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Śāntiniketan and Modern Southeast Asian Art: From Rabindranath Tagore to Bagyi Aung Soe and Beyond

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Śāntiniketan and Modern Southeast Asian Art: From Rabindranath Tagore to Bagyi Aung Soe and Beyond

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Abstract

Through the example of Bagyi Aung Soe, Myanmar's leader of modern art in the twentieth century, this essay examines the potential of Śāntiniketan's pentatonic pedagogical program embodying Rabindranath Tagore's universalist and humanist vision of an autonomous modernity in revitalizing the prevailing unilateral and nation-centric narrative of modern Southeast Asian art. It brings into focus the program's keystones on the modern, art and the artist, which have been pivotal in discoursing on the Burmese alumnus of the ashram-turned-university, and explores how the same might be applicable to fellow artists in Myanmar and the region.

Résumé

A travers l'exemple de Bagyi Aung Soe, pionnier de l'art moderne birman du vingtième siècle, cet essai examine le potentiel du programme pédagogique pentatonique de l'ashram de Śāntiniketan pour revitaliser le récit actuel de l'art moderne en Asie du Sud-Est. Ce programme part de la vision universaliste et humaniste de Rabindranath Tagore, pour élaborer une modernité autonome. L'article en met en lumière les principes clés pour aborder la modernité, l'art et l'artiste. Ces cadres alternatifs d'analyses se sont révélés essentiels dans les discours sur Aung Soe, ancien diplômé birman de l'ashram devenu université. On s'interroge enfin sur leur pertinence pour étudier l'art et les trajectoires des autres artistes de la Birmanie et de la région.

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Western art was an imperative point of reference in the emergence and development of modern art in Southeast Asia in the twentieth century.¹ Its theoretical terminology and frameworks have likewise dominated discourses on art from this part of the world. Western art was however only one amidst a host of competing artistic references, each negotiating the boundaries of its *modi operandi* in relation to those of others, in the genesis of modern Southeast Asian art. Critical enquiry into its complex genealogy hence demands more than the indiscriminate adoption of Western art history's theoretical tools. Attempts to reconsider the relationship between modern Southeast Asian and Western art, as well as the adaptation of the latter's art historical model in writing the former's narratives, have been underway since a quarter of a century.² They are ongoing. In the meantime, the classification and theorization of modern Southeast Asian art using transplanted terminology and frameworks persist—inevitably, one might reason—at the expense of excavation into its distinct origins, objectives and significances. The term “expressionist,” for example, continues to obfuscate the art of Indonesian painter Affandi (1907–1990), one of the few Southeast Asian artists to gain international acclaim in his living years, feeding the supposition that modern art's DNA is *ipso facto* Western and Southeast Asian art, perforce, derivative.³ Truly, if certain Southeast Asian bodies of works are perceived as abstruse—such as that of Myanmar's trailblazer of modern art, Bagyi Aung Soe (1923–1990)—it is also due to the lack of appropriate language and framework to

explicate their motivations, processes, expression and meanings.⁴

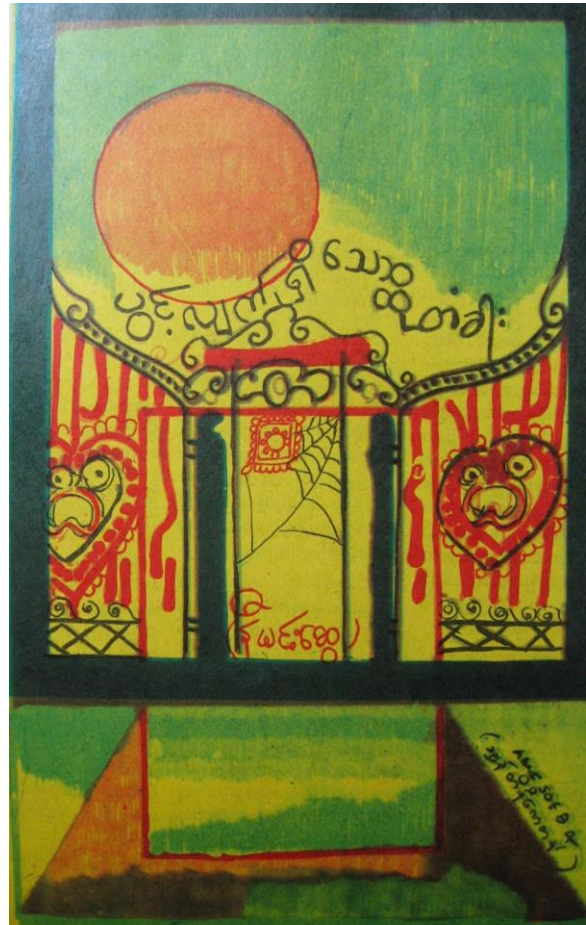


Figure 1. Bagyi Aung Soe, Illustration for *Myawadi* Magazine, February 1985. Media and dimensions of original work unknown. Photograph by Yin Ker.

An art historical narrative fashioned by a select group of individuals conditioned by very specific historical and cultural experiences of the modern Western world is conceivably inadequate to address the distinction and diversity of Southeast Asia. The example of Aung Soe—his synthesis of multiple pictorial models and spiritual and intellectual traditions, and unwonted medley of signs and symbols from fields as diverse as physics, language and esoteric practices—only underscores the inadequacy of this unilateral model (Figs. 1 - 3). The urgency for an adapted

¹ While the term “Southeast Asia” is not inadequate in this preliminary examination of an alternative model of artistic modernity and excellence, it is in truth simplistic and merits problematization with respect to the diversity of the region in question. The contradictions and limits of this modern construct dating from the Second World War beg scrutiny in studies beyond this essay.

² For examples of pioneering studies on this topic, see John Clark, ed., *Modernity in Asian Art* (Broadway: Wild Peony, 1993); T.K. Sabapathy, “Developing Regionalist Perspectives in South-East Asian Art Historiography” in *The Second Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art*, exh. cat. (Brisbane: Queensland Art Gallery, 1996), 13-17.

³ See for example, “Affandi: Indonesia's Top Expressionist Painter,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 28, 1990, accessed August 15, 2016, http://articles.latimes.com/1990-05-28/news/mn-2_1_expressionist-painter. In 2016, Affandi's daughter, Kartika who is an artist, similarly used the term “expressionist” to refer to his art in a public talk. Kartika Affandi, “Kartika Affandi” (talk given at *Talks and Forums: Reframing Modernism* at National Gallery Singapore, June 18, 2016).

⁴ In this essay, the word “Myanmar” is used to refer to the country once known as “Burma.” “Burmese” is used to mean the culture, language and people of Myanmar. John Okell's system is referenced for the romanization of Burmese words, with the exception of names and titles.



