

Embekke: A Storehouse of Artistry

Posted on



Photographs: Gamini Jayasinghe

Embekke is the name of a village in Sri Lanka that is virtually synonymous with wood carving. This fairy-tale hamlet is reached by a road that winds up and down steep hills, but if the traveller is panting at the end of it, it's not in vain. The road ends at the Embekke Devale, where a storehouse of artistry awaits him, or her.

This monument of Kandyan architecture, now dedicated to God Kataragama, was built in the 14th or 15th century and is believed to have been the audience hall of the Gampola kings. On all four sides of each wooden pillar, at about head-level is an exquisitely carved picture, each frame different from the other, displaying the abundant variety of traditional Sinhalese decorative art. Lions, swans, lotuses, dancers, mythical beasts etc. still stand out in fine detail, centuries after execution. The pillars, beams, caves and rafters of the structure are all carved with the easy harmony that only the craftsman of old could master.

The building itself is typical of the Sinhalese architectural tradition in wood – without walls but with rows of wooden pillars supported on a stone base, and a sloping roof with flat tiles.

Though the craft of wood carving is still practised in Embekke and the surrounding villages, it is no longer as a continuing part of the ancient tradition. This is inevitably so, since the purpose of wood carving today is quite different from its purpose in medieval times, when the craftsman had an allotted role in society, in supplying the needs of the community and the royal household. Wood carving as it is practised today serves either the handicraft industry or the furniture industry, and both the role of the craftsman and his products have changed accordingly.

Decorative designs were even carved on the carpenter's tools indicating the pride he took in his work. Though the tools used by Sinhalese carpenters were many, carving was done with only a few simple chisels. The tools used today remain much the same.



Wrestlers in a grip from the panels of Embekke



Cavalryman, with the clothes and headgear showing influence of the West



Herunda Pakshiya - a mythical bird which is carved at Embekke



The stylised face of a lion etched in wood



Makara-a mythical animal often found in Sri Lankan ritual decoration, carved on a panel at Embekke Devale



The lion defeats the elephant



Kinduri - mythical bird woman of the Himalayas playing a stringed musical instrument



Ornamental panel with intricate floral design.