

FEATURES, OPINIONS · NAIMA · JANUARY 8, 2022

The Last Painter-Princess of Burma: One of June Yadana Bellamy's Nine Lives



"When life puts me at a crossroad, I don't stop and dwell on it; I keep going, looking at the best way to continue my journey. Then, when it's the right time, I make a decisive turn. Without looking back. Without fear. [...] Similarly, in romantic relationships, I always fell in love in a total, crazy way, without holding back. [...] It's not just impulsivity, it's also instinct, fast-thinking, and great resolve. I ponder my thoughts very rapidly."

— Excerpt from *My Nine Lives* by June Yadana Bellamy

I don't know about you, but whenever I think about princesses, I tend to yawn. I think about very nice dresses and exquisite necklaces, sure, but also a privileged life devoid of any adventure. Boring words like formality, etiquette, and familiar responsibility come to mind.

I know, I know, it's not always like this. You could argue that there are plenty of adventurous princesses like Miyazaki's Mononoke, Xena the Warrior Princess, or even real ones like Princess Sissi of Austria, who was apparently one of the best horsewomen of her age. That said, I would still prefer for them to skip the princess phase and move straight to queenship (and all the power that that entails).

HOME IS WHERE THE HEART IS OUR HEARTLANDS

So when I came across an autobiography of June Bellamy, the last Burmese princess, I was both curious and hesitant. Would this intriguing title *My Nine Lives: From Mandalay to Florence* make me reconsider my deeply-rooted distaste for princesses?

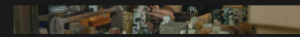
Turns out it did, and more. Indeed, the book hooked me over the course of a weekend, as I became acquainted not only with June Rose Yadana Bellamy, a bewitching, determined, fearless personality who embodied both the East and West, but also with a fading world that no longer exists.



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Portrait of June Yadana Bellamy.

Who was June Yadana Bellamy?

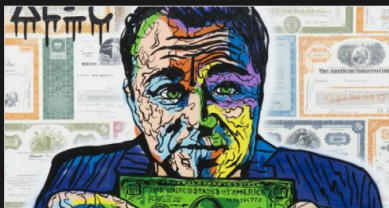
If you have any degree of familiarity with the history of politics and royalty in Burma, you will definitely know June Yadana as the daughter of the princess Ma Lat – the direct descendent of the last King of Burma – who later became the wife of the dictator Ne Win. What is less known is June's turbulent life across Europe and Asia, where she traversed the most significant moments at the turn of the twentieth century, always animated by a relentless spirit. She writes: "My life is a story of upheavls and transformations, but despite all sufferings, I can say I've lived in full, unconditional joy."

When she mentions that her unconventional trajectory was written in the stars, she is not just speaking of the astrology that seems to govern most of the decisions of Burmese – but of her noblewoman mother, Princess Ma Lat's unconventional marriage to a well-off Australian horse breeder and bookmaker by the name of Herbert Bellamy. It was a blissful collision of opposite worlds driven by love that June tried to mimic in her romantic life – to various degrees of success and a whole lot of cinematic moments.



June as a child (right) with her mother Ma Lat (left).

The June whom we read about in the book constantly changed and evolved, never looking back. She spent her childhood as a princess in exile, witnessing the Second World War, and was at one point wounded by a bomb. She fled to India when the Japanese invaded Burma, and later married a charming Italian doctor whom she saved by entering the jungle alone to free him from the communist rebels. Later still, she became a TV anchor in the Philippines, then a woman who abandoned everything for a new love in Siena, then a First Lady accused of being a Western spy, and finally, a cuisine teacher.



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But it doesn't even end here. One of her most interesting lives is the one she lived as an artist and a painter, as she approached her 40s. The need to reflect upon the emotional baggage that she carried from one country to another, from one relationship to the next, pushed her to put brush to canvas. Together with Buddhism, painting for her seemed to be a form of spirituality.





June Bellamy, *Natura Morta con Uva* (1968). Image source: MutualArt.

Art as a rebirth

While she had always been interested in art, having painted and drawn from time to time, June recounts that her life as an artist really started at a particularly low point in her life: when she had just married a new love, a famous horse breeder Andrea Fagnani.

Sadly, the marriage was shortly-lived, as the man died from sudden cancer, leaving June estranged in a country in which she felt she did not belong. Going back to Burma had not been an option for her at the time. She had been away from the country for a long time and the political situation at the end of the 60s was dire and confusing then.

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She had tried many jobs before, but something told her she needed to stay in Tuscany. With the help of friends who were hosting her in their home in Florence, she began working as a salesgirl at Emilio Pucci, one of the country's most prestigious fashion houses at the time.