Figure 2. Bagyi Aung Soe, Cover for *Atway Amyin* Magazine, September 1987. Media and dimensions of original work unknown. Photograph by Yin Ker.

approach to seeing, thinking about and writing on modern Southeast Asian art is acute. Closer to home in South Asia, with which Southeast Asia shares trade links, political ties and a Hindu-Buddhist cultural and artistic heritage since the first millennium, are treatises expounding hitherto unexplored approaches to image-making in Southeast Asia: the *Vāstusūtra Upaniṣad* and the *Viṣṇudharmottara Purāṇa* generally referred to as the *Śilpa Śāstras*, for example.⁵ More specifically with respect to the modern period, there is Rabindranath Tagore’s (1861–1941) vision of a

contextually significant modern art of universalist aspiration founded on the revitalization of traditional Asian arts and ancient bodies of knowledge such as those embedded in the *Śilpa Śāstras*.⁶ It was implemented by his right-hand man, Nandalal Bose (1882–1966), at the art school of the *Viśva-Bhāratī* University founded in Śāntiniketan in 1901. Its pertinence in relation to modern Southeast Asian art history is all the greater in light of the fact that as many as four

⁵ On the earliest Southeast Asian Hindu-Buddhist art in relation to South Asian art, see *Lost Kingdoms: Hindu-Buddhist Sculpture of Early Southeast Asia*, exh. cat. (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014). On the ancient treatises, see Alice Boner, Sadāśiva Rath Śarmā and Bettina Bäumer, *Vāstusūtra Upaniṣad; the Essence of Form in Sacred Art* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1982); Stella Kramrisch, “The Viṣṇudharmottaram,” *The Calcutta Review* 10 (1924), 331–386; Isabella Nardi, *The Theory of Citrasūtras in Indian Painting: A Critical Re-evaluation of their Uses and Interpretations* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

⁶ Literature on Tagore’s philosophy is abundant. For an overview of his life and philosophy, see Uma Das Gupta, *Rabindranath Tagore: A Biography* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004). On his ideas on modernity, nationalism, art and education, see Bhabatosh Chatterjee, *Rabindranath Tagore and Modern Sensibility* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996); Kumkum Bhattacharya, *Rabindranath Tagore: Adventure of Ideas and Innovative Practices in Education* (Cham: Springer, 2014); Rabindranath Tagore, *Nationalism* (San Francisco: The Book Club of California, 1917); Rabindranath Tagore, *Rabindranath Tagore On Art and Aesthetics: A Selection of Lectures, Essays and Letters* (Kolkata: Orient Longmans, 1961). This paper owes the idea of a contextually significant artistic modernity to R. Siva Kumar, *Sāntiniketan: The Making of Contextual Modernism*, exh. cat. (New Delhi: National Gallery of Modern Art, 1997).



Figure 3. Bagyi Aung Soe, *Untitled*, 1988. Felt-tip pen and ink on paper. 18.5 x 14 cm. Collection of Gajah Gallery. Image courtesy of Gajah Gallery.

leading exponents of the modern period were part of this mecca of artists and intellectuals from across Asia and beyond: Fua Haribhitak (1910–1993) from Thailand, Rusli (1916–2005) and Affandi from Indonesia and Aung Soe from Myanmar (Fig. 4).⁷ As such, not only does the first Asian Nobel laureate’s vision offer considerable potential as a parallel point of reference for interpreting Southeast Asian artists’ practices and oeuvres, it also holds the promise of relevant tools of thought and language for rethinking and reshaping the narrative of modern Southeast Asian art.⁸

Research since 2000 has demonstrated the thoroughgoing impact of Tagore’s school on Aung Soe; its teachings have elucidated a large number

of idiosyncrasies observed in his art and practice, which resist or elude the lenses of an Eurocentric art history.⁹ In this essay that is part of a wider long-term project of formulating contextually significant narratives of modern Southeast Asian art written on its own terms, it is hence with Aung Soe as a case in point that we advance possibilities presented by Tagore’s Śāntiniketan model. It brings into focus its pedagogical program’s keystones on the modern, art and the artist, which have been pertinent to interpreting Aung Soe’s art, and proposes how the same might be applicable to fellow artists in Myanmar and the region. The aim is neither to conduct critical studies of the Bengali thinker, the Burmese artist or modern Southeast Asian art, nor to examine Śāntiniketan as an end in itself; the topic is Śāntiniketan’s viability as a competing point of reference in reinterpreting and reframing modern Southeast Asian art, whose treatment within the limits of this prefatory essay investigating an uncharted connection is inevitably cursory and sweeping. Moving between Śāntiniketan, Yangon and other sites of modern art in Southeast Asia, the first part focuses on Tagore’s vision of an autonomous modernity articulated in tandem with tradition, followed by his art school’s concept of art and the artist. If this essay does not propose a distinct methodology, it is because it participates in an ongoing debate on the revision and revitalization of systems of methods applied to the historicization of art from this very eclectic region. In lieu of imposing authoritarian or clerkly apparatuses that strain the delicate balance between structure and open-endedness in this nascent field of study, and risk distortion in the interpretation of primary materials, it pleads prudence in approaching the endeavor as “a serial and self-redefining operation, a permanent problem - formulation,” analogous to the open-

⁷ In addition to artists from East Asia like Xu Beihong from China and Kampo Arai from Japan, artists and intellectuals from beyond Asia who were part of Tagore’s circle included Sylvain Lévi from France, Giuseppe Tucci from Italy, Stella Kramrisch and Moritz Winternitz from Austria, and Charles Freer Andrews, William Winstanley Pearson and Leonard Knight Elmhirst from Great Britain. See Uma Das Gupta, “Śāntiniketan and Sriniketan: A Historical Introduction,” *Visva-Bharati Quarterly* 41 (1975–1976), 30, 35.

⁸ On Haribhitak, see Pipop Boosarakumwadi, *A Century of Fua Hariphitak: Life and Works* (Bangkok: Art Centre, Silpakorn University, 2010); on Affandi, see Sardjana Sumichan, ed., *Affandi*, Vols. I–III (Jakarta: Bina Lestari Budaya Foundation, Singapore: Singapore Art Museum, 2007); on Aung Soe, see subsequent references in this essay’s footnotes. Rusli’s oeuvre awaits research.

⁹ See Yin Ker, “Bagyi Aung Soe: Strategies for an Autonomous Artistic Modernity” (paper presented at *Southeast Asia and Taiwan: Modernity and Postcolonial Manifestations in Visual Art*, Taipei Fine Arts Museum, Taipei, November 21, 2015); “Figurer, voir et lire l’insaisissable: la peinture *manaw maheikdi dat* de Bagyi Aung Soe (1923/24–1990)” (PhD diss., University of Paris-Sorbonne, Paris IV, 2013); “Modern Art According to Bagyi Aung Soe,” *Journal of Burma Studies* 10 (2006), 83–157.



