

# Flights of Fancy

## Hintha and Kinnaya, the Avian Inspiration in Myanmar art

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Daw San San Maw

For thousands of years, Burmese artisans have been inspired by mythical birds. The fanciful imagination of these wood-carvers and painters has resulted in the fabulous winged creatures which inhabit Myanmar art. The two winged-beings which are the subject of this article, the *hintha* and the *kinnaya*, are not the only birds in Myanmar art. They share the celestial realms with the royal peacock, the owl, parrot *garuda*, *karaweik* and *pyanthadinzu*. However, the *hintha* duck and half bird-half human *kinnaya* have an unusually rich literary and artistic history, and present two important aspects of the country's art: the incorporation of religious symbols into the royal arts, and the interplay of anthropomorphic and zoomorphic images in the country's ritual practices.

The question of the origins of anthropomorphic imagery in Burmese art are buried in the iconography of the country's pre-Indic religions. It is likely that prehistoric spirit and ancestral veneration evolved into the present anthropomorphic convention for portraying many spirits, the *nats*. But it is noteworthy that while some *nats* – *devas*, legendary figures, and those derived from Hinduism – are shown in human form, others such as tree and water spirits, are disembodied.

The arrival of Buddhism in Myanmar is traditionally linked to the visit of the monks Sona and Uttara in the 3rd century BC. However, the earliest dateable Hindu and Buddhist artefacts from Pyu sites are placed in the 1st to 5th centuries AD,



Fig. 1. Kinnara corner piece from manuscript cabinet. 18th century. Gilded wood, 46 cm. Courtesy of U Sein Myint, Mandalay.

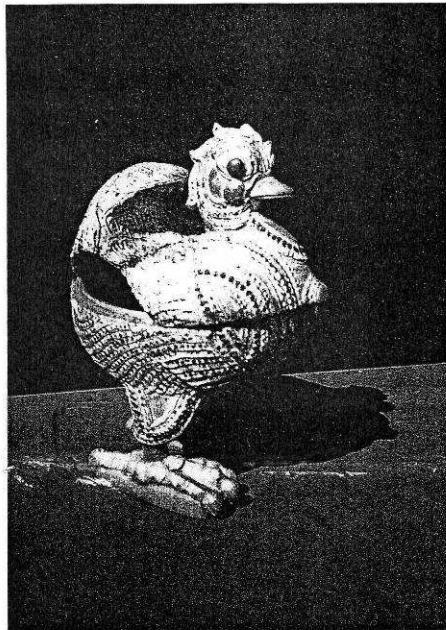


Fig. 2. Hintha betel box. 19th century. Lacquered, gilded, and mirrored wood, 20 cm. Courtesy of U Sein Myint, Mandalay.



Fig. 4. Detail of scaled drawing for a monumental hintha in Shwe Kyin Monastery, Mandalay. January 1994 drawing by U Win Maung (Tampawaddy). Total height will be 4.3 m (grid is in feet).

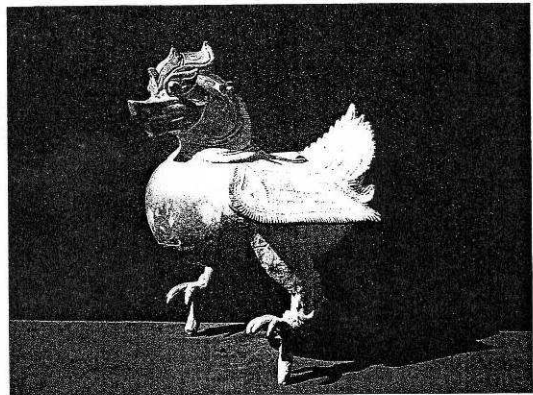


Fig. 3. Royal hintha from *dagondaing*, Mahamuni Pagoda, Mandalay. Pre-18th century. Brass, 30 cm. Courtesy of U Sein Myint, Mandalay.

suggesting that the arrival of Indic religions coincided with the first appearance of images of the Buddha in India around this time. It could therefore be argued that an important artistic innovation arising from the new religions was anthropomorphism. To date, no anthropomorphic *nats* have been recovered from Pyu sites, although Myanmar chronicles, recording the legends of the Pyu and Pagan periods include many *nat* histories which explain later iconography.

