Contemporary Buddhism: An Interdisciplinary Journal

Shan buddhist art on the market: what, where and why?

Catherine Raymond
Published online: 26 Jun 2009.

To cite this article: Catherine Raymond (2009) Shan buddhist art on the market: what, where and why?, Contemporary Buddhism: An Interdisciplinary Journal, 10:1, 141-157, DOI: 10.1080/14639940902916219

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14639940902916219

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE
SHAN BUDDHIST ART ON THE MARKET: WHAT, WHERE AND WHY?

Catherine Raymond

Shan Buddha images are generally identifiable even in the absence of typologies of Shan iconographic styles. Our contribution herewith to the development of such a typology is based on recognizably Shan Buddha images within the Northern Illinois University Burma Art collection, several of which bear inscriptions indicating date and provenance. That the present borders of Burma/Myanmar, Laos, Thailand and China dissect the former Shan kingdoms – in none of which countries the Shan assert cultural sovereignty – suggests an eclectic approach to Shan iconography, and implies the reason for the seemingly-disproportionate present share of Shan Buddha images in the international antiquities trade.

Overview

When looking through a collection of Buddha images of Burmese origin from any given period, the Shan pieces are somehow easily recognizable. Yet systematic typological studies of distinctively Shan Buddhist art are still largely absent from the iconographic research: paralleling our slender knowledge of the particularity of Shan Theravāda Buddhist practice. Due in part to arguably chauvinistic aspects of Myanmar’s commitment to cultural conservation, Shan art and Shan religion are clearly de-prioritized now in defining and protecting the ‘national patrimony’.

Thus, Shan artefacts appear to figure disproportionately large within the contemptible international trade in prima facie stolen religious artwork: as evidenced from the antiquary markets in Bangkok, Chiang Mai, Hong Kong and Singapore; and from the advertisements in the Asian art collectors’ magazines. Indeed, such a de-contextualizing of Shan art is precisely a component of a ‘Heritage in Danger’. This paper wishes to address some of the difficulties of defining Shan Buddhist iconography applied to Buddha images, as well as defining their provenance within a broader area encompassing not only the Shan States in Burma, and Burma proper, but also former Lanna and Lan Xang; as well as Sipsong Panna (Xishuangbanna).

Based upon a limited set of well-known and un-dated (or of uncertain dates) Buddha images from various collections in Southeast Asia (Laos, Northern
Thailand, Shan States), or in the US—more specifically, several dated Shan Buddha images included within the Burma Art Collection of Northern Illinois University—this paper proposes a very preliminary comparison of Shan and non-Shan iconography, and thence extending such a comparison to other less-known collections: such as the supposed ‘Lane Xang’ Buddhas in the Ho Phrakeo and Vat Sisaket Museums in Vientiane, which are predominantly Lao and Lanna in provenance, and thus which—presumably—afford greater commonality with the Shan traditions.

The second element examines what appears to be an unprecedented share of identifiably Shan images now available in the international antiquities trade, and the possible explanations thereof. While a review of the literature shows only slender iconographic research on purely Shan Buddha images, the author puts forward an eyeball survey of recognizably Shan, or assertedly Shan, artefacts presently or recently marketed to international collectors: including those being sold directly at the River City Emporium in Bangkok; those advertised in severable reputable journals for collectors of Asian art; and, not least also, those seen online at various web sites of greater and lesser probity.

The author argues that a more general analysis including both the Shan States of Burma/Myanmar and the key Shan regions in neighbouring countries is required properly to understand this rich tradition. While strongly urging that a survey be speedily conducted of what remains of significance within Shan Burma, it is recognized that such a survey in itself will be insufficient to preclude or even much limit international trafficking of Shan Buddha images. Nevertheless, while the first objective obviously warrants extensive new fieldwork cataloguing major pieces amongst the various monasteries in Shan States, this paper will meanwhile leap towards considering the reasons for the sudden prominence of Shan Buddhist pieces on the globalized art market.

