

# Trends in Myanmar Wall Paintings from the Eleventh to the Twentieth Centuries<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

Wall paintings in Myanmar have a long history. Extant remains date as far back as the eleventh century, and murals continue to be produced today. This paper is based on the survey of more than 150 temples in the central zone of Myanmar, exploring the imagery to consider its role in the construction of religious spaces. This paper argues that sacred biography has remained the most significant theme in Myanmar wall and panel painting from the eleventh through the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Yet, the 900-year long history of this art form discussed here has recorded a process of visual simplification, and by the twentieth century, the extraction of specific stories from an encompassing narrative, iconic, and decorative formation utilized from the eleventh through the nineteenth centuries indicates a profound shift in the role of murals and painted religious imagery from enveloping and complex systems to primarily merit-making and heuristic devices.

**Keywords:** mural, Myanmar, Buddhism, narrative, art

## Introduction

In Myanmar, ritualized giving was and remains a major religious activity across all echelons of society. By making donations, individuals improve their stores of merit, ensuring rebirth in a better condition in future lives. Offerings have taken many forms, ranging

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from simple obeisance and offerings of flowers and incense to donations of tracts of land and temples to house images of the Buddha. Such temples were not only manifestations of a donor's generosity, but they were also *udeiktha zedi* (Pali: *uddesika cetiya*), commemorative spaces where devotees could interact and develop a personal relationship with the Buddha by recollecting his exceptional qualities and engaging in ritual actions (Figure 1) (Trainor, 1997: 170, Swearer, 2007: 232, and Gifford, 2011: 12).



**Figure 1** Min Ye Gyi temple complex, Amyint, eighteenth century

Source: Author

Donating a temple provided significant social capital, and, in recognition of the expense, donors were titled *hpaya-daga*. The structure of the building was only one part of the gift, however, as donors did not leave buildings plain. Buddha images and paintings, as well as offerings, embellished interiors, and stucco and tile decoration enhanced the exteriors. A main Buddha image (or images) was placed against the building's back wall or central pillar, or set against a large slab set

towards the western end of the shrine room. While the main Buddha image in the central room was the focus of worship generally, the murals set the scene and established the correct atmosphere through the beautification of the space and the replication of religious material. This is corroborated in temple inscriptions that state the purpose of the paintings and religious texts. For instance, in the Mahā-Ummagga Jātaka (no. 546), one of the stories of the Buddha's previous lives, after a series of buildings had been completed, the *bodhisatta* (future Buddha) Mahosadha "...summoned painters, and ... set them to work at painting beautiful pictures, so that the hall became like Sakka's [Lord of Tāvātimsa Heaven] heavenly palace Sudhammā" (Cowell, 1995: 159). The donors of temples in central Myanmar have been decorating temple and shrine interiors for nearly a millennium with differing painting programs, but always one in which biography, Buddhist or otherwise, was key. The focus on narrative imagery arranged in specific patterns indicates the importance of stories in Myanmar art, its relationships with religious texts, and therefore its role in religious activities.

### Objectives and Methods

In this paper, I present vignettes of the main mural painting phases in the central region and address organizational changes over time. A survey of the narrative structures as a whole, within story types, and in individual stories from more than 150 sites in Myanmar's central zone forms the basis of this study. While the murals' participation in contemporary social, religious, and political networks is briefly discussed, it is not the main purpose of the paper, which aims to underscore the continuities and differences in disposition and format between the various periods.<sup>2</sup> This will develop a body of visual imagery that can function as evidence for the changing role of religious sites in ritual practices in Myanmar.

<sup>2</sup> For further information about the social, political, and economic conditions, see Green, 2018b: passim.

## Results and Discussion

### Late Eleventh to Early Fourteenth Centuries

Over the course of more than 300 years, thousands of buildings were constructed on Bagan's plain. These temples came in all shapes and sizes from large cruciform designs with circumambulatory corridors to small, single-celled shrines, and of the structures that are still standing, many contain evidence of having once been painted in their entirety with imagery comprising narratives, icons, and ornamental sections.

Bagan-period murals depict a variety of themes, a subject that has been addressed by G. H. Luce in his magisterial work, *Old Burma Early Pagan* (1969), and Claudine Bautze-Picron in her volume *Timeless Vistas of the Cosmos: The Buddhist Murals of Pagan* (2003). The subject matter of the murals is enormously complex, drawing widely upon the many ideas circulating in the regional ecumene at the time. For instance, there is Brahmanic and Mahayanist material, and Tantric imagery may also exist, but has been little studied. *Bodhisattas* function as guardian figures and flank doorways. There are also images of the Buddha reclining on cosmic waters and other cosmological features, such as Lake Anotatta. Monks, particularly the Buddha's foremost disciples Sariputta and Moggallana, and the gods Sakka (Indra) and Brahma, protectors of the Buddhist faith, are seen regularly. The Buddha's footprint or a lotus form is usually found on the ceiling, emphasizing the purity of the space and the presence of the Buddha. Sometimes thousands of tiny Buddhas with geometric or floral surrounds create a honeycomb pattern on ceilings and occasionally walls (Figure 2). Research into how this imagery functions together is still in its infancy.

