

Aung Khaing and his lifelong love for Modern Art

I was born on 16th December 1945, in Dabein village. Yangon. My parents are U Tun Aung and Daw Khin Kyi. When I got to university I got a chance to make illustrations for different annual university magazines. Myo Nyunt (architect) and I have been friends since primary school and we have gone to many different art exhibitions because we are both crazy about art. One day he took me to Kin Maung Yin's house and from that day on I had more opportunities to learn about crazy western art through Kin Maung Yin's and Myo Nyunt's books.

As western art was similar to my artwork, it was really interesting and an encouragement to me; especially as my teachers disliked my work as I painted a lot of deformed images. In 1964 I also started to copy the works of Bagyi Aung Soe and sketches of Maung Ngwe Tun from a book; as their artwork was similar to mine. I showed my work to Khin Maung Yin, also known as Swe Set who was also a film director. He said they couldn't use my artwork for their magazines; but he then continued to say that he'd take me to see Paw Oo Thett's place, 555 Gallery on Merchant Road, where Paw Oo That and Ko Shwe Oung Thame had a gallery. At that time Lokanat Galleries was not yet established. As soon as Paw Oo Thett saw me, he took my hand and looked at my palm. Whilst looking at my said you are most welcome to work here, "please come here always" Paw Oo Thett didn't teach me anything, but we would go to many places together and I would have a chance to listen to him having conversations with other interesting people. I wanted him to teach and me something, but he didn't. I would be so happy to work on his paintings, I would mostly do the colouring on his unfinished artwork. It was also a great chance for me because I couldn't, at that time, even afford to buy paints. As I was there so often I started to become friends with more artists.

I also remembered another thing that Ko Shwe Oung Thame said in 555 Gallery, "Aung Khaing, why do you need to come to learn? Why don't you paint yourself? What do you want to learn from here?" I replied I want to learn about modern art. He replied "Aung Khing, you don't need to learn about it, but you have to paint it. For example, take a ladder, stand on it, climb up it and jump off it. that is modern." It was then that I understood that modern is not something that you must learn, but something that you have to do. I really respected this advice. I also started to understand that if I am just hanging out with other people without doing anything or creating anything, then nothing will happen.

Paw Oo Thett knew that he couldn't teach me because Bagyi Aung Soe had already had a heavy influence on me. Even so he would still give me critical suggestions about my artwork. For example, he would highlight when the comb that I painted were bigger than they needed to be. Whenever he talked it would always be about the philosophy of art. I was always happy to listen and learn from his philosophies, but style would never influence me.

Although I love realistic paintings, I don't know how to paint realism and I've always wanted to paint in a modern style. I have wanted to make modern art since 1969. Although I was working with them, all I wanted to do was very strong modern art. After a few years, I found other companions who were also interested in modern art like San Minn, Zaw Lu Min, Maung Theid Dhi and more. They created and spread modern art around university. I would help them when they needed help and I would participate in their shows.

In February 1973 I started exhibiting my work in an exhibition called "Rainbow" with other artists I had the opportunity to show my work, even though it was difficult to exhibit our work at that time, because of my uncle, ICS U Hla Shein, who was a friend of U Ngwe Gaing. In March 1973 I showed my works in a modern artwork exhibition called "Summer" at Lokanat Galleries. In 1974 I showed my work in another modern artwork exhibition called "Wild Eye" at Dome. We wanted more people to know about modern art so we created a modern art movement and continued to organize modern art shows with different exhibitions like "Century Tower", "New Step" and "Period".

Although I have had the chance to show my work in more than 20 group exhibitions, I have not yet done any solo exhibitions. In 1984 I tried to organize a solo exhibition at Art and Artist Association in Bogyoke market as San Minn said he would sponsor me, but unfortunately it never happened as the censorship board rejected nearly all of my 120 paintings.

There are many local artists that I like, but my favourite ones are Bayin Kalay, Maung Ngwe Tun, Bagyi Aung Soe, Khin Maung Yin, Paw Oo Thett and Win Pe. Their styles are very similar to mine. I like their artwork because their styles are so free and they don't really follow my theories. My favourite international artists are Vincent van Gogh, Pablo Picasso, Paul Gauguin, Matisse, Modigliani, Jackson Pollock and William De Kooning.

I want to more creation on traditional themes on my own and want to have my own style. I have more than 40,000 sketched.