**Shan Buddha images at Northern Illinois University and their links with neighbouring countries**

In considering their provenance, knowing for certain that they had been purchased in Thailand after the *coup d’etat* by Ne Win in 1962, I questioned whether the comparison with dated Buddha images in quite the same style from the two former kingdoms of Lanna (or Lan Na) and Lan Xang—which were both under Burmese ‘patronage’ between 1550 and 1772, CE—could prove more informative as to how to better define Shan art?

For Northern Thailand, the previous studies undertaken by Griswold (1957, 1959) and more recently by Woodward (1997), Fickle (1974) and Stratton (2004, 290–294) give us a wide range of new information regarding Buddhist sculpture of which the provenance was the present Northern Thailand. But we do not yet have quite the same breadth of knowledge from the former kingdom of Lan Xang in Laos, apart from the study by Gagneux (1975) of Lao epigraphy—later published in part by Giteau—and Giteau’s own study of the collection of the Ho
Phra Keo and Vat Sisaket Museum in Vientiane. The information is still rather limited, but research initiatives presently underway should in the near future better instruct us how to relate these collections to the larger region.

Among the common aspects of Burmese Shan seated Buddha images, and also Lan Na and Lan Xang seated Buddhas, is the māravijaya posture. Indeed, this evocation of Gautama Shakyamuni’s ‘victory over Māra’, whereby the seated Buddha extends his right hand towards the Earth Goddess to call her to witness, is by far the prevalent posture in Mainland Southeast Asian Buddhist iconography.

But if we look more carefully at the seated Buddhas from Lan Na5 and Lan Xang, the majority of the statues—particularly the earlier examples in bronze and those later in wood or in lacquer—the āsana, or position of the legs displayed, is ordinarily virāsana; with the notable exception of examples of the so-called ‘Singhalese’ or Phra Singh type, which are in padmāsana: more often associated with the dhyānamudra, gesture of meditation. This ‘full lotus’ position—where the

*FIGURE 1*

Crowned Buddha, wood, inscribed ca. 1885 (cat. #BC 86.01.07)
two soles of the feet are both visible—is also that displayed by the majority of seated Buddha images from the Shan States, as well as in specifically Burmese Buddhist iconography.

This tends to be confirmed by the Northern Illinois University (NIU) Burma Art Collection’s Buddha image (catalogue No. 86.01.07.00, dated by inscription to CE 1885; see Figure 1), which is the only example with an inscription in yuan and is indeed in the virāsana posture. The others, inscribed in khun, are in padmāsana. As noticed by Finot⁶ and more recently by Peltier,⁷ yuan script is indicative of the Chiang Mai and Chiang Rai region, although it is also associated with the Tham (in Laos), the Lu (in Sipsong Panna), and the Khun (in Shan States) (Ba Shin 1966, 1–5; Than Tun 1988a and 1988b).

Finot also notes that the first Shan inscriptions found in Laos date from 1550 and 1560.⁸ This date coincides with the beginning of the extension of the Burmese Empire, which for over two centuries would assert its authority over Lanna, and episodically, over Lan Xang.

So we can assume the religious exchange of Buddha images and techniques related to Buddhist images between Lan Xang and Shan States via Lanna had existed at least since the sixteenth century CE, and we know from the account left by Van Wuysthoff, a Dutchman serving as a VOC agent who visited Vientiane in 1641, that the Lan Xang Kingdom was flourishing at that time (Lejosne 1987). Furthermore the recent article by Justin McDaniel argues that, contrary to the popular assumption that states ‘destruction, stagnation and intellectual stagnation’ occurred during the time the Burmese ruled part of Lan Na and Lan Xang (1551–1772), the Buddhist practice and the production of manuscripts flourished in Northern Thailand (McDaniel 2007). It is also confirmed by these two dated Buddha images from 1520 and 1523 found in a private collection in Bangkok by Griswold (1959, 59). They bear inscriptions ‘probably in Tai Lu, the language of Mong Wa’ in Shan States, a language similar to that found in Sipsong Panna (Griswold 1959, 59). But this style of the images described by Griswold as ‘rather crude 16th century provincial productions of the old kingdom of Lanna’ is also nearly identical to that of a number of Buddha images displayed now throughout the cloister of the extant royal temple of Vat Sisaket, and probably originally from several other royal temples destroyed during the sacking of Vientiane by the Siamese in 1827–28 CE. Therefore, we can assume exchanges of images were well established between Shan States, Lanna, Lan Xang and Sipsong Panna, knowing already that ‘in the middle of the 15th century the Sinhalese form of Buddhism was introduced there by a mission from Chiang Mai, where it had been implanted some years beforehand. But in 1523, Keng Tun transferred its allegiance to one of the Northern Shan States and ultimately to Burma’ (Coedès 1925, 93 and 138) These images are thus witness to the long tradition of fabricating images in one venue and receiving their inscriptions in another.

