David C. Owens was born in England and emigrated to Canada after graduating from Imperial College, University of London. A career in the metal mining industry included 25 years working in Southeast and East Asia, an experience that stimulated David's interest in Asian history, culture and art. A frequent visitor to Myanmar since 1992, David now devotes much of his time to the collection and study of old Burmese (Myanmar) silverwork.

The Noble Silver Collection, assembled by David and his wife Kathleen over eight years, is the largest-known single collection of work from the Burmese Silver Age.

David's distinct expertise is deciphering the iconography of the archetypal visual narratives that decorate Burmese silverwork. He regularly consults on Burmese silver art and has contributed articles on the subject to the prestigious Asian art journals *Arts of Asia* and *Passage*.

Above: Lid of a salted fish jar, c. 1890
Front: Ceremonial betel box, c. 1910
Front flap: Eight master silversmiths of the Burmese Silver Age, c. 1904
Back: Decorative scene from the Vessantara Jataka on a treasure box, c. 1910

Burmese silversmiths produced a magnificent body of work between the mid-19th and early 20th century. From ceremonial betel boxes and offering bowls to vases, jars and tea services, these artefacts reveal an unsurpassed mastery of technique and decorative art.

Burmese Silver Art shines a light on this hitherto overlooked genre of silverwork, presenting for the first time in stunning photographs a collection of 100 rare and fine-quality artefacts produced during the Burmese Silver Age.

Much of the work is embellished with intricate allegorical stories from ancient religious and mythological sources. Author David C. Owens vividly elucidates the complex iconography of these stories and unveils their profound ethical teachings, which resonate to this day.

Coupled with a historical account of silversmithing in Burma and expert advice for collectors, this volume fully captures the allure of Burmese silverwork. In doing so, it takes its place as the definitive reference work for any art historian, collector, student or general reader interested in deepening their appreciation of this remarkable body of noble art.

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BURMESE SILVER ART David C. Owens

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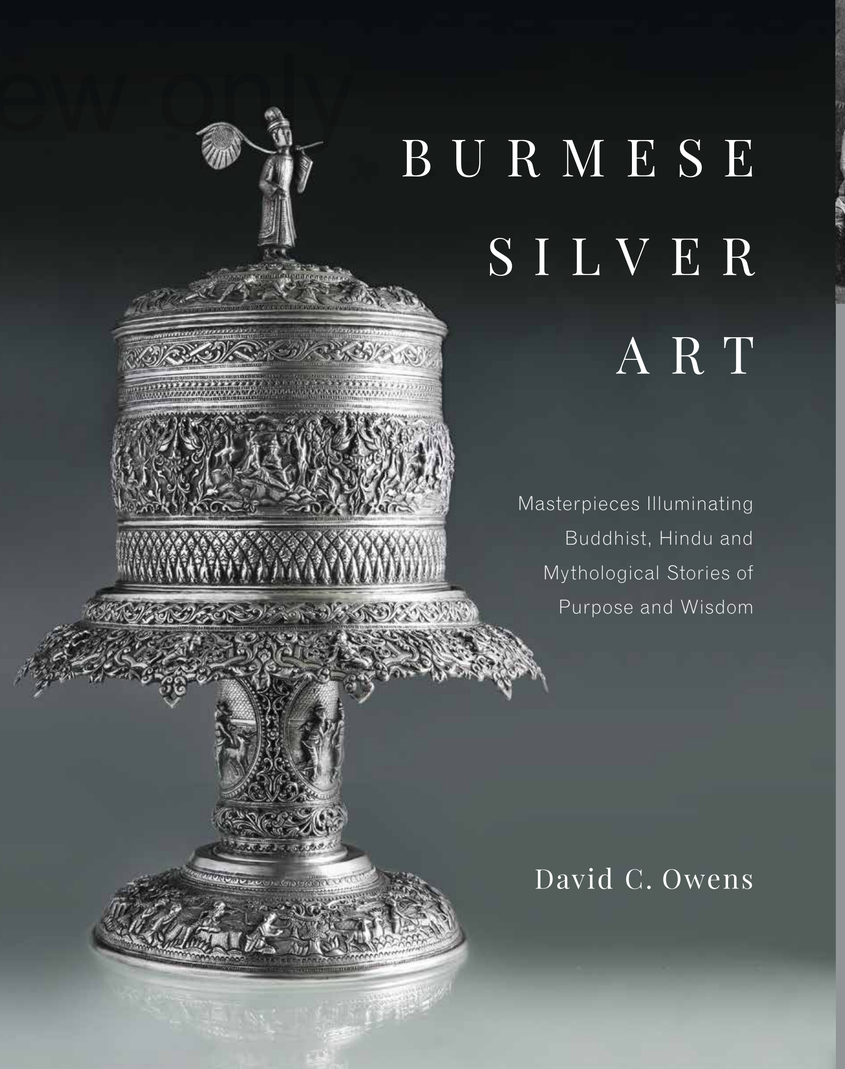

BURMESE SILVER ART

Masterpieces Illuminating Buddhist, Hindu and Mythological Stories of Purpose and Wisdom

David C. Owens

Burmese Silver Art presents a photographic gallery of exquisite silver artefacts and comprehensive information on the varied facets of the art form, including:

- Historical and cultural framework – the Pyu Era and the Burmese Silver Age
- Silversmithing techniques and silver sources
- Three style classifications – domestic, export and competitive
- Classical domestic designs – offering bowls, betel boxes, treasure boxes and food storage jars
- Other designs – lime boxes, drinking vessels, vases, tea services and document holders
- Regional decorative styles – Lower Burma, Middle Burma and Shan States
- Iconography – the early life of the Buddha, Jataka tales, Therigatha poetry, the Ramayana, Burmese mythology and images of flora and fauna
- Master silversmiths and their prize-winning work
- Silversmiths' trademarks
- Silver metal – genesis, properties and utilization
- Collecting silverwork – tips on care and tarnish prevention
- The Noble Silver Collection – statistical data on form, decoration and size

Burmese Silver Art

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Contents

Preface

The silver art illustrated and described in this book was crafted in the years between approximately 1850 and 1930 in a land known to the English-speaking world as Burma. Therefore, the author uses the contemporary English names of this period for the country, political divisions, major towns and geographical features. The military government of the Union of Burma changed the official English name of the country to the Union of Myanmar in 1989. At the same time, place names chosen by the colonial British in the 19th century were discarded, and other English names were changed to better reflect Burmese pronunciation. For example, Rangoon became Yangon. Burma is officially known today as the Republic of the Union of Myanmar.

Three actualities sowed the seeds that grew into this book. The first is a wanderlust coded into my genetic condition, which led me to first visit Burma in 1993 and return many times thereafter. The second is a long and valued friendship with Sao Ratana Hseng Leun of Vancouver, Canada. She is the youngest daughter of Sao Shwe Thaike and Sao Hearn Hkam. Sao Shwe Thaike was the last Shan Saohpa, or prince, of Yawnghwe State and the first President of independent Burma from 1948 to 1952 following the end of British colonial rule. Leun's remarkable early life and experience in Burma kindled a profound historical and cultural interest in the country and in the Shan States. Leun also connected me to her network of family and friends in modern Myanmar, who have enlightened me on so many facets of life in the country, both past and present. The third actuality was incidental and serendipitous. I accompanied my wife to the Isan Gallery in Singapore, ostensibly to view exquisite hand-woven silk textiles from Thailand, but to my surprise, also discovered a display of mesmerizing Burmese silverwork. A ceremonial offering bowl purchased that day in 2013 was the beginning of the collection exhibited in this book (the Noble Silver Collection).

Building the collection has always been a joint labour of love with my wife Kathleen. She shares my curiosity in deciphering the visual narratives that adorn the silverwork and has a sharp eye for silverwork quality and value. Kathleen has also provided sterling support, both material and emotional, to the nurturing and compilation of this book. My thanks to Kathleen – without her constant encouragement and fortuitous interest in Thai textiles, neither the silverwork collection nor a book to share the delight of Burmese silver art would have materialized. My thanks are also due to Charlie Lim, a Singaporean artist and photographer who created the superb photographic images of the silverwork. Charlie is a wonderfully creative photographer, adept at controlling light and always vigilant to the detail of every shot.

