



Feasting the Female Form

Shireen Naziree and Jørn Middelborg





2500 Nude With Apple Lungwitz

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PREFACE

JØRN MIDDELBORG
THAVIBU GALLERY

I recall the first time I viewed paintings by U Lun Gywe in Rangoon; it was a revelation not only to see the high quality of his work, but also the originality of its execution. It was a joy to view his bold, dynamic brush strokes and his masterly blend of colours. His work stood out and made an immediate impression. I have since engaged myself actively with his art and followed his career.

I have had the good fortune to get to know U Lun Gywe and his family over the years, and I have studied his work as he has painted his ideas and dreams of beauty that inspire him. He is at his best when inspired by a certain place, event or person. Then his brush strokes move rapidly and fluidly over the canvas, and the result is often a painting of stunning beauty.

U Lun Gywe's impressionist style has many inspirational sources, but the one that stands out first of all is his love of women and the female form. He is close to his soul mate and wife, Daw Lun Mya Mya, who often serves as his muse. Over the years he has drawn inspiration from persons whom he has encountered as well as from folk tales and traditional stories. In many instances, the encounters resulted in a new painting of female beauty, which had lingered in his thoughts. U Lun Gywe belongs to an older generation of Burmese artists, primarily trained in the traditional school of apprenticeship. He also received formal art education in Burma and by studying in foreign countries such as China and (East) Germany. He has himself been a mentor for a number of artists of the younger generation and is a well-known figure in Burma. In fact, he is probably the most important living master of Burmese painting today.

My sincere thanks to Shireen Naziree for her informative and lucid text, which constitutes a framework for U Lun Gywe's rich art and accessibility to his creativity.

May this book serve as a tribute to U Lun Gywe, an artist by conviction and spirit.

Artist and his Model, 1997
Watercolour on paper
56 x 76 cm
Collection of the National Art Gallery,
Malaysia



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

SHIREEN NAZIREE

U Lun Gywe's life and work are evidence of the intellectual and moral forces that transcend cultural borders and bind people together. His aspiration for peace and happiness expressed through his paintings is engendered through vibrant visual messages that reflect his rich Burmese heritage.

I have been privileged to be welcomed into U Lun Gywe's inner world over the many years that I have known him and his family. I have enjoyed many moments of his warmth and good humour. This accessibility has been significant for my own understanding of Burma's cultural history and, importantly, the life and work of one of Southeast Asia's most accomplished senior artists – a painter whose extraordinary creative drive has challenged traditional conventions.

The idea of this book has been the vision of Jørn Middelborg, who has collected and promoted U Lun Gywe's art with discernment through his Thavibu Gallery in Bangkok. I thank him for entrusting me with the writing of this book. His professional attention and his insights on U Lun Gywe have helped shape the book most significantly.

I thank Dr. Thant Myint-U for his scholarly reflections on Burma, as well as the National Art Gallery of Malaysia, and Richard Stowell, for permission to publish photos of artworks from their collections. Finally, I thank U Lun Gywe and Daw Lun Mya Mya for their friendship, trust and support, and for welcoming me into their world.

Detail of **Thanaka Beauty**, 2005
(p. 38)





The Artist and his Model, 2005
Oil on canvas
120 x 180 cm



Vincent van Gogh
1890

INTRODUCTION

U Lun Gywe's aesthetic vision took shape as an interesting combination of threads: the romanticism of French Impressionism, Oriental sensibilities, and concepts of his own Burmese ethnicity. His art constitutes a living web of his emotions, his memories and his cultural history with the flamboyancy of an artistic vocabulary that speaks a universal language.

U Lun Gywe's contribution to Burmese modern art is particularly significant in that he has challenged traditional expectations about painting for much of his fifty-year career. Although his adoption of an impressionist style gives him historical importance and shaped his aesthetic as we know it today, his paintings are based strictly on a Burmese cultural mould – the heart of his unique world – to which he is profoundly attached.

U Lun Gywe has spent much of his artistic life exploring the values of his Burmese heritage and the discipline of his Buddhist faith, as well as the human and intellectual experiences accumulated during his long career. Despite the tumultuous social realities of Burma's modern history and his own personal struggles, U Lun Gywe has always been happiest as an artist, reminiscing and visually interpreting the exotic landscape and idyllic social environment of his youth. The permanence of the rich culture and ancient civilization that is integral to Burmese society has given humanity a place in humanism, which in turn has demonstrated to U Lun Gywe the power and richness of the Creator and the beauty of His being. This ideology has been the fundamental nourishment that has constantly inspired him to create his art.

