

Religion in Colors: Buddhist Paintings in Sri Lanka

Jayanthi Bandara

Department of Sinhala, University of Colombo, Colombo, Sri Lanka

Abstract Sinhalese paintings adorned the surface of a variety of buildings, celestial places and shrine rooms. Sinhalese maintained a continuous tradition of decorating interior and exterior surfaces of buildings by carving, molding and painting. Different religious themes were identified in the walls of Viharas, image houses and devices. Many Buddhist temple ceilings are decorated with beautiful Zoomorphic, floral designs, human figures, Jathaka stories and Buddha's characteristics. It has been passed down through the generations of the Buddhist art tradition.

Keywords Buddhist Paintings, Rock- shelters, Elegant

1. Introduction

Sri Lanka has a rich tradition of Buddhist Paintings. Most of the rock-shelters used by the Buddhist monks, right after the introduction of Buddhism to Sri Lanka in the third century BCE, are still bear fading evidences of such paintings. The plastered surface of the roof of the rock-shelters was decorated by elegantly colored paintings narrate by the important incidents of the Buddha's life and the Buddhist *Jataka* stories. This tradition was uninterruptedly continued up to the 18th century CE.

The purpose of maintaining that tradition for a long period in history was to sensitize the common people about the essence of teachings of the Master in a simplified manner. It was a major strategic approach followed by the Buddhist clergy to communicate the righteousness of the philosophy of the Master to the lay society. The artistic expression of the Sinhalese Buddhist paintings was changed from time to time. It could be expressed by the transformation in the style and the color composition. Contrary, the subject matters of the paintings show a marked regularity throughout its evolutionary history suggesting that the objectives of the intended message were not changed parallel to the change that occurred in the style.

2. Subject Matter

Most of the themes, painted on the rock and wall surfaces show a stereotype content. During the early stage of development, the painters had preferably chosen the events of the Buddha's life. For instance, the North wall of sanctum in *Thivanka* temple in Polonnaruwa shows how Buddha

descended at *Sankassa* from the *Thavthisa* heaven after preaching to the gods. A fragmentary painting on the roof of the rock-shelter image house in Situlpauva depicts a conversation between two monks. A creature, probably a Deer was beautifully painted in the same composition. It seems that the painter wanted to show that the deer is listening to the conversation. This purely a creative idea by that unknown painter.

3. Classical Style

The archaic examples signify by the realistic tradition which is known as the classical style (CS). Few extant examples of the CS are the fragmented plasters remained on the rock surface in Situlpauva in Hambantota District and Hindagala in Kandy District. It is considered the CS dominated during the first millennium CE which is popularly known as the 'Anuradhapura period'.

The subject matter of most of the classical style paintings relates to religious narratives other than the rare example in Sigiriya. In spite of the paucity and relatively limited scope of the paintings and the absence of a single unified composition, the fragmentary masterpieces of Sigiriya constitute a source of book for the study of early sri Lankan paintings. They provide information in a number of different spheres artistic, iconographical and chronological. our knowledge of this tradition is supplemented by even more fragmentary remains from several Buddhist cave -temple sites of Anuradhapura period. Events pertaining to the Buddha's life were the preferable themes of the paintings as suggested by the remains of painted plasters in Hindagala, Vessagiriya, Kudagala and Kotiyagala. These all sites where nearly complete figures or discernible portions of figures have survived.

The paintings at Kotiyagala is faded and much damaged but still quite descramble. Fragmentary outline and patches of pigment show a standing posture of female figures,

* Corresponding author:

jayanthi@sinh.cmb.ac.lk (Jayanthi Bandara)

Received: Oct. 1, 2020; Accepted: Oct. 28, 2020; Published: Nov. 15, 2020

Published online at <http://journal.sapub.org/arts>

identified as a representation with holding a lotus stalk in their hands. Line drawing in a faded red, with touches of yellow and orange. (See fig. 1 & 2), *Bandaranayake* pointed out, Kotiyagala paintings at least two exceptional style are in evidence here: one, rather stiff and schematic: the other, somewhat sketchy and fluid (*Bandaranayake* 1986).



Figure 1. The female figure holding a lotus stalk in her hand, Kotiyagala cave Paintings, Monaragala District. Sri Lanka



Figure 2. The female figure holding a lotus stalk in her hand, Kotiyagala cave Paintings, Monaragala District. Sri Lanka

Apparently, ladies are the ones at the top. The hair is orange, with a long and curly tip at the top of the head. The female figure is holding a lotus flower in her hand. The beauty of the female figures was enhanced by using the colors. All the female figures were endowed with broad hips and prominent breasts. But all female figures depicted same as *Sigiriya* and *Thivanka Pilimage* paintings.