A warm expression of gratitude is also due to the many friends who have contributed their knowledge, experience, guidance, enthusiasm and personal support to all aspects of building the silverwork collection, conducting research and writing the book. Those in Myanmar deserving of special acknowledgement and kind appreciation include David Fu, Than Htun, Kin Maung Toon, Saw Sanda Soe, Princess Hteik Su Phaya Gyi (granddaughter of King Thibaw and his wife Queen Supayalat), Sao Shwe Ohn and Sao Hseng Zanda Siri. In Singapore, Percy Vatsaloo was an indispensable mentor in the field of Burmese silverwork and unstinting in his support for this book and the development of the collection. Michael Backman, Joseph Cohen and Wynyard Wilkinson in London and Neil and Digna Ryan in Penang also generously shared their knowledge and provided invaluable encouragement to write this book. My thanks also to the many authors listed in the bibliography whose publications have provided the knowledge upon which I have drawn so extensively in the process of researching Burmese silverwork and writing *Burmese Silver Art*. Finally, I must express my appreciation and gratitude to Marshall Cavendish International (Asia) Pte Ltd for undertaking to publish this specialist art book. Glenn Wray and Justin Lau at Marshall Cavendish have guided the book, and the author, through the publication process with consummate skill, efficiency and equanimity. I thank Glenn and Justin for nurturing *Burmese Silver Art* and delivering a book worthy of the exceptional quality and value of Burmese silverwork.

Any errors, omissions or inadvertent misrepresentations in the content of the book are entirely the responsibility of the author. I welcome all and any corrections, additions and feedback.

CHAPTER ONE

Prologue

Burmese Silver Art is the first publication since 1904 dedicated exclusively to the exhibition of silverwork handcrafted in Burma during the mid-19th to early 20th centuries – a period coined the 'Burmese Silver Age'.

1.1 Salted fish storage jar, c. 1890

1.2 Decorative narrative – Vidhura-Pandita Jataka

The body of work created by master silversmiths during this time is characterized by superb technical workmanship and a unique decorative style featuring detailed illustrations of narratives from Buddhist and Hindu religious traditions, Burmese folk tales and mythology. These ancient narratives also embody profound ethical wisdom on transcendent notions of virtue, morality and nobility. This distinctly Burmese genre of silverwork has wonderful aesthetic value, eloquent decoration and is little known or understood.

Objectives and Motivation

The primary objective of this publication is to showcase in a photographic gallery 100 alluring Burmese silver artefacts that represent some of the finest-quality work from the Silver Age (Fig. 1.1). A second objective is to elucidate the captivating visual narratives that adorn much of the silverwork (Fig. 1.2). An understanding of the historical sources and meanings of these narratives provides a more complete insight into the cultural and artistic importance of the silverwork. Many of the narratives described in this work are little known outside of Burma or the predominantly Buddhist countries of Asia.

All authors have a motivation for their work. The motivation for *Burmese Silver Art* was the contention that a book exclusively on the subject was fully deserving and long overdue. Fully deserving, because the silverwork is of exceptional artistic merit and cultural value, and long overdue because the last dedicated work – *Modern Burmese Silverwork* by Harry L. Tilly – was published in 1904. Tilly was motivated to write because of his deep personal interest in many Burmese art forms and his passion to preserve their traditions. This author's passion is more simply to collect and study the silverwork that Tilly fostered and so much admired. The outcome of this passion is now the 'Noble Silver Collection' of Burmese silverwork. This collection has been assembled over an energetic eight-year period, largely from art galleries and private collectors in Singapore, Yangon, Mandalay, London and Hong Kong. Chapter 3 of this book illustrates 100 of the most important silver artefacts in the collection. This is the first catalogued exhibition of these pieces.

This book does not profess to be a scholarly work. It is a general interest publication by a private collector to showcase Burmese silver art to the widest possible audience. To achieve this purpose, the book comprises two essential chapters: one, a 'virtual' gallery of compelling photographs of individual pieces of silverwork accompanied by catalogue-style descriptions; and, two, the detailed illustration and deciphering of the many religious and mythological stories that adorn the silverwork. The book also features an introductory chapter containing historical and technical information on Burmese silver art. An Appendix to the book includes pertinent information on silver metal, including its genesis, properties, mineral occurrence, applications and tarnish prevention. A comprehensive bibliography at the end of the book acknowledges the indispensable source literature for historical, scientific and technical information.

There are also subjective opinions and conjecture in the book regarding many aspects of Burmese silver art. These are based on the author's research in Burma and the hands-on study of many silver artefacts of variable form, decorative style and quality. The cogency of the author's opinions and conjecture is for the reader to decide.

1.3 Betel box, c. 1910

1.4 Treasure or cheroot box, c. 1910

1.5 Ceremonial offering bowl, 1853

Burmese Silverwork

'Burmese silverwork' as a descriptive term encompasses a wide range of artefact designs, functionality and decorative styles. The archetypal silverwork is the ceremonial offering bowl that resembles the form and function of the traditional alms bowl (*thabeik*) carried by Buddhist monks (Fig. 1.5). This form of silverwork is the focus of the Noble Silver Collection. The silver bowls were typically commissioned by wealthy Burmese and used for ceremonial offerings, religious and secular rituals, votive objects and status display in the home. Other traditional forms of Burmese silverwork featured in the book's virtual gallery include cylindrical betel boxes (Fig. 1.3), rectangular cheroot and treasure boxes (Fig. 1.4), rice and dried fish storage jars, lime boxes, water bowls and vases. In form, decorative style and ownership, these works constitute a 'domestic' class of silver.

Silversmiths also created cross-cultural artefacts that incorporate elements of both Burmese and European style and utility. This type of work was typically commissioned by foreign residents of Burma as gifts, trophies and keepsakes. It is an 'export' class of silverwork. There is no evidence of commercial-scale manufacturing of silverwork for export during the Silver Age.

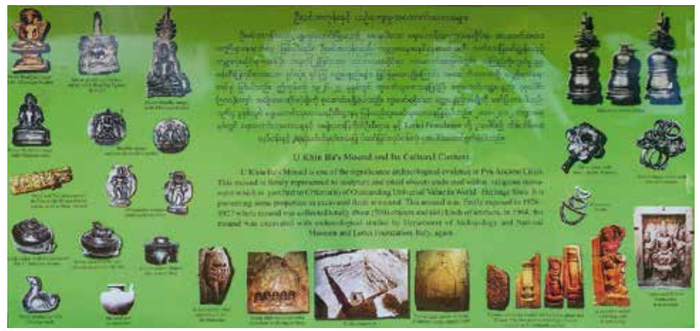
Master silversmiths also crafted a special and limited class of silverwork for international and domestic art competitions sponsored by the British colonial administration in India in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. This work was often highly ornate and served as ceremonial centrepieces and display objects. An example of this class by a master silversmith is currently exhibited in the silver gallery of the Victoria and Albert Museum in London.

Historical and Cultural Background

Silverwork (*pan htyan*) is recognized as one of Burma's traditional art forms. It has an ancestry dating back to the city-state Pyu civilization that occupied the central Irrawaddy river valley in modern Burma (Myanmar) from about 100 BCE to 900 CE. The oldest extant Pyu silverwork was discovered in 1926 during the archaeological excavation of the Khin Ba burial mound adjacent to the Pyu city of Sri Ksetra (Figs. 1.6–8). The mound contained a treasure trove of over 50 artefacts, including a rich and varied selection of silver objects. Among these objects were decorated silver bowls and plates that are reminiscent of Silver Age work crafted almost 2,000 years later. Some art historians ascribe Pyu artistic style to Indian influence from Andhra Pradesh and the contemporary Gupta Empire.

The source of the two most popular decorative narratives found on Silver Age work – the Buddhist Pali Canon and the Ramayana – reflect a much older Indian influence on Burmese silver art. The Theravada branch of Buddhism believes that the scriptures in the Pali Canon represent the original words and teaching of the Buddha who lived in northern India in the 6th to 5th centuries BCE. The Ramayana is an epic poem containing the teachings of ancient Hindu sages. It was written by the Indian poet Valmiki. The verses recount the life of Prince Rama during the Vedic period (c. 1500–500 BCE) of Indian history.

The recurrent use of Buddhist and Hindu decorative iconography is a singular characteristic of Burmese silverwork.