A terracotta figure commonly identified as a *kinnari* was recovered from the 1st-5th century AD site of Beikthano (Aung Thaw 1968). The *kinnari* interpretation of the figure is open to question, but it is clearly anthropomorphic, perhaps a *deva* (U Maung Maung Tin, personal communication, 1993). Thus there was already a history of experimentation with the human figure across a range of Indian icons. Although the *kinnari* from Beikthano presumably took her form from imported texts or images, the point here is that anthropomorphism was not restricted to a very few important Indic religious images. Even if the concept of an anthropomorphic icon departed from existing visual practices, it does not seem to have posed a threat, either artistically or conceptually to Myanmar artists. In the absence of further excavated evidence, the date and nature of the inception of anthropomorphism is, of course, unknown. It is a question, however, which is central to the two main sources of *hintha* and *kinnaya* stories – the Buddhist *jatakas*, previous lives of the Buddha, and local legends. In both cases, animals often adopt human behaviour, but rarely human features.

### The Hintha

Some people believe the *hintha* to be a representation of the common goose (see Vogel 1962, for discussion of the bird

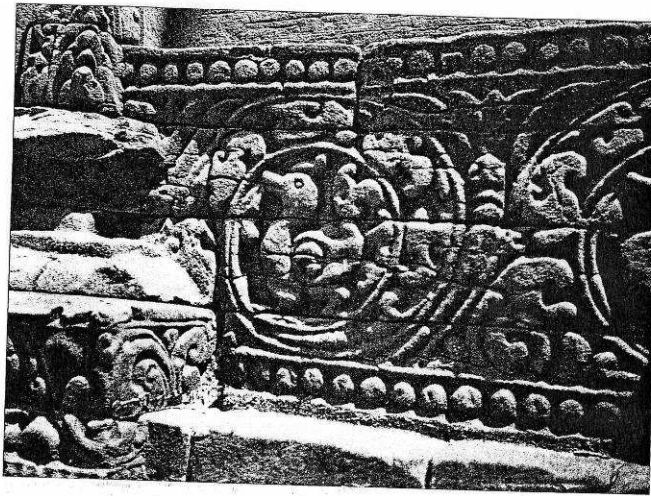


Fig. 5. Hintha frieze, Nanpaya Temple exterior, Pagan. 11th century. Sandstone, 15 cm.

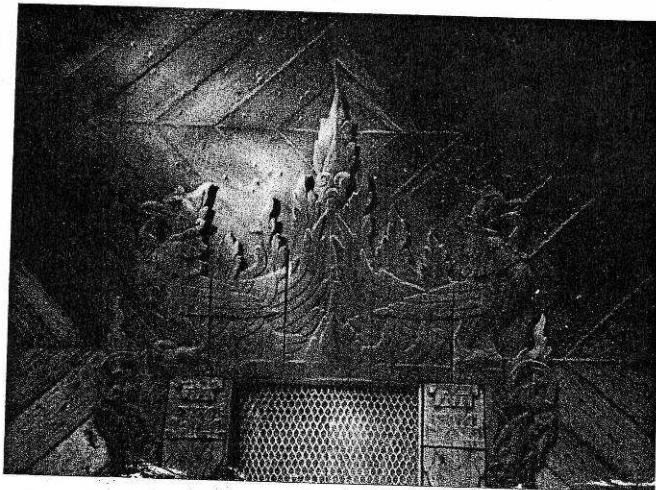


Fig. 6. Hintha or karaweik window surround, Shwe In-bin Monastery, Mandalay. 19th-20th century. Wood, 50 cm.

in Indian art). Generally, however, in Myanmar, *bintha* means *wunbe* or duck. (Somewhat confusingly, the word *wunbe* was also used in the Pagan period to refer to the mythical *setkawa* bird.) The *wunbe* can be the Brahminy or the Mandarin duck. The Mandarin duck, found in Vietnam and China, is not local to Myanmar (Gear 1992:114). The word *bintha* derives from the Pali word *bantha*, the syllable "han" having been transcribed into the Burmese as "hin" (Bo Kay 1981; Hla Myint (Sagaing) 1955:13; Kyaw Nyein (She Haung) 1974; Hla Myint (Zagaing) 1972). The alteration to *bintha* incorporates the bird's celebrated fidelity: it is said to

have the habit of committing suicide at the death of its mate. It also refers to its ability to travel vast distances (Hla Myint 1955:13; Kyaw Nyein 1974).

