

Ivory Carving in Myanmar

by Daniel Stiles

Very little is known about the history, technical aspects and artistic features of ivory sculpture in Myanmar (Burma). Kunz devotes one paragraph and St. Aubyn ¹ does not even mention Myanmar in their seminal reviews of ivory art around the world. This paper aims to help fill this gap in our knowledge of Southeast Asian art by presenting the results of six weeks of research in 2002 with ivory carvers in Mandalay, Myanmar, sponsored by the National Geographic Society.

The research stems from previous investigations carried out by the author in 2001 on the ivory trade. ² Elephant poaching is still a serious problem in Asia, as it is in Africa. Elephants are killed primarily for their ivory. There is worldwide pressure to stop all trade in ivory, thus it is important to document details of ivory carving before the craft disappears. Luckily, in Mandalay there are still old master carvers who have knowledge of the history of the art and traditional methods used in crafting ivory sculpture. ³ This paper will not deal with jewelry and trinkets, which in most cases have no artistic value and are aimed primarily at the tourist trade.

History

Marco Polo visited Burma in the 13th century and described it as teeming with elephants, unicorns (rhinos) and other wild beasts. In spite of the fact that ancient Burma was a land filled with elephants, there is no evidence that ivory was used during the Pagan Kingdom (1044-1287) in the north or during the Toungoo Dynasty (~1540-1752), which ruled present day Myanmar with the assistance of Portuguese entrepreneurs, first from Toungoo, then Pegu (Bago) in the south, and then from Ava in central Burma from 1635. Toungoo, in the Pegu Yoma highlands, is even today a major center of the teak timber industry, in which thousands of trained elephants are used in extracting logs from the forest. In 1586 Ralph Finch, probably the first Englishman to visit Burma, counted over 5,000 trained elephants owned by the king of Bago alone. ⁴ No doubt it was timber and possibly ivory that attracted the Portuguese to this region. In the 16th century Zhangzhou on the Fujian coast of China became a center for carving Catholic statuettes (the Madonna, Christ on the cross, etc.) in ivory for the Spanish and Portuguese ⁵, and Burma might well have been a source of some of the ivory.

The Konbaung Dynasty succeeded the Toungoo and King Alaungpaya established its capital at Ava in 1752, near present day Mandalay. In 1755 he conquered Lower Burma and built Yangon ("End of Strife"), though nearby Pegu (Bago) became the administrative center. In two wars in 1824-26 and 1852 the British took over Lower Burma and annexed it to the Raj, leaving King Mindon to rule only the northern half. Pegu became the British administrative city. The British knew very little about the Court of Ava in Upper Burma and decided to send a British diplomatic mission there in 1855. The large mission spent six weeks in Upper Burma and recorded an extraordinary amount of detail about the geography, natural resources, commerce, architecture and arts, culture and other features of Burmese life. ⁶ They made only two mentions of ivory. The first was that ivory was produced in two remote tribal areas in Kachin State in the north, and the second was the description of an implement like a small

paper-knife used by the nobility to squeeze on ceremonial headdresses and tuck away hair. Ivory had obviously not yet begun to serve as a familiar raw material in carving, though jewelry and sculpture employing gold, silver, bronze, stone and wood were common.

In 1857 King Mindon had Mandalay built and he moved the capital there. The walled palace is still a tourist attraction today. In 1885 the British completed the annexation of Burma and took Upper Burma by force, exiling King Thibaw, Mindon's son. They made Yangon the capital of the colony and corrupted the name to Rangoon.

The earliest dated object made from ivory in the National Museum collections in Yangon today is an ivory chair crafted for King Thibaw in 1878, the year he succeeded his father to the throne. The museum also contains royal swords with ivory hilts and manuscripts of Buddhist scripture written on ivory plaques from the 19th century. The earliest use of ivory in Myanmar is therefore associated with the nobility and the *Sangha*, the Buddhist church. The museums in Yangon and Mandalay contain stone and wood religious sculpture, but none of ivory.

Using reconstructed genealogies and oral histories from informants, it appears most likely that Burmese ivory carving began in the 1860s in the court of King Mindon with U Oh and U Hmyin, who were brothers, and U Maun. They may not have been the only ivory craftsmen in Mandalay at the time, but no one in the ivory industry today remembers others. Informants do remember a famous carver in Rangoon, also beginning around the 1860s, called U Saya Ohn, the Master. He is generally credited with training the Rangoon and other Lower Burma first generation ivory carvers. The three best master carvers in Mandalay, and thus the country, today trace their carving heritage back to him.



