Bagyi Aung Soe (1923-1990):
Strategies for an Autonomous & Compassionate Artistic Modernity
巴基昂梭（1923-1990）:
自主藝術現代性之策略

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Abstract

Following "The Question of the Emergence of Modern Burmese Art: Kin Maung (Bank) (1908-1983) and Bagyi Aung Soe (1924-1990)" (2014) on the unevenness and plurality of the modern in twentieth-century painting in Myanmar, this essay expands on Aung Soe's assimilation and innovation of "true modernism" as defined by Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) in reaction to imperialism and colonization, and as implemented by Nandalal Bose (1882-1966) in the pedagogical program of the Viśva-Bhāratī University in Śāntiniketan. Through a selection of Aung Soe's works and writings from the 1950s to the 1980s, it investigates the strategies he adopted to formulate an artistic modernity aligned with Tagore's vision of absolute autonomy. The first part probes his constructs of the "modern," "art" and "artist" that paved the way to a Burmese and modern pictorial idiom founded upon a diversity of artistic traditions in conjunction with ancient spiritual technology. The second part examines how Buddhist thought, practice and imagery next provided him with the means to create "the most advanced of modern art" that is the sum of "all the traditions of the world," and the final part addresses the implications of this singular conception of artistic modernity with respect to his legacy.

Keywords: Modern Burmese art, Modern Southeast Asian art, Buddhist art, Śāntiniketan, Tagore

摘要

本文關於緬甸藝術家巴基昂梭 (1923-1990) 根據由拉賓德拉納特·泰戈爾 (1861-1941) 所定義，隨後由南達拉爾·鮑斯 (1882-1966) 在和平鄉的維斯瓦·巴拉迪大學所實踐的「真正的現代主義」而審驗的自主藝術現代性。首先，本文欲理解昂梭如何解釋其藝術策略中對「現代」、「藝術 」與「藝術家」的精神概念，以推敲其建立在多元的圖像傳統與古老的心靈文化技術，進而領先於國際現代藝術之藝術。本文接著探討昂梭如何通過佛教思想、修行與圖像，創立以「全世界的各個傳統」為基礎「最進步的現代藝術」的藝術風格。如此獨特的自主藝術現代性又留下了什麼樣的傳承？本文將細讀昂梭的作品與書寫，研究其在1950至1980 年代所建立的藝術風格。

關鍵字：現代緬甸藝術、現代東南亞藝術、佛教藝術、和平鄉、泰戈爾

In 1948, as Myanmar emerged a new nation following political independence from the British Empire, Bagyi Aung Soe (1923-1990) broke into the Yangonite art world with illustrations in the literary magazine Taya founded by Dagon *Taya* (1919-2013), leader of the *sa-pay-thit* (New Literature) movement and one of the country's most eminent writers.[1] Over the next four decades, as the country once known as Burma slipped from a forward-looking republic to a purportedly socialist military-ruled country whose political and economic fiasco culminated in the 8888 Uprising in 1988, Aung Soe devoted himself to formulating a pictorial idiom that would be both modern and Burmese–doggedly and as if impervious to the vicissitudes precipitated by his country's spiraling situation.[2] By the time he passed away in July 1990, two months after the country's long-awaited elections, he had created more than 6,000 works–most of which illustrations–, *and* secured his stature as the leader of modern Burmese art.[3] Yet, although he continues to be recognized today as Myanmar's leader of modern art as well as her most prolific illustrator, his art cannot be said to be representative of modern Burmese art: his signature works baptized "*manaw maheikdi dat* painting," meaning the painting of the fundamental elements through the power of intense mental concentration in Burmanized Pāli, are starkly distinct from those of fellow leading Burmese artists, such as Kin Maung (Bank) (1908-1983), U Ba Kyi (1912-2000) and Paw Oo Thet (1936-1993). In spite of the innumerable eulogies paid to him in Myanmar, there is ironically no evidence to date that his artistic vision has been understood.[4] In fact, due to their esoteric nature or origins, not even the Buddhist references found in his works are necessarily known to Buddhists in Myanmar. Given the unwontedness of Aung Soe's art and his countrymen's curious unawareness of the reasons for its distinction which they extoll nonetheless, could the inspiration of Aung

1 This essay is adapted from a presentation given at "Southeast Asia & Taiwan: Modernity & Postcolonial Manifestations in Visual Art," organized by and held at Taipei Fine Arts Museum on 21 November 2015. Following "The Question of the Emergence of Modern Burmese Art: Kin Maung (Bank) (1908-1983) and Bagyi Aung Soe (1924-1990)" on the unevenness and plurality of the modern in twentieth-century painting in Myanmar, which was published in *Modern Art* in 2014, it shifts the focus to Aung Soe's singular artistic model with an emphasis on the means that facilitated its articulation. In many ways, it revisits, redresses and expands some of the arguments made in the first academic paper published on Aung Soe more than a decade ago (See Ker, 2005/2006). On Aung Soe's year of birth, there has been much debate on whether it should be 1923 or 1924, with most sources in Myanmar citing the latter. However, based on the fact that Aung Soe affirmed that he was born on 9 December on a Sunday, he had to be born in 1923 and not 1924.

2 In this essay, the word "Burmese" is used to mean the language, culture or people of Myanmar, instead of "Myanmar" whose spelling is undifferentiated from the country's name. John Okell's system of romanisation is referenced for the transliteration of Burmese words, with the exception of names and titles.

3 There are currently more than 6,000 documented illustrations and original works by Aung Soe and counting. To view some of these illustrations, see Ker, 2016.

4 For a survey of Burmese painting in the twentieth century, see Ranard, 2009. For writings on and by Aung Soe, see Ker, 2016.

Soe's vision for modern art and its arsenal of strategies be located beyond Myanmar and hence its relative obscurity in the country?

