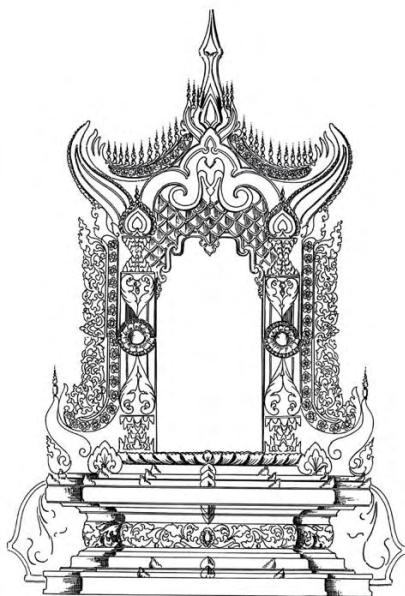


# *The Journal of Burma Studies*



*Volume 10  
2005/06*



*Featuring Articles by:*

*Alexandra Green*

*Chie Ikeya*

*Yin Ker*

*Jacques P. Leider*

# THE JOURNAL OF BURMA STUDIES

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## MODERN BURMESE PAINTING ACCORDING TO BAGYI AUNG SOE

Yin Ker

*Rangoon-based artist Bagyi Aung Soe (1924–1990) has been regarded by fellow artists as a pioneer of modern art in Burma. Influenced by precepts practiced at Rabindranath Tagore’s Sāntiniketan, he elaborated an original painting approach and style synthesizing diverse artistic approaches, which neither adhered exclusively to the European or Burmese artistic tradition nor regurgitated twentieth-century Western artistic innovations. Despite his renown within Burma, his idiom remains little understood both within and beyond Burma because of a lack of awareness of his motivations and their context. This article attempts to elucidate Bagyi Aung Soe’s interpretation of modernity in Burmese painting, and with reference to his works and writings, examine the modernity of his art.*

### INTRODUCTION

The conflict between a modernity of Western importation and pre-existing mind-sets and customs remains central to the articulation of a modern Burmese identity. As a Burmese expatriate writes, “The question is how to convince people that modernization doesn’t have to mean westernization” (Aung-Thwin 1997:43). This tug-of-war between a Western version of modernity and Burmese traditional culture has engaged artists in Burma (Myanmar) for more than half a century. As early as the 1920s writers like Min Thu Wun (U Wun) (1909–2004) and Zawgyi (U Thein Han) (1907–1990) were already inquiring into the “modern” in a literary movement referred to as *khitsan*, or “New Writing” (Min Zin 2000). It was, in fact, Min Thu Wun who initiated the inquiry into the issue of modernity in contemporary Burmese art. This leader of *khitsan* was inspired by the renaissance of Indian art at the beginning of the twentieth century driven by artists like Abanindranath Tagore (1871–1951). Having met Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941) and learned of the Nobel laureate’s vision for his *āśramah*

(conservatory) christened Śāntiniketan in Bengal, he sought a suitable candidate who could bring about a similar revival in traditional Burmese art to send to study in Śāntiniketan (Min Thu Wun 1991). In July 1951, a young illustrator from Rangoon, Aung Soe (1924–1990), left for the *āśramah* with a scholarship from the Indian government after a farewell party held in his honor and attended by prominent figures of the literary circle such as Zawgyi.

Shortly after his return to Burma, Aung Soe's non-figurative illustration for Kyi Aye's short story in *Shumawa* magazine in 1953 caused much uproar and earned him the enduring title of *seik-ta-za-pankyi*, meaning "mad art" and "mad artist," an expression that has come to be synonymous with abstract and modern art in Burma (see fig. 1 in gallery of illustrations at end of article). Fellow artists accused him of destroying Burmese painting, and some even suggested boycotting his work (Zaw Hein 1998:8). Despite the lack of support for non-traditional Burmese artistic expressions from both the authorities and the people,<sup>1</sup> he pursued a painting style that would be both modern *and* Burmese until his death in 1990. This objective is asserted in his 1978 self-published collection of his writings on art, *From Tradition to Modernity*. That there was remarkably little pressure on illustrators to refrain from non-figurative modes of representation (although this does not mean that illustrations were free from official censorship and public scrutiny)—in contrast to the difficulties faced by artists working in avant-garde art idioms<sup>2</sup>—on top of the *carte blanche* he benefited from many poets, writers and editors, Aung Soe was able to experiment on a modern

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<sup>1</sup> Detractors of modern art argued that the preservation of traditional Burmese culture against "decadent" foreign influences should be the first priority. This fixation on keeping out external agents for change is apparently typical of Burmese political culture. In 1977 Silverstein wrote that despite a century of contacts with the West through war, commerce, and colonization, the sense of isolation and the desire to derive solutions to local problems from the Burmese tradition remained persistent (Silverstein 1977:4).

<sup>2</sup> Artist Paw Oo Thet's letter addressed to the Artists' and Sculptors' Council delivers a succinct and but vivid account of the artist's struggles. It is translated and reproduced in a recent monograph (Ma Thanegi, 2004:117–18).



Burmese painting through illustration work for more than four decades with as many as eighty illustrations per month in various publications.

Because of his illustrations—as well as his writings, which allowed his ideas and art to reach a wider public—Aung Soe is considered by many in Burma to be *the* father of modern Burmese art,<sup>3</sup> although some circumspectly regard him as a pioneer alongside Khin Maung (Bank [1911–1983]) from Mandalay (Ma Thanegi 1996; Zaw Hein 1998:1–10). His unparalleled prolificacy notwithstanding (two publications in 1978—the third book, *Nights of Abstraction*, was unfinished at the time of his death [Ye Shan Ti ca. 1991] and the wide diffusion of his illustrations), none of his contemporaries dare claim understanding of his person or art. To date, there exist at least eighteen articles, rich in anecdotes, which pay homage to the artist, with—unfortunately for the art historian—little consequential analysis. Likewise, despite numerous articles and publications by local artists and amateurs on modern Burmese art, there has yet to be academic interest in the topic.<sup>4</sup> This void in domestic scholarship on modern art in Burma parallels the situation in international scholarship where alternative art forms deviating from preconceived ideas on what Burmese art resembles, as construed by her arts and crafts and archaeological findings, have inspired relatively

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<sup>3</sup> Interviews with both members of the art community and laypeople who know little about art suggest that Aung Soe is more well-known as *the* exponent of modern art. Khin Maung (Bank), despite his distinction, had little influence on fellow artists save those who knew him personally, such as Win Pe (1936–) and Paw Oo Thett (1936–1993); most have never seen his work before. In the most recent publication on modern Burmese artists, the writer begins the book with a chapter on Bagyi Aung Soe (Khin Than Phyu 2005:11–16). Aung Soe's standing as *the* modern artist is also possibly due to his more arresting idiom, as well as his penury and reputation of being an *enfant terrible*, which caters to the general public's imagination of the long-suffering eccentric artist—a stereotype of the artist not exclusive to the Burmese context.

<sup>4</sup> Burmese manuals on contemporary artists are often narrative and carry a good number of factual errors. Some present contradictory information. Nonetheless there have been theses on modern art by students from the University of Culture: "Contemporary Myanmar Painting as 'Art in its Second Function'" in English by Zaw Lynn, and "Study on the Works of Bagyi Aung Soe, a Modern Painter in Burmese" by Zaw Hein (Min Zaw).

little interest until recently.<sup>5</sup>

Considering that Aung Soe's work is regarded by his own people today as exemplary of modern Burmese art—the other significant contender in popularity being Paw Oo Thett (1936–1993), whose figurative illustrations of local legends and genre scenes are probably closer to the hearts of the masses—an understanding of Aung Soe's approach to modernity in painting is salient to the piecing of the eclectic tableau of modern art's inception in Burma.<sup>6</sup> It also is relevant to assessing the motivations and directions of younger Burmese artists today, for whom “modernity” is often considered a battle won.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Noel Singer's contribution to modern Burmese art in Turner's *Dictionary of Art* ends with the 1970s. It notes the rivalry between the watercolorists and the oil painters, a revival in traditional values, and the experimentation and adoption of styles prevalent in the West—without reference to any specific artist or example of work (Singer 1996:246–47). All other existing sources in English on modern art in Burma are to be found in art journals targeted at amateurs and collectors. Tuyet Nguyet first reported on the contemporary Burmese art scene in *Arts of Asia* (1971). Also in *Arts of Asia*, Elizabeth Moore documented six figurative artists working in the western tradition of oil and watercolors, and a copyist of classical mural paintings (1992). More recently are several contributions in *Asian Art News*, especially in 2001 and 2002, by Ian Findlay, Sian Jay, Ma Thanegi, and Jill Sheng. We look forward to John Glass' PhD dissertation on twentieth-century Burmese art (School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London).

<sup>6</sup> The stylistic plethora observed in contemporary Burmese painting is the result of the way modern art has been introduced to artists in Burma. Due to the unavailability of formal training in modern art and the scarcity of reading material—and all the more so translated ones—artists assimilated “modernity” in each his (or her) own intuitive way, relying mainly on reproductions, rather than texts. This leads to the manifestation of diverse practices within the same generation of artists. I owe this insight to Ahmad Mashadi and Joyce Fan of the Singapore Art Museum speaking in a panel discussion for the exhibition *Cubism in Asia: Unbounded Dialogues* (Singapore, February 17, 2006).

