and so on.

The currency used in Myanmar is the kyat. In the first eight months of 2020, when we conducted our eighty interviews, the exchange rate to the US dollar was roughly USD 1 = MMK 1,400.

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We are extremely grateful to the eighty artists who agreed to be interviewed for this book. It is self-evident that without their collaboration it could not have been written. Pyay Way, a painter and gallery owner who appears here, willingly liaised with many artists for us. Nay Aung Shu and Sandar Khaing, also painters featured in the book, kindly discussed with us the fifty-year censorship regime imposed on Burma at the start of the 1960s and dismantled in Myanmar at the start of the 2010s. This part of the project, conducted in Burmese, was undertaken by Aung Kaung Myat, who also made initial translations of the interviews into English. The remainder of the project, finalizing the interviews and turning them into chapters, writing the introduction and conclusion, compiling the list of further readings, and assembling the images, was undertaken by Ian Holliday. Supporting that work at the University of Hong Kong were Janet Lau, who provided superb general assistance, and Pashur Au-Yeung, who contributed great technical expertise. At Hong Kong University Press, we thank publisher Peter Daniell for commissioning the book and acquisitions editor Kenneth Yung for guiding us through the production process. We also acknowledge Andrew Selth and an anonymous reviewer, both approached by the Press, for constructive and useful comments on a draft manuscript. The usual disclaimer applies.

Ian Holliday
Aung Kaung Myat
March 2021

Introduction

At the start of the 2010s, Myanmar embarked on a transition away from half a century of rigid military rule. Elections were organized in 2010, a constitutional government assumed office in 2011, and controls that had long held sway began to be loosened. As the reform agenda advanced, the major opposition party emerged from harsh repression to secure a landslide electoral victory in 2015 and take a share of power in 2016. Across all walks of life, ordinary people stepped up to claim rights and freedoms made freshly available to them. In parallel, waves of intolerance swept and scarred a society with scant experience of navigating diversity and difference, and xenophobic nationalism came to occupy a prominent place on the political agenda. By the end of the 2010s, the forward march towards what military leaders termed ‘discipline-flourishing democracy’ remained on track, though darkly regressive episodes surrounding ferocious ethnic cleansing of Rohingya Muslims were fresh in the memory and largely unaddressed. In 2020, another election confirmed the delicate balance of political power established five years previously, enabling people to look with confidence to the future. In early 2021, however, a coup d’état led by Commander-in-Chief Senior General Min Aung Hlaing brutally curtailed the experiment with democratic reform. In almost every state and region, spontaneous popular resistance was met with violent repression, tipping the country into spiralling, chaotic decline. A decade after it began, Myanmar’s transition was brought to a crashing halt.

During the reform years, analysis of and commentary on Myanmar expanded considerably, reflecting the signal importance of this interlude in the nation’s modern narrative. Broadly, though, local observers spoke to local people in their own language, leaving global discourse to be dominated by foreigners writing in English. This was not uniformly so, for in English-language commentary one of the most prominent voices of all in the 2010s belonged to Burmese historian Thant Myint-U. But it was so to a striking degree. In consequence, people watching from a distance found it hard to grasp what citizens thought about the direction the country was taking. This was especially problematic when on a range of important issues local and global opinion was not only divergent, but in fact antithetical. In such circumstances, essential interaction between Myanmar and international society tended to falter or break down, and constructive partnership built on shared understanding all too frequently gave way to a dialogue of the deaf. As the transition vanished into history with the cataclysmic military power grab, interested outsiders were left with no clear picture of the lived experience of that momentous era of change.

To take a small step towards capturing the lifeworld of Myanmar’s transition and sharing it with a global audience, this book reproduces paintings by, and concise companion interviews with, eighty artists who resided and worked in the country throughout the decade. The aim, in essence anthropological, is to fill a gap in a quite extensive literature by showcasing in an accessible and stimulating format the perspectives of a broad range of contemporary painters with direct, first-hand knowledge of the reform period. Placed alongside each other, the eighty paintings and the reflections of the artists who produced them generate a collection of diverse and nuanced indigenous viewpoints on a significant, though parenthetical, phase in national development. As Myanmar starts down a very different path in the 2020s, they provide a set of poignant insights into the elaborate and tangled possibilities that opened up in the 2010s.

