

HAND-PAINTING AS A CULTURAL TOURISM PRODUCT: A CASE STUDY IN BAGAN, MANDALAY REGION, MYANMAR

Hnin Ei Moe¹

Abstract

The title of this paper is hand-painting as a cultural tourism product: a case study in Bagan, Mandalay region, Myanmar. The main purpose of this paper is to explore the role of hand-painting art within the tourism sector in Bagan. The specific objectives are to analyse the impact of tourism on hand-painting artists and to describe tourists' perceptions and preferences regarding hand-painting. Qualitative research method is used in this research. The findings reveal that hand-painting has evolved from a creative pursuit into a thriving business, generating income and creating employment opportunities for local artists. This activity allows visitors to connect deeply with Myanmar's heritage, serving as a unique and memorable souvenir. Tourists, particularly domestic travelers, often choose designs inspired by temple murals, and the service is offered in temporary stalls adorned with traditional elements like Patheingyi umbrellas and puppets to attract customers. Despite its commercialization, hand-painting maintains its cultural significance by merging traditional art with modern tourist experiences. As tourism grows in Bagan, the demand for hand-painting is expected to rise, further solidifying its role as a distinctive cultural tourism product that enhances visitors' cultural immersion and appreciation of Myanmar's artistic heritage.

Keywords: hand-painting, tourism, tourists, souvenir, Bagan

Introduction

Tourism is one of the activities pursued by humans for pleasure. It is not only a global set of activities crossing many cultures, but also a factor in shaping local identity and culture. Tourism is considered a smokeless industry, contributing significantly to the income of many countries. It is one of the most important sources of economic revenue and employment. Therefore, every country in the world strives to promote tourism through its natural landscapes, historical buildings, and unique cultural traditions.

To develop tourism, tourist attractions are crucial. Tourist attractions refer to places of interest that tourists visit, typically for their inherent or exhibited natural or cultural value, historical significance, scenic beauty, or offerings of leisure, adventure, and amusement. Moreover, cultural attractions play an essential role in tourism at all levels, from global highlights of world culture to attractions that support local identities (Richards, 1996).

Tourism and culture are interrelated. Culture may be modified in two ways: through diffusion, which involves borrowing traits or patterns from another culture, or through the invention or discovery of new cultural elements within the society. In the globalized world, tourism brings not only new demands but also new opportunities—new destinations to travel to, new cultures to explore, and new tourism products and experiences to consume, along with a whole new set of dynamics surrounding the phenomenon as it unfolds (Schouten, 1996).

In this research, hand-painting art, one of the new tourism products, is considered from an anthropological point of view. The main study site for this research is Bagan in the Mandalay Region. Bagan is an ancient city and a UNESCO World Heritage Site. It served as the capital of the Bagan Kingdom from the 9th to 13th centuries and is located in the middle of the "Dry Zone" of Myanmar. Bagan is the most attractive destination in Myanmar's tourism sector and can also

¹ Department of Anthropology, University of Yangon

be regarded as one of the best places for numerous ancient cultural sites among Southeast Asian countries.

For local people, Bagan is mostly interested and frequently visited for the reasons of having ancient pagodas and being an ancient kingdom once where range of dynasties were rooted to create Today Myanmar. As Myanmar people say that “If you are a Myanmar, you must have been to Bagan”, most Myanmar people try to visit there. For foreign tourists also, Bagan is a must-visit destination in their travel plans within Myanmar. The lists of Department of Hotel and Tourism, (Bagan branch), show the number of tourists visited to Bagan as 308441 in 2017, 250917 in 2018, 478118 in 2019, 97179 in 2020, 641 in 2021, 287222 in 2022, and 489484 in 2023. Therefore, Bagan has become the top tourism destination for both domestic and foreign tourists. Consequently, business related to tourism has been paving as main earning route for locals.

Aim and Objectives

The aim of this research is to explore the role of hand-painting art within the tourism sector in Bagan. The objectives of this research are to analyze the impact of tourism on hand-painting artists and to describe tourists' perceptions and preferences regarding hand-painting.

