

# Art and History of Myanmar Lacquerware

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**Abstract**— Lacquerware was originally derived from China which has a lacquer tradition approximately 7,000 years old. The art of lacquerware originated in Bagan Period and gradually developed through the ages of Taungoo, Inwa and Nyaungyan, reaching its zenith in Konbaung Period. There are six distinctly different forms of lacquerware made in Myanmar: Plain lacquerware (*Kyauk-ka*), Incised lacquerware (*kanyityun*), Gilt lacquerware (*shwe-za-wa-yun*), Relief moulded lacquerware (*tha-yo*), Glass mosaic and gilt lacquerware (*hman-zi-shwe-cha*), Dry lacquerware (*man yun* or *man phaya*). Bagan Period lacquerware, lacked decorative paintings, were of only plain black. In Inwa Period, there were painting emerged on lacquerwares. The surface of lacquerwares was engraved with a fine iron stylus during the Nyaungyang Period. The art of lacquerware developed to *Shwe-za-wa* (gold leaf lacquerware), *Tha-yo* (relief moulded lacquerware) and *Hman-zi-shwe-cha* (glass-inlay lacquerware) in Konbaung Period. Basic materials used in the production of lacquerware are bamboo or wood, resin (*thit-si*), vermilion, yellow orpiment, indigo and gold leaf. During the Colonial Period the lacquerware industry dramatically declined due to imported commodities. After Myanmar regained her independence and Institute of lacquerware was founded by encouragement of the government to preserve lacquerware handicraft.

**Index Terms**— Art, Culture, Handcraft, History, Lacquerware, Myanmar, Tradition

## INTRODUCTION

**H**ISTORY of Myanmar Lacquerware during Konbaung Period is a very wide subject to explore, so that although many researchers and scholars had written on the subject from various aspects, some areas remained unexplored. Introduction of Lacquerware, Production, Utility and The Decline of Lacquerware Industry will all be discussed in this paper.

The introduction of lacquerware art to Myanmar has three varied opinions concerning with the arrival of the art of lacquerware. The first thought that it came from China. The second opinioned that lacquerware art arrived Bagan through the relations with Mons in Thaton, and Mons received lacquerware art through the trade with Chiangmai. The third was after the famed Myanmar King, Bayinnaung, conquered Chiangmai and Ayudhaya, he took prisoners of war which included Yun people who were lacquerware craftsmen and allotted them in Hantawady. So, it can be suggested the art of lacquerware spread through Yun people. Lacquerware art, introduced to Myanmar in Taungoo Period, reached zenith in the Konbaung Period. The productions of lacquerware objects in Myanmar spread out to thirteen places in Sagaing Division, three places in Bago Division, three places in Magway Division, six places in Mandalay division, one place in Rakhine state and seven places in Shan State. Among these places, the most famous regions are Bagan, Kyauk-ka, Inwa, Mandalay, Pyay, Linkhe and Kyington. Lacquerware objects were widely used not only in royal ceremonies and royal families but also most people in rural areas during Konbaung Period. Due to widespread uses of lacquerwares in various social classes, the art of lacquerware and lacquerware industry developed dramatically during the Konbaung Period. Moreover, the lacquerware objects are produced for both secular and religious purposes. Causes for the decline of lacquerware industry from Colonial Period to the

present time are briefly presented as well. The main causes for the decline of the lacquerware industry are due to imported foreign commodities which are more beautiful and durable. Rare raw materials, less demand from local market and investment of a lot of time and many labourers are presented as the causes of declined lacquerware industry.

## LACQUERWARE ORIGIN

The art of lacquer - known as *pan yun* in Myanmar, is one of the ten flowery arts, "*Pansemayo*" in Myanmar language. There are some major differences of opinion amongst scholars as to exactly when the lacquer tradition originated in Myanmar. One opinion considers that Myanmar's lacquerware tradition was originally derived from China because of prolonged relationship between the two countries for about 7,000 years.

A second thought states that the lacquer tradition was established in Upper Myanmar during the reign of Anawrahta (1044-1077AD) when he conquered Thaton in 1058 A.D, bringing back artisans and craftsmen with him to his city of Bagan. He then put the lacquer craftsmen to settle in his capital and put them to work. The theory further states that the lacquer tradition of the Mon kingdom, which was transplanted to Bagan, was not even native to Thaton, but was acquired through its overland trade with the neighbouring kingdom of Chiangmai.

A third thought posits that the lacquer tradition began in Myanmar only in the 16th century and was due to King Bayinnaung (1551-1581 A.D) taking back artists and artisans from Lanchang (Laos), Chiangmai and Ayuthia to his capital of Hanthawaddy, after his conquest of these kingdoms.