1.6 Information board, Khin Ba mound, Department of Archaeology and National Museum, Myanmar

1.7 Discovery of the silver reliquary in the mound chamber, Charles Duroiselle, 1926

1.8 Khin Ba burial mound, Sri Ksetra, Myanmar, 2017

1.9 Traditional silversmith, Ywataung village, Sagaing, 2015

This characteristic imbues the work with a religious and spiritual value that is only revealed by interpreting and understanding the detail of the iconography. The original owners of the silverwork would have utilized the visual narratives on the artefacts to teach and reinforce Buddhist and Hindu precepts and wisdom. This fervent emphasis on religious silver art is not found in the silverwork traditions of other Asian countries.

Prior Publications

The claim was made earlier in the Prologue that a publication dedicated to revealing the achievements of Burmese silversmiths in the mid-19th to early 20th century was long overdue. A brief account of the English-language literature on Burmese silverwork is required to support this claim. Two short monographs by the Englishman Harry L. Tilly, dated 1902 and 1904, constitute the metaphorical 'canon' of writing on Burmese silverwork (Fig. 1.10). These works comprise only 61 pages in total, although the information, commentary and photographic plates in both works are a rich and invaluable source of knowledge on many aspects of Burmese silverwork from a contemporary expert. No other books exclusively on Burmese silverwork have been published since Tilly's 1904 monograph.

More recently, other eminent authors have provided important accounts and illustrations of Burmese silverwork in chapters from books that otherwise focus on silversmithing traditions in India or Southeast Asia. The four most important of these chapters are found in the books *Silverware of South-East Asia* by Sylvia Fraser-Lu (1989); *Burmese Crafts: Past and Present* by Sylvia Fraser-Lu (1994); *Indian Silver 1858–1947* by Wynyard R.T. Wilkinson (1999); and *Delight in Design: Indian Silver for the Raj* by Vidya Dehejia (2008). All four of these titles inspired the author to collect, study and write this book. Other traditional forms of Burmese art and craft, including lacquerware, textiles, wood and stone carving and bronze sculptures, have already been illustrated and described in a wide variety of publications ranging from specialist and general interest books to academic papers. Many of these other traditional art forms were also produced in high quality during the 19th and early 20th centuries.

1.10 Pages from Harry L. Tilly's 1904 monograph

The author's efforts to uncover Burmese-language information on silversmithing proved unsuccessful. The difficult task of conducting Burmese archival research requires language skills and fortitude unavailable to the author. A more productive and enjoyable means of gathering information was to spend time discussing silverwork with collectors, silversmiths, gallery owners and friends in many parts of Burma over the last eight years.

Provenance

An official system of silver hallmarking to certify provenance has never existed in Burma. It was also rare for silversmiths to inscribe their name or initials on domestic class artefacts and no workshop records are known to survive that would help to establish provenance. It is also difficult to establish clear provenance for a substantial proportion of silverwork made in China, India, Thailand and other Asian countries in the 19th and early 20th centuries. In Burma, the silversmith's anonymity reflects religious and cultural values. Buddhist strictures on vanity, pride and material possession are strong rationales for the silversmith to remain anonymous.

An uncommon exception to this practice is found on some silverwork produced by master silversmiths for either foreign patrons or specifically for national and international art competitions sponsored by the British India colonial government. W.R.T. Wilkinson (1999) lists the names of 37 silversmiths who were officially recorded as contestants in these competitions and any surviving work by these silversmiths is particularly coveted and valued by collectors. H.L. Tilly (1902 and 1904) also

1.11 Silversmith's trademark – Maung Shwe Yon, c. 1880

describes and illustrates prize-winning pieces by documented master silversmiths. There is also design and decorative style evidence to suggest that master silversmiths produced both signed and unsigned versions of successful or popular silverwork. The traditional domestic offering bowl typically bears no inscription of the silversmith's name or his workshop.

That is not to say that domestic silverwork is devoid of all provenance information. One third of the pieces in the Noble Silver Collection are inscribed with context information, including one or more of the following: the owner's name and title, the completion date of the piece, the owner's township residence and a short inscribed message. The completion date is the most valuable information. It establishes an outline technical and artistic chronology of the Silver Age and a reference base for estimating the age of non-dated silverwork.

Silversmiths also commonly inscribed a whimsical mark on the underside of the object, typically an animal, mythological creature or floral motif. In most instances these marks have little provenance value, because there are no known records that correlate specific marks to a silversmith's name or period of work. One exception is the 'seated deer' trademark (Fig. 1.11) used by the master silversmith Maung Shwe Yon and his son's silversmithing company, Mg Shwe Yon Bros. A tiger trademark used by an unknown silversmith is one of the more common trademarks on surviving silverwork.

The final determination of authenticity and age of the silverwork in the Noble Silver Collection rests on the inscribed provenance data and the intangible property of practical experience gained by handling a wide variety of silverwork and studying its form, design, technical workmanship and decorative quality. This experience is also acquired by the exchange of knowledge, information and opinion with other silver collectors and gallery owners specializing in Burmese

CHAPTER TWO

A Frame of Reference

There is a 2,000-year old cultural tradition of silversmithing in Burma dating back to the Pyu Period (100 BCE–900 CE). The surviving Pyu silverwork includes a magnificent Buddhist reliquary (Fig. 2.2), gilded plates (Figs. 2.1 and 2.4), decorated bowls (Fig. 2.6), Buddha images, miniature stupas, jewellery and coins. This important work is arguably the oldest and finest-quality Buddhist silver art discovered in South and Southeast Asia.

2.1 Gilded silver Pyu peacock plate, c. 5th century
National Museum of Myanmar, Naypyitaw

2.2 Pyu silver reliquary, c. 5th century. National Museum of Myanmar, Yangon
Photo: Metropolitan Museum, New York and National Museum of Myanmar, Yangon

Pyu Period

Most of the surviving Pyu silverwork is displayed in the National Museum of Myanmar in Yangon, the National Museum in Naypyitaw and the Sri Ksetra Archaeological Museum in Pyay.

The Pyu people first appear in the archaeological records in the late first millennium BCE in the central dry zone of Burma. They spoke a Tibeto-Burman language and archaeologists debate whether the Pyu evolved from a much older Bronze Age society in the Samon River area of central Burma or migrated directly from southwest China. The pre-historical roots of the Pyu may have been the high plateaus of Qinghai and Gansu in northwest China. There are references to a Piao people in Chinese chronicles from the Jin dynasty in the 3rd century CE to the Tang dynasty in the 9th century CE. Other ancient texts suggest that the Pyu called themselves 'Tircul'.

The Pyu were the first hierarchical urban civilization in Southeast Asia and the first to build city-states enclosed by fortified brick walls. These cities and other smaller settlements were all located within the basins of the Irrawaddy and Chindwin rivers in central Burma (Fig. 2.3). Pyu settlements ranged in size from less than 10 hectares (ha) up to 1,452 ha. Sri Ksetra (1,452 ha), Beikthano (859 ha) and Halin (629 ha) were the largest royal cities and the centres of Pyu religious, economic and cultural life.

Pyu engineers also constructed sophisticated water irrigation systems and mastered skills in ferrous and non-ferrous metalworking. Silver-copper alloy coins imprinted with Buddhist and Sanskrit motifs have been found in quantity at many Pyu sites. The silver content ranges from about 30 per cent to over 80 per cent, which suggests the coins were minted in several locations. It is uncertain if the Pyu silver coins were used for monetary exchange or some form of symbolic or token value.

A sophisticated and literate culture developed during the 1,000-year Pyu period. Dynastic and religious inscriptions on stone, silver and leaf artefacts, written in the Pyu, Sanskrit and Pali languages, reveal the influence of Brahman, Theravada Buddhist and Jain religious traditions from India as early as the first millennium CE. Indic influence also permeates many other aspects of Pyu culture and society, including Buddhist architecture, religious art, funerary customs, kingship rituals, dynastic names, artistic symbols of power, pottery design and decoration, coin symbols and even brick dimensions. Cultural influence also flowed along early trade routes that linked Pyu city-states to contemporary China and the Roman Empire.

