

Black Elephant Lacquerware



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All photographs in this booklet were taken at the Black Elephant Studio workshop in Bagan. The images illustrate Black Elephant’s complex process of creating the highest-quality lacquerware using their unique technologies based on traditional techniques.

These intricate stages are part of Veronica Gritsenko’s unique craft, which is different from other lacquerware processes of different quality or artistry. It took her seven years of research and experimentation to revive the highest quality lacquer that for many reasons had been lost. The technology that she has revived is recorded in a publication that she presented at the Lacquer Symposium held in Buffalo, New York in 2013.



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Myanmar Lacquerware

Myanmar is one of the seven lacquer producing countries in the World. This is an extremely rare and endangered art form that exists only in Asia: China, Japan, Korea, Vietnam, Thailand, Cambodia, and Myanmar.

Lacquer Art originated in China 3000-5000 years ago, spreading to Japan and Korea, and later to South East Asia. The lacquer craft arrived in Myanmar about 1000 years ago from Yunnan Province; it appeared first in Upper Burma and then slowly traveled to Bagan, changing on its way.

Praised for its strength, water resistance, and beauty, lacquerware in Asia was originally made only for the court and nobility. The reason being that the technological processes for its creation are very sophisticated and materials are scarce and expensive. This is the reason lacquer craft achieved its intricacy and virtuosity in Bagan, as it was a King's capital city with a palace and court.

According to Sylvia Fraser-Lu, lacquer was a popular gift to foreign envoys from members of the Burmese court. Lacquered boxes were used to store royal jewels, letters, and sacred Buddhist manuscripts.

Lacquerware was also used in important Buddhist ceremonies and for presenting food to the monkhood. Lay people also used lacquerware daily: food, refreshments, clothing, cosmetics, and flowers were all kept in or served on lacquer receptacles.

After the decline of the Bagan Kingdom, lacquer craft survived and continued until our days. The technological process, though, has endured serious changes and declined in quality. However, because of its high-status lacquerware has always been highly valued. Bagan is still the largest and most important center in Myanmar for lacquer.

Myanmar lacquerware varies intensely according to bases, quality of the lacquer, layering, fillers as well as other mixing materials, and the density and complexity of the designs. It may take up to eight months to complete a particularly intricate and dynamic work.

About Veronica Gritsenko, Founder of Black Elephant Studio

“I wish to elevate lacquer from a craft to an art form. This is how, by preserving the past, we take care of the future.”

Veronica Gritsenko founded Black Elephant Studio in Bagan in the year 2000. An extremely creative and talented artist, Veronica’s background is as interesting as the lacquer pieces she designs. Originally trained as a scientist at the Academy of Science in Kiev, Ukraine, Veronica earned her MS degree in Physics from the Kiev State Polytechnic University. She later transitioned to the art world, teaching painting and sculpting and working as an art dealer, before moving to London in the 1990s to become a fashion designer and establishing her fashion business.

Veronica first came across Myanmar culture in London, when she met a Buddhist monk in 1995 and started studying Theravada Buddhism and meditation under his guidance. In 1996 she visited Myanmar with him as one of his disciples. Traveling throughout the country while staying at the monasteries, she was immediately captivated by this extraordinary country and its people. Fueled by her passion for learning and her discovery of Myanmar, upon her return to London, she enrolled in Sotheby’s Institute. There she studied Asian Arts and later earned her MA degree in Indian Art

from the School of Oriental and African Studies at the University of London. She came back to Bagan in 1999 to write her MA dissertation on Bagan architecture, where she first came across Bagan lacquer and was both fascinated by its beauty and in despair by its declining state and quality. Since then, her dedication to reviving the Bagan Lacquer craft has led her to develop a unique technique based on ancient methods and materials.

The name 'Black Elephant' is rooted in Burmese traditional astrology, as a Black Elephant is considered a guardian spirit for all those born on a Wednesday afternoon, as Veronica is. It is also an homage to a real elephant she met in December 1999 in Chin State, that took her across the forest on her pilgrimage to the Kasapa caves.

Collaborating with the craftsmen from both Myinkaba and New Bagan, Veronica began producing her own lacquerware and experimenting with the use of cow bone ash for ThaYo almost twenty years ago. Over the course of many years, Veronica and the artisans working at Black Elephant understood the correct consistency of bone ash ThaYo and figured out the sufficient number of layers for the lacquer to be both resistant and durable.