Context

The context for everything presented here is the journey taken by Myanmar in the two modernizing centuries leading up to the 2010s. Through wars fought in 1824–1826, 1852–1853, and 1885, Burma was fully absorbed into the British Empire in 1886 as an add-on province of the Raj. Central plains, known as Ministerial Burma or Burma Proper, were ruled directly and settled ways of life, focused on monarchy

and monastery and sustained mostly in isolated villages or village tracts, experienced substantial change. Peripheral uplands, known as Scheduled or Frontier Areas, were administered indirectly through local chiefs and princes and witnessed somewhat less change. Nonetheless, as imperial control intensified in the second half of the nineteenth century, many parts of a closed and traditional society were rapidly opened up to global trade and commerce. When employment boomed in colonial capital Rangoon, in a new rice frontier in the Irrawaddy Delta, and in parts of north-western Arakan facing Bengal, economic migrants moved to Burma from other parts of British India on a temporary or permanent basis, posing further challenge to established modes of being.

Colonial rule was quite violently contested, especially in the years after 1886 when the British prosecuted a brutal pacification campaign. Indeed, at no point during the imperial interlude was Burma the fully quiescent backwater senior officials would have wished to govern. Nevertheless, by the start of the twentieth century the province had developed a prosperous and even nonchalant veneer that for a while successfully pasted over the cracks of a tense imperial relationship. A new legal system, devised for British India, was in place throughout the territory. Extractive industries particularly in the oil, mining, and forestry sectors generated sizeable profits for British companies. Intensive agricultural practices enabled high-quality rice to be exported all over the world, notably from the Irrawaddy Delta. Rangoon, built largely from scratch by colonial administrators, was a celebrated, though rather insignificant, imperial outpost.

Disruption triggered initially by the First World War, subsequently by protest and reform in India, and finally by the Great Depression meant, however, that in the interwar period latent nationalist sentiment became ever more pressing. In the 1930s, large peasant and student movements claimed self-rule and rattled the preening arrogance of the colonial elite. Race riots took place in Rangoon and other cities as economic hardship exposed grassroots tension between communities lacking experience of living and working side by side. In 1937, Burma was allowed separate colonial status and local people gained a greater say in government, echoing earlier and larger reforms in India. By the end of the decade, though, the colony was still far from at peace with itself.

During the Second World War, swift Japanese invasion drove the British out of Burma in 1942 and imposed on it a different form of imperial rule. Key nationalist figures, including General Aung San, participated in both the invasion and the puppet government installed by Japanese overlords. Inside Burma, loyalties were split as the majority Burman community sided mostly with the Japanese while minority ethnic peoples fought mainly with the British. In 1945, however, an alliance of all Burmese and Allied forces regained control of the territory and reinstated British government. Again, Aung San was a pivotal figure, ensuring that once the war had been won it was no longer possible to uphold the case for colonialism. In 1948, independence was granted to, or secured by, Burma. Six months previously, Aung San and several members of his cabinet-in-waiting had been assassinated on the orders of a political rival.

Underpinning sovereign Burma was a liberal democratic constitution with social democratic trappings drafted by both nationalist leaders and colonial officials in the immediate post-war period. Characterizing the country on a daily basis, however, were ethnic and ideological strife, growth of an increasingly powerful *Tatmadaw* (armed forces) to combat it, and fragmentation of the broad nationalist coalition that had spearheaded the drive for independence. Ethnic conflict saw minority peoples living in peripheral parts, led by the Karen and followed by others, rise up in revolt against Burman dominance. Ideological dispute saw the Communist Party of Burma contest control of the state in this corner of Southeast Asia, as was also happening in other parts of the region at a time of post-war reconstruction and revolution in China. In the course of the 1950s, the political elite appeared to become ever less capable and the military elite ever more effective.