Figure 4. Photograph (left to right): Bagyi Aung Soe, Affandi, Maryati, Kartika, 1951, Śāntiniketan, India. Collection of Maung Maung Soe, Bagyieain Foundation, Yangon, Myanmar. Photographer unknown.

ended and evolving *process* of picture-making as observed by art historian Michael Baxandall.¹⁰

An Autonomous and Atemporal Artistic Modernity

Aung Soe's "*manaw maheikdi dat* painting," meaning in Burmanized Pāli the painting of the fundamental elements of the phenomenal world by way of immense mental concentration achieved through meditation, was the fruit of his quest for a modern *and* Burmese painting. Insights into its means and processes are to be sought in Buddhist thought and practice.¹¹ The demystification of its motivations and genesis, on the other hand, hinges on the ideological underpinnings of his *alma mater*: Śāntiniketan. Founded in reaction against

the British colonial system of education, Tagore aspired to offer a holistic education based on a redefinition of modernity.¹² Of his two key propositions on the modern that have been pivotal in expounding Aung Soe's art, we begin with his definition of "true modernism" in 1916:

Modernism is not in the dress of the Europeans; or in the hideous structures, where their children are interned when they take their lessons; or in the square houses with flat straight wall-surfaces, pierced with parallel lines of windows, where these people are caged in their lifetime; certainly modernism is not in their ladies' bonnets, carrying on them loads of incongruities. These are not modern, but merely European. True modernism is freedom of mind, not slavery of taste. It is independence of thought and action, not tutelage under European schoolmasters.¹³

¹⁰ See Michael Baxandall, *Patterns of Intention: On the Historical Explanation of Pictures* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), 73, 137.

¹¹ See Ker, "Figurer, voir et lire l'insaisissable: la peinture *manaw maheikdi dat* de Bagyi Aung Soe (1923/24-1990)."

¹² See *Santiniketan, 1901-1951* (Kolkata: Visva-Bharati, 1986 [1951]), 11.

¹³ Rabindranath Tagore, *Nationalism* (San Francisco: The Book Club of California, 1917), 93-94.

To be modern was defined as a fully autonomous state distinct from the acquisition of appurtenances of the Western world: one needs not and must not imitate the West to be modern. While it is not known if the Mahaguru's speech was made known to students at Śāntiniketan, his vision was certainly interiorized in its curriculum. It explains Aung Soe's fury when likened to Picasso by his countrymen, which he very likely interpreted as a subjugation of his artistic sovereignty and distinction: "When someone calls me the Burmese version of Picasso, it really hurts. I would rather be hit in the face. To be compared to Picasso is the worst insult."¹⁴ Similarly, it was probably Tagore's relativization of the Western model that inspired him to examine traditional Asian arts (Burmese wall paintings, Persian miniatures, Japanese woodblock print, etc.) *after* his Indian sojourn.¹⁵ Prior to his immersion at Śāntiniketan, he clearly favored Western art and was in fact disappointed that he would not be heading for Europe or North America instead.¹⁶ This transformative experience is echoed by fellow alumnus Satyajit Ray (1921–1992): "Śāntiniketan opened my eyes for the first time to the splendors of Indian and Far Eastern art. Until then I was completely under the sway of Western art, music and literature. Śāntiniketan made me the combined product of East and West that I am."¹⁷

In addition to demarcating modernization from westernization, Tagore reasoned that modernity ensued from the synergy between the old and the new. Although the idea that the old continues to nurture as well as to haunt the modern was already present in Western discourses on modernity, the version of modernity that reached Southeast Asia was highly distorted by imperialism and conflated with westernization.¹⁸

The indigenous was likened to the old and the traditional, and framed as antipodal to reason, science and progress hailed as synonymous with Western civilization. It is in this context that Tagore's emphasis on the role of tradition or the "granary of the past," which Bose analogized to "the outer shell of the seed that holds the embryo of new growth" and "protects the embryo from being destroyed by heat or rain or violence" before the latter "should have the power enough to break tradition open [and] new art emerge" was and remains significant—and likewise his proposition of a politically, culturally, spiritually, intellectually and artistically autonomous modernity displacing the West as modernity's sole author.¹⁹ With the restoration of indigenous traditions as modernity's nourishment, there was thus no contradiction between modern Western painting, traditional Asian art forms and ancient spirituality in Aung Soe's art. He went further to posit that it was precisely the spiritual technology of ancient origins such as meditation, *mantras* and *yantras* that qualified his *manaw maheikdi dat* painting as "the most advanced of modern art," since their atemporal character transcended the historicization of modern art made up of series of movements that rise and fall.²⁰

If Tagore's definition of the modern offers the most efficacious model for interpreting Aung Soe's art and practice, it is because the Burmese artist made Śāntiniketan's teachings the blueprint of his quest for a modern Burmese art. In spite of the lack of formal parallels between *manaw maheikdi dat* painting and his Indian gurus' works, evidence abounds that Śāntiniketan's teachings functioned as his beacon throughout the next four decades of his career in Yangon, from the 1950s to the 1980s.²¹ In his notes and articles, he reminisced about Śāntiniketan, his gurus and their works,

¹⁴ Due to difficulty in hearing in old age, Aung Soe essentially communicated in writing. See Bagyi Aung Soe, written communication with Sonny Nyein, Yangon, c. 1985.

¹⁵ For these illustrations from the 1950s, see *Online Database of Illustrations by Bagyi Aung Soe, A (Hi)Story of Art From Myanmar: 1948–1990*, accessed August 8, 2016, <http://www.aungsoeillustrations.org>.

¹⁶ Sonny Nyein, interview by author, Yangon, November 2005.

¹⁷ Amartya Sen, "Tagore and His India," in *Nobel Laureates in Search of Identity and Integrity: Voices of Different Cultures*, ed. Anders Hallengren (Stockholm: The Nobel Foundation, 2004), 204.

¹⁸ For a succinct overview of the dilemmas between the old and the new in Western modernity against the context of an analysis of alternative modernities beyond

Euramerica, see Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar, "On Alternative Modernities" in *Public Culture* 11 (1999), 1–9.

¹⁹ See Mohit Kumar Ray and Rabindranath Tagore, "An Eastern University," in *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore*, Vol. IV (New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers and Distributors, 2007), 653; K.G. Subramanyan, "Nandalal Bose," in *Nandan: Nandalal* (Kolkata: Visva-Bharati, 1982), 20.

