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| Burmese Modernism |
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| Modernistic painting in Burma first assertively appeared in the 1940s and with greater force in the 1950s, emerging as a full-fledged movement in the 1960s. An element of Burmese painting is its lateralism, whereby realist or modernist styles have persistently drawn from a surviving wellspring of traditional arts. In the 1940s-1960s, artists sought an indigenous development that did not mimic foreign aesthetics. They began to look backwards into the ancient mural painting in Pagan 800 years earlier, which in many ways anticipated Surrealism and abstraction. However, by the late 1970s, modernism began to wane. When Burma began to open to the outside world in 1987, an older mastery in Realist and Impressionist painting — introduced by Ba Nyan (1897-1945), who studied in London in the 1920s — dominated the country’s painting style. From the late 1990s onwards, modernism in Burma experienced a vigorous resurgence. |
| Birth of Modernism  Kin Maung (Bank) (c.1908-1983), the ‘Father of Modernism in Burma,’ initiated the move towards abstraction in Burmese art in the 1940s-1960s. Kin Maung was an amateur painter who read English and was familiar with international art movements. He delivered papers and workshops in Burma, urging painters to develop modernist styles. He understood that Burma’s conservative Buddhist culture frowned on art that was jarring, dislocating, or violent, unless it enhanced the thought of the Buddha, and thus Kin Maung advocated a gradual negotiation towards modernism. He encouraged painters to rediscover Buddhist paintings at Pagan, where phantasmagoric tableaus were common, and travelled there with several modernist painters to study these ancient works.  Kin Maung’s oeuvre was small, but his range was wide: it included Realism, Impressionism, semi-Cubism, and figurative and non-figurative Expressionism. His oil painting *Modern Palette* is an intriguing mix of the historical icons of Burmese culture in a style that he apparently never repeated.  File: Kin\_Maung\_Modern\_Palette.jpg  Figure 1: Kin Maung (Bank), *Modern Palette*. Oil on canvas. 34 x 31.25 inches (87 x 80 cm). Collection: NM Gallery, Yangon.  Not every modern painting was influenced by Burma’s traditional corpus. Burmese modernists were aware of their dilemma: they could not renovate ancient styles, but neither should they copy the West. Instead, they aimed to find a distinct, contemporary style of painting that reflected Burmese culture. Sometimes this ingenuity revealed itself in a single work or a handful of works, as painters turned to fresh syncrsetisms between the traditional and the modern, or the international and Burmese.  Aung Khin (1921-1996) abhorred mimicry of the West, although much of his work was influenced by Picasso and Van Gogh. He eventually found his torturous way to an original expression. He concluded that the essential element in powerful abstract work was ‘crazy colours,’ but insisted that Burmese paintings should ‘smell’ Burmese. One of his outstanding works is *Iron Workshop*, with its unusual colours and Pagan influence in the stiff figures with black outlines. In Aung Khin’s last paintings, he depicted the heavenly and hellish realms of Burmese Buddhism in non-figurative abstract works, which was a daring but logical step, considering that these realms were beyond figurative perception.  File: Aung\_Khin\_Iron\_Workshop.jpg  Figure 2: Aung Khin, *Iron Workshop* (1995). Oil on canvas. 27 x 36 inches (61 x 92 cm). Collection: Myat Min, Yangon.  Three catalysts of the modernist movement of the 1960s were Paw Oo Thet (1936-1993), Win Pe (1936--), and Kin Maung Yin (1938--). Paw Oo Thet and Win Pe were students of Kin Maung. Early in their careers, they were also influenced by Dong Kingman, the Chinese-American watercolourist, through a correspondence course they took at the Famous Artists School, where Kingman taught. Ba Nyan’s early Realist (and occasional Impressionist) paintings were full of dark colours, chiaroscuro*,* and impasto, and Kingman’s watercolours were light, bright, and vivid. Paw Oo Thet began painting colourful semi-Cubist watercolours of Burma’s temples and comic depictions of Burmese people with expanded grins that became popular among Burmese audiences. Win Pe also created vivid watercolours with flourishes of Expressionism.  Like Kin Maung, much of Paw Oo Thet’s exceptional oil work was done in a style that appeared in a single painting and was never repeated. *Three Blind Men*, an oil colour painting only available for reproduction in black and white, is one such work. The same episodic brilliance is true of Kin Maung Yin.  File: Paw\_Oo\_Thet\_Three\_Blind\_Men.jpg  Figure 3: Paw Oo Thet, *Three Blind Men*. Date and dimensions not provided. Photograph courtesy of the Paw Oo Thet family.  File: Kin\_Maung\_Yin\_Portrait\_of\_Paw\_Oo\_Thet.jpg  Figure 4: Kin Maung Yin, *Portrait of POT (Paw Oo Thet)* (1964). Oil on canvas attached to board. 19 x 11 inches (49 x 28 cm). Collection of the Paw Oo Thet family, Mandalay.  Bagyi Aung Soe (1924-1990) has had the most dramatic influence on contemporary modernism in Burma. In his time, he was little understood and often maligned, sometimes referred to as ‘psychotic.’ He studied painting at Santiniketan, the institution in India established by Rabindranath Tagore, but inexplicably returned from the school early. Of the early modernists, Aung Soe most liberally embellished techniques from Pagan, but he also drew from many other sources, including Japanese *sumi-e*, traditional and modern Indian painting, Western Expressionism, and from his friend, the Indonesian painter Affandi, whom he met at Santiniketan.  Aung Soe was enthralled by the primitive and magical power of traditional art, and filled his work with occult, cabalistic symbols. This reflected age-old tensions in Burmese culture because — although Buddhism was the means towards enlightenment — the occult had been deeply embedded in Burmese culture since pre-Buddhist, pre-Pagan times. Aung Soe understood this dichotomy and captured it in his paintings. He also painted works of many other subjects, such as his black-and-red series, where he explored savage expressions of human consciousness.  File: Bagyi\_Aung\_Soe\_Bearded\_Man\_Behind\_Bar.jpg  Figure 5: Bagyi Aung Soe, *Bearded Man Behind Bar*. Appears to be mixed media. 14.75 x 12.5 inches (38 x 32 cm). This may be a self-portrait. Collection: NM Gallery, Yangon. The Resurgence of Modernism The advent of modernism did not push the older school of Realism and Impressionism aside. Ba Nyan’s enormous influence on modern — not modernistic — painting lingered in the work of countless painters. As Burma opened its doors, painters of the Ba Nyan school found their work avidly sought by collectors. By the year 2000, the focus changed. Burma slowly modernized and awareness penetrated the art community that Realism and Impressionism were, inevitably, archaic forms. A second generation of modernists, born in the 1940s and early 1950s, had difficulty capturing the attention of art enthusiasts, but they were boosted by a younger generation of modernists. Imaginative abstract paintings surfaced rapidly, many drawing from Burmese traditions in the characteristic lateral manner. |
| Further reading:  (Ah Mar)  (Ker)  (Shein)  (Ranard)  (Ranard, Burmese Painting: River of Unknowns)  (Thanegi) |