SILVER PRODUCED in Burma during the latter part of its Colonial period (1825–1948) has only recently begun to attract the attention of collectors worldwide. Combining European form and function with decorative elements familiar to every Burman, these are pieces which represent a confluence of two disparate cultures, pieces which are finding new resonance in today's multi-cultural society.

Because of the strictures imposed by Theravada Buddhism, ownership of silver in Burma was, prior to the Raj period, theoretically limited to the nobility. Despite this prohibition, there was an ancient tradition of working silver in Burma which blossomed with the demand created by the arrival of foreign consumers. Burmese silver dating from the 19th and early 20th century was produced throughout the country, in seven major centres in particular. Pieces from Rangoon, Mandalay and Thayetmyo can be confidently identified, as each city has a distinctive, documented style of decoration. To date it has not been possible to make concrete geographical assignments for the vast body of Burmese work from the remaining four centres. There is more research to be done before correctly attributing other characteristic forms of decoration to their geographical origins.
A Short History of Burma

The Burmese date their era from 638 AD, when they arrived from the region where China meets Tibet. By 850 AD a Burmese capital was established at Pagan (modern Bagan), and for the next four hundred years administered an area whose boundaries varied little from those of the modern state. The Burmese developed a unique civilisation with its roots in Theravada Buddhism, though this society was subsumed by the invading armies of Kublai Khan in the 13th century. It was not until the advent of King Alaukpya in 1750 that a united Burma emerged. It was Alaukpya who re-established and fostered the development of Burma’s original Buddhist culture. His forces invaded neighbouring Siam and brought entire communities of Siamese artisans, including silversmiths, to work for his court at Pagan. The influence of these early craftsmen on Burmese art and taste is still in evidence today.

The first Anglo-Burmese War (1825) resulted in the annexation of the provinces of Arakan (in the West) and Tenasserim (Central, extending Southeast), which were placed under British Commissioners. In 1852 Pegu, just north of Rangoon (modern Yangon), was added and it too was given its own Commissioner. In 1862 these three jurisdictions were incorporated into the departmental entity “British Burma”, governed by a Chief Commissioner with a seat at the Governor General’s Council in India. “British Burma” was thus granted the same status as an Indian administrative province and was governed in much the same manner.

Thibaw, the last of the Burmese kings, agitated for the third Anglo-Burmese conflict in 1885, urging his followers to “drive the British into the sea”. His defeat brought about the annexation of Upper Burma, a province extremely rich in natural resources and with a larger land area, and consequently greater political weight, than any province in India proper. In 1923, a diarchal form of government with a freely elected parliament was established for Burma. The British formally separated Burma from India in 1937 and re-assigned its administration to the Burma Office in London until Burmese sovereign independence was declared on January 4th, 1948.

Silver in Burmese Society

Many major religions incorporate rituals in which objects made of gold or silver play some role, thereby providing silversmiths with a guaranteed source of work. Not so in Burma, one of several cultures whose religion forbids the use of precious metals in ceremonial worship. Theravada Buddhism places the responsibility of spiritual salvation firmly with the individual. There were and are no religious services or rites conducted by priests, hence no requirement for vessels and implements made of gold or silver. The role of the priests and monks is to expound Buddha’s laws and to set an example by strictly adhering to an ascetic lifestyle in which contact with precious metals is forbidden. Although silver and gold figures are seen in the adornment of Theravada temples, the subject of temple décor is outside the remit of this article.

Secular tradition further limited the possibilities for Burma’s silversmiths; only those of royal blood could own items of silver or gold. Because his market was twice limited, the Burmese silversmith catered to a very small coterie of customers, but this is not to say that his craft was not highly developed. In reality, wealthy merchants did indeed possess silver, as did many Buddhist monks, who skirted religious strictures by engaging secular acolytes to carry their silver begging bowls.
Three beakers, circa 1900

Bowl, circa 1900
Burmese Silver Bowls and Other Objects

Burmese silversmiths under the Raj produced a vast array of objects in silver for the expatriate community as well as for international export. Once the British discovered these craftsmen could apply the rich and intricate decoration of their indigenous creations to familiar Western household objects, a new industry developed, and the silver-producing centres of Burma flourished. Everything from tea caddies to whist boxes, ink stands to tea sets, photograph frames to flower vases and visiting card cases was made to satisfy a seemingly limitless demand, but it was the silver bowls (ngwey-balas) of all sizes, some made in imitation of the begging bowls, (thabeiks) used by Buddhist monks and pala, the ubiquitous water bowls found in every Burmese household, which were the crowning glory of Burma’s silversmiths.

