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## Myanmar prison art tells story of repression



A visitor looking at paintings by Myanmar artist Htein Lin during an exhibition at a hotel in Yangon. Painted on scraps of clothing with carved soap, cigarette lighters and even syringes, Htein Lin's artworks were his lifeline during years in Myanmar jails -- and the spark for an extraordinary love story. AFP PHOTO/Soe Than WIN.

By: Hla Hla Htay

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**YANGON (AFP).**- Painted on scraps of clothing with carved soap, cigarette lighters and even syringes, Htein Lin's artworks were his lifeline during years in Myanmar jails -- and the spark for an extraordinary love story.

"These paintings were really dangerous and also precious," said the 46-year-old former student protest leader, who produced more than 200 works during his six-and-a-half years in jail under the junta.

"I really wanted to tell the government that locked me up for nothing: 'You might have put me behind bars but you cannot imprison my creativity'," he

said.

Htein Lin was arrested in 1998 and imprisoned on the basis of an intercepted letter from a former "comrade" naming him as potentially still interested in opposition activity.

Jail was fraught with hardship such as beatings, solitary confinement and unsanitary conditions, but it also became his "studio".

Using any material he could get his hands on Htein Lin -- who had previously focused on performance art -- channelled his creativity to express the injustices that were a part of life during decades of military rule.

With names like "Shadow of Hope", "Back from the Chain Gang" and "Self Torture for 6 Years", the paintings writhe with colour, depicting anything from contorted figures to abstract designs.

Held first in Mandalay prison and then at Myaungmya, close to his hometown in the Irrawaddy delta region, the artist was able not only to receive the occasional batch of smuggled paint, but also to sneak the collection out.

The paintings are "strongly entwined with my life", Htein Lin told AFP in Yangon on a recent rare visit to Myanmar, where political changes under a reformist government have raised hopes of a new era of openness.

After he was freed in 2004 the artist came to the attention of then-British ambassador Vicky Bowman, who visited him and persuaded him to let her take the paintings for his own security.

"When we met, she told me that these paintings were dangerous for me to keep and I should give them to her if I trusted her. So I gave them all to her -- I really felt like I was giving her my whole life," he said.

The meeting, the first of many as the pair catalogued the works, was to kindle a love affair between the diplomat and the dissident.

"She became my life," said the artist.

The pair married in 2006 and live in London with their daughter.

Bowman was able to smuggle the paintings out of the country and the collection is now in Amsterdam at the International Institute of Social History.

In March Myanmar saw its first exhibition of works from former detained dissidents, and organiser Tun Win Nyein, himself an ex-political prisoner, hopes the country will one day have its own museum devoted to prison art.

"We want to show the next generation what people went through for the country," he told AFP.

Htein Lin said each painting tells the story of the people around him in prison -- from the fellow political or criminal prisoners who donated their uniforms for canvasses, to the guards who helped smuggle in materials.

One piece, a geometric design called "Map of Rat", was inspired by a guard who smuggled a batch of paintings out of prison but on seeing the images mistook them for escape plans and destroyed them.

On another occasion his jailers became suspicious and searched his cell, but failed to spot artwork under their noses.

"They were looking for something particular, with a frame, a portrait or something," he said.

A trained lawyer, Htein Lin said he hopes the political reforms in his homeland mean he will one day be able to exhibit all his prison art in Myanmar.

He has so far resisted all offers to buy the paintings -- even those from celebrity fans.

"The last one who wanted to buy these paintings was the singer Bono from U2. But I explained to him that I have to bring all these paintings back to the country one day," he said.

"This was part of history. We should not forget."

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Arabtec to build Abu Dhabi Louvre for \$654 mn with the aim of opening the museum in 2015

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Myanmar prison art tells story of repression

Portland Museum of Art completes banner year

bes-ti-ar-y: A descriptive or anecdotal treatise on various real or mythical kinds of animals

Architecture critic Ada Louise Huxtable dies at 91

## Heritage Auctions

2.- Forger claims Da Vinci masterpiece "La Bella Principessa" is supermarket checkout girl

3.- Leadership insight from top museum directors revealed in new book published by the High Museum of Art

4.- Constable's celebrated composition reappears on the market for the first time in 160 years

5.- Queen's University receives Rembrandt masterpiece from Alfred and Isabel Bader

6.- Feminist makeover for Pirelli calendar by photographer Annie Leibovitz wins praise

7.- Statue of Liberty, a symbol of democracy and freedom, inspired by Arab woman: Researchers

8.- "Hoarders: The Hidden History of Ancient Britain" opens at the British Museum in London

9.- Art Basel in Miami Beach opens with premier line-up of international galleries

10.- Century-old cake baked for Austrian Empress Elisabeth sweetens museum collection

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Marcia Liss: Nightmare Alley

Bijaya Jena: International Film Festival of India, Goa, 2015


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