Dissatisfied with the evolution of Burmese democracy in the decade after independence, *Tatmadaw* Chief of Staff General Ne Win engineered a situation in which he was called upon to lead the country

on a caretaker basis for eighteen months from late 1958. Although elections were then held to enable a restoration of constitutional rule to take place in 1960, national politics remained divisive and chaotic and civil war continued to blight peripheral parts. In 1962, Ne Win took matters in hand by performing a near-bloodless coup. This time, moreover, there were no half measures. The constitution was abrogated, a small Revolutionary Council was formed with forceful military backing, socialist dogma was proclaimed and aggressively implemented, and democratic institutions were systematically dismantled. Xenophobic nationalism, championed from the top of the state and built around the majority Burman identity, drove out most foreigners and condemned the country to extreme isolation and autarky. Burma became a hermit nation run on state socialist principles.

In 1974, a new constitution codified state socialism and installed single-party rule by the Burma Socialist Programme Party with, again, full military support. Under this charter, Ne Win assumed the presidency, though he relinquished it in 1981 while continuing as party chairman and supreme political leader. The country was still isolated and in disarray. In 1988, mass protests for democracy triggered by economic hardship and deep dissatisfaction with the regime sounded the death knell for both the party and its ideology. The state survived, however, and through an internal coup was taken over by a small military directorate known from 1988 as the State Law and Order Restoration Council and from 1997 as the State Peace and Development Council. In 1990, the junta allowed a general election to take place, though it declined to implement the landslide victory won by the National League for Democracy. Instead, from the late 1980s onwards it subjected Aung San Suu Kyi and other opposition leaders and activists to long periods of detention through house arrest and imprisonment.

Under Senior General Than Shwe, head of state from 1992 to 2011, the junta sought to embrace both a new openness to the wider world and a form of crony capitalism designed to rectify the economic catastrophe of the socialist era and enrich the small politico-military elite. In the main, though, Western states responded to the events of 1988–1990 by shunning the country and its generals and imposing ever tougher economic and political sanctions. By contrast, states in the region were open to engagement, with a resurgent China becoming ever more significant. In 1997, Myanmar was admitted to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations.

Conscious that it was unlikely to perpetuate its rule forever, the junta in the 1990s and 2000s embarked on a stop-start constitution-writing process that was announced in 1992, institutionalized in 1993, and eventually brought to a close in 2007. Alongside this, in the 1990s the regime negotiated a series of ceasefire deals with ethnic armed groups in peripheral areas. Chiefly in the 2000s, it sponsored glacial progression towards discipline-flourishing democracy. In 2008, a draft constitution was put to the people in a nationwide referendum. While in no sense credible, massive public endorsement did create the foundation in 2010 for Myanmar's first transitional elections, which were boycotted by Aung San Suu Kyi, still held under house arrest, and her party. Across these two decades, the country accomplished only very limited re-engagement with the outside world. Nevertheless, by the end of the 2000s, particularly in the wake of devastation wrought by Cyclone Nargis in 2008, there was a growing willingness on the part of the military elite to contemplate change.

Following on from the notionally democratic poll held in 2010, the junta in 2011 dissolved itself and handed power to a quasi-civilian government led by the Union Solidarity and Development Party. At senior levels, the new administration was staffed by former junta stalwarts. Under President Thein Sein a gradual and cumulative liberalization process nonetheless began to unfold. Freedoms of speech, assembly, and protest not known since the early 1960s were reintroduced and up and down the land people made zealous use of them.

By and large, the reformist gains were maintained when the NLD took office in 2016 after a sweeping electoral triumph in 2015. Formally led by President Htin Kyaw from 2016 to 2018 and by President Win Myint from 2018, this government was visibly run by State Counsellor Aung San

1

*Artists born in post-war and democratic Burma
(before 1962)*

Sein Myint – စိန်မြင့်

Sein Myint was born shortly after the Second World War, in 1945, to parents who had fled Mandalay for the Sagaing Hills. His paintings emphasize village life and Myanmar's traditions and culture. He has held many exhibitions and won multiple awards.



Sein Myint, *Bagan Temple in Red*, 2017, watercolour, 17 × 24"

Why did you create this painting?