One particular body of material, Buddhist biography, came to dominate the subject matter during the Bagan period, and this emphasis has continued into the present (Figure 3) (Bautze-Picron, 2002; Galloway, 2013). In the eleventh to thirteenth centuries, representations of such material primarily included the Buddhas of the Past, the life of Gotama Buddha, and the *jātaka* stories (tales of the Buddha's previous



**Figure 2** Buddha images set in squares and a rampant vyala, elephant, tortoise, and guardian figure typical of Pala imagery, Payathonzu temple, Bagan, thirteenth century  
Source: Author

lives), each of which was illustrated in a distinctive manner. The previous Buddhas were represented seated and usually making the gestures of enlightenment, meditation, and teaching the doctrine. Occasionally, the Buddhas were shown in conjunction with small-scale representations, usually depicted as a short series, of the Buddha's renunciation or hair-cutting scenes. Later, these were enlarged in size, though not expanded in scope, and the use of the teaching and meditation gestures declined in the murals, leaving the gesture of awakening as the dominant mode of depicting seated Buddhas. Episodes from the life of Gotama Buddha, however, were often condensed

into single-scened depictions of the Eight Great Events - the birth, enlightenment, first sermon, twin miracles, Pārileyyaka retreat, taming of the Nālāgiri elephant, descent from Tāvatiṃsa Heaven, and the *Parinibbāna* (the Buddha's final extinction) - placed occasionally around a Buddha image or more frequently surrounded by the *jātaka* stories.<sup>3</sup> Gotama Buddha's previous lives were shown as a unified corpus of material in a series of square panels, each of which depicts a single story.<sup>4</sup> In a few temples, such as the Lokahteikpan, the ten great *jātakas*,



**Figure 3** The taming of the Nālāgiri elephant, Wetkyi-in Kubyaukgyi temple, Bagan, thirteenth century  
Source: Author

<sup>3</sup> Some sites contain more extensive biographies; for instance, Bagan's Myinkaba Kubyaukgyi that dates to 1113 has further scenes of the Buddha's life, as well as episodes from the *Mahāvamsa*, indicating connections with Sri Lanka, representations of the three main Buddhist councils held after the Buddha's demise, and stories of world conquerors, among others.

<sup>4</sup> This format probably arrived in Myanmar via India, but early fourteenth-century Persian manuscripts also display a similar layout. The use in Myanmar thus indicates participation in a wide artistic milieu.

where the nascent Buddha perfected the ten virtues (*pāramī*) necessary for enlightenment, were extended into horizontal strips showing cause and effect. Charlotte Galloway has discussed in detail how these three aspects of Buddhist biography emerged at Bagan during the late eleventh and early twelfth centuries, relating them to the conjunction of the aspirations of kings, personal religious practices, and the arrival of Buddhist texts in the region (Galloway, 2013: 159-74).

Combinations of themes and the way in which the highly diverse material was organized varied over the three-hundred-year period, but what united the varied Bagan-period sites was the constancy of particular features. *Bodhisattas*, multitudes of seated Buddhas, the twenty-eight previous Buddhas, the *jātaka* stories, floral and architectural motifs, and scenes from the life of Gotama Buddha all appeared at multiple sites. Stylistically, the imagery often replicated that of the Pala International style, sometimes in virtually identical form, and over time, certain images became standardized at Bagan (Bautze-Picron, 1998; Bautze-Picron, 2012; Bautze-Picron, 2002: 225-26). A specific example of this stylistic repetition can be seen in the incident where the Buddha tames the Nālāgiri elephant, who has been sent to kill him. In these images, the Buddha is usually shown in three-quarters profile holding his robe in one hand and flexing his other hand so that the palm faces the ground, while the much smaller sized elephant is shown twice, once with his trunk up-raised aggressively and once in a subdued posture, one behind the other.<sup>5</sup> Sharing forms occurred between paintings, plaques, and stucco imagery too. The use and reuse of specific representations continued into the nineteenth century, and while radically different styles are visible over the centuries, standardization persisted as a significant characteristic of Burmese murals. Various theories exist for such a phenomenon, ranging from practical reasons, such as the use of copybooks and the presence of painting ateliers, to theoretical ones, particularly those focused on the conservatism of religious imagery as necessary to maintain religious authenticity for practitioners (Satlow, 2012: 130-50). While

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, the Payathonzu, Wetkyi-in Kubyaukgyi, and Lokahteikpan temples at Bagan.

there has been some discussion about how similarities mask substantive literary and conceptual differences, an examination of these artistic relationships cannot be dismissed as discursive simplicity since visual renderings provide insight into the purpose of the paintings, as well as contemporary practices and interactions (Handlin, 2009/10: 24). The murals are not merely reproductions of texts, but are images specifically gathered together within the temple for the purpose of creating an appropriate space in which to house a Buddha image and engage in religious devotions with the object of future benefits. In the reuse of subject matter can be seen the materialization and recapitulation of this concept, with the resultant reification of the significance of biography, art forms, and luxury imagery in the production and embellishment of temples (Gell, 1998: 251-58).<sup>6</sup>