Especially interesting amongst the limited number of Shan Buddhas found in the NIU Collection are two of the dry lacquer Buddhas, of which the hair is made of lacquer thickened with teak sawdust.⁹ Lacquer hair of a similar technique and
style was commonly applied to the heads of bronze Buddha images found now in Laos and dating as early as the fifteenth century. It was still very popular not only in Laos but also in Burma at the end of the eighteenth century and thence through the early nineteenth century.

But the characteristics of what is viewed as a traditional Shan Buddha image vary according to whether it is made out of bronze (see Figures 2 and 3); or is in gilded wood (see Figures 1 and 4–6); or in dry lacquer (Figure 7), with the exception of some in gilded alabaster (Green 2008, 209, Fig. 10.8 and 210, Fig. 10.9). For various environmental reasons the most ancient of the dated Buddhas are usually in bronze. Shan Buddha images can be either a simple Buddha wearing a monk’s robe; or alternatively buddha parés, or ‘adorned Buddhas’ (Figures 1, 4–7). In the latter case the image bears a crown with one to three tiers, sometimes decorated with thayo (lacquer putty) and inlaid glass mosaic (Figure 4) and is always surmounted by a finial ending either as a lotus bud or as a flame.
and which can differ in shape (Figures 1 and 5–7). When the Buddha is in gilded wood, ‘flying ribbons’ in wood are attached to or inserted into the crown (Figure 6). The ears are gently curved outwards, and may touch the shoulders, while bearing circular earrings (Figures 5 and 6). In addition, various pieces of jewellery, emblems of his rank, may cover all or part of the torso and arms, which may differ greatly from the Burmese crossing salwe and the associated flanges.

Other distinctive Shan characteristics may also be identified, including an oval and serene face with a rounded chin and a shy smile: the downcast eyes often represented as simple, inclined small slits, and the arched eyebrows that could be incised, seeming to extend from the bridge of the nose, commonly displaying rather wide nostrils. Although the three creases on the neck are sometimes visible, this element may vary between the bronze images (Figures 2 and 3) and the wooden and dry lacquer images.

Sometimes rings are seen on each of the Buddha’s fingers (Mongrai 1965; for illustration, Green 2008, 210, Fig. 10.9). The fingers are long and equal in length.
with a long thumb, a feature shared also with the images in Lanna and Lan Xang to whom they should be stylistically compared. All of them sit atop high, stylized lotus thrones usually square or rectangular in section, except for those images in bronze and dry lacquer where the thrones may be ‘waisted’.

Some of these thrones could be hollowed, as indicated at least in two of the images from the NIU collection (Figures 4 and 8). Such a distinctively Shan practice could have been either for insertion of relics, or most probably for housing the ashes of the deceased. This is reinforced by the inscriptions sometimes associated with such images; for example, ‘May all attain Nirvana’ (Figure 4) ‘... in the hope of one day seeing the coming of the future Buddha Ari Metteya’ (Figure 7).