1. [Ladies hair pins](#)

Ivory carving (*sinswe pan pu*) developed out of what the Burmese call *pan pu*, woodcarving, which is one of the *pan sai myo*, or "ten arts".⁷ It is most likely that U Saya Ohn and the U Hmyin and U Oh brothers began life as woodcarvers, then received commissions to carve certain objects in ivory from the court and from Buddhist pagoda monks. Lower Burma ivory carving was probably stimulated by the presence of the British and Indian merchants and administrators. Ivory became a popular material for a great variety of items in Europe in the 19th century⁸ and wealthy Indians had been using ivory in religious

and decorative sculpture for centuries.⁹ According to informants, the British wanted mainly utilitarian ivory items such as combs, cigarette holders and cases, shoe-horns, paper-knives and so on while the Indians desired bangles, combs and hair pins for their wives and statuettes of gods and goddesses such as Ganesha, Krishna and Sarasvati. Upper Burma ivory carving developed in the Court of Ava in the 1860s with occasional royal paraphernalia, but there were no pieces that might require refined carving skills.

Following the dissolution of the Konbaung Dynasty in 1885 the Mandalay ivory carvers no longer enjoyed royal patronage. U Hmyin and U Oh carried on in Mandalay, however, carving pieces mainly for the British and Indians who now moved there. Moulmein (Mawlamyine) and Pyinmana in the south also had ivory carving workshops in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. U Maung Nyaing of Moulmein was a noted master carver in the 1890s, but he only used from eight to twelve pairs of tusks a year, crafting items such as medicine and jewelry boxes, picture frames, utensil handles, paper-knives, chessmen and chairs.¹⁰ In general, Burmese ivory craftsmanship at this time was not ranked very highly and the industry as a whole was not flourishing.¹¹

Two second generation carvers in Yangon, both students of Saya Ohn, were U Tun Yin and U Tun. In Mandalay, U Kyee (right) carried on the family tradition of ivory carving for U Hymin and U Oh, though he was only a nephew. U Kyee's father, U Kyin Dun, was a silk merchant. U Kyee carved the first ivory fan in Mandalay, for a Buddhist monk, in about 1900. Three other remembered second generation ivory carvers in Mandalay were the brothers U Oh (no relation to the first generation U Oh) and U Toe and U Thet Pyin. U Thet Pyin was the son of first generation carver U Maun. U Kyee's son U Ba Khin, thus third generation, carved ivory from about 1920-35, but he died prematurely. All of these carvers worked from about the early 1900s to the Second World War, when Japan invaded Burma at the end of 1941.

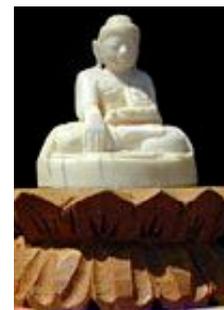


[2. U Kyee](#)



[3. Buddha](#)

Rather than damage the ivory business, the Japanese occupation in Mandalay stimulated it. During the occupation there were an estimated 56 ivory craftsmen in eight businesses in Mandalay.¹² The Japanese soldiers bought large quantities of ivory chopsticks, combs, cigarette holders and cases and name seals (*hankos*). A small Buddha figurine survives from 1942 (left), which shows that carvers had begun to diversify from jewelry



[4. Buddhas](#)

and utilitarian items into religious decorative ones, which require greater skill. The Buddha is fascinating stylistically, as it does not resemble anything seen in Myanmar today, nor Buddhas seen in India, Thailand, China or Japan. The face is blunt and somewhat crude and the hands are oversized. Buddhas carved by U Toe in the 1940s also survive, and again the quality of carving is not high (right).



[5. U Thein Ley](#)

A third generation ivory carver in Mandalay, U Thein Ley ("Uncle Thein"), son of U Thet Pyin, is 82 today (left). He learned the craft from his father and from the U Oh-U Toe brothers. He set up one of the first ivory shops in the Zegyo Market in about 1940. In the 1980s he had the largest ivory shop in the Zegyo and employed 20 carvers. The 1988 and 1990 disturbances forced him to close his shop, but in 1994 he opened a smaller one near the Maha Muni Pagoda. Uncle Thein no longer carves, but he still runs a small ivory shop on the outskirts of Mandalay that is extremely difficult to find. He

said he had heard that in his grandfather U Maun's time (1860s-1920s) most carvings were for religious use, such as carving stories of the Buddha's life on tusks and monk's fans. People would pay for the ivory and donate it to the pagoda as a good deed.