<sup>7</sup> Regrettably, significant conceptual confusions—for which both artists and critics are accountable—continue to plague the comprehension of modern art in Burma today; it remains referred to as *seik-ta-za-pankyi* or “mad art.” Writings on art by detractors of modern art who do not necessarily master the language of art have fueled conceptual misunderstandings. For many, including the senior artists, “expressionism” simply means an expressive style; “impressionism” could be used to refer to avant-garde styles in general (Hla Thamein 1994:339). **Writings by local art critics** and amateurs, as well as interviews with artists suggest that most are unaware of the difference in meaning between “abstract art” and “modern art.” Writer Dagon Taya identified this confusion when he acknowledged uncertainty as to whether the term “modern” or “abstract” should be applied to the Aung Soe's work (Dagon Taya 1997). Misinterpretations of Western art concepts abound.

Among them, many claim inspiration in the person and art of Aung Soe: Htein Lin, Bagyi Lynn Wunna, and Nay Myo Say (Ma Thanegi 2002d), etc. To create a personal style that is truly modern and Burmese remains a key concern today, regardless of the artists' individual iconographic and stylistic agenda.

In this paper, independent of the definitions of "modern" in other histories of art and its (mis)interpretations in Burma, I attempt to outline the factors contributing to this Burmese artist's perception of modernity and the ways in which he experimented in the direction of modern Burmese painting after his return to Burma in 1952.<sup>8</sup> This paper does not lay claim to having assimilated a comprehensive vision of the man and artist that he was; it is but a suggestion of what he might have been and attempted. New testimonies and findings on both the artist and the contexts of his art are constantly revising existing scholarship.

#### FROM DILETTANTE TO SCHOLARSHIP HOLDER AT ŚĀNTINIKETAN

The name "Bagyi Aung Soe" developed when the artist added the Burmese word for painting and art, *bagyi*, as a prefix to his name when signing an illustration in 1955. It remains his innovation to spell the word *pangyi* the way it is pronounced, instead of the way it ought to be written. Born in Rangoon, Aung Soe was the only son of a high-ranking police commissioner posted at Mandalay, where he spent his childhood. Although he drew and painted sporadically under the tutelage of U Ba Kyi (1912–2000), a distant relative, it was definitely under a relatively unknown painter, U Hla Bau (1904–1949), who was also a teacher of Khin Maung Yin (1936–), that he began to take art seriously during the Japanese Occupation (Zaw Hein 1998:21). Prior to his apprenticeship with U Hla Bau, Aung

<sup>8</sup> Technically speaking, it is not obvious as to whether the term "drawing" or "painting" should be used for Aung Soe's oeuvre. When referring to his work, Aung Soe used the Burmese word *bagyi*, which means both "art of painting" and "painting" (*Myanmar-English Dictionary* 1993). That is, moreover, how he signed his illustrations: with *bagyi* as a prefix to Aung Soe. Nevertheless, the majority of his works, which employ felt-tip pen on paper, is technically closer to drawings. In this paper, I use the terms "art" and "painting," as well as "painter" and "artist," because that was how Aung Soe spoke about his own work and how he referred to himself.

Soe was more of a dilettante who carried refreshments and equipment for artists on their outdoor drawing sessions (Min Thu Wun ca. 1991). In fact, he first aspired to be a cartoonist at a time when cartoons were a means of expressing the common people's hopes and frustrations (Zaw Hein 1998:4).<sup>9</sup>

Aung Soe's induction into creative fine arts definitely owed much to the key players of twentieth-century Burmese literature. They exposed him to new art forms and techniques, such as printmaking, presented established artists to the young amateur that he was, and even created opportunities for him—the most consequential event being Min Thu Wun's nomination of him for the Indian government scholarship to Śāntiniketan (Min Thu Wun ca. 1991). Another literary giant who made a significant impact on Aung Soe was Dagon Taya (1912–), who had in fact introduced him to Min Thu Wun. He was promoting *sarpay thit*<sup>10</sup> with his magazine, *Taya* (1947–1950), and, by bidding Aung Soe to illustrate for the magazine, inaugurated the young artist as an illustrator. Among many other things, he instilled in the artist-to-be the importance of “originality” through the lives and works of Paul Gauguin (1853–1890) and Vincent Van Gogh (1848–1903). Years later, Aung Soe claimed to have modeled himself after these two Post-Impressionist artists, according to the accounts of Irving Stone's *Lust for Life* and Somerset Maugham's *The Moon and Sixpence*, which were directly inspired by their lives (Kaung Nyunt ca. 1987).

Judging from his illustrations in *Taya*, and the handful of sketches that have survived, Aung Soe's early style bears the mark of U Hla Bau's European academic naturalism with emphasis on the imitation of nature—as discerned from the master's journals (fig. 2). Nevertheless, in Aung Soe's predominantly landscape and genre pieces, we observe a propensity for human expression, bolder strokes, and

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<sup>9</sup> On Burmese cartoons: Goux 1991:26 and Guillard 1990.

<sup>10</sup> This post-war literary movement meant “new literature” in Burmese. Her writers went a step beyond the writers of *khitsan* by introducing realism in literature. Their maxim was “art for the people.” Min Thu Wun recognized this movement as “the *khitsan* of *khitsan*” (Min Zin 2000).

occasional deviations from figuration. Compared to the work of more experienced artists-cum-illustrators like U Ngwe Gaing (1901–1967), U Ba Kyi (1912–2000) and U Ba Yin Ka Lay (1919–1988),<sup>11</sup> Aung Soe's style was not the most accomplished, but it certainly was sufficiently innovative to have convinced Dagon Taya and Min Thu Wun that he had the greatest potential to bring about a revival in traditional Burmese art.

In spite of the weight of the writers' impact, their role in the making of Aung Soe's art appears to have been only of an interim nature; it pales in comparison to the enduring influence of Nandalal Bose (1882–1966), the guru responsible for Śāntiniketan's pedagogical blueprint. After the young artist's return from India, their relationship waned;<sup>12</sup> Min Thu Wun remarked that Aung Soe's style was dramatically different after his return, and that it had become very unlike traditional Burmese art (Min Thu Wun ca. 1991). Others, however, considered it more brilliant than before (Paragu 2000), and commissions for illustrations accrued.

### **Śāntiniketan's Recipe: Burmese ingredients and other spices**

The University of Śāntiniketan, meaning the "Abode of Peace" in Sanskrit, was founded by Rabindranath Tagore to realize his ideal of education: a rounded artistic education whereby students in painting would also practice music and dance, and, vice versa, in the bosom of nature.<sup>13</sup> (*Śāntiniketan: The Making of Contextual Modernism* 1997; *Śāntiniketan 1901–1951* 1986; Kowshik 1980). Aung Soe was enrolled at the Kala-Bhavan (Department of Painting). His gurus included Nandalal Bose, Abanindranath Tagore (who died a few months after Aung

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<sup>11</sup> It is common for artists in Burma to illustrate for magazines and books; the concomitant practice of fine art and illustration is not frowned upon.

<sup>12</sup> For diverse reasons, interaction between the artist and his first benefactors flagged over the years. Contact between Dagon Taya and Aung Soe became intermittent and they last met in 1983—seven years before the artist's passing (Dagon Taya 1997). Min Thu Wun's recollections of Aung Soe date back to the middle of the century (Min Thu Wun, personal communication, Rangoon, February 2001).

<sup>13</sup> Situated in Bengal, Śāntiniketan is approximately 200 kilometers northwest of Calcutta. The land was acquired in 1901 and the school became Viśva-Bharati, a private institution, in 1922.

Soe's arrival on campus, in December 1951) and Ramkinkar Baij (1906–1980).<sup>14</sup> Despite his ultimate signature style resembling little of his teachers' work, not only is the Bengali *āśramah*'s spirit constant throughout Aung Soe's writings, he continued to quote or reminiscence on specific aspects of the *āśramah* in exchanges on scrap papers with friends and students (he communicated in writing due to hearing difficulties), right into the last decade of his life. He also signed "SANTINEKETAN" [*sic*] in Burmese and Roman letters on both his illustrations and paintings.

Aung Soe's leaving Śāntiniketan in 1952—little more than a year after his admission and without completing his course of study—caused much indignation among his Burmese contemporaries, who had pinned great hopes on him. In light of Indonesian artist Rusli's experience at Śāntiniketan in the 1930s, in which he was advised by a teacher to find his voice in the cultural and artistic heritage of his homeland,<sup>15</sup> it is possible that Aung Soe received similar advice, or had revelations that pointed in the same direction. This conjecture is supported by Aung Soe's travels throughout Burma almost immediately after his return to Rangoon, as well as his affirmation that it was Śāntiniketan that imbued in him the love for Burmese arts and crafts—even though he had always appreciated classical Burmese painting (Zaw Hein 1998:5,12). Like Nandalal, who surveyed the south of India at the beginning of his career (Gangoly 1968–1969:23), Aung Soe traveled to remote provinces in Burma. He lived among craftsmen in villages and learned such skills as woodcarving, lacquer painting, and the fabrication of papier-mâché and wooden toy figurines, the colors of which he transposed in his paintings and illustrations (fig. 3).

Nandalal's interest in folk and popular arts, which he in turn inspired in Aung Soe, should not be mistaken as an end in itself. Nandalal's trips to study classical and indigenous art

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<sup>14</sup> For examples of works by Nandalal, Abanindranath, and Ramkinkar, see *Śāntiniketan: The Making of Contextual Modernism*, 1997.