The earliest written reference to the *bintha* bird is, as the Myanmar word *wunbe*, seen in the ink inscriptions of Pagan, the labels for the *jataka* stories in the temples (Bo Kay (Mon) 1984; Kyaw Nyein (She Haung) 1974). These *jataka* stories provide explanations for two of the main *bintha* icons in Burmese art – prayer posts and betel boxes. The *bintha* is not, however, only referred to in the previous lives of the Buddha, but is also in designs of the Buddha's footprint, as one of the 108 auspicious symbols. The *bintha* also appears yet again as the vehicle of the *nat* Thurawadi, here derived from Sarisvati, the Hindu goddess of knowledge.

The first stone inscription, rather than ink inscription, reference to the *bintha* is in a transcription of a stone inscription from Sithumyngyi Pagoda (Government of the Union of Myanmar, Pagan Inscription Books). Despite its Pagan provenance, the style of writing, the form of the letters, and the usage of the passage, suggest that it was carved during the second Inwa (Ava) period (17th - 18th century). The early part of this period was the "heyday" of Burmese literature, during which time poets and composers wrote lyrics about the *bintha* and the *wunbe*, each being described differently. Sometimes, they even combined the two birds into the *binthawunbe* (Kyaw Nyein (She Haung) 1974). In later periods, when describing the Pagan era, the words *binthā* and *setkawa* were both used to refer to figures of *wunbe*.

The Mon peoples in Myanmar have never interchanged *bintha* and *wunbe*, and according to Mon legends, the birds have always been different species. In the old history of Pegu (Hanthawaddy), *bintha* birds were already present when the Buddha visited the site, causing him to predict that the place would in future be known as Hanthawaddy, place of the *binthas* (Bo Kay 1984). The legendary founding of Pegu involves two *bintha* birds: the male lands, alighting on the only piece of dry land amidst a great marsh; the female comes to rest on his back. (Interestingly, to this day the men of Pegu are thus said to be dominated by their wives (Khin Myo Chit 1984)).

Among the *jatakas* featuring *binthas*, the Javana Hamsa





Fig. 7. Kalaga (tapestry): kinnari; from Mandalay Palace of King Thibaw, Yangon. 19th century embroidery and sequins on felt, 20 cm. Private collection.

has been the most popular in Myanmar art (Cowell IV:476). It is this *jataka* which explains the presence of beautifully carved *binthas* on top of thousands of prayer posts, *dagondaing*, in pagoda precincts (Min Thurein 1982; Myint Tun (Thetethi) 1983). According to the *Javana Hamsa*, after a long series of events, the Lord Buddha was a king of the *binthas*, who competed in a race against the sun. When the human king praised the bird's speed, the *bintha* replied that his swiftness was nothing compared to the passing of a human lifetime. The king, who was deeply afraid of death, fell unconscious to the ground. His people also became stricken with fear. Eventually, the king sought instruction from the *bintha*. The bird counselled him not to be troubled, to practise the ten laws incumbent on kings, particularly charity. In memory of the swiftness of death, which comes

faster than the flight of the *bintha* king, respect is paid to the wisdom of the *bintha* by placing him at the summit of prayer posts throughout Myanmar.

The *Javana Hamsa jataka* provides ample explanation for the presence of the *bintha* on prayer posts in a Theravadan context. Interestingly, aspects of Mahayana doctrine also support its iconic use. According to the Mahayana text, the *Yathawdaya* (Yasodhara, wife of Prince Sidhartha), the *Ariya* (arhat), having reached the time to enter heaven, transformed himself into a *bintha* bird and flew up to heaven to pay respect to the Buddha. This account is a Mahayanist response to queries about why *binthas* appear on top of Burmese prayer posts.

In the *Sulahantha jataka*, a hunter snares the *bintha* king. However, the earthly monarch, on seeing the ruby-coloured blood of the bird caused by his hunter's net, took pity on the *bintha*, nursed and eventually freed him. In reference to this story of royal compassion, many royal figures, particularly in the 18th-19th century AD Konbaung period, commissioned wood and lacquer betel boxes in the shape of *bintha* birds, *kwam-up*, which became part of the identification of royal rank, or insignia (Yi Yi 1960a:161). The ruby red blood of the story may explain the many pagoda donations of miniature prayer posts with ruby-studded *bintha* holding a red jewel in his mouth.

