

The history behind the headlines – a new British Museum exhibition to mark the 75th anniversary of Myanmar's independence from Britain

2 November 2023 – 11 February 2024  
The Joseph Hotung Great Court Gallery

31 October 2023

Supported by:  
Zemen Paulos and Jack Ryan

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**Burma to Myanmar** is the first major exhibition in the UK to focus on telling the story of Myanmar – also known as Burma. On the 75th anniversary of Myanmar's independence, the British Museum is staging this unprecedented exhibition to offer the chance to learn about how Myanmar's history has shaped its present, including the lasting impact of over a century of British colonial rule.

Interconnected yet cut-off, rich in natural resources such as jade, rubies and teak but with much of the country living below the poverty line, Myanmar has gone from influential superpower to repressive regime over the past 1,500 years. It has recently experienced decades of civil war and is now ruled again by a military dictatorship and riven with human rights issues including the violent persecution of the Rohingya.

This forthcoming exhibition provides a new perspective, looking at Myanmar's history behind its headlines. It is in four sections: an abundance of riches – geography and natural resources, a landscape of states and networks, the British colonial take-over, and the independence era.

It includes over 130 unique objects, drawn from the world-class collection at the British Museum, complemented by spectacular loans from across the UK, Germany and Singapore – most of which will be on display to the public for the very first time.

Beginning at around AD 450, the exhibition explores how the peoples of the region that is now modern Myanmar interacted with each other and the world around them, leading to the development of new ideas and art forms.

The focus of the exhibition is on the 15<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> centuries when several kingdoms jostled for power over resources, people and religious authority and expanded their links with Thailand, China, Sri Lanka, and traders from the Middle East and Europe, creating a fertile ground for diverse cultures to flourish. For instance, a coin shown in the exhibition issued by King Dhammaraja Hussain (r. 1612–22) of the Mrauk U kingdom in Arakan (now Rakhine State), inscribed in Arakanese, Bengali and Persian, shows the wide reach of that kingdom's trade and political networks.

The exhibition also comments on the effect of British colonisation (which occurred in three phases between 1826 and 1885) on the numerous cultures and societies of the region. Changes ranged from the abolition of the monarchy and the imposition of new administrative systems to the use of new techniques and materials, and the development of new clienteles

by artists. The introduction of the census led to ethnic stereotyping that helped set the stage for the conflicts of today.

The Second World War devastated the country, loosened colonial control and thereby hastened independence from Britain in 1948. The exhibition concludes by exploring Myanmar's short-lived democratic phases and successive military dictatorships for their impact on art and material culture, as well as prominent individuals such as U Thant, Ne Win and Aung San Suu Kyi. It looks at how modern-day artists have defied state censors, marrying activism with artistic traditions in expressions of resistance and hope.

Key objects in the exhibition include:

- **The golden letter from King Alaungpaya to George II**, made of gold, set with 24 rubies, and in an elephant-tusk case. It demonstrates the diplomatic reach of the Konbaung kingdom established in central Myanmar in the 1750s, the strength of its expanding empire and the country's incredible natural wealth. The letter is now a UNESCO memory of the world object.
- **Wall hanging (*shwe-chi-doe* or *kalaga*) illustrating scenes from the *Ramayana***  
The vibrant scenes exquisitely embroidered on this wall hanging are episodes from the *Ramayana*, an epic tale that originated in India and was adapted in parts of Southeast Asia. The *Ramayana* became popular at the Burmese court after the forced relocation of Thai theatre troupes there in 1767 and was performed around the country. Panels like this would have been hung as room dividers or backdrops.
- **A shell "letter"** requesting the development of local infrastructure from 1907 written to the colonial government. The letter, written on pages of silk bound in a large shell and held in place by silver supports, is from the townspeople of Myeik (Mergui) to Lieutenant-Governor Herbert Thirkell White.
- **Oil worker's helmet** Myanmar is one of Southeast Asia's oldest oil producers, with Chinese records dating Burmese oil wells to the 1200s. Originally monopolised by Burmese kings, oil became a major export under British colonial rule. During the Second World War, the retreating British army destroyed oil fields to prevent them from falling into the hands of the invading Japanese. The oil industry has still not recovered from this damage.
- An extraordinary **gold Buddhist reliquary from the 1400s** that demonstrates the religious connections between the kingdom of Hanthawaddy in lower Myanmar and Sri Lanka.
- An exceptional late 19th or early 20th century **blanket from the Nung-Rawang people** (one of the Kachin groups) of northern Myanmar. Its materials, patterning and weaving techniques demonstrate both the Nung-Rawang's links with other Kachin groups, as well as their distinct cultural attributes.
- A stunning **map of several Shan states from the 1880s** made to assist the British in the process of drawing hard borders with China. The states of Selan (black) and Nam Kham (red) became part of British Burma, while China's Yunnan province absorbed Mong Mao (yellow).

