

The Most Common Decorative Motif in Bagan Temples: Lotus

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Abstract

Bagan temples were decorated with various lotus designs. They are carved out of the bricks, stucco, stone and glaze on exterior and interior walls of the temples. Lotus are used for ornamentation with different purposes as it has many historical backgrounds connected to the history of Buddhism. As it is carved as offerings to the Lord Buddha, lotus flowers are used to decorate on many parts of temples from the base of the main body up to the finial. Lotus are artistically and elaborately designed for the exterior decoration of Bagan temples. This paper will present the designs and styles of the lotus motifs used as the exterior decorations at some temples of Bagan period.

Keywords: Lotus, motif, decoration, stucco, ornamentation

Introduction

Every temple in Bagan, big or small, was ornamented with interior and exterior stucco motifs. Although the exterior decorations of the temples seem to be the same, they are different in design and style. It can be seen that from the base of the main body up to the finial just above the square-tower of the temples are richly decorated with stucco motifs and mythical creatures. The use of motifs depends on different backgrounds and purposes. As the lotus flowers are common motif of the temples, they are decorated on the parts of the temple from base of the main body up to the finial. Among the motifs decorated as the exterior decoration, the lotus motif is decorated in various designs. They are carved in various designs not only on the exterior walls of the main body and pillars but also in the perforated windows.

Symbolism of the lotus flower in different beliefs

It is known, according to the literary source, that ancient Egyptians started to use the symbol of lotus flowers with the spiritual purposes. According to their belief, lotus means spiritual flower and also the beauty of transcendency. Its roots symbolize eternity and its stalk, the umbilical cord, which links human to his origin and its flower, sun lights.² It can be found the capitals of the Egyptian temples were decorated with lotus, carved in the form of bud or in bloom or sometimes in the form of bell (Figure1).

Lotus was regarded as an important flower in the ancient East. During the 8th century BC, the custom of using the lotus motifs was moved from Egypt into Phoenicians and then to Mesopotamia and Iran. The Phoenicians goddess holding lotus symbolizes the creation power. According to Assyrian-Phoenician and in Greek-Roman, lotus refers to a burial and funeral

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² Pedram Rezaia, "Symbol of lotus in ancient word", *Life Science Journal*, 2011; 8 (3), p.309

ceremony and resurgence and eternity life.³ The symbol of lotus came into India and custom of Buddhists from Iran. In India, lotus is accepted as the representation of the sun. In the India culture, lotus is growing in water and mud but is not affected by water and mud. In the same way, humans, while being alive, should not enjoy doing bad things. Hundreds of petals in a lotus refer to thousands of religious sects, castes and sub-castes, language and dialects etc., even though it is the one whole.⁴

In Buddhism, the Buddha, who is free from mental defilements, is compared to lotus flower which is free from “mud and water”. Therefore, lotus flowers also refer to a person free from mental defilements or in purity.⁵ Moreover, by looking at the number of lotus flowers blossomed at the formation of the earth, refers to the number of Buddhas to be enlightened in that world. For example, as there were five lotus flowers at the formation of this world (Bhadda Kappa), five Buddhas are to be enlightened.⁶

In Buddhism, it is believed that lotus relates to the previous lives of the Boddhisattva (the Buddha-to-be). For example, the Boddhisattva in the life of the hermit Sumedha, together with the future Yasodhaya, made an offering with lotus flowers in the presence of the *Dipaṅkara* Buddha to fulfill perfections to be a Buddha. And therefore, it is accepted that when the newly-born Boddhisattva took seven steps, there are lotus flowers appeared underneath his feet. In addition, just before the Buddha preached the Dhammacakka, the symbol of the lotus grows in the mud and when the Buddha preached the Dhamma, he was sitting on the lotus throne.⁷ Therefore, the lotus is regarded as a sacred flower in Buddhism. Consequently, lotus flowers, buds, stalk and petals are carved as exterior decorations in the temples and stupas.

