

Yadanazedi inscription of 1388 (Sagaing). Characters in Kammavaca volumes were written in the style of stone and wall inscriptions of the Pagan and early Inn Wa periods. This archaic style was still in use until the 1970s

Asian Art
Kammavaca Texts

Their Covers and Binding Ribbons

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Photographs

Among the [palm leaf and paper manuscripts](#) of [Myanmar](#) (formerly Burma), the *Kammavaca* ([monastic ceremony and higher ordination text](#)) is by far the most ornate in appearance, gleaming with gold, silver and occasionally with mother of pearl inlay. It attracts the eye with its extravagant decoration and the curious blank script is found nowhere else.

A volume could consist of one, five or all nine khandakas, extracts from the *Vinaya Pitaka* (monastic disciplinary code; see box). These formulae which are used by the [Theravada Buddhists](#) are the oldest surviving specimens of Pali and are connected with a specific ritual associated with priesthoods.

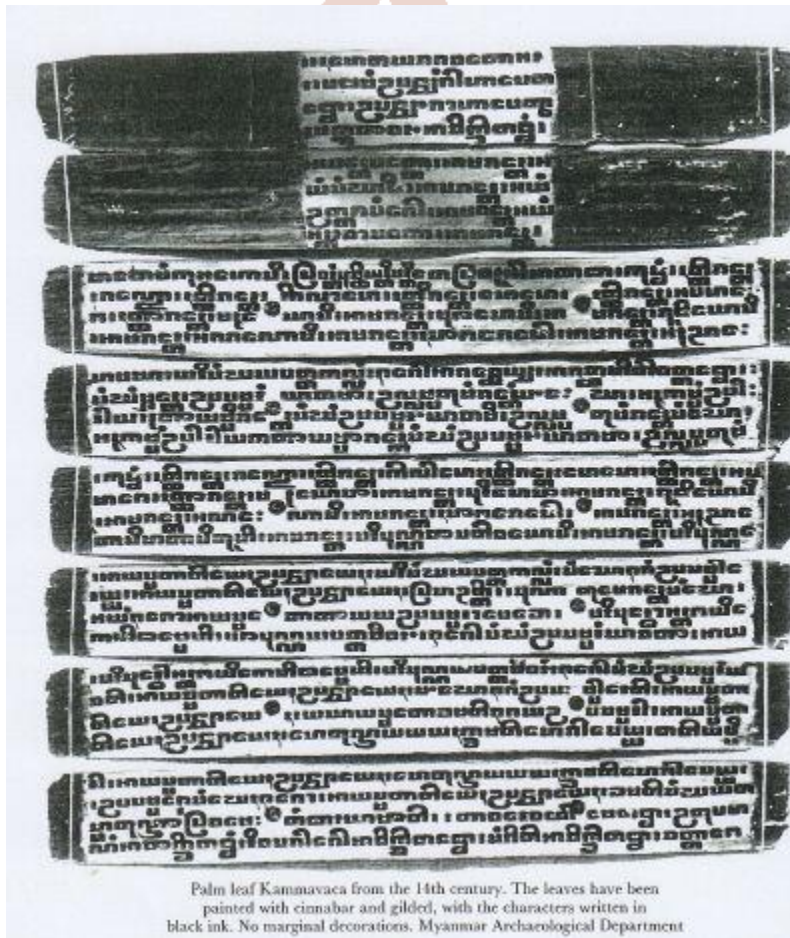
As it is still obligatory for boys to enter a *vihara* ([monastery](#)) for a period, parents may sometimes present the presiding monk with a Kammavaca on the *upasampada* (higher ordination). The acolytes are richly dressed and taken in procession through the town. Later, appropriately robed, they are rejected

to a ritual interrogation before a chapter of monks by a **Kammavaca saya** (teacher) who reads the ordination service.