As time passed, British presence in Burma had a liberating influence on local attitudes towards the ownership of precious metals as the author Mi Mi Khaing’s 1946 account reveals:

“Silver carving is one of our show industries; the silversmiths of Mandalay and Moulmein produce handsome bowls, boxes, dagger handles and various other objects bought by foreigners. Burmese people do not have the custom of buying objets d’arts (sic) for their houses, but the articles of daily use which they like to have of good quality and pleasing designs are the real inspiration of these traditional crafts of Burma. We had silver bowls, ngwey-balas, of all sizes, smaller ones for drinking, bigger for pouring the bath-water, and enormous ones. ...for holding gifts to the monks on festival days. Sometimes my mother used these to hold tak-pan, the flowers of the Honolulu creeper, for the drawing room, but she always preferred a religious use for such noble and valuable objects.” (p. 24)

Decoration: Subject Matter

Decoration on Burmese bowls, characterised by deep repoussé and finely chased details, most commonly consists of renderings of the Jatakas, moralistic tales from the lives and parables of the Buddha. There are ten principal legends (Mahanipata) within the Jatakas revealed throughout some five hundred tales. Tradition dictates that each character is assigned a unique costume, complete with implements and ornaments, in order to be instantly recognisable in an oral and visual culture, in much the same way as Christian art treats apostles and saints. The characters’ stances are in many instances prescribed, so the demons, ogres and guardian spirits who regularly dart in and out of the stories to help or hinder the hero are immediately identifiable. Scenes from the Hindu epic The Ramayana are also frequently depicted on Burmese silver bowls as are Burmese traditional folk tales featuring mythological beasts, ogres, demons and sprites, and representations of the zodiac, cosmos and Burmese days of the week. These same themes and subjects are also commonly found decorating Burmese lacquerware as well as carvings in wood or ivory.

The rims of Burmese silver bowls are usually left plain and highly burnished. Below the plain rim are generally a
Zodiac representations from a Rangoon bowl, circa 1900

Jataka scene detail

Detail of the rim of a Rangoon bowl, circa 1900

few lines of chased beaded decoration. Lower, a wider band of floral scrollwork in relief is commonly followed by another line of beading before the main pictorial scenes which are rendered either in a continuous frieze or in sections separated by cusped arches or spandrels of foliage. Below the pictorial decoration is usually a circle of stylised acanthus foliage or lotus bud sepals.
The Burmese silversmith had few tools at his disposal: bronze or iron anvils and punches, clay crucibles, and hammers in various sizes in addition to a bamboo blast blowpipe, solder and flux. Because his customer supplied the raw silver for a commission, the silversmith held no stock. Customers often included large retail emporiums like the Burmese Curio Depot in Mandalay, Klier or Beato’s, which had branches in both Rangoon and Mandalay. Such retailers catered to a sophisticated international clientele and commissioned a vast range of pieces. George W. Bird described a visit to Beato’s shop in his *Wanderings in Burma* of 1897:

“Signor Beato undertakes the packing and dispatch of all articles purchased from his studio, and has for a number of years carried on a large export trade with Europe, America and other parts of the world...Employing as he does a large number of workers (over eight hundred in number) in the different art industries, he is able to command the best specimens and hence those who patronise his studio may rest assured that they will get the real article, at a reasonable price, and of the very best workmanship.”