The relationship of the above attributes and those of the crown Buddha (Fraser Lu 1981a; Galloway 2002) and the Universal Monarch, as the sambhogakāya (Mus, 1928, 153–278 and PG in Menzies, 2001, 56–63) should be more carefully studied. This type of representation well known in India and Bengal—mistakenly called in Burma Jambhupati Buddha—became very popular during the early Pagan Period; and since the fourteenth century, each of the kingdoms from Mon, Burmese, Arakanese and Shan had developed their own specific iconography. At the inscriptions associated with the jewellery from the crown to the chest necklace, the bracelets, the epaulets and armlets, as well as the rings, require further analysis. For example, they are clear distinctions between
the chest ornament on Shan Buddha images (Figures 1 and 4–6; Di Crocco 1998, 143, Figures 2–3 and 5; Karow 1991, 49–71, Figures 43–57, Green 2008, 198–199, Figures 10.6 and 209–211, Figures 10.8–10.9) and the Burmese salwe¹⁵ (Lowry 1974, Figures 2 and 12) which differ also from the Arakanese (Gutman 1979, 48–55, Figures 1–13; Blurton 2001, 58–59, Figure 6.4) and from the Mon (Di Crocco 1998, 138, Figure 2; Isaacs and Burton 2000, 134–135, Figure 76; Green 2008, 202, Figure 10.10).

Each of these qualities should be compared and analysed systematically according to their provenance: either from the Shan States or from the Mon States in Burma, as well as those from Arakan. In the NIU Collections, we can notice that most of the dated images were made subsequent to the fall of the last Burmese dynasty. Had the end of the Konbaung Dynasty indeed changed Buddhist practice in Shan States?

Ideally, a more ambitious study could be pursued in comparing a much larger number of dated Buddha images, along the lines of the research conducted.
by Professor Than Tun at Pindaya Cave in the western part of Shan States (Than Tun 1982, 2003). We would like also to see a major future survey of inscribed Buddha images found in the major monasteries around Inle Lake as well as those in the 22 monasteries of Kengtun, Shan State.

**Shan art on the market**

Compared with the extensive investigations on Lanna culture over the past decades, very little work has been done on Shan culture, for which we need to be particularly appreciative of those few who have undertaken it.\(^2\)

Yet, while the iconographic knowledge of Shan Buddha images is sparse, Shan artefacts appear to figure disproportionately large within the contemptible international trade in *prima facie* stolen religious artwork: as evidenced from the antiquary markets in Bangkok, Chiang Mai, Hong Kong and Singapore; and from
the advertisements in Asian art collectors’ magazines. Indeed, such a de-contextualizing of Shan art is precisely a component of a ‘Heritage in Danger’. See, for example, this extract from the web site of a well-known dealer:

Our offerings come from private collectors, from museum de-accessions, and from our travels in the remote areas of Burma, Cambodia, Laos, Viet Nam, and Nepal. But our chief source is Thailand, the Asian capital for antique art.

We never deal in stolen antiques or looted antiquities, and salaried, adult craftsmen make our new pieces. Each member of our consortium has its own network, which
This brazen web site also claims that its proprietor is ‘officially’ present (whatever that may mean) in Asia, in Europe and in America. Dealers like these ordinarily receive artefacts through a network of local agents. Such middlemen serve both to insulate dealers from the potential physical danger entailed in unsavoury acquisitions, and to create plausible deniability regarding illegal trafficking in antiquities.

The artefacts here are marketed not to sophisticated collectors with some understanding of Buddhist iconography, but rather—with a shallow pitch towards purchasing décor pieces lending ‘peace and serenity’—to lifestyle consumers looking to upgrade their interior design. It used to be that somebody wanting a Buddha head had to go, for example, to River City in Bangkok, but now a few clicks
on the computer will have it dispatched to him or her straightaway. The likely increasing demand bodes ill for the in-situ conservation of cultural properties. And what could be more pleasing to even the most naive new collector wanting to participate in an exotic experience than a Burmese Buddha, or, more specifically, a Shan gilded Buddha image with a smiling face adorned with semi-precious stones or glass inlay work?