Following World War II, U Kyee's grandsons U Tin Aung and U Tin Maung, who had learned the craft from him, carried on the tradition. U Tin Aung established an ivory shop in the Zegyo Market in 1946 and carved ivory from his home on 80th Street, where he still lives and carves today (right).¹³ He became well known when in 1961-62, working in collaboration with Dr. U San Baw, he carved the head and neck of an ivory human femur (fig 7 below) that was used in a hip transplant for the Buddhist nun Daw Pounnya.¹⁴ Some 600 of these ivory femora were eventually used in hip transplants. U Tin Aung and Dr. Baw received an award from UNICEF for their contribution. In 1969 the British Orthopaedic Association had



[6. U Tin Aung](#)

Tin Aung carve ivory human finger bones for transplants.—



[7. Ivory femurs](#)

The government began bringing in tour groups in the early 1970s and because the Myanmar dictator Ne Win's wife was a customer and friend of Tin Aung, tourists were turned his way. He opened a second ivory shop in his expanded home. In the 1970s he employed up to 17 carvers. As more tourists visited Myanmar in the 1980s many more carvers got into the business and took clients from Tin Aung. In the 1980s his carvers were down to 7-8. After the riots of 1988 he had to close both shops. The Zegyo shop is still closed, but he reopened his house shop in 1990. Today he uses three part-time carvers and a nephew apprentice.

The brother U Tin Maung set up his own ivory business, but after his death in 1991 no one has carried it on. U Tin Aung has no sons and at 73 is unlikely to produce any now, thus a line of ivory carvers that started in the royal court of King Mindon in the 1860s will soon come to an end.

U Win Maung (right), born in 1936 in Yangon, learned his craft from U Tun Yin, a student of Saya ("Master") Ohn, in the 1950s. He became one of the best and most successful ivory carvers in Myanmar. After the elections and political problems in 1990 he moved to Mandalay. Today he is a specialist in human figurine carving and in staining to "antique" a piece, having his own secret recipe. He works independently and carves on commission for several shops, and overseas visitors and shops in Yangon buy from him. In Yangon he trained a young apprentice from Rakhine in the southwest named Ba Pe who, though unmarried and only in his early 30s at the time, earned the honorific address "U" because of his carving skill and business acumen. U Ba Pe moved to Mandalay with U Win Maung and today at 37 he is considered the best master carver in Myanmar. He also employs the most carvers with 17 working in his workshop.



[8. U Win Maung](#)



[9. U Ohn Nyunt](#)

The fourth and last master carver of Mandalay is U Ohn Nyunt (left), Win Maung's nephew. U Ohn Nyunt's grandfather, U Tun, was an ivory carver in the 1920s to 1940s and was a student of U Saya Ohn. According to Ohn Nyunt he also held a position within the British colonial regime with authority over all ivory and wood carvers. U Tun trained his son, Ohn Nyunt's father, U Hla Pe to carry on in ivory, but he died in 1966 when Ohn Nyunt was only one year old. Ohn Nyunt learned his craft from two other Yangon ivory carvers (Fig. 1). In 1996 he won a government sponsored competition as the best ivory carver in Myanmar. He employs four carvers today.



[10. U Khin Maung](#)



[11. The Nai Myo Zin shop](#)



[12. U Kyaw Myint Than](#)

The first known retail ivory outlets in Mandalay started near the north gate of the Maha Muni

Pagoda in 1929-30 (Table 1). One of these, called *Nai Myo Zin* today, moved nearby on 81st Street in 1942 and is still there today (fig. 10, 11, above). It is the largest ivory outlet in Mandalay, getting most of its carved pieces from U Ba Pe's workshop. The other two shops are still open near the north gate, but today they sell no ivory. U San Tint opened the first ivory shop in the Zegyo Market near the center of town around 1940. The Zegyo Market has been the main market for manufactured goods in Mandalay since the late 19th century. This shop closed in 1990 after the 1988 and 1990 political disturbances. San Tint's son U Myint Kyaw Than opened an ivory and antique crafts shop on 29th Street in 1994 called *Nan Myint* ("Royal Watchtower"), which still operates successfully (fig.12, above). He also sends various ivory items such as chopsticks and seals to Ruili in the Yunnan Province of China to be sold. The east gate of the Maha Muni Pagoda today has eleven shops that sell ivory (fig 13, below). No ivory is sold today in the New Zegyo Market. Traders also buy worked ivory to take to Shweli (China border) and Tachilek (Thai border) to sell.

