As Myanmar’s political reforms unfold, artists and intellectuals are exploring new space for creative self-expression. Today writers give readings at literary festivals, musicians perform rap and hip hop in concert, and painters exhibit canvases that for decades could be shared only with trusted friends.

“Painting the transition” presents the work of a dozen leading contemporary artists in Myanmar. While some are openly political, most are concerned above all to connect with and update the cultural heritage of a major artistic tradition.

Buddhist symbols and ritual feature strongly. Ethnic costume, music and dance are key themes. Customs and habits of village people in a still rural society are carefully represented. Changing rhythms of urban life are fully documented.

In these many ways, contemporary painters capture a society embarking on what is certain to be a difficult journey. The start point was military dictatorship. The end point is unknown. Capturing twists and turns in the road is a network of accomplished artists emerging from a hermetic state.