<sup>15</sup> Jasdeep Sandhu (Gajah Gallery), personal communication, Singapore, September 2000.

served the main purpose of deciphering their visual tradition's linguistic rationale. Following the break-up of traditional society and the disintegration of her paradigms, it was clear that the modern artist was no longer a part of a living tradition. Nandalal's solution to this rupture was a concept of the artist founded on his capacity to utilize art as "an extended form of communication," and to make the most of its fundamental capacity for communication. As such, the modern artist had to be as resourceful and versatile as possible to express visually all that can be known and experienced. This was to be achieved by applying himself to the practice of multiple communicational tasks employing different media and idiom, and serving different purposes (Kumar 1991). As such, teachers at Śāntiniketan initiated students to techniques of craft and art ranging from tempera painting to leatherwork to batik; students were free to alternate activities and address whichever guru with whom he or she shared affinities (Kowshik 1980:70–80). This largely explains Aung Soe's stylistic eclecticism and his readiness to apply himself to illustration as well as mosaics (an example of which can be seen at the former building of the Southeast Asian Ministry of Education Organization, Rangoon). That the artist within Nandalal's concept effaces his person, relinquishes self-expression to focus on resolving a communicational task creatively, is reflected in Aung Soe's repeated interpretation of the same motif or theme using different idioms over the decades: the episode of the deer hunt (Burmese: *Thaminlait*) from the *Rāmāyana* for example (fig. 4), and symbols drawn from Burmese folk and popular arts, as well as daily life.

Aung Soe's references to traditional Burmese folk art and classical Burmese painting were particularly predominant during the two decades following his return from India. Products of Burmese arts and crafts like puppets (*yokthay*), wooden figurines (*thittha-ayok*), papier-mâché dolls (*hpowayok*) and tumblers (*pittainghtaung*), and village entertainment scenes (such as *pyazat*, *zatpwe*, and *anyein*) were frequent subject matter although they were not subjected to as wide a range of stylistic



experimentations as the *kapī* of classical Burmese painting: mythological creatures such as the sacred goose (*hintha*), the mythical serpent (*naga*), the king of birds (*galon*), the ogre (*bilu*), and the lion (*hkyinthay*), which were interpreted using different idioms until the late 1980s (fig. 5). In Aung Soe's later illustrations, the *kanut*, which refers to the decorative aspect made up of stylized forms of floral and geometric patterns in classical Burmese painting, is reinterpreted to form the bodies of fantastical human figures and other ornamental compositions (fig. 6).

As much as Aung Soe's mastery of the skills of classical painting remains to be assessed, he definitely had adequate appreciation of the elements of its pictorial language comprising the *kanut*, the *nārī*, the *kapī*, and the *gajā* (Aye Myint 1993:238–39; Tin Lwin 1974; Wenk 1977:3)<sup>16</sup> to subsequently regenerate this idiom through the simplification of its motifs, without sacrificing its principles of design and composition. He never abandoned themes drawn from Burmese folk and popular art and classical painting; he only directed the linguistic structure toward a more expressive idiom with bolder strokes and alternative color schemes. Twentieth-century Western modes of representation were most likely an impetus in their message of liberation from mainstream academic naturalism. Other muses certainly included the colors and format of Indian miniature art, the reduction of forms to their minimal traits in Chinese *xieyi* painting, the graphic vibrancy of Japanese *ukiyo-e* prints—all to which he must have been exposed at Śāntiniketan.<sup>17</sup> The earlier drawing and shading techniques

<sup>16</sup> The *nārī* (human figure) and the *gajā* (monumental and stationary elements such as landscape features, buildings, or elephants) of classical Burmese painting do not seem to have captured the interest of Aung Soe.

<sup>17</sup> Japanese and Chinese art were not foreign to Śāntiniketan (Appaswami 1969:38–44). Its Pan-Asian leanings had been largely inspired by the Japanese author of *The Ideals of the East*, Okakura Kakuzo (1863–1913), who met Rabindranath in 1902 (*Śāntiniketan: The Making of a Contextual Modernism*, 1997). At least Nandalal was versed in both Japanese and Chinese painting (Appaswami 1969:38; Elmhirst, 1968–1969:10–14). In 1951, the year of Aung Soe's arrival in Śāntiniketan, there was moreover a visiting professor from Japan by the name of Tetsuro Sugimoto (1899–1985) (Kenjin Miwa, The National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo, written communication, March 2006).



learned from U Hla Bau were gradually abandoned by the end of the 1950s in favor of a more linear and graphic approach.

In 1978, Aung Soe published *Poetry without Words*, a collection of forty-seven black and white illustrations presented under four headings: "Fragments of traditional Burmese civilization," "Fragments of nature painting," "Heartbroken," and "Fragments of modern painting." This thematic division reiterates Nandalal's precepts of art instruction. The first two steps of Nandalal's pedagogical program consisted in familiarizing the student with his or her own cultural and artistic traditions—lessons assimilated by Aung Soe in "Fragments of traditional Burmese civilization," and making him or her study the immediate environment—"Fragments of nature painting." Nandalal's third step was to awaken the student's aesthetic sensibilities in order to forge his or her individual vision; the fourth was to encourage experimentation with diverse materials; the very last was to inculcate in the student a sense of social responsibility, both as an individual and as an artist (Subramanyan 1982:11).<sup>18</sup> The assimilation of Nandalal's third and fourth principles can be seen in Aung Soe's attempt at relatively novel forms in the sections "Heartbroken" and "Fragments of modern painting." Despite the illustrations being dateless and in monochrome, *Poetry without Words* is extremely precious for two reasons. Aung Soe's organization of the illustrations suggests a conscious effort to adhere to precepts to which he was exposed almost three decades ago in India. Secondly, this personal selection, as opposed to the entire corpus of illustrations published over thirty years, reflect what the artist appreciated best about his own oeuvre at this point of his life and career. Illustrations like *Give it Back to Me*, *The Little Oak Weeps* and *Beethoven's Visit in the Village of Nattogyi* marry traditional Burmese iconography and drawing with Western art styles such as surrealism and cubism (fig. 7), while *Poetry* and *The Intense Concentration of Mind* [Pali: *jhāna*, Burmese: *zan*] employ expressive brushstrokes reminiscent

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<sup>18</sup> For further readings on Nandalal Bose's teachings: Bose 1999; *Śāntiniketan: The Making of Contextual Modernism* 1997; Kumar 1991; Gangoly 1969; Mukherjee 1969.

of Far Eastern calligraphy and the *xieyi* tradition of Chinese ink painting (fig. 8). This collection of illustrations reflects the achievements and latest developments of Aung Soe's work over the past decades.

The writings of Aung Soe contain even more direct references to Śāntiniketan. Inspired and encouraged by Dagon Taya, Aung Soe first began writing on painting in the 1950s, after his return from India (Zaw Hein 1998:37). As soon as 1953, he wrote an article on Śāntiniketan in *Thway Thauk* magazine. That year, as he published *Poetry without Words*, he published *From Tradition to Modernity*, which contained twenty articles previously published in *Shumawa* magazine. They explored Burmese arts, Japanese prints, Indian miniature painting, etc. Here, Aung Soe dedicated an entire article to "Professor Nandalal" (Aung Soe 1978b:95–116). Echoing Nandalal's teachings, he wrote at length on the artist's responsibility to his epoch, cultural heritage, and self (Aung Soe 1978b:217–22), and argued that the modern Burmese artist would neither be a slave to his predecessors, nor abandon his heritage in full favor of Western-imported expressions.<sup>19</sup> Much as the drive against local art becoming derivatives of Western models might never have been articulated explicitly within Śāntiniketan's teachings, the school's pedagogical program focusing on the artist's resourcefulness—through diversifying visual tools for the purpose of effective visual communication—transcended the binary opposition between Oriental and Western art, a conclusion Aung Soe drew from his lessons at the *āśramah*. Possibly, it was a word of caution that Aung Soe wanted to give to his fellow artists in Burma. He continued to stress that it was only through immersion in one's artistic tradition that the artist would be able to establish himself in the international art scene (Aung Soe 1978b:217–22).

<sup>19</sup> Singaporean-Chinese artist Chen Wen Hsi (1906–1991) who was never in Śāntiniketan made a similar statement in writing that "I also believe that the true artist, while he absorbs the traditional and conventional values and merits, is not slavishly bound by them, but builds his own philosophy and style after he assimilates the good features of the past masters" (Chen 1976). The similarity in outlook suggests the presence of a *zeitgeist*.

Heir to Rabindranath's humanist ideals and witness to both the Pan-Asian and Nationalist movements, Nandalal had a famous metaphor (Subramanyan 1982:20):

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. . . . Similarly, in art, this inner embryo should have the power enough to break tradition open. Then only will new art emerge.

In other words, an artist's heritage was vital, but it should only serve art's ultimate purpose in the regeneration of forms, not hinder it; tradition was encouraged under the condition that its elements were capable of reinventing themselves when confronted with foreign and modern influences. The old and the new were not mutually exclusive; such was Aung Soe's inheritance. He wrote, "We should neither destroy all that is old, nor accept all that is recent. Environment will retain good traditions from the old, draw sincerity, and truth from the new" (Aung Soe 1978b:217–22).