Bautze-Picron sees in the composite themes efforts to situate the Buddha within a specific perspective of the cosmos, and that the temple and its ornamentations in their entirety - painted and otherwise - represented the universe itself (Bautze-Picron, 2003: 32). Alternatively, Lilian Handlin argues that "... temple programs linked these lives [the *jātakas*] to other aspects of the Buddha Vacana (the Word of the Buddha) and its vast commentarial corpus, to authorize their veracity, and empower their agency" (Handlin, 2009/10: 16). The two positions are not mutually exclusive; the murals emerge in large part from Buddhist texts, as well as present an encompassing space within the architectural setting. The proximities, juxtapositions, and dispositions of visual narratives and iconic figures not only draw on extant texts, but also replicate ritual activities from chanting and recitation to circumambulation. For instance, narratives were usually painted on the walls of entrances and circumambulatory corridors where the devotee would be in motion, which not only mirrors the Buddha's progression through countless lives before his enlightenment, but also suggests a correlation between physical movement through the temple space and spiritual advancement (Green, 2001: 44; Galloway, 2013: 168). While

<sup>6</sup> Gell argues that his analytic method enables us to see art as a totality, as a cognitive process that reveals thought, memory, and future aspirations.

each temple may generally have a different arrangement and selection of subjects, the reuse of material and the combination of historical and contemporary imagery and concepts indicates the emergence of new visual programs, "texts" considered appropriate for temple spaces.

The wall paintings provide information about cosmopolitan Bagan-period society. Mythical beasts, painted architectural features, and Indian trade textile patterns frame the narrative material and the representations of the Buddhas. Much of this strongly resembles Indian, particularly Pala, imagery, indicating artistic and economic connections with the multiple communities of the subcontinent (Bautze-Picron, 2015; Bautze-Picron, 2012; Bautze-Picron, 2003: 119-55; Guy, 1998: 56-59; Barnes, 1997: *passim*). Indian artists appear to have been present in Myanmar, and the fact that Myanmar kings sent expeditions to Bodhgaya to assist with the repair of the temple associated with the Buddha's enlightenment further promulgated interactions, visual exchanges, and artistic adaptation. The amalgamation of varied religious concepts and participation in an international milieu resulted in sumptuous, richly patterned interiors that enriched the Sangha (the monkhood), perpetuated the *sāsana*, the Buddha's dispensation, and furthered the kammic aspirations of the donors. The wall paintings thus present a complex picture of ideas and activities circulating during the eleventh, twelfth, and thirteenth centuries at Bagan and in the wider Buddhist world, one that saw the murals as a deliberate nexus of artistic production, text-based scholarship, ritual activity, and regional networks.

### **The Fourteenth to Seventeenth Centuries**

Only a few fragments of paintings that date to the fourteenth to the mid-seventeenth centuries still exist, and thus it is difficult to characterize these murals. A multitude of potential reasons could account for the lack of mural samples. Political changes and the periodic relocation of the capital between the fourteenth and seventeenth centuries may have adversely affected the extent of production. Humidity and rising damp are not conducive to the long-term survival of murals, even in the dry climate of the country's central zone. Over-painting and whitewashing

in later periods further contributed to the loss of murals. Despite the lack of remains, a few sites provide a glimpse of the transformations that occurred between the Bagan period and the late seventeenth century.

Judging from the mural style and subject matter of some fourteenth century sites at Bagan, it seems that no radical alterations emerged during Bagan's decline. Many basic attributes of the eleventh- to thirteenth-century paintings remain evident, including a lotus pool at the center of the ceiling, four ceiling panels filled with floral or geometric motifs, the Buddhas of the Past, *jātaka* squares, the life of the Buddha, and multitudes of very small Buddha images set in geometric shapes (Pichard, 1992 vol. 1: 336-38; Pichard, 1993 vol. 2: 16-17).<sup>7</sup> The discovery of a temple with murals, probably dating from the fifteenth to early seventeenth centuries, on a hill above the Kyaiklat Kyaung in Sagaing contributes to a greater understanding of the emerging changes (Singer, 1999: 98; Singer, 2000: 138-41). The building is small with a single entrance hall that is divided into two sections and a central room. The front part of the entry once had paintings and an inscription, but these are now illegible. Further inside the entrance, however, are clearer paintings showing six rows of narrative and floral designs with footprints on the ceiling. Flanking the entry door on the east wall of the inner shrine are two standing *bodhisatta* guardian figures similar to those seen at Bagan. The interior room has a lotus pool ceiling surrounded by four panels containing rows of small Buddhas seated in *bhumisparsa mudra*, the gesture of enlightenment. Similar characteristics are found in eleventh- to thirteenth-century wall paintings, and the use of ink drawn outlines and the seemingly square script further indicate a connection with the Bagan period.<sup>8</sup> The main Buddha image has now been completely reconstructed and sits in *bhumisparsa mudra* flanked by two kneeling, painted figures. Most