The number of volumes of this particular type produced over the centuries must have been enormous. This has resulted in many being smuggled out of the country in the 1960s, culminating in a glut in the antique markets of London in the 1970s, when they were sought by the collectors and interior decorators for their opulent visual effect. The flow appears to have ceased as one rarely comes across a volume for sale these days.

In 1476, a momentous event occurred in the history of *Kammavaca* when the Mon King Ramadhipatiraja (1472-1482), appalled at the lack of discipline among the religious fraternity, organized the re-ordination of its members and purification of **Buddhism**, which had gradually split into two different sects. So serious was the situation that the king instructed the senior clergy to unfrock those monks who had accumulated wealth and slaves, and those who earned a living manufacturing ivory articles and images.

The *Kalyana inscriptions* of 1476-1479 state that at the ceremonies held at Zainganaing, near the capital Sri Hamsawati, musicians “sounded drums, conch shells and other instruments at the conclusion of each reading of the Kammavaca” and that over fifteen thousand monks received the pure form of the Sihala upasampada ordination of the Mahavihara sect.



Palm leaf Kammavaca from the 14th century. The leaves have been painted with cinnabar and gilded, with the characters written in black ink. No marginal decorations. Myanmar Archaeological Department

While religion flourished in the Mon country of Ramannadesa as a result of the pious efforts by devout men, across the Bay of Bengal in Sri Lanka the teachings of Gautama gradually waned. By the second half of the seventeenth century, it was found that copies of the Kammavaca were no longer available on the island and ordinations were rarely held. The Dutch, in a calculated move to counter the growing influence of the Portuguese priests who had in the 1570s managed to convert Dhammapala, the chief of Colombo, to Catholicism, organized the exchange of religious missions with the Buddhist kingdom or Rakhaing, on the west coast of Myanmar.

In 1684, forty monks from the capital Mrauk U arrived at Kandy with sacred texts. The *Mahavansa* (chronicle of the Greater dynasty) recorded the event and said that the delegation from “Rakkhangadesa” was led by Abbot Santana, and as a result of the visit, ordinations resumed.

Thirteen years later, another mission for the acquisition of Kammavaca was dispatched and, although the Rakhaing kingdom had now entered a turbulent period with the Mughal archers of the Royal Guard virtually in control, making and assassinating kings at will, seven volumes were procured. It was noted that some were from “Hamsavati-pura” and some from “Rakkhanga-pura”. The former, written in a round script, were of [Mon](#) origin, the latter were in the square Myanmar type. It is interesting to learn that these volumes have survived and are still used at ordination ceremonies held in Kandy.

A characteristic of Mon “Kammawat” is the employment of silver leaf which was also favored by the Myanmar who lived in the area. The large marginal panels in these volumes are sometimes delineated with floral patterns in the cinnabar or ink on a gold ground, with silver in the central section reserved for the text. The British Library has only one example (ADD. 24129), dated 1753, which fortunately survived the Mon Myanmar war of 1757.

According to the *Hmam Nan Chronicle*, when hostilities ceased the Myanmar king had one thousand Mon Kammavaca removed to his capital Shwebo. Some of these volumes were believed to have been in the royal library when the chronicle was compiled seventy-two years later but, with the fall of the dynasty in 1885, what remained was probably destroyed as they are not mentioned in the list of [manuscripts](#) savaged from the palace.

The flow of similar material to England began partly as a result of the First and Second Anglo-Burmese Wars of 1826 and 1852. Despite the vandalism of religious works of art by iconoclastic Muhammadan soldiery and some of their British counterparts, many spoils of wars were taken which later found their way into private and national collections.