The approach adopted by Aung Soe to create a modern painting uniting the finest of the old and the new was a synthesis of diverse practices and idioms. This is precisely the solution developed and endorsed by Nandalal. As early as the 1950s, Aung Soe's illustrations point to the assimilation of a wide repertoire of visual languages. By the end of the 1970s, we witness the successful integration of idioms both Burmese and foreign, Oriental and Western, within the same pictorial space. On top of his knowledge of classical Burmese painting and arts and crafts, Chinese ink painting, Japanese prints, and Indian miniature and contemporary art, Aung Soe was familiar with the innovations of early twentieth-century Western painting. European presence at Śāntiniketan since the return of Rabindranath from Europe in 1921 had bequeathed

documentation on Western art at the *āśramah* (*Śāntiniketan* 1901–1951 1986:20–21). From books in the libraries of the university and the Rangoon Institute of Technology where he taught part-time, Aung Soe further instructed himself on the differences in representational modes. Myay Chit Thu recollects Aung Soe's words in a letter by Myay Chit Thu, "Contemporary art understands that space is a continuous existence, in which an object changes, warps, twists but cannot interrupt. . . . This is the concept that cubism handed down to abstract art" (Aung Soe 1978b:20–23). This statement suggests that Aung Soe had a comprehensive appreciation and even insightful knowledge of recent Western art. His two portraits of Christ wearing the crown of thorns reflect the ease and confidence with which he slides from one idiom to the other, in this case from the graceful line work of what resembles French medieval drawing to a playful Surrealist version of an otherwise grave subject (figs. 9, 10).

In terms of method, Aung Soe claimed reliance on a combination of the "clever in hand" approach of Western art and the "clever in mind" approach of *Śāntiniketan* (Zaw Hein 1998:14–15). The former referred to technical flair whereas the latter is the capacity to perceive and translate in two-dimensional form the subject's essence; both were of equal importance to Aung Soe (Kaung Nyunt ca. 1987). At Rabindranath Tagore's *āśramah*, he had familiarized himself with the mnemonic technique, a technique that was relatively unknown to artists in Burma, save for a handful like U Lun Gywe who studied in China more than a decade later in 1964 (Jay 2001b:82). This method rejects the established practice in Western art from the Renaissance to the nineteenth century to "copy" nature; instead, it demands memory skill, spiritual concentration, intuitive intelligence, and imagination. It consisted of appraising nature's form to understand its "internal truth" before putting it down on paper at all. Students would go on excursions: enjoy the scenery, watch herds graze, admire the beauty of the *Santhal* women, chat with villagers, and not draw or paint at all—until the following day when they would

have to put on paper what they could recall from memory, or draw from imagination (Zaw Hein 1998:15). The *leitmotifs* of an inclined female figure and a three-quarter back view of a woman—in *sari* and later in Burmese dress—could well be developed from a souvenir of one of these excursions (fig. 11).

The teachings of Śāntiniketan explain Aung Soe's artistic practices to a great extent. Nevertheless, it should be noted that the learning experience at Śāntiniketan went beyond the transmission of ideas and *savoir-faire*. Accounts of previous students often point to Śāntiniketan being a living experience, "a way of aesthetic experience" and not merely a teaching institution (Kowshik 1980:8). There were no syllabi, no curricula, no examinations, no classrooms; the lessons were written on the grounds of the *āśramah*: the wall paintings, the sculptures in open spaces, as well as nature itself (Kowshik 1980:73, 76). Nandalal, for one, seldom taught vocally, privileging observation (Ramaghandran 1968–1969:28). Students were engaged in activities beyond their discipline of study; Aung Soe learned Indian dance, for example (Zaw Hein 1998:19). That Aung Soe rarely dated his work, rejected art as a market commodity, referred to himself as "*ako*" (elder brother) with his students and younger artists, and despised playing safe for success—all hark back to the sights and sounds of the Śāntiniketan he once knew (Kowshik 1980:70–80). Even though he did not go as far as to realize the philosophy of Rabindranath supposedly underlying the concept of Śāntiniketan's teachings, "which declared the kinship of Man to the lowly blades or particles of rock," he seemed to have been nonetheless conscious of Śāntiniketan's environs, "... the truth that art had to be lived and felt deeply within, before it was externalized" (Kowshik 1980:71,75).

#### **PAINTING EQUALS COMMUNICATING THE INTANGIBLE**

Since the mid-1960s, Aung Soe meditated with a group of writers and poets. He focused on the *thamahta* technique (Pali:

*samatha*)<sup>20</sup>—“the practice of concentration to gain tranquillity of the mind” (Hpe Aung 1954:17), or the pursuit of “*quiétude psychique*” (Bizot 1998:151).<sup>21</sup> By the early 1980s at the latest, he had integrated this meditation technique into his painting routine. It was noted by the artist as one of the four principal ingredients of good art (the other three being skill—or “clever in hand” imagination—or “clever in mind,” and knowledge through experience) (Zaw Hein 1998:25). Through meditation, he entered a state of mind that was appropriate to translating the Buddhist Ultimate Truth and other metaphysical concepts into painting, using sacred formulae and symbols. He referred to this method as *manaw maheikdi*<sup>22</sup>—a term originally associated with *weikza* practices<sup>23</sup>—which may be loosely translated as the great power of the mind. Aung Soe, however, denied affinities with practitioners of the *weikza* path, explaining *manaw* as the

<sup>20</sup> *Samatha* meditation is one of the two aspects of meditation in Buddhism. The other technique is the *vipassanā*.

<sup>21</sup> *Thamatha* meditation leads to mental concentration (Pali: *samādhi*), which is one of the three prerequisites of nirvana (*nibbāna*)—the other two being morality (*sīla*) and wisdom (*paññā*). It is believed to be the only way to attain the highest mind development through visual and spiritual concentration on one of the forty objects of concentration (Pali: *kamathana*). It begins with recitations that reinforce attention on the object; once concentration becomes complete, the devotee should be able to reproduce the image of the object—for example one of the discs (Pali: *kasina*)—in his “mind’s eyes.” Apparently, a very strong will is required to retain the image in mind (Hpe Aung 1954:17–18).

<sup>22</sup> According to a Burmese informer, *manaw* refers to the mind. More specifically, Shway Yoe explains that *manaw* is the sixth sense, the heart, or faculty of knowing, on which meditation—the unique way to attain the higher realms—relies (Shway Yoe 1989:390). He specifies that this “seat of knowledge” is the equivalent of what is known as the soul in other systems of religion (Shway Yoe 1989:391). *Eikdi* (Pali: *iddhi*) refers to “one of the six kinds of Higher Spiritual Powers” (Pali: *abhiññā*) (Nyanatiloka 2003). It is said to result from *samatha* meditation.

<sup>23</sup> The Burmese word *weikza* is derived from *vijjā* in Pali, meaning “(higher) knowledge” (Nyanatiloka, 2003). A *weikza* has been referred to as a “Buddhist wizard” (Pranke 1995) and a “Burmese Buddhist kind of superman” (*une variété bouddhique birmane de superhomme*) (Rozenberg 2005:93), among other things. However, as put forward by Rozenberg, “There is, indeed, not one but several possible conceptions of the *weikza* path and the vocation of its practitioners; accordingly, there is not one but several possible ways to define *weikza* (Rozenberg 2005:90). The findings of this author also suggest that *weikza* may “describe not only an attribute or a quality but also a state of being; it may both refer to a particular kind of knowledge and qualify the class of individuals who possess that knowledge and the supernatural powers pertaining to it” (Rozenberg 2005:93).

"subconscious,"<sup>24</sup> he wrote on the back of a work, "It is only painting. But I apply in modern painting basic knowledge on cabalistic diagrams, amulets and Pali protective verses, which have existed since a long time."<sup>25</sup>

Using the rarely exploited medium of felt-tip pen on paper, Aung Soe represented symbols of Burmese Buddhism on paper of approximately A4 to A3 size. We see the Buddha—in full-length, in portrait, full face, or in profile—Indian divinities, rituals in honor of the local spirits (Burmese: *nat*), surrounded by symbols from astrology and numerology (fig. 12).

Cabalistic designs (Burmese: *in*), the sacred monosyllable "Om,"<sup>26</sup> verses in both Burmese script and what appears to imitate the Devanāgarī script,<sup>27</sup> magical formulae in stylized designs, Burmese consonants such as "*sa-da-ba-wa*" and "*ka-ga-na-la*," which contain the short form of verses offering protection and power, and numerals derived from (and thus different from) standard Burmese numerals populate each work (fig. 13).<sup>28</sup> Apparently indifferent to the magical powers

<sup>24</sup> Aung Soe wrote, "In life, there are the body and the mind; that is what the Buddha said. The body may be smelt and touched but mind, it has to be felt. There are two kinds of mind: the exterior and the interior. The exterior mind, we call it the 'CONSCIOUS MIND' [written in English and in capital letters] in psychology. The interior mind, we call it the 'UNCONSCIOUS MIND' or the 'SUBCONSCIOUS MIND'; it is '*manaw*' in Burmese."

<sup>25</sup> It is said that figurative oil-painter U Ngwe Gaing had previously applied the principle of *manaw maheikdi* to his work. It is, however, uncommon for craftsmen or artists to do so. Unlike the work of Aung Soe, esoteric symbols and formulae cannot be found in U Ngwe Gaing's work.

<sup>26</sup> "Om" or "Aum" incarnates the Veda and Supreme Knowledge. It is made up of three sounds: "A", "U" and "M." Being the "seed" of all mantras, its importance in the development of Tantrism is fundamental. It is the mantra attributed to the Hindu god, Ganeśha. Because it is considered the beginning of all creation, it is not only used for protection on its own alone, but also for intensifying the power of all other mantras (De Bernon 1998:54; Renou, Filiozat 1947; Robinne 2000:155).

