

# [Behind the Curtain] Thein Zaw from Trisha Furniture

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## MYANMORE

*[Glimpses into the lives and works of Myanmar's independent creators of beautiful things.]*

It was mid-day when I was summoned to the parking garage of my condo community in Yangon. My custom-built furniture had arrived.

Descending to street level, I encountered the slender yet imposing figure of Thein Zaw, independent furniture craftsman. The first thing I wanted to do was select Zaw for my imaginary pick-up basketball team, as he stands well over six feet tall and looks to be quite fit. He also sports a calm but earnest countenance that befits a man who is both confident in his craft and dreaming of bigger things, despite COVID-19, for his small staff and family.

As the furniture I'd ordered came off the truck, I was struck by how beautifully crafted the three pieces were. I didn't really know what to expect. I can't recall, even, exactly how I was led to reach out to [Trisha Furniture](#) in the first place. With Trisha having a minimalist social media footprint, it must have been another denizen of one of Yangon's expat Facebook pages who made the recommendation, but I really couldn't tell you. In any case, I made contact with Trisha via Messenger and away we went, sharing photo ideas, dimensions, drawings.....until Zaw said 'Okay, that's all I need. Wait two weeks, please.' Waiting two weeks for handcrafted, custom-designed furniture, at a shockingly reasonable cost, was definitely not an issue for me.

The furnishings were moved into my condo unit with great care. After placing the pieces where I wished them to go, Zaw and company stayed on another half hour or so, touching up, polishing, checking their work once again before departing with satisfaction that my wide-eyed, slack-jawed gaze was a good thing.

Trisha Furniture, to put it simply, can make whatever you want them to, at prices that would be unheard of on the 'western' side of the planet. Using a selection of reclaimed teak, rubberwood, pine, or whatever Zaw can obtain based on customer desire, the furniture is crafted by hand, using a combination of both hand and electric tools. Zaw and his crew, working out of a small outdoor studio protected from the tropical sun by a green mesh canopy, are meticulous in their craft. Out of an ever-growing collection of sawdust and wood shavings come the most beautiful pieces of art. Yes, art.

And always at the center of the operation stands the imposing figure of Thein Zaw. I couldn't help but want to know more about him; this man who had decided at some point to make custom-built furniture his life's work. I wanted to know if and how COVID and the temporary exodus of expats was impacting his independent little business and his life in general. Did he even play basketball? I'm a curious guy and I like to get to know people, learn what makes them tick. Fortunately, Thein Zaw was willing to sit down with me and answer a few basic questions.

Age 34 now, TZ knew at age 16 that he wanted to make furniture, but not in a factory, not in a mass-production environment, not as a cog in somebody else's wheel. He wanted to do it his way, by hand, designing his own pieces and also working with the designs, often just rough pencil sketches, that his first customers would bring to him. Now, 18 years later, when a piece of furniture leaves the Trisha grounds, it is something to behold. Zaw told me that he will work with various materials, as the design may require, including metals, plastics, rope, rattan, and what have you; whatever it takes to bring the customer's vision to tangible fruition. Zaw and his crew are also fully capable of restoration and even fine woodcarving, a sub-art which is often incorporated into the pieces.

I was quite curious about how an independent artisan like Thein Zaw could manage to stay afloat in the rolling lockdown environment that COVID-19 has foisted upon all of us. He told me that it's a bittersweet environment at the moment, as locals, both neighbors and those further afield, have started to place orders since the usual flow of mass-manufactured furnishings (mainly from China) has slowed due to border crossing restrictions. On the other hand, the pandemic has resulted in a substantial drain of expats, and a majority of Trisha Furniture's customers have always been foreigners who, mainly through word of mouth or a wink-wink social media quip here and there, love the idea of having hand-made, custom designed, affordable furniture to take back home one day in order to regale guests, in their dotage, with tales of the Burmese furniture trade. It's a tough go of it right now but Thein Zaw is holding on to hope.

I was warmed to hear Zaw speak of the need to keep pushing through these bittersweet times in order to support his family, especially his two daughters. Covid has done nothing to dampen the family's enthusiasm for play, for listening to music, and sharing in the excitement of televised cricket matches. That's the thing. It is a good feeling to buy something from someone who is able to take your payment directly to his or her own family, to food, to clothing, to educational needs. In return, you sit in wide-eyed and slack-jawed wonder at this incredible wood furniture and decor that has finally made your own living space complete. Most of us could never have afforded such cool stuff back home. It's a win-win as I see it.

From playground equipment (installed!) to hand-carved screens to teak tables and cabinets and bookshelves and wardrobes to a massive bar counter for a customer in Thailand.....Well, the reader should, at this point, feel free to keep going in his or her own

head because whatever one can imagine, Thein Zaw and Trisha Furniture can likely build it. As for me, I am imagining something from an Old West saloon, hand-carved and stained to a dark patina. I am not yet finished with Trisha Furniture.

Thein Zaw hopes that the social media stylings and 'support independent, support community' enthusiasm of my own little three-member team will help boost his business, providing an extra buffer of support for his family and his dedicated team, and allow him one day to expand his workspace and production capacity. Thein Zaw and his crew of expert woodworkers at Trisha Furniture deserve to be known.

I never did get to ask Zaw if he played basketball in his school days....but now I am imagining his looming and earnest presence as a cricket bowler, and that may just be even cooler than seeing if he can dunk.

**To contact Zaw Thein with your own custom furniture needs, email [\[email protected\]](#) or visit his Facebook page [TRISHA FURNITURE](#)**

