

Frescoes from Two Temples

Posted on



Degaldoruwa Rajamahavihara – in Gunnepana, a suburb of Kandy

Photographs by Gamini Jayasinghe

Degaldoruwa – Rajamahavihara

A temple in the Kandy district at Gunnepana. The paintings belong to the 18th century. The murals in the shrines at Degaldoruwa are some of the best examples of what must be considered the true Kandyan tradition. This is not surprising as the better artists were in the service of the kings and the more affluent chieftains who were resident at the political capital. Dunuwila Mudali carried out the royal commission to construct the shrine. A Makara arch at the entrance to the shrine chamber is flanked by two large figures of guards outside the door.



Earth goddess Mahi-Katha pays homage to the Buddha.



King Vessantara greets visitors



Vessantara Jataka; a previous life of the Buddha. King Vessantara, wealthy and powerful, gifts caparisoned elephants to his visitors.

The paintings are attributed to Devaragampola Silvattena, the best known of the

'sittara' painters. These murals are considered the most outstanding examples of this style of painting. Details of Silawa Jatakaya, Vessantara Jatakaya, Sutasoma Jatakaya (episodes from the Buddha's many previous reincarnations) and the 'Defeat of Mara' are some of the most dramatic compositions.

The many compartmented cave temples show the complexity of the lay-out as well as the variety of expression that a completely artistic background has to offer.



Purwarama at Kataluwa, on the southern coast.



A scene from the tragic tale of Patacara who lost everything in life before finding solace in the teachings of the Buddha.



Wall paintings at Purwarama depicting many tales from the life of the Buddha. The giant reclining Buddha statue, inside the shrine room.



Western motifs on Eastern themes is seen in some of the paintings.

Purwarama - Kathaluwa

Located midway between Galle and Matara, these paintings are a hundred years old. They display the full stylistic range of the southern school through the greater part of the 19th century. Six Jataka stories are painted on the outer walls of the vestibule: Vessantara, Kattaharvi, Culle Dhammapala, Sutasona, Temiya and Khandehala. Five other stories based on personalities and events in the life of the Buddha - Patacara, Nandiya Upasake, Soreyya Sitano, Masura Sitano and Mahadhana itano - are some of the paintings. The paintings have the most

immediate impact of richness of colour and intricacy of decoration. Like other Sri Lankan wall paintings these too were meant to be read in several different ways – pictorially, artistically as well as in a moral and religious sense.

The murals of a typical southern temple and the character and sequence of southern styles in the latter half of the 19th century are clearly seen in the well-preserved cycle of paintings at Purwarama.

The original image house dates from the 1840s and consisted of only the inner chamber and the vestibule to which were later added the ambulatory corridor and the porch. Soon after the addition, the present paintings had been done. The date 1886 is painted over the front door and a painting is dated 1884. The paintings have a significant stylistic variation with the sectional divisions, which seems to be the result of at least three or more different ateliers having been at work at the same time.

These murals are not flat or static and have a continuous narration technique. A number of devices are employed to create a sense of space and activity with a background colour of black or red. A picture strip continuity of the narrative is clearly seen throughout. The characters in the stories are deployed very much like actors on a stage, the setting being provided by architectural forms such as palaces, pavilions or outdoor scenes. The settings are theatrical with interiors separated into rooms and compartments by columns.