

# A Conversation About U Win Pe

January 26, 2026|U Win Pe



Chris Dodge with U Win Pe at his studio, 2023, Washington DC

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*Interview by U Hlaing Bwa with Chris Dodge of BurmaModernArt.com*

### **U Hlaing Bwa:**

Chris, you are well known among artists and collectors of Myanmar art. How did your interest in Myanmar and its artists first begin?

### **Chris Dodge:**

It was serendipity, really. I had just built a large house and needed art for the walls. My mother used to take us kids to art galleries and museums—she's the one who sparked my interest in art and collecting. My degree is in history, and I lean toward social and cultural history. Art and artists are part of that story.

I'd always wanted to collect art and do biographical interviews, but trying to do it in the U.S. seemed overwhelming. I've traveled all over the world, and later in life I became captivated by Asian culture—it's so different from the Americas or Europe.

80% of life is just showing up. In 2004, I went to Vietnam, spent time in the galleries, and bought a couple of paintings. I liked the country and the people,

but the art scene never really clicked for me. Then, in 2006, I went to Myanmar as a tourist with a friend. I didn't have any grand plan—just did the usual tourist things. But I was taken with Yangon as a city. I've been to many places, but walking the streets of downtown Yangon was probably the most diverse experience I've ever had.

Again, I went to the art galleries. At one gallery I met an American collector who helped me get started. I came back the next year, visiting more galleries and artists. In those early days I had a couple of mentors in Yangon who taught me about the history of painting in Myanmar. I bought some paintings, but I had no idea what I was doing. It was obvious—and people took pity on me! They helped by introducing me to other collectors, gallerists, and dealers. I'd sit with them in their galleries or homes, drinking tea or having lunch, and learning from them.

Around that time, I also met a few British collectors. One of them was Robert Thornhill, who lived in Bangkok—I think U Tin Win introduced us. Robert was a wonderful man, and we became good friends. He knew many people in the Myanmar art world. I would stop to see him in Bangkok on my way to or from Yangon. We'd have dinner and trade stories. He also introduced me to Andrew Ranard, who was then working on his book *Burmese Painting*. Later, Andrew and I exchanged many emails. Robert passed away in 2017, and I still miss him.

### **U Hlaing Bwa:**

How did you first encounter the art of U Win Pe?

### **Chris Dodge:**

After I had gotten some education about Myanmar art history, I was at a well-known gallery. The owner—one of my mentors and my best Myanmar friend—took me upstairs to see his NFS gallery, really his private museum of best works. Most were “old masters.” As we walked around the room, he told me about the works and the artists.

I remember very clearly when we came to an old Win Pe watercolor landscape on paper. It was falling apart because of the climate and age, but it was beautiful. I told him I liked it a lot. He also had a small Win Pe oil of a bird—now I know it as a classic Win Pe subject. I liked the humor in that bird

painting. But it was the watercolor landscape that really captured me, and I told him so.

He said, "Win Pe left the country in 1994 and now lives in America."

"Where?" I asked.

"Near Washington, D.C., I think," he said. (Win Pe was working at Radio Free Asia then.)

I told him I would look him up when I got back to the U.S.—and I did, as soon as I got home. I called Win Pe out of the blue and told him I liked his art and asked if I could come see him. He was amused that I was interested but agreed. He lived about twenty minutes from my house, and I went out to see him. This was 2008.

**U Hlaing Bwa:**

What was your first impression of him?

**Chris Dodge:**

He was welcoming and open-spirited, curious, informal, and humble—very gracious and gentlemanly. Actually, in my experience, Win Pe is always the same. He has a strong, admirable character and is very straightforward.

Early on I could see he was an intellectual. He enjoyed analyzing the world around him. His English was very good. Right away we had a strong connection. Our friendship developed deeply for several years before he returned to Yangon. Even after no contact for ten years, when he came back to the U.S. during COVID, we immediately reconnected as intimate friends again.

**U Hlaing Bwa:**

How did your connection and friendship become so strong?

**Chris Dodge:**

I went to see him regularly—at least once a month. We'd sit in his living room and talk, or go to a buffet restaurant near his house called the Bamboo Garden. We'd eat, then sit for hours drinking tea, with me asking questions and him telling me about the old days with Paw Oo Thett and Kin Maung Yin in

Yangon; about his family and childhood in Mandalay; about listening to Louis Armstrong on BBC and VOA radio; about his teachers U Ba Thet and U Kin Maung (Bank); about living at the monastery at Sagaing Hill during World War II; about the oppressive days of British colonialism; about deciding to become a film director; and funny stories about getting all his friends to act in his movies—including Bagyi Aung Soe and Kin Maung Yin—and the parties they'd have in the streets of Yangon while filming.

Later Win Pe introduced me to Paw Thame, who was living in Texas. They had an incredibly close relationship. Win Pe was father, uncle, mentor, friend, and colleague to Paw Thame, but he also admired Paw Thame's enormous creativity and fearless art. We spent a lot of time talking about Peacock Gallery.