Literature Review

Tourism brings new life to destinations by attracting visitors who engage with customs, traditions, old skills, and crafts, thereby encouraging pride in the heritage and culture of a destination as it is re-evaluated (Cooper et al., 2008). Tourism also promotes the preservation of an area's cultural heritage, which includes archaeological and historical sites, traditional arts, crafts, dance, music, theater, rituals, ceremonies, and clothing (Inskip, 1991). Additionally, tourism can serve as a force for preserving and revitalizing host communities' cultural identities and traditional practices, while also acting as a source of income to conserve heritage sites (Easterling, 2004).

Tourism development can enhance a country's economy through numerous positive economic impacts. According to Easterling (2004), these positive economic impacts include the improvement of the standard of living, the creation of employment, and significant infrastructure expenditure. Economic impacts also contribute to increased local incomes, more employment opportunities, and stimulated investment (Sharpley, 2014). The development of tourism can influence people's habits, everyday routines, social life, and beliefs and values. The social and cultural impacts include the enhancement of local prestige, identity, and pride, shifts in traditional values, and the commercialization of culture (Andersson & Lundberg, 2013).

A tourist is defined as someone who travels to places outside of where he or she normally lives for the purpose of pleasure. Business tourists may visit these places for conferences, workshops, or further education. Private tourists may travel for adventure, recreation, education, pilgrimage, or other purposes (WTO, 1995). The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) stated that as tourists seek to collect souvenirs, arts, crafts, and cultural manifestations, craftsmen have responded to the growing demand by altering the designs of their products to better align with new customers' tastes. While the interest shown by tourists contributes to the sense of self-worth of the artists and helps preserve cultural traditions, cultural erosion may occur due to the commodification of cultural goods.

Research Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative research approach to examine hand-painting as a cultural tourism product in Bagan. The research was conducted in Bagan, Mandalay Region, a UNESCO World Heritage Site and one of Myanmar's major cultural tourism destinations. Data were collected through participant observation, individual interviews, and key informant interviews (KII). Participant observation was conducted at hand-painting stalls located near prominent pagodas and tourist sites in order to observe the interaction between artists and tourists and the practices involved in hand-painting activities. A total of 30 respondents participated in this study, including hand-painting artists and tourists who experienced the service. The respondents were selected through purposive sampling because they were directly involved in hand-painting activities. Fieldwork was carried out from April 2023 to May 2024. The collected data were analyzed using descriptive qualitative analysis in accordance with the research objectives, focusing on the impact of tourism on hand-painting artists and tourists' perceptions and preferences regarding hand-painting in Bagan.

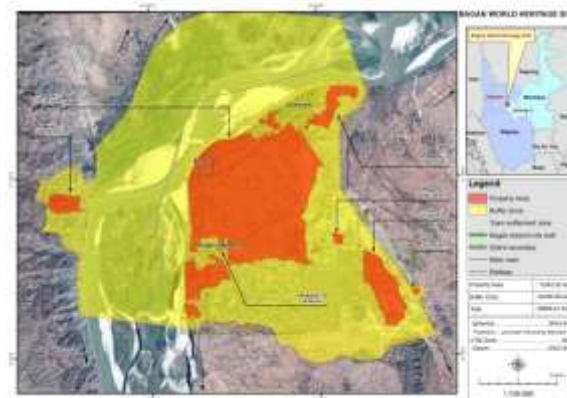


Figure 1. Bagan World Heritage Site

Source: Department of Archaeology and National Museum (Bagan branch)

Finding

Hand-paintings mean drawing painting on the skin by using colourful water-colour paints. The customers can choose the art they like. It is not like tattoo which cannot be disappeared. It is a temporary drawing which may disappear when exposing with water. It is durable for at least water without washing carefully with water. Hand painting stalls are opened under the shady trees near the famous pagodas in Bagan. Not only the local visitors but also the foreign tourists try the hand painting. However, being a product of creativity and freedom, hand painting artists are actors that create motifs which are not limited to certain type or characteristics. Local visitors and foreign tourists ask the artist to draw the mural arts found on the wall of ancient pagodas and floral arts on the forearm, on the back of the hand, on the fingers, on the arm and on the side of the neck. According to a hand-painting artist,

“While selling the lacquer-wears to the foreigners, floral arts designs are drawn for their children. When other visitors see it, they come and request to draw for them too. Then, people posted it on facebook. Then a lot of people get

to know about that and it become a business which gives the service of drawing the hand painting with some fee. It has been running for 6 years”.