To combat such traffic, UNESCO passed the 1970 Convention for Preventing the Illicit Traffic in Cultural Property (Bureau of Education and Cultural Affairs 2005). In Myanmar, in 1998, due to the increase of tourism, the Archaeology Department prepared the Protection of Cultural Heritage Regions Law, which includes ‘stupa … monastery, carving, image and painting thereon’. 14

The greatest defect of Myanmar’s Cultural Heritage Law, as well as analogous laws in the Lao PDR and Cambodia, is that the demand for such objects is neither addressed nor alleviated. Most exported artefacts pass through Thailand, yet neither Burma or Thailand are signatories to the 1970 UNESCO convention. While this is obviously beneficial to the countless Thai traffickers in illegal antiquities, one wonders why insufficient international pressure has been brought to bear to change this in nearly 40 years.

Knowing too the importance, since the sixteenth century, of the fabrication of images in establishing the Shan Buddhist lineage system, the disruption of that lineage through the theft of Buddha images—motivated by reasons political or economic, or both—entails further heavy consequences in eroding traditional Shan religious practices.

Catalogue of selected Shan Buddha images from the Burma Art Collections at Northern Illinois University

Crowned Buddha with inscription

BC 86.01.06. Crowned Buddha, wood gilded with inscription incised (1837) (Figure 4). Inscription in Tai Khoen dated in BE 1199, equivalent of CE 1837, done during the waxing moon (i.e. the full-moon day) of May. Like all these images presented here, this Buddha is in māravijaya. The image seated in padmāsana was ‘offered by (illegible) with sons and daughters, in the hope it can last 5,000 sāsana, and may all attain nirvana’. The back of the pedestal is hollowed, very probably as a repository for the ashes of the deceased. The inscription, located under the niche, was evidently incised by a well-educated person.

BC 86.01.11. Crowned Buddha, wood gilded, inscription painted (1887) (Figure 5). Twelve lines of inscriptions, painted red on black background, one-half in Burmese and one-half in Tai Khoen, dated from BE 1249, equivalent of CE 1887. This image is seated in padmāsana. The inscription was done by a well-intended but not well-educated person.
Crowned Buddha wood gilded inscription incised (1889) (Figure 6). Inscription in Tai Khoen, dated from BE 1251 equivalent of CE 1889. Three lines are visible on the upper part of the pedestal, in front and on the two sides. This image in māra-viṣaya, seated in padmāsana, was offered by the chief of Myo La Mya Lwin township, within Keng Tun area, in the hope of one day seeing the arrival of the future Buddha Ari Metteya. The inscription was incised by a well-educated person.

Crowned Buddha wood, inscription incised (1885?) (Figure 1). Inscription in Tai Yuan from Lan Xang, dated from BE 1247 equivalent of CE 1885. Thirteen lines incised on the back of the pedestal. This image in māra-viṣaya seems seated in virāsana.

Crowned Buddha with no inscription

Although this general type of image is of the Burmese style (Isaacs and Blurton 2000, 133; or Green 2007, 208, Figure 10.6), this particular image in māra-viṣaya is seated in padmāsana.

Crowned Buddha in lacquered and gilded wood with no inscription (Figure 8). Buddha, Northern Shan States, Hopong. No inscription. This Buddha in māra-viṣaya is seated in padmāsana and is hollowed on the back of the pedestal either for relics or for the ashes of a deceased.

Bronze with inscription

Bronze with inscription

BC 87.05.01. Buddha, inscription (1878), Northern Shan (Figure 2). Image in māra-viṣaya is seated in padmāsana. The robes and throne are shown by incising. Two small rings on each side of the lower level of the pedestal were once probably receiving two kneeling disciples paying homage. On the inscription deeply incised on the back of the pedestal and barely legible, we still can read BE 1238, equivalent of CE 1878.

BC 86.01.10. Buddha, inscription (1888), from Nam Kham, near Hsipaw (Figure 3). Similar to the previous object, with the robes and throne shown by incising, but here on this image the folds of the robes have fallen in relief from the left shoulder. The robe covered also a part of the left shoulder. Inscription deeply incised on the back of the pedestal, dated from BE 1250, equivalent of CE 1888.