<sup>27</sup> Examples of these verses or formulae are *aung arahan theikdi*, *namo buddhāya*, *aung pataman*, *aung konawin arahan theikdi*, *aung pataman konawin*, and *Om mani padme hūm*. They can be a combination of Burmese and Pali words and expressions, which makes them incomprehensible to the uninitiated. Aung Soe's orthography of them is not always consistent.

<sup>28</sup> Aung Soe held back the use of cabalistic designs and sacred formulae in his illustrations; the readers saw mainly runes. It is in his works not destined for public circulation that we witness the extensive use of these mystical instruments on the fringe of Theravada Buddhism, but integral to Buddhism as it is practiced in Burma.



attributed to these elements, Aung Soe used them as symbols of the Law of Impermanence, fragments of Buddhist truths the pertinence of which had been lost over the centuries, the semantic function of which he was attempting to revive.

Considering Aung Soe's constant use of Buddhist framework and terminology in expressing his opinions on the world around him, there is no doubt that he identified himself very much with the teachings of the Buddha.<sup>29</sup> The extensive use of esoteric diagrams and formulae reserved to the initiated—some being derived from Tantra and Mahāyāna sources—suggests that apart from knowledge acquired from spiritually inclined friends and the environment, Aung Soe did study them in detail; it is unlikely that he hijacked the symbols and inscriptions for merely decorative purposes, surgically removed of their contextual significance. There is, however, no record as yet of any religious literature Aung Soe might have consulted or of any long-term retreat he might have undertaken to further spiritual advancement.<sup>30</sup>

Unquestionably, Aung Soe was steering away from representations of the material world to illustrate the abstract world of concepts and energies, “not to reflect the visible but make visible,” as U Ba Than (Dhammika) put it in English in his foreword to the artist's *Poetry without Words*. To do so, Aung Soe resorted to signs and symbols. Using cabalistic symbols, he attempted to communicate religious concepts and mystical dimensions. Using such commonplace signs as letters of the Burmese and Latin alphabet, scientific diagrams, arrows, eyes, numerals, and question marks, he endeavored

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This is possibly due to the regime's reservations about expressions of unorthodox beliefs like wizards. Fink provides an anecdote on a film-maker's experience with the censors with regard to a scene figuring a puppet of a wizard (Burmese: *zawgyi*) (Fink 2001:199).

<sup>29</sup> That Aung Soe's drinking ran against the Buddhist precept of abstinence from alcohol should be interpreted as his incapacity to restrain himself, not his disregard for it; this is the opinion of the artist's close friends. In an article he recounted how, in his desperation, he begged the Buddha and *nat* to help him abstain from alcohol (Aung Soe ca. 1987).

<sup>30</sup> Aung Soe, however, did make at least one day trip to meditate at the Sonlon monastery in the company of an editor and poet sometime in the 1970s.



to convey in visual terms his perception of reincarnation and Einstein's theory of " $E=mc^2$ ," for example, as well as his own metaphysical musings termed "zero theory" and "I draw solar energy" (figs. 12, 14, 15). In these new paintings, signs assume multiple functions: graphic, semantic, and even philosophical nuances. In one red and black illustration, "Om" in Devanâgari, in addition to its mystical significance, fulfills both an ornamental and structural purpose through the multiplication of its script to form a border around the drawing of an eye (fig. 16)—a metaphor of *thitsa* (Burmese for "fidelity" as well as "truth" or "sincerity"). In another work of extreme graphic and semiotic austerity, Aung Soe figured "Om" in both Burmese and Devanâgari script (marked by the interplay between the white paper surface and the red ground), with the words "exist" (*hpyit*), "grow" (*thi*) and "be destroyed" (*pyet*) in Burmese, and the Burmese numerals 3, 6, and 9 to express the fundamental Buddhist truth of Impermanence (Pali: *anicca*), seen in fig. 17. This elaborate recourse to signs—especially letters and numerals—bordered on a calligraphic art that eventually evolved into a hitherto unseen idiom: abstract signs resembling script, but with no meaning whatsoever become subject matter in their own right (fig. 18).

It is perhaps the numeral 0 ("zero theory") that best demonstrates Aung Soe's use of signs in his new painting otherwise known as "NEW VISION," "NEW ART," "NEW THOUGHT," etc.—inscriptions in English and capital letters found on his illustrations in *Hkyeyi* magazine in 1987. According to recollections of Aung Soe's followers, the artist argued that a point became a 0 when enlarged, like a circle; the smaller ones had greater mobility within a pictorial space than the bigger ones. He showed them how 0, or circles, of different sizes could well be the main graphic element in an artwork—as can be seen in some of his illustrations. For Aung Soe, 0 was a symbol of humility, a reminder of the importance of modesty in life, and possibly also an echo of the Buddhist concept of nothingness (Pali: *natthi*)—as suggested by an editor and friend. As such, 0 has been interpreted as the cessation of

suffering and liberation by some of his contemporaries. Aung Soe wrote on one of his works, “Do not think the small number zero unworthy, insignificant, and unimportant.” If Aung Soe were also thinking of the Burmese consonant *wa*, which is written exactly like a circle, when invoking 0, it would seem that the “zero theory” was also intended as a statement on the importance of a good foundation: *wa* is the first letter of the Burmese alphabet children learn to write at school.

### **Liberty alongside limits**

Preoccupied by the freedom to act as he liked, unrestrained by social conventions of respectability and what he considered to be trifling mercantile engagements, Aung Soe worked alone, independent of Rangoon’s art community, and almost never participated in official exhibitions.<sup>31</sup> What external stimulus he missed out on, he made up with internal journeys: meditation, reflections on the metaphysical, and on ways to transpose the intangible into art. That his reticence led to misunderstandings of his person and work did not seem to bother him.<sup>32</sup> He persisted in supplying either enigmatic or partial answers to inquiries on his works. On one of the illustrations grouped under “Fragments of modern painting” in *Poetry without Words*, he wrote in English, “We see only what we know. When you call a thing mysterious, all that it means is that you don’t understand it.” His standard reply to laypeople who questioned the meaning of his works was, “It is because you absolutely want to know that I have to invent an explanation. In fact, this drawing has no meaning” (Kaung Nyunt ca. 1987), but among close friends, he admitted that “behind every painting—even though the work does not figure

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<sup>31</sup> Aung Soe was not enthusiastic about making oil paintings, despite friends’ continual encouragement. There were ample opportunities to exhibit, which he turned down. For example, U Ba Than (Dhammika), who founded the Lokanat Galleries, repeatedly solicited the artist’s participation to no avail. If he exhibited on several occasions at the Peacock Gallery during the 1980s, it was at least partly out of his affection for his one-time student who co-founded that gallery.

<sup>32</sup> There were many—including artists—who took Aung Soe for a mere drunkard; they only grew to respect him after his death in retrospect.

any object, there is always a subject" (Zaw Hein 1998:30–31). Aung Soe's framing of answers to suit the interlocutor's level of understanding (as he assumed it to be) has thus left us with a trail of contradictory statements on diverse aspects of his person and art. It is not impossible that this usually gentle man's erratic and lunatic behavior was but a means of creating avenues for momentary indulgence in freedom of speech and action. He would return from the psychiatric hospital—where he was sent by his wife whenever he became uncontrollable after heavy drinking—and recount how interesting were his fellow inmates.

An amalgam of chromatically discordant colors, a combination of flat areas of colors conscientiously filled in with felt-tip pens in neat parallel strokes, and rapidly executed lines, and an unwonted juxtaposition of symbols, inscriptions, and figuration characterize Aung Soe's signature pieces. There is little reverence for proportion and balanced compositions, which the artist justified as the works being subjected to "time and space."<sup>33</sup> Certain paintings appear to have been executed in a frenzied state, others in a very calculated manner. Sometimes there is a mixture of both. It would seem that Aung Soe let each work "grow," rather than stick to a fixed agenda, in a way akin to "*écriture automatique*" of surrealism (a style that fascinated Aung Soe, as can be seen in his illustrations), whereby one wrote or painted spontaneously without preconception as if in a trance.<sup>34</sup> According to his followers, instead of manipulating ink or paint to achieve an intended form or effect, Aung Soe let it flow: observation itself was considered to be a part of the creative process. To Aung Soe, there was no such thing as glitches in execution; whatever "accidental" spot of paint

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<sup>33</sup> Aung Soe wrote, "Painters will say that this image of Buddha is not a correct 'DRAWING.' If they were to evaluate it according to their vision and rule, it is perhaps true. On my part, I would not say that this image is not correct. Because there is 'TIME AND SPACE,' it is not wrong."

<sup>34</sup> Although this approach certainly explains his spontaneous technique of pouring and scraping during the few times he used oil paint, only further investigation may throw light on the specific part of surrealist influence on Aung Soe's modern painting using *manaw maheikdi*.

ensued from a single creative spur and was thus an integral part of the work. It could even be a point of departure in the development of a new imagery. As such, he advocated against touching up or correcting works for the purpose of rendering a painting more “beautiful” in conformity with conventional expectations of art. Relying on spiritual concentration achieved through *thamatha* meditation, Aung Soe painted with a mind freed from premeditations to focus solely on the moment.