likely there was once the usual depiction of a Bodhi tree behind it. The north and south walls primarily depict rows of narrative scenes, including the Eight Great Events, scenes from Gotama Buddha's life, and *jātaka* stories. Below the narrative registers is a row of painted, reclining Buddha images, and beneath these figures is a row of devotees. The condition of the paintings is such that without clear glosses, which are in a poor state, it is difficult to decipher the action of the scenes, although Singer (2000: 138) has identified some of them. Narratively, the format is an extended one with lines, trees, and buildings separating scenes. While the narrative looks like that found at the Lokahteikpan at Bagan in that there is little background detail compared with seventeenth- and eighteenth-century paintings, it must be noted that far fewer images occupy the scenes and the sequence of the scenes is considerably easier to follow than in earlier extended narratives, foreshadowing the later wall paintings (Figure 4).

Although this is one of the few examples of fifteenth- and sixteenth-century wall paintings known to scholars, it is possible to speculate about the transitional process that occurred during the late fourteenth to early seventeenth centuries. While many of the Bagan



**Figure 4** Extended and square narratives with an illustration of the birth of the Buddha, Kyaiklat Kyaung temple, Sagaing, possibly fifteenth-sixteenth century

Source: Author

<sup>7</sup> For instance, the Ottama Kyo-kyauung-u-zedi (temple no. 224) and the Shwe-leik-kan (temple no. 264), both of which are approximately of a fourteenth-century date.

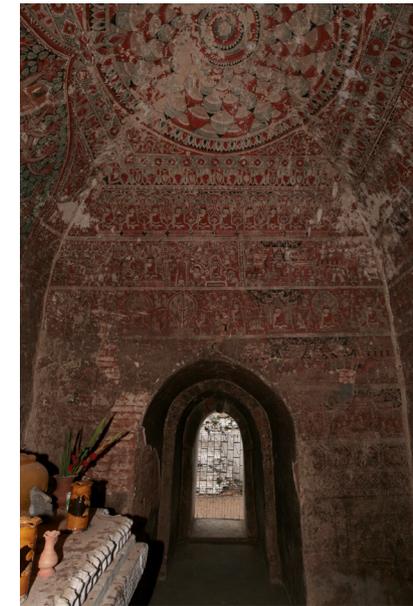
<sup>8</sup> This could be debated as little of the writing remains, and that which is clearest may have been re-written more recently.

period motifs remain, the extension of the narratives from single scenes to multiple ones is in clear evidence here, and the unfolding of narratives from monoscenic representations to extended formats reveals a shift to a process-oriented method of representation. A simplification process is also at work with more standardized formats and subject matter emerging. This marks a shift from representing a broad selection of religious ideas, texts, and contexts to the illustration of a more focused body of material in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

### The Seventeenth to Early Nineteenth Centuries

A second efflorescence of wall painting commenced in the late seventeenth century with murals being painted in numerous small temples outside the capital region (see Green, 2018b; Chew, 2005; Munier and Myint Aung, 2007). Although there is some variation, temple interiors usually comprise a small central room of about three meters square, entered by one or three passages, and provide an intimate space in which to honor the Buddha. It is in these buildings that the process-oriented method of representation reached its culmination with hundreds of temples in the central dry zone of the country embellished with extended narratives telling, generally in chronological order, Buddhist biographical stories. While the Bagan period murals are characterized by a broad repertoire, the later paintings almost exclusively depict the ten great *jātaka* stories indicating the perfection of the ten virtues (*pāramīs*) necessary for enlightenment, the life of Gotama Buddha with a focus on the events leading up to and just after the awakening, and the enlightenment of the twenty-eight previous Buddhas, who are important because they made prophecies of future Buddhahood to Gotama in his past lives (Green, 2005/06: 6-16). These elements of Buddhist biography are presented in narrow registers, mimicking illustrated manuscript formats, that wrap around the temple walls as the stories progress upward (Herbert, 1992: 9-12). The subject matter, in enveloping the main image with these scenes, narrates the context for the central image seated in the gesture of enlightenment beneath a painted Bodhi tree and often flanked by two monks (Green,

2011: 325-26). The *jātaka* stories occupy the lowest part of the narrative section of the walls; the life of the Buddha succeeds these stories; and the Buddhas of the Past cap the narratives at the top of the walls (Figure 5). The previous Buddhas, shown in the enlightenment posture seated beneath a tree, function as the culmination of the biographical material below, in part through their position on the walls, but also because, in addition to other significances, they indicate the moment of awakening, *nibbāna*, the conclusion of suffering and the exit from the cycles of rebirth. Implied in this arrangement is a progression from sentient being at the base to enlightened one at the top, following the hierarchical arrangement of the Buddhist universe and Myanmar society, and this disposition, combined with the concepts represented by each part, renders the biographical representations as a complex and integrated unit.