There are no ivory carvers in Yangon today with family carving histories. The best self-proclaimed master carver is 54-year old U Thape Wam, an ethnic Chinese who learned carving on wood from his secondary school art teacher. There are only about seven ivory carvers left in Yangon, the rest having retired, shifted to wood or moved to Mandalay. Although there are 34 shops selling ivory today in Yangon, mostly in the south entrance of the Shwedagon Pagoda and in the New Bogyoke Market, obtaining raw ivory is too difficult to sustain more carvers. Most of the tusks in Myanmar go to Mandalay, Thailand or China.



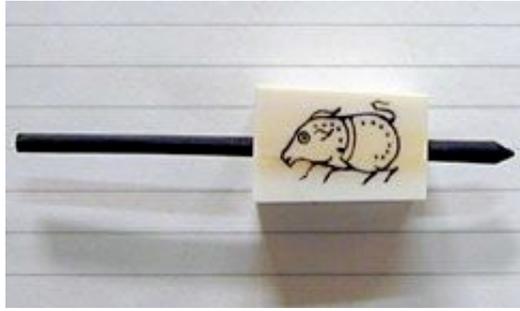
[13. Shop in the Maha Muni Pagoda](#)

Technical Aspects

Carver training – Only males are taught to carve, as the carvers believe that females do not have the necessary strength. Unlike in most parts of the world today, all ivory carving is done by hand; electric tools are not used, except rarely for buffing. Boys become apprentices in a workshop at the age of 10-12. They begin by performing menial tasks such as making the small sticks used in the *le gon jin* game of chance, in which an ivory die with an animal on each of four sides is spun like a top on the 6-7 cm stick (fig 14, 15, below), or they wash and polish ivory bracelets or beads. They also watch how the cutting, sketching and carving of pieces is done and begin practicing carving on softwoods when they reach 14-15 years old. If they demonstrate proficiency on wood, they might be given their first simple ivory piece to start on at age 17-18; usually the first stage of carving in which the crude roughout of the design is done with hammer and chisel. A trained carver will take over to complete the fine carving. Only the better craftsmen will graduate beyond this level to begin the detailed carving using fine chisels, awls and burins. Men older than 60 rarely carry on fine-carving. Their eyesight and steadiness of hand are not up to it. With their experience and knowledge they are often the ones who measure and cut the tusk into the requisite size pieces for the ivory items that the workshop chief has decided to make. ¹⁶ In the 1970s-80s when the ivory industry was growing, many woodcarvers turned to ivory, though ivory is considered to be a more challenging raw material.



[14. Apprentice](#)



[15. The *le gon jin* game](#)



[16. Tusks](#)

Ivory types – There is no formal classification of ivory types, but buyers distinguish quality based on:

- size – probably the most important criterion. Larger size tusks or pieces command higher prices per *viss* (1 *viss* = 1.6 kg).
- gender – male tusks are larger, and about one-third of the length at the base is hollow and the outer layer is thin. Female tusks are smaller, sometimes no more than 10 cm tushes, straighter, with less hollow at the base, and with a thicker outer layer. Often a female tusk will be filed down to remove the rough outer skin. Male tusks are considered preferable for carving most items. Some female Asian elephants have no tusks.
- grain – a smooth, fine grain with even, concentric growth rings is desired. For this reason fresh wild elephant ivory is preferred to timber elephant, as timber elephant tusks are often damaged or diseased from work. Wild elephant tusks are sometimes flawed by burial or exposure, buried either intentionally by poachers or exposed by accident after dying in the forest (fig 16, above). Monks sell the best ivory from their deceased temple elephants.
- color – consistency of color with no blemishes or hue changes is highly desired. Burmese ivory is usually white, unlike African forest ("hard") elephant ivory that is often tinged yellow or pink. (African savanna elephant ivory is considered to be "soft").

The carving process and tools:



[17. carving tool kit](#)

1. If the outer layer of the tusk is thick or damaged it will be filed away using a metal file (*thazin*) to remove any roughness, cracks or fissures. The traditional method of carving is to work only on the duramen or inner core of the tusk, but with the rise in ivory prices over the years some carvers start directly on the outer layer so as not to waste ivory.

2. Measure – Usually several pieces will be made from one piece/tusk so the carver has to measure the parts for each and mark in pencil (fig 18, below).

3. Cutting - the tusk is cut into pieces using a saw (*roy*, pronounced 'lwa'). Some carvers make the saws themselves from imported steel (fig 19, below).

4. For smaller pieces, the two ends of the tusk section are filed to make them smooth and flat so that the piece will fit in stable fashion in the vice. Larger pieces will often be steadied by the carver's feet.