Aung Soe considered no subject matter taboo, not even eroticism in illustrations; it was a question of its level of sophistication being high enough to surpass judgmental eyes. Like Nandalal, he considered that “Art should be rated on the basis of aesthetic, not moral quality” (Bose 1999:16). His work looked at urban life in Rangoon, Burma’s myths and legends, the theme of the woman in all her multiplicity from the symbol of the mother and nation to the vamp, and many others. This vast thematic spectrum suggests an inquisitive mind and a keen eye. His interpretations of a single theme or motif using different modes of representation further imply a progressive outlook open to adopting new ways of perceiving and representing subject matter. There is great ease in the transition from one idiom to another. Aung Soe’s stylistic variety is an acute example of a contemporary regional approach to foreign, and specifically Western, influences: modern Western art styles such as cubism, expressionism, and surrealism were regarded by artists as a “pool of resources” serving “a means, not an end.”<sup>35</sup> There was no reason for artists to pursue “-isms” emptied of contextual significance on Asian soil; each mode of representation became merely an option among many others. In experimenting with what he understood to be cubism, Aung Soe was not striving to be the “second Picasso.” He clarified to a student, “I am sad to be called the Burmese version of Picasso. I would have preferred to be slapped across the face rather than to be called that. . . . It would have been as

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<sup>35</sup> Ahmad Mashadi and Joyce Fan, *Cubism in Asia: Unbounded Dialogues*, Singapore Art Museum, Singapore, February 17, 2006.

if I were the second Po Sein.”<sup>36</sup> As in the case of contemporary artists within the region (Singapore: Chen Wen Hsi, Cheong Soo Pieng; Malaysia: Datuk Syed Ahmad Jamal, for example), Aung Soe’s thematic and stylistic diversity should be rightly understood as an affirmation of both cultural and artistic autonomy. It was less the manifestation of artistic immaturity than an all-rounded effort to survey existing styles before synthesizing the relevant to create a personal idiom. Any debate on Aung Soe’s art being derivative of Western models is thus largely irrelevant.

Financial constraint was not the main reason behind Aung Soe’s lesser legacy of oil paintings. He was known to have rejected friends’ and colleagues’ offers of conventional paint materials; it was his deliberate choice to work in ink and felt-tip pen on scrap pieces of paper or even the back of calendars. This decision was both ideological and artistic. It was within Nandalal’s concept of modern art—which Aung Soe respected—that the artist should use readily available materials (Bose 1999:xi–xii); the Indian artist actually advocated the self-fabrication of brushes.<sup>37</sup> Moreover, Nandalal had begun a new phase whereby the use of “poor materials” became even more pronounced at Śāntiniketan around 1950—the time when Aung Soe studied there (Mukherjee 1968–1969:47). Aung Soe probably understood that as a culturally responsible artist, he should avoid relying on the oil medium, considering its foreign origins and high cost.<sup>38</sup> This does not mean to say that he boycotted the use of “expensive” materials, however; Aung Soe used whatever was at hand, which is how a small number of oil paintings did come down to us. Almost certainly, on top of the low cost of felt-tip pens, Aung Soe found that it

<sup>36</sup> Mintha Po Sein (1880–1952) was a renowned dancer and actor who brought innovations to Burmese dance and drama (Singer 1995:54,58). Here, Aung Soe meant that the stakes between Picasso and himself were so different; to compare him with Picasso was as farfetched as comparing him with a dancer.

<sup>37</sup> Shyamali Khastagir, personal communication, Śāntiniketan, February 2001.

<sup>38</sup> In *From Tradition to Modernity*, Aung Soe also expressed sympathy with Japanese painter Shindo Domoto who deliberately worked in only ink on rice paper—readily available materials in Japan (Aung Soe 1978b:171–77). Reviewer Astri Wright signals that Thai artist Thawan Duchanee (1939–) also employs a similarly “poor” and unconventional medium: ballpoint pen.

facilitated the expression of linear beauty—an important aspect of Asian pictorial aesthetic, according to Nandalal (Bose 1999)—as compared to oil or watercolors. Clearly, his expression is pronouncedly linear even when manipulating Western media like oil and acrylic, as can be seen in his self-portrait (fig. 19). Felt-tip pen and ink's quick drying properties also allow speedy execution—a skill valued by Aung Soe (Zaw Hein 1998:25).

It should be noted that the context of creation of most of Aung Soe's late works was marked by his ailing health and dire poverty. He drank, was losing his hearing and sight, and after a minor heart attack in 1983, spoke with difficulty. Because he never relied on the sale of paintings for a living—although he did exchange works against refreshments at the teashops<sup>39</sup>—he was dependent on alternative resources. However, by the 1980s, his ill health, as well as his moments of willfulness in younger days, which dented his professional reputation, had prevented him from acting in movies and lecturing at the Rangoon Institute of Technology. Younger illustrators also meant greater competition in securing commissions for illustrations. In spite of escalating economic difficulties, Aung Soe refused to modify his mindset with regard to the commercialization of art; he continued to express disdain at artists who made financial returns a part of their agenda. He insisted, "I am happy being poor painting; that is the life I chose." This disregard for money must stem partly from the education he received at Śāntiniketan where monetary rewards were considered irrelevant to artistic excellence. Albeit strained material conditions during his last decade, it appears that his responsiveness to the cultural, religious, social, and even political environment—as preached by the gurus at Śāntiniketan—only became more acute. Confronted by the political unrest that gravely affected his own students,

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<sup>39</sup> It is recounted that Aung Soe always had his bag filled with felt-tip pens, as well as his favorite snacks, wherever he went. Be it at a teashop by the roadside or in a magazine's editorial office, he was always ready to paint or draw on any piece of paper or cardboard at hand. The fresh works would either be exchanged against refreshments or given away on the spot.

he voiced his anguish in the portrait of a Buddha attacked by iron screw catapults and the representation of a chalkboard hit by a bullet. The dynamics of break dance pricked his curiosity and its movements were analyzed in a schematic drawing that remains in the collection of his last and youngest student.

### A BURMESE PAINTER'S MODERNITY

Aung Soe's oeuvre does not share cogent similarities with documented modes of representation from outside the country. Neither do they resemble those of his predecessors and contemporaries within Burma in any way. Considering the work of an immediate contemporary, U Lun Gywe (1930–), who has chosen to pursue an Impressionist style of painting until today, Aung Soe's work must have been groundbreaking. Aung Soe did not seek to capture beauty. To him, painting in itself was a concentration exercise the sole purpose of which was communication: using signs in ways to communicate concepts most effectively. Instead of resuming the Burmese artistic tradition, or simulating a specific foreign art style—none of which alone would have been capable of expressing the full spectrum of life in twentieth-century Burma—he chose to develop an original idiom built on signs taken from his immediate environment. The result is an expression of the old and existing in original modes of representation through the ultimate reconciliation between the modern Western concept of total creative freedom, which was given a more objective dimension through Śāntiniketan's humanist ideals and consideration for traditional Eastern artistic practices, and the essentially Burmese, deeply ethical view of the painter's ties with Buddhist precepts of morality, concentration, and knowledge (Pali: *sīla*, *samādhi*, *paññā*).<sup>40</sup> It is an attempt at modern painting through the fusion of Burmese Buddhist spirituality, both Eastern and Western artistic stylistic methods, and the artist's personal philosophy about life and art.

Besides being a dramatically revised interpretation of

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<sup>40</sup> Aung Soe cited all three as the basis of art, custom, and culture in Burma (Aung Soe 1985).



Buddhist symbols, Aung Soe's art also is a reflection of life in Burma in the second half of the twentieth century—minus the Arcadian overtones. Indeed, it is primarily from Burmese culture that Aung Soe's art drew strength, if not always its form. His strong artistic personality and resourcefulness then found a way to weld the unfamiliar discourses, practices, and styles into a single idiom. In taking pride in the local, the mundane, as well as the universal, his art affirms a singular cultural integrity, which echoes Rabindranath's definition of true modernism as the "freedom of mind" and the "independence of thought and action" (*Śāntiniketan: The Making of Contextual Modernism* 1997). It is what Aung Soe referred to as "world tradition," the foundations upon which he laid Burmese tradition, but whose objective clearly seeks to transcend the insularity of the specific. Credit for the blueprint of this "modern" art certainly goes not to Aung Soe, but to the masters of Śāntiniketan, especially Nandalal who cast the humanist and Pan-Asian ideals specific to the *āśramah's* context, as well as the arguments from the formative period of modern Indian art, into a distinct pedagogical program (Kumar 1991:3).<sup>41</sup> Aung Soe's contribution lies in his foresight and genius for experimentation and synthesis.

In representing a worm emerging from an apple on the cover of the 1987 March issue of *Atway Amyin* magazine (fig. 20), Aung Soe led a young reader to realize that even a worm, weary of being stifled in the apple and eager for the world outside, could symbolize the thirst for truth and knowledge; he learned that there was more than one way of seeing the world and interpreting it. For those who may see, there is freedom through mental conditioning and imagination. Aung Soe's new painting sought renaissance; it was neither rupture nor custodianship. The ambition of Burma's literary pioneers for their country's art has not failed.

<sup>41</sup> A comparative study of the works of artists from India, Japan, Indonesia, and Thailand who lived and worked at Śāntiniketan during the first two-thirds of the twentieth century would certainly provide a new dimension to our understanding of the gestation and genesis of modern art within the generic geographic confines of Asia.



## GALLERY OF ILLUSTRATIONS

*Editor's note: The following illustrations demonstrate the range of works by Aung Soe. All photographs of the images were taken by the author unless otherwise specified. Color versions may be found online at <http://www.grad.niu.edu/burma/publications/journal/journal.htm>.*

**Fig. 1.** Illustration, *Shumawa*, January 1953, medium and dimensions of original artwork unknown. Original artwork: Location unknown.