²⁰ Bagyi Aung Soe, written communication with Bagyi Lynn Wunna, Yangon, c. 1985.

²¹ For examples of works by the teachers of Śāntiniketan, see Kumar, *Santīniketan: The Making of Contextual Modernism*.

notably Bose.²² More than thirty years after his studies there in 1951–1952, he signed his works “Shantiniketan” in Burmese or Latin script and drew at least one portrait of Tagore for personal contemplation (Figs. 1 and 5). The same does not hold true for fellow Burmese artists who were not initiated to Tagore’s vision. There is not even any evidence to suggest that the literary giants who revered Tagore, nominated Aung Soe for the Indian government scholarship and gave impetus to the enterprise of revitalizing Burmese art, understood the import of the poet’s vision as assimilated by their protégé. In fact, the chasm between Aung Soe and other Burmese artists was plausibly due to the latter’s oblivion to the conflation between Western and modern art, and the mirage of Euramerican artistic superiority as censured by Tagore. In terms of subject matter, they espoused the colonizer’s exoticized vision of Myanmar: ethnographic portraits of minorities, “natives” at work, topographical or picturesque landscapes of “innumerable pagodas, innumerable huts, an endless series of river and village scenes,” etc., which the leading writer Zawgyi (U Thein Han) (1908–1990) lamented in 1958 as “a rather deadly monotony of theme.”²³ The seemingly unquestioning adoption of techniques and styles of Western painting was likewise pervasive amongst artists, including Kin Maung (Bank) (1908–1983) of Mandalay, who is regarded as the pioneer of modern Burmese art in Upper Myanmar.²⁴ Indeed, in spite of Tagore’s popularity in Myanmar, which he visited in 1916, 1924 and 1927—there is even a private library in Yangon named after Śāntiniketan, which was founded by writer U Paragu (1921–2011)—his vision left no patent

imprint in modern Burmese art beyond Aung Soe.²⁵

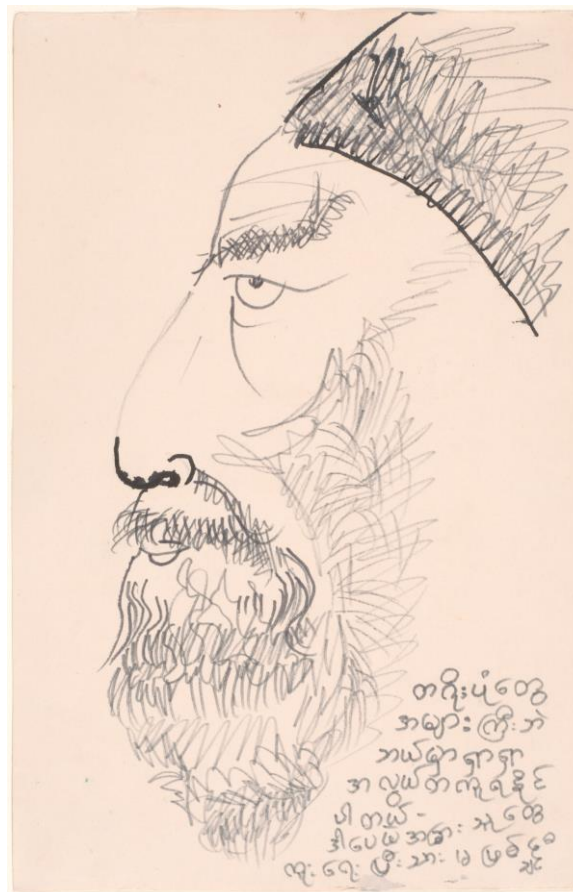


Figure 5. Bagyi Aung Soe, *Portrait of Rabindranath Tagore*, 1989. Marker on paper. 29 x 18 cm. Collection of National Gallery Singapore. Image courtesy of National Heritage Board. © Maung Maung Soe, Bagyieain Foundation, Yangon, Myanmar.

Exposure and receptivity to Tagore’s ideas vary across Southeast Asia. Tagore is not known to have set foot in the Philippines on the northeastern end of the political conglomeration, whose cultural and spiritual ties with India are relatively weak, just as he did not Laos and Cambodia—in spite of his wish to visit Angkor Wat.²⁶ In the instance of Indonesia, initial admiration that prompted the invitation to Tagore to visit various parts of the archipelago in 1927 subsided amidst nationalist

²² See Bagyi Aung Soe, “Professor Nandalal” in *From Tradition to Modernity* [Burmese] (Yangon: Khin May Si Sapay, 1978), 95–116; “Indian Painting,” *Myawadi* [Burmese], February 1954, 107–109; “Santiniketan” *Thwaythauk* [Burmese], May 1953, 25–29.

²³ U Thein Han, “Contemporary Burmese Art,” in *Perspective of Burma: An Atlantic Monthly Supplement* (New York: Intercultural Publications, 1958), 45. For examples of works as such by Saya Saung (1898–1952) and Yatanabon Maung Su (1903–1965), see Ranard (2008), 67–69, 121–125.

²⁴ On Burmese painting in the twentieth century, see Andrew Ranard, *Burmese Painting: A Linear and Lateral History* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2009). On Kin Maung (Bank), see *ibid.*, 217–225. For a study of the two modes of modernity discerned in Aung Soe’s and Kin Maung’s oeuvres, see Yin Ker, “Tantao xiandai Miandian yishu de xingqi: Jinmaung (1908–1983) yu Angsuo (1924–1990)” [Kin Maung (Bank) (1908–1983) and Bagyi Aung Soe (1924–1990): Two Models of ‘Modern’ Myanmar Art and the Question of its Emergence], *Xiandai Yishu Modern Art*, 173, June (2014): 62–75.

²⁵ On Tagore in Myanmar, see Swapna Bhattacharya, “Rabindranath Tagore in Myanmar and His Perception of Southeast Asia-India Relations,” in *Interrogating History: Essays for Hermann Kulke*, eds. Matin Brandtner and Shishir Kumar Panda (New Delhi: Manohar, 2006), 213–229.