[18. Measuring](#)



[19. Cutting the tusk](#)



[20. Drawing the design](#)

5. Drawing - the outline of the subject to be carved is drawn in pencil on the surface of the ivory (fig 20, above).

6. Roughout - chisel a rough outline following the pencil sketch using gouges and chisels tapping with a piece of metal (*ley yat*), wood or a carpenter's hammer. Care is taken not to waste ivory and not to crack or break the piece. (fig 21 - 23, below)



[21. The early stage](#)



[22. Rough carving](#)



[23. Rough carving](#)

7. Fine carving – This stage is only done by the best carvers. They will study the roughout carefully before beginning. They use a chisel (*apya*), awl (*chun*), gouge (*gaw*), small file (*sau*), burin (*sowkwa*) and sometimes a hand drill if holes are required. Tapping is done with a flat metal piece. The most skillful carvers can remove blemishes and cracks leaving not a trace. (fig 24 - 26, below)



[24. Fine carving](#)



[25. Carved tusk](#)



[26. Fine carving](#)

8. Finishing - The finished piece is smoothed and polished using the culm sheath (*wa bo*) of the giant bamboo (*Dendrocalamus brandisii*) soaked in water and sometimes it is scrubbed with the stringy mass of fiber from the dried fruit of the sponge gourd (*Luffa pentandra*). U Tin Aung's workshop has an electric buffer to polish pieces. The piece is then wiped dry with a clean cotton cloth. (fig 27, below)

9. Support – Most statuettes, some carved or polished tusks and all lamps made from hollow tusk base-sections will be mounted onto wood bases with screws. (fig 28, below)



[27. Smoothing](#)



[28. wooden stands](#)

Antiquing – Many pieces are stained to make them appear older than they are. Pieces with fissures or chips are usually "antiqued". The usual mixtures include tea, coffee and/or tobacco leaves boiled in water for 20 minutes to two hours. ²⁰ The worked ivory piece, and on occasion carved bone, is submerged in the cooled concoction for one to four weeks, depending on the darkness of hue desired. These pieces are shamelessly sold as coming from King Thibaw's time or as being "a century old". (fig 29-30, below)



[29. bone carving](#)



[30. gumbi](#)

Artistic Features

Forms – A craftsman traditionally must master five forms to become an expert carver: (1) *hathi*, the shaping of an animal, usually the elephant; (fig 31, below) (2) *gumbi*, the ogres that figure in Burmese mythology; ¹⁷ (3) *na yi*, the woman; (fig 32, below) (4) *ka noke*, (fig 33, below) the convoluted style of depicting lotus stems, buds and flowers that are seen on Buddhas or Jataka story carvings; and (5) the Buddha in his various *mudra* (positions). (fig 34, below) Other carving motifs of note are the *yeh kyaw pan*, (fig 35, below) floral designs and flowing branches seen most often at the base of elephant bridges that symbolize the forest, and the rare *kun char*, (fig 36, below) a filigreed outer layer with a carved figure within.



[32. Na Yi](#)



[31. Examples of *hathi*, the elephant.](#)



[33. Ka noke](#)



[34. Low quality Buddhas](#)



[35. Yeh kyaw pan](#)

Lesser carvers who cannot master the five forms, or who do not want to, specialize in only one or two of them [18](#) or they concentrate on simpler jewelry pieces, cigarette holders, chopsticks or signature seals.



[36. Kun char](#)



[37. aesthetic style](#)



[38. naturalistic style](#)

Style – Some carvers and knowledgeable ivory merchants recognize two carving styles, the formal, aesthetic style and the informal, naturalistic style. The first is used with religious (Buddha, bodhisattvas, *nats* or *nats* holding up Buddha, Chinese Taoist immortals and sages) or historical figures (kings, hero generals) to achieve a sense of serenity and reverence (fig. 37, above). The pieces usually include symbolic motifs that identify the subject or story being portrayed. The naturalistic style is used with subjects of traditional Burmese life such as cane-ball players, (fig. 38, above) fishermen, fig 39, below, women fetching water, a man and woman in a romantic dance (*hna paa thwar*), a drama troupe performing (*dho bat*) and so on. The naturalistic style is also commonly used with the Laughing or Fat Buddha, (fig. 40, below) the Chinese representation of Maitreya, and with animal subjects.