According to him, the business of drawing hand painting started by drawing hand painting for the foreigners. Then it was well-known through Facebook.



Figure 2. Hand-painting designs

Source: Photo taken by the author

Both local visitors and foreign visitors try hand painting, so more business opportunities are created. Some run the hand painting individually or some do it together with friends. While doing it together with the friends, the collected money is divided equally. The stalls compete with each other to get more beautiful work. Besides, Myanmar traditional small puppets are hanged on the trees to attract more visitors. There are about 50-100 puppets which are hanged in each hand painting stall. Moreover, each stalls is decorated with fancy bullock cart, Pathain umbrellas and Swan Oak (large bowl with stand and cover for offering of food to monks). The general course for running a hand-painting stall is about 15 lakhs. According to a 25year-old female hand-painting artist,

“I started opening my stall with 10 puppets and 5 Pathein umbrellas. I live on a small amount of money and invest all the money both the capital and the interest into this stall. The tourists only take photos and draw hand-painting only when the stall is beautiful. The decoration on the brunches costs about 15 lakhs”.

According to the above utterance, it can be found out that hand-painting stalls use decoration and do some maintenance to attract the tourists.



Figure 3. Decorated Hand-painting stall

Source: Photo taken by the author

During the travel season and government holidays, the number of visitors increases, so do the customers who draw hand-painting. As hand-painting has become trendy, sand painters and wall-painting artists have also started to engage in this as a profession. In the vacation season and the pagoda festival season, hand-painting art services have to be provided non-stop. When that time, all family members have to do the painting without taking a rest. Hand-painting is better only with a passion for art and an interest in the work. The fee is charged depending to the design and the time duration to draw that design. While drawing hand-painting, painting the pictures of Kyan-Sit-Thar, the queen, prince and princess takes about 20-30 minutes and painting normal floral art will only take about 10 minutes. Since the beginning of 2023, instead of using colorful water-colors for painting, artists have started using paint bottles (henna) produced in India. The paint bottles (henna) come in only two colours: red and black. The paintings created with henna are also found to last longer than those made with water-colour paints. Depending on the design and the time taken, the fee is from 2000 kyats to 7000 kyats at most. During travel season and government holidays, the income of a hand-painting artist is about 100,000 kyats. When there are only a few visitors, their income is 20,000 kyats a day. A 38-year-old hand-painting artist shared how the incomes are allocated. He said,

“We, 5 friends, opened the stall together and draw hand-painting. If we get 100,000 kyats for drawing 5 customers, we allocated 20,000 for each. Then we recollect 1000 kyt or 2000 kyats for the materials. The materials are easy to get damaged. Pathein umbrella and puppet only last for over one year. If they get wet or exposure to sunlight, they can get old easily. We have to take care of these things since we can earn a living depending on these things. Sometimes, we need to save money to buy more materials”.

A 36-year-old hand-painting artist who changed his profession stated.

When creating a sand painting, it takes three days to complete a single normal painting. Since it involves intricate detailing, it requires focused attention and careful execution. The price of painting depends on its size. When creating hand-paintings, there is no need for detailed drawing, and the income is higher compared to creating sand paintings. In addition, since the work involves direct interaction with visitors, it also provides opportunities to gain new knowledge. In the field of social relationships, the number of acquaintances also increases.

According to their utterance, hand-painting has become popular among the tourists, and the artists have high income for their living. Through their work, artists generate additional income, which supports their livelihoods while preserving traditional art forms. This not only enhances their financial stability but also contributes to the sustainability of local cultural heritage. Moreover, the rapport can be built between the visitors and the artists since they have direct interaction.



Figure 4. Hand-painting artist

Source: Photo taken by the author

Hand-painting not only provides income for the artists but has also become a symbol for visitors coming to Bagan. Tourists visiting Bagan often draw beautiful hand-painting designs on their hands and take commemorative photos, which has become a modern trend in Bagan. Domestic travelers tend to engage in hand-painting more than international tourists. Tourists predominantly paint hand designs inspired by ancient temple murals and floral patterns from the Bagan era. A 27-year-old woman explained.

