

**Alexandra Green, *Buddhist Visual Cultures, Rhetoric and Narrative in Late Burmese Wall Paintings*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press. 237 pages. ISBN 978-988-8390-88-5. US\$55/ £43.**

*Reviewed by Sarah Shaw*

This book sets the bar for examination of the relationship between text, art, chant and ritual practice in a given period and a given location. Indeed, the period under discussion here – from the seventeenth century to the early nineteenth century – saw a flowering of Buddhist art in Burma, expressive of the richness of personal and public devotion and offering. Generous in its annotation, with extensive citation of primary and secondary sources, careful in its examination of the evidence specific to each context, and, most importantly, highly appreciative and analytic in its account of the beautiful art that is demonstrated, the book builds for us a sense of the particular location, social and economic background that contributed to the commissioning and execution of some remarkable temple paintings and murals.

When we come to a temple, however beautiful, we often have little capacity to understand the interplay of text, art, funding, social circumstances, hierarchical interactions, and popular practice that created its environment. This book provides extensive and detailed background to the paintings, and so communicates a sense of the kind of people for whom they would have had meaning, and those who would have supported and commissioned the painting in the temple. Their imaginative life would have been shaped by the colourful, intricate and densely active narratives that fill all the space of these temple environs. As the author says, the ‘temples and their contents operate as a whole, with the murals enfolding the sculpted images in a space designed for personal interactions’. And, as we are included in the careful delineation of the rich interiors, notably well contextualized, this book introduces the detail of the chants, stories and personal devotions that would be familiar to those visiting,

as well as providing close analysis of the murals, ceiling painting, shrines and spatial arrangement of the temple itself.

The introduction sets the background to the book. Factors that militate against these temples' survival are exhaustively delineated – from bats, infestation, lizard eggs to an ethos of the abandonment old temples, or the painting over of old murals. Throughout many parts of Southeast Asia, until recently, there has been an inbuilt cultural preference for the accumulation of merit through new artistic work rather than preservation of the old. Green gives the history of such depictions in Burma from the extraordinary and now well documented efflorescence of the eleventh to the thirteenth century, through a slight dip from then until the late seventeenth century, and then the less discussed period afterwards, the primary subject of this book. The motifs and subject matter are briefly discussed, alongside the accompanying textual basis, before study of the various kinds of contemporary approaches that can be applied to the examination temple murals. In an excellent analysis of recent narratological study, Green suggests that the traditional 'cause-and-effect' structure of a story need not apply, as the exuberant and rich vertical, horizontal and central periphery work in these temples attests. Narrative and icon work together, not instead of one another, each, as the author says, 'reinforcing the other to present the Buddha as worthy of and available to worship' (Page 15). Audience, usage and the unusually central role accorded in Burma to the Jātakas, the stories of the many lives of the Bodhisatta as he finds his way to Buddhahood, are discussed.

Chapter 1, 'A Formula to Honor the Buddha', examines this in greater detail. It is an impressive aspect of Green's work that her research has been so comprehensive and thorough. Trends, overarching themes and anomalies can then be carefully noted and analysed. It is on the basis of this extensive fieldwork that in this chapter Green explores the murals and their content more: the life of the Buddha, his past lives in Jātakas, and the twenty-eight previous Buddhas. As she notes, from the seventeenth century there is a notable continuity of content and to a certain extent arrangement, though there is variation within these parameters. An emphasis on the figure of the Buddha and the aspiration to Buddhahood remains always central. Chapter 2, 'Presence and Memory: Commemoration of the Buddha', explores the subject matter with greater scrutiny, linking the complex material to the *Buddhānussati* practice, clearly so central to devotion at this time. As she argues, ritual practice and mural depiction work together to create a kind of visual memory system, linking the devotee to a vast narrative and text base, largely consistent throughout these

regions, but also engaging and allowing a more immediate devotional response to the works, through particular emphases on certain key scenes involving the Buddha's life and teaching. Chapter 3, 'Art as Action: Representation as Ritual', suggests that the narrative element and its arrangement provides also a far more subtle and considered system of encoding and conveying information about the teaching. The importance of offerings is central to this, and Green argues that the repetitive motifs and luxurious patterns surrounding murals would have represented offerings of the rich textile designs produced by the merchant traders, a class growing in power during this period, who would have been financing the temple depictions and thereby demonstrating their loyalty to the throne, the people, and the temple. Often simply beautiful, yet ornate, repetitive motifs, 'enveloping the interior', support meditation, ritual, offerings and *paritta* chant in their use of reiterated qualities, so that 'the three themes of the Burmese murals – merit, protection and enlightenment – worked together through relationships within and between the separate subject matters, objects, and spaces, creating in the process a formula for the embellishment of temple interiors' (page 160). Chapter 4, 'Word and Image, Expanding Vernacular Narratives', explores further the relationship between text, depiction and ritual. Esoteric literature, alchemy and astrology are copiously referenced in these paintings. Green suggests such allusions offer a means of communicating a body of literature and its associated practice traditions not only to the court and educated monastic elites, but also to those visiting from peripheral regions, or to those who would not naturally encounter them outside the temple. Large amounts of material are thus, through the paintings, encoded and integrated into the cohesiveness of the temple surrounds.