[39. Fishermen](#)



[40. Laughing Buddhas](#)

Subjects – It has always been the clients and not the carvers who have had the stronger voice in determining what subjects are crafted. This is not to say that the craftsmen have not influenced demand, however. The more adventuresome have experimented with introducing subjects they have seen or heard of being produced elsewhere, or which are related to pieces that were carved at the time. The naturalistic style and corpus of subjects grew in this way. Fishermen were probably the first naturalistic style subjects carved, as this theme has been the subject of ivory carving for centuries in China and the Burmese replicas strongly resemble

them. In Yangon in the 1960s, when Burma became friendly with China, U Win Maung was asked by a Chinese visitor to carve a fisherman and was shown a Chinese example. Today he is an expert fisherman carver and the subject sells well. But he and U Ba Pe's workshop have branched out into an entire range of subjects of Burmese traditional life using the naturalistic style, enumerated above.



[41. carved tusks](#)

In general, worked subjects have progressed from simple utilitarian items such as chairs (using plaques nailed onto wood) and sword hilts for royalty and plaques used to write Buddhist scripture on and monk's fans in the 19th century to intricate, delicate and refined statuettes and carved tusks today. Previous ivory trade studies have assumed that Burmese ivory carving has deteriorated over time, [19](#) but the opposite is the case. The figures represented in the statuettes deserve additional attention:

Burmese subjects – The most common ones are the Buddha, either standing, reclining or sitting in the lotus position, or several sitting Buddhas on a carved tusk, (fig. 41, above) Jataka stories (fig. 42, below) (Buddha's life) on tusks or plaques, the arhat Shin Thi-wa-li (a revered Buddhist monk who reached spiritual perfection), dancing nats or nats holding up Buddha, the "King riding an elephant" (fig. 43, below) (*Min see sin*) motif, [21](#) General Pan Du Hla (he defeated the Thais in a 19th century battle), (fig. 44, below) royal figures, ogres (fig. 45, below) and the naturalistic figures from traditional Burmese life. Animals, other than elephant trains on tusks, are not serious subjects in Myanmar. [22](#)



[42. A Jataka story](#)



[43. Min see zin](#)



[44. General](#)



[45. Poneka](#)

Chinese subjects – These are the common religious ones seen in China, Hong Kong, Singapore, Taiwan and Southeast Asian countries that have Chinese populations. The buyers are almost all local or visiting Chinese and the high proportion of statuettes of these types seen in the shops (40-50%) indicates how important the Chinese are as ivory buyers. The most common subjects are Kwan Yin (goddess or bodhisattva of compassion), [23](#) (figs.46-47, below) Maitreya (Budaifu in China, the Laughing or Fat Buddha, often draped in children. He represents happiness as he has found enlightenment that, perversely for Buddhist thought, has led to prosperity), the Taoist trio of Immortals Fū (money), Lù (luck) and Sò (long life), (figs. 48-49, below), Long Life on his own, Zhongli Kwan (an Immortal who carries a fan he uses to revive the souls of the dead), Li Tiekwai (a Confucius sage depicted as a beggar clutching a crutch and pilgrim's gourd) and various other Taoist Immortals with staffs and gourds and Confucius sages. The Kwan Yins and Long Lifes can be quite large, up to 60-70 cm, and the larger Laughing Buddhas can only be made on the largest of tusks because of their girth.



[46. Kwan Yin](#)



[47. Long Life and Kwan Yin](#)



[48. Fu, Lu, So from Mandalay](#)



[49. Fu, Lu, So from China](#)



[50. Erotic pieces](#)

Erotic subjects – These are recent and are usually ordered by French or Thai clients. U Win Maung and Myint Tan, who carves for the *Nan Myint* shop, have carved erotic sculptures. They are usually copies of pieces brought by the customer and involve a phallic object in some way. (fig 50, left)

The Future of Burmese Ivory

From the 1970s to 1996 the Myanmar government supported *sinswe pan pu*, the art of ivory carving, as it did the other main arts of the country. In fact, in 1995 the owner of the *Nan Myint* shop thanked the State for its assistance to the traditional art of ivory carving through the Myanmar Artists and Artisans Association. In addition, he said, "Myanmar traditional art of ivory sculpture, having come as it has through generations past, is part of our cultural heritage. Preserving and safeguarding it from decadence and extinction is tantamount to holding our national prestige and integrity, and should be our paramount duty".²⁴ That same year the government held an auction of state-owned ivory. In 1996 the government sponsored a nation-wide ivory carving competition during the "Visit Myanmar Year"²⁵ to stimulate ivory sales with tourists, seemingly unaware that there was a global ban on the international trade in ivory. Myanmar did not belong to CITES in 1996 and therefore technically it was not illegal for them to export ivory. Over 200,000 foreign tourists did visit Myanmar that year, and some were appalled to see that the government was actively encouraging ivory sales. International criticism followed and the government withdrew its support to the ivory industry. In 1997 Myanmar joined CITES. To date, the government has not held another ivory auction nor has it sponsored another ivory carving competition. The government has also cracked down on all illegal wildlife trade in an attempt to improve its image. Informants knew of many arrests of ivory and other wildlife traders and seizures of illegal ivory, particularly of tusks coming from India. Some wildlife traders had quit the business. It is still legal, however, to buy the tusks of deceased privately owned elephants, and those trimmed from living elephants, and to work and sell ivory.

