Art Through The Ages

Posted on



A view of the images on display at the gallery

Words Chiranthi Rajapakse | Photographs Prabhath Chathuranga/Mahesh Prasantha

Walking into the gallery is a soothing experience. Artworks are displayed on panels. Gentle reds and oranges suffuse the room. Visitors browse through the room, looking at the photographs. The atmosphere is tranquil; this newly opened photo gallery at the Gangaramaya Temple is a place that provides aesthetic pleasure as well as knowledge.

Opened by President Mahinda Rajapaksa in March 2011, in the presence of Ranil Wickremesinghe, Leader of the Opposition, the photo gallery of Buddhist paintings at the Gangaramaya Temple in Colombo is a valuable resource for art lovers. Ven Galaboda Gnanissara Thero, Chief Incumbent of Gangaramaya Temple, Dr Daya Hewapathirane, Advisor to the President and Tasneem Moosajee, the people behind this photo gallery explained the thinking behind this initiative and how it became a reality.

A temple that has a longstanding role and reputation in social service, its repertoire

includes a plethora of services. “On a suggestion by President Mahinda Rajapaksa, Dr Daya Hewapathirane wished to open a new art gallery that would showcase photographs collected over a period of 45 years of cultural and religious sites of Sri Lanka,” says Ven Galaboda Gnanissara Thero. “As with all social service activities of the temple that have been conducted with no personal benefit or gain in mind we accommodated the request to host the art gallery and facilitate the cause,” he adds further.

The concept for the gallery was developed with funding provided by Tasneem Moosajee. The idea had its origins in what Dr Hewapathirane aptly calls his “passion for Buddhist art.” Having spent many years living in Canada, Dr Hewapathirane nevertheless made it a pastime to visit historic temples all over Sri Lanka. He took numerous photographs of the paintings which he found at these temples, and amassed a unique collection of around 3500 photographs. He then used these photographs to develop an exhibition, which was shown in major cities in Canada. Following his retirement, Dr Hewapathirane came to Sri Lanka with the determination to work towards promoting Sri Lankan culture. It was then that the idea was born to convert the temporary exhibitions into a permanent art gallery. All the images showcased at the gallery have been donated free of charge by Dr Hewapathirane and the gallery was designed by Professor Sadev Wittachy.

“We explored different locations but picked the Gangaramaya Temple because everyone who visits Colombo invariably comes here. In a strange way it’s a non-denominational temple. Whatever race or religion you belong to, you end up coming here for different reasons – it welcomes people from all walks of life. It’s free of restrictions,” says Tasneem Moosajee. Supporting this line of thought the Ven Gnanissara Thero adds, “in the past tourists did not visit here much but gradually this changed as the collection of artefacts grew ever larger and visitors were able to see items of value that they cannot find anywhere else.”

The gallery is arranged chronologically and divided into periods so that the visitor is given an overview of the evolution of Buddhist art. The first section is devoted to photographs of paintings belonging to the Classical period extending from 3rd Century BC until the 13th Century AD (a period of 1600 years). During the Classical period Anuradhapura, Sigiriya (for a brief period) and then Polonnaruwa were the capitals. Says Dr Hewapathirane, “some of the most fabulous artistic creations were seen during this period. What’s special about the paintings in the Classical period is the emphasis on spirituality. When you study them very closely you can’t help but feel calm and gentle. It has a meditational effect.”

Following the Classical period came a time of instability; the period of changing capitals which lasted 450 years from the 13th to 17th Centuries AD. During this time there was less patronage from kings and Buddhist monks. As a result, explains Dr Hewapathirane, artists did not have huge temples and temple walls to paint on. However the artists did not let this stop them drawing, they adapted to the new conditions. Drawing on cloth became popular and these creations were referred to as pethikada paintings; several beautiful examples of pethikada paintings are on display at the gallery. Other artists drew on pottery, a process of clever adjustment to a difficult period of change.

This period was also notable for its literary achievements. Important literary works such as the Kudavaliya, Amavathura and Buthsarana were produced and this renaissance in literary work also had an impact on art. These works were produced on Ola palm leaf books with wooden covers. The covers of these books were beautifully painted, often with floral designs, and in many cases the work was done by Buddhist monks themselves. Visitors to the gallery can see many photographs of Ola leaf books with intricately painted covers.

The third section of the gallery is devoted to the Mahanuwara period in the 18th and 19th Centuries AD. During this time there was a revival of Buddhist art with many temples that were destroyed by the Portuguese and Dutch being restored. A new painting tradition started which incorporated Hindu influence and resulted in the blending of traditions.

This change in styles is apparent to the visitor; the use of bright, vibrant colours marks out the paintings from this period. The collection includes photographs of the paintings inside the relic chamber at the Dalada Maligawa, which is not usually accessible to the public.

Another interesting change seen in the painting style during this period is the development of painting in the south. During the Kandyan period, the southern coastal areas were occupied by the Portuguese, Dutch and the British. As a result temple artists were strongly influenced by Western traditions. Paintings started depicting women in western outfits such as skirt and blouse and thematically too, differences crept in. In addition to the traditional lotus design painters began to depict roses, which were popular in Western art. Even the facial features of the figures depicted in the paintings show the influence of Christianity and European art. The use of astrological signs rather than floral designs for ceiling paintings was another new development in the south at this time.

The last section in the gallery depicts artists' work during the Modern period in the 20th and 21st centuries AD. Creations from temples such as Kelaniya Rajamaha Viharaya, Bellanwila Viharaya and Gotami Viharaya adorn the walls.

Tasneem Moosajee points out that the gallery is still very much in the initial stages. A documentary film on Buddhist art which was developed using Dr Hewapathirane's photographs, is also screened daily at the gallery. She says,"We want people to come and leave more knowledgeable; to create the desire for them to travel around the country and perhaps see more of the real thing."

Furthermore the temple also has valuable artefacts that are yet not on display. Ven Ganissara Thero not only hopes to progressively showcase these in the near future but also expand the gallery by conducting searches to bring the concealed and unknown to the limelight. "We are also starting another section for talented school children to provide them with the opportunity to exhibit their work even in small scale for their friends and families to see," adds the Thero.

This is not just a room containing a collection of photographs; it is a lovingly created reflection of the efforts of hundreds of artists. They worked in different eras, in different places, some in fame, some in obscurity. We may not know their names but through this gallery, the beauty of their creations lives on.

[nggallery id=35]