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FINE ART AUCTIONEERS





Burmese Silver Ewer with Narrative Reliefs

Silver Jug / Ceremonial Water Vessel - from Burma (Myanmar)

Late 19th century, circa 1880–1900 CE

Origin

This silver ewer (jug or pitcher) was made in Burma — most likely in Mandalay or Rangoon — between approximately 1880 and 1900 CE. It has an influence of Konbaung dynasty. Skilled silversmiths, often working within family workshops passed down through generations, created water vessels, bowls, betel boxes, and presentation pieces of remarkable quality. These were not simply useful objects. They served as religious offerings, gifts of prestige, and public declarations of a patron's wealth and devotion — made for royal courts, wealthy households, and important monasteries. A jug of this type is tall and wide, with a curved spout, a large handle, and a raised base was used to hold water or scented liquid during ceremonies, at domestic shrines, and at religious festivals. Its size and the ambition of its decoration make clear that it was intended for special occasions, not everyday use. Most remarkably, its entire outer surface has been turned into a visual story — something that sets it apart even among the finest Burmese silverwork of the period[1].

[1] David C. Owens, "Master Silversmiths (c. 1880–1910)," excerpt from *Burmese Silver Art*, Asian Review of Books, August 8, 2020, accessed June 12, 2026, https://asianreviewofbooks.com/master-silversmiths-c-1880-1910-excerpt-from-burmese-silver-art/.

Shape, Proportion and Method of Making

The body of the jug rises from a broad, stable foot-ring at the base. The lower section come outward gently — this is the widest part of the vessel and the zone where the main narrative scenes are concentrated. Moving upward, the body narrows into a cylindrical neck, which continues into a gracefully curved spout, wider at the tip to help control the flow of liquid. The proportions are carefully thought out. The broad base gives the jug physical stability. The outer lower body provides both visual weight and the surface area needed for storytelling. The narrow neck and curving spout give the whole form a sense of elegance.

The handle is one of the most carefully made elements of this jug, and also one of the most meaningful. While the body of the jug is hammered from a flat sheet of silver, the handle was made by a different method: lost-wax casting, known in French as cire perdue[2]. In this process, the silversmith first carves the handle in wax, capturing every intended detail. The wax model is then encased in layers of clay to form a mould. The wax melts when the mould is heated and flows away leaving a hollow space in the exact right shape. Then molten silver is poured in, and when it cools the clay is broken away to reveal the finished handle. This technique allows shapes and surface details to be produced that would not be possible by hammering alone. The finished handle is attached to the body of the jug by soldering — joining the two pieces with a thin layer of metal under heat. The join is concealed beneath a decorative collar of overlapping petals or scrolling leaves, so that the handle appears to grow naturally out of the body.

The handle rises in a broad curve from the top of the jug and bends down to join the body near the base. This shape makes the jug easier to hold when it is full and heavy, while also giving it an elegant appearance. At the top of the handle, where it meets the neck of the jug, the form is modelled as the head of a naga or dragon— a sacred serpent of great importance in Buddhist and broader South and Southeast Asian traditions[3]. The naga is associated with water, rain, and the protection of the Buddha and protectors of the Dharma. Its body runs the length of the handle, expressed through engraved scales and textured lines, and the design closes at the lower

[2] The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, "Lost-Wax Process," Encyclopaedia Britannica, last modified April 8, 2026, https://www.britannica.com/technology/lost-wax-process.
[3] Dragon Symbolism in Buddhist Art and Tradition: A Visual Guide," Enlightenment Thangka, November 21, 2023, https://enlightenmentthangka.com/blogs/thangka/buddhist-dragon.

end with a floral leafy ornament. The handle is thus a complete figure in its own right — not merely a grip, but a guardian.

The choice of the naga is deliberate. On a jug whose body depicts scenes from the life of the Bodhisattva (the Buddha in his previous births), the naga — protector of the Buddha in several key stories — adds a layer of sacred meaning to the whole object. The handle watches over the stories carved around it.

The Carved Decoration: Technique

The surface decoration is achieved through three techniques working in combination: **repousse**, **chasing**, and **engraving**. Repousse is the foundation. The silversmith places the silver sheet face-down on a cushion of soft material — tar, pitch, or something similar — and uses rounded punches and hammers to push the metal from the back. This forces parts of the surface outward, creating raised (relief) figures on the front: princes, attendants, elephants, trees, and architectural pavilions all stand out from the surface in low relief. Once the main forms are raised, the smith turns the piece over and works from the front using chasing tools — narrower, more precisely shaped punches.

Chasing refines and enriches the detail: the folds of a robe, the tusks and wrinkled skin of an elephant, the curling leaves of a tree, the tiered roofs of a palace[4]. Engraving handles the finest lines — the outlines of faces, the veins of leaves, crosshatching that creates shadow in background areas, and the border patterns between the decorative zones. Unlike repoussé and chasing, which shape the metal without removing it, engraving cuts directly into the surface with a sharp tool. It is precise and permanent. Together, these three techniques produce a surface of remarkable richness: smooth polished figures rising from a finely matted background, with crisp engraved lines picking out every detail. Due to this jug scenes seem almost alive.

[4] The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, "Repoussé," Encyclopaedia Britannica, accessed June 13, 2026, https://www.britannica.com/art/repousse.