Based on Aung Soe's illustrations, it was only from 1952 onwards, after his studies at the Viśva-Bhāratī University in Śāntiniketan, Rabindranath Tagore's (1861-1941) ashram-turned-university in India, that he conducted concerted research into pictorial references beyond modern Western models to include Asian art forms, especially Burmese ones.[5] From this newfound interest would evolve his signature *manaw maheikdi dat* painting, which he qualified as the sum of "all the traditions of the world" and "the most advanced of modern art".[6] The fact that Aung Soe reminisced and wrote about his experiences and teachers at Śāntiniketan throughout his life, and regularly signed his works "Shantiniketan" more than thirty years later in the 1980s, the import of his Indian *alma mater* with respect to his artistic modernity–to which there was no parallel in Myanmar–is not to be underestimated (Fig. 1). To discern the strategies he adopted to nurture a distinctive modern artistic idiom against the context of post–colonial Myanmar's conflation of modernization and westernization, it is hence crucial to make sense of Tagore's definition of "true modernism" and the corresponding pentatonic pedagogical program devised by Nandalal Bose (1882-1966), the polymath's right-hand man, its director and Aung Soe's guru, which was implemented at the Kalā Bhavana, Śāntiniketan's art school. Given that there is no known competing blueprint for Aung Soe's version of a modern Burmese art, Śāntiniketan's teachings were his roadmap: the finger pointing to the moon according to which the artist had to find his way. This essay next throws light on the ways in which Buddhist thought, practice and imagery ultimately provided Aung Soe with the means to accomplish–and expand on–Śāntiniketan's instructions on "true modernism" in artistic practice through *manaw maheikdi dat* painting. To conclude, with respect to Aung Soe's legacy, this essay addresses some of the implications of his methods' disregard for many a convention of allegedly "international" frameworks of art assumed to be universal.

Both Aung Soe's writings and works of art will be referenced in this essay: articles

5 To see examples of Aung Soe's illustrations, see Ker, 2016.

6 Bagyi Aung Soe, written communication with Bagyi Lynn Wunna and Sonny Nyein, c. 1985.

Fig. 1
Bagyi Aung Soe
Untitled (Cover for *Atway Amyin Magazine*)
August 1986
Media and dimensions of original work unknown
Photographer: Yin Ker

published in literary magazines and written exchanges with friends and family, as well as original works and printed illustrations.[7] The reasons for taking into consideration illustrations in any study of Aung Soe's oeuvre are manifold.[8] Firstly, he rarely dated

7 As Aung Soe had difficulty hearing towards the end of his life, he communicated by writing, thus bequeathing us with a sizeable quantity of materials with which to reconstitute his voice and trace his thought processes. For examples of articles by Aung Soe, see Ker, 2016.

8 On the significance of illustration in Aung Soe's practice, see Ker, 2008.

his works, making illustration the only reliable way of dating them according to their date of publication. Secondly, with the exception of his sojourn in India, he illustrated consistently throughout his entire career between 1948 and 1990. As such, illustration becomes the art historian's primary resource for studying his artistic evolution. There is otherwise inadequate examples of his early works prior to the 1980s. The significance of illustration moreover extends to twentieth-century Burmese artistic creation–an unexplored research angle with immense potential with regard to the writing of modern Burmese art history. Contrary to Western art's emphasis on specialization and its hierarchization of fine and commercial arts, an artist's versatility and ease in moving from one style and medium to another were held in high esteem by the Burmese. In other words, an artist that illustrated and worked in an array of styles and techniques was likely to be perceived as more outstanding. The fact that the art market in Myanmar before 1990 was virtually inexistent only boosted illustration's popularity amongst artists, since it not only promised greater renown, but was also a source of income. As such, almost all Burmese artists illustrated at some point of their career. For avant-garde artists like Aung Soe whose works did not find favor with the socialist government and had slim chances of exhibiting in public exhibitions organized by the authorities, illustration was clearly *the* site of presenting and making known their artistic experimentations.

Tagore's "true modernism" by way of Bose's pentatonic pedagogical program

Tagore the first Asian Nobel laureate exerted international influence and was three times in Yangon in 1919, 1924 and 1927.[9] In 1901 in Bengal, he founded an ashram named Śāntiniketan meaning "the abode of peace" in Sanskrit, which grew to become the Viśva-Bhāratī University. Living up to its name meaning "where the world roosts in one nest", it was the hub of intellectuals and artists from all over the world: Okakura Kakuzō (1862-1913), Amanda Coomasrawamy (1877-1947), Xu Beihong (1895-1953) and Stella

9 On Tagore in Myanmar, see Bhattacharya, 2006.

Kramrisch (1896-1993), for example.[10] At this school, in retaliation for what he denounced as the utilitarian aims of the British education system, Tagore sought to nurture men and women young and old "gathered for the highest end of life […] in the peace of nature".[11] Art was to play a central role. Across the Bay of Bengal in Myanmar, intelligentsia who were his ardent admirers were spurred on by his vision and school, as well as the Bengal School of Art's rejuvenation of Indian painting through classical Indian lore and folk art and Far Eastern ink painting.[12] Revered writers and esteemed exponents of the khit-san (testing the times) literary movement, Zawgyi (U Thein Han) (1908-1990) and Min Thu Wun (U Wun) (1909-2004), notably, aspired for a similar revival of traditional Burmese art, which according to the former in 1958, remained on the whole "a rather deadly monotony of theme [comprising of] innumerable pagodas, innumerable huts, an endless series of river and village scenes."[13] Nominators of Aung Soe for the Indian Government scholarship to study in Śāntiniketan in 1951, the mandate they placed on the twenty-seven-year-old's shoulders was clear: to rejuvenate Burmese art through the teachings and ethos of Śāntiniketan, Tagore's cherished brainchild.[14] It is noteworthy that the urgency to restore Burmese art was first foregrounded by Myanmar's intellectuals and not anyone from the art world.[15]

What might Aung Soe have learnt at Śāntiniketan? In his lectures at the Imperial University and the Keio Gijuku University in Japan in 1916, Tagore argued the following:

> "[…] modernizing is a mere affectation of modernism, just as affectation of poesy is poetizing. It is nothing but mimicry, only affectation is louder than the original, and it is too literal. One must bear in mind, that those who have the true modern spirit need not modernize, just as those who are truly brave are not braggarts. Modernism

10 On the beginnings of Śāntiniketan, see *Śāntiniketan: 1901-1951, 1986.* On the international intellectuals and artists at Śāntiniketan, see Bose, 1999, p. 14; Kumar, 1997, unpaginated; Nercam, 2005, p. 73.

11 See *Śāntiniketan*: 1901-1951, 1986, p. 11

12 Evidence of Tagore's influence on Burmese intellectuals lives on in the form of a library named after Śāntiniketan set up by writer U Paragu (1921-2011) in Yangon.