Part of the process of crafting new techniques based on traditional methods was Veronica's re-discovery of the importance of using cloth in high-quality lacquer-making. Indeed, fragments of cloth have been found in old lacquerware pieces in archeological sites

in Bagan, indicating that cloth was used in former times in the creation of high-quality lacquerware. However, lacquer masters abandoned the use of cloth because it made the process more laborious and required the use of larger quantities of thit-si, which is extremely valuable, making the objects more expensive.

Slowly, the group of craftsmen that work with Veronica grew and the number of workshops that she collaborates with increased. Aiming to change the artisans' attitude towards lacquer, from a routine job for their livelihood, to regarding it as an art form, as it originally was, Veronica fosters relationships of mutual respect, trust, and support among the artisan group. This approach allowed them to make a breakthrough in lacquer technology.

By 2007, Black Elephant's technology was finalized, in terms of how many layers of ThaYo to apply and what consistency each layer should have; the method of textile application; how many layers of pure thit-si should be applied; how to purify lacquer; and how to apply the final layer to provide a canvas for further decoration so incisions and etching are strong and bright.

Traditionally, Burmese lacquer uses pigments such as cinnabar and orpiment. The green color was obtained by using a mixture of indigo and orpiment. However, Black Elephant experiments with a variety of pigments, developing their own colors such as lilac, coral, beige, pink, and different shades and hues of blue and green.

Black Elephant is also involved in supporting the infrastructure necessary in order for artisan families to be able to prosper with their craft, helping rebuild buildings, wells, and underground drying cellars, known as thyiks, in the areas around the Bagan workshop.

Veronica works towards the objective of establishing a self-sustainable school of high-quality lacquer art. Currently, around ten families are involved with Black Elephant. The knowledge and skills they learn from working with Black Elephant are then transferred back to their own family workshops.



Veronica's lacquerware can be found in the collection of the British Museum, Victoria and Albert Museum, Museum of Royal Botanic Gardens Kew in London, Museum of Oriental Art in Turin, Asia Society in New York and Hong Kong and many private collections.

Sap Gathering

It all starts with a tree. The lacquer tree, or *Gluta Usitata*, is a tree native to southeast Asia. Growing wild in the highlands of Shan State, the lacquer tree reaches a height of 15 to 18 meters and a girth of 2 to 3 meters, when fully grown.

In Myanmar, the sap of this tree is called *thit-si*. The tree is tapped by making V-shaped cuts with a chisel. The bark above each cut is torn to produce a cavity into which is inserted a shoot of bamboo with an obliquely cut mouth, to form a spout. The sap, which at first is yellow-white, turns dark but remains fluid. Once a tree has been tapped, it has to be left for four to five years to heal completely before being tapped again.



The gatherers of *thit-si* know the forest and its trees thoroughly. They follow animist traditions to ask the spirits permission to enter the forest and collect the *thit-si*.



Removing the Crust

The Lacquer Sap, or *thit-si*, is delivered to Bagan in boxes. When opening the box, a crust can be clearly seen at the top.

Raw *thit-si* is carefully cleared from the crust, as each drop is valued.

Raw *thit-si* is brown in color due to the presence of water. In order to remove the water, the *thit-si* is filtered, heated and then filtered again.



Filtering and Heating the Thit-si



Thit-si needs to be stirred a long time in the heat to allow the water to evaporate. It is then put under a heat lamp to allow it to become liquid enough to pass through a dense cloth, removing impurities. After this process, it needs to be applied to a base within two days.

Bases

Because of its viscosity, lacquer has to be applied to a base. There are three types of bases for Myanmar lacquerware.



Coiled bamboo



Woven bamboo



Horsehair base

Coiled Bamboo Base

Coiled bamboo is often used to make stronger objects like trays and boxes. To keep the coiled bamboo strips together, lacquer is applied acting as glue.

The coiled bamboo base is further processed by shaving, to make it finer and smoother.



Base Reinforcing and Shaving

Raw thit-si is applied to the freshly made base to keep it intact and protect it from bursting. For this process, disposable brushes are made from coconut fibers.

