

Textiles Asia

J O U R N A L



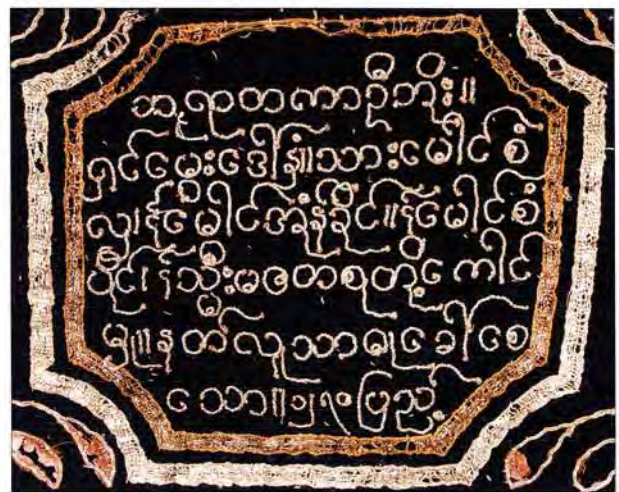
September 2011, Volume 3, Issue 2

Shwe Chi Doe: A Recent Acquisition of the Tilleke & Gibbins Textile Collection

Dr. Linda McIntosh

The Tilleke & Gibbins Textile Collection accessioned a large *shwe chi doe* hanging (h 1.6 m x w 4.7 m) in 2010. Pre-World War II examples are rarely found in the market; thus, the purchase was a rare opportunity to acquire a type of textile absent from the collection. Existing examples are housed in private and major museum collections, including the Victoria & Albert Museum, the Australian National Gallery, the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco and the Denison University of Ohio. Little is known about the history of the *shwe chi doe*. However, a Canadian collector purchased the textile from a dealer in Hong Kong over twenty years ago, and then auctioned it in 2010. The theme of the overall design is a Buddhist narrative, more specifically the Three Worlds. The earthly realm is depicted with a scene of Burmese royalty on the composition's left side. On the right hand side, the ruler and judge of the Underworld, Yama, delivers sentences. And, names of the various realms of Buddhist heavens are found in the top section. The textile's couched inscription in Burmese lists the names of the family who commissioned the piece.

[This is the] good work of U Bo, Daw Hnan, Maung San Hla (son), Maung Oun Khaing (son), Maung San Paing (son), and Ma Eta Su (daughter). May it be recognized. 1270 (i.e. 1908 CE)



Dedication – The couched names of the family members who commissioned the shwe chi doe and donated it to a Buddhist temple and the year the hanging was made (1908 CE) in Burmese.



Royal Family – Detail of the royalty with court retainers.



Hell and Yama – Far right section of the shwe chi doe. A scene of hell is illustrated with Yama, overlord of Hell, passing judgement on sinners.

History of Shwe Chi Doe

Ornately decorated with metallic yarns, sequins, glass cabochons and various types of fabrics, *shwe chi doe*, also called *kalaga*, continue to be produced in Burma and Thailand. Some authors state that this decorative work has existed for over a thousand years with evidence from early kingdoms, such as the Pyu. *Shwe chi doe*, or gold thread embroidery in Burmese, flourished during the Konbaung Dynasty (1752-1885 CE), the last Burmese dynasty before British annexation of the kingdom in 1885-6. Production declined after losing royal Burmese patronage although some Shan courts and other members of society, local and English, commissioned *shwe chi doe*. After World War II, commercial production in Thailand and Burma revived this art form with its consumer base expanding to tourists. Efforts, including those of Jim Thompson, assisted in the revival of this art form. It is now made in varying levels of quality to meet the market demand. As with all other arts, styles come in and out of popularity, leading to change.