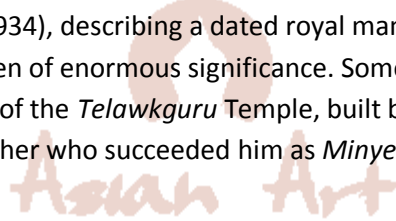
A letter sent by an officer in 1827 for publication in *the Mirror* says that “When the Burmese temples and monasteries were ransacked by our soldiers, they strewed about the books found therein. I picked up one, and a few fragments which I carried off by way of plunder.” A monk later offered him one hundred ticals for the volume and, when he refused, raised the offer to three hundred (about four hundred rupees). The officer ruefully concluded: “Had our soldiers been aware of the value which the Burmese priests attach to their sacred writings, they would not have wantonly destroyed a booty which would, for its redemption, have fetched an extraordinary price.” Judging from his description, the manuscript appears to have been a **Kammavaca**.

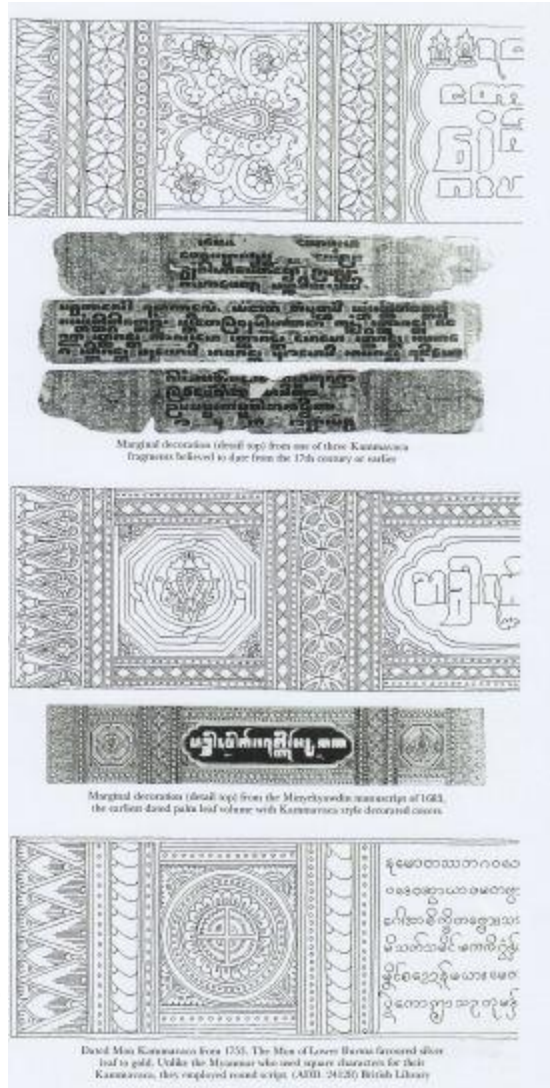
During the 1970s the **Myanmar Archaeological Department** acquired some palm leaf *Kammavaca* which were believed to date from the fourteenth century. A photograph sent by the late U Bo Kay, conservator of [Pagan](#), showed the folios lacquered and the central section gilded, on which the text had been written in ink, in a square script. The margins at his stage were under decorated. He also confirmed that early *Kammavaca* were produced on small leaves, but these had been superseded by a larger variety called *pitika pay*.

A break of about three hundred years occurs at this point, as classification on old *Kammavaca* has still to be undertaken by the relevant authorities. However, one can assume that the conservative style of the fourteenth century, continued into the next, with the introduction of ornamentation in the margins following soon after.

In 1978, the discovery in London of three unusual *Kammavaca* fragments accompanied by a label dated 1829, which read "[Burmese Sacred Writings](#)". Taken from the house of a rajah during the advance of the British troop", prompted by U Bo Kay to suggest that, because of the style of the inked script, the leaves were datable to the seventeenth century or earlier.

Authenticated material from this period is extremely rare, but the chance of finding by the writer in 1989 of J.A. Stewart's "**Burmese Dedicatory Inscription of AD 1683**" (*Bulletin of the school of Oriental and African studies*, Volume VII, 1934), describing a dated royal manuscript with covers, decorated in the style of a *Kammavaca*, has been of enormous significance. Some of the ornamentation of this volume can be seen in the murals of the *Telawkguru* Temple, built by King **Narawara** (1672-1673) in 1672, eleven years before his brother who succeeded him as *Minyekyawdin* commissioned the manuscript.