Bagan temples and pagodas collapsed in the 1975 earthquake. When I saw photos of the ruins amid all the dust, I created five paintings as a memorial. I used strong colours to depict the powerful earthquake. My paintings usually draw on Myanmar traditions. Currently I'm doing a series on the Ramayana epic. Right now I'm creating a large painting, five feet by thirteen, of a scene from that. Because of COVID-19 I can't get out of the house or have people to visit, so I'm mainly working.

Has life for you as a painter changed in the past decade?

To survive as an artist, your style has to keep changing. Only if you use different subjects, colours, figures, and composition will you have a new style. So painters have to do that. As a Myanmar artist, I don't go to extremes. We have so much to paint. We have festivals and flowers for all twelve months, plus the Burmese zodiac. We have both a Buddhist and a secular history. In the past decade I participated in shows. I worked with Saya Min Wae Aung. Art galleries appeared in Yangon, creating a win-win situation for artists and art lovers. It was going well until the pandemic. Then the sky fell and everything came to a halt.

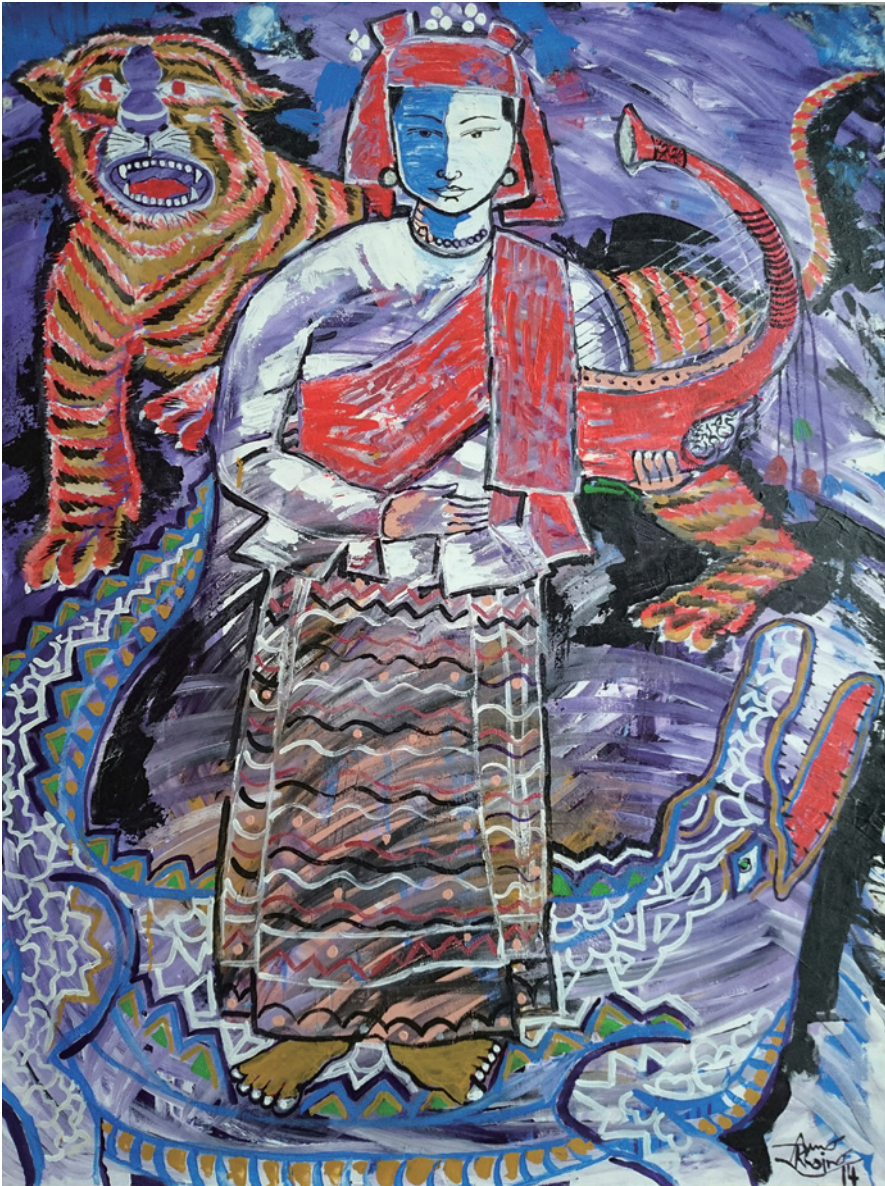
Has Myanmar changed in the past decade?