**Fig. 2.** Illustration, *Taya*, February 1950, medium and dimensions of original artwork unknown. Original artwork: Location unknown.

**Fig. 3.** Cover illustration, *Ngwaytayyi*, November 1971, medium and dimensions of original artwork unknown. Original artwork: Location unknown.

**Fig. 4.** Cover illustration, *Moway*, August 1979, medium and dimensions of original artwork unknown. Original artwork: Location unknown.

**Fig. 5.** Cover illustration, *1000 Poems*, 1968, medium and dimensions of original artwork unknown. Original artwork: Location unknown.

**Fig. 6.** Illustration, *Shumawa*, July 1985, medium and dimensions of original artwork unknown. Original artwork: Location unknown.

**Fig. 7.** Illustration, *The Little Oak Weeps, Poetry without Words*, 1978, medium and dimensions of original artwork unknown. Original artwork: Location unknown.

**Fig. 8.** Illustration, *The Intense Concentration of Mind (Zan)*,

*Poetry without Words*, 1978, medium and dimensions of original artwork unknown. Original artwork: Location unknown.

**Fig. 9.** *Jesus Christ*, 1970, medium and dimensions of original artwork undetermined, location of original artwork unknown. (Photo: Masao Takenaka, *Christian Art in Asia*, Tokyo: Kyo Bun Kwan, 1975)

**Fig. 10.** Title unknown, undated, gouache, oil pastel, marker, and felt-tip pen on paper, 378 x 230 mm. Collection of U Sonny Nyein, Rangoon.

**Fig. 11.** *Indian Woman*, undated, pencil, gouache, and felt-tip pen on paper, 228 x 298 mm. Collection of Gajah Gallery, Singapore. (Photo: Jasdeep Sandhu)

**Fig. 12.** Title unknown, undated, marker and felt-tip pen on paper, 275 x 195 mm. Collection of Gajah Gallery, Singapore. (Photo: Jasdeep Sandhu)

**Fig. 13.** Illustration, *Myawadi*, June 1988, marker and felt-tip pen on paper, 280 x 183 mm. Original artwork: Collection of Nay Myo Say, Rangoon.

**Fig. 14.** Illustration, *Hkyeyi*, May 1985, medium and dimensions of original artwork unknown. Original artwork: Location unknown.

**Fig. 15.** Title unknown, 1985, marker and felt-tip pen on paper, 355 x 255 mm. Collection of Gajah Gallery, Singapore. (Photo: Jasdeep Sandhu)

**Fig. 16.** Original artwork for illustration, undated, marker and felt-tip pen on paper, 216 x 170 mm. Collection of Gajah Gallery, Singapore. (Photo: Jasdeep Sandhu)

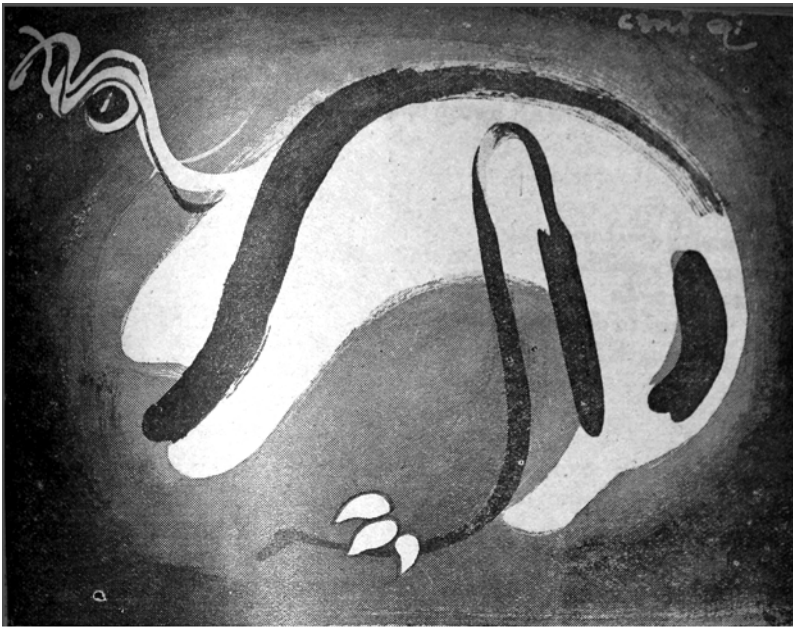
**Fig. 17.** Title unknown, undated, felt-tip pen on paper, 180 x 140 mm (approximate). Private collection.

**Fig. 18.** Illustration, *Myawadi*, May 1988, medium and dimensions of original artwork unknown. Original artwork: Location unknown.

**Fig. 19.** *Self-portrait*, undated, oil on board, 600 x 480 mm. Collection of Singapore Art Museum, Singapore. (Photo: Singapore Art Museum)

**Fig. 20.** Cover illustration, *Atway Amyin*, March 1987, marker and felt-tip pen on paper, dimensions unknown. Original artwork: Collection of Maung Wuntha, Rangoon.





**Fig. 1.** Illustration, *Shumawa*, January 1953, medium and dimensions of original artwork unknown, location of original artwork unknown. (Photo: Author)





**Fig. 2.** Illustration, *Taya*, February 1950, medium and dimensions of original artwork unknown, location of original artwork unknown. (Photo: author)







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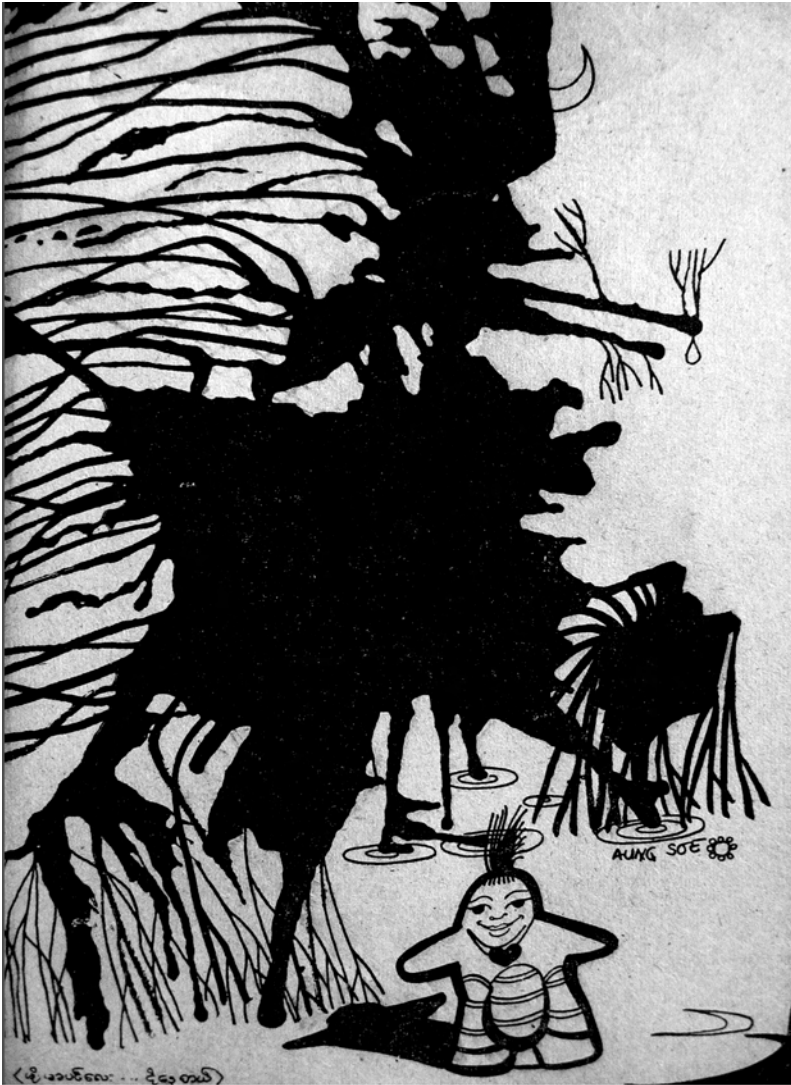
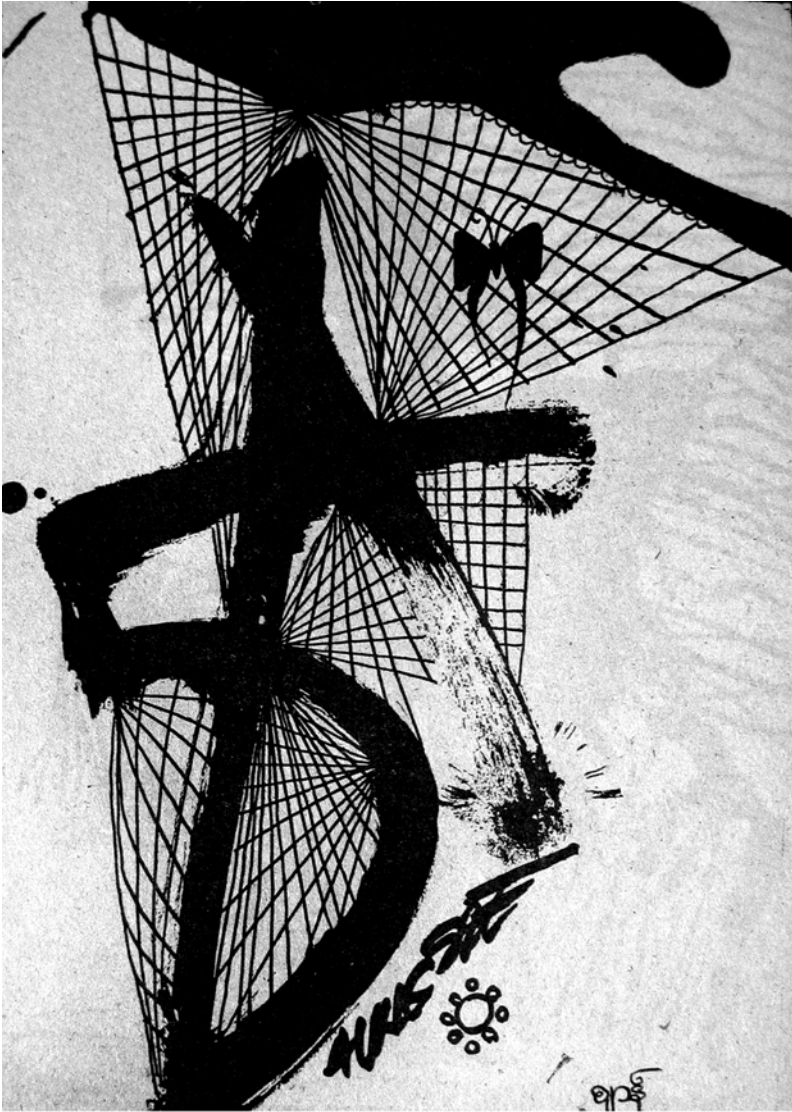