**Figure 5** View of the North wall, temple in the Monywa complex, Salingyi, eighteenth century  
Source: Author

The overarching structure also enfolds numerous smaller juxtapositions and associations, and specific emphases are evident within the individual stories themselves. In the sections illustrating the life of Gotama Buddha, the narrative sequences focus upon his birth, his departure from his palace home and renunciation of royal life, his efforts to become an awakened being and the immediate aftermath of his enlightenment. The awakening itself is usually not separated from the other parts of the narrative or embellished, suggesting that it is the sculpted main image with its painted surround of the Bodhi tree that particularly celebrates that moment and thereby revealing a close relationship between the murals and sculpture in the temple. Events beyond the seven weeks after the enlightenment or the first sermon are rarely shown in the narrative sequence, but occasionally, the *parinibbāna* is represented. In such instances, however, the story jumps from the events associated with the enlightenment to the end of the Buddha's life without depicting occurrences between the two. The focus is thus primarily on the process of becoming an awakened being (Green, 2011: 318-26).<sup>9</sup>

Like the life of Gotama Buddha, many of the *jātakas* are not shown in their entirety, but they are instead represented by selected sequences of events excerpted from a larger narrative. This imagery brings to the fore episodes that make the narratives instantly recognizable to those familiar with the tales, which many people would have been through schooling, sermons, plays, and so forth. For instance, the gambling scene where Puṇṇaka wins the minister Vidhura in the Vidhurapaṇḍita Jātaka and the sinking ship in the Mahājanaka Jātaka were popular images for the representation of those two narratives.<sup>10</sup> The characters are usually shown in standardized positions, and the stories are set in contemporary contexts, with elaborate palace scenes

of elegant wooden architecture, clear details of hair and clothing styles, and vibrant flora and fauna, making the Buddha and his history present for devotees of the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries. All these features would have facilitated the ready recognition of the stories by the practitioner. In striving for dramatic effect and recognition, however, the virtues were not necessarily emphasized. This is not to say that the imagery never indicated the *pāramī* - the imagery from the Vessantara Jātaka that includes Prince Vessantara giving away the white elephant, the horses, the carriage, and his children clearly reveals the importance of giving, for instance - just that it does not have to, allowing other themes to come to the fore, including that of wealth, status, and power (Figure 6). The fact that virtuous action is not the only imagery depicted and that easily recognizable scenes are prioritized in the representation of the *jātakas* stories corroborates Robert Brown's argument that the *jātakas* operate as a group, not as individual entities (Brown, 1997: 65). As such, the fact that the representations do not specifically focus upon the virtues suggests that rather than illustrating the Buddha's exceptional nature and the *pāramīs* (virtues) directly, the imagery together stands as an index for both.



**Figure 6** The four brothers asking their father for permission to visit their grandfather, Laung U Hmaw, Ywathitgyi village, eighteenth century

Source: Author

<sup>9</sup> I have argued that this suggests a connection with the Southeast Asian text of the life of the Buddha, the *Paṭhamasambodhi*, which narrates the tale of Gotama's life from birth through the enlightenment.

<sup>10</sup> For example, Laung U Hmaw in Ywathitgyi, Powindaung caves, Shwe U Min temple at Pakhangyi, temples in the Zedi Daw Daik complex at Anein, Ywagyigone, and so forth.

From the late eighteenth century, a few other designs emerged as part of the subject matter. Connections with Sri Lanka probably resulted in the representation of pilgrimage sites, a highly popular subject in Sri Lankan painting at the time (Holt, 1996: 57-63). And, the arrival of Thai artists after the Myanmar sack of Ayutthaya in 1767 prompted the inclusion of central Thai painting elements (Green, 2011: 337-49). The emphasis on the rainy season retreats in the late eighteenth-century publication of a vernacular life of the Buddha by Dutiya Medi Saya-daw, the *Mālāṅkāra Vatthu*, as well as a shift towards stricter observance of the Vinaya, the rules of conduct for monks, that encouraged meditation, probably appear as the increasing numbers of depictions of the Buddha passing the *waso* (Pali: *vassa*) in monastic settings. This new imagery was placed above the representations of the *jātaka* stories and the life of the Buddha, yet beneath the Buddhas of the Past.<sup>11</sup> Such a disposition suggests that pilgrimage, which is associated with sacred locations, and teaching, a post-enlightenment occurrence, were important activities among the Myanmar Buddhists, and their placement above the narrative sequences of cause-and-effect that show the process of attaining enlightenment suggests their alignment with the Buddhas of Past and the escape from *samsāra*, the cycle of rebirths. The fact that new material was incorporated into the existing structure indicates that the social and religious concepts underlying the wall paintings' subject matter remained stable and were not significantly altered by the accommodation of contemporary variations.

Non-narrative material in the wall paintings included floral and geometric motifs probably derived from luxury Indian trade textiles, but also seen in Indian manuscripts and south Indian murals, protective diagrams, scenes of karmic retribution, both good and bad, beings paying homage to the Buddha, and guardian figures. Painted textile patterns made the space appear as if it were hung with actual cloths and

canopies (Green, 2018a).<sup>12</sup> Except for the textile patterns that blanket the interstitial spaces around the narratives and the ceilings, this imagery is primarily found in liminal areas - entrance passageways and around the edges of the narratives - and occasionally on ceilings, indicating a horizontal hierarchy with Buddhist biography closest to the main image of the temple.