Until reliable examples which predate this [palm leaf volume](#) can be found, the six distinct motifs, all of which were probably in general use when the manuscript was produced in 1683, will have to be accepted as the earliest known patterns also employed in the decoration of **Kammavaca**. These comprise a row of heart shaped **palm leaf awana** (fans used by monks) each flanked by a lotus bud and leaves; a band with tiny circles; another of diamonds; overlapping circles which create an illusion of either a star or a flower with four petals (an ancient design found in China, Egypt and India); a lobed panel; and a square with a linked circle containing and octagonal frame within which is a flower shaped like an inverted tear-drop.

U Bo Kay's suggested dating of the three Kammavaca fragments mentioned earlier is borne out by the inclusion of four out of these six motifs.

Foreign influences, which are noticeable in some designs, may be attributed to court artists who were in a position to observe gifts brought by envoys, as they had to record in **parabaik** folding paper books the more outstanding objects. Ample opportunities for contacts with other cultures also existed, owing to

the presence at the capital of officials and attendants from various races, whose **religious beliefs** were tolerated.

It is therefore not unusual to find on some volumes interlaced patterns which can be traced to illuminations in the Koran or bowls from Khurasan in Iran. Some marginal decorations of flowers and birds are decidedly Sri Lankan or Chinese in feeling. The wealth of paintings in the temples of Pagan must also have been an important source of inspiration. Court artists were the disseminators of the latest trend in design, spreading new ideas which others in their profession copied.

Three types of Kammavaca were produced in the kingdom: these written under royal patronage, and accordingly of the finest quality in ornamentation and calligraphy; those for the official classes; and those available in the stalls at major pagoda for the commoner. Donors either commissioned works to their own specification or made a selection from existing stock.

The folios, made by craftsmen whose families had been in the profession for centuries, were elaborately decorated with gold or silver leaf and are instantly recognizable by the unusual black square script. Makers of Kammavaca volumes either prepared the lacquered and gilded leaves themselves or bought the required quantity from dealers. Although some gold was produced in areas such as the Kachin States, most of the *shwe saing* (gold leaf) sold in the bazaars and pagodas came from China, as did the cinnabar.





Some folios from the eighteenth century are recognizable by their distinctive slightly tarnished silvery sheen. This was acquired by adding a small amount of gold to silver, a piece of which was pounded repeatedly in a leather pouch to produce *mogyo* leaf or “sky string”, said to resemble the color or lightning.

The text and pagination were first written on the gilded surface in cinnabar by the scribe, and later filled in with ink by his assistant. Covers and margins were then decorated with a fine brush and bamboo pen red linear work on gold and black ink on silver appears to have been the norm. Colored paints were never used.

During the seventeenth century, a [new material](#) was introduced. This consisted of strips of cloth which had been cut from the robes of the King or eminent monks and then lacquered. Kammavaca of this type were reserved for important occasions and royal presentations and were understandably much prized.

For ordinary volumes each folio was made of four pieces of coarse cloth, pasted together with lacquer and painted with cinnabar. The increased use of this durable material, from about the beginning of the eighteenth century, may have been caused by the fragile nature of the pitaka pay or its scarcity, induced perhaps by a natural disaster.

It has often been quoted that the first recorded instance of using cloth as a base for lacquered articles was to be found in gilded figure of Htilaing Min (1084-1112) in the Nanda Temple of Pagan which is dated 1091, and that during the Japanese occupation vandals, convinced that the figure was solid gold had cut off parts of it, whereupon exposed cloth base disintegrated. A thorough investigation carried out in the 1970s by U Aung Thaw, then Head of the Department of Archaeology, confirmed in a private communication that the "portrait was originally carved out of a single block of sandstone" and that the figure which had been damaged before the incident had, at some time been, restored with cloth and lacquer.