Pyu silversmiths created a wide range of sophisticated Buddhist and secular artefacts. A treasure trove of these artefacts was discovered in 1926 in an undisturbed 5th-century royal relic chamber which lay underneath the Khin Ba mound in Sri Ksetra. This one-metre-square, brick-lined chamber contained over 50 silver and gold artefacts, including the magnificent 'Great Silver Reliquary' (Fig. 2.2), 20 leaves

2.3 Major cities during the Pyu period

2.4 Gilded and decorated silver Pyu plate, c. 5th century
Sri Ksetra Museum, Pyay, Myanmar

2.5 Detail from Fig. 2.4 – repoussé lions and cubs

of golden Pali text, silver votive stupas, silver Buddhas, silver Bodhisattvas, and silver bowls, betel boxes, cups, bells, rings, butterflies, petalled lotuses, sheets and coins. Farmers and archaeologists have also discovered silver artefacts at many other Pyu settlements. The regal silver plate from Sri Ksetra (Figs. 2.4 and 2.5) confirms that Pyu silversmiths had already mastered the decorative skills of repoussé and gilding by the middle of the first millennium CE. The classic shape and decorative style of the Pyu bowl illustrated in Fig. 2.6 is reminiscent of the archetypal ceremonial offering bowls of the 19th and early 20th centuries.

The Pyu civilization effectively vanishes by the end of the 9th century after a period of gradual decline that began in the previous century. This decline was probably due to repeated invasions by a Tibeto-Burman tribe from Nanzhao in southwest China and a related contraction of the economy. Historical chronicles record that in 832 CE the Bamar tribe from Nanzhao sacked a Pyu city, either Halin or Maingmaw. This event may have initiated a gradual political, economic and cultural assimilation of the Pyu people with the more powerful Bamar tribe.

The final eclipse of the Pyu occurred in the mid-10th century, when King Anawrahta founded the Bamar kingdom at Bagan. The archaeological record of the Bagan period from the 10th to the 13th centuries does not include any important silver artefacts, although burial tomb inscriptions describe interred silver objects, and it is likely that silver regalia and ornamentation were present at the royal court of the Bagan kings. There is no evidence that silver coins were used extensively during the Bagan period.

Burmese silverwork of artistic or cultural significance is also missing from the archaeological record for the long period of history between the Bagan era and the early 19th century. However, written accounts of a Portuguese priest to the Kingdom of Arakan in 1634, and the first official British mission to the Konbaung dynasty court at Ava by Michael Symes in 1795, describe silver thrones, silver regalia, silver ornamentation and silver money. It is also recorded that Siamese silversmiths captured during the Burmese-Siamese wars of the 16th to 18th centuries were permanently relocated to work in Burma.

Silverwork and silver coins have been constantly recycled in the silversmith's furnace throughout human history. This destiny no doubt befell much of the 'missing' silverwork from long periods of Burmese history. There are many reasons and causes to account for the recycling, including war, revolution, political and social change, wealth preservation, protection against fiat money and – most tragically – the theft and looting of artefacts from ancient and sacred burial tombs and royal palaces. Conflict in all its forms is perhaps the major catalyst for silver recycling, and Burma has a long and bloody history of war. The Mongol Empire launched three invasions in the 13th century; Burma fought 18 wars with neighbouring Siam (Thailand) between 1547 and 1855; the Chinese Qing dynasty armies invaded Burma four times in the 18th century; there were three Anglo-Burmese wars in the 19th century; and Japanese forces overran the country in the 1940s. The nation's history has not been conducive to the preservation of its cultural and artistic heritage.

2.6 Pyu silver bowl, c. 5th century
Sri Ksetra Museum, Pyay, Myanmar

The Burmese Silver Age

The 'Burmese Silver Age' is a descriptive title coined by the author for the period between about 1850 and 1930, when Burmese silversmiths handcrafted an exceptional and important body of artistically and technically high-quality silverwork.

This achievement is particularly noteworthy because Burma at the time was not an economically and artistically sophisticated country compared to Europe, China and the United States. It was in fact a largely undeveloped rural country with little infrastructure to nurture and support silversmithing. Private collections of the surviving work from the Burmese Silver Age are known to exist in Burma, Singapore, Thailand, France, England, Austria and the Middle East. The permanent collections of several museums in Asia, Europe and North America include representative examples of Burmese silverwork. Chinese, Indian, Thai and Cambodian silverwork is by comparison better known, published and publicly exhibited.

The extraordinary and rapid growth of silversmithing in mid- to late-19th century Burma was a result of many factors. Two key factors stand out from the wide perspective: first, the serendipitous advent of a new generation of gifted silversmiths; second, the momentous impact of incremental British colonization following the three Anglo-Burmese Wars of 1825–26, 1852–53 and 1885 (Fig. 2.8). Colonialism fundamentally changed the political and economic structure of Burma: the king was exiled (Fig. 2.7), royal prerogatives and laws were abolished, mercantile capitalism replaced a semi-feudal

2.7 King Thibaw and Queen Supayalat escorted aboard the PS *Thooreah*, Mandalay, 29 November 1885

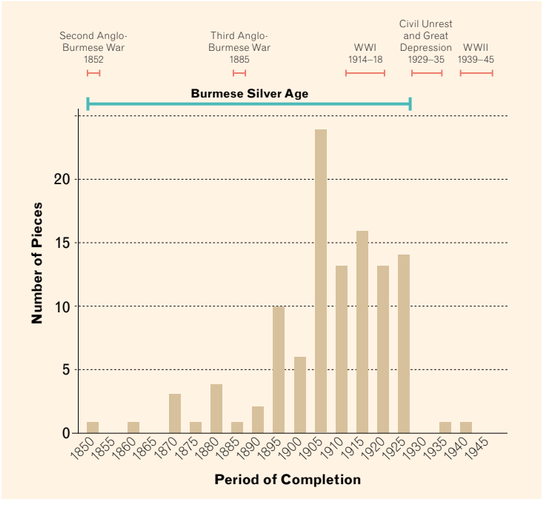
2.8 British colonial expansion in Burma, 1824–85

economy and the unified country was systematically opened to foreign investment and international trade for the first time in its history. This formidable and rapid change transformed the world of Burmese silversmithing.

The change was legal, economic and human in character. Legal because royal sumptuary laws proscribing silver ownership to all except royalty, high court officials and a few elite private families were abolished after 1885. Economic because a fast-expanding economy after 1885 created a burgeoning class of affluent Burmese. And human because master silversmiths previously cloistered in the royal palace at Mandalay under the patronage of the king were now released to either train a new generation of silversmiths or take commissions from an increasing number of nouveau-riche Burmese.

Typically, the new wealth and disposable income belonged to entrepreneurs and traders, timber and agricultural developers, and middle- to high-ranking colonial government officials. These groups constituted the primary market for silver art in Burma from about 1850 to 1930. British and other foreign residents in Burma were a secondary, but important, market for silverwork during this same period. The acme of the Silver Age occurred in the early 20th century, and a rapid decline in silverwork output and quality appears to have begun in the late 1920s. This decline coincides with the international Great Depression and the widespread civil unrest and rebellion against British colonial rule in Burma in the early 1930s.

Very little information in the English language is available on the identities and biographies of the two generations of silversmiths who defined the Burmese Silver Age. Journeyman silversmiths were well established in small town workshops all over Burma at the turn of the 19th century and their anonymous images appear in several contemporary travel books written by Europeans. Some master silversmiths working in the larger towns and cities are identified by name only, with no surviving record of their individual work. Harry L. Tilly's 1902 and 1904 monographs illustrate and identify the work of a small number of preeminent silversmiths who submitted work to important national and international art competitions. These events were sponsored by the British India colonial government as part of



2.9 Burmese Silver Age: Dated artefacts in the collection and a historical timeline

CHAPTER THREE

One Hundred Silver Artefacts from the Noble Silver Collection

This chapter is a photographic exhibition of 100 fine-quality Burmese silver artefacts from the period 1850–1930. The elegant images are the work of the acclaimed Singaporean artist-photographer Charlie Lim. A caption to each photo tabulates catalogue data for the artefact. Selected artefacts are described and appraised. All the 100 artefacts are from the Noble Silver Collection. They are arranged in the following eight 'galleries', according to the physical form and function of the artefact.