I don't read the papers and I'm not interested in the news. So I don't know much. The past five years were a period of transition from the past to the current government. The way the country is governed has changed.

7 August 2020

Aung Khaing – အောင်ခိုင်

Aung Khaing was born in 1945 in a village on the outskirts of Yangon. Since the 1960s, he has worked as a painter and illustrator. In 1984, he had a searing experience of censorship when his entire show of 120 paintings was banned. For many years thereafter he did not present his work for public exhibition. His first solo show took place in Yangon in 2013.



Aung Khaing, *U Shin Gyi Nat*, 2014, acrylic, 36 × 48"

Why did you choose this painting?

I have a semi-abstract style because I can't paint realistically. When I was young, I loved the work of Bagyi Aung Soe and Paw Oo Thet. So I'm influenced by them. When I paint, I just do whatever I want. My hand does the job and my mind wanders. I don't worship *nats* (spirits). But I respect them because Myanmar people have long worshipped them. This is U Shin Gyi, Lord of the Sea. Vendors of bananas and coconuts for *nat* worship also sell *nat* pictures. I referred to them when I was doing this painting.

Has life for you as a painter changed in the past decade?

In the past, I didn't sell many paintings and I struggled to get by. In 2004, I had to sell my house. Only in the last ten years have my paintings sold. Now buyers come to my home. Even during the COVID-19 period, they still commission me to paint. A domestic collector bought more than 400 of my paintings. According to our belief, my karma is on the rise. I'm not rich, but it's okay for me now. I paint every day. I don't like the idea that an artist has to live in poverty. I want Myanmar artists to be prosperous. An artist must earn something from what he creates. And our country must be proud of our art.

Has Myanmar changed in the past decade?

There will always be change in Myanmar. I want to see improvements in the economy, education, and healthcare. I don't like personality cults. I welcome people who can change the country for the better. Looking around the world, I can't abide authoritarian systems where the ruling class oppresses the people. I think it's good that we're on the path to democracy. But we need good leaders as well as good policies.

6 July 2020

2

*Artists born under the Revolutionary Council
(1962–1973)*

Co Thiee – ကိုယ်သီး:

Co Thiee was born in Yangon in 1963. As an undergraduate student, he drew posters for the 1988 democracy movement. In the 1990s, he was employed as a signboard painter, illustrator, graphic designer, and film director. He turned to painting in 2000, making it his professional career in 2006.



Co Thiee, *Novitiation*, 2013, acrylic, 36 × 48"

Why did you choose this painting?

I'm a Buddhist. There are two truths in Buddhism: *samvrti* (truth in the lay world) and *paramartha* (truth in the religious world). In *samvrti* territory, there are conventions agreed upon by most people. Once you enter *paramartha* territory, however, you leave those conventions behind. You no longer think about or practice them. When you exit from *samvrti* territory by leaving behind money, cars, and property and enter *paramartha* territory, the first thing you have to do is have your head shaved. You give up and dismiss your possessions. Maybe it's the opposite of what monks are doing now. But you dismiss your possessions and show humility in practice. That's why I used shaving as a theme. You no longer have *samvrti* values as you move into another world. And, as you enter, you dismiss and give up all your possessions. You own nothing. There's nothing you can possess. You've let go of everything. That's what I wanted to say.

Has Myanmar changed in the past decade?

In 2010, the *sangha* (community of monks) was as elegant and enlightened as ever. But after 2010 there were *sangha* organizations supported by the government. Fake monks came from their ranks. While there are still many genuine *sangha* members carrying out their religious duties, there are also fake members meddling in lay affairs. I don't know how they'll resolve this. Some monks are now convinced they have to be involved in politics. As there's more political participation, they want to join in. But there are also many Buddhist monks who are just interested in missionary work. I met a Burmese monk in Korea. He had learned Korean and was fully committed to missionary activities. And he continued to engage in community work. He mainly preaches Buddhist sermons. He has all the necessary virtue and moral character. I've found a lot of monks like him. When a country develops, there can be as much decline as progress. Progress and decline are often found together.

