Built on Faith: the Holy Trinity Church

Posted on



Holy Trinity Church in all its solemn splendour

Intricately carved stone pillars towered above lifting a peaked wooden roof out of human reach. Rays illuminate the Holy Trinity Church, gently seeping through the arches to avoid disturbing the sanctity of the chapel. All eyes are on the mural of the crucifix that ignites a passion within.

Words Keshini de Silva | **Photographs** Menaka Aravinda

Pillars are decorated with ancient Sri Lankan motifs

Winding through the chatter filled passageways of Trinity College the environs silenced as we crossed on to the chapel grounds. Even the birds chirped softly and the winds blew quietly. Amidst the backdrop of the Udawatta Kele Sanctuary, the Holy Trinity Church dedicated in 1935 stood, emulating a sense of earthy grandeur within sanctitude.

With a high pitched roof, open nave and granite pillars, the quaint oratory steps away from the typical classical, gothic and Byzantine church architecture. Instead it embraces ancient Sri Lankan design, a style that inspired the architect, Vice Principal Rev Lewis John Gaster upon a visit to historical Polonnaruwa. The annals of Trinity College history relate the manner in which the heated discourse among the school administration on the style of architecture to embrace only ceased after Rev Gaster suggested using an influence closer to home. Born out of discussions led by Principal Rev Alexander Garden Fraser, the chapel today resembles the Gampola-era architectural marvel, the Embekke Devalaya.

The 54 stone granite pillars that carry the roof have with great finesse been embellished with entwining swan motifs and a variety of lotus flower designs inspired by Embekke. Each carved out of a single block, quarried from Lady Anderson’s Drive above Aruppola, weighed approximately 3 tons. To bear the weight of the pillars, at least a six-feet deep pit was dug and filled to ensure a strong foundation. In the 1920s, a time before machinery, two elephants were required to transport a single 18-foot pillar – one pulled while the other pushed – along the slope. The *pekada* (column capital) and *pekada* beams carved out of robust Gammalu timber mimic the pillars of Embekke down to the finer details. Standing beneath these detailed carvings the onlooker is almost transported to its Gampola era muse. The height of the chapel’s nave is amplified by the simple and unassuming church pews, impressing upon the worshipper the enormity of the power of God. The pulpit and podium where the holy word is delivered have been worked with symmetrical lotus designs to match the grander design theme.