Another material employed as a base for Kammavaca was ivory, thought to have been introduced at some time during the eighteenth century. However the remarkable similarities of certain motifs on a volume in the British Library (OR.14008) and those on the Minyekyawedin manuscript of 1683 indicate that the date may have to be pushed back to the second half of the seventeenth century. The use of ivory may originally have been a prerogative or royalty as the cost and difficulty of procuring straight lights to form sets of up to eighteen folios could not have been easy. It was probably not popular with the craftsmen either, because of the difficulties experienced in applying lacquer to the smooth slightly oily surface.

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In 1782, when the capital was moved to [Amarapura](#), Kammavaca makers were allocated land at Taguntaing, a village nearby where a small amount of work is still carried on in Kammavatan with a street named after their profession.

Four variations in chronological sequences of Kammavaca have been observed. Each subtle change in design from the seventeenth century onwards would probably have lasted about a decade or so:

- a) Four lines of inked script on a plain gold ground. Fourteenth to the first few decades of the eighteenth century.

Kammavaca from the Pagan period (1044-1287) were either incised or written in ink on plain palm leaves. Folios from the fourteenth century and later have four lines of ink writing in large square characters on an undecorated gold or silver ground. Although the margins were left unadorned, by 183 when the Minyekyawdin manuscript came to be copied, ornamentation with a row of palm leaf fans, each flanked by a lotus bud with leaves, appears to have been the practice.

From about the latter half of the seventeenth century the text of the Kammavaca, which had traditionally been written in ink, was being replaced by a method which entailed the use of thick resinous lacquer. Because of their square embossed shape, which resembled the seed of the tamarind (*Tamarindus indica*), the character were called *magyi si sar* (tamarind seed script).

A curious characteristic of some manuscripts from this period is the punctuation symbols, shaped like small gilded pillars in groups of twos and threes, with the ending of a chapter symbolized by a throne, shaded by an umbrella and flanked with a flag and pillar. Later variations are simple parallel lines.

- b) Four lines of inked script on plan gold around or four to five lines of lacquered script between gilded yazamat (hatched) borders. Early to mid eighteenth century.

In examples from this period, new designs have begun to appear on some of the covers and large marginal panels. These are: upward pointing lotus petals called karlan which have replaced the rows of fans; a variety of birds in full display enclosed within circles, serrated octagons and frames resembling mandalas; wavy lines with curling tendrils or dots; plaited ribbons; rows of petals and a new variation on overlapping circles.

- c) Five lines of lacquered script between hatched borders decorated with leaf sprays and birds on a gold ground. Second half of the eighteenth and early nineteenth century.

In some volumes from this period, the space between each sentence is decorated with floral sprays remarkably like mistletoe, against a hatched background of great delicacy. In later examples tiny birds have been added to the foliage. Covers and marginal panels are usually delineated with linked geometric patterns, flowers and birds, with the hintha (Brahmani duck) being favoured by **Mon** and the *karaweik* (a type of crane) by Myanmar artists.



Other themes are Buddha with Bo tree, Buddha with Sariputta and Moggallana, and twenty eight Buddhas. These figures were replaced in the early part of the nineteenth century by celestials and creatures from mythology.

d) Six to seven lines of lacquered script between hatched borders containing animals, birds and floral designs on a gold ground. Second half of the nineteenth century until the 1970s.

The traditional [palm leaf folios](#) have been replaced by large panels of lacquered cloth or fine strips of closely woven bamboo. Depending on size, each can accommodate from seven to eight lines of text, as a result of which the characters are noticeably smaller than those of the seventeenth and eighteenth century.