13 Thein Han, 1958, p. 45.

14 See Min Thu Wun, c. 1991.

15 Scholarship on the intersections of the artistic and literary worlds in Myanmar and the region remains nascent. Its development is crucial to advancing the history of modern art in this part of the world.

> is not in the dress of the Europeans; or in the hideous structures, where their children are interned when they take their lessons; or in the square houses with flat straight wall-surfaces, pierced with parallel lines of windows, where these people are caged in their lifetime; certainly modernism is not in their ladies' bonnets, carrying on them loads of incongruities. These are not modern, but merely European. True modernism is freedom of mind, not slavery of taste. It is independence of thought and action, not tutelage under European schoolmasters. It is science, but not its wrong application in life, a mere imitation of our science teachers who reduce it into a superstition absurdly invoking its aid for all impossible purposes."[16]

What merits emphasis is his message that modernism must be made distinct from the effects of Western culture, and that modernization and westernization are not identical processes because "true modernism is freedom of mind, not slavery of taste;" it is the "independence of thought and action, not tutelage under European schoolmasters." A humanist championing spiritual, intellectual and cultural autonomy–not a nationalist or pan-Asianist entertaining the naïve assumption that political independence from colonial rule presented the solution to all ills–, Tagore argued for the relativization of the Western model, which should not be misconstrued as its demonization. While Aung Soe definitely did not meet him, since he had passed away in 1941, ten years before the young artist arrived in Śāntiniketan, and it is not known if the students of Kalā Bhavana had access to a transcript of this speech, there is little doubt that this vision of "true modernism" would have been scrupulously transmitted by Bose and pervaded all aspects of student life. Indeed, one of the chief effects of the education received in India on Aung Soe was the relativization of Western art: western art as one amidst myriads of art forms from different parts of the world; it is neither superior nor inferior. By extension, a modern artist's merit is not defined by his or her capacity to emulate Western art or to situate himself or herself within its discourses; artworks deemed "modern" on the basis of stylistic affinities with Western modernist idioms are not necessarily so.

The framework providing Bose with the elements to design a pedagogical program

16 Tagore, 1917, pp. 93-94.

serving the transmission of Tagore's definition of the modern was Okakura's thesis on the interdependence of nature, tradition and originality in good art:

> "For Total development, Art Needs Nature, Tradition and Originality, all three. Without the knowledge of Nature a work of art tends to be weak and contrived; without an understanding of Tradition, static and immature, but even with all these if it does not have any contribution of the artist's own, it does not come to life. Conversely, if it draws only on Nature, it is imitative; only on Tradition, craftsmanly; only on Originality, neurotic." [17]

In underscoring the artist's immediate environments both cultural and natural, and shifting the focus from technical and stylistic issues to the fundamentals of artistic creation that are nature, tradition and originality, the clerkly concepts and isms of a modern art shaped by an exclusively European experience and agenda were circumvented. Tradition was engaged as a living one, rather than a body of monolithic and invariable conventions; nature was observed in her manner of operation, not reduced to naturalism or stylization; originality is understood as the expression of individual sensibility that is also the motivating factor. Building on this triad whose elements Bose sought to balance out in a student's work, he added technical and stylistic experimentation and versatility as the fourth step and social responsibility as the fifth.[18] Indeed, the "freedom of mind" and "independence of thought and action" that are the defining characteristics of Tagore's vision of autonomous artistic modernity can only be effective when aligned with ethics such as discipline and moral obligation. Although other teaching staffs were free to pursue their own artistic objective–another of Aung Soe's teacher, Ramkinkar Baij (1906-1980), for example, was relatively inclined towards modern Western art–, Bose's program presided.[19] It was not adventitious that Aung Soe dedicated an entire article to Bose in *From Tradition to Modernity* (1978), an anthology of his own writings; there is no doubt that the Indian guru's vision played a paramount role in the formulation of his artistic

17 Bose, 1999, pp. 44-45.

18 On Bose's pedagogical programme, see Subramanyan, 1982, p 11.

19 On Baij and examples of his work, see for example, Ramachandran, 2012.

consciousness.[20]

Specifically, how might Bose's strategies have served Aung Soe's mandate? We begin with tradition, the first criterion. Four other artists from Southeast Asia are known to have studied in Śāntiniketan before the government took over the university in 1951: Fua Haribhitak (1910-1993) from Thailand, and Rusli (1916-2005), Affandi (1907-1990) and his daughter Kartika (1934-) from Indonesia; Aung Soe was the last.[21] Indonesian artist Rusli, the first to be there, related that he was urged by Bose to return to Java to study the Borobudur; Thai artist Haribhitak who was there during the Second World War systematically studied classical Thai architecture, sculpture and painting after returning to Bangkok and became celebrated for his restorations of old mural paintings.[22] It is not impossible that Aung Soe received similar instructions, for immediately after returning to Yangon, in parallel to experimenting on pictorial idioms from all over the world, he travelled throughout Myanmar to study indigenous art forms and made a large number of sketches and illustrations featuring traditional Burmese art. Given that Aung Soe is not known to have expressed interest in traditional Asian arts prior to his studies under Śāntiniketan, there is every reason to infer that it was Bose that inducted him into the brilliance of classical and folk art back home–just as it was for his fellow alumni.[23] Siva Kumar, to whom we owe much of our understanding of Śāntiniketan and her protagonists, explained that traditional art following decolonization was a "means to a new self-assertion", and it is in this light that Aung Soe's engagement with traditional Burmese art forms must be understood and not be confused with a nationalist agenda.[24]

The second step of Bose's strategy on nature, specifically with respect to the pictorial representation of one's natural environment, likewise played a momentous role in Aung Soe's art. The Burmese artist recounted that when he first arrived in Śāntiniketan, his

20 See Aung Soe, 1978, pp. 95-116.

21 On Haribhitak, see Boosarakumwadi, 2010; on Affandi, see Sumichan, 2007. There is to date no known substantial monograph on Rusli.

22 Sandhu, Jasdeep. Personal interview. August 2000. For Haribhitak's works, see Boosarakumwadi, 2010, figs. 62-213.

23 Satyajit Ray's confession best articulates the experience of this transformation: "Śāntiniketan opened my eyes for the first time to the splendors of Indian and Far Eastern art. Until then I was completely under the sway of Western art, music and literature. Śāntiniketan made me the combined product of East and West that I am." Sen, 2004, p. 204.