"Hand painting can only be done when I visit Bagan. As Myanmar people say that if you're a Myanmar, you must have been to Bagan. It's an absolute joy to have the privilege of drawing the traditional kanote designs from the Bagan era on my hand. When I take a photo of my painted hand and post it on social media, everyone who sees it knows that I'm in Bagan."

Additionally, according to the statement of a 33-year-old man,

"In other cultures, hand-painting is typically done only by girls during weddings, "henna night" ritual or religious festivals. However, the hand-painting done in Bagan is not a traditional custom but is portrayed as an art form and a memorable experience. Both men and women can participate in it. While experiencing the painting, one is reminded of the high cultural standards of the Bagan era. It allows people to experience the blend of traditional culture and beautiful art. It gives a sense of fully immersing oneself in the beauty of Bagan."

According to the above statements, the hand-painting designs that have emerged in Bagan, based on ancient wall murals, not only appear to revive traditional art on the hand but also provide a sense of peace to visiting tourists. Additionally, since hand-painting can be done by anyone regardless of gender, it has become a popular and renowned artistic souvenir for Bagan tours.

Tourists' appreciation for hand-painting arises from the ability to personally experience Myanmar's cultural art and take it home as a keepsake. For tourists who visit with a strong curiosity and desire to explore, hand-painting has become a valuable artistic souvenir from their trip to Bagan. Additionally, hand-painting is an art form that introduces the beauty of Myanmar's traditional culture to the world. Travelers also regard the opportunity to personally engage with

traditional art as an invaluable keepsake. It has been found that experiencing hand-painting in conjunction with a tour of Bagan greatly enhances travellers' satisfaction.



Figure 5: Hand-painting artist and tourists

Source: Photo taken by the author

Discussion

Tourism plays a vital role in breathing new life into the customs, traditions, and cultural practices of a destination, as noted by Cooper et al. (2008). By attracting visitors, tourism helps to re-evaluate and rejuvenate heritage, fostering pride among local communities. This is evident in Bagan, where the traditional art of hand-painting has gained popularity among both local and foreign tourists, leading to resurgence in the appreciation of ancient designs inspired by temple murals and traditional floral patterns. Such practices not only generate income for the artists but also act as symbols of cultural identity for visitors, making them feel more connected to Myanmar's rich heritage.

According to Inskeep (1991), tourism can significantly contribute to the preservation of an area's cultural heritage. In Bagan, this is particularly true as hand-painting stalls, adorned with traditional decorations like Patheingyi umbrellas and puppets, attract tourists and encourage them to engage with the local art. The commercialization of hand-painting, as seen in Bagan, provides artists with a steady source of income, allowing them to preserve and maintain their craft. The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) similarly highlights how the demand for cultural souvenirs such as hand-paintings fosters a sense of pride among artists while preserving the tradition. However, there is also the risk of cultural commodification, where the art may shift to meet tourist preferences, potentially eroding its original cultural significance.

Easterling (2004) emphasizes that tourism can be a driving force for economic growth by generating employment, increasing local income, and encouraging infrastructure investment. In Bagan, hand-painting stalls provide job opportunities for local artists and serve as small businesses, where profits are shared among artists. The business has now become a profitable venture due to the increasing interest from tourists, with incomes rising during peak travel seasons and festival times.

Sharpley (2014) expands on tourism's economic benefits, noting that tourism development can improve the standard of living and stimulate local investment. Hand-painting, which started with simple floral designs for tourists' children, has now grown into a well-known business, with tourists paying fees ranging from 2000 to 7000 kyats per design, depending on the design and the time taken. The shift from watercolors to more durable materials such as henna reflects the evolving nature of this art to meet tourist expectations while maintaining its artistic integrity.