1. Betel Boxes and Food Platters
2. Cheroot, Treasure and Dried Food Boxes
3. Master Silversmiths
4. Ceremonial Offering Bowls
5. Food Storage Jars
6. Lime Boxes
7. Drinking Vessels and Vases
8. Variety Silverwork

How to Read the Captions: An Example

Offering Bowl (S115), c. 1880 → *Form or function | Inventory number | Year of completion (inscribed or estimated)*
Maung Shwe Yon → *Silversmith*
Lower Burma → *Regional style*
Patacara Therigatha → *Decorative design or visual narrative*
'M.S.Y.' → *Base inscription (English translation)*
Wt 1,754 g ■ D 26 cm ■ H 17.5 cm → *Weight, Diameter, Height*

3.1 **Betel Box (S9), c. 1910**
Lower Burma
Sama Jataka
Wt 1,773 g ■ D 25 cm ■ H 40 cm

3.5 Betel Box (S40), c. 1910
Shan
Astrological
Wt 338 g ■ D 10.5 cm ■ H 10.5 cm

3.6 Decoration on lid

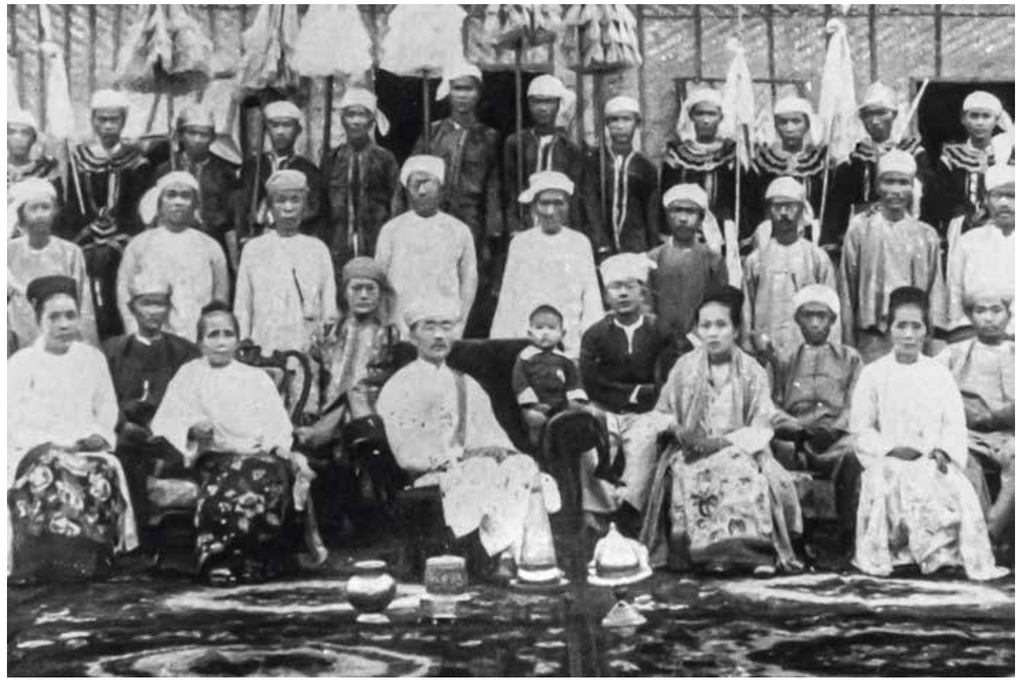
3.7 Decoration on hidden base

3.8 Betel Box (S130), c. 1910
Lower Burma
Sama Jataka
Wt 1,242 g ■ D 18.5 cm ■ H 17.5 cm

3.9 Elephant tusk cylinder for crushing areca nut

formal portrait photographs of the last Konbaung kings, Shan Saohpas and high-ranking Burmese families (Fig. 3.10).

Figure 3.11 is an example of a masterpiece ceremonial betel box. The two-tray box comprises five independent components: a two-section support stem soldered to a flared pedestal with five talon-like feet; a flanged base with a strongly serrated edge; two individual circular trays; and a friction lid surmounted by a soldered cast finial. These stacked components are schematically illustrated and described in Fig. 3.12. All the components of the betel box are intricately decorated with either scenes or figures from the Sama Jataka. This exceptionally large box contains about 2.6 kilograms (5.7 lbs) of silver and measures 0.5 metres (1.6 ft) in height.



3.10 Sao Shwe Thaike, Saohpa of Yawnghwe (Nyaungshwe), Shan States, with family and retinue

3.16 Treasure Box (S86), c. 1910
Lower Burma
Vessantara Jataka
'Po Kyaw's box'
Wt 2,207 g ■ L 33.5 cm ■ W 20 cm ■ H 15 cm

3.17 Lid detail (S86) – Prince Vessantara gifting a sacred white elephant

Cheroot, Treasure and Dried Food Boxes

Rectangular, cylindrical and elliptical silver boxes were used to store a variety of important items in wealthy Burmese homes, including jewellery, cigars, cheroots, special dried foods and other personal valuables. Smoking is a traditional habit enjoyed by men and women alike from all social classes. Cigars were made from Burmese tobacco and cheroots from a mixture of crushed mild tobacco and dried wood seasoned with tamarind pulp. The filter was made from a dried corn husk, while the size of the cheroot varied from the equivalent of a long cigarette to a Churchill cigar. Offering a cigar or cheroot to a guest was a social custom of equal rank to offering a betel quid or a pickled tea-leaf salad. Ornate silver boxes in the home symbolized status and wealth.

The landscape orientation of the planar lid on rectangular storage boxes served as an ideal canvass for the silversmith's decorative work. Large box lids commonly feature a single panoramic scene from either a Jataka tale or the Ramayana poem. Other framed scenes from the same narrative typically wrap around the vertical sides of the box in a storyboard fashion. These visual narratives were an effective and joyful means of teaching and reinforcing Buddhist scriptures and values in the home, especially for children in a time prior to the advent of illustrated books, comics and the internet!

The silver box S86 (Fig. 3.16) combines art, function and storytelling. It is a near-airtight container for treasured items, documents, cheroots or high-value dried foods. All the outer surfaces of the box are decorated with finely detailed scenes from the Vessantara Jataka. The hinged lid of the box is adorned with one of the best-known events in the Jataka – Prince Vessantara giving away his kingdom's auspicious white elephant (Fig. 3.17). Scrolling around the sides of the box in a chronological sequence are a series of vignettes, or scenes, that provide an abridged visual narration of the entire Jataka. Each scene differs in width according to the specific story episode and is typically framed by a tree and floral bands. Vignettes also wrap around the curved corners of the box. The Vessantara Jataka is an allegorical story teaching the moral value of charity – arguably the most important virtue in the Buddhist religion.

Storage box S56 (Fig. 3.18) is an exceptionally fine example of Burmese silver art. It is well-proportioned, aesthetically refined and the embodiment of traditional Burmese decorative style. The composition, perspective and sense of realism of the scene portrayed on the lid's landscape-oriented surface are superb (Fig. 3.19). The scene is an artistic rendition of a pivotal event from the Vidhura-Pandita Jataka – a dice competition between King Dhananjaya and his adversary Punnaka. The drama is set in a magnificent gaming room in the king's palace, filled with 22 men and women wearing a variety of lavish costumes and headdresses. These figures include the king's sage Vidhura-Pandita, a host of visiting kings, military personnel, ladies in waiting and the king's guardian deity. A floral frame around the scene features narrow bands of small lotus buds and entwined acanthus. The four side panels of the box portray other events from the Jataka in high fidelity. The Jataka is an allegory on the virtue of truth and equanimity.

S111 (Fig. 3.20) is an unusual set of six small pie-shaped storage boxes that surround and interlock with a central cylindrical box. The hinged lid of each box is decorated with exceptionally high-relief repoussé work. Scenes from the Burmese royal court during the Konbaung dynasty adorn the pie-shaped boxes and feature images of the king, his chief wives, his concubines, a newborn child, a wet nurse and a courtier holding a large snake. The central box is embellished with a stunning, almost three-dimensional, rendition of a dynamic horse and demon rider (Fig. 3.21). The horse is portrayed with flared nostrils and a gaping jaw, which reveals all the ugliness of the animal's teeth. The master silversmith has also added the precise details of the horse tack – bridle, reins and stirrups.