I would take notes in notebooks—often on scores of napkins—which I still have.

**U Hlaing Bwa:**

How did you come to be interested in telling Win Pe's story from America?

**Chris Dodge:**

Early on, I don't remember what I said exactly, but something about wanting to interview him or record a video. I dreamed of recording the stories he told me—planning a video to show in America, but also hoping someday to get those stories back to Myanmar for the benefit of scholars and writers like you, and for the art community and regular people. Everybody loves stories.

While I had no qualifications, I saw an opportunity. Here was the giant of Myanmar culture! Myanmar was a world away, but his house was only twenty minutes from mine. He would introduce me by saying, "This is Chris Dodge; he is my biographer," with a twinkle in his eye—classic Win Pe, with his dry, whimsical humor.

**U Hlaing Bwa:**

Why did you decide to collect Win Pe's art?

**Chris Dodge:**

I really liked his art, and I believed in him. I started buying his paintings regularly—every month, really—partly to encourage him to paint full-time again.

He wasn't painting much when I met him; he had been very busy at RFA for years as a writer and editor. He called himself a "Sunday painter." When I met him, he also had a popular radio program on BBC, which aired weekly in Myanmar on Sunday afternoons, called *Win Pe's Mailbag*.

I took a dozen watercolors to galleries in Washington, Bangkok, Singapore, and Hong Kong and asked them to take on Win Pe and promote him. The gallerists all praised the quality of his work but said they were busy with their current artists. The last one, Jorn Middelborg of Thavibu Gallery, said, "Why don't you promote him?"

After a while, I guess that idea started to take hold. It was a big commitment—financially and in effort. I needed to do some due diligence. So on my next trip to Yangon, I took some of his works to show collectors and artists. I was stunned by the reaction. People were thrilled—almost reverent. That's when I realized what foreign dealers had missed: in Myanmar, U Win Pe is not just a painter. He is a cultural monument.

He also gave me letters of introduction to his friends in Yangon. They graciously let me see their collections. Everyone—artists and dealers—encouraged me.

**U Hlaing Bwa:**

Which medium that Win Pe uses do you like best?

**Chris Dodge:**

For me, his masterpiece watercolor landscapes are among the most beautiful works of art ever painted—it's like God painted them.

After watercolor, I like his oils. In later years, he's mostly used acrylics. Though his hand isn't as steady as it once was, he hasn't lost anything as an artist or creator. He's constantly reinventing himself, and I really admire that.

**U Hlaing Bwa:**

Why didn't you sell his art in the U.S.?

**Chris Dodge:**

I did, and it was well received—but then the Financial Crisis hit, and that knocked the art market back for years. Also, I don't think I was a good gallerist. I like to buy art, support artists, and promote them. Only recently have I learned to be a dealer, which takes a different skill set than being a gallerist.

Now we're contacting museums around the world to place the works of Win Pe and Paw Thame, and to have them tell the story of the advent of modern art in Myanmar—particularly the Peacock Gallery. We've gotten a good reception in Asia. Both artists are also Americans, so we're confident we can place their works in U.S. museums as well.

I've been lucky—I went to the other side of the world to collect Myanmar art and ended up collecting art by two of Myanmar's greatest artists living in the United States. It's an honor and a sacred obligation to tell the stories they shared with me and to place their art with the most appropriate collections, especially in Myanmar.

**U Hlaing Bwa:**

How do you see his legacy now, in 2025?

**Chris Dodge:**

Andrew Ranard told me he thought Win Pe's watercolors were as good as Dong Kingman's, who influenced him. But of course, Win Pe is much more than a painter. He has excelled as a film director, writer, cartoonist, musician, and public intellectual.

I believe Win Pe is the most important figure in Myanmar's artistic and cultural history of the last hundred years. He is Myanmar.

**U Hlaing Bwa:**

Thank you, Chris.

**Chris Dodge:**

Thank you, U Hlaing Bwa. It has been a pleasure to speak about my friend.



Hlaing Bwa, Win Pe and Paw Thame Biographer

*The following interview was conducted with U Hlaing Bwa, whose deep research into the pioneers of Myanmar's modern art movement provides invaluable context for collectors and historians alike.*

## About the Author

**Hlaing Bwa** is a distinguished artist and art historian born on August 18, 1973, in Seikkun Village, Shwebo Township, Sagaing Division. He earned his Bachelor of Arts in Painting from the National University of Arts and Culture, Yangon.

As a practicing artist, he has held two solo exhibitions and participated in numerous group shows across Yangon. Beyond the canvas, Hlaing Bwa is one of Myanmar's most dedicated chroniclers of modern art. He has authored and published influential monographs on the lives and works of seminal artists **Paw Thame, Tin Maung Oo, and Kyee Myint Saw**.

He is the author of ***The Life and Work of Paw Thame (2016)***

His most recent publication, ***Win Pe: Painting with Sound, Singing in Color***, continues his essential work in documenting the evolution of Myanmar's modern masters. He currently lives and works in Yangon, Myanmar.