

Cave Temples of Dambulla: A Record of Beauty in Painting and Sculpture

Posted on

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A happy blend of antiquity and richly textured artistic splendour cloaks the entire vicinity where the historic Dambulla Rock Temple also known as “Rangiri Dambullu Raja Maha Vihara” is situated at the central hills of Sri Lanka. The Dambulla Viharaya which is the most celebrated and venerated Buddhist cave temple in the island is a unique art gallery of Buddhist iconography and paintings.

This ancient rock temple with a remote and complex past is of great historic and archaeological importance. It consists of five caves scattered in an area of around fifty acres. Rising up to a height of 500 feet above the surrounding plain, in magnitude this surpasses all the other cave temples in the country.

The Viharaya on the top of the monolithic stone mass can be approached by the path cut into the rock at periodic intervals interspersed with stone staircases and level landings. The massive temple trees covered with araliya blossoms provide the shade to the visitors who come in their hundreds to see the beautiful images and paintings which provide an abundance of valuable material for the study of aspects of the evolution of Sinhala Buddhist paintings and sculpture. For the convenience of many who have taken to modern transport a new road has been built almost up to the temple. But the pilgrims, true to tradition go their hard way climbing the rock while the casual visitor and the tourist may reach half way up the rock by motor cars. According to folk tradition the Dambulla Rock Temple was originally built by King attagamini Abhaya (29 – 17 B.C.). A 13th Sinhala literary work known as Pujavaliya states that King “Vattagamini Abhaya- (Valagamba) converted the caves at Dambulla into temples which gave him shelter and a hideout for 12 years – when he was fleeing from South Indian invaders who had captured Anuradhapura.

The Mahawamsa – the great chronicle of Sri Lanka – describes the renovation activities of this temple carried out by Vijayabahu I (1058-1114 AD.) and Kirti Sri

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Nissankamalla (11 – 1196 AD.). It is interesting to note that the Dambulla Vihara Rock inscriptions of Nissankamalla states that he applied gold on 73 images found within the temple and named it “Swarnagiriguha” (meaning ‘Gold Rock Caves’). Since then, the temple is known as “Rangiri (“Rangiri” means Gold Rock) Dambulu Viharaya”. The five natural caves shrines of the Dambulla Temple which are a veritable treasure house of murals and statuary are named, Devaraja Viharaya, Maharaja Viharaya, Maha Alut Viharaya Paschima Viharaya and Devini Alut Viharaya. The first, second and the fourth caves are said to be the work of King Valagamba. Maha Alut Viharaya was built by Kirti Sri Rajasinghe (1747-1782AD) and Deveni Alut Viharaya by Dullewe Maha Adikaram in 1820 hence all these caves do not belong to the same period.

In the Devaraja Viharaya lies the much talked of rock sculpted and painted over image of a colossal Buddha in sleeping posture with his life-long attendant and devout disciple Ven Ananda at his feet. The cave comprises six other statues of God Vishnu, and the Buddha with many beautiful paintings on the walls and ceiling, depicting Buddhist love.

The Maharaja Viharaya, or the Cave of the Great Kings, a name obviously given to the cave as it is full of images of Kings Valagamba (439-440BC) and 454 – 466 B.C.) and Kirthi Sri Nissankamalla, is the most impressive of all. This cave has the largest number of sculptures (nearly 60 statues) both religious and secular. All along the cave walls and above on the rock ceiling are thousands of colourful Buddhist paintings. As one enters the cave he encounters a magnificent image of King Valagambahu the founder of this shrine.

Life-size, sculptured in wood, and painted beautifully, the statue has a ‘Makuta’ or a head-dress. The upper part of the body is bare. It is interesting to note that the dress on this statue is unusually simple. The ears are long and drawn in the Malabar style. The cave also houses an impressive life-size Buddha Statue, beautifully carved in standing position under a Makara Thorana (an archway depicting a mythical dragon-like creature) which is believed to be one of those statues painted in gold by King Nissankamalla hundreds of years ago.

Maha Alut Viharaya meaning ‘The New Great Temple’, so named because it was built recently by one of the last Kings of the Kandyan Kingdom, Kirti Sri Rajasinghe, houses fifty seven images among which is a colossal reclining Buddha statue almost 30 feet long. A fine image of King Kirti Sri Rajasinghe himself superbly sculptured his full beard and royal robes finely distinguishable, is another outstanding creation

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in this cave. Paschima Viharaya (meaning western cave) consisting of beautiful statues is of special significance as it is believed that the stupa built in the middle of this cave contained the jewelery of Somawathie the queen of King Valagamba. Hence it's also called "Soma Cetiya". Deveni Alut Viharaya, comparatively new, contains beautiful images of the Buddha and Gods Vishnu and Kataragama (Skande), as well as of a local deity known as Devata Bandara, richly ornamented with crowns and jewellery. Whether the cavern in which these five houses of brilliant sculpture which attract thousands of visitors, has been formed naturally or is the result of human construction has not been yet determined.



A section of the 1,800 square metres of painted rock wall at Dambulla.
(Gamini Jayasinghe)

Over 1,800 square metres of painted walls and ceilings constitute the interior of these giant caves. These paintings retouched, redrawn, repainted, for the last time in the 18th C, are still as fresh and alive as they were 200 years ago. These 161 sculptured images and figures of the Buddha, Bodhisatva, Gods and Kings in the caves whose walls are also packed with beautiful murals are no doubt a rare find anywhere. The themes of the paintings include the Jataka Stories (Stories pertaining to the earlier lives of the Buddha), and significant events in the history of Sri Lanka such as the arrival of the first Sinhalese in Sri Lanka and the famous battle for supremacy between Sri Lankans and South Indian invaders.

The paintings of the Dambulla Rock Temple which cover an area of nearly 20 thousand square feet, seem to aim at depicting the greatness of the Buddha, and the proud history of the island. An interesting factor is that paintings dealing with historical episodes are left uncaptioned, probably suggesting that the artists were of the impression that every Sinhala Buddhist would recognise such a picture as they saw it.

The painters of these extraordinary murals, belonged to a special generation of artists from the time of the Sinhala Kings. They were the Nilangama Painters and it is interesting to note that P. G. Jivan Naide 66 years old belonging to this generation is still making a living by painting murals.

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According to popular belief King Valagambahu entrusted the work of sculpturing images and painting the walls of the Dambulla temple to one master painter “Bodhinarayana Mulacharya” who received a village known as Nilagama from the King, for the services successfully completed. According to Jivan Naide, the originator of this generation was Bodhinarayana and he belonged to the group of eighteen craftsmen who arrived in Sri Lanka from India during the reign of King Devanampiyatissa, in the 3rd Century B.C. Jivan Naide, who is the lucky owner of some gifts offered by Sinhala Kings to his ancestors, proudly presents the “Nilagama Tudapata” which contains the history of the murals painting and iconography of the Dambulla temple to interested visitors. Among his treasure are a golden plate, a golden pin used for the anointing ceremony during the time of Kings and even a golden head-dress which symbolised the title of his generation. Jivan Naide who is now associated with the conservation work at Dambulla Raja Maha Vihara under the Unesco Sri Lanka Cultural Triangle programme, considers himself privileged to be involved in the restoration of the paintings which he sees as the living tradition of his people.



Seated Buddha in Dhyanamudra, the attitude of meditation with the hands in the lap, at Dambulla.



Paintings of the Rock Temple.- at Dambulla life of the Buddha.