U Lun Gywe's paintings rarely mirror reality. Instead, they represent his personal readings where ideas, observations and temperament have been mediated by a sensitive imagination and rigid artistic discipline that have prompted him to translate his feelings into images which capture the essential essence of presence and appearance. While his primary purpose as an artist is to capture visual attention, the tonal nuances of his imagery never fail to engage the senses of his audience.

Two Ladies Fetching Water, 2001
Oil on canvas
68 x 68 cm

Very much in the tradition of the French Impressionist movement, U Lun Gywe creates pictures that feast the eye, for his paintings are made to be looked at and savoured for their glowing palettes. He is a master painter who is fully in control of his canvasses. Through the orchestration of colour, form and texture, he asserts the vitality of his painterly skills, which articulate the expressive power of the pictorial form and the physicality of the materials.

U Lun Gywe's pictures are impressionistic in their sensibility and romantic in their allusive complexity. With a dramatic interplay between luminescence and shadows, his pictures often take on surreal qualities allowing for otherwise ubiquitous moments of life scenes or landscapes embellished with imposed movements.

Nevertheless, his subjects never lose their authenticity and in fact, in some paradoxical way, they take on a well-grounded earthiness. No matter how much he submits himself to the process of painting, his subjects – most often female forms – remain his primary focus.

Although the female form has been universal artistic currency for centuries, U Lun Gywe's images of women take on a more palpable immediacy as they invade the comfortable distances common in Burmese and traditional Asian art practices. While his subjects are the fabrics of ideas, they are very significant to the artist; sylph-like maidens, dancers and voluptuous damsels have become icons of the dominant ideals that determined the course of his life.

At the same time, the themes of many of his paintings draw attention to an almost clouded past when Burma was revered for its physical and cultural wealth, a sharp contrast to the present-day country, which is largely characterized by the effects of an impoverished social environment with a sparse cultural heritage. His paintings also draw attention to the intersection between culture and gender and the significant place of women in Burmese society. His vision is also a result of his extensive contact with the intrinsic beauty of his land. Often his keen observation of people and place come together in his paintings.

Paying Homage to Buddha, 2009
Oil on canvas
152 x 152 cm



L. K. 2009





U Lun Gwye's ability to merge the figurative with the landscape draws parallels with the fertility of both the land and the female form. The subject has inspired him to execute a number of paintings within the series "Fetching Water".

Fetching Water, 2001
Oil on canvas
76 x 105 cm
Collection of the National Art Gallery,
Malaysia





Morning at the Riverside, 2003
Oil on canvas
53 x 69 cm





Though U Lun Gwye has found beauty in the everyday such as women washing clothes, he regards the element of water as a vital force that conveys nature's energy and forcefulness.

Nymphs Washing Clothes, 2006
Oil on canvas
90 x 120 cm

As an artist, U Lun Gywe is constantly nourished by his deep Buddhist understandings that are rooted in meditation – both in terms of meaning and imagery. These concepts of peace and serenity have allowed him to submit himself entirely to the visual, often resulting in the fluidity of painting with emotions that make each of his paintings a place of personal experience.

Through the memories and imagination that constitute his iconography, U Lun Gywe quietly reveals his deep hopes for a land that bears witness to a great past. Though the presence of these icons is often viewed literally, they do initiate a dialogue with the viewer. And from within this dialogue, interpreting the formal and symbolic aspects of his art becomes the means to view its purpose as a spiritual reality. For U Lun Gywe, this purpose is not the realistic rendering of form or symbol, but rather reflections upon a spiritual place where the aesthetic represents humanity.

U Lun Gywe's organization of colour reinforces the symbolic significance of his work. He uses the emotional strengths of colour, diverse and sumptuous at times, to show the immensity of space, light and silence. He allows colour to merge with the inspiration of his dreams, creating the actual essence of his paintings as he reinvents in his themes a culture that he feels is necessary for his artistic survival. It is from this sparkling palette that he is able to unite himself with his distant dreams. With this extraordinary understanding of colour, he is able to project his audience towards an eternal moment.

Indeed, art has allowed U Lun Gywe to express the passing of his world. Although he is mindful of the romantic illusions of his representations, it is by means of the language of painting that he gives his artistic legacy an essential purpose – to confirm the beauty of life. In a manner, his paintings form part of a discourse on exile. While new roots have been established within modern Burmese art practice against the tensions of history, his art may also be interpreted as a unifying force between the past, the present and the future. In the heart of his artistic world are incandescent reminiscences of beauty within which, he believes, the world was created.

Bathing Beauty, 2003
Oil on canvas
60 x 45 cm