Lotus Motifs of the temples in the Early, Middle and Late Bagan Periods

Lotus used as a sacred flower by ancient people by their beliefs is an essential motif of Early Bagan Period temples. However, as there were almost all stucco works flaked off at some early Bagan period temples, the presence of lotus motifs cannot be estimated. For example, in the Nat-hlaung temple, the remnants of upturn and downturn lotus flowers are still found below the crenellation of the upper receding terrace although they are very thin, and not clearly outlined (Figure 2). At the Abeyadanar and Nanphaya temples, which are Early Bagan period temples, the perforated windows are decorated with lotus motifs in various designs. There are two designs of lotus motifs in the perforated windows of the Abeyadanar temple. One is the four-petal lotus inside the rhombuses and the other is the one with the petals surrounding a hole shaped like a stigma (Figure 3.a, b). In the perforated windows of the Nan-phaya temple, the lotus motifs are placed in the rhombuses in such away as those of the Abeyadana temple (Figure 4). However, they are made of stone and more elaborately carved. The fully-bloomed lotus flowers are found on the lintels of the perforated windows (Figure 5). Moreover, rimmed

³ Pedram Rezanian, “Symbol of lotus in ancient word”, *Life Science Journal*, 2011; 8(3), p.310

⁴ *Symbols of Indian Culture*, Delhi, Ocean Books (P) Ltd, 2000, p.7

⁵ Maung Maung Thiri, *Notes of the Basic Methods of Myanmar Studies*, Department of Archaeology and Museum, December 2018, p. 4

⁶ Dr. Saw Mra Aung, *Thaton Chronicle*, Yangon, Shwe Myot Taw Press, 2016, p. 4

⁷ U Myo Nyunt, *Architectural and Artistic Works of Bagan Pagodas and Temples*, Yangon, Yaung Sin Press, 1st Edition, December 1999, pp. 108-111

lotus petals are carved serially on the pediments of the perforated windows. Long lotus-petals are carved in the manner of the heaving the pediments above (Figure 6). The lotus buds from friezes are decorated on the walls of the temple (Figure 7). Therefore, it is known that the lotus motifs carved with stone and stucco are famous ornamentations of the perforated windows of the temples of the Early Bagan period.

During the 12th century AD, the lotus motifs were used more widely at the temples. At the Wetkyi-in Gubyauk nge temple and the Myae-bon-tha-phaya-hla temple, the stucco lotus motifs are richly ornamented for the whole temple. Up turn and down turn lotus motifs are carved above the cornices of the main body of those temples (Figure 8, (a) (b)). It can be known that the upturn lotus flowers refer to being fresh and downturn lotus flowers being withered. Large fully-bloomed double-layered upturn and downturn lotus flowers are carved at the pilaster cornice of the main body (Figure 9). It can be regarded that the upturn and downturn lotus flowers imply the temple on lotus flowers.

Above the projected bands around the main body of the Wetkyi-in Gubyauk nge temple are decorated with upheaving lotus flowers. There are two designs; one is single-layered upheaving lotus flowers and the other, which is above the former, is a double-layered one (Figure 10). In Sulamani temple, the upheaving lotus flowers are longer than those at the Wetkyi-in Gubyauk nge temple (Figure 11).

The decoration of the pillars in the corner of the main body is also very important. Lotus motifs are carved in the middle of the pillars. Some flowers have angular-shaped petals and some have circular-shaped ones (Figure 12). At the Sulamani temple, lotus flowers in green and yellow glaze are found on the cornices around the main body (Figure 13). Moreover, lotus flowers are half carved on some lintels and receding terraces of the back drops (Figure 14).

Similar to the use of lotus flowers, lotus buds are also important in ornamenting friezes and pediments. Lotus buds are essential decoration of the pediments of the entrance to the temple (Figure 15). The artistic works of the lotus buds in the middle Bagan period temple are slender, in higher relief and more elaborated than those of the early Bagan period temples like Nan-phaya temple (Figure 16).

As at the 12th century Bagan period temples, the lotus motifs are carved richly and elaborately at the 13th century Bagan temples. The cavetto mouldings at the base of the Hti-lo-min-lo temple are decorated with the lotus motifs (Figure 17). The recesses of the base of the main body of the 13th century temples are decorated with the four angular-shaped petals lotus flowers or circular-shaped petals lotus flowers (Figure 18).

The atmortizements (decoration of the corner-pillars) of the main body of 13th century are more richly ornamented with the lotus motifs. The upper part and the lower part of the pillars at the Hti-lo-min-lo, Thakya-muni and Ta-yok-pyae temples are decorated with ogre-heads with lotus motifs in their mouths, having lotus stalk and lotus coils etc, hanging down (Figure 19). The lotus motifs in the middle of the pillars of the late Bagan period temples are similar to those of the 12th century Bagan period temples. However, they are beautified with more floral designs and roles of beads.