As a royal art, *shwe chi doe* was classified under *pan tein*, the art of making items in gold and silver. These decorated textiles under court patronage were composed of precious metals, gemstones, silk, cotton, and imported goods. Imported raw materials, including velvet and wool, were an indication of status as sumptu-

ary laws limited access to them. The Burmese royalty and Buddhist temples had the exclusive privilege to use these valuable textiles (the latter received the textiles as offerings, usually for ceremonial purposes). Later, members of the royal family gave permission to others, such as officials and members of court, to wear clothing decorated with *shwe chi doe*. Dancers' costumes may have been adorned with *shwe chi doe* artistry, but the materials were likely replaced with less valuable goods. Glass replaced gems, for example. After the abolition of the Burmese monarchy in 1886, sumptuary laws were struck down, and citizens with the means could commission *shwe chi doe* to donate the textiles to the Buddhist institutions and for their own personal consumption.

Under royal patronage *shwe chi doe* technique was applied to nine types of objects: royal regalia, such as robes and headdresses; embellishments for processions, such as saddles; decorations on pillows and table covers; clothing for non-royalty; coffin covers; clothing and items for religious ceremonies, such as ordinations; theatrical costumes; clothing for puppets; and interior decoration items, such as wall hangings and partitions. *Shwe chi doe* actually is not embroidery with gold threads, but rather gold and silver wrapped yarns are



Peacock – Typical of hangings from this period, several borders frame the center section, and images of birds, peacocks in this example, fill in the large border.



Meru – Center portion of the shwe chi doe. It depicts a fortress, perhaps symbolizing Mount Meru, with buildings in the fashion of the Mandalay palace at its summit. In Buddhist cosmology, the heavenly realms begin at this mountain's peak.

placed on a fabric's surface to form a pattern and are secured with stitches; and this technique is called couching. This technique is similar to techniques used in other cultures, such as *zardosi* work of India. The Burmese style of adornment also includes the appliqué of cloth, sequins, gemstones, or glass.

Production of the raw materials and of the actual textile was and continues to be specialized. After the court was moved to Mandalay in 1857, artisans were housed outside the palace in special quarters or organized in villages depending on specialization. For example, one village produced sequins. Workshops or studios received commissions to create a *shwe chi doe* according to particular specifications. A master artist designed the *shwe chi doe*, and his assistants supervised the

numerous stages of production carried out by workers.

A large hanging was made of smaller units joined together. First, using chalk, the artist draws the design outline on a cloth stretched onto a frame, (sometimes paper stencils replace the drawings). There were numerous small stretchers of cloth with an outline of one section of the overall design. On the small stretchers, each decorative element is completed, such as the couching of gold wrapped yarns, the attachment of sequins and glass, and the appliqué of different types of fabric. It became popular to stuff some of the designs, *trapunto*, to add dimension (this was not popular in hangings made for the royalty or during the 19th century). Coated with rice paste on the reverse, finished designs were cut out and then stitched onto the large background fabric.

The designs could be narrative. The subject matter for the designs often had a religious theme. Various *jataka* tales, especially the last ten, were popular choices. Episodes from the life of Siddhartha Buddha are also illustrated in *shwe chi doe*. Traditional beliefs and literature, including localized Indian epics such as the Ramayana, were other sources of inspiration. Some