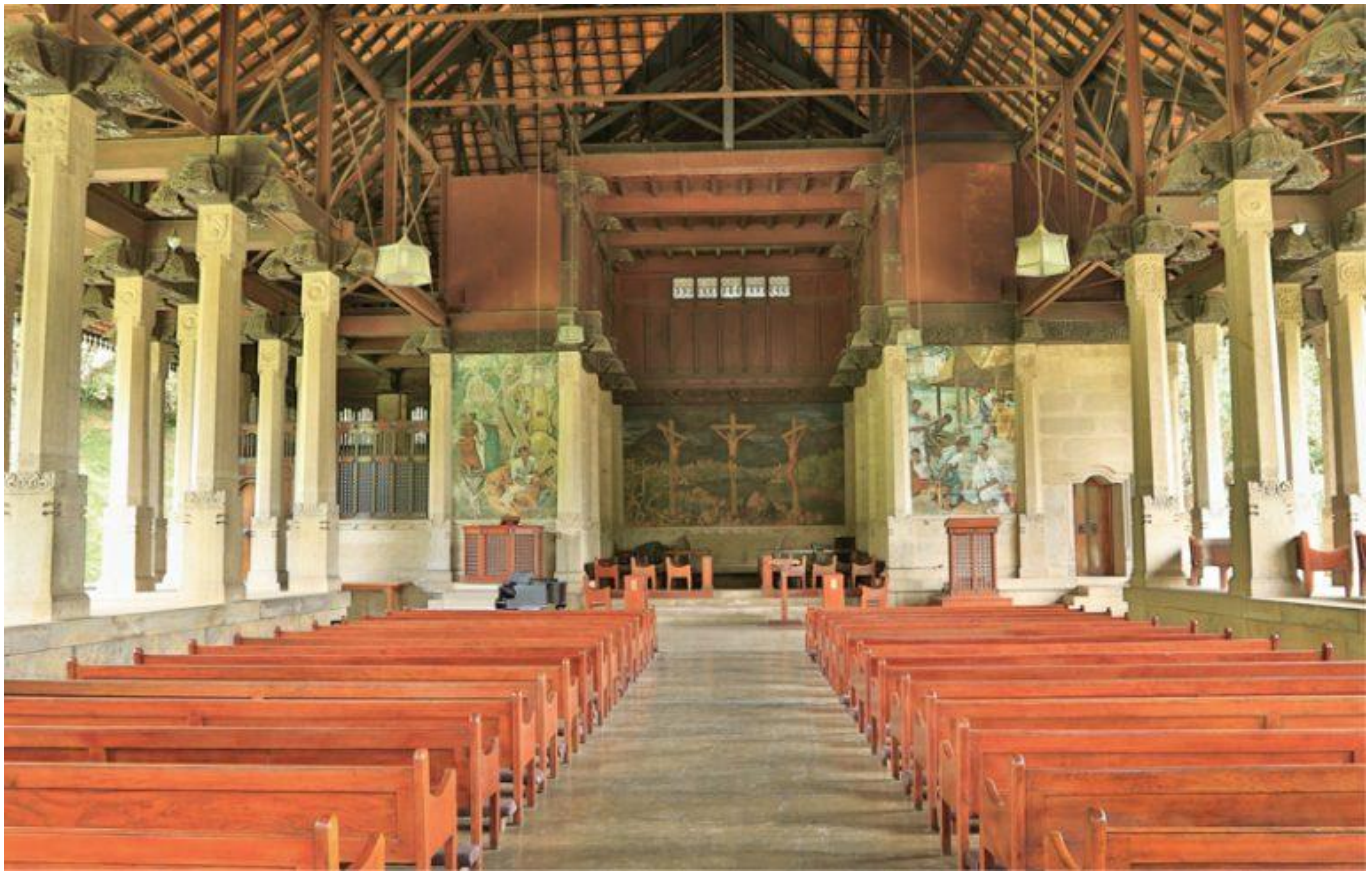
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A hallmark of the chapel are the murals, that are masterpieces painted by Sri Lankan artist David Paynter. The main mural painted in 1933, the crucifixion, complements the stone and wooden structure, modestly standing out and igniting

an ache of spiritual passion within parishioners. The frescoes on either side, depict the ‘Parable of the Good Samaritan’ (1957) and the ‘Washing of the Feet’ (1965), that Paynter wanted to appeal to the local audience is evident; the faces in the murals boast Sri Lankan features, while the scenery has been inspired by the Island’s geography. Although the frescoes have fared well through the unrepentant tropical weather, they require great care for the sake of posterity.

The left chamber, with a timber-worked partition and ornate door, houses the smaller ‘Chapel of the Light of the World’ consecrated in 1930. It was the school chapel until the existing structure was completed and was later absorbed into its design. Even today service is held in the inner chapel, adorned with the mural ‘Are ye able’, which depicts the Mother of James and John appealing to Jesus.

The pillars near the entrance to this smaller chapel, are marked with the names of the Four Evangelists and their symbols: Matthew and the winged man, Mark and the winged lion, Luke and the winged ox and John and the eagle. Keeping with the theme, the sculptor had illustrated the four symbols in ancient Sri Lankan aesthetic charm. Even the rainwater drain outside takes the form of a lotus.



All eyes are on the crucifix, the stone chapel exudes the power of faith

According to the *100 Year Trinity College souvenir*, the inception of this architectural marvel arose from the need for a spacious chapel. Interestingly, while the foundation stone was laid by Rev Foss Westcott, the Metropolitan of India, Burma and Ceylon at the old chapel location near the road, the block itself was moved to the current spot, the then cricket pitch above the school. The relocation was triggered by growing noise on the roads.

Holy Trinity Church is not just a construction of stone and wood, but one built on faith and unity. In 1927, with underground construction proving to be expensive, the project was strapped for funds. Yet the administration lead by Principal Rev John McLeod Campbell did not lose heart, appealing far and wide for funds. The captivating edifice finished eight years later is the fruit of their prayers and the generosity of many colleges in the UK. In appreciation of the contributions their school logos adorn the inner pillars of the chapel; notably one could recognise the court of arms of Eton College.

Today, the Holy Trinity Church is the pride and joy of the many young lads that walk through Trinity College’s doors. It is an architectural marvel in itself; a creation that while nurturing the faith fosters an appreciation of Sri Lanka’s vibrant and sophisticated artistic heritage.