An inscription on the underside of the cylindrical container records that the seven-piece box set was made from 100 coins. This information cannot be precisely correlated to the current weight of the set (688 grams) and the weight of contemporary silver coins. One hundred half-kyat denomination Konbaung Peacock coins would have weighed about 600 grams. This is the closest correlation, and it assumes that all the coins used to make the box set were of the same denomination, which may not have been the case.

CHAPTER FOUR

Understanding the Decorative Narratives

The unique allure of Burmese silver art lies in the complex and allegorical iconography that embellishes the silverwork. It is difficult to fully appreciate the character and artistic value of the silverwork without understanding this iconography and its religious and cultural origins. No other traditional silverwork from East or Southeast Asia is so overwhelmingly adorned with such a diverse collection of visual narratives. The most important sources of these narratives are sacred Buddhist scripture, the epic Ramayana poem from India, Burmese folk legends and the world of mythology and astrology.

This chapter illuminates and interprets a selection of the most interesting visual narratives, or storyboards, that adorn silverwork in the Noble Silver Collection. The most common stories are Buddhist Jataka tales and episodes from the Burmese version of the long Ramayana poem. Each storyboard typically illustrates an abridged version of a full Jataka or select episodes from the Ramayana. These episodes are commonly some of the most dramatic and well-known stories in the Ramayana. The broad range of stories and small narrative details used to decorate Burmese silverwork indicate that many silversmiths were well-educated in Buddhist theology, Hindu tradition and Burmese legend. Most silversmiths would have received a monastic education in their youth and lived at least a short period of their life as an ordained Buddhist monk.

The interpretation of the visual narratives presented in this chapter largely relies on two published reference works: *The Jataka*, edited by Professor E.B. Cowell and first published by the Pali Text Society of London in 1895; and *Burmese Ramayana* by Ohno Toru – a translation of a palm-leaf manuscript dated 1871 and published in English in 2000. *The Jataka* translates all 547 Jataka tales from the original Pali language and is the source of all Jataka quotations used in this chapter. *Burmese Ramayana* is the only available English translation of the Burmese version of the Indian Ramayana poem. The daunting task of this chapter is to condense each of the long and complex text narratives into a coherent synopsis that integrates with the illustrated visual narratives on the silverwork.

4.1 Offering Bowl S44

4.2 360-degree storyboard of the early life of the Buddha on Offering Bowl S44

4.39 Offering Bowl S109

4.40 Elephant keepers instructed to intoxicate Nalagiri with arak spirit

4.41 The drunk Nalagiri goaded to stampede

4.42 Villagers flee before the charging Nalagiri

4.43 The Buddha's power calms Nalagiri

with a short account of a failed attempt by Devadatta to slay the Buddha by hurling a large stone at him from the top of a cliff. Next, Devadatta convinces the king of Rajagaha that only the king's fiercest elephant can destroy the Buddha. This is Nalagiri. Devadatta mistakenly believed that only this elephant would be immune to the influence of the virtuous Buddha.

Figure 4.40 illustrates the beginning of Devadatta's murderous plot. The king is ordering the elephant keepers to serve Nalagiri 16 pots of a fiery arak spirit, twice his normal consumption, and more than enough to intoxicate him. Three arak pots stand in the right foreground of the scene. The following morning, Nalagiri is frenzied with alcohol and the cruel elephant keepers spike and goad him to break down his stall and charge into the street. Figure 4.41 portrays the drunk elephant struggling to stand and thrashing his head and trunk towards his abusive handlers. Once in the street, Nalagiri charges towards the Buddha who is collecting morning alms with his disciples. The terrified citizens in his path flee in fear of their lives (Fig. 4.42).

The Buddha, however, is unperturbed by the raging elephant charging towards him. He faces Nalagiri directly, and calmly speaks these compassionate words:

> Ho! Nalagiri, those that maddened you with 16 pots of arak did not do this that you might attack someone else, but acted thus thinking you would attack me. Do not tire out your strength by rushing about aimlessly, but come hither.

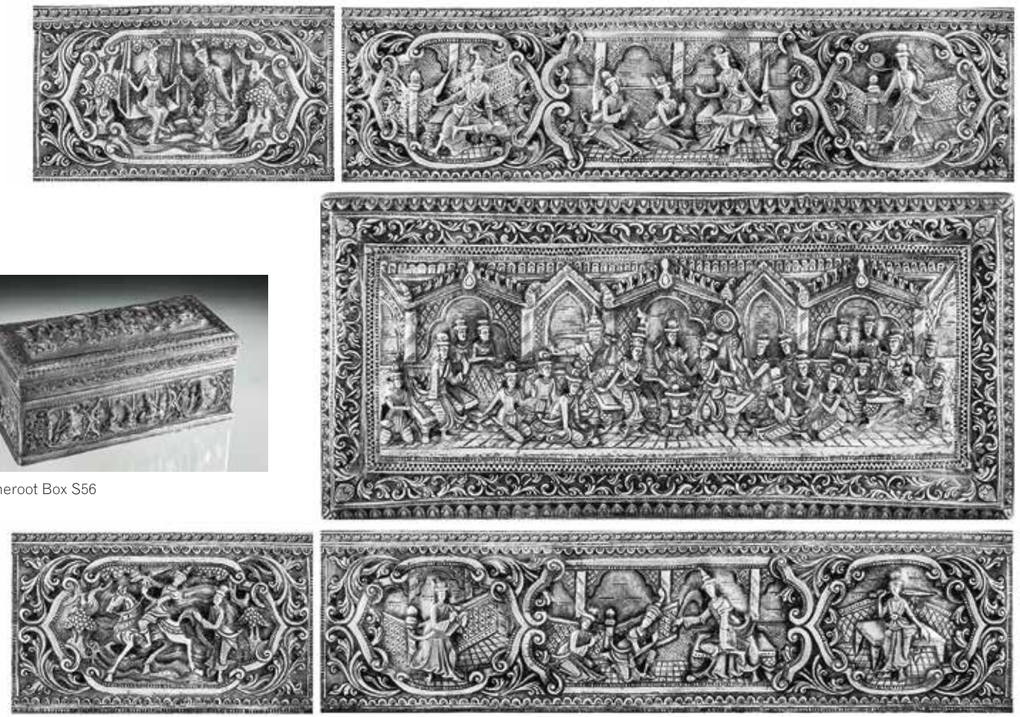
These words immediately soothed Nalagiri and the intoxicating effects of the arak miraculously passed away. And, overcome by the spiritual power of the Buddha, he dropped his trunk, shook his ears and fell at the feet of the Buddha. This moment is portrayed in Fig. 4.43. The Buddha is standing on a lotus pad holding an alms bowl and blessing Nalagiri. Five of his disciples, including Ananda and Sariputta, stand behind him in a traditional file of monks. The citizens of the town clasp and raise their hands in praise towards the Buddha after witnessing the miraculous taming of Nalagiri. Finally, the elephant lifted dust from the Buddha's feet and blew it all over his head before quietly returning to his stall. Thereafter, Nalagiri was always tame, harming no one, and became known as Dhanapalaka, 'the keeper of treasure'.

Mahajanaka Jataka

The Mahajanaka Jataka (No. 539 of the Jataka tales) is an inspiring allegorical tale of courage and vigour centred on the life of Prince Mahajanaka, the lost prince of Mithila. It is worthy of a full account. The biographical story includes the death of his father in battle, Mahajanaka's subsequent birth and life in exile, his return to Mithila as a virtuous king, and – like many Jataka kings – his final rejection of the material world in favour of the ascetic's life. Two offering bowls from the collection illustrate pivotal events in this heroic story: S120 (Fig. 4.44) and S37

4.44 Offering Bowl S120

4.78 Cheroot Box S56



4.79 Panorama storyboard on S56

Vidhura-Pandita Jataka

The Vidhura-Pandita Jataka (No. 546 of the Jataka tales) is an inspiring narrative that teaches the essential moral value of truth. It incorporates the drama of young love, misunderstood language, a supernatural horse, high-stakes gambling, abduction, attempted murder, reconciliation and, finally, the revelation of truth. Burmese silversmiths had a penchant for crafting majestic silver images of the supernatural horse. This popular horse was the mount of Punnaka, a *yakka* general and a demon spirit. His supernatural horse is featured in six of the seven Jataka scenes on the offering bowl S126 (Fig. 4.80) and the rectangular cheroot box S56 (Fig. 4.78). The decorative scenes from all sides of the cheroot box are illustrated in a panoramic storyboard format in Fig. 4.79.