Summaries of books cannot do justice to the full range of their argumentation. But as an example of this, we could take an area so often marginalised in studies of Buddhist practice. One of the many great excellences of this book is the dedicated care with which the chanting traditions are examined and explained. Such close scrutiny is rare in a book of art history, and worthy of mention. Buddhist practice, ritual and education have, since the earliest times, been perpetuated by the chanting of the texts. Repetition, rhythm and the enumeration of extensive lists are the lifeblood of the Buddhist transmission. From the earliest times, memory devices such as *mātikās*, or root lists, and endlessly repetitive *suttas* were specifically designed for the human brain to remember and pass on to the next generation. It is chant, both of longer texts and shorter *parittas*, that has ensured that both at a monastic and at a lay level, the varied texts of

the Tipiṭaka and the commentarial stories have been remembered and recited. As Green notes, they have also been used meditatively, as means of calming the mind, and arousing mindfulness through the stretch of the human faculties needed to remember vast quantities of discursive texts. They are complex and highly organized memory systems, and to this day in Burma skill in remembering the texts is highly valued: there are eleven accredited chanting monks today who know and can recite the entire Tipiṭaka of Sutta, Abhidhamma and Vinaya.

By taking so many temples, in a relatively small area, Green is able to examine tendencies and deviations from the norm with unusual precision, and offers intelligent analysis of the evidence that is available. In doing this, she gives a rare examination of the interplay and dynamic of chant, text and image. She suggests that reiteration, which governs so deeply the pace and content of the chants, has also affected the very patterning and balance of the designs that loop, like bales of cotton and silk, across all available space upon the walls and ceilings. Just as rhythm and repetition impel the momentum of the texts that would have been heard chanted constantly in these temples, so motifs and designs provide the moving heartbeat to more illustrative depictions that surround the Buddha figures at the centre and the entrance of these temples. These patterns, she suggests, also have their own natural pace and rhythm, and repeat themselves, with slight variations, just as the chants would repeat the qualities of the *anussatis*, the recollections of the Buddha, *dhamma* and Sangha. This then provides a supportive background as the practitioner within the temple goes, over and over again, the recollections of Buddhist practice (*bhāvanā*), allowing them to settle in their own minds. Such practices are, of course, still at the centre of devotional and meditative activity throughout Southeast and Southern Asia. As Green demonstrates, the exercise moves out to other aspects of theory: protective diagrams, numerical patterns, zodiacal imagery, and a cosmology of vast and magnificent scope extend the recollections so that they become ordering principles for the evocation of a highly complex doctrinal tradition. The art, with its highly detailed diagrams and patterns, becomes then an enactment of the Pāli *imaginaire* in its ritual context. It is a credit to this book that through its extensive referencing and intelligent commentary it manages to link us to this background too, giving some sense of the interconnected world in which those attending the temples would have entered. As the author points out, we can only surmise as to the extent such symbologies and interconnections would have been known to those who entered the temples when they were constructed. But, as in Southeast Asia today, where yantras, mandalas and numerical symbologies

are comparably dense, most lay and monastic participants would have some intuitive sense, if not detailed knowledge, of the auspicious world which enfolded them as they entered into the presence of images.

Of course, another major feature of the book is the discussion of the stories depicted in this world. As Green points out, the *Jātakas*, tales of the past lives of the Buddha, would be known to everyone, particularly the *Mahānipāta*, or the Great Ten as they are known, dedicated to the pursuit of the ten perfections of *pāramīs*, the qualities needed by the Bodhisatta if he is to become a teacher of gods and men, a fully awakened Buddha. These transregional, transcultural stories, kept living through their constant depiction in temples, were, again, constantly recited too. Burma really seems to have been the home of the highly detailed *jātaka* depiction, at least from the eleventh century onwards. Translated into vernaculars throughout South and Southeast Asia, and constantly refigured, in drama, story-making and art throughout Burma, these tales formed the basis of the legal system in the eighteenth century, and, perhaps even from the eleventh century, appear to have provided the well of narratives from which all classes drew inspiration and understanding of their Buddhist teaching. In *Jātakas*, ogres, monsters, humans, gods, animals and beings of many kinds argue, debate, extol the benefits of *dhamma*. Beings communicate constantly between their own kind, and other species. The *Jātaka* universe is highly interactive, and all creatures in these tales converse with one another, even when on hostile terms. Each character in the ongoing drama of the Bodhisatta's quest for awakening has his or her own individual *kamma* and path. As Green demonstrates, this inclusivity is an important aspect of the subject matter of the temple art. So, whether king, monk, peasant worker or, indeed, the kind of merchant that financed and so often commissioned these pictures as offerings, all who entered into the temple could feel, even by lighting a simple lamp, that they were participating in a shared field of merit and devotion, stretching out through many lives and many universes. The subtle and allusive art that explains individual paths within this is itself then, as Alex shows, an offering, linking the participant to the great panorama of interrelated narratives which evoke a Buddhist history, cosmology, and imaginative background.

Southeast Asian art has not yet received the extensive scrutiny that has been accorded to Western religious depiction. In cultures where the generation of new merit by the renewed depiction takes precedence over the preservation and appreciation of the old, this process of examination is still nascent. What is striking about this book is the detailed analytic care with which the author

undertakes her study, and draws on so many disciplines, with full references, to provide a complete cultural background to study of these exuberant and sumptuous pictures. Although often necessarily highly technical in its account of the way texts and image support one another, the book is easily accessible for any scholar of Buddhist studies, or reader from an unrelated field too.