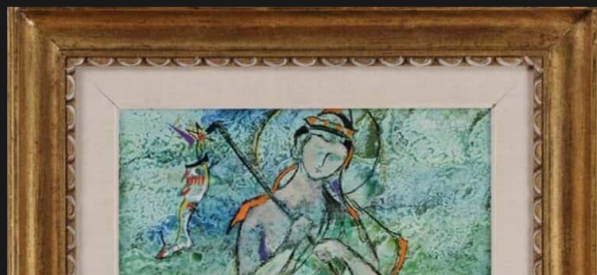
But that life did not feel right for her. June was used to a life of independence and travelling, so living in her friends' spare room made her feel "like a 36-year-old runaway teenager who has found refuge at a schoolmate's place," as she put it.



June and beau Lazzaro Donati.

Everything changed when she met local artist Lazzaro Donati. He was a charismatic and well-connected Renaissance man who hired her as his assistant, allowing her to leave the salesgirl job. The two quickly became lovers. June admitted in her writing that she was never in love with him in the way she had been with her first two husbands, but he served as a mentor of sorts. He was supportive on many different levels, encouraging her to paint – a passion that she never fully cultivated before then – and lending her a studio. He also introduced her to lacquer painting, a technique that she made her own.

A constant that we find in the artist's autobiography is her incapability to process her emotions, given the speed at which her life was constantly unfolding. In that regard, she admits that painting greatly helped her. Particularly, after the death of her second husband Andrea, she felt a deep need to work with shapes and colours to give voice to her inner life.





June Bellamy, *Angelo del Mare* (date unknown). Image credit: MutualArt.

She writes, "to lose a sense of wonder for life, and then find it, is a powerful experience. I found again the thirst and pleasure to look at the world with renewed eyes. I was shedding my old skin, again at a turning point in my own existence."

While she was deeply inspired by Lazzaro's practice, she quickly went for deep blues and greens that become her trademark. Her subjects came from the animal world, reminiscent of the wilderness she had been exposed to as a child. There were horses, birds, different types of architecture, and even mythological figures such as unicorns.

In her paintings, we find recurring figures that she dubbed "June's Birds". The inspiration for these figures came once she was walking on the riverside in Florence and noticed a long-legged bird on the sand that looked as though she was wounded. She was limping away from her nest, while being menaced by a hawk. The hawk attacked, but at the last minute the bird jumped and flew away. Her legs and wings were, in fact, uninjured, but she had pretended to be wounded to distract the predator from her eggs.

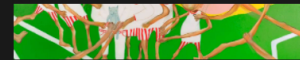
"I would find myself bursting with joy and the ingeniousness of nature," June writes. Once at her studio, she eagerly immortalised the scene on canvas.

Something left unfinished

In 1971, June had her first solo exhibition at the modern art gallery Metropolitan in Siena. While some local critics tried to read the work as either Asian-inspired or conversely Italian- and Europe-inspired, others saw that her art, just like her personality, was a perfect mixture of her two worlds. Over the years she exhibited in a number of galleries across Europe and the US, from London and Zurich to Chicago and Palm Springs.

Between one show and another, she also found the time to meet dictator Ne Win, whom she married in the hope that it would enable her to concretely help her people and restore the positive influence that her family used to have over Burma. Little did she know that Ne Win's ploy was to use her to gain the respect and love of the populace. He never allowed her to have full decisional power and make significant changes in the country.

This chapter of her life drew to a close when she left Ne Win, fed up with him as a husband and as a politician. In 1977, she re-established herself in Florence, ready to start again. The first thing she did once she settled back in Italy was to head to one of the small shops on the Lungarno and buy some artisanal fine paper to write to all the gallerists around the world that she had once collaborated with. She wrote: "I'm going back to painting. I hope you'll support me like in the past. June Bellamy."



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June realising her last mural, *The Unicorn and the Coral Tree*, at Canneto di Lipari.

June left painting for good when she became allergic to lacquer, but she continued to express herself through cuisine. She opened a cooking school in the heart of Florence, where she experimenting with Italian and Burmese recipes.

This fascinating figure just passed away last year. She leaves behind this autobiography as her legacy, along with a final wall painting: *The Unicorn and the Coral Tree*, a five-metre by five-metre fresco that features all her canonical subjects: June's birds, pheasants, trees with entangled roots and fruits.

"I have worked on this mural for a month, but I've decided to leave it incomplete. I have left two blank spaces that I would have to fill someday," she wrote. "It's wise to leave something unfinished in a place where you wish to return to one day."

And with that, I have to say, I have no more excuses to dismiss princesses, especially those who broke all the rules – and left blank spaces for our imagination to fill.

June Rose Yadana Bellamy – *My Nine Lives* is the princess' autobiography, written with Francesco Moscatelli and published by Italian publishing house ADD Editore in Italian. For more information about the book, click here: <https://www.addeditore.it/catalogo/bellamy-le-mie-nove-vite/>

Unless otherwise stated, all images are courtesy of June Bellamy's family ADD Editore.



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