NOTES

1. See the web site of the Burma Art Collection from the Center for Burma Studies at Northern Illinois University, in DeKalb Illinois, USA (www.grad.niu.edu/burma). The Center for Burma Studies was established in 1986 by the Burmese Studies Foundation of the Association of Asian Studies to promote the study, understanding and appreciation of Burma, including its people, society, art, literature, language, history, religion and cultures.
2. See Orientations or Arts of Asia.

3. As he underlines, ‘More is known about political and monastic affairs than about stylistic development . . .’.

4. See Giteau (2001), where she presents an analysis of her previous studies of the Royal collection in Luang Prabang; see her article in Arts Asiatiques, t. XVI. 1973 and her UNESCO report for the Ho Phra Keo collection, 1969.

5. Sarassawadee Ongsakun (2005). The best example is the ‘Phraphuttha Mueangrai Chao’ bronze image dated from 1565, commissioned by the Burmese commissioner Chaban Sankran according to the Burmese inscription. This image of the Buddha is seated in padmasana following the Burmese. For comparison see the Phracheo Mun thong at the Prasat temple in Lanna and dated from 1590 where the Bronze Buddha image is seated in virasana, more in the Lanna style. See Sarassawadee Ongsakun (2005, 117, Fig. 51) and Ba Shin (1966, 1–5, Figures 2–4).

6. Finot (1917, 26). This is still the most comprehensive study on the subject.

7. Peltier (1987 and 2000). For the past 20 years, A.R Peltier has been collecting documents in various Khun languages, see Fonds Anatole–Roger Peltier, at EFEO, Chiang Mai, Thailand. For comparison you may also refer to his tables presenting the four writings: tham, khoeun, yuan and lu (Peltier 1990). An overview of his work is also presented in English in Goudineau (2003).

8. Finot (1917, 26–27). Finot classified the Shan writing into three categories with minor differences in the lettering: the Tham used in Laos mainly for religious purposes, the lu used in North of Laos essentially in Sipsong Panna, and the yuon used in Xieng Mai area touching Xieng Tong.

9. See at the end of the paper a catalogue of a selection of six dated images with Shan inscriptions and two non-dated images. For other dated and non-dated images see the web site of the Burma Art Collection at Northern Illinois university (www.grad.niu.edu/burma/).

10. Giteau (2001): in bronze, p. 153 (Fig. 113) dated from 1491 and p. 156 (Fig. 118); in lacquer, p. 161 (Fig. 128) and p. 162 (Fig. 131) dated from 1811.

11. In comparison, two NIU Burma images from the late eighteenth century in dry lacquer BC.2005.1.1 and head of a Buddha in dry lacquer BC.2008.1.2. This type of workshop making dry lacquer Buddha also called Hman-hpaya, a technique popular for centuries in China, existed in various places in Burma and was then exported to Shan States. One of the most famous in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was located near Butalin in the Lower Chin-dwin and in the late nineteenth century was Ye-u township in the Mon-ywa district (Fraser-Lu 1994, 244).


14. See Myanmar (1998, Chapter 1, section 2b1). Although it exists, it was done mainly with the aim of not destroying archaeological sites but not really addressing the illicit traffic of Buddha images. See Chapter VII under prohibition
section 20c ‘excavating in search of antiquities’. We can also question section 21b, which states ‘carrying out archaeological excavation’ ‘without prior permission granted under this Law’.

15. The salwe (chest ornament) consisted of a silver and gold chain draped around both shoulders, so as to cross the chest diagonally. The wearing of the twenty-four chains was the prerogative of the Burmese monarch, while the Shan rulers were permitted to wear only eighteen. Fraser Lu (1994: 168)

REFERENCES


---

**Catherine Raymond**, Director of the Center for Burma Studies and Associate Professor of Southeast Asian Art, Northern Illinois University, 101 Pottenger House, 520 College View Court, Dekalb, IL. 60115, USA

Email: craymond@niu.edu