Narrative Scenes

The carved decoration on this jug does something remarkable — it transforms the entire outer surface of the vessel into a continuous Buddhist narrative landscape. The artist has not treated the jug merely as a container but as a three-dimensional storytelling medium, where the sacred story unfolds around the curved body as a flowing sequence of scenes. Human figures, animals, trees, and architectural elements are woven together into a single harmonious composition. Each scene rises from the silver surface in raised relief, creating a sense of movement and depth that shifts as the light changes.

The decoration closely related with the **Vessantara Jataka** — one of the 547 birth stories of the Buddha, and by far the most beloved in Burma. For centuries, this story has been one of the most important subjects in Burmese Buddhist art, appearing in temple murals, illustrated manuscripts, woven textiles, and metal objects. The figures of princes, attendants, elephants, trees, and palace pavilions on this ewer all belong to that long and rich visual tradition. The Vessantara Jataka tells the story of Prince Vessantara, the Bodhisattva in his previous birth before becoming the Buddha[5]. The story celebrates the perfection of generosity — *dāna pāramī* — one of the essential virtues on the path to Buddhahood. Vessantara gives away everything he owns without hesitation: his wealth, his kingdom's sacred white elephant, his children, and even his wife. With every offering he makes, he shows that he is free of attachment to the world and that his compassion is without limit for all beings.

The narrative scenes on the jug are set within an idealized world — royal court, sacred forest — that is neither purely realistic nor purely symbolic, but something in between. Trees with curling branches and stylized foliage surround the figures, their flowing curves echoing the rhythm of Burmese ornamental design. These are not simply background decoration. They carry meaning: symbols of life, continuity, and the connection between the human world and the spiritual realm. Among them move carefully modelled animals — including the famous white elephant — each carrying its own symbolic weight within the story.

[5] Vessantara Jataka (#547)," The Jataka Tales, accessed June 13, 2026, https://thejatakatales.com/vessantara-jataka-547/.

Architectural forms appear throughout the composition as markers of place and status. Carved pavilions, throne and palace-like structures, with their layered roofs, pillars, and ornamental details, frame the scenes and signal the royal and sacred settings in which the story takes place. These are not portraits of real places. They create an ideal world — a moral landscape — in which the teachings of the Jataka can unfold with clarity and beauty.

The jug depicts key scenes from the Vessantara Jataka -



This scene shows a noble figure seated beneath a canopy or pavilion — most likely Prince Vessantara himself from the court of Sivi. In Burmese visual tradition, a canopy marks royal presence and authority. Around him, attendants kneel in quiet respect, giving the scene a feeling of ceremony and solemnity. The silversmith has arranged the figures with care, gently guiding the eye toward the central character without anything feeling forced. The figures are handled with great restraint. Faces are calm, bodies hold their poses with natural grace, and clothing falls in soft, considered folds. Rather than dramatizing the story's emotional moments, the silversmith has chosen dignity over action — a hand open in giving, a body inclined in reverence, a posture that speaks of patience and wisdom. The figures do not perform their virtues. They simply embody them.



This scenes on the jug captures the moment Prince Vessantara gives away the royal white elephant — the act that sets the entire story in motion. This was no ordinary animal. His gesture toward the elephant communicates the act of *dāna*, perfect generosity, one of the highest virtues in Buddhist teaching. In the kingdom of Sivi, the white elephant was a sacred creature, believed to bring rain, prosperity, and good fortune to the land. Giving it away was not simply a generous gesture. It meant giving away something the whole kingdom depended upon. The scene clearly shows the elephant being offered as a gift. The figures approaching it represent the people who came to request the elephant. Their land was suffering from drought, and they hoped that receiving the elephant would bring rain and relief to their people.



This scene depicts Prince Vessantara, surrounded by his family and nature. It might be referring to the time he was forced to leave the kingdom after giving away the royal elephant. His wife Maddi and children Jali and Kaṇhajina went with him into the forest and dwelt in exile. The carving gradually shifts from palace architecture to forest scenery, reflecting the prince's movement from a life of wealth and comfort to a life of simplicity and spiritual practice. The trees and plants are not simply decorative, they represent the forest where Vessantara continued to practice generosity, compassion and self-sacrifice. These forest scenes relate to the period of exile, when Vessantara lived as an ascetic. The artist fills the scene with trees and hut creating a placid and peaceful environment. The scene depicts Prince Vessantara giving his children to the Brahmin Jujaka — his most painful act of generosity as a bodhisattva. The figures are rendered calm and expressionless to shift focus from personal grief to spiritual meaning, conveying that true selfless giving transcends even the deepest human attachments. In Buddhist art the forest is often represented as a site of spiritual development, where worldly attachments are discarded and virtues cultivated. The world of Vessantara is a world of harmony, a world of animals, people and nature, a reflection of Vessantara’s compassionate and kind character.



In this carving, one of the most important moments in the narrative, the Bodhisattva's practice of extreme generosity. This scene depicts the moment after Vessantara has given away his two children to the Brahmin, a painful test of his generosity. At this point, only Vessantara and his wife, Maddi, are together. This act is considered as one of the highest expressions of the perfection of giving (dāna) of the Bodhisattva. The artist depicts the figures with serene gestures and composed expressions, stressing the spiritual significance of the event, rather than its emotional suffering.

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