Royal patronage of the *bintha* is also seen in the use of the bird on one of the eight thrones of Mandalay Palace. The *Hanthathana*

throne is carved of *Thingantha* (*hopea odorata*) wood and placed in the *Zayadawun* or Goose Throne Room, chamber of the palace (Yi Yi 1960b). The king was said to always use this throne when praying. King Mindon purportedly sat upon the *bintha* throne when chastising his eldest daughter. In both instances, the actions recall the *Javana Hamsa jataka*, where the king prayed to the *bintha*, and was also chastised by the bird.

Royal artists also used the *bintha* motif in opium weights. King Bayinnaung, in the 16th century, ordered standard weights produced. The weights were called "standard weight" (Kyaw Nyein (She Haung) 1974, Ba Aye 1959). Because the weights were also used for measuring opium during the reign of King Bodawpaya in the 19th century, they were also called "Bodaw weight" or "golden weight" (*sbwele*) (Tha Myat



Fig. 8. Kinnara decorating the base or surround of the Buddha. Lokateikpan Temple, Pagan. 12th century. Mural painting, 15 cm.



Fig. 9. Detail of kinnari on interior arch Paya Thon-zu Temple. 13th century. Mural painting, 60 cm.

1959:101). During the 19th century reign of King Sane, the figure of the *bintha* was seen not only on weights but also as a symbol on seals (Tha Myat 1959:101-2).

### Kinnari and Kinnara

The female *kinnari* and male *kinnara* (pl. *kinnaya*) are a mythical composite of avian and human attributes. As with all Burmese icons, their history is complex. In India, the *kinnaya* can be either half horse or bird. The half-bird is favoured throughout Southeast Asia, although some Myanmar sources concentrate more on the half-human aspect, contending that the reason it is named *kinnara* is the ambiguity of its human-ness. Some take the word as a translation of the Sanskrit *Kim Narab* meaning "human, in a very ugly state" (Nyo Lwin 1955; San Thamein 1986).

One dictionary avoids the problem by simply defining *kinnara* as a "A mystical winged human being" (U Hoke Sein). Others describe it as a mythical bird with human head and torso (Burmese Commission), or state the animal has a bird's body and human head, or a human body and a horse

face (U Wun). Despite the availability of an Indic horse depiction, the *kinnaya* in Myanmar are half-bird. Artistic changes over the centuries have particularly concentrated on the human features of the *kinnaya*, such as costume and hairstyle (Hla Myint (Zagaing) 1971).

Like the *bintha*, the source and celebrity of the *kinnaya* icons stem from the *jatakas*. However, unlike the *bintha*, the power of the *kinnaya* centres around its anthropomorphic nature. The *bintha* is honoured for its avian characteristics, such as speed of flight, and beauty of colour. The *kinnaya* are instead recalled for their fidelity and human, tender, caring.

In the *Canda-kinnara-jataka*, a king who loved a *kinnari* shot a poisoned arrow at her *kinnara*. However, the Bodhisattva, Sakka, who knew of the *kinnari*'s loyalty and love for her husband, revived him with holy water and they lived happily ever after (Cowell IV: 485). The *Bhallatiya jataka* describes the love of the *kinnari* and *kinnara* as a model for an estranged king and queen (Cowell IV: 504). In the *Tetkaliya jataka*, the parable concerns an overly talkative hermit whose wordiness leads him into trouble. The Buddha used the *kinnari* and *kinnara* as ideals, for they were so wary of telling lies that they were most often silent (Cowell IV:



Fig. 10. Kinnara corner piece from monk's preaching chair, Mandalay Palace Museum, Mandalay. 18th century. Painted and gilded wood, 25 cm.

481). In the *Atthasadda jataka*, a king heard eight horrific sounds in the middle of the night. A hermit explained to him that the sounds were cries of various animals. In the Burmese, but not the Indian version of this story, among the eight sounds the seventh cry was that of a *kinnari* who pined for her *kinnara*. Upon the advice of the hermit, the king set all the animals free (Cowell IV: 418).