24 Kumar, 1991, p. 38.

drawings of the bamboo plant were frowned upon by his teacher time and again–both when he drew it based on what he remembered of the plant's form without studying it, and when he made detailed botanical drawings of it. It was not until he studied the plant in detail, acquired an intimate understanding of its form and life force, and made a drawing based on this understanding that he received the approval of his teacher.[25] What this anecdote confirms is Aung Soe's adoption of Bose's approach to picturing his physical environment, which was partly inspired by ancient Far Eastern ink painting.[26] Emphasis was placed on the expression of the inner character in lieu of superficial structural variety, on mind rather than matter. Relinquishing the excellent skills he possessed in portraiture and figure-drawing, Aung Soe thus turned his attention to what Bose referred to as the universal "life rhythm" that is "the reality whose vitality has generated the whole world and all its forms, actual and imaginary, and pulsates within them."[27] He would have been simultaneously initiated to the classical Indian method of establishing visual correspondences (Sanskrit: *sādṛiśyabodha*) between forms in nature, and the principle of ornamentation and visual rhythm, on which he would conduct extensive experimentations and apply to innovate classical Burmese designs (Fig. 2).[28] These concepts, methods and techniques of making sense of and evoking, if not representing, the physical environment–or rather, its inner character–most likely ushered in a vision of art that transcended modern Western art's binary opposing figuration and abstraction, and contributed to his growing disinterest in the world of appearances in favor of nature's most fundamental constituents referred to as "*dat*" in *manaw maheikdi dat* painting.

On the awakening of one's aesthetic sensibilities with the aim of forging a distinct vision and the emphasis on technical and stylistic versatility, these third and fourth steps must be understood in relation to Bose's conception of art. They were what propelled Aung Soe's studies of multiple pictorial traditions: Japanese woodblock prints, classical Burmese painting, Egyptian reliefs, surrealism, abstract expressionism, as well as scripts

25 Zaw Hein, 1998, p. 14.

26 For examples of Bose's studies of ink painting, see *Rhythms of India: the Art of Nandalal Bose,* 2008, pp. 206-222. On Bose's instructions on making art in general, see Bose, 1999.

27 See Bose, 1999, p. 18.

28 On *sādṛiśyabodha,* see Tagore, 1914; ibid., pp. 28-29.

Fig. 2
Bagyi Aung Soe
Untitled (Illustration for *Shumawa* Magazine)
April 1986
Media and dimensions of original work unknown
Photographer: Yin Ker

and alphabets.[29] Inspired by Coomaraswamy, Bose conceived "art" first and foremost in relation to language: "a connected spectrum of art and language", whereby each pictorial tradition is believed to possess a distinct linguistic rationale.[30] The panorama of traditional arts is thus seen "as levels of a visual language linked to a hierarchy of functions and communicational needs" understood in terms of their linguistic properties and communicational potential rather than mere styles reduced to formal effects as an end in themselves.[31] The artist's duty would be to master "the running correspondence between art language and art expression at the different levels", so as to be able to face

29 For examples of these works, see Ker, 2016.

30 See Kumar, 1997, unpaginated. This approach to art as language is not to be confused with conceptual art's association between language and art in the 1970s.

31 *Ibid.*

each situation creatively without being limited by one's psychic subjectivity or obsessed with stylistic self-expression.[32] In the image of the primordial artist-cum-inventor of the ancient world moving freely from one activity to another, versatility was lauded–contrary to Western art's preoccupation with specialization–, and the artist enhanced his or her linguistic versatility by training in crafts like batik and leatherwork too.[33] There was nothing too plebeian, and by invalidating the dichotomies of high versus low art, fine versus commercial art, the East versus the West, as well as the compartmentalization of "art" according to nation, period, movement or style, this approach allowed the artist to translate into practice the all-embracing and timeless tenor of Tagore's vision of modernity. Indeed, it was emancipation from the Western canon's inapposite biases that facilitated Aung Soe's immersion in the wealth of the world's pictorial traditions throughout the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s, and eventually, his formulation of the polyphonic pictorial idiom that is *manaw maheikdi dat* painting.

Of the five points in Nandalal's program, the first four were adapted by Aung Soe to organize his illustrations gathered in the anthology titled *Poetry Without Words* (1978): "Traditional Burmese Civilization", "Drawings of Nature", "Heartbroken" and "New [or Modern] Painting".[34] The fifth and last point was doubtlessly the motivation behind *From Tradition to Modernity* published in the same year. In it, Aung Soe declared:

> "If this book has done its bit towards helping people, who have lives so much more noble than mine, so that they march more strongly towards a better society, then I care not for all that I have given."[35]

This last criterion of Bose on social responsibility can be understood as a means to rein in the danger of the ego misconstruing the ideal of "freedom of mind" and "independence of thought and action". It is an example of how Śāntiniketan's, as well as Aung Soe's, model of artistic modernity partakes of a keenly ethical and socially conscious

32 See Kumar, 1991, p. 37.

33 For an overview of the ancient traditions of the Indian "craftsman" or "artist" that were Bose's point of reference, see Kramrisch, 1958.

34 See Aung Soe, 1993.

35 See Aung Soe, 1978, pp. 217-222.

worldview. In addition to pursuing the joy of creation, being an artist meant benefitting others with one's art too; empathy and compassion for one's fellow human beings were part of an artist's makeup.

Patently, both *Poetry Without Words* and *From Tradition to Modernity* were homages paid to the life-changing education that Aung Soe received in Śāntiniketan. Published towards the end of the 1970s on the threshold of his signature idiom manaw maheikdi dat painting, they can be understood as concluding statements on the twenty-seven years of his profound engagement with Śāntiniketan's teachings aimed at bringing forth art that would be harmonized with the spirit of one's space and time without being subservient to the Western model or falling victim to any of the many forms of fundamentalism that threatening humanity. To be sure, Bose's pentatonic program was nothing less than the guiding principle of Aung Soe's practice and his key to articulating an artistic modernity on his own terms. It would seem that for decades following his Indian sojourn, in a country whose prospects grew dimmer by the year and amidst Burmese artists ignorant of Tagore's take on the modern with whom he could share no dialogue on this mission, Bose's five-pronged plan of action was his principal refuge and subject of assiduous meditation.