²⁶ On Tagore and French Indochina, especially Vietnam where he stopped over in 1929, see Chi P. Pham, “The Rise and the Fall of Rabindranath Tagore in Vietnam” (M.A. diss., University of California, 2012).

fervor: the Indian humanist's skepticism of nationalism and his faith in premodern indigenous culture and wisdom were condemned as incompatible with the young nation's aspirations.²⁷ Sutan Sjahrir, Indonesia's first prime minister, argued in antithesis of Tagore:

We intellectuals here are much closer to Europe and America than we are to the Boroboedur [*sic*] or Mahabharata or the primitive Islamic culture of Java and Sumatra. Which is our basis: the West or the rudiments of feudal culture which are still to be found in our Eastern society?²⁸

Tagore's legacy on the political front notwithstanding, his recommendation of indigenous traditions in the creation of a contextually significant modern art disenthralled from "European schoolmasters" is felicitous to the task of recalibrating modern Southeast Asian art. Incipient is a compelling competing benchmark for evaluating artistic excellence: the adroit maneuver of the old and the new within a synergetic configuration. It is most germane to oeuvres drawing inspiration from local bases of knowledge, imagery and techniques: lacquer painting by Nguyễn Gia Trí (1909–1993) and ink on silk painting by Nguyễn Phan Chánh (1882–1984) from Vietnam, batik painting by Chua Thean Teng (1914–2008) from Malaysia, Islamic calligraphy by Ahmad Sadali (1924–1987) from Indonesia, and mural painting by Prasong Padmanuja (1918–1989) from Thailand, for example.²⁹

Art in Terms of Diversity and Linguistic Versatility

Over two decades after returning to Yangon from Śāntiniketan, Aung Soe studied a diversity of pictorial traditions ranging from the prehistoric to

the modern, the courtly to the folk, the Oriental to the Occidental.³⁰ Stylistic eclecticism as such, which can be observed in Myanmar and across the region—Myanmar's Paw Oo Thet (1936–1993) and Singapore's Cheong Soo Pieng (1917–1983), just to name two—is generally interpreted as a sign of artistic immaturity, if not, inferiority.³¹ Yet, in view of the way in which varied models of modern Western art reached Southeast Asia primarily in the form of reproductions, and were next disseminated via this medium, there is possibly more to this procedure than imitation as an end in itself. At the receiving end of a wide range of historically dislocated styles from different periods and parts of Europe at any given moment, but without necessarily benefitting from instructions on their historical progression, theoretical significances or even techniques, most Southeast Asian artists made sense of these foreign pictorial systems' rationales and strategies by replicating to their best what they could observe. Overwhelmed by the flood of visual data, they did so swiftly too, moving from one style to another in one painting to the next. Their goal was the assimilation of these novel formal *as well as* semantic properties, as if learning new languages, and it is in this respect that the way art was defined and taught in Śāntiniketan by Bose is pertinent: art as a diversity of pictorial traditions, whose linguistic rationales must be mastered to develop the optimum linguistic facility and versatility required to communicate the purview of the new times.³²

Of Śāntiniketan, Amartya Sen (1933–) recalls that "there was something remarkable about the ease with which class discussions could move from Indian traditional literature to contemporary as well as classical Western thought, and then to the

²⁷ See Arun Das Gupta, "Rabindranath Tagore in Indonesia: An Experiment in Bridge-Building," in *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde* 158 (2002): 451–477.

²⁸ J.D. Legge, *Intellectuals and Nationalism in Indonesia: A Study of the Following Recruited by Sutan Sjahrir in Occupied Jakarta* (Singapore: Equinox Publishing, 2010), 60.

²⁹ The question of tradition in modern and contemporary Southeast Asian art has preoccupied art historians like T.K. Sabapathy since the 1980s, although the Śāntiniketan model remains unexplored. For examples of foundational debates on this topic, see Caroline Turner, ed., *Tradition and Change: Contemporary Art of Asia and the Pacific* (Brisbane: University of Queensland Press, 1993).

³⁰ For examples of Aung Soe's studies of different pictorial idioms, see *Online Database of Illustrations by Bagyi Aung Soe, A (Hi)Story of Art From Myanmar: 1948–1990*, accessed August 8, 2016, <http://www.aungsoeillustrations.org>.

³¹ See *Cheong Soo Pieng: Visions of Southeast Asia*, exh. cat. (Singapore: National Gallery, 2010); Ma Thanegi, *Paw Oo Thett, 1936–1993: His Life and His Creativity* (Yangon: Swiftwinds, 2004).

³² On Bose's concept of art in relation to his concept of the artist, see R. Siva Kumar, "Nandalal's Concept of the Artist: An Overview," in *Nandan* (Kolkata: Visva-Bharati, 1991), 36–38. On how Bose taught art, see Nandalal Bose, *Vision and Creation* (Kolkata: Visva-Bharati, 1999). Unless otherwise stated, all sources on Bose in this second part of the essay are from these two publications.

culture of China or Japan or elsewhere.”³³ Likewise in the art school’s curriculum, diversity was promoted in lieu of homogenization yoked to an authoritarian model of artistic excellence. Thought systems and art forms from far and near were studied and practiced in the spirit of Tagore’s aspiration for the university, whose name “Viśva-Bhārati” in Sanskrit means where the world roosts in one nest. Spaces and times merge, and contrary to Western art, there was no hierarchical distinction between the artist and the craftsman, fine and commercial art, high and low art, etc. No art form was deemed too plebeian for the Śāntiniketan polymath, who, in the image of the primordial artist, worked in a range of techniques and media: woodblock, batik, leatherwork, mural painting, as well as folk arts like the Bengali *alpāna*. It was certainly not coincidental that Aung Soe foregrounded the character of diversity in his *manaw maheikdi dat* painting by calling it the sum of “all the traditions of the world.”³⁴

Understood within the framework of linguistic rationales rather than stylistic and aesthetic properties, Bose foregrounded art as a communicational task. The duty of the Śāntiniketan artist—unlike the modern artist perceived as being preoccupied with self-expression—would be to master the semiotic possibilities of the widest spectrum possible of pictorial systems understood as “levels of a visual language linked to a hierarchy of functions and communicational needs” in any given society. Style was deemed incidental, since it primarily reflected the artist’s sensibility or idiosyncrasy. Through these lenses, the stylistic eclecticism observed in Aung Soe and fellow Southeast Asian artists hence constituted research processes on the linguistic rationales of the transplanted isms’ pictorial systems. Studies of the impressionist, cubist or expressionist style would have been conducted with the objective of expanding their repertoire of means of expression and honing their versatility—not in the interest of copying alone. Specifically, they would be investigating the communicational

logic and mechanisms of these pictorial systems, as would a linguist with respect to languages and their structures, so as to develop an intimate understanding of their manner of operation and to elicit specific pictorial strategies. In other words, the procedure was most likely strategic and not necessarily hesitant or arbitrary. To begin with, contrary to Western art’s exaltation of specialization, stylistic and technical versatility was held in high esteem in most traditional Southeast Asian societies. Against the context of twentieth-century Southeast Asia whose social fabric had been ruptured under colonial threat, if not rule, “linguistic versatility” was in addition, according to R. Siva Kumar, the leading scholar on Bose, vested with a social function:

It [an education that aimed at linguistic versatility] gave the artist an all-round view of his tasks and allowed him to reach out to his audience at many different levels. The first allowed him to reinstate a total communication system and the second allowed his voice to cut across social segmentations a good deal. Decolonization demands both the revival of the indigenous language and the co-ordination of the people not only at the political but at the social and cultural levels as well. They are the subject race’s means to a new self-assertion.³⁵

In the case of Aung Soe, this ultimate end intertwined with political, social and cultural renovation was reinforced by his art’s medium of diffusion: illustration whose momentous role in the genesis of modern art in Myanmar is a consummate example of the inappositeness of the dichotomy between commercial and fine arts in this part of the world.³⁶ To be sure, Śāntiniketan’s instruction on facing each situation creatively by drawing on a battery of methods, idioms, techniques and materials from a variety of artistic traditions, disciplines, historical periods and lands, and adapting them accordingly served multiple ends. At the most primary level, it challenged and

³⁵ Kumar, “Nandalal’s Concept of the Artist: An Overview,” 38.