The overall design protected the space and beautified the temple, honoring the Buddha while demonstrating the centrality of the enlightenment in Myanmar Buddhist thought. Upon entering a temple, devotees were themselves enveloped by an architectural space enhanced by the wall paintings. Not only did the setting make them part of the Buddha's community by presenting that group as materially contemporaneous with Myanmar society, but it demarcated the field of merit around the Buddha image and thereby enfolded practitioners within its protected area. As with the Bagan-period murals, the arrangement of the imagery in the temple space mimicked ritual actions; for instance, the strip narrative format "tells" the stories and in wending around the temple walls, mimics the cycles of *samsāra* and wraps the main Buddha image and devotees within the Buddha's biography.

The new visual format, differing substantially from the Bagan period murals, arose from numerous social, political, economic, literary, and religious factors – the rise of secondary monastic centers, greater emphasis on specific stories, and changes to permitted donations to the Sangha. Most significantly, the murals participated in the development of vernacular religious material, mimicking textual and ritual forms that resulted in the predominance of sequential layouts for particular aspects of the narrative and monoscenic ones for others (Green, 2018b: ch. 4).

### **The Mid-Nineteenth to Early Twentieth Centuries**

From the early nineteenth century, the donation of small temples to the Sangha waned as the secondary monastic centers declined, resulting in fewer sites with wall paintings. Newly constructed temples in the central

<sup>11</sup> For example, Shwe U Min, Myatheindan, and Kan Yoe Kyaung temples at Pakhangyi, Upali Thein at Bagan, and temples at Pakkoku.

<sup>12</sup> While there is little written information about the role of Indian trade textiles in Myanmar, visual evidence abounds. In many cases, the textile patterns are replicated very closely.

region were often built on a considerably larger scale than those produced in the previous two centuries, revealing a shift from small personal donations to larger, more community oriented or royal ones. Britain's gradual annexation of the country and its suppression of aspects of Buddhist practice also contributed to changes in the distribution of wealth and the ways in which people engaged with Buddhism.

New subject matter emerged in the wall paintings, although old material was also retained. Major wall painting sites in the central region during this period include the Taungthaman Kyaukdawgyi (1840s), the Pokala temple in Shwezayan (1850s), the Toungoo temple (mid-nineteenth century), the Mahamuni temple at Amarapura (late nineteenth century), and the Shwegunyi temple in Kyaukka (late nineteenth century). These late Konbaung and early colonial styles of painting were characterized in part by modern paints, introduced in the nineteenth century, the extensive use of a bird's-eye perspective, and a panel-like format. The latter involved the widening and reduction in number of the narrative registers so popular in the eighteenth century. An emphasis upon location and setting is visible with the narrative action placed into extensive and detailed buildings or outdoor scenes. Separation of scenes within the space, rather than through the use of physical elements, such as trees or buildings, and the incorporation of multiple ground lines via the use of various perspectives enable the narratives to progress in a serpentine, rather than linear, fashion. Palaces and other architectural features are generally of a large scale, occupying most of the width of a register, but unlike the murals of the eighteenth century, several scenes are depicted within a single representation of a building. These elements make the appearance of the murals significantly different from the earlier ones, although widening registers and the resulting varied ground lines were a form adopted after the relocation of Thai artists to the Myanmar heartland in 1767. The use of multiple perspectives may also have resulted from the presence of Europeans, and it has been suggested that some Myanmar artists were trained in Western painting techniques by English-trained

Indian artists who came to Myanmar with the British Colonial Government (Bailey, 1979: 46). Subject matter underwent a shift around the mid-nineteenth century too, with the inclusion of fewer *jātaka* stories. Depicting the zodiac and constellations on ceilings became common, replacing the old imagery replicating Indian trade textile designs that once indicated luxury, but which shifting trade patterns in the Bay of Bengal had seemingly rendered obsolete.

Bagan Min (r. 1846-53) had the Kyaukdawgyi in Amarapura constructed in a form based on that of the early twelfth-century Ananda Temple at Bagan but with innovative murals. Found in the entryways, the wall paintings depict buildings donated to the Sangha, and on the ceilings, constellations and the Buddha's footprints (Figure 7). As representations of donations, these paintings connect thematically, rather than in subject matter, with other, earlier wall paintings. While during the eighteenth and very early nineteenth century, most temples contained representations of people, deities, monks, and beings with exceptional abilities paying homage to the Buddha, illustrating donated religious structures in the wall paintings at the Kyaukdawgyi presents



**Figure 7** Architectural donations, Taungthaman Kyaukdawgyi temple, Amarapura, 1840s

Source: Author

the final manifestation of such instances of homage, the result of an act, rather than the physical act of worship itself. One of the greatest forms of homage, donating a temple or stupa indicated the spiritual status of the patrons by displaying their material and social prominence, and in the case of royalty demonstrated their significance in promoting the spiritual welfare of the kingdom. The painted list of sites provides a clear record of donations to be honored and emulated and, at the time, reaffirmed the king's roles and status in lay and religious society. The Kyaukdawgyi murals thus participated in the wider realm of expressions of piety prevalent in Myanmar since the Bagan period, but with the overt indication of royal good *kamma* and the king's responsibility for the country's spiritual welfare.