Other exceptional pieces include:

- **A trading permit from the king of Arakan to an Armenian merchant** based in Chennai, India in 1728.
- **A bust of General Aung San**

General Aung San (1915–47), was leader of the Burma Independence Army. He initially supported Japan to hasten independence from Britain, but after Japanese colonial intentions became clear, he agreed to fight with the Allies, provided talks for independence began after the war. Aung San is regarded as the founder of modern Burma, although he was assassinated by a political opponent just before independence.

- Alongside traditional museum objects there are also **pieces from the 20th and 21st centuries, including advertising and film memorabilia, paintings** responding to the isolation imposed by the military regime in the 1960s–80s, **contemporary ceramics, a Rohingya photograph**, and in response to the military coup of 2021, **projections of contemporary artworks of resistance**. This group of material includes:
- ***Green Burmese Python***. This iridescent ceramic serpent was produced by Soe Yu Nwe (born 1989), a Chinese-Myanmar artist, during her residency at the famous Jingdezhen kilns in China. The sculpture combines the artist's Chinese zodiac sign with the Burmese belief that pythons are protectors of the Buddha, visually symbolising her unified identity.

**Dr Alexandra Green**, Henry Ginsburg curator for Southeast Asia at the British Museum said: "Through a wealth of diverse objects, this show explores Myanmar's complex histories over 1,500 years of cross-cultural engagements shaped by global trade routes, religious networks and expanding empires. We explore the diverse kingdoms, principalities, empires and complex kinship networks that inhabited Myanmar from about AD 500 through the 19th century"

It fosters a broader awareness of the relatively unknown history and impact of Britain's colonial rule of the country. And we also look at key issues of the post-independence period."

**Mark Jones, Interim Director of the British Museum**, said:

"**Burma to Myanmar** is an exhibition we hope will encourage debate and enhanced understanding. It presents changing perspectives on the multiplicity of kingdoms and political networks in what is today a one-nation state. I would like to express my gratitude to Zemen Paulos and Jack Ryan for making this exhibition possible and helping us to illuminate the lives and cultures of Myanmar."

**Lead supporters Zemen Paulos and Jack Ryan** said: "Life is never a straight line, and the complexities of geography, religion, ethnic diversity, wealth, internal cultural conflicts, external threats and social movements drive decisions that weave an immensely rich chronicle of Myanmar. Our hope as sponsors is that viewers can suspend our contemporary judgements to explore an immense story, as expertly told by the British Museum."

The exhibition is the result of a multi-year project led by Dr Alexandra Green at the British Museum. It is made possible thanks to the collaboration from organisations including the V&A, British Library, the Brighton & Hove Museums, the Gurkha Museum, the Russell-Cotes Museum, National Museums Scotland, National Trust, Calderdale Museums Services and Bankfield Museum, Cambridge University Library, Imperial War Museum, the Pitt Rivers Museum, the Royal Collection Trust, Wellcome Trust, Royal Asiatic Society, the World Museum of Liverpool and several private collections.

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## Notes to Editor

The *Burma to Myanmar* exhibition runs from 2 November 2023 – 11 February 2024

in The Joseph Hotung Great Court Gallery at the British Museum.

Open Saturday – Thursday 10.00–17.00, Friday 10.00–20.30. Last entry 70 mins before closing.

Adult tickets from £16, under 16s free, 2-for-1 tickets for students on Fridays, and concessions and group rates available

[www.britishmuseum.org/exhibitions/burma-myanmar](http://www.britishmuseum.org/exhibitions/burma-myanmar)

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To coincide with the exhibition, a lavishly illustrated catalogue, *Burma to Myanmar*, edited by Alexandra Green, will be published by the British Museum Press in November 2023. Hardback, £35, ISBN 9780714124957.

For further reading, Alexandra Green's recent publication, *Southeast Asia: A History in Objects* was published in February 2023 by Thames & Hudson in collaboration with the British Museum. Hardback, £32, ISBN 9780500480878.

For more information on the books please contact Toni Allum [tallum@britishmuseum.org](mailto:tallum@britishmuseum.org)

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*The Burma to Myanmar exhibition* would not have been possible without the generosity of our supporters Zemen Paulos and Jack Ryan.

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## Further information

Contact the Press Office:

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High resolution images and caption sheet available at: <https://tinyurl.com/3bt57mzr>