The designs of the heaving lotus motifs of the Late Bagan period are similar to those of the middle Bagan period. The style of the heaving lotus motifs at the Myi-ka-bar Gubyauk nge are still used at the Tha-kya-muni, Ta-yok-pyae and Kon-daw-gyi temples (Figure 20). The design of long heaving lotus petals at the Sulamani temple are also still in use at the Hti-lo-min-lo temple but there are smaller petals embedded the larger petals (Figure 21).

The flaming pediments are more beautifully decorated with lotus buds at Hti-lo-min-lo, Ta-yok-pyae and Tha-kya-muni temples. The lotus buds in the flaming pediments of Hti-lo-min-lo temple are ornamented with deva figures (Figure 22). The lower parts of the flaming pediments are decorated with the lotus flowers on which small mythical birds standing (Figure 23). The flaming pediments of the Ta-yok-pyae temple are elaborately decorated with lotus floral designs. The lotus flowers are placed underneath the seated deva figures on the banana buds of the pediments (Figure 24).

In the 13th century Bagan temples, the upturn and downturn lotus flowers are in lower relief than those of the middle Bagan period temples. Upturn and downturn lotus flowers are vaguely outlined on the stucco slap of Kon-daw-gyi temple (Figure 25). Even Ta-yok-pyae temple, which is known for its artistic works, although up turn and down turn lotus flowers are in high relief, does not bear the tender and supple appearance like those of Wetkyi-in Gubyauk nge temple and Myae-bon-tha-pha-ya-hla temple (Figure 26).

One significant feature is that the friezes at the temple No. 357, Tha-Kya-muni and Ta-yok-pyae temples are connected with strings of lotus petals and beads (Figure 27). Hanging lotus buds at the friezes of the Late Bagan period temples are the same as those of the Early Bagan period temples. Although they are not as thick as those of Early Bagan period temples they are carved proportionately and elaborately.

Conclusion

It can be concluded the Early Bagan period temples have fewer lotus motifs on the main body. However, it found that the only perforated windows and their flaming pediments are decorated with lotus flowers. During the 12th century AD, the styles of decorations changed as the temples were ornamented with more lotus motifs designs. They became more artistic, more elaborately carved and in higher relief. Moreover, they began bearing a tenderer and supple appearance. The 13th century Bagan temple became more intricately and richly ornamented with lotus motifs of various designs, although some maintaining style of the Middle Bagan period. However, although their reliefs were lower, they became more proportionate and elaborate.

It can be assumed that the use of that use of lotus flowers as a sacred motif at the exterior and interior walls of the Bagan temples is just to venerate the Lord Buddha whose lives and Dhamma are much related to the lotus flowers and the Bagan artists might be motivated by their great devotion to Buddhism to innovate more various lotus motifs designs in ornamenting the temples.



Figure (1) Capital of Egyptian temple,
Source: Rezania, 2011;8(3):309-312.

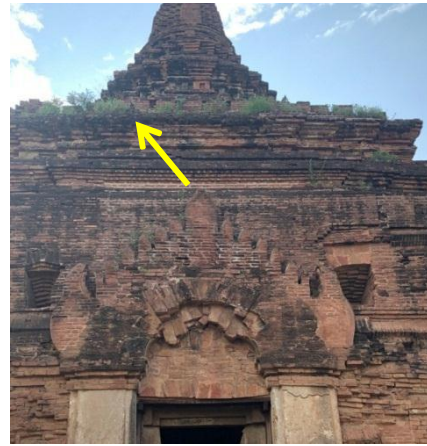


Figure (2) Upturn and down turn lotus motifs at Nat-hlaung temple



Figure 3 (a) Four petals lotus flowers inside the rhombuses at perforated windows of Abeyadana temple



Figure 3 (b) Circular-shaped lotus flowers at perforated windows of Abeyadana temple



Figure (4) Lotus motifs on the perforate window at the Nan-phaya temple



Figure (5) Fully-bloomed lotus motifs on the perforate window at the Nan-phaya temple



Figure (6) Long lotus petals at the perforate window of the Nan-phaya temple



Figure (7) Hanging lotus buds at the Nan-phaya temple



Figure 8 (a) Upturn and downturn lotus motifs at the Wetkyi-in Gu byauk nge temple



Figure 8(b) Upturn and downturn lotus motifs at the Myae-bon-tha-phaya-hla temple