4. Post-classical Style

The post classical style is an extension of the classical style itself. Post-classical history also called the post-antiquity era, post-ancient era, or pre-modern era. The period runs from about 500 CE to 1500 CE, though there may be regional differences and debates. A special feature of the paintings of this period is the use of themes in the attempt to depict events related to the character of the Buddha in relation to the *Jathaka stories*. The paintings were depicted in places like *Thivanka pilimage* images in particular seem to follow a more natural tradition than a stylistic one. Also, the color range used reflected different features compared to the Kandyan era. *Thivanka pillimage* paintings, which are created using a limited amount of color such as red, orange, green and black, depicted the majestic features of women very well. Also, these paintings are captivating to the viewer as they are portrayed following the rules of party philosophy. Many scholars have pointed out the romance in these paintings. *HCP Bell*, *Benjamin Roland*, *Wijesekera*, and *Bandaranayake* said the paintings were depict in 1055 A.D.-1110 A.D. It is said to belong to the 12th century. Many of the paintings in this gallery have been destroyed due to exposure to the weather and other environmental hazards.

The main theme of these images was descent of the Buddha into the city of *Sankassa* after preaching the Dhamma to the God in Heaven. There was a ladder which depicts the descent of Buddha to the *Sankassa* from heaven. The image of the Buddha of these paintings are larger than the normal size of a human which is a clue of *Mahasampradaya* style.

5. Central Kandyan School

Most of the existing ancient paintings of Sri Lanka fall under the category generally known as Kandyan paintings to the 1400 A.D – 1815 A.D. Kandy was the last capital of the *Kandyan* kingdom. Historians use this place to denote a historical period: but with regards to Sri Lankan paintings that term is used to indicate a particular school of painting in this era. These paintings are not limited to the district of Kandy.

This style was rapidly spread to successive areas, centered in Kandy. It is possible to identify a large number of examples from different parts of Sri Lanka such as *Uva*, Southern and *Sabaragamuwa*. The distinctive features of the Kandyan style of painting are evident in the paintings of the central Kandyan period, which seem to have deviated somewhat from those basic features as they spread to successive areas probably due to the subcultural features of the areas that led to the paintings. However, the color scheme of *Kandyan* style, lines of use, concepts of light and darkness, the proximity and the distance of the painting, the direct visual and partial rules used in the painting are also used for paintings depicted in more or less successive areas.

6. Regional Styles

Kandyan frescoes were influenced with the invasion of Portuguese, Dutch, and British emperors. As Portuguese and Dutch ruled coastal areas of the country, this influence can be seen very largely in coastal areas than upcountry areas. Few examples of the regional style are the fragmented plasters remained on the rock surface in *Rakkithakanda* and *Mayuragiriya* cave temples in Monaragala district in Sri Lanka. (See fig. 2). According to these changes *Kandyan* frescoes can be divided into two as, up country *Kandyan* era frescoes and low country *Kandyan* era frescoes.

A closer look of the paintings in temples reveals, what kind of influence the society had on the depiction of these paintings. The events depicted in these paintings show how the people lived in the *Uva* Province where cave temples are located were very much in touch with the environment. People who dealt with the environment in particular have always used various forms of witchcraft to protect themselves from natural disasters. Thus, among the spells they followed, *Bali* and *Thovil* were special (see fig. 3) The paintings depicted in temples have been used as a means of expressing the customs they followed. The best examples of this are the paintings were depicted at *Mayuragiri* and *Rakkhitakanda*.



Figure 3. Zoomorphic ceiling paintings in Mayuragiriya temple at Monaragala district in Sri Lanka

7. Literature Review

There are three sources that were used in this investigation.

1. Field observations.
2. 18th and 19th centuries Buddhist paintings, consisting of literature.
3. As literature and history bounded to the contemporary Art.

The study was carried out to investigate the literature through such sources.

In this study on **Buddhist** paintings in Sri Lanka, the literature review has been discussed in three main streams as

mentioned above. But although there is a great deal of information on the Vihara paintings in Sri Lanka, therefore, field study methodology became the most important in this research to gather more information.

8. Conclusions

There are differences between Buddhist paintings and other parts of paintings Sri Lanka 18th 19th century. Mainly they reflect both the integral styles and content of art traditions. Regional tastes and implications for the communicative aims of art were identified as critical in determining regional identities. It has shown that the Jataka stories, Buddha characteristics depicted in the Vihara frescoes studies namely, criteria of ethics, ideology, culture, rituals and identities which are expressed in the walls of Vihara. In these publications on the identities of the elites who sponsored the paintings are also included.

The Buddhist paintings in Sri Lanka reflect a simple, largely representational and illustrative art formulated by an artist or patron or by a monk who acted with the attention of both. Because of the social and political changes with the time, changes in the style, color, and objects of art were able to achieve the long-lasting religious and social functions of the basic structural and structural elements.