Kammavaca on gilded sheets of brass and copper were also introduced about this time. The panels, cut to the required lengths, were available from metal merchants in Zaygyodaw Bazaar at

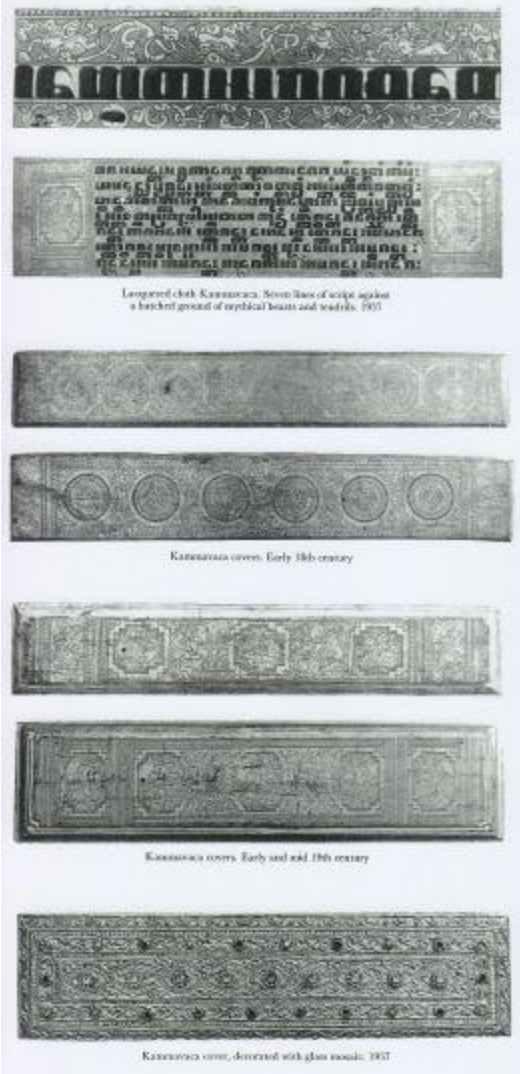
[Mandalay](#). Examples are usually of poor quality and the lacquer does not always adhere to the metal surface.

Two other types of materials also made a brief appearance. These were buffalo hide, on which the characters were painted with lacquer in the usual manner, and lacquered cloth overlaid with mother-of-pearl. The latter technique is unknown in **Burma**, and the few examples that have survived are probably the result of a visit by Thai craftsmen, who left their mark with the distinctive phum flame-like motif in the marginal decorations.

Production of **Kammavaca** is **Amarapura and Mandalay** reached its peak during the early part of this century. Although some splendid pieces exist, because of the high demand of the artwork deteriorated noticeably, resulting in the monotonous groups or badly sketched *devas* (deities) within floral or *naga* (serpent) entwined frames. The **figures** were mere decorations and were not believed to protect the manuscript in any way.

The volumes found outside **Myanmar** are rarely complete and may not always have their original wooden *kyan* (covers). These are usually carved and are broader than those of palm leaf manuscripts, allowing ample space for ornamentation, which in some later examples departs from the traditional linear style to ornate glass mosaic work. Covers and folios from the eighteenth century are of a finer quality and display a mastery of design.

A manuscript for presentation to a monastery was first wrapped in cloth, and then bound with either a plain ribbon or one woven with a prayer from the donor called a [sarsekyo](#) (*sasigyo*). The characters, usually in white, stand out against a background of indigo, brown, red or green. As a result of age and constant handling, the colors in most surviving examples have now faded.



Although cords for securing **palm leaf texts** have been employed for centuries, it is not known when ribbons with script were introduced. Perhaps, as weaving skills increased patterns were added. With the periodic influx of captured foreign weavers experimentation began with the tile of a work or short quotations from the *Vinaya*, progressing lengthy wishes and supplications by the second half of the eighteenth century.

A **sarsekyo** begins with a loop used as a noose for binding the volume. This is followed by a strip which, in examples from the second half of the second half of the nineteenth century, is woven with religious symbols or one of the animals representing the day of the week on which the donor was bor. The middle section consists of a prayer, composed in verse by professionals; it ends occasionally with a curse intended for vandals. Some ready-made ribbons contain wishes of a general nature, applicable to anyone who did not feel the need to have one specially woven.