Culturally, tourism in Bagan has led to the blending of ancient traditions with modern practices. Andersson and Lundberg (2013) highlight how tourism can enhance local prestige and foster pride in cultural identity. In Bagan, hand-painting, which was traditionally limited to women in wedding or religious ceremonies in other cultures, has been embraced as an inclusive art form that can be enjoyed by everyone. The experience of hand-painting in Bagan allows visitors to immerse themselves in the high cultural standards of the Bagan era, bridging the past with the present. Moreover, hand-painting provides visitors with a tangible connection to Myanmar's cultural heritage. Hand-painting in Bagan is more than just a temporary art form; it is a way to engage deeply with the country's traditional culture, making the experience both meaningful and memorable. For tourists, having their hands painted with floral patterns from the Bagan era, which they can take home as a keepsake of their cultural immersion. By offering visitors the chance to participate in traditional art, tourism creates a deeper connection between the destination and its cultural roots, while also generating income for local artists. The rise of hand-painting as a tourist attraction in Bagan underscores the broader influence of tourism in reviving and maintaining cultural practices, making it an essential element in both cultural conservation and economic development.

Conclusion

In conclusion, tourism plays a significant role in shaping and promoting local culture and identity while providing substantial economic benefits. As a "smokeless industry," tourism offers opportunities for employment, investment, and income generation, benefiting both local communities and national economies. In destinations like Bagan, where cultural heritage and tourism intersect, new forms of tourism products, such as hand-painting art, have emerged.

The popularity of hand-painting among tourists has led to the creation of a thriving industry, offering artists an additional source of income and fostering direct interactions between tourists and local artisans. The fusion of traditional Bagan-era mural art with modern hand-painting techniques has captivated both domestic and international visitors, enhancing their travel experience and providing them with memorable souvenirs. Hand-painting has not only contributed to the preservation of cultural art forms but has also become a symbol of the tourist experience in Bagan, allowing visitors to engage with Myanmar's cultural heritage in a personal and meaningful way.

As tourism continues to grow in Bagan, the hand-painting industry will likely expand, further integrating art with tourism and solidifying its place as a unique cultural offering. Through this synergy between tourism and culture, hand-painting serves as a testament to how creative expressions can contribute to the cultural and economic vitality of a destination, enriching both the lives of tourists and the livelihoods of local communities. By promoting sustainability, this integration not only safeguards Bagan's artistic heritage but also ensures its lasting benefits for future generations, striking a balance between preserving culture and fostering economic growth.

Acknowledgements

I am so much indebted to Dr. Sandar Win, professor, Department of Anthropology, University of Yangon, for her permission to make this research. Moreover, I would like to express my sincere thanks to Dr. Thida, Lecturer, Department of Anthropology, Yadanabon University, for her invaluable guidance and help. Finally, I would like to express my gratitude to my family and friends for their constant support and encouragement throughout this journey.

References

- Cooper, C., Fletcher, J., Fyall, A., Gilbert, D., & Wanhill, S., (2008) *Tourism Principles and Practice* (4th ed.). Harlow Pearson Education Limited.
- Easterling, D. S., (2004) "The resident's perspective in tourism research" *Journal of Travel and Tourism Marketing*, 17, 45-62.
- Inskeep, E., (1991) *Tourism Planning: An Integrated and Sustainable Development Approach*. John Wiley & Sons.
- Richards, Greg, (1996) "Production and Consumption of European Cultural Tourism" *Annals of Tourism Research*, Tillburg University.
- Schouten, W.R., Briel, W.J., Auwerda, J.J. and de Graff, E.J., (1996) "Ischemic Nature of Anal Fissure" *British Journal of Surgery*, 83, 63-65.
- Sharples, R., (2014) "Host perceptions of Tourism: A Review of the Research" *Tourism Management*, 42, 37-49. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tourman.2013.10.007>.
- Tommy D. Andersson and Erik Lundberg, (2013) "Commensurability and sustainability: Triple impact assessments of a tourism event" *Tourism Management*, vol. 37, issue C, 99-109 <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tourman.2012.12.015>.
- United Nations Environment Programme, (2001) "Economic Impacts of Tourism" *Industry and Environment*, 24 (3-4), p.7 Available from: <https://www.unep.org>.
- World Tourism Organization, (1995) "UNWTO technical manual: Collection of Tourism Expenditure Statistics" (PDF). P.10 Retrieved 26 March 2009.