The Buddhist paintings in Sri Lanka, one can draw a hypothetical conclusion about the paintings of the 18th and 19th centuries. It was pointed that there are many differences between the paintings in the temples in different parts of Sri Lanka. Importantly, these differences are reflected in both style and content of the paintings.

The level of local taste to disperse regional identities and the role of the villagers in implementing these objectives is very important. Vihara murals confirm the way in which the events related to the character of the Jataka stories and character of Buddha are depicted in the murals.

Although there were many changes to the social and political changes of the period, the use of color, the objects of the painting, the basic structural features and methodologies remained in place for a long time to fulfill the expected religious and social functions.

The second aim was to find out what are the distinctive features found in Buddhist temples. The vihara paintings reflect the various types of addicts and social practices adopted by the society during the period. This is an excellent example of how spiritual beliefs have an impact on the lives of people living there.

1. Following the basic features of the Kandyan tradition of painting, the artists have highlighted its unique morphological features.
2. Artists have been practicing their own techniques in terms of their features and style.
3. The paintings reflect the artisans' understanding of the social, economic, political and cultural backgrounds of Sri Lanka during 18th and 19th centuries. It had been appropriately used in their design.

REFERENCES

-
- [1] Bandaranayake, S., 1974. *Sinhalese Monastic Architecture: the Viharas of Anuradhapura*. Leiden.
- [2] Bandaranayake, S., 1977. *Form and Technique in traditional rural housing in Sri Lanka*. Proceedings of the National Symposium on Traditional Rural Culture of Sri Lanka. 61-73 pp.
- [3] Bandaranayake, S., 1982. 'The Kataluwa murals', *Ordinations* 13(1): 22-37 pp.
- [4] Bandaranayake, S., 1986. *The Rock and wall Paintings of Sri Lanka*, Colombo: Lake House.
- [5] Bell, H.C.P., 1904, *Annual Report of the Archeological Survey of Ceylon for 1897-1911*, Annual Report of the Archeological Survey of Ceylon for 1908.
- [6] Bell, H.C.P., 1917. 'Dimbula- Gala: its caves, ruins and inspirations', *CALR* 3(1): 1-12; 3(2): 64-79 pp.
- [7] Bell, H.C.P., 1918. 'Demala- Maha-Seya Paintings', *JRASC* 71(3-4): 199-201 pp.
- [8] Coomaraswamy, A. K., 1957. 'An Open letter to the Kandyan Chiefs', *Cultural Magazine*, Colombo: Published by the Art Council Government Printers.
- [9] Coomaraswamy, A. K., 1906. 'Some Survivals of Sinhala Art' *JRASC* 19(57): 72-89 pp.
- [10] Coomaraswamy, A. K., 1907a. 'Degaldoruwa temple', *Kandyan* 2(3): 163-168 pp.
- [11] Coomaraswamy, A. K., 1907. *Notes on Painting, Dyeing, Lacwork, Dumbara Mats and paper in Ceylon*: JRAS (CB), Vol. xix, No.58.
- [12] Coomaraswamy, A. K., 1914. 'Painted ceiling at Kelaniya Vihara', *Journal of Indian Art* 16 (128): 113 p.
- [13] Coomaraswamy, A. K., 1969. *Mediaeval Sinhalese Art*, New York: Pantheon Books.
- [14] Coomaraswamy, A. K., 1935. *The Transformation of Nature in Art*, Harvard University Press: Cambridge.
- [15] Coomaraswamy, A. K., 1913. *The Arts and Crafts of India and Ceylon*, New Delhi: Today & Tomorrow's Printers.
- [16] Coomaraswamy, A. K., 1981. *Essays in National Idealism*. New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publication.
- [17] Coomaraswamy, A. K., 1985. *Fundamentals of Indian Art, the Historical Research Documentation Programme*: Jaipur.
- [18] Deraniyagala, P.E.P., 1954. *The Human and Animal Motif in Sinhala Art*, Speech for the Presidential Address. Colombo.
- [19] Gomrich, R.F., 1978. 'A Sinhalese Cloth Paintings of the vessantara Jataka', in H. Becher ted., *Buddhism in Ceylon and Studies on Religious Syncretism in Buddhist Countries*, Gottingen: 77-88 pp.
- [20] Gunasinghe, Siri., 1978. *An album of Buddhist Paintings from Sri Lanka*, Colombo: Department of Government Printers.
- [21] Gunasinghe, Siri., 1979. "Art and Architecture", *Modern Sri Lanka: A Society in Transition*, ed. Tissa Fernando and Robert N. Kearney, New York: Syracuse University.
- [22] Gunasinghe, Siri., 1980. "Buddhist Paintings in Sri Lanka: Art of Enduring Simplicity," *SZ*, Vol. 35(1-2): 479-89 pp.
- [23] Somadeva, R., 2012. *Rock Paintings and Engraving Sites in Sri Lanka*, Colombo: Postgraduate Institute of Archeology.