Fig. 7. Illustration, *The Little Oak Weeps*, *Poetry without Words*, 1978, medium and dimensions of original artwork unknown, location of original artwork unknown. (Photo: author)





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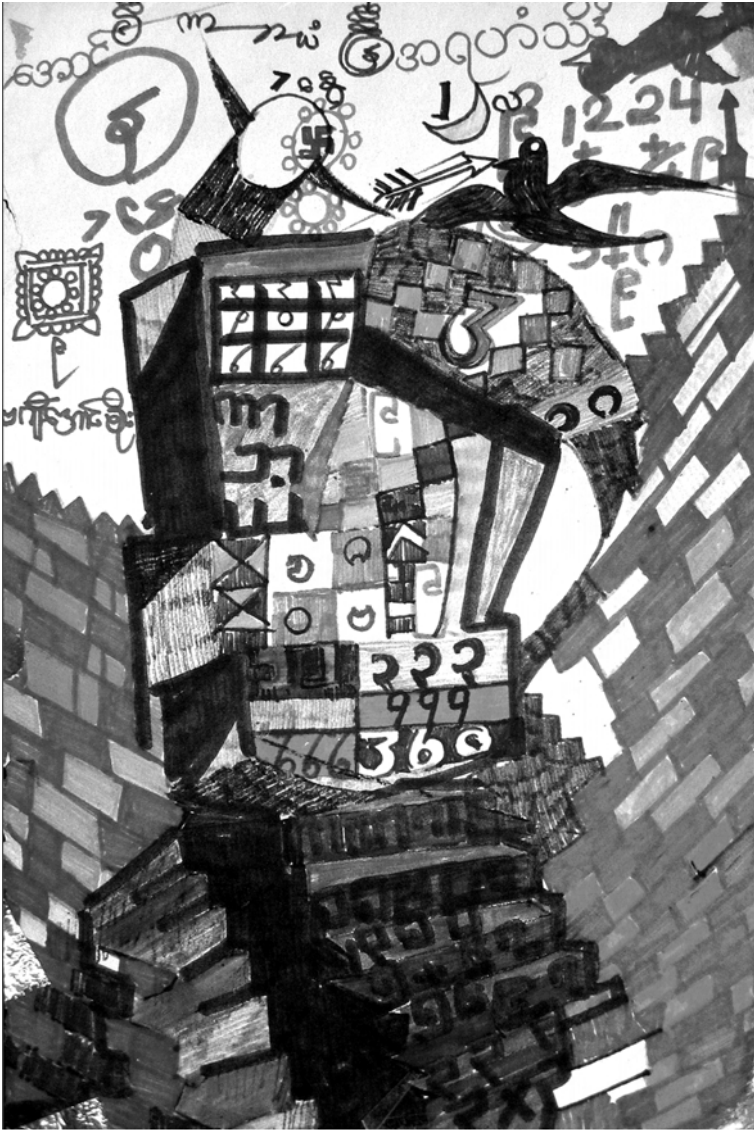


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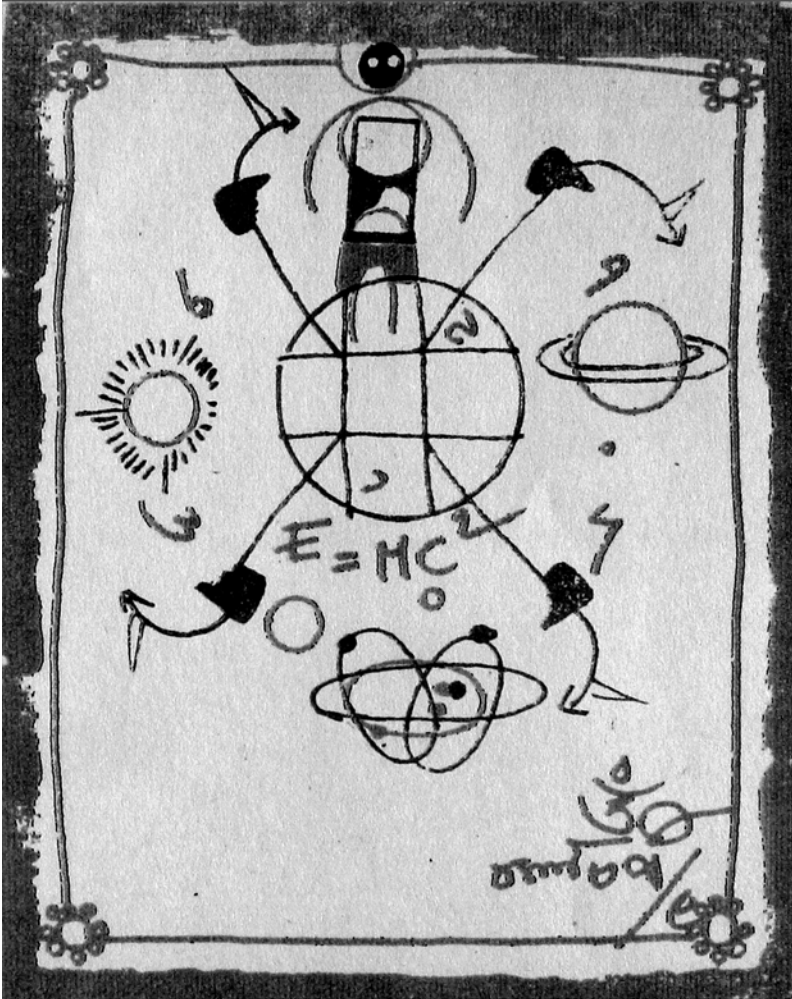


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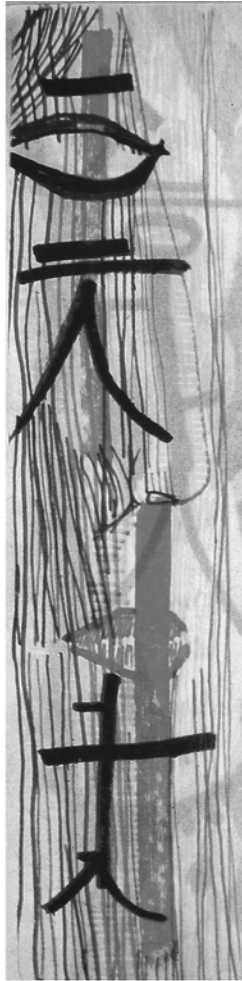
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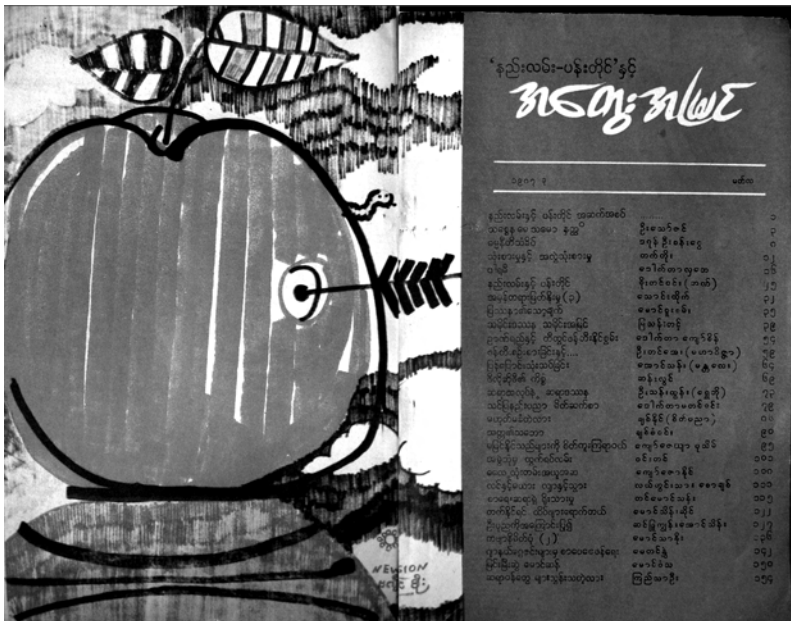






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