A famous *kinnaya* tale is found in the *Mahawhsatha uminga jataka*, shown in six mural panels in the 11th century in the Abeyadana Temple at Pagan (U Mya (Thiripyanchi) 1974). In the Burmese version of this *jataka*, a Brahmin named Wissa, tired of worldly pleasures, left his wife, children and servant, and became a hermit in the Himalaya forest. Near his small monastery was a cave. In it lived many *kinnari* and *kinnara*. At the entrance of the cave, however, an evil spider

had made his web and caught unwary *kinnaya* who flew in and out. In horrific detail, the spider would bite off the heads and drink the blood of the *kinnaya*. The spider's body was said to be like a big cart-wheel and was full of strength. By nature, the *kinnaya* were timid so they could not kill or destroy the big spider. One day they came before Wissa and told him about the big spider. They pleaded with him to get rid of the predator so that they could live in peace. To this, Wissa scolded them in anger, and sent them away, saying that hermits should not take the lives of others. The distraught *kinnaras* went back to their cave. However, among them was a *kinnari* called Yatawaddy who was of age, very beautiful, and single. One day, the *kinnaras* dressed her like a heavenly *deva* (*nat*) and took her to Wissa's monastery. They begged him to kill the spider, and to be their lord, with Yatawaddy as his mate. When Wissa saw her, he was overcome by her beauty and desired her. Wissa agreed to fight the spider in exchange for Yatawaddy. Then, taking his hammer, he killed the spider which was coming out to look for food. Wissa lived happily, until he died, in the Himalaya forest with Yatawaddy, who bore him many children.

In Konbaung courts, the *kinnari* and *kinnara* were seen carved on either side of the throne of the king thus denoting his fidelity and recalling the festive dancing of the *kinnaya* when the Buddha attained Enlightenment. They are also seen on royal boats and barges and in the emblem

of the *Kaya* (Karen) peoples of the country. Another use is on the four corners of the coffin at the cremation festival of a monk.

### Summary and Conclusion

In Myanmar, the earliest known *kinnari* was found at Beikthano, although this identification is questionable. However, at Pagan, *kinnari* and *kinnara* are seen in many guises. This continued after Pagan, at Pinya, the various Inwa periods, and to the present day. They are popular as a symbol of marital love and fidelity. Unlike the *hintha* betel boxes and opium weights, the *kinnari* was not as ubiquitously incorporated into three-dimensional objects for royal use.



Charming exceptions can be found, particularly when the *kinnari* is cast as a loom weight, the bells on the weight jingling as the pulley is used, to allow the mother of a young girl to ascertain that she is indeed at work at the loom.

In general, however, the *kinnaya* motif was restricted to occasions of great significance, linking religious and royal realms, such as coronations and funerals of monks and royalty. It also continued to be seen as a motif in pagoda depictions of the heavenly forest. Likewise, the appropriation of the *bintha* by the king did not pre-empt its use within pagoda precincts. The predominant relationship in the *bintha jatakas* is between bird and king, helping to explain the Konbaung Dynasty's fondness for incorporating the *bintha* not only on thrones, but in objects of personal use. It was also during the Konbaung Dynasty that the motif of *kinnari* and *kinnara* became a popular symbol of conjugal bliss. Even in this process of secularisation, however, the *kinnari* and *kinnara* never lost their position within the mythical world.

In contrast, it will be remembered that the *bintha* is variously defined as a goose or a duck, but always based on an actual bird. Rooted in reality, the *bintha* is elaborated in the *jatakas* as a paragon of royal wisdom and in legend as a symbol of fidelity. The *bintha* image recalls the king of the birds offering advice to a human king. It also reminds the viewer of the greatness of royal power, be it zoomorphic or anthropomorphic. The *bintha* and *kinnaya* also present differ-

ences in stylistic evolution. The majority of stylistic changes in *kinnaya* involve the creature's human characteristics. Thus hairstyles and clothing reflect contemporary practices. Because the *kinnaya* remained predominantly two-dimensional, the style did not have to adapt to additional practical needs. The *bintha* has remained more variable, the form being determined more by use and the material the object is made of.

The depiction of the *kinnaya* has derived more from human than mythical conventions, but although the *kinnaya* have both bird and human features, they are considered to be neither bird nor human. Today *kinnaya* images abound: they continue as part of the religious decoration of pagodas, and are also a popular motif on greeting cards, especially sent to married couples. However, despite (or perhaps because of) being part-human, they have remained other-worldly. The *kinnaya* is uniquely anthropomorphic amongst the birds of Myanmar art and it is the creature's human aspects which account for its popularity. The *bintha*, on the other hand, presents worldly transformation, from a common bird to the deeply wise favourite of the king.

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Kashan Carpet - Animal Rug. Iran. Period of Shah Tahmasp, second half 16th century.  
Silk, Senna knot. 7ft. 10 in. x 5ft. 10 1/2in. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Bequest  
of Benjamin Altman, 1913. (14.40.721).