Manaw maheikdi dat painting: "the most advanced of modern art" by way of "all the traditions of the world" and ancient spiritual technology

On the cover of the August issue of *Moway* magazine from 1979 is a rendition of Rāma chasing the golden deer, Myanmar's favorite episode from the Indian epic of the Rāmāyaṇa and a recurrent theme in Aung Soe's early works (Fig. 3). In interweaving classical Burmese drawing, collage and the spontaneous application of vibrant paint in the background, it celebrates an eclectic array of media and expression, and rejects the authority of any single Western pictorial mode that is customary in modern art in Myanmar. Indeed, situated at the end of Aung Soe's three decades of companionless investigation into the semiotic possibilities and linguistic rationales of a wide spectrum of pictorial traditions, and on the threshold of *manaw maheikdi dat* painting deploying

Fig. 3
Bagyi Aung Soe
Untitled (Cover for *Moway* Magazine)
August 1979
Media and dimensions of original work unknown
Photographer: Yin Ker

Buddhist spiritual imagery and technology, this illustration can be seen as a landmark in Aung Soe's oeuvre. What ensued were diminished stylistic citations in favor of a new iconography made up of signs and symbols drawn from contexts and bodies of knowledge both ancient and modern, whose expression essentially relied on visual rhythm through the repetition of forms, chromatic symphony or concomitant lines. Increasingly, the descriptive, the symbolic and the rhythmic overlap as can be seen in a book cover from 1980 (Fig. 4).

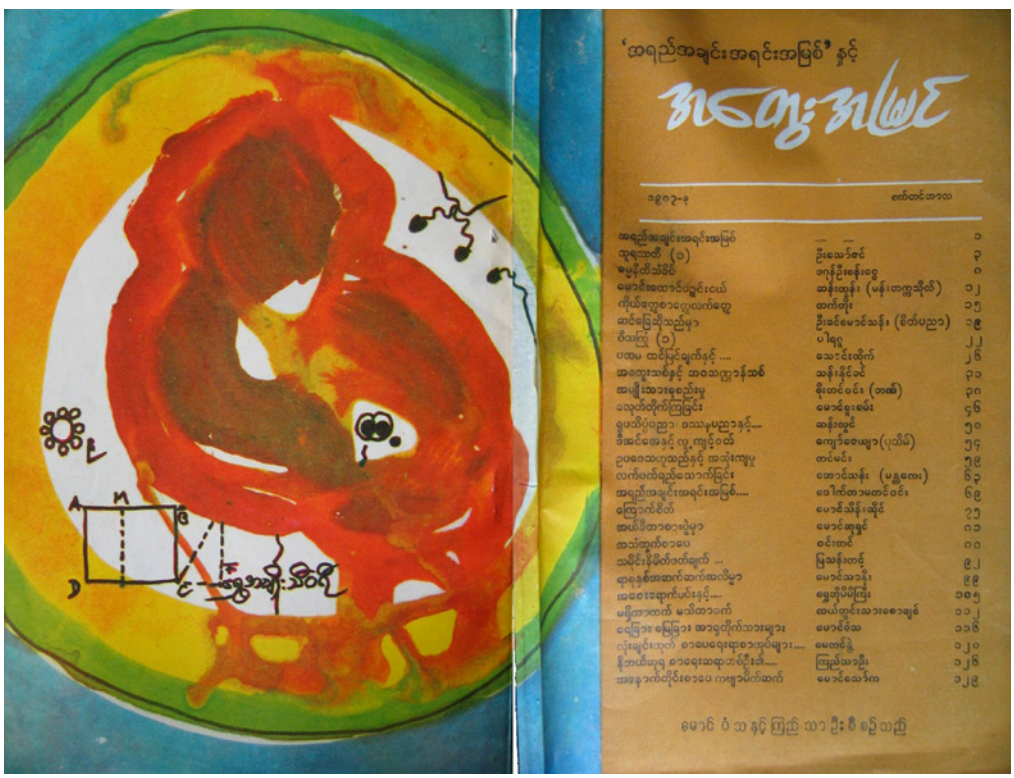
This strategy of synthesis and consilience is salient in subsequent m*anaw maheikdi dat* painting throughout the 1980s. Concepts and forms from different spheres and whose modes of representation are usually distinct coalesce within a single frame: an atom

floating inside a tree, a statistical graph mapping existence's inconstancy as conceived through the lenses of Buddhist philosophy and terminology, an embryo superposed with the golden rectangle and a Burmese inscription meaning the golden number, a female silhouette dancing inside a swirling ribbon against a ground of traditional Burmese designs, and an apple paired with the sun and the moon and bearing inscriptions meaning

Fig. 4
Bagyi Aung Soe
Untitled (Book cover)
1980
Media and dimensions of original work unknown
Image courtesy of U Sonny Nyein

Fig. 5
Bagyi Aung Soe
Untitled (Illustration for *Myawadi* Magazine)
1988
Media and dimensions of original work unknown
Photographer: Yin Ker

Fig. 6
Bagyi Aung Soe
Untitled (Cover for *Atway Amyin* Magazine)
September 1987
Media and dimensions of original work unknown
Photographer: Yin Ker



the Buddhist Threefold Training of virtue, concentration and wisdom (Pāli: *sila, samādhi, paññā*), for example (Figs. 5 and 6). While this innovatory pictorial idiom's backbone remained the spiritual methods and imagery of Buddhism–whose range from Myanmar's Theravāda tradition to Japanese Zen and Tibetan tantra is mind-boggling to begin with–, it assimilated bodies of knowledge ranging from the natural sciences to poetry, from prehistory to the contemporary, from the Himalayas to Yangon. On the one hand are esoteric formulae, symbols and diagrams distilled from Buddhist milieux of all its three schools (Theravāda, Mahāyāna, Vajrayāna); on the other hand are those extracted from physics, chemistry, geometry and mathematics (Fig. 7). The esoteric ancient and the secular modern conjoin, as is the case of the formula "1+2=1" which embodies the essence

Fig. 7
Bagyi Aung Soe
Untitled (Illustration for *Myawadi* Magazine)
June 1988
Media and dimensions of original work unknown
Photographer: Yin Ker