³⁶ In Myanmar, illustration was no less than *the* site for avant-garde pictorial experimentations for more than half a century until the 1990s. For a case study demonstrating the importance of illustration in the development of modern art in Myanmar, see Yin Ker, “L’« art fou » ou l’art moderne birman selon les illustrations de Bagyi Aung Soe,” in *La Question de l’Art en Asie Orientale*, ed. Flora Blanchon (Paris: Presses de l’Université de Paris-Sorbonne, 2008), 387-404.

³³ Amartya Sen, “Tagore and His India,” 204.

³⁴ Bagyi Aung Soe, written communication with Sonny Nyein, Yangon, c. 1985.

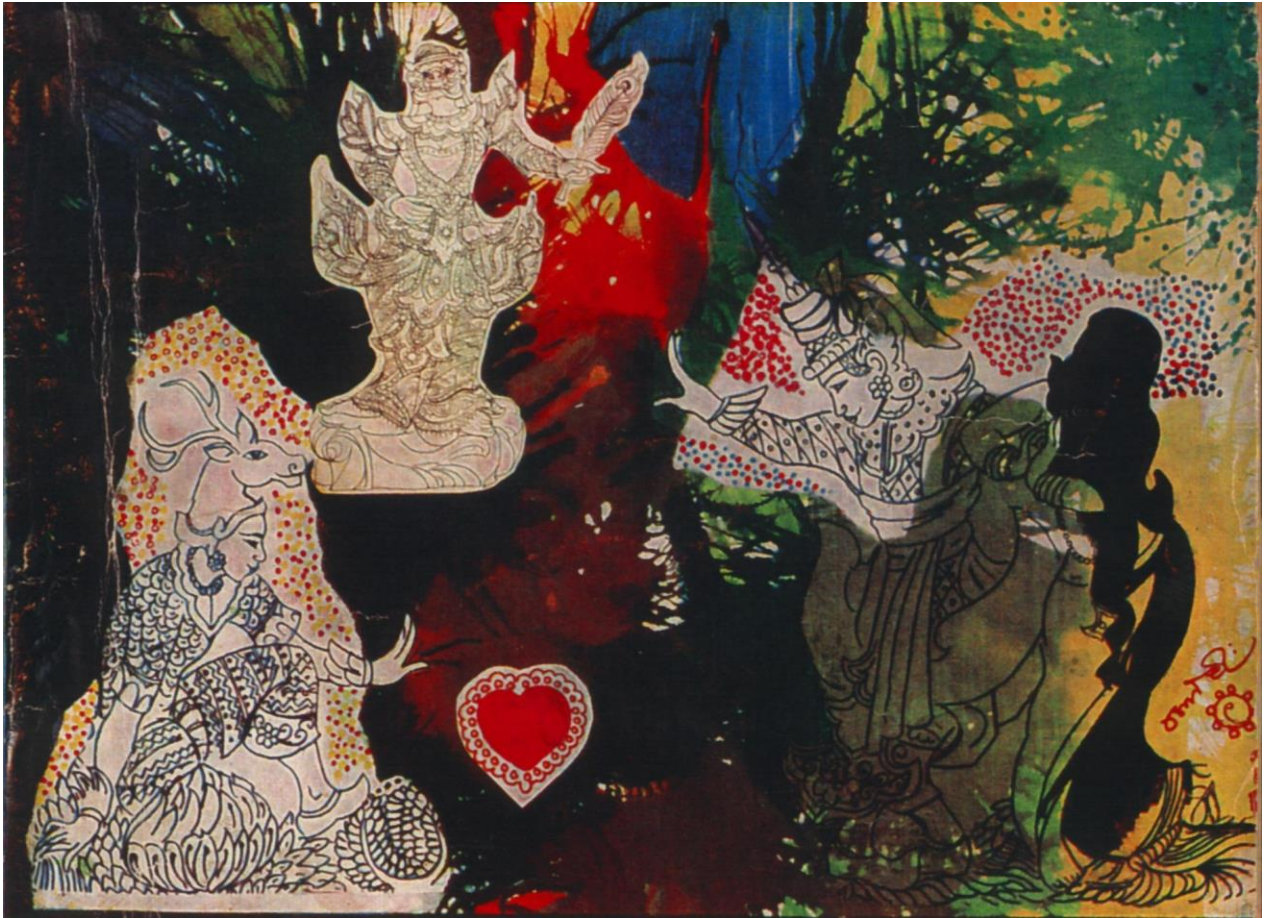


Figure 6. Bagi Aung Soe, Cover for *Moway Magazine*, August 1979. Media and dimensions of original work unknown. Photograph by Yin Ker.

relativized the Western canon of art by proposing competing paradigms of artistic practices. Another effect was the circumvention of nation-centric categories and nationalist and identity politics without sacrificing social and cultural resonances.³⁷ Free to dismantle, reinvent and synthesize manifold pictorial systems and strategies irrespective of their national and art historical affiliations, Aung Soe thus articulated his syncretic *manaw maheikdi dat* painting that was the sum of “all the traditions of the world,” of which his illustration of Myanmar’s favorite episode from the *Rāmāyaṇa* is a forerunner (Fig. 6). Although the three other Southeast Asian pioneers of modern art known to have been at Śāntiniketan—Haribhitak, Rusli and Affandi—did

not take Bose’s lesson on linguistic versatility as far, they were possibly similarly insulated from nation politics due to their acquaintance or familiarity with Tagore’s humanist and universalist vision. None appears to have been caught in the dilemma between international abstraction and a politically engaged figurative art tasked with the immortalization of the trials and tribulations of their newborn nations, for example, as were many artists in Indonesia, notably those succeeding Sindoutomo Sudjojono (1913–1986) and Hendra Gunawan (1918–1983) in the 1960s.³⁸ The absence of a uniformed style amongst the alumni can likewise be traced back to Bose’s take on style as adventitious.