Asia has various styles of lacquerware such as

Thai, Vietnamese, and Chinese, all very different. Myanmar lacquerware also has its unique style. This craft was founded approximately in the 10th century in Myanmar and has different appearance through time.

The art of lacquerware constitutes among the ten traditional arts and crafts. The word "yun" in Myanmar has two meanings: the one indicates name of an ethnic group, speaking a Shan dialect used in easternmost part of the Shan State; the other denotes the lacquerware, delineate on lacquerware and etch coloured designs on lacquerware.

## Production

In Myanmar, utensils made of bamboo wickerwork and wood with resin were called lacquerware. Dry lacquer images called *man phaya* are made in a group of villages about eight miles west of Ye-u, notably at Me-o, Sithemye, Malwe and Leindaw. The craftsmen are cultivators who make the images in their spare time. "The method is to make a rough image of well kneaded mud, moulding with the hand where possible, and finishing off the more intricate parts with a wooden, or iron implement (*than-lyet*). Before the mud is dry, the image is daubed over with a wash of straw ash and water. Over this core is laid a plaster of *thit-si* mixed with finely sifted teak sawdust, the eyes, nose, and delicate parts being moulded with the iron, or wooden implement. The mud core is then removed the plaster being cut open to extract the mud from the head, arms and other difficult parts. The openings are next closed again with the *thit-si* and saw dust plaster, and the images coated with a lacquer of clear strained *thit-si* mixed with the ash of straw or bran. The outer coat is smoothed with an iron instrument smeared with sesamum oil, and left to dry. When the lacquer is set, the image is washed, polished with Stone, and varnished with the purest strained *thit-si*. The images, left in this condition till a purchaser appears, are gilded, if desired. A man can turn out altogether about 30 to 35 images in a season. The work cannot be done in the hot weather for the mud gets too dry, and the lacquer does not set properly; and it cannot be done in the rain for, though the lacquer will set, the mud remains moist and sticks to it." Few *man phayas* are sold in Myanmar, almost all finding their way to the Shan States, in which they are sold everywhere, even in places as remote as Kyaington. Most of those sold in the Shan State are almost a cubit high.

The word lacquerware was used during the reign of king Bayinnaung in Taungoo Period. Such texts as *Hanthawaddy Ayedawbon Mawgun Udan* and the Glass Palace Chronicles, volume two mentioned the word lacquerware craftsmen definitely. Though the utensils made of bamboo whickered with application of resin began to emerge in Bagan period, it was not called lacquerware, but only in Bayinnaung's reign, it was called lacquerware after the arrival of Chiangmains and their art. Lacquerware industry developed throughout the ages and became not only common people utensils but also royal paraphernalia in Kongbaung Period. Lacquerware

art reached highest in Konbaung Period and still in the Colonial Period.

The substance used to make lacquer in Myanmar is called *thit-si*, which is the sap of the lacquer tree (*Melanorrhoeausitata*), and it grows wild up to elevations of nearly 1000 meters in the drier forests of the Shan State, the Kathe and the Bhamo District. *Thit-si* which turns black on exposure is tapped by making V shape incisions in the bark of the trees. The liquid is then gathered in a small bamboo cup inserted at the base of the cup.

Basic materials used in the production of lacquerware are bamboo and wood. Thus, Myanmar lacquerware objects durable, resisting heat, with gracious beautiful. The principal requirements for the lacquerware industry are skilful artisans, market and raw materials. The production of lacquerware stabled from early Konbaung to the end of second Anglo-Myanmar war. During the Colonial Period cheap consumer goods were imported into the country which affected the lacquerware market. Loss of market for lacquerware greatly inflicted lacquerware craftsmen and caused gradually declined the lacquerware industry.

The following materials required for the production of lacquerware. They were

- (1) bamboo or wood
- (2) resin
- (3) vermilion
- (4) yellow orpiment
- (5) indigo and
- (6) gold plate

In most cases the lacquerware process begins with the making of an object in either bamboo or wood. Soft woods such as *baing* (*Tretramelesnudiflora*), *di`- du`* (Bamboo insigne) and *let-pan* (*Bambaxmalabaricum*) are used to fashion everyday rectangular objects such as boxes, folding tables and screens. When greater weight and durability are required for articles such as monastic furniture and architectural fixtures, teak wood is used. Many gilded and inlaid objects are made from wood.

The best quality lacquerware is usually made from a base of bamboo. *Tin wa* (*CephalostachiumPergacile*) or *myin-wa* (*DendrocalamusStrictus*) from the central Sagaing Division are considered best because of their ten feet trunks and widely spaced joints. After drying, the bamboo trunk is cut just below the joints with a machete. These cylindrical pieces are spilt with a sharp knife into long thin strips. They may be flat or round depending on the type of receptacle to be made.