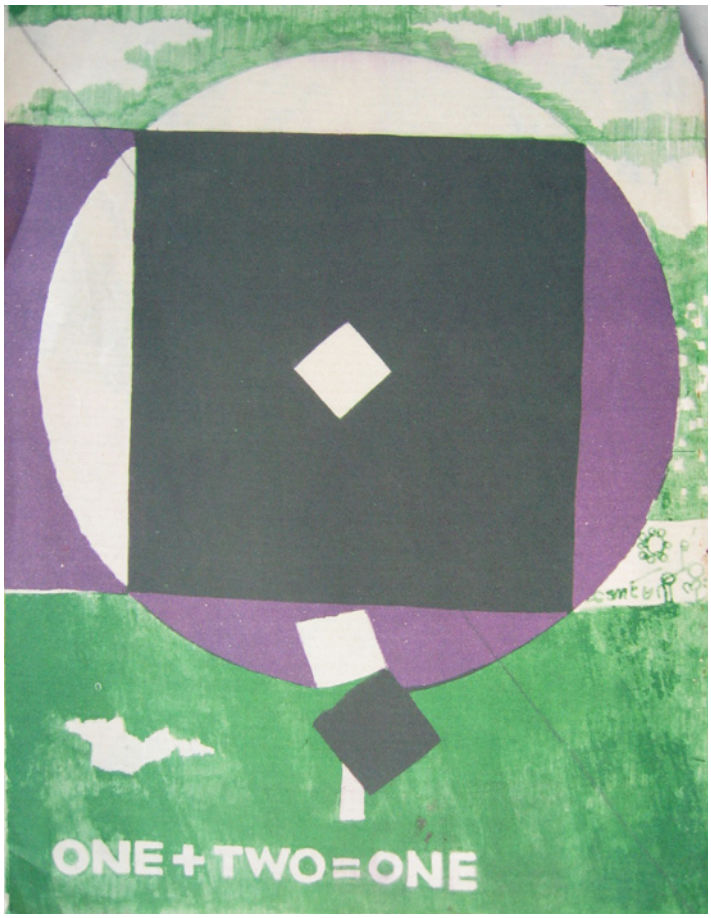


Fig. 8
Bagyi Aung Soe
Untitled (Cover for *Atway Amyin* Magazine)
May 1988
Media and dimensions of original work unknown
Photographer: Yin Ker

of tantric thought and practice using the means of mathematical symbols (Fig. 8). Even the antithesis between the sensual and the ascetic is dissolved (Fig. 9).

While *manaw maheikdi dat* painting's embodiment of "all the traditions of the world"–"traditions" in the sense of established methods of knowledge and image-making, as well as traditions of the past–is writ large in its synthesis of diverse pictorial, intellectual and spiritual traditions, it is less evident how this makes it "the most advanced of modern art". To comprehend how Aung Soe reasoned that an art founded upon the inherited or "tradition"–a notion that is generally perceived as incompatible with the modern–might transcend the Abrahamic concept of time as linear and directional along with the historical framework of the modern, and thereby is not only modern but ahead of it, it is suitable to consider his understanding of tradition and modernity, which he also

Fig. 9
Bagyi Aung Soe
Untitled (Illustration for *Myawadi* Magazine)
November 1988
Media and dimensions of original work unknown
Photographer: Yin Ker

Fig. 10
Bagyi Aung Soe
Untitled (Illustration for *Myawadi* Magazine)
1988
Media and dimensions of original work unknown
Photographer: Yin Ker

referred to as simply the old and the new respectively.[36] He argued in *From Tradition to Modernity*:

> "Nature will choose the good traditions out of the old, and sincerity and truth out of

36 In Burmese, the word for "new", "*thit*", is commonly used to mean the modern.

> the new [modern]. Not everything old is decadent, not everything new [modern] is revolutionary. We have to search for the soul in the old, and foster the progress of the new [modern]." [37]

A clearer understanding of Aung Soe's unusual point of view can be derived from his guru Bose's analogy of the seed:

> "Tradition is the outer shell of the seed that holds the embryo of new growth; this shell protects the embryo from being destroyed by heat or rain or violence. When it is intact it will come out, break open even this hard shell. Similarly in art, this inner embryo should have the power enough to break tradition open. Then only will new art emerge." [38]

Here, the new or modern and the existing, old or traditional are conceived as forces and conditions engaged in a synergetic and evolving relationship. They complement each other; a binary is spurious. There is hence no contradiction between the practice of modern art and the interiorization of classical art forms, ancient knowledge, spiritual practice and the different techniques and tools of mental cultivation employed with the aim of enhancing mental concentration and bringing about a spiritual transformation, such as meditation, mantras, yantras and maṇḍalas from and beyond the local Burmese spiritual landscape, which Aung Soe made the cornerstone of *manaw maheikdi dat* painting (Figs. 5-10). Indeed, in and on Aung Soe's own terms, it is precisely *manaw maheikdi dat* painting's recourse to ancient spiritual technology that this art embodying "all the traditions of the world" is "the most advanced of modern art": these magical formulae, numerals, letters of alphabet and diagrams making up its vocabulary transcend all historical constructs of time, as well as all known models of modern Western art conditioned by historical time, because they are of a nature beyond this modern secular world resting upon a linear timeline. Aung Soe wrote:

> "There is nothing extraordinary. They [ancient spiritual technology] have existed

37 Aung Soe, 1978, pp. 217-222.

38 Subramanyan, 1982, p. 20.

> since a long time. […] We are in the electronic and digital age, but the cabalistic runes and all this esoteric knowledge are making a comeback and are even ahead of our times. This is the nature of [*manaw maheikdi dat*] painting transcending consciousness." [39]

In all likelihood, he would agree with Claude Lévi-Strauss that what is referred to as "magic" is an entirely well-articulated system and mode of acquiring knowledge that is independent from and parallel to science, and "one deprives oneself of all means of understanding magical thought if one tries to reduce it to a moment or stage in technical and scientific evolution".[40] Having disentangled these instruments of spiritual technology whose mechanisms and manner of operation are universal from the modern framing of "superstition" and restored them as equal to modern science, Aung Soe made them the self-regenerating dynamo of *manaw maheikdi dat* painting, "the most advanced of modern art" so advanced that it is beyond many audiences. In principle at least, they confer a modernity of an atemporal dimension to his art, which he reasoned using Buddhist terminology:

> "MODERN ART stops when there is no progress made. But painting with mental energy [*manaw maheikdi*] progresses. MODERN ART from the past is not like the present one. This concept coincides with the law of change [Pali: *anicca*]; whenever the new comes into being, the old has to disappear." [41]