Two late nineteenth-century sites with extant wall paintings - the Shwegunyi and the Mahamuni - portray imagery associated with the numerous lives of Gotama Buddha. The wall paintings at the Shwegunyi are in the two rooms immediately preceding the central shrine room and at the end of a long entrance corridor. The room that contains the main Buddha statue is decorated with glass mosaics, instead of wall paintings. In the first outer room closest to the main shrine, there are representations of the twenty-eight previous Buddhas, and in the second one, there are scenes from the life of Gotama Buddha, the Vessantara Jātaka (no. 547), and the Culla-Paduma Jātaka (no. 193). This arrangement mimics the vertical hierarchy seen in earlier paintings but in a horizontal format, with the narrative scenes furthest from the main Buddha image and the previous Buddhas the closest. The practitioner advances past the cause-and-effect narratives, which are narrated in numerous scenes telling the stories in detail, towards the Buddhas of the Past and finally encounters the main image, the central focus of ritual devotions.

The Mahamuni temple in Amarapura, the murals of which date to the 1890s, exemplifies the changes taking place in wall painting subject matter. The currently extant paintings are located in the western and southern corridors and depict scenes from the life of Gotama

Buddha, particularly the descent from Tāvātimsa Heaven, the Buddhas of the Past, and *jātaka* stories. Material has also been drawn from the *Mahāvamsa*, the great chronicle written in Ceylon in the mid first millennium CE, and there are representations of Buddhist sacred sites, such as Kyaiktiyo golden rock in southern Myanmar and the Mahabodhi temple in India. The zodiac and constellations occupy the ceiling spaces, and protective diagrams, such as that associated with 136 lives of the Buddha edge the images of the Buddhas of the Past (see Stadtner, 2011: 260-75).

In the five spaces with wall paintings at Shwetandit near Pakkoku, some of which date to the early twentieth century, the standard arrangement of registers winding around the interior space has been lost, as has the vertical arrangement, and many of the narrative scenes now occupy the entire allocated space in a single register. The imagery draws on both old and new themes; the former includes the Buddhas of the Past and the prophecies made to the future Gotama, the life of the Buddha, and some of the ten great *jātaka* stories, with a focus on the Vessantara. The events of the life of the Buddha are primarily characterized by the episodes leading up to and immediately after the enlightenment, but one of the buildings, which is dated by an inscription in the paintings to 1907, also portrays less common themes, such as the Buddha preaching at Uruvelā and in Tāvātimsa Heaven, the *Parinibbāna*, the distribution of the relics, and the story of the heretics trying to claim the alms bowl (Figure 8). Two of the five Shwetandit buildings also depict monks meditating on the corpses in the ten stages of decomposition, imagery not present in the wall paintings prior to the late nineteenth century. This was a topic that became common in Thailand at the same time, reflecting trends in Theravada Buddhist thought and indicating Myanmar's participation in a wider Buddhist community (Green, 2011: passim; Green, 2001: chs. 2, 3, and conclusion).<sup>13</sup>

<sup>13</sup> This participation is substantively supported by visual evidence. With connections between Myanmar, northern and central Thailand, and Sri Lanka demonstrated by the sharing of particular imagery.



**Figure 8** The Buddha and the heretics, the Buddha visiting Kapilavastu, and meditation on decomposing corpses, Shwetandit, near Pakkoku, 1907

Source: Author

A reduction in the number of *jātaka* stories, the inclusion of new subject matter that displaces the old, and the loss of the register format characterize the mid-nineteenth- to early twentieth-century wall paintings. As I have argued elsewhere, changes to style and details within the paintings do not necessarily mean alterations to the religious and social purposes of the murals (Green, 2005/06: 1-50). During this time, paintings as a donation remained a primary motivation in the production of this art form, yet the shifting arrangements in which the subject matter was displayed indicated a new role for the wall paintings - one that was starting to move away from the enveloping programs utilized since the Bagan period. Like the fourteenth- to seventeenth-century period, this was a transitional phase with the wall paintings changing from their role as donations and a means to create a narratively connected space encompassing the Buddha's field of merit into donations that added to the sanctity of the site without being an essential part in the creation of a unified sacred space.

