

# NOTES

## FIVE NINETEENTH-CENTURY BURMESE BRONZES

In recent years the Bangkok art market has become inundated with bronze Burmese Buddha images, although only a decade earlier Burmese art was rarely seen. As increasing numbers of Burmese bronzes reach Bangkok, many obstacles emerge for scholars as they try to place the figures into a chronological and geographic framework. Basically the problem stems from the absence of a definitive history of Burmese art of the post-Pagan period, from the thirteenth century A.D. This unfortunate gap in southeast Asian historical knowledge may be partially explained by the closed-door policy governing relations between Burma and the rest of the world—even today it is difficult for foreigners to study the stylistic traditions of the various ethnic groups *in situ* because of the restrictions the Burmese government has placed since 1962 on travel and residence. The best available option in attempting to establish a framework for the post-Pagan period is to analyze the bronzes with datable inscriptions which have already left Burma.

In March 1977 two inscribed Burmese bronzes came to my attention (figures 1 and 2). Long before their subsequent purchase by the Australian National Gallery, Canberra, I became interested in these Buddha images for several reasons: (a) the dealer originally dated the images to the seventeenth century A.D. making them two very early Burmese sculptures actually carrying inscriptions; (b) supposedly the bronzes came from the Shan States. If this were true, then they would be quite rare, for Mr. A.B. Griswold has stated in a private communication that he knows of only two dated images from the Shan States, and both bear sixteenth-century inscriptions; (c) the Buddha images display a bluish-green patina which only occurs on bronzes which have been buried for a long time. In Burma it is quite unusual to find excavated sculpture; most images are found in temples and their relic chambers, simply tarnished or perhaps lacquered or covered in gold leaf.

Stylistically figure 1 and figure 2 are quite similar; in fact, they are so alike I believe they could have been produced in the same workshop, if not by the same artisan. The bluish-green bronzes measure approximately 38 centimeters tall, including an angled base marginally lower in the front than the rear. The heads are broad ovals, with vertically marked headband lines dividing the forehead curls and the lotus bud finials. Raised, double eyebrows arch above the almond-shaped eyes, while the broadly formed nostrils nearly reach the outer margins of the slightly curving lips. A boneless quality of the bodies is readily apparent in the foreshortened armpits, attenuated arms and elongated hands. The right hands are frontally posed with four fingers of equal length pointing downward in *bhumisparamudra*. The images sit in tightly locked diamond positions, the *vajrasana*, with the left hands supported underneath by small bronze lumps. The horizontality of this seated pose is accentuated by the smooth and flattened slab-like feet.

Both Buddha images wear monastic dress which is raised and decorated with a double line motif indicating the hems and edges of the robes. The upper hems of the garments pass diagonally across the chests, with the flaps of the robes reaching below the waists. The lateral edges cross the ankles and flow downward along the sloping bases. The images sit upon double lotus thrones having sharply constricted waists and indented tiers. The banding of these tiers serves to emphasize the horizontality of the images already created by the headband lines, the eyes, the bases of the noses, the left hands, the spread of the laps and the slab feet. With the *ushnishna* as the pinnacle, it seems as if each Buddha had been conceived as a series of interlocking triangles with each successive horizontal line acting as a subsidiary base.

The lower tiers of the indented bases carry Burmese inscriptions. These were translated by Mr. Aye Maung, a Burmese lawyer and former monk. He stated that the script is perfectly legible, and occasional archaic or misspelt words appear. Two epigraphists from the National Library, Bangkok, have verified the accuracy of his work. The inscriptions read as follows.

INSCRIPTION ON FIGURE 1

သကြာ ၁၁၇၂ ခု မဆုနံ ဝေဒနာ ဝေဒနာ : ဆင် : ဝေဒနာ သွန်း : ဝေဒနာ : သွန်း  
 ဝေဒနာ သွန်း : သွန်း : ဝေဒနာ : ဝေဒနာ : ဝေဒနာ : ဝေဒနာ : ဝေဒနာ : ဝေဒနာ :  
 သွန်း : သွန်း : သွန်း : သွန်း

*Phonetic pronunciation*

Thākarit 1172 kaṣon lá kwè nāy kyay sin dū gò thoon ywāy pyī thi waw si thā thāmēē khinbōon dā zu kaung hmū neikban sū lu nāt thā du khawzaythaw.