³⁷ This said, Burmese art was never an important battleground of political ideologies in the first place, unlike Indian or Indonesian art. Neither did the socialist government between 1962 and 1988 exploit it to the same extent as communist China and socialist Vietnam.

³⁸ On “Art in the service of the revolution,” see Helena Spanjaard, *Modern Indonesian Painting* (London: Sotheby’s, 2003), 73–93. See also Spanjaard, “The Controversy Between the Academies of Bandung and Yogyakarta,” in *Modernity in Asian Art*, ed. John Clark (Sydney: Wild Peony, 1993), 85–104.

While there is no evidence that other artists in Myanmar and the region knew of Bose's lessons on art in terms of diversity and linguistic versatility, it is not impossible for them to have responded similarly to the smorgasbord of isms laid before them: intentional experimentation and selective assimilation with the aim of expanding one's repertoire of pictorial strategies. Some form of discrimination must have been exercised in the adaptation of the available models to suit their ends, as can be observed in the works of Chen Wen-Hsi (1906–1991) from Singapore, Vicente Manansala (1910–1981) from the Philippines and Popo Iskandar (1927–2000) from Indonesia with respect to the cubist idiom.³⁹ To begin with, the lesson that no art form or style is superior to another, since each pictorial system serves distinct ends, liberates the reading of modern Southeast Asian artistic practices and productions from the dictate of an authoritarian model. In these few ways alone, the applicability of Śāntiniketan's approach to art in remapping the genesis of many a twentieth-century Southeast Asian artist's oeuvre and to realigning their narratives is unequivocal and begs systematic exploration.

An Artist Bound to Society

Aung Soe's drunken antics, outlandish dressing and rejection of the art market in spite of excruciating poverty can be interpreted as the excesses of a genius artist or the caprices of a celebrity—which he was, having starred in more than forty films. As much as they contradict conventions of virtuous conduct in Myanmar, they conform to the modern myth of the long-suffering, charismatic and rebellious artist.⁴⁰ But what if his behavior and choices were also due to his Indian gurus' concept of the artist? Aung Soe published two anthologies in 1978: *From Tradition to Modernity* comprising of twenty previously published articles and *Poetry Without Words* of

forty-six illustrations.⁴¹ The latter is divided into four parts replicating all except the very last point of Bose's pentatonic pedagogical program inspired by Okakura Kakuzō's (1862–1913) triadic conjunction of nature, tradition and originality.⁴² Based on Aung Soe's declaration in *From Tradition to Modernity*, this last point on the cultivation of a sense of responsibility towards society, both as an individual and as an artist, which did not find expression in his corpus of illustrations, was none other than this anthology's *raison d'être*: "If this book has done its bit towards helping people, who have lives so much more noble than mine, so that they march more strongly towards a better society, then I care not for all that I have given."⁴³

In a Kafkaesque world turned on itself, it is a radical act to play the madman. Considering Aung Soe's determination to be of benefit to his society—one undermined by cultural conservatism and political repression during the most of his career since 1962—it is conceivable that his idiosyncrasies such as incongruous dress, capricious behavior and semblances of madness were acts of resistance and a method of tacit activism. In other words, his behavior was not necessarily motivated by individualistic concerns or political convictions, but rather, stemmed from moral indignation and duty. It is likewise with his single-minded exploration of avant-garde expressions and esoteric Buddhist subject matter frowned upon by the ruling party. An attitude as such would be consistent with Tagore's refusal to compromise with mental enslavement of any kind, be it travestied as imperialism, nationalism, tradition, modernity, science or reason; the creation of Śāntiniketan was precisely his way of standing up to the insular and mercantile world in which thought is actively suppressed in favor of doctrine. Indeed, it is worth pondering if in decrying injustices through their persona or

³⁹ See *Cubism in Asia: Unbounded Dialogues*, exh. cat. (Singapore: Singapore Art Museum, 2006).

⁴⁰ On Aung Soe's diversions in film, see Myint Lwin Khine, "The Magic of Art and its Creator," in *The Legacy of Bagyi Aung Soe: Twentieth Death Anniversary* [Burmese] (Yangon: Swiftwinds, 2010 [1988]), 142–151.

⁴¹ See Bagyi Aung Soe, *From Tradition to Modernity; Poetry Without Words* [Burmese] (Yangon: Wun Shway Ein, 1993 [Yangon: Pangyi Sarpay, 1978]).

⁴² The first four points of Bose's pedagogical program are familiarity with one's cultural and artistic traditions, understanding one's environment, awakening one's aesthetic sensibilities with the aim of forging a distinct artistic vision, and experimentation in diverse media, techniques and styles. See Subramanian, "Nandalal Bose," 11. On Kakuzō's triadic conjunction, see Bose, *Vision and Creation*, 44–45.

⁴³ See Aung Soe, *From Tradition to Modernity*, 217–222.

practice, artists like Myanmar's Htein Lin (1966–) and Thailand's Vasan Sitthiket (1957–) were not in fact motivated by a sense of moral duty towards their fellow countrymen too.⁴⁴ While there is no doubt that they do not have direct links with Śāntiniketan, its concept of the socially responsible artist does have the potential to widen and deepen interpretations of the artist's motivations which are rarely schematic.

The prominence of unconventional “poor” media in twentieth-century Southeast Asian art is also likely to benefit from a rethinking through Śāntiniketan's emphasis on the artist's responsibility towards society. It is indisputable that quality art materials were rare in socialist Myanmar—as in many parts of Southeast Asia, especially during World War II—but Aung Soe's rejection of costly imported Western art materials like oil paint and canvas in favor of felt-tip pen and ink on paper was in all likelihood ideological too. Echoing Bose's disapproval of the oil medium out of consideration for students from modest families and due to its perceived unsuitability for training in rigorous line work, he extolled the master of modern Japanese painting Inshō Dōmoto's (1896–1975) eschewal of foreign paint materials in favor of local rice paper, inks and mineral-based paints in an article.⁴⁵ Against the backdrop of Myanmar's economic fiasco and Aung Soe's personal penury, to paint using affordable and readily available materials was admittedly a more self-respecting as well as respectful stance towards one's society. It is not impossible that artists like Vietnam's Bùi Xuân Phái (1921–1988) who employed cardboard and newspaper due to extreme poverty also shared comparable concerns without necessarily rationalizing their choices as such.⁴⁶ Indeed, apart from the want of quality paint materials, this is an additional factor that can further enquiry into the modern Southeast Asian artist's practice.