The very best of Burma’s silver was made for, exhibited and sold at the various international exhibitions, at which it garnered top prizes as late as 1924. Each Burmese silver bowl is usually the work of one artisan who achieved his status only after an apprenticeship to a master silversmith. There is no tradition of hereditary trades in Burma, but there was and still is a tradition of tied apprenticeship which consists of a student’s labour freely given in exchange for the opportunity to study with a master. At first an apprentice was assigned simple tasks in the workshop while his master assessed his suitability for the craft. Gradually, the novice was permitted to perform more complex tasks, working the bellows for example. Next, in addition to silverworking skills, he was taught draughtsmanship, beginning with *kanote*, curving stylised scrollwork. As he progressed, the apprentice learned to depict *nari*, the human form, *kappi*, monkeys, and finally, *gazza*, the elephant, considered to be the most demanding form to represent. Once an apprentice became a master, he would not look forward to a life of luxury. According to H.L. Tilly in *The Silverwork of Burma*, “The leading artists are devoted to their art and are quite content if they can gain enough to live on, provided they keep their position at the head of the craft”. (p. 11)

**Ordering, Material and Fabrication Practices**

When a bowl was ordered, the customer handed over silver rupees (91.6% pure silver) to the craftsman, a portion of which the latter would retain as payment for his labour. According to George Bird, eight annas (half a rupee) was charged for each rupee weight of the finished product for an ordinary level of work. For the highest quality work the rate was three times higher. Other sources of material were sundry silver coins, and “baw”, the pure silver mined at Bawdwin in northern Burma. “Baw” was usually worked in a very high purity (96%) allowing the craftsman to achieve the intricate detail of best quality work. By the turn of the 20th century, much of the silver used in the larger Burmese production centres was sterling standard material refined in England (92.5% sterling standard).

To make a bowl, silver was melted into a flat clay saucer and allowed to cool. This resulted in a plate which was flat on one side and convex on the other (see illustration of silversmiths at work, where several of these are on the table in the foreground). The plate was slowly beaten out on a round iron anvil with an iron hammer until it reached the full diameter of the finished bowl. Throughout the fabrication process the bowl was frequently annealed—heated and cooled—to maintain its ductility. With the full diameter of the bowl attained, an edge or lip was raised all around by hammering with a straight-edged hammer at a 45 degree angle. Next, the bottom of the bowl was hammered in a narrowing spiral towards the centre, and then outwards again once the centre was reached. This inwards and outwards spiral hammering caused the edges of the bowl to rise until the desired height was achieved.

The bowl was then hammered on a small curved iron anvil until it attained a uniform thickness and shape. A hot resinous mixture was poured into the bowl with a stick
placed in the centre which functioned as a handle once the resin cooled and hardened. The bowl was now ready for decoration.

Horizontal lines were drawn onto the surface of the silver first with a compass and then with a graver to delineate the various areas of decoration. The silversmith then divided the surface into sections for figures. Next, the ornament at the borders and the base of the bowl were drawn on in pencil then traced with a graver. Once the entire pattern was drawn, the first embossing was carried out, beginning the process whereby the principal figures would eventually be rendered in high relief. All of the areas to be lowered were now punched inwards, forcing out those elements which were to be in relief, the resin absorbing shock and preventing the silver from cracking.

Once the first embossing was completed, the resin was heated and poured out and the parts of the decoration intended for high relief were punched outwards from the inside. This punching process was performed two or three times, with repeated annealing ensuring the integrity of the silver. Now ready for finishing, the bowl was again filled with resin and the edges of the embossed pattern defined before the decoration was chased and carved to achieve such fine details as facial features, feathers, jewellery and other minutiae. The completed piece was heated once more before being boiled in a solution of alum, a cleaning agent, from which it emerged matt white. Finally, the piece was washed in water and burnished.

Pierced decoration was common in Burmese silver and was achieved by removing the areas around the figures and foliage with a sharp chisel. A plain polished silver liner was then inserted behind the piercing to achieve a lace-like effect, an effect which also appears in wood and ivory carving from this period.

The ancient “lost wax” (*cire perdu*) metal casting technique was well known to Burmese silversmiths. They prac-
ticed the art with great skill, producing small figures like dancers or peacocks designed to support menu cards or candles, and decorative statuettes of sprites and mythical figures which became feet, spouts and handles of teapots and other tea accessories, the finials of spoons or the scabbard of a dagger. The casting process involved the making of a highly detailed model using a composition of two parts beeswax to one part resin. The model was coated with a layer of fine clay which had been well kneaded and mixed with minced straw. This was in turn thickly covered with ordinary clay. The mould was then baked in the fire until the wax ran out of a hole intended for this purpose and the clay hardened to brick-like firmness. Molten silver was then poured in through the hole. Once the silver cooled, the mould was broken to reveal the silver casting which was then carved, chased and corrected to a finely detailed finish.