In 1960 in Myanmar there were a maximum of 9,000 wild elephants, in 1990 6,000 and in 2000 about 5,000. There were 6,000 to 7,000 domesticated elephants in the country in 2000.²⁶ The level of worked ivory demand within Myanmar is at about the same level it was in 1995, but raw ivory demand has grown due to smuggling to Thailand and China. The decrease in supply with increase in demand has caused the local price of ivory for a good >5 kg tusk to surge between 1991 and 2002 from 15,000 kyat/kg to 200,000 kyat/kg.²⁷

In spite of loss of government support and the difficulty and expense of obtaining raw ivory, most ivory carvers and retailers interviewed still thought that the ivory craft would carry on in future. Most were not worried about the extinction of the elephant and thought that there would always be enough ivory to satisfy demand.²⁸ A minority, arguably better informed and aware of the outside world, had already or were planning to shift out of ivory and into more sustainable arts and crafts (real and fake antiques, kalagas, marionettes, etc.).

Depending on government policy and law enforcement, and what occurs in these areas in China and Thailand, the Myanmar ivory craft can carry on indefinitely. With no ivory smuggling out of the country and no increase in demand within Myanmar, the current elephant population is large enough to sustain the ivory industry with no illegal elephant killing. If smuggling continues and/or demand increases, Myanmar's elephants will be in trouble.

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- 1 G.F. Kunz, *Ivory and the Elephant in Art, in Archaeology, and in Science* (New York: Doubleday, Page and Co., 1916) and F. St. Aubyn, ed., *Ivory: An International History and Illustrated Survey* (New York: Harry Abrams, 1987). [\[back\]](#)
- 2 Esmond Martin and Daniel Stiles, *The South and Southeast Asian Ivory Markets* (Nairobi and London: Save The Elephants, 2002). [\[back\]](#)
- 3 I would like to thank U Tin Aung, U Myint Kyaw Than, U Ohn Nyunt, U Win Maung and many others for generously sharing their time and knowledge with me. [\[back\]](#)
- 4 Kyaw Zaw, "Utilization of elephants in timber harvesting in Myanmar," *Gajah*, 17 (1997): 9-22. [\[back\]](#)
- 5 Kunz, *Ivory and the Elephant*, 237. [\[back\]](#)
- 6 Henry Yule, *A Narrative of the British Mission to the Court of Ava in 1855* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1968). Yule's account also reviews what the American Reverend Mason listed in his *The Natural Productions of Burma*, and ivory is not mentioned, nor is it included in Yule's description of the crafts and trade items amongst the Shan of the northwest. [\[back\]](#)
- 7 Myint Kyaw Than, *Myanmar Traditional Sculpture in Ivory* (Mandalay, Myanmar Handicrafts & Traditional Ivory Carvings Work Shop Co-op., Ltd., 1995). Another version can be found in *Today* (Vol. 5, 1998), an English-language magazine published in Myanmar for tourists. The other nine crafts are iron working (*pan pe*), gold/silver working (*pan dein*), painting (*pan ji*), lacquer ware (*pan jun*), turnery (*pan bu*) (royal betel or flower trays, ceremonial food containers, veranda posts, carts), cement carving (*pan do*) (wall reliefs, religious edifices), stone carving (*pan tamo*), masonry/architecture (*pan jan*) and bronze casting (*pan din*). [\[back\]](#)
- 8 Esmond Martin, "The great white gold rush," *BBC History*, August (2001): 30-32. [\[back\]](#)
- 9 St. Aubyn, *Ivory*, and René Huyghe, ed., *Larousse Encyclopedia of Prehistoric and Ancient Art* (New York, Prometheus Press, 1966), 368ff. [\[back\]](#)
- 10 H.S. Pratt, "Ivory carving in Burma," *Journal of Indian Art and Industry*, IX, no. 75 (1901): 59. [\[back\]](#)
- 11 Kunz, *Ivory and the Elephant*, 115. [\[back\]](#)
- 12 Esmond Martin, "Wildlife products for sale in Myanmar," *TRAFFIC Bulletin*, (17, no. 1, 1997): 37. [\[back\]](#)
- 13 80th Street is also known as "China Street", as many of the Chinese silk and other produce merchants used to live there. [\[back\]](#)
- 14 Anon., "U Tin Aung - The Master of Ivory Carving", *Arts & Crafts of Myanmar*, (no number or page numbers, 2000). This is a free tourist magazine. [\[back\]](#)
- 15 A group of French doctors visited U Tin Aung's home in 2002 during this research to see the ivory femur. They also bought a few ivory trinkets to take home. [\[back\]](#)

