

Echoes of our History: A legend retold

Posted on



A mythical bird one of the carvings at Embekke temple.

During the Kandyan era of our country's history, old traditions of stone carvings gave way to those of wood.

Splendid examples of wood carvings can still be seen at the Embekke Devale (temple) in Udunuwara in the district of Kandy.

The roof, pillars and gateway of this devale, which is dedicated to God Kataragama, are exquisitely carved with artistry that is a feast to the eye. Carved pillars of wood can also be seen in the King's Audience Hall in Kandy. Many of the motifs are based on nature, depicting fruits, flowers and birds. Traditional designs painted in conventional colours can be seen on the ceilings and doorways of the Temple of the Tooth in Kandy.

Given below is a story woven around a lifelike wooden carving done by a master craftsman of the Kandyan era.

The Missing Birthmark

Gascoine was a Frenchman,

O so elegantly dressed!

With frills about his collar

And braid about the breast

Of his well-cut velvet jacket,

As an emissary he came

To meet the King of Kandy, King Narendra was his name.

King Narendra met the Frenchman,

who from a far off country came,

He gave gifts to King Narendra, King Narendra did the same.

They talked about a treaty

Which would let the Frenchmen trade

In pearls and gems and spices And thence a bond was made.

Gascoine remained in Kandy, The city of green hills,

He was welcome in the palace Where he roamed around at will.

And there the gallant Frenchman

One day espied the Queen,

Her beauty left him

speechless,

As such he'd never seen!

She smiled at handsome Gascoine,

And her heart began to beat! And ever often after

They met in quiet retreat

In secret, and the lovers Many happy hours spent,

In and around the palace

In stolen love, content.

But after months of' pleasure, One day Gascoine was told,

"The Queen lies in a stupor, She lies mindless, she lies cold. Evil spirits have

possessed her
The gods we must invoke
With offerings at a ritual
For we must them not provoke!

So in great haste the rites were planned.

The Queen was carved in wood on a stand, such a likeness have you ever seen.
'Tis a perfect picture of my Queen?"
To his Frenchman guest, King Narendra said.
To which Gascoine with a shake of his head.
Remarked that the craftsman had failed to dot
Her thigh with a birthmark, and on the right spot,
He painted the mark with a turn of his wrist,
For that was all that the artist had missed!

King Narendra full of fury,
Like a snake about to strike
Said, "Strip this Frenchman, march him
And pierce him on a spike!
He was my royal guest here,
But as far as I can see,
This villain of a Frenchman
Is teeped in lechery!

The funeral drums struck up a muffled beat and slow.
Attired in red, to his death, did the dashing Frenchman go.
The Queen looked down from her upper room with grief distraught,
And weeping loud lamented, "Oh what grief to you I've brought." "Though Ravana
captured Sita," he answered, "he nothing gained,
But the love that we shared with each other, was surely not in vain!"



Splendid examples of wood carvings can still be seen at Embekke Devale near Kandy.