To get a base object of bamboo, it has to undergo through various processes:

- (a) bamboo cutting near the joint or below the joint
- (b) the cut cylindrical pieces are spilt into bamboo stocks
- (c) tips of bamboo slats are cut off to be equal
- (d) cutting of joints
- (e) splitting bamboo slats into strips
- (f) dividing tips of bamboo strips
- (g) trimming bamboo strips into long trim strips

After long trim strips of bamboo are obtained, four

kinds of base object are to make, namely:

- (a) Making coiled object
- (b) Making woven object
- (c) Making twisted object
- (d) Making body object.

For colouring, other than black (the natural colour of lacquer) a variety of pigments are used. The characteristic red colour of Burmese lacquer called *hin-tha-ba-da* comes from finely ground cinnabar (*mercuric sulphide*) which is imported from China. Before being applied to a lacquerware surface, it is mixed with a little *thit-si* and worked to a smooth consistency with a portion of tung oil (*Shan-si*) which comes from a tree in the Shan States. On inferior wares, red ochre is sometimes used as a colourant. Since it does not bind well with lacquer, it has a tendency to flake. The resulting colour is rather dull, and lacks the high gloss of the *hin-tha-ba-da* pigment. In recent years brown had become more common among Myanmar lacquerware. It is made by adding a higher proportion of *thit-si* to the *hin-tha-ba-da* pigment. Red and brown are commonly used to finish the inside of Myanmar lacquerware. Yellow or *hsei-dan* is found in the Shan State. It is pounded and washed several times until a fine, impalpable power remains. This is mixed with a pellucid gum such as dammar. When ready for use, it is waked up with a small amount of *thit-si* and *Shan-si* to attain a suitable consistency. To make orange, orpiment is added to *hin-tha-ba-da*.

A blue colour (*me`ne*) is made from finely ground indigo. Indigo comes mainly from West Germany and India. Blue pigment is rarely used in lacquer work because it tends to form a rather dull, uninteresting colour when combined with *thit-si*. It is usually added to orpiment to produce a green colour.

The usefulness of lacquer prevailed since Bagan Period. It was used in gold gilding of utensils and objects of worship. Shwekuncha Pagoda inscription<sup>1</sup>, dated in 1223, described that in gilding Buddha images, vermilion, yellow orpiment and lacquer were used. Evidences indicate that lacquer was used to make utensils last long and in gilding of images in Bagan Period. Lacquer is the principal material in lacquerware industry. It has the property of being sticky, hardening and hot.

Depending on various techniques in decorating lacquerware were divided into six types in the Konbaung Period. They were

- (a) plain lacquerware (*Kyauk-ka Yun*)
- (b) incised lacquerware (*Yun lacquerware*)
- (c) gold Leaf lacquerware (*Shwe-za-wa Yun*)
- (d) relief moulded lacquerware (*Tha-yo Yun*)
- (e) glass-Inlay lacquerware (*Hman-zishwe -cha Yun*)
- (f) Dry lacquerware image (*Mañor Manphaya*)

### Utilities

Myanmar art and architecture was born and brought up together with Buddhist religion. In other words Myanmar art began as a Buddhist art. Similarly the lacquerware craftsmen in ancient times were influenced by the concept of Buddhist religion.

The large *hsun-ok* are used when making ceremonial offerings to monks; the ordinary trays by women, for carrying fruit and vegetables to market; and the bowls and small boxes for miscellaneous purposes. The pumpkin lacquerware boxes became very popular from 1900 to the 1950s.

Maungdaung turns out the shallow stands on which the dishes are arranged at meal time, *daunglan*. Maungtaung produced a great many of lacquerware, of which Maungtaung *khwet* or Maungtaung cup is well known throughout the country. The use of Maungtaung *khwet* is connected with a very important Buddhist procession called *shinpyu* (novitiation) ceremony.

*Daung-lan* is made of wood or bamboo with *thit-si* painting. It is a circular shape plate with 4 legs.<sup>55</sup> It was roughly 3 feet in diameter and 6 inches to 12 inches in height.<sup>56</sup> *Daung-lan* was used for family meals during Konbaung Period. The trays are usually made of bamboo weaving and applied with black *thit-si*. It is found that the *daunglans* have been come into the existence since the Bagan period. Lacquer cup (*yun ye-khwet*), made of woven bamboo slips and decorated with *thayo* and black *thit-si* paintings, were used by Myanmar families to drink water.

Betel boxes were made of woven bamboo slips applied with gold and precious jewellery while the ordinary people used the black-plain betel boxes. The betel box could be differentiated into two types of multi-cup betel box and little betel box. The multi-cup betel boxes were used for ceremonial purposes and the lids and outer surface of the main frame were decorated with incised lacquer design. In the upper tray about half-fist sized silver cups were placed with chipped betel nut, catch resin, tobacco, lime paste and spices such as clove aniseed etc inside them. This multi-cup betel box was used in important celebrations such as royal ceremonies, charities and wedding ceremonies.