7 February 2020

Thu Rein Myaing – သုရိန်မြိုင်

Thu Rein Myaing was born in Seikphyu, Magway Region in 1964. He studied art under U Khin Maung Zaw, U Myo Nyunt, and Saya Nwe. He held solo exhibitions in 2003 and 2013.



Thu Rein Myaing, *Pazundaung Creek and Shwedagon*, 2013, acrylic, 36 x 48"

Why did you create this painting?

This is a painting of Pazundaung Creek with Shwedagon Pagoda in the background. Close to Yangon it's called Pazundaung Creek. But its higher section is called Nga Moe Yeik. I went along that section and painted about five pictures. I think the boats are fishing boats. They're small motor boats. I took a photo in the afternoon. I took pictures of the creek in North Dagon, Tharkayta, and Thingangyun. I wanted to paint Pazundaung Creek and Shwedagon Pagoda in the evening. I mostly paint scenery. I rarely paint figures.

Has life for you as a painter changed in the past decade?

I haven't experienced any change in my life as an artist. When I was thirty, I was confronted by a teacher. He asked what I wanted from art because I painted so much. I said I didn't want anything. I live in a rural area, so I just want to be an ordinary painter who paints regularly. I don't want to be famous in Myanmar or the world. But I want to make sure my paintings reach the standard of paintings done in Myanmar or the world. There aren't any changes in my life. It's quiet.

Has Myanmar changed in the past decade?

As the urban area is developing, there are taller buildings. But there aren't any major changes. Pazundaung Creek is there as always. I go out every Sunday. I haven't missed that for two and a half years. But because of COVID-19, I haven't been out for three weeks.

27 April 2020

3

*Artists born under President Ne Win
(1974–1981)*

Khin Maung Win – ခင်မောင်ဝင်း

Khin Maung Win was born in Dawei, Tanintharyi Region in 1976. He attended a state-run art school in Yangon from 1996 to 1999. He was then apprenticed to U Aung Ba, U Myint Maung, and U Win Tint. He has participated in more than twenty group shows.



Khin Maung Win, *Snacks to Bring Home*, 2013, acrylic, 36 × 48"

Why did you choose this painting?

Some people buy food when they go home in the evening. I liked this scene with people buying food from stalls on Pansodan Street, so I painted it. I always see the night market as I travel to and from the downtown area. In this painting, I describe my feelings through colour and line. I referred to a photo to draw outlines. Then I painted the rest from my imagination. I don't want to create just one type of painting. I like to create new perspectives that are rarely seen in reality. I get bored if it's the same.

Has life for you as a painter changed in the past decade?

There haven't been many significant changes. I took part in over twenty group shows. Recently, I started to use fewer strokes to paint dark colours and more strokes to paint light colours. So my paintings look livelier and better than before.

Has Myanmar changed in the past decade?

The night market no longer exists. A building was put in its place. The vendors moved to another area. But at the moment there's no market because of COVID-19. I think we have more freedom now. In the past, you could get in trouble even for taking photos. When I took a photo of a market for a painting, a conductor on a bus that had stopped where it shouldn't had a problem with me. I had to run away. Now there are no bus conductors so it's easy to do. In the past, there was more mess and it was more interesting to paint. Now I feel there are better living standards and it takes longer to find something to paint. Everything is clean. It's not simple like before. In the past, street vendors were good to paint. If a lot of them work in a market building and there are fewer vendors on the street, they're not a good subject. Then I have to come up with something.

28 May 2020

Tamalar – တမာလာ

Tamalar was born in Lamaing, Mon State in 1978. After finishing high school, he took informal painting lessons with a neighbourhood artist. He attended the State School of Fine Arts in Yangon from 2001 to 2004. Since graduation, he has worked as a full-time artist.



Tamalar, *Welcome to Karen State*, 2014, acrylic, 36 × 48"

Why did you choose this painting?