**Maker’s Signatures**

Most of the silver produced in Burma was unmarked, but many pieces have a design chased into the underside of the base which functions as the maker’s signature. These designs often take the form of single animals—an elephant, peacock, tiger, deer, bird of prey or a mythological beast—or flowers.

Much of the best work is associated with the peacock, the emblem of the Royal Court. Some of the most accomplished makers, such as Maung Yin Maung of Rangoon, have been identified, mainly as a result of pieces they sent to the various international exhibitions of the period which were well documented. In the absence of those exhibitions, Burma’s virtuoso silversmiths of the period would have remained anonymous.

Heightened international interest in Burma’s silver from
Demon spoon finial

Photograph frame foot

Teapot handle

Naga (snake) cream jug handle

Demon spoon finial

Naga (snake) cream jug handle
Examples of written makers’ marks
Examples of four different chinti makers’ marks

Examples of two different peacock makers’ marks
the later 19th century encouraged local communities to take an interest in their own crafts. Suddenly, everyone in Burma, native and expatriate alike, was giving silver bowls as presents. As a result, many examples bear inscriptions on the undersides which detail the making of the bowl, and often even the day and phase of the moon at production as well as the place of manufacture, and the name of the craftsman.

**Identifying Origin**

In addition to the jewellery, bowls and betel-nut accoutrements made for the local population, every sizeable town in Burma produced silver for its expatriate community. The more prolific centres of silver production were Moulmein, Mandalay, Pegu, Prome, Rangoon, Shwegyin, Thayetmyo and the Shan States. The silversmiths of Pegu were mentioned by A.J. Page in his report on the district for the *Burma Gazetteer* of 1917 as being “justly noted for their skill”.

Two distinct types of silver work emerged from Thayetmyo. One can often be identified by cast and applied additions to the decoration—spears, *dahs* (the traditional Burmese sword-knife), figures and other ornaments—which lend pieces a unique “prickly” appearance; the other is characterised by a flat form of chasing in which practically the entire surface of an object was embellished with stylised flowers and scrolls enveloping creatures from Burmese mythology or the animals representing days of the week.

Pieces made in Rangoon during the Colonial period typically feature stylised landscapes rendered as “scales” forming the background to the figures; beakers and bowls also have a convex ridge of deeply chased flowers and scrolls near to the rim.

Mandalay silver is distinguished by the use of arches or brackets to define the scenes of decoration; there is little or no convex band below the rim, as on Rangoon-made wares. The field behind the figures is either simply rendered matt by striking with a wire brush or making innumerable little dots with a hollow-ended punch, or the background has a chased pattern creating a wallpaper effect.

**Dating**

Finely wrought silver was made in Burma long before the British arrived, and this work is a separate study. Silver of Colonial influence was produced in quantity from roughly 1870 until just before the Second World War, with the finest work dating from the period 1890–1925.

From about 1920 onward, pressures on craftsmen to work faster had a negative impact on the quality of their finished product. Later pieces were rarely signed, the undersides often appearing unfinished, with hammer marks still in evidence. Rims of bowls made after 1920 often have a separate piece of wire soldered around the inside to prevent splitting—a sure indication that the time-consuming processes of the past were being abandoned.

It is encouraging to note that silver continues to be produced today in Sagaing, across the river from modern Mandalay, particularly the nearby village of Ywahtawng. Bowls, boxes and ornaments are still being made in traditional forms using time-honoured methods for a new generation of connoisseurs.

**Further Reading**


George Watt, *Indian Art at Delhi* (catalogue), Calcutta, 1903.


Thayetmyo “flat” style, circa 1900

Mandalay beaker showing typical flat border below rim, “wallpaper” background and scene-dividing brackets

Thayetmyo “prickly” style, circa 1900

Pagan jar, signed and dated 1897