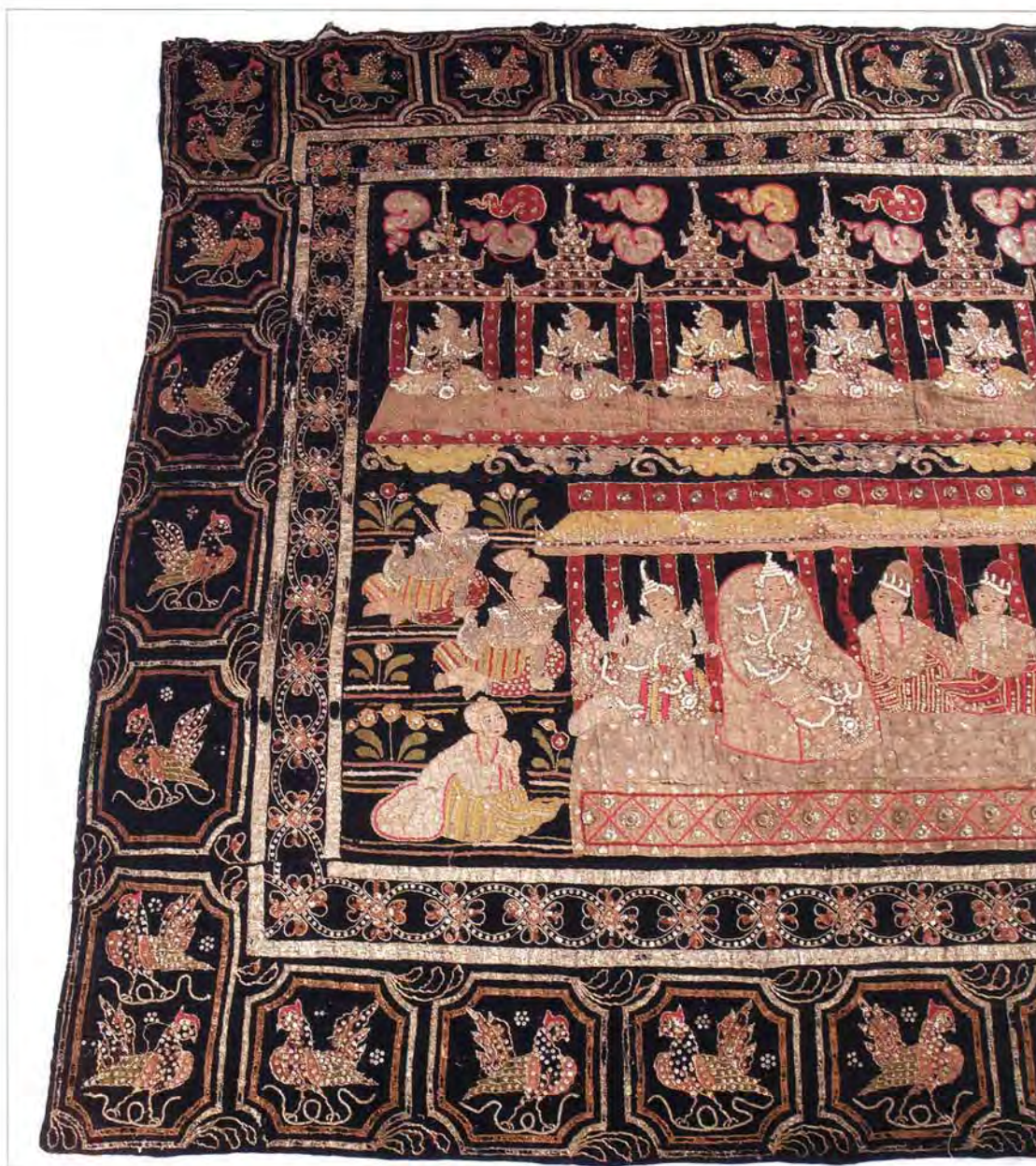
hangings were decorated with scenes from court and village life, landscapes, and festivals. The themes of *shwe chi doe*, cloth paintings and mural paintings are similar. Sometimes, *shwe chi doe* are decorated with different types of flora and fauna. Symbols of astrology are popular as well.



Scene from Hell, detail – Punishment is beheading, and the heads are boiled in a cauldron.



Detail of court council members – Different types of court officials are symbolized by distinctive dress.



Heaven and Earth – Far left section of the shwe chi doe. The central field's top section is decorated with gods and the names of the various realms of Buddhist cosmology couched on their sitting cushions. Below is a scene of a Burmese court palace with court officials waiting on two members of royalty.

Note: Dr. Patrick McCormick provided the translations of the inscriptions. Thank you very much for your assistance.

References and Further Reading:

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Photographs courtesy of the Tilleke & Gibbins Textile Collection.

Dr. Linda McIntosh specializes in mainland Southeast Asian textiles, particularly examples produced by the Tai ethnic groups. She is an advisor to the Traditional Arts and Ethnology Centre in Luang Prabang, and serves as a consultant on development projects in Laos. She has curated exhibitions at the Jim Thompson Art Center and the National Museum of Laos in Luang Phabang. Linda currently acts as consulting curator for The James HW Thompson Foundation and the Tilleke & Gibbins Textile Collection in Bangkok.



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