I named this painting 'Welcome to Karen State'. Both the painting and the exhibition it's from have the same title. Most of us visit Shan State or upper parts of Myanmar. As I look around the country for landscapes to paint, I find Karen State is different. I'm an ethnic Karen, but I first visited Karen State only when I was thirty-six years old. In our country, people mostly paint the hills in Shan State or the landscapes in Anya. In my opinion, the mountains in Karen State are unique. They're like haystacks in a field, pointy and long. In this painting, I used matching colours from a colour range. Previously, I didn't dare do that. As I painted more, I learned I could use unnatural colours too. I like Japanese artists and their style and philosophy when using colour. So eventually I learned how to express myself artistically.

Has life for you as a painter changed in the past decade?

These landscape paintings brought me some financial success. But I painted them for almost a decade. So I started a 'Treeveller' series by combining tree and traveller. In the past decade, I tried abstract painting and embarked on my new series. I felt happy and even elated working on it. I also had many troubles and challenges, though. But I'm satisfied with that series.

Has Myanmar changed in the past decade?

The weather is different in 2020 from 2013. Some mountains I saw are no longer there. I know because I took photos whenever I visited. They probably demolished them for cement, lime, and rock. So it's become hotter. It's not as beautiful as it was. I couldn't say who did that. But I don't want it to happen. Now that I've witnessed these issues myself, I've come to love the environment. During my childhood, it was so cold in Insein in winter. We had to gather round the fire. Now there's no cold anymore. So I want trees, mountains, and forests to be preserved.

1 April 2020

4

*Artists born during the decline and fall of
Socialist Burma (after 1981)*

Kaung Kyaw Khine – ကောင်းကျော်ခိုင်

Kaung Kyaw Khine was born in Sittwe, Rakhine State in 1982. Encouraged by his father, a commercial artist and practitioner of traditional Rakhine drumming, he moved to Yangon to attend the State School of Fine Arts from 2003 to 2007. Since graduation, he has worked as a full-time artist.



Kaung Kyaw Khine, *Rakhine Drummer*, 2013, acrylic, 36 x 48"

Why did you choose this painting?

The Rakhine drum is part of my life. My father is a school art teacher with an interest in Rakhine culture. I've always felt I was born with art and with the drum. I learned the basics of art and local history from my father. I've been playing the drum ever since I can remember. I teach the drum team of the Rakhine Men and Women Sweeping Groups at Shwedagon Pagoda. I based this painting on that aspect of my life. It's a self-portrait. When I create paintings, I prioritize my feelings. With this one I wanted to revitalize the Rakhine drum that exists in my heart. The drum is only played on auspicious occasions such as the ordination of monks and Rakhine Thingyan. Drummers have to be religious. They mustn't drink before playing. As a player myself, I was capturing the expression and mental state of those who play. I painted a full series to express the delight I get from playing. I also added silver coins used in the Rakhine kingdom in AD 600.

Has life for you as a painter changed in the past decade?

I think these paintings are from 2010 and 2011. I painted them between my first and second solo shows. After that, I had two more shows. A lot has changed because I've made many different series. At first I relied on visual presentation. Then I slowly evolved to emphasize psychological dimensions. Broadly speaking, there are good and bad things everywhere. There's no censorship in Myanmar now. About fifteen members of the Censorship Board came to my first solo show. We could go ahead only with their permission. But during the U Thein Sein administration censorship ceased. It's arguably an important change for Myanmar art. Censorship focused on minor details. The paintings I'm doing today wouldn't have got through. They'd think I'm disparaging the country. Now that we have a chance to express ourselves freely, there's more interest at home and abroad.

Has Myanmar changed in the past decade?

Just as I welcome change, there are many things that haven't changed as we expected. For example, we now enjoy freedom of expression and freedom of speech. But there are so many behind-the-scenes powers restraining us citizens of Myanmar.

29 May 2020

Saw Lin Aung – စောလင်းအောင်

Saw Lin Aung was born in Twantay, Yangon Region in 1982. He attended the State School of Fine Arts in Yangon from 2001 to 2004 and since graduation has worked as a full-time artist. His first overseas group show was in 2008.



Saw Lin Aung, *Inle Lake*, 2013, oil, 36 × 48"

Why did you choose this painting?