An exposition of what Aung Soe meant by "painting with mental energy [*manaw maheikdi*]"–the key ingredient to his "most advanced of modern art"–can be found on the back of a felt-tip pen drawing of a seated Buddha from around 1985. He wrote: "I do not paint matter; I paint the mind."[42] To do so, it was imperative that he meditated to maintain if not increase his level of concentration and to attain the higher levels of mental absorption, making meditation both the path and the goal of his artistic practice–

39 Bagyi Aung Soe, written communication with unknown interlocutor, c. 1985. Collection of Gajah Gallery, Singapore.

40 See Lévi-Strauss, 1966, p. 13.

41 Bagyi Aung Soe, oral communication with Lynn Wunna, c. 1987. Collection of Lynn Wunna.

42 Collection of Gajah Gallery, Singapore.

something he foregrounded time and again in his writings and written communications.[43] Although not as plainly apparent as the mantras and yantras, it is omnipresent in his works: tightly packed parallel short lines in vibrant hues of felt-tip pen which iterate the rising and falling of the breath that is the object of observation in Myanmar's most widespread technique of insight or vipassana meditation, known as "mindfulness of breathing" or ānāpānasati in Pāli (Figs. 5, 7 and 8). These rhythmic lines similarly echo the oscillatory patterns of brain waves as recorded by electroencephalography. Integral to the fabrication process of manaw maheikdi dat painting, at the end of which–as Aung Soe claimed on the back of the same drawing–mental defilements like anger and greed are said to transform into positive mental factors, it corresponds to a psycho-spiritual transformation leading to the contemplation of ultimate Buddhist truths such as the Three Marks of Existence of Impermanence, Suffering and Non-self (Pāli: *anicca, dukkha, anattā*), which Aung Soe sought to render manifest in the consciousness of both himself and the viewer looking at his art. Deemed the principal means of inducing wholesome states of mind such as wisdom and compassion in Buddhist practice, meditation's central role in Aung Soe's exercise of artistic modernity is perhaps to be expected: his alma mater Śāntiniketan was conceived as an "ashram where men have gathered for the highest end of life" after all.[44]

An autonomy in exile?

Aung Soe's adherence to Tagore's vision of artistic autonomy freed from the hegemony of the West was absolute. Whenever his countrymen likened him to Picasso, he expressed fury:

> "When someone calls me the Burmese version of Picasso, it really hurts. I would rather be hit in the face. To be compared to Picasso is the worst insult."[45]

No doubt, some of Aung Soe's works, especially the earlier illustrations from the

43 See for example, Aung Soe, 1985.

44 *Śāntiniketan, 1901-1951,* 1986, p. 11.

45 Bagyi Aung Soe, written communication with Sonny Nyein, c. 1987. Collection of Sonny Nyein.

1950s, display cubist stylistic characteristics. Based on his writings and collection of printed matter, the bold strokes, flat areas of vivid colors and disregard for illusionist linear perspective observed in *manaw maheikdi dat* painting are however indebted to indigenous folk art, the Far Eastern ink tradition, Tibetan Buddhist imagery and other references closer to home–many of which were in fact nineteenth- and twentieth-century European avant-gardists' sources of inspiration–, not cubism or Picasso. This was apparently not evident for Aung Soe's audience in Myanmar and likewise for many outside the country. On the one hand, the mirage of Western art as modern art's exclusive model remains chronic; on the other hand, the habitual Eurocentric points of reference for evaluating modern art fail with respect to this exceptional pictorial idiom. Indubitably, *manaw maheikdi dat* painting's rejection of and emancipation from the dictates of the Western canon, whether in terms of expression, content, process or objective, is in consequence not without misunderstanding and even sacrifice. Already in his living, Aung Soe was exasperated that no one in Myanmar understood his art and writings published with the aim of benefitting his fellow nationals.[46] Today, more than twenty-five years after his death in 1990, there is still no evidence that *manaw maheikdi dat* painting's artistic modernity has been understood by the many who wax lyrical about his genius, but stop short at his art's content and manner of operation. In the international arena, it is uncertain if his eventual renown will be on his own terms and not at the price of being labeled "Myanmar's Picasso" and denied of an autonomous artistic identity and modernity. Clearly, if not even those whose artistic, cultural and intellectual autonomy has been compromised by imperialist agenda are awakened to the genius of Tagore's definition of "true modernism", what are the chances that Aung Soe's artistic modernity might be unencumbered by Eurocentric *modi operandi* in its discourse and evaluation?

The rigorously ethical and spiritual dimension of Aung Soe's practice emphasizing virtues like truth, sincerity and responsibility towards one's society, as well as it being a site of spiritual transformation, does not facilitate its integration into the secular materialist world either. An art intended for the cultural, if not spiritual, betterment of the masses via the platform of illustration, *manaw maheikdi dat* painting was conceived

46 See Aung Soe, 2006.

and formulated with total disregard for the art market whose role in the consecration of an artist today is incontrovertible. In spite of the more profitable prospects of selling in an art gallery, Aung Soe chose illustration over gallery spaces, using it to better disseminate his works to fellow Burmese of all social strata throughout Myanmar. Out of a sense of camaraderie with the writers and poets whose financial situation was comparable to his own, he was moreover accepting rates for illustration that were so low that no other artist would.[47] When he did peddle his works, he priced them at a mere fraction of what his peers were asking. He explained:

> "No matter how much they [his fellow Burmese] want to buy, they can't afford to spend the money, even if it is just 25/50 kyats. That's why I slashed the prices to 10 kyats. That's fair to all. I want them [the works] to reach everybody."[48]

The year he died in 1990, when he finally increased his prices to twenty-five kyats following unbridled inflation in the country, it was still approximately the equivalent of about four dozen eggs, which was less than a third of the rate for an illustration and up to twenty times less than the price of a painting sold in a gallery.[49] As an artist, Aung Soe empathized with his fellow human beings' sufferings and was concerned about their welfare. This compassionate dimension was integral to his practice and it stemmed from Śāntiniketan's holistic program aimed at remedying modern art's disconnection from local histories, culture and environment.[50] Yet, in espousing Tagore's and Bose's teachings that art should serve higher ends and that it would be "mercenary and vulgar for artists to consider painting as a market commodity", his practice of art as a calling rather than a profession alienates him from the professional art world whereby the capacity for compassion or spiritual attainment is not a benchmark for measuring artistic excellence at all.

