# Galleries of Buddhist Art

Posted on

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Lankatilaka Vihara, Handessa, Kandy

Many a Buddhist temple in Sri Lanka is a rare gallery of art. While the massive proportions, and yet serene appearance, of the Buddha statue dominate the interior of a temple, there is often a wealth of other artistic expression vying for the eye of the beholder. They are the frescoes that adorn the walls: expressions of artistic skill and religious fervour which once discovered can provide hours of satisfying exploration.

The walls of Buddhist temples have been an inviting canvas to artists from the time the first temples were built more than 2000 years ago. In fact, Sinhalese art in Sri Lanka is in essence the art of Buddhism. As elsewhere in Asia, Buddhism gave a tremendous impetus to the growth of the arts -painting, sculpture, architecture – in Sri Lanka too. Kings who gave patronage to the new teaching, and constructed the many ancient temples, and the monks who advised them, realised early and well the value of art in spreading the message of Buddhism. Thus today, save for the famous frescoes of Sigiriya, which are among the finest examples of secular art, the abundance of extant Sri Lankan expression in art is Buddhist art, best seen in the temple frescoes.

The use of art to foster the spread of Buddhism was done from the earliest age of Sinhala civilisation. The Mahavamsa, the Great Chronicle of the Sinhalese, which archaeologists regard as one of the best sources of history in South Asia, records that King Dutugemunu (161 – 137 B.C.) commanded artists to illustrate various scenes from the life of the Buddha in the relic chamber of the gigantic Ruvanveliseya Dagaba.

Another king, Jetta Tissa (332 AD.), is known to have been one of the greatest patrons of the arts in Sri Lanka and had himself been an artist of considerable skill. Fa Hsien, the Chinese pilgrim who visited Sri Lanka in the 11th Century AD., records

that on a Buddhist festival both sides of the roads of Anuradhapura were decorated with Buddhist paintings; possibly in the manner of today's pandals put up in public places on Vesak Full Moon Day.

Although detachment from the attractions of the world – and painting was one of those attractions -was considered essential for Buddhist monks seeking a higher existence, the monks and their royal patrons soon realised the powerful influence painting held for drawing men and women towards the new teaching, and in nurturing their belief. Painting soon became an instrument for glorifying the Buddha and illustrating Buddhist stories for the easy comprehension of the people. The depiction of various divine forms, and the sufferings in the various hells, soon became part of the Buddhist tradition of painting. In addition, the fusion of the various religious cults, which were in existence in Sri Lanka at the time of the introduction of Buddhism, with the philosophy of Buddhism led the Sinhala Buddhist to find his way with comparable ease through a rapidly changing world of symbol and image.

Many of the frescoes from ancient temples show how the pre-Buddhist spirits which consisted of nagas (snake spirits), yakshas (demons) and the spirits of the woods, trees, rocks, hills, streams and rivers were woven into the new Buddhist images of the lotus, the chakra ( wheel of life) and the rishi, and the many deities that people the celestial worlds of Buddhist legend. To walk into any of the temples famous for its frescoes is to enter a fascinating gallery of artistic expression. It is to be surrounded by walls depicting several stories of the lives of the Buddha, his life when he attained enlightenment, and those of previous births, when he was striving to attain enlightenment through his journey in Samsara.The walls are adorned with kings and queens, palaces and pleasure gardens, beggars and mendicants, elephants, horses and palanquins, monks and devotees, warriors and demons. Often and technique used in the latterday paintings resemble to some extent the modem cartoon strip, and in other places it is one vast canvas encompassing the earth, the heavens and the nether kingdoms. Many of the ceilings are exquisite works of art, done in traditional Sinhalese motifs. Among the best examples of temple paintings preserved in Sri lanka are today found in Polonnaruwa, the medieval capital which held sway from the 10th to 12th Centuries AD. The Tivanka Image House here is a huge gallery of Buddhist painting. The British Archaeological Commissioner, H.C.P. Bell, writing in 1901 described the art at Tivanka thus: "Probably no old Buddhist temple in Ceylon, certainly in none left to us, was a greater wealth of exquisitely painted scenes from Buddhist legend ever presented

than this medieval vihara of Polonnaruwa