4.80 Offering Bowl S126

A short introduction to the Jataka is required to understand the visual narratives. Vidhura-Pandita was a wise minister and sage to King Dhananjaya in the kingdom of Kura. He had a sweet tongue and gave eloquent instructions concerning temporal and spiritual matters to hundreds of spell-bound kings at the court of King Dhananjaya. Vidhura-Pandita's fame also spread to the underworld kingdom of the *nagas,* where Queen Vimala longed to hear his discourses but knew he would never visit the underworld. This realization made the queen deeply unhappy and in her desperation she exclaimed to her husband that she desired the 'heart' of Vidhura-Pandita, otherwise she would die. Naturally, the king was unwilling to perform this dire request. Instead, he persuaded his beautiful daughter Irandati to seek a husband with the power to fulfil her mother's desire. Irandati agreed and devised a clever plan to attract such a powerful husband. She prepared a nighttime garden in the mountain spread with perfumed flowers and here she

4.81 The demon Punnaka courts the *naga* princess Irandati

danced and sang songs appealing for a powerful husband able to bring her mother the heart of Vidhura-Pandita. At the same moment Punnaka was flying above her on his supernatural Sindh horse and heard her sweet siren songs. Overcome by her voice and beauty, he descended to the garden and made a promise to Irandati in these words: 'Oh lady, I can bring you Vidhura's heart by my knowledge, holiness and calmness. Be comforted, I will be thy husband.'

Figure 4.81 illustrates this garden scene. Irandati is identified by her serpent-head *naga* headdress and Punnaka wears the face mask of a *yakka* demon. His caparisoned horse grazes and waits at his side. The garden is filled with a variety of pretty flowers, bushes and trees. A respectful distance separates the courting couple and Irandati's body language suggests both happiness and a coy allure. After the couple agree to marry, Punnaka flies Irandati back to her father's palace and asks the king for permission to marry his daughter.

The *naga* king and queen agreed to the marriage on one condition: Punnaka must first deliver the heart of Vidhura-Pandita. Punnaka, although filled with passion and desire for Irandati, dared not fulfil the marriage condition without the permission of Vessavana, his respected *yakka* uncle. To obtain this approval, Punnaka had to fly a long distance on his Sindh horse. When he eventually found Vessavana, he was already busy resolving the case of two disputants and Punnaka was required to wait patiently for an audience with his uncle. During this wait he overheard Vessavana instruct one of the disputants to 'Go thou and dwell in thy palace'. Punnaka, impatient and deceitful, seized on the words 'Go, thou' to falsely confirm his uncle's permission to bring the heart of Vidhura-Pandita to Queen Vimala. Without further ado, he mounted his magical steed and rose into the sky in search of the sage Vidhura-Pandita.

The scene in Fig. 4.82 depicts Punnaka's grand departure from his uncle's home. His majestic caparisoned horse is

4.82 Punnaka and his supernatural horse surrounded by *yakka* demons

APPENDIX ONE

Silver – A Precious and Noble Metal

Genesis and History

Silver is made in the stars. All silver in the universe is created in the last few seconds before the life of a giant star ends in a cataclysmic supernova explosion. It is only during these few seconds that the gravitational collapse of the star's core produces the extreme temperature and density conditions required to create heavy silver nuclei from other much lighter elements. The enormous force of the supernova explosion expels the freshly minted silver and other matter into the vast regions of deep interstellar space. This matter eventually accumulates into enormous clouds of gas and star dust. Later, these clouds coalesce under the force of gravity to form new stars and new planets. Figure 5.1 is an image captured in 2007 of a collapsing blue superstar in the constellation of Ursa Major. Ten years later the star exploded to create the giant supernova SN2017ein – the stellar genesis of a vast mass of new silver.

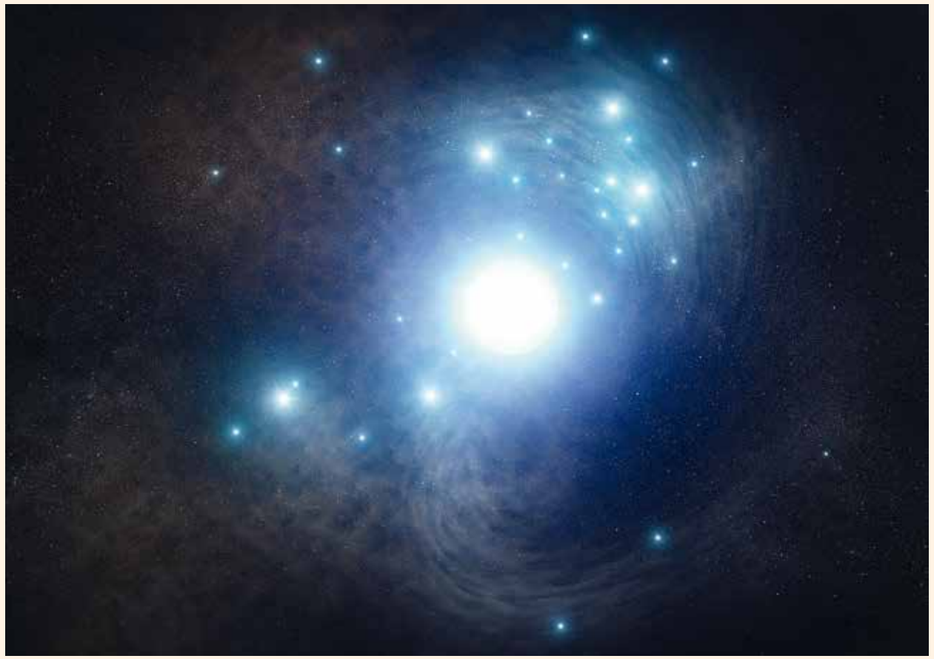
Planet earth was born out of a cloud of gas and star dust about 4.5 billion years before the present. Its mineral composition at birth contained only a trace mass of silver – the average concentration of silver in the earth's crust is estimated to be only 0.08 parts per million (ppm). By comparison, the concentration of the two industrial metals, iron and aluminum, is 41,000 ppm and 82,000 ppm respectively.

However, trace amounts of molecular silver are not uniformly distributed within the earth's crust. Some of the molecules have combined with other elements to form silver mineral species as a result of thermal and tectonic activity over geological time. Silver concentrations produced by these activities are typically in the form of rare macroscopic strands of pure silver metal, more common mineral compounds formed by silver bonding with sulphur, chlorine, antimony, arsenic and other elements, and as silver atoms within the molecular lattice of other more common lead, copper and zinc minerals. The occurrence of these silver concentrations at or close to the earth's surface is a later consequence of crustal uplift and the relentless process of surficial erosion over billions of years. More recently, prehistoric human exploration and curiosity eventually led to the first discovery of silver in surface rocks and the birth of our love affair with this alluring metal.

History, of course, does not record the moment when a curious *Homo sapiens* first gazed upon native silver and beheld its beauty. The oldest extant silver artefacts date from the Sumerian civilization in Mesopotamia in about 3,000 BCE. Silver is therefore known as one of the seven metals of antiquity, together with gold, copper, iron, mercury, lead and tin. Archaeological evidence from antiquity also indicates that cupellation metallurgy was first used in Sumeria and neighbouring Anatolia during the third millennium BCE. This important early Bronze Age discovery provided ancient civilizations with the ability to separate silver from lead and other metallic ores using a simple charcoal-fired furnace (Fig. 5.14). The only sources of silver prior to the discovery of cupellation metallurgy were rare native silver accumulations and the metal electrum, a natural alloy of gold and silver in variable proportions. Cerro Rico mine, or 'rich hill', in Potosi, Bolivia is the world's largest single source of silver, having produced about 60,000 tons, or nearly 2 billion ounces, of the metal since the 16th century (Fig. 5.2).