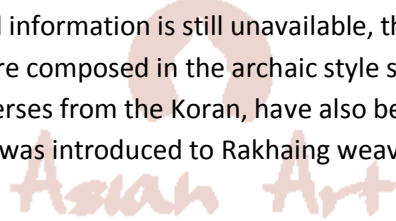
Until the 1920s sarsekyo weavers together with the sellers of Kammavaca, were to be found in the stalls leading to Phayargi Shrine in Mandalay which contains much revered Mahamuni image, looted

by the Myanmar from the Rakhaing city of Dhanyawadi in 1785, the reasons for this concentration appear to have been the ability of the icon to draw a constant flow of pilgrims from all parts of the country and the large community of textile workers in nearby **Amarapura**.

Sarkseyo were woven not only by professionals but also by ladies of rank as an act of devotion. Henry Yule, on his visit to the court of Ava in 1855, saw one of silk made by the Moguoung queen. A second royal ribbon, which exists in the British Library, is of red and white cotton and was made between 1872 and 1878. It is still attached to a presentation copy of *Jaaka Attakattha*, donated by Setkya Daywe, an adept in astrology and chief queen of Mindon Min (1853-1878). The volume is unusual in that the square characters are in yellow orpiment or saydan (arsenic trisylphide) brushed onto black lacquer boards.

Recently, the author **Shwebo Mi Mi Gyi** of *Mandalay* discovered a nineteenth century palm leaf volume containing a collection of over one hundred wishes, some of which had been commissioned by members of the royal court. A keen collector, she has already catalogued over five hundred sarsekyo with the help of her son, U Ye Myint.

The Rakhaing, who are noted for their weaving skills, also used these ribbons, a considerable number having been found and listed in the early 1970s by the monk scholar Pannatera of Sittwe (Akyab). Although background information is still unavailable, the quality of the weave is believed to be superior; the prayers too are composed in the archaic style still in use by these people. Since similar ribbons, woven with verses from the Koran, have also been produced by some Islamic cultures, it is possible that art was introduced to Rakhaing weavers by immigrants from India and the Gulf area.





Despite claims made by some writers that the craft is centuries old, the earliest sarsekyo from a Myanmar donor dates from about the period when Rakhaing was annexed in 1785, and captives were relocated near the Phayargyi area.

A chronological list of Myanmar sarsekyo would begin with the indigo brown ribbons, woven from coarse home-spun cotton. These are broader than later examples and are rarely accompanied by ornamentation. Because of similarities in the formation of the clumsy script, indicative of the craft's infancy, they are datable from the second of the eighteenth to the early part of the nineteenth century.

Most of the large characters look relatively modern but in one example with an indigo ground, the letter *ya* resembles a shepherd's crook, a variation used during the seventeenth century. This style continued to be employed intermittently together with the current inward curling version until the first half of the eighteenth century, to make a final appearance in the Theinkayung Pagoda inscription of 1785.

A Kammavaca donated in the 1790s by a Mon lady called Shin Htaw can be seen in the Royal Asiatic Society, London. As it is wrapped in a brown sarsekyo, one may suppose that because of its color and style of script, it forms part of the original gift.

Red sarsekyo, which complement the gold of Kammavaca covers, are woven to a smaller width and have remained in better condition as foreign yarn, available from the 1970s onwards, was used. The tightly woven characters and religious symbols, such as bells, hinthas, umbrellas or sacred posts, are amazingly detailed and neat. Various other figures have also been observed. This type made an appearance in Upper Myanmar in about 1850 and continued in popularity until the first few decades of this century.

Sarsekyo weavers in the delta, however, abandoned the traditional plain red style and by the 1890s were producing new color combinations for the emerging wealthy civil servants and merchant classes of Lower Myanmar. These early colonial ribbons, which are made of thick cotton, are distinguished by a band of dark blue or red running down the middle, with the characters spread across the one inch width.