Aung Soe's choice of media-"poor" fragile materials of ink and felt-tip pen on paper–

47 Bagyi Aung Soe, written communication with Sonny Nyein, c. 1985. Collection of Sonny Nyein.

48 Bagyi Aung Soe, written communication, c. 1987. Collection of Maung Maung Soe, Bagyieain Foundation

49 Lin Lei Lei Tun, Ma Thanegi and Sonny Nyein, written communication with Yin Ker, November 2005.

50 Kowshik, 1980, p. 77.

further relegates his art to a no man's land beyond the walls of modern institutions of art. From the gallery's and museum's point of view, manaw maheikdi dat painting is neither exactly a modern painting in oil or acrylic, nor a contemporary installation made of ephemeral materials; it is neither this nor that. It is undeniable that there was a shortage of quality art materials in socialist Myanmar, but Aung Soe's rejection of professional imported Western art materials was ideological and artistic too. In an article titled "New Forms of the Twentieth Century", he extolled the master of modern Japanese painting Inshō Dōmoto's eschewal of imported paint materials like oil and watercolor paints in favor of local rice paper, inks and mineral-based paints, much like his own Indian guru who shunned oil and acrylic out of consideration for students from modest households, amongst other reasons.[51] Against the backdrop of his and his country's precarious financial situation, painting within one's means was certainly a more self-respecting as well as respectful stance towards one's society. It was also an assertion of autonomy as well as integrity. Arguably, the highly disintegrative body of his art due to the fragility of the paper and felt-tip pen is moreover an embodiment of the Buddhist ultimate truth of impermanence. Through the fading colors, his art performs the Buddha's teachings on the law of *anicca*.

Akin to what André Leroi-Gourhan refers to as "mythograms […] in which the eye and the intelligence are liberated from the rectilinear progress of the written text in his study of pre-alphabetic expressions", the esoteric signs, symbols and diagrams of manaw maheikdi dat painting engage with cognition in ways that are quite distant from the habitual thought processes of today.[52] Partaking in premodern worldviews whereby logic is differently conceived and applied, they appeal for a psychodynamic and philosophical enquiry for which there is no empirical proof. As such, the challenge of discoursing intelligently on their representation and reception against the context of modern art is multiplied with no certainty of a satisfactory resolution. To begin with, albeit manaw maheikdi dat painting's Buddhist content and process, it does not conform to art history's framework for Buddhist art. It cannot be reduced to a mere icon, aniconic symbol or visual narrative of the Buddha, his last or previous lives, and presents problematics

51 See Aung Soe, 1978, pp. 171-177.

52 See Leroi-Gourhan, 1993, p. 263

that are distinct from those of conventional Buddhist art found in museums today.[53] In fact, it being a means of spiritual transformation, rather than an end in itself, defies the fundamentals of art history revolving around style and iconography. Until the historiography of Buddhist art history is revisited, the construct of "Buddhist art" revised and a more rigorous methodology for engaging the multiple lives of Buddhist images as works of art, aesthetic manifestations of devotion and faith, sites of merit-making, etc. is outlined, this aspect of *manaw maheikdi dat* painting's atemporal modernity is likely to be condemned to at least partial oblivion.

The demise of political colonization in Myanmar and the rest of Southeast Asia did not herald the end of imperialist domination in economy, culture or art. The works of Burmese artists in the second half of the twentieth century suggest that post-colonial Myanmar did not witness any stocktaking of modern art, much less its relationship with Western art. In general, Western techniques and styles and exoticized subject matter marched on unchallenged in the works of Burmese painters.[54] Hedged in by Western art's perennial hegemony and the unflagging conflation of modernization and westernization, Aung Soe demonstrated tenacity in articulating an autonomous artistic modernity based on Śāntiniketan's teachings. His strategies relying on the network of tradition, nature, originality, experimentation and responsibility towards one's society prioritized sensitivity to concerns of both the past and the present, to those of the individual as well as the collective, and most importantly, to the dynamics that connected them, hence staving off the shortsighted pursuit of any extreme. In this manner, he assimilated the artistic and spiritual traditions of his own culture and environment in tandem with scientific thinking without losing sight of the universal to create a forward-looking but not rootless art. Given the humanist dimension of this paradigm of artistic modernity inherited from Śāntiniketan, it is in addition a *compassionate* artistic modernity—one that encompasses responsibility for the well being of others and seeks to nourish the human spirit rather than to enslave it in the name of progress.

53 For two examples of critical studies exposing the contradictions of the theoretical frameworks of aniconism, the icon and visual narratives in the history of Buddhist art, see Brown, 1997; Huntington, 1990.

54 As indicated, see Ranard, 2009.

This relatively unmitigated autonomy is however not without setback. Amidst the cacophony of a so-called "postmodern" world where much collide without necessarily arriving at any point of integration or synthesis, *manaw maheikdi* dat painting's synergy of forms, modes of representation, processes and meanings pertaining to domains that are conventionally perceived as antipodal–the poetic and the scientific, the descriptive and the ornamental, the ascetic and the erotic, the old and the new, the East and the West–is as estranged as it is groundbreaking. Admittedly, ahead of their times, Aung Soe's strategies for an autonomous and artistic modernity constitue an anachronism in twentieth-century Myanmar. To bring them into the folds of a larger art historical narrative, it is perhaps by first unyoking Aung Soe's art from the colonial legacy (if that is possible at all!): nation-centric frameworks bridling the scrutiny of connections across immigration borders, reductive form-biased methods obfuscating the motivations, processes and functions of the image in question, Eurocentric assumptions of the universality of "art" and "modernity" which are in truth variable constructs, etc. On the unsuitability of nation-centric frameworks, for example, if Aung Soe foregrounded his art's Burmese character, it was to assert the subsumed cultural, spiritual and artistic lineage; it was neither to extol nor to serve a nationalist agenda. As this essay has shown, his artistic modernity must be understood in connection with Śāntiniketan; its vision finds no echo within the confines of his own country whose intelligentsia looked to Tagore for inspiration and whose artists essentially engaged with Western art as the sine qua non of modern art, contrary to Tagore's appeal and Aung Soe's quest for an autonomous and compassionate artistic modernity. Myanmar is not a monolithic entity in the first place, and neither is this region named Southeast Asia whose borders have always been open to other parts of Asia and the world–until it was carved out and carved up as such not too long ago by colonial powers and became "modern".

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