Chemical and Physical Properties

Silver is a naturally occurring heavy element with an atomic number of 47 and an atomic mass of 107.87. The internationally recognized symbol for the element silver is Ag, from the Greek word 'Argyros'. The Sanskrit root of 'Argyros' means



5.1 Blue star in the constellation of Ursa Major

5.2 Cerro Rico mine in Potosi, Bolivia (elevation 4,090 m), the largest silver mine in history

5.3 Silver (Ag) in the periodic table of elements

5.4 Medical dressings coated with silver sulfadiazine

'shining white'. 'Argentum', the Latin word for silver, is also the etymological root of the word 'argent', the French locution for money. Silver (Ag) is one of the Group 11 (1B) elements in the periodic table of elements (Fig. 5.3). It is also more generally classified as a transition, precious and noble metal. The alchemist's symbol for silver is a crescent moon, and many ancient cultures used silver to represent a lustrous, white moon.

Figure 5.5 lists the key physical properties of silver. In its purest form it is soft, white, lustrous, malleable, ductile and the most reflective of all metals (Fig. 5.6). It has high compressive and tensile strength, which gives the metal its characteristic properties of malleability and ductility. These properties make it an ideal metal for cold-working by silversmiths.

Silver is also endowed with the highest electrical conductivity and the highest thermal conductivity of all metals. These properties are utilized in many industrial applications. Silver is a stable element in air and water and therefore suitable for use in bullion, coins, jewellery and artefacts. Silver dissolves easily in nitric acid to form a photosensitive nitrate that is the precursor chemical for traditional silver photographic film. In low concentrations, silver is also toxic to bacteria, algae and fungi. This anti-bacterial effect is utilized in medical dressings coated with silver sulfadiazine (Fig. 5.4) and silver nano-coated medical instruments. The ancient Greeks first recognized this unusual property of silver and used it to sterilize water and wounds. Also, it was a common belief in the Middle Ages that the wealthy were less likely to die from the plague because their everyday plates, cups and cutlery were made of silver.

On the other hand, the ingestion of colloidal silver over long periods of time for medicinal purposes can produce the unfortunate side effect known as argyria. This condition presents as a purple-blue-grey skin discolouration over much of the body.

Elemental Properties of Silver	
Periodic family	Group 11 (IB)
Atomic number	47
Atomic weight	107.86
Melting point	961.8°C
Density	10.49 g/cm^3
Crystal structure	Face-centred cubic
Moh's hardness	2.5
Vickers hardness	26 (annealed) 100 (cold worked)
Stable isotopes	107Ag and 109Ag
Radioactive	No
Crustal abundance	0.1 ppm
Maximum purity	99.95%

5.5 Elemental properties of silver

5.6 A key property of silver – exceptionally high reflectivity

Sources and Utilization

Sources

Native silver is rare in the natural world. Wire silver (Fig. 5.7) and electrum, a combination of native gold and silver, are the two most common occurrences of native silver. The most common silver minerals include argentite/acanthite (Ag_2S) (Fig. 5.8), pyrargyrite (Ag_3SbS_3) (Fig. 5.9), proustite (Ag_3AsS_3) (Fig. 5.10) and chlorargyrite (AgCl). Silver also forms a valuable solid solution phase in lead, copper and gold ores. Argentiferous galena (PbS) (Figs. 5.11 and 5.12) contains up to two per cent silver by mass. The silver produced as a by-product of mining lead, copper and gold ores in 2018 totalled 605 million ounces – equivalent to 73 per cent of the total global mine production (877 million ounces).[1]

1. Source: The Silver Institute – World Silver Survey 2019

5.7 Native wire silver, Kazakhstan

5.8 Argentite, Czech Republic

5.9 Pyrargyrite, Mexico

5.10 Proustite, Mexico

5.11 Galena, Slovakia

5.12 Galena, Bolivia

5.28 Sealed display case to reduce silver sulphide tarnish

commonly used by national art and design museums. When applying a seal, it is important to verify beforehand that the chemical will not adversely affect the natural surface appearance of the silver. Corrosion is also inhibited by wrapping silverwork in acid-free and sulphur-free paper when it is transported or stored.

There is no 'silver bullet' for the permanent prevention of tarnish. Therefore, it remains the inescapable duty and responsibility of the diligent collector to periodically clean the silver! This is not necessarily such an onerous task as many believe. The cleaning work simultaneously allows the collector to examine their silverwork in fine detail and occasionally results in the discovery of previously unknown decorative detail.

The first appearance of light tarnish is easily removed by a gentle buffing of the affected area with a light polishing cloth or a soft, thick microfibre cloth. The Noble Silver Collection uses a variety of brand name and generic polishing cloths (Figs. 5.30 and 5.31) for light tarnish removal. Hagerty silver polish (Fig. 5.32) is the preferred polish for removing or reducing the heavier and more extensive tarnish sometimes found on new acquisitions that have not been recently displayed or cleaned. This polish and other similar products also contain corrosion inhibitors to reduce the rate of future chemical tarnishing. The polish should be applied sparingly using a thick microfibre polishing cloth and left on the silver for a few minutes before starting the work. The best cleaning results are often obtained by working on one small area at a time to better monitor and regulate the effect of the polish on the silver. Silver polish is a mild abrasive and overly aggressive or uncontrolled polishing may irreparably damage the surface, particularly the high-relief decorative detail. With time, the polisher will develop the experience to calibrate the required hand pressure on the cleaning cloth to efficiently clean the tarnish and avoid any damage to the important ornamentation. It is also important to work the polishing cloth in all directions to diffuse tarnishing edges and to ensure the cloth doesn't 'miss' the low-relief surface areas. After using the polishing cream, a gentle all-over buffing with a clean microfibre cloth will complete the work and optimize the appearance of the silverwork.

Hagerty silver gloves (Fig. 5.33) are ideal for the light buffing of artefacts with a flat surface or low-relief decoration. Gloves made from cotton, non-powdered latex or nitrile organic compounds should always be worn when handling and cleaning the silver to prevent the transfer of corrosive, chlorine-rich perspiration and to protect the hands.

Silver tarnish also has an aesthetic character. The attractive black sooty 'patina' common on old Burmese silverwork (Fig. 5.34) is a result of differential corrosion and polishing over many years. This occurs because the efficacy of hand polishing is naturally strongest on high-relief surface areas and weakest in the low-relief crevices and hollows. Consequently, the corrosion of the low-relief areas continues until they are

5.29 3M anti-tarnish strips

5.30 Arthur Price silver polishing cloth

5.31 Generic polishing cloths

5.32 Hagerty silver polish

5.33 Hagerty silver polishing gloves

5.34 Black patina – an attractive form of deep silver sulphide tarnish

5.35 Servants 'overpolishing' the household silver, 19th century

5.36 No overpolishing – detail preserved

5.37 Early stage overpolishing – lost details on the face

5.38 Late stage overpolishing – face is smooth without detail

eventually covered in deep layers of black silver sulphide that define the patina. There is often an attractive visual contrast between the deeply tarnished areas in black and the strongly reflective high-relief decoration. The patina also adds value to the general appearance of the silverwork by increasing the perception of decorative depth, sharpening the outline of repoussé work and increasing the range of silver colour tones. Cotton buds and a touch of silver polish can be used to clean small recesses within the decoration. Recessive areas that are more inaccessible can be gently and very carefully cleaned of undesirable patina by using a soft shoe brush or a soft toothbrush.

A final note of caution. Over-polishing of beautifully decorated silverwork will eventually round the edges and obliterate the details of the workmanship. This can materially impair the aesthetic and monetary value of the artefact. The historical custom of delegating silver polishing to the servants (Fig. 5.35) effectively maintained the high lustre of the unadorned family silverware, but often degraded the high-relief repoussé decoration on more ornamental silverwork. The progressive damage caused by the overpolishing of old Burmese silverwork is illustrated in Figs. 5.36–38. There is no over-polishing on Fig. 5.36 and the facial features of the court minister's head are sharp and well-preserved. The first indications of over-polishing are visible on the female heads in Fig. 5.37. The eyes and ears have lost detail and are unattractive. Extreme over-polishing of the human figure in Fig. 5.38 has left only a trace of the face and a flat, almost featureless torso. Only an echo remains of the silversmith's detailed workmanship.

'Every cloud has a silver lining' is perhaps a fitting proverb that states a general truth about silver care – polishing tarnished silverwork may not be a favoured pastime, but the effort unfailingly reveals the full natural beauty and visual splendour of the silver artefact. The time and effort required to effectively care for a silver collection might seem like a metaphorical cloud, but the superb lustre of a tarnish-free surface or the contrasting tones of an old patina are undoubtedly a glorious 'silver lining'!