

Good Design: Mekong Design Selection
~Travel to Myanmar~

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Through the *Mekong Design Selection* project which is a collaboration project between Japanese designers and the CLMV (Cambodia, Lao P.D.R., Myanmar, and Vietnam) awarded companies, my design proposal was chosen with Bagan House Co., Ltd., a lacquer ware crafts shop located in the ancient city of Bagan. The project is organized by the Japan Institute of Design Promotion (JDP) and ASEAN-Japan Centre (AJC). Through the power of design this project aims to produce a new brand product that will eventually let the companies become more independent and have a stronger presence in the global markets.

Before I explain about my overseas trip, I would like to briefly explain about the purpose of this voyage to Myanmar.

The main purpose is to meet Ms. Maw Maw Aung, the Proprietor of Bagan House Co., Ltd. in person, present my design proposal, and if all goes smoothly to conclude a contract to begin the collaboration project. Moving forward, another trip in June will be planned if a contract was to be concluded in this trip. To be frank, I am pleased to say that we successfully concluded a contract.

To get to the final destination in Bagan, I had to stay overnight in Yangon, the former capital city. The following day I took a domestic flight to my destination. The temperature at the time was a 30°C difference between Japan and Myanmar. The weather was overall nice and unlike Japan's summer season, less humid. Bagan is similar to Japan's Kyoto or Nara as it used to be an ancient capital city of the Kingdom of Pagan dynasty. During the height of the Pagan dynasty, over 10,000 temples and pagodas were constructed and to this day many of them still remain. Bagan is also famously known as one of the top 3 Buddhist temple sites in the world and the government of Myanmar are currently working to have the city designated as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Many of the pagodas are crowded with tourists visiting the sacred site. What was especially memorable and breathtaking to me was the site of the city during the evening dusk hours.

Now let me explain about the main project that deals with lacquer ware. Myanmar uses the traditional *kinma* technique to engrave elaborate designs and add colors to the lacquer ware. The main difference in the techniques between Myanmar and Japan is the base materials before adding the lacquer. Typically in Japan, the material used for the base is made of wood materials;

however, in Myanmar aside from using wood materials they generally use a mix of bamboo and horse hair. This allows for the lacquer ware to be more malleable and created into various shapes and sizes. This was the point that I took into consideration when coming up with my design proposal.

The existing lacquer wares sold in Myanmar have colorful designs and are perfect for souvenir gifts and decoration purposes, but using them as a bowl or daily use tableware is difficult as a marketing product in Japan. Space and blank margins are an important aspect of Japanese culture and aesthetics which I incorporated in my design proposal.

Bagan is the most famous place in Myanmar for traditional lacquer ware production and like Bagan House Co., Ltd., there are several companies that employ large amounts of craftsmen. Many of the companies allow visitors into their workshops and witness the process of making the crafts from beginning to finish. Not only do the visitors just buy the products as souvenirs, but they get to “experience” the product as well which is a very innovative and enjoyable experience for tourists. As a designer, my worries rely on the copy rights and patents of designs, as many craftsmen often work in several different companies in their lifetime and designs are often shared.

As I mentioned earlier, a contractual agreement was successfully concluded, and to my amazement, Ms. Maw Maw has shown positive feedback and strong ambitions for the collaboration. She brought many of the craftsmen while I presented my design proposal, which made me even more passionate to work for the success of this project. I am also grateful for the support that I received from Ms. Kawaguchi, the advisor and Ms. Ei the translator in making this first meeting go smoothly.

I would like to work hard towards the success of making a brand new product with Bagan House Co., Ltd. through the *Mekong Design Selection* project. I look forward to the second trip in June and the progress it will take to make all those involved in the project content with successful results.

For the original report in Japanese with pictures, please view this link:

http://www.asean.or.jp/ja/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/Myanmar-Report_modanico_Mr.-Sasaki_1.pdf