I love Inle Lake. I wanted to paint a bird's-eye view. Back then, no painting had that kind of perspective. Now people won't feel it's strange because drones are so popular. When I created this painting, I based it on my imagination. Today the water has reached dangerous levels. The lake dries up so much during the summer. Its depth is only about three feet.

Has life for you as a painter changed in the past decade?

There have been changes. In the past, I had to sell paintings like this one through galleries. Now I just stay home and have exhibitions and workshops in foreign countries. I've also joined overseas art camps. At times I was just trying to survive, like when this painting was bought in around 2010. Today it's different. I don't know what others think, but there are lots of differences between my generation and young artists. I can't explain in detail, but I notice that. For me, I just paint what's in my mind. Mostly I work in a studio. So I feel trapped and want to paint wide open spaces. The difference between my past and current paintings is that now I'm releasing a feeling of suffocation. Previously I painted close-up, abstract forms of water that people don't notice in nature. Now I paint the high mountains in Inle, the light in water droplets that people rarely see, the reflection of light in small waves in the morning when fog lingers in the air as the sun comes out, and the life of Inle fishermen.

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Conclusion

Our eighty artists, all born, bred, and still living in Myanmar, have reflected on their art, their lives, and their country during its thwarted transition. They have done so through their paintings, drawn broadly from the 2010s. They have also done so through their commentary on those paintings, dating from the far narrower span of the first eight months of 2020. Inevitably their views are quite varied and often conflicting. Nevertheless, several core themes are visible and worth gathering together in this brief conclusion. Some issues are important for a sizeable number of artists and are therefore reported here. Equally, some topics that might have emerged in either the paintings or the interviews in fact do so only rarely, or not at all, and are thus also noted.

Dominant themes

Two major themes for the artists are the removal of censorship in 2012–2013 and the improvement in Myanmar's art market across the bulk of the 2010s. The two are linked in the broad-based democratization and liberalization that defined the decade. Indeed, it is hard to imagine that one could have happened without the other. Nonetheless, each was necessary for the country's art scene to develop and flourish to the extent seen during the period.

The lifting of censorship is a common talking point, indicating the degree to which it had hung over and fettered artistic imagination and endeavour in the preceding half-century. Many artists celebrate the freedom they were able to claim and exploit in the 2010s. A willingness to move into previously forbidden territory is evident in the paintings and a sense of creative relief and release is palpable in the interviews. As the reform agenda advanced, artists with a political interest or message no longer needed to check themselves or hide their canvases. Abstraction was permissible. Even nude paintings, without doubt the greatest taboo in a traditional and conservative nation, were allowed, though perhaps still not admired and given equal billing alongside other work. For the best part of a decade, free expression became a reality for artists in Myanmar.

At the same time, even here at the most critical point in the relationship between the state and the art world, there is an element of nostalgia for times past. A subtext to the broad welcome accorded to the lifting of censorship is a wistful backward look to the days when painters had to struggle to outwit military rulers and their agents on the Censorship Board. Some artists hold that the material generated by a poor, downtrodden nation was superior to that presented by the more free and affluent society encountered in the 2010s. Some indicate that the process of engaging with censorship was itself a stimulus to invention and creativity. None of this is to argue that any of our artists wished to turn back the clock. Nevertheless, there is an awareness in some interviews of what was lost during Myanmar's transition.

Also important for artists was the market expansion witnessed in the 2010s. Above all in Yangon, the emergence of dozens of new galleries created opportunities for exhibiting and selling work that had not existed before. Some feel that the most significant change was ready access to foreign patrons, while others point to the emergence of domestic collectors. For cohorts of artists accustomed in most cases to finding ways to make a living beyond their passion, the art boom that took place in the 2010s was a propitious and vital development. Again, this is not to say that life suddenly became comfortable and artists were at once able to relocate to Easy Street. Often they note that all they could do was move from almost no earnings from art to a limited and generally unpredictable source of income. Still, there was substantial growth in the sector.

Once more there is a counterpoint, with several artists expressing reservations about trends in the Yangon art market in the 2010s. Some are not entirely happy with the emergence during the period of powerful gallery owners, viewed as key gatekeepers and brokers. By contrast, others feel that entry to the