After this, the base is placed in an underground cellar for five days to let the thit-si harden.



Woven Bamboo Base

Whereas coiled bamboo bases are made only by men, woven bamboo bases are made only by women.



Horsehair Base

Weaving with horsehair is the most virtuoso technique for base making. Nowadays only a few people in Bagan possess this skill. Horsehair is woven around split bamboo, acting as a warp.



The bamboo splints for horsehair weaving are made from finely split bamboo that has been boiled in a special solution to make them soft and pliable. Using horsehair produces the lightest lacquerware, thus making it more time-consuming and expensive.



ThaYo

Thit-si is mixed with different fillers to make it thicker and the object stronger. The best and the most expensive filler are cow bone ashes. The mixture in Myanmar is called ThaYo, which is translated as Meat and Bone. Mixing with cornhusk ash makes the lacquer more pliable - good for horsehair bases. Nowadays, it is more and more common to use sawdust or clay as a filler. However, this reduces the quality, making the lacquer easier to break or crack, sometimes just months after creation.



Applying Cloth

The first layer of ThaYo, or lacquer, cannot be applied directly to any of the bases, it is so strong that it would crack.

Instead, a bit more thit-si is added to the ThaYo to make it thinner, and then a thin layer of natural textile, such as cotton, is applied to the first layers over the base as reinforcement.

Afterwards, a further two or three layers of ThaYo are applied. When the process is complete the object is placed in an underground cellar to harden.



Second and Third Layers of ThaYo



After the first layers are dry, they are sanded to prepare for further ThaYo application. When this is finished, the objects are placed in the underground cellar to dry for 5 - 7 days. The process is repeated twice.

Applying Lacquer, or Pure Thit-si

After sanding, the previously filtered and heated thit-si goes through another stage of purification. The process is done under a hot lamp and permanently stirred to allow the thit-si to filter through a thick cloth.





Lacquer is applied by hand in the afternoon. It responds to the heat becoming more viscous, and can be applied smoothly without leaving any fingerprints. At least 4 or 5 layers of thit-si are applied without any filler. Each layer takes one week to dry.

Final Layer of Thit-si

The final layer must be smooth and thick, as it is prepared for engraving and etching. For this reason, it is applied in two layers. All is done within one day.

The first layer is applied in the morning and then sent to the cellar to settle and create a thin film. In the afternoon, a second layer is carefully applied. All is smoothed over with a piece of rubber; any air bubbles or foreign objects are removed with a sharp stick.



Charcoal Polishing

When the lacquer is dry it is carefully polished. First, with a paste made with finely ground charcoal and water to create a smooth and mat surface. Then fossilized wood is ground into a fine powder and used for final polishing.



Engraving

The outline of the design is engraved freehand on the surface of each item. Black Elephant's lacquer master, Veronica Gritsenko, outlines the sketch of her designs directly on the lacquerware, using white paint. Traditionally, only men do the engraving; however, Black Elephant challenges the norm of men-only designs, by featuring Veronica's exquisite creations.



Etching Before Cinnabar

Before the red-colored cinnabar is applied, the parts of the design that are meant to be red are further etched on the surface.



Cinnabar

Cinnabar is a rich red mineral used traditionally as part of the aesthetic decoration process. A mixture of ground cinnabar, peanut oil, and thit-si is carefully applied to the lacquer piece.



After spending 3 - 4 days in the underground cellar drying, cinnabar is washed away. In the final product, the cinnabar will only remain in the engraved incisions.



Washing away cinnabar

Bamboo shavings for applying cinnabar



Applying Color

After 10 days, the cinnabar thit-si is completely dry. Now, other colors can begin to be applied. Acacia sap is applied to the entire object as glue, sealing the red color in. Once the sap has dried, further etching is done on the parts where the pigment is desired.



Pigments



Each color application requires five days in the cellar to stabilize, and two days in the open. Only then can another color be applied.



Black Elephant experiments with a variety of pigments, developing their own colors such as lilac, coral, beige, pink, and different shades and hues of blue and green.

Final Polishing

Two weeks after the last color application, when the object is completely dry, it is polished with finely ground fossilized wood.



Care Instructions

To clean your lacquerware, use your finger to dab a small amount of coconut oil directly on the item. Then use a soft, clean cloth to rub it lightly.





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