*Translation*

In the year 1172, Burmese Era, on the perfect waning moon day of the month of Kason<sup>1</sup> this image was moulded. By this meritorious deed, Wawsi and members of his family prayed for Nirvana, and may all humanity and *nats* say 'sadhu' in recognition of this act of meritmaking.

INSCRIPTION ON FIGURE 2

သကြာ ၁၁၇၃ ဝေဒနာ : သွန်း :  
 သွန်း : သွန်း : သွန်း : သွန်း : သွန်း : သွန်း : သွန်း : သွန်း :  
 သွန်း : သွန်း : သွန်း : သွန်း

<sup>1</sup> The date is equivalent to mid-May 1810 A.D.

*Phonetic pronunciation*

Thākārit 1173 takū lah bye gyaw sè yet nāy dwin shin einda thā thāmee maung hnan dá zu doh gā kyay a chein 30 hnin sin dū daw thōon ywāy pyī thi dī bū ā hnin neikban sü.

*Translation*

In the year 1173, Burmese Era, on the tenth post-waxing moon day of the month of Tagu<sup>2</sup>, this image was moulded out of 30 viss of brass or bronze by Shin Einda, wife and members of his family, and they prayed that they would be able to tread over the correct path to Nirvana for this donation.

According to the two translations, the bronze images date to the early nineteenth century A.D., rather than to the seventeenth century as previously ascribed by the dealer. This later date in no way detracts from the historic value of the images. In fact, it demonstrates that fine casting techniques in Burma survived into the early nineteenth century. Of course it is possible that these bronzes are seventeenth-century images with nineteenth-century inscriptions. I spoke with several Burmese monks at Wat Don, Bangkok, who said that on occasion old images retrieved from ancient ruins, or found inside larger venerated images, might be rededicated and newly inscribed at a later date. With regard to figures 1 and 2 this is quite unlikely, since both inscriptions state that the Buddhas were moulded on a particular day, not just given in merit on a chosen day. This effectively negates the possibility that the stated donors inscribed earlier images. Furthermore, I thoroughly examined the inscriptions and the simple etchings on the monastic robes with a magnifying glass. On each image the engravings were equally worn and were approximately the same depth. Assuming the artisan completed the robe decorations shortly after casting, then the inscriptions must be assigned to the same period as the moulding dates.

Another dated bronze Buddha image (figure 3), which has also been recently purchased by the Australian National Gallery, arrived in Bangkok some months after I had discovered figures 1 and 2. Though considerably larger, the third image recalls the stylistic tradition of the first two. A comparison reveals a similarity in the simple bulbous *ushnisha*, the tiny orthodox curls, the headband line, the broadened oval facial shape with the highly arched eyebrows over elongated and raised almond eyes, a broad nose with a flattened nostril region overshadowing a diminutive and foreshortened mouth, and the boneless quality of the bodies. Furthermore, the images wear similar monastic dress, draped in the 'open' mode with the right shoulder exposed and the cloth covering the left arm sweeping down over the hip. Here, too, the legs are locked in a tightened lotus position, with slab-like feet resting on the lap. The single, tiered throne bears the following inscription.

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<sup>2</sup> The date is equivalent to mid-April 1811 A.D.



*Figure 1.* Burmese bronze Buddha image, dated 1810. Recently purchased by the Australian National Gallery, Canberra.



*Figure 2.* Burmese bronze Buddha image, dated 1811. Recently purchased by the Australian National Gallery, Canberra.



*Figure 3.* Burmese bronze Buddha image, dated 1807. Recently purchased by the Australian National Gallery, Canberra.



*Figure 4.* Burmese bronze Buddha image, dated 1852. Private collection, Bangkok.



*Figure 5.* Burmese bronze Buddha image, dated 1856. Private collection, Bangkok.







possible. Again the name San appears, and in combination with the highly respected title Shin used by Burmese monks. Several Burmese have told me that Shin used together with the name San is very odd indeed. Shin alone as a title of respect is possible; San alone is feasible, but the combination is unusual. Furthermore, Shin San was married because the image was donated by Shin San, wife and children. He could not have been a Burmese monk and still retain the title of Shin, while donating the Buddha in the name of his wife and children, too. Only Shans retain their former monk's title. Shin San could not have been Burmese. Most likely he was Shan.

With the growing amount of Burmese sculpture entering Bangkok, it becomes an increasingly complicated task for scholars to understand the history of post-Pagan Burmese art. Not being able to study works of art *in situ*, scholars must rely on images with datable inscriptions to establish a chronological and geographic framework. The five dated Burmese bronze images included in this study may serve as specific reference points in further research.

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