16 U Win Maung at 65 was the only ivory carver out of about 40 encountered who still did fine-crafting over the age of 60. [[back](#)]

17 Some are taken from Hindu mythology, such as Hanuman and Tatakiri, and others are *bilu*, black ogres (eg. Poneka and Tanoyeka). Yule in *A Narrative of the British Mission to the Court of Ava in 1855*, p. 27, described *bilu* as monsters that ate human flesh, possessed superhuman powers and were dark and tusked like Calibans. The Burmans believe that *bilu* and *nats* (animist earth spirits) used to inhabit the land and that Mount Popa, near Pagan (Bagan), was a special place for them. The Buddhist monastery on Mt. Popa today is the center of *nat* worship. Yule suggested that the idea of *bilu* originated from Negritos who used to live in the Chin Hills forests near Bangladesh. [[back](#)]

18 A 62-year old carver in Mandalay named U Paw Oo and his son U Soe Thein specialize in elephant bridges. U Paw Oo was taught by his older now deceased brother U Taung Tan, who in turn learned the craft from their grandfather U Oh, who was also a teacher to U Thein Ley. Soe Thein plans to teach his sons the craft when they are old enough. Their craftsmanship is not of the highest quality and as a consequence they do not always have ivory commissions. In between ivory carving they make wood and cow bone carvings. [[back](#)]

19 Martin, "Wildlife Products for sale in Myanmar"; Chris Shepherd, *The Trade of Elephants and Elephant Products in Myanmar* (TRAFFIC Online Report Series, No. 5, 2002): 7. [[back](#)]

20 Nigerian and Cameroonian antique fakers use a similar method. The Chinese in Beijing or Guangzhou more commonly smoke the pieces; Esmond Martin and Daniel Stiles, *The Ivory Markets of East Asia*, (Nairobi and London, Save The Elephants, in press). [[back](#)]

21 A king decides one day to leave the royal palace and ride an elephant through his realm to see what is going on. [[back](#)]

22 U Aung Sein from Amarapura near Mandalay, who carves animals on demand for U Tin Aung, is an exception. He specializes in water buffalos, elephants and tigers and is considered to be an excellent craftsman. Most ivory elephants in the shops are small and poorly carved. [[back](#)]

23 Kwan Yin derives from *Guanshiyin*, "he who hears the cries of the world," C. Clunas, *Chinese Carving* (London, Victoria & Albert Museum, 1996). In Mahayana Buddhism this deity is represented by Avalokitesvara, a male bodhisattva who delays his own attainment of Buddhahood until he has helped all humankind to reach that goal; Gwyneth Chaturachinda, Sunanda Krishnamurty and Pauline Tabtiang, *Dictionary of South & Southeast Asian Art* (Chiang Mai, Silksworm Books, 2000). [[back](#)]

24 Myint Kyaw Than, *Myanmar Traditional Sculpture in Ivory*, 6. [[back](#)]

25 U Ohn Nyunt won this competition with an original piece featuring an old man in traditional Burmese dress alongside a nat. A French woman purchased the piece. U Ba Pe came second, only, some say, because he carved a common Buddha. [[back](#)]

26 Martin and Stiles, *The South and Southeast Asian Ivory Markets*, 28-29. [[back](#)]

27 The US dollar equivalents are irrelevant to the Burmese ivory buyer as foreign currencies, which are tightly controlled by the government, rarely enter into their business.

In early 2002 the black market exchange rate was 1 USD = ~1,160 kyat [[back](#)]

28 The Burmese, most being devout Buddhists, respect animals, particularly the elephant. U Tin Aung and his wife, for example, will not buy undocumented (i.e. poached) ivory, as this would signify that they wished for the animal's death. Others are not so particular, but many carvers and retailers still make offerings to a pagoda for the reincarnation of elephants that have died to provide the tusks that ensure their livelihoods. [[back](#)]

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