Figure (9) Fully-bloomed lotus motifs at the Wetkyi-in Gu byauk nge temple



Figure (10) Heaving lotus petals at the Wetkyi-in Gu byauk nge temple

Photo by researcher



Figure (11) Heaving lotus petals at the Sulamani temple



Figure (12) Lotus motifs in the middle of the pillars of the Middle Bagan period



Figure (13) Lotus flowers with green and yellow glaze at the Sulamani temple



Figure (14) Half-carved lotus flowers in the Middle Bagan period

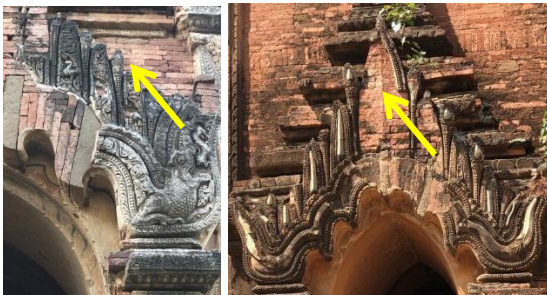


Figure (15) Lotus buds between the flaming pediments at the 12th century Bagan temples



Figure (16) Hanging lotus buds at the friezes in the 12th century Bagan temples



Figure (17) Lotus petals cover on the cavetto mouldings at the Hti-lo-min-lo temple of 13th century Bagan period



Figure (18) Lotus flowers on the recesses of the 13th century Bagan period

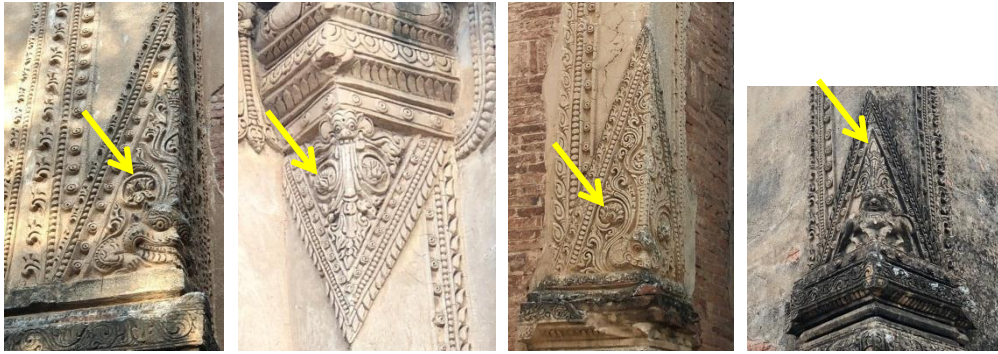


Figure (19) Lotus flowers above the ogre head at the 13th century Bagan period temples



Tha-kya-muni temple



Ta-yok-pyae temple



Kon-daw-gyi temple

Figure (20) Heaving lotus petals at the 13th century Bagan period temples



Figure (21) Heaving lotus petals at the Hti-lo-min-lo temple



Figure (22) Lotus bud among the flaming pediments decorated with deva figure at the Hti-lo-min-lo temple

Photo by researcher



Figure (23) Lotus flowers with small bird on the flaming pediments at the Hti-lo-min-lo temple

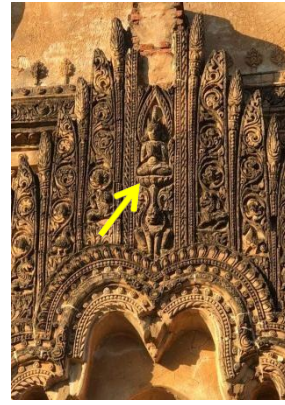


Figure (24) Lotus floral designs, lotus buds and lotus flower below the deva at the pediments of the Ta-yok-pyae temple



Figure (25) Upturn and downturn lotus motifs at the Kon-daw-gyi temple

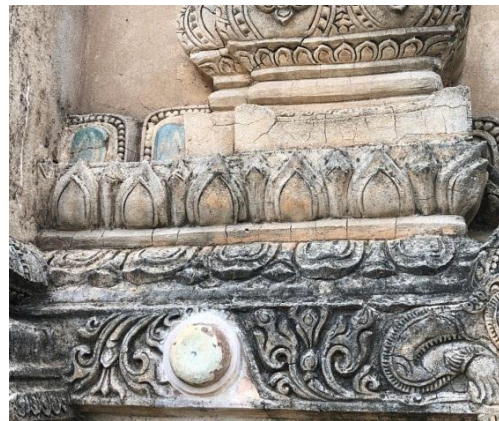


Figure (26) Upturn and downturn lotus motifs at the Ta-yok-pyae temple



Temple No. 357



Tha-kyamuni temple



Ta-yok-pyae temple

Figure (27) Strings of lotus petals at the 13th century Bagan period temples

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