

The Kammawa-sa

Burma's Sacred Prayer Book

By Annig Huchet

Many collectors know about the beautiful gold and black or red Burmese books which we use as decorations on our walls, but do they know the story behind them? Such books, *kammawa-sa*, were commissioned by the family of a novice or a monk when he entered a monastery. They could be different sizes and always consisted of two teakwood covers decorated with *devas* (a female deity), *kinarees* (mythical creatures) or dancers. Between the two covers there are between 14 and 16 pages according to the size of the book. Both sides of each cover are decorated with more dancers and *devas* and the pages inside contain the scriptures. On each page you can see a small hole in the left-hand side; this enabled the pages to be bound together with a small bamboo pin.

We can trace the origins of the *kammawa-sa* back to the Pagan period (1044 – 1287), but the first ornate and more sophisticated ones were produced during the 14th century. The pages were made of palm leaves, lacquered, then written on with black lacquer and decorated with gold leaf. The pieces you see today, created during the 19th and 20th centuries, are very similar.

During the 17th century the writing of the scriptures changed from Sanskrit to a style called 'tamarind seed', which consisted of square-shaped characters. That script was in fact Pali, the ancient Indian language still used in Theravada Buddhism. It is interesting to note that people practising Mahayana Buddhism (in Tibet, China, Vietnam) kept Sanskrit, the classical language of India, for their prayer books.

The pages of the prayer books made from the 17th to the 19th centuries were sometimes from fabric recycled from robes that had belonged to famous abbots or monks. This fabric would be lacquered many times in order to become hard enough. The pages were also made of metal or ivory, but most of the time palm leaves were used.



Very ornate prayer book from Mandalay, made for special ceremonies

During the 19th century the region of Mandalay became an important production centre for these prayer books.

Some interesting facts about *kammawa-sa* prayer books

- In the region of the Mon, south of Burma (Moulmein) the books tend to be decorated with silver, not gold leaf.



Prayer book from the Shan states, 18th century

- In the Shan states the format of the books is different; they are slender and the pages are thinner. Moreover, the two covers are decorated with birds inside a motif of rondels, as can be seen in the photo.
- There are also some very ornate books, with the covers decorated with pieces of glass and a thick coat of gold leaf. Those books were used for special ceremonies.

Those precious books were kept in special boxes or cabinets when not being used. They would be wrapped in brocade or velvet fabrics to protect them against dust.

Knowing all those details, no doubt you will now look at those sacred scriptures with a different eye.



A more ordinary prayer book from the end of the 19th century

Annig Huchet is French and has lived in Asia for more than 30 years. She started dealing with antiques during the 70s in France after she completed her Master of Arts. She gives talks and writes articles about Asian art. Her hobbies are travel and photography.

All photos courtesy of the author