During the Konboun Period, coronation ceremonies such as crown prince selecting or wedding ceremonies of princes and princess, records were made on folded writing sheets. *Yunbaung parabaiks* were used to record the ceremonial events of the royal families.

### Declined Industry and Possible Solution

The most produced lacquerware during the Colonial Period were *hsun-oks*, *hsun-taungs*, alms bowl cover, *maung-htaung* cup, *laphet-oks* (pickled tea boxes), and *kun-it* (betel-boxes). These lacquerwares were produced in Bagan, Kyauk-ka, Inwa, Linkhe, Mo-ne and Kyaing-ton. Lacquerwares were mostly sold in the bazaars of famous pagodas festivals in various part of the country. The household goods such as *kun-it*, *laphet-ok*, *say-taung*, water cup, animal figures, etc., were produced in Bagan and sold in the fair of famous pagoda festivals. Kyauk-ka produced religious lacquerwares and they are sold in Shweguni Pagoda festivals. The pagoda festivals always go together with the fairs, so the festivals may have been held for some days. Many pagoda festivals were held in most regions. Such pagoda festivals

may have depended on the plentiful supply of regional products, convenience of road transportation and fulfillment of the local needs from the neighbouring areas. Alms bowl cover produced from Inwa exported to Mandalay. The lacquerwares of Lechar and Kyaington exported to pagoda festivals around the country. So it can be suggested that the commerce of lacquerwares still existed in the Colonial Period and the production of lacquerwares especially religious uses also exist. Because most of the Myanmar people are Buddhists and they donated many religious monuments. Although the lacquerwares were still being produced in a less or more number, the amount of production could be estimated as declining due to the scarcity of raw materials.

As the price of raw materials increased the owners of lacquer works reduced the use of high quality raw materials which resulted in production of low-quality lacquer products. When lacquerwares competed with foreign commodities in market, it was less favour and demands from consumers. As a result, adequate wages could not be given to the professional craftsmen and workers. They faced the difficulties in daily life. That factor caused new generation to be less interested in lacquer works. It is noted that this factor caused the decline of lacquerware industry during the Colonial Period.

Although the production of household use lacquerwares had declined during Colonial Period, the lacquerwares for religious use did not declined. Myanmar traditional architecture developed with the Buddhism. In Myanmar, most people donated and constructed many pagodas, stupas, monasteries and religious buildings. The religious use materials could not substituted with foreign imports. The main cause for the decline of the lacquerware industry probably ceased the production for the royal use. This factor could be the main difficulties met by professional *yun* workers. Although the royal handicraftsmen continued to lacquerware industry for to survive, their products competed with the foreign commodities in the market. In practice, the lacquerware industry invested in time, money and labourer. Many families have been involved in the lacquer industry for generations. But the demand market decrease caused the difficulties investment money.

After regaining independence, Lacquer School upgraded to a Technical University. Its campus attached built workshop and museum. Moreover, the main cities such as Mandalay, Taunggyi and Yangon also built museum to maintain ancient artifacts and handicrafts. Although *yun* works do not totally disappear in the present time, this industry steadily decline. In present time, *yun* production places are no more than five places. Hence, it is necessary for the government to encourage and support in all possible means for long-lasting this industry. It can be suggested that the businessmen should be interested to provide and invest in the lacquerware industry. The owners of the lacquerware workshops and skilful

workers in the production regions also must make an attempt to develop and attract new generations. Most people also help to maintain traditional lacquerware art. It is assumed that the main cause for the decline of lacquerware industry is that this industry takes a large amount of time to produce finished goods and needs many labour forces for it. Moreover, to make the exquisite and standard item need raw materials, right process, skilful workers and much money. To save this industry, it can be suggested that the lacquerware co-operative societies should be established in our thriving tourism industry. These societies endeavour to produce modern and durable lacquerware in order to enlarge market not only in local but also in broad. Government and private business should assist and provide this society with funding by sharing system. And then the lacquerware co-operative societies must make an attempt to attract youths and their families in lacquerware producing regions by incentive means.

### Conclusion

The history, production and utilities of lacquerwares formed not only the cultural and traditional values but also the financial and societal values so that both government and local lacquerware industries should cooperate better to enhance the substantial values of such fine products.

Figure



*man phaya*

*hsun-ok (thit-si)*

*Hman-zishwe-cha Yun*



*kun-it: Betel Box*

Lacquerware stall

*hsun-ok (thit-si)*





Daung-lan Daung-lan(Thit-si) [top] [bottom]



Yun Craftsman Daung-lan(thit-si) Pumpkin lacquerware



Yunbaung parabaiks yun ye-khwet Yun Craftsman

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