### The Twentieth Century and Beyond

In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, important figures of state and wealthy members of society, as well as communities, have continued to donate temples and murals, the latter now sometimes augmented by the artist's signature. As Myanmar people and foreigners place emphasis upon Bagan, the site has once again become important religiously, economically, and socially, and replication of Bagan period imagery has become popular. However, much of the subject matter in new paintings remains the same, including extensive details of the life of the Buddha, *jātaka* stories, the Eight Great Events of the Buddha's life, the Buddhas of the Past, particularly significant religious donations, and so forth. At the same time, the number of Buddhist stories has been reduced. There is greater emphasis on the life of the Buddha and the Vessantara Jataka, with the limited representation of the other ten great *jataka* stories and the Buddhas of the past. As single-scened representations, they are a revolutionary change from the manuscript-like, strip imagery of the seventeenth to nineteenth century murals, and as single narrative scenes arranged along the upper sections of walls, they demonstrate a return to a monoscenic repertoire from the Bagan period. The twentieth century paintings display stories in sections, but unlike the earlier imagery, however, these later forms are larger and clearer and are intended to tell a story, as the extended and detailed captions demonstrate. Other imagery found in earlier wall paintings, such as floral, geometric, and textile patterns, is no longer in use, and the narrative scenes are framed simply.

This period has also seen the diversification of painting types. Many sites with these images have started to make use of painted panels, and even posters of paintings have been mounted high on the walls of sites. Often these narratives are relatively sparse with only one or two rows of monoscenic representations detailing the story or group of tales, rather than being an extensive body of imagery that operates as an integral part of the architecture in which it is housed (Figure 9). This change, as well as the lack of framing material, disengages the narratives from the space in which they are placed, because the

biographical subject matter is presented individually and not as a cohesive narrative and visual unit concluding with *nibbāna* (Skt. *nirvana*), the culminating point in Buddhist thought and practice (Collins, 1998: 241-81). The paintings are thus merit-making images that remind the viewer of the Buddha's great achievements, rather than holistic presentations of the path to awakening found in the seventeenth to early nineteenth centuries.



**Figure 9** Paintings of the eight victories, near the Lesu Kyaung, Theindawya village, mid-twentieth century

Source: Author

Most of these new images are located in entrance walkways and *zayat* rest houses around temple and stupa complexes, still within sacred spaces where shoes need to be removed or part of a religious compound. The twentieth century images add to the sanctity of the space by portraying sacred sites and Buddhist biography, but are merely one aspect among many at the sites where they exist, although their presence in corridors leading to the central shrine or in rooms around the central area indicates their continuing ritual connotations. However, they have lost their intimate connection with the architecture and sculpture found at the earlier temples.

Sites honoring the *nat* spirits have also been constructed to mimic some aspects of Buddhist temples, and these too have been embellished with paintings on panels of the lives of the *nats* and important sites associated with them placed high on the walls of entry

corridors or ante-chambers to shrines and accompanied by captions, a convergence of visual culture forms in paying homage to powerful beings (Figure 10). As with earlier paintings, sacred biography remains an essential part of honoring the Buddha and spirits, yet the change in disposition and the narrower body of narratives simplified their ritual significances in temple and shrine contexts to honorific and heuristic devices.



**Figure 10** Scenes from the life of Popa Medaw, the *nat* of Mount Popa, *nat* shrine, Mount Popa, mid-twentieth century

Source: Author

## Conclusion

Myanmar wall paintings are a constantly evolving art form, yet they are one that retains close links with the past. Sacred biography, often in standardized formats, has remained the most significant theme in Myanmar wall and panel painting from the eleventh through the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Yet, the 900-year long history of this art form has recorded a process of visual simplification. During the Bagan period, individual narratives were not emphasized; instead sets of material, such as the 550 or ten great *jātaka* stories, the Eight Great Events of the life of Gotama Buddha, and the twenty-eight previous Buddhas, functioned together and in conjunction with the architectural form to create an appropriate place to house and honor a Buddha image.

The artistic, religious, and textual complexities of the murals indicate the relevance of trade and religious exchanges in the development of this art form at Bagan. Subsequently, the few remnants of murals indicate a shift away from the large bodies of material found at Bagan. Wall paintings from the seventeenth to early nineteenth centuries focused on the path to enlightenment, thereby validating the Buddha's great achievement, through the representation of a narrower body of material arranged in a hierarchical format. The disposition of the narratives and the ways in which the stories were told visually became highly standardized, indicating the importance of a formula in honoring the Buddha. The nineteenth century, like the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, was a transitional point with the arrival of new subject matter and the displacement of a format that had been utilized since the late seventeenth century. The emergence of large-sized, nineteenth-century temples with murals attests to royal and communal religious efforts, while simultaneously indicating the decline of regional monastic networks that lead to the efflorescence of murals during the eighteenth century. The twentieth century saw the proliferation of single-scened narrative panels painted or hung on walls, which reveals the continued importance attributed to narratives in religious practices in Myanmar. The extraction of specific stories from an encompassing narrative, iconic, and decorative formation utilized from the eleventh through the nineteenth centuries, however, indicates a profound shift in the role of murals and painted religious imagery. In particular, the removal of representations of the Buddhas of the Past eliminates the sense of a conclusory point from the biographical narratives, rendering the imagery incomplete as biography and hence narrowly focused on explicating a specific aspect of the Buddha's nature. Changes in disposition, location, and format all provide evidence of new roles for painted material, in addition to the ever-present merit-making function. The partial illustration of Buddhist biography and the diminution of its role in the creation of a sacred site were thus radical alterations to the wall painting tradition in Myanmar, requiring new theoretical approaches in their interpretation.

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