In an effort to retain what was imagined to be the grand style of old court, weavers in the regions adopted a confused mixture of elaborates scripts form the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries. The delicately woven religious symbols, favored by the donors of Upper Myanmar, are noticeably absent. In one example from about 1910, the ribbon is woven in strips of indigo red and indigo the characters straddle these bands, with parts within the indigo areas in yellow. Some ribbons with yellow characters on a green ground are also known.

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Weaving a ribbon similar to a sarokyo. Note the Mink lekhat wooden handle and the small chat leather squares in front. Photo by Staveland Hi Mi Gyi



Ingredients used for the weaving of a sarokyo: (handling ribbons, lekhat frame shaped wood handle) and chat (perforated leather squares)



Sarokyo (binding ribbon). The Thakkyang Pagoda inscription of 1785 showing the letter "ya" which resembles a shepherd's crook



Indigo sarokyo with a similar version of the letter "ya" resembling a shepherd's crook. Victoria and Albert Museum



Brown sarokyo from the dated Kammawasa of 1792. Royal Asiatic Society



Red sarokyo. Circa 1820



Brown sarokyo with central strip of indigo. Circa 1898



Two indigo sarokyo. Early 19th century



Indigo sarokyo with red central strip. Circa 1910



Sarokyo without strip. Early to mid 19th century

All the dyes were originally produced locally: blue from mene (*Indigofera linctoria*)| brown from *htanauang* (*Acacia leucophloea*); red from powdered stick-lac yellow from the jack tree (*Artocarpus integrifolia*); for green, dyed yellow strands were boiled with twigs of the mene plant.



Covers and marginal panels of Kasaravasa are often decorated with linked geometric patterns, flowers and birds. The kirita duck (kama), above, was favoured by Mysore artists. Telukaganra Temple (1672), Nagaling. Photo by Shobho Mi Mi Gyi



Birds on Kasaravasa covers and its marginal decorations are enclosed within circles, serrated octagons and flowers surrounding mandalas. The kiravitha rooster (kavavitha), above, was popular with Mysore artists. Telukaganra Temple (1672), Nagaling. Photo by Shobho Mi Mi Gyi

Depending on the aptitude of the student of sarsekyo making, training took about three months. As concentration was necessary, it was a lonely process, and this is believed to have been one of the reasons for the lack of interest among young weavers. The rewards were too small. **Sarksekyo** were sold at one rupee per foot in 1936. As a result, other readily saleable items also had to be made.

The base of a ribbon usually consisted of eighty-eight cotton strands of two colors, threaded into forty-four four inches square pieces of lacquered leather called chat, with a perforation at each corner. These were strung out between posts and the squares turned out each time additional white thread was used to form a character. This was tapped into place with a foot long *letkhat* or razor shaped handle, made either of tamarind or paudak (*Pterocarpus*) wood. If an error occurred, the strip was unraveled and weaving had to begin again.

The last few ribbons were produced in the early 1970s by an eighty-two years old professional called Daw Sint, of Oakshitkon village neary Monya. She had been taught by Daw Khaing and her daughter Daw Khaing and her daughter Daw Kywe, both of whom have trained in **Mandalay**. This craft, which is peculiar to Myanmar, is now no longer practiced.

Sarsekyo can still be found in monastic libraries, museums and private collections in Myanmar and in the West, but it is doubtful whether the total figure would exceed three thousand. The Department of Culture has become aware of the uniqueness of these ribbons and has started collecting them. In 1987, ninety had been acquired, fifty with prayers and forty without. Over two hundred sarskeyo are also said to have been retrieved by the Universities Central Library.

Although the number of craftsmen producing Kammavaca with traditional materials has fallen sharply, volumes are still being made. However, a round script written with a pen has in recent years replaced the distinctive square style of the twelfth century. The appearance also of cheap printed paper copies, decorated with the usual complement of devas, does not in any way encourage the hopes for revival of sarsekyo.

For more information, visit our site: <http://www.burmese-art.com>