Aung Soe's commitment to illustration was tenacious. He relied on it to take his art out of the gallery so as to “reach everybody.”⁴⁷ Intent that it should benefit all strata of the Burmese society, he furthermore peddled his works at a mere fraction of the going rate: the equivalent of approximately five dozen eggs for each work, which in the year he died in 1990, was less than a third of the commission for an illustration and up to twenty times less than a painting sold in a gallery.⁴⁸ While socialist or even communist inclinations might be inferred from his ways, an awareness of Śāntiniketan's credo and Aung Soe's adherence to it suggests that he was in fact honoring his *alma mater's* instruction that it would be “mercenary and vulgar for artists to consider painting as a market commodity.”⁴⁹ Tagore's and Bose's opinion that artistic practice was a calling above personal status and material gain explains why no reward of official endorsement and material comfort could buy their student's subservience—not housing privileges, not the prestige of being a founding member of Yangon's very first art gallery alongside the country's leading avant-garde artists, not money.⁵⁰ To be sure, although this spirit of altruism is not exclusive to Śāntiniketan, the emphasis placed on it as integral to an artist's integrity is unusual in the world of modern art—and hence the importance of addressing its potential in reinterpreting and rethinking particular aspects of modern Southeast Asian artists' practice and art. With respect to other Southeast Asian artists who similarly disregarded or even despised the accumulation of personal material wealth—fellow alumnus Haribhitak and Burmese artist Kin Maung Yin (1938–2014), for

⁴⁷ Bagyi Aung Soe, written communication, Yangon, c. 1985. Collection of Maung Maung Soe, Bagyieain Foundation.

⁴⁸ Towards the end of the 1980s when Aung Soe priced his works at 25 kyats each, one kyat was only worth two to three duck eggs. Due to inflation, the remuneration for each illustration had risen to 80 kyats and paintings sold between 300 to 500 kyats in galleries. Lin Lei Tun, Ma Amy and Sonny Nyein, e-mail messages to author, August 2013; Than Ohn, interview by author, Yangon, November 2005.

⁴⁹ See Dinkar Kowshik, *Blossoms of Light: Some Reflections on Art in Santiniketan* (Kolkata: Visva-Bharati, 1980), 77; Kumar, *Santiniketan: The Making of Contextual Modernism*, unpaginated.

⁵⁰ The nineteen founding members of Lokanat Gallery in 1971 were Ba Khine (1913–?), Bogie (1949–), Hla Shein (1904–1979), Kin Maung (Bank) (1908–1983), Ko Lay (1920–1982), Shwe Aung Thein (1932–1994), Maung Di (1941–), U Kyi (1913–1987), Ohn Lwin (1907–1988), Paw Oo Thet (1936–1993), Paw Thame (1948–2014), Pe Nyunt Way (1950–), Sai Kyaw Htin (1947–), San Shein (c. 1913–1990), San Win (1905–1981), Sun Myint (1948–), Thein Nyunt (1923–1995), Tin Win (1950–) and Win Myint (1939–?). The artists' names and dates of birth and death follow the index of artists compiled by Ranard. See Ranard, *Burmese Painting: A Linear and Lateral History*.

⁴⁴ On these two artists, see Nathalie Johnston, ed., *Htein Lin: the Storyteller*, exh. cat. (Yangon: Goethe Institut, 2015); Apinan Poshyananda, *Thai-tanic: Thai Art in the Age of Constraint and Coercion* (New York: Ethan Cohen Fine Arts, 2003).

⁴⁵ See Kumar, “Nandalal's Concept of the Artist: An Overview,” 36–38; Aung Soe, *From Tradition to Modernity*, 171–177.

⁴⁶ See Jorn Middleborg, ed., *Art Works by Bui Xuan Phai: From the Collection of Van Duong Thanh* (Bangkok: Thavibu Gallery, 2006).

example—the merit of the Śāntiniketan model lies in its aptitude to uncover underlying contextually bound significances that might be otherwise overlooked or dismissed.

Conclusion

As a means of seeing, picturing, experiencing and even shaping the nascent worlds emerging from prolonged independence struggles, modern Southeast Asian art share few commonalities with its Euramerican counterpart. If narratives skewed by Eurocentric criteria of artistic excellence persist nonetheless, it is partly due to the absence of a cogent competing art historical framework—or rather the lack of consensus on one. It is against the context of this imbroglio that this essay explores the potential of Tagore’s vision of an autonomous artistic modernity, art and the artist as implemented at Śāntiniketan—which has proven to be indispensable in making sense of Burmese artist Aung Soe’s practice and oeuvre—in rethinking the narratives of modern art in this part of the world. While it is not equally applicable to all Southeast Asian artists, it does clarify and nuance in ways that the prevailing narrative fails to. For a start, the paradigmatic shift throws into relief distinctions that are muzzled at best and distorted at worst by Eurocentric frameworks and stereotypes of once-colonies. As a counterpoint, it is indispensable for expanding the art historian’s tools of thought and for teasing out future research questions. For example, between Tagore’s ideal of the socially responsible artist and the international professional artist, where does the Southeast Asian artist stand and how is he or she similar to yet different from these two models?

The aim is not to supplant the prevailing art historical framework with the Śāntiniketan model. It would be absurd to do away with one authoritarian narrative only to replace it with another. To be sure, “art” is a variable construct, and that of Tagore’s ashram-turned-university—not unlike that bequeathed by the European Renaissance half a millennium ago—is only one of

the many that have come and will pass. Ironically, in spite of Tagore’s insistence on absolute autonomy, he is not known to have questioned the construct of “art” that is arguably the *fine fleur* of Western imperialism’s soft power—but why should it not be? In framing his art using the terms “Burmese” and “traditional,” to what extent was Aung Soe in fact conditioned by essentialized ethnic constructs that are correlational to the colonial subjugation of “lesser” peoples—power structures against which he fought to free himself in and through his art? Indigenous thought systems independent of nation-centric modes of cultural classification and territorial demarcation beg to be heard too and they are a myriad in Southeast Asia. Their study begins with the registration of denotative and connotative meanings present in local terms used to communicate an image-maker’s practice and production: what are the words used to mean “art”? In Burmese, the word pronounced “*ba-gyi*” meaning “painting” as well as “drawing” is used to mean “art” in almost all circumstances. In the case of Indonesia, is “*seni*” or “*kagunan*” more appropriate—even if neither means exactly “art”? How about local words used to mean “modern” and what do they reveal about indigenous constructs of modern art, which are not necessarily bound to secularization and industrialization? The outcome of subsequent experiments on writing the history of modern Southeast Asian art in dialogue with the Śāntiniketan model will rely on the level of engagement with indigenous languages too. A keen sense of the limits of the *lingua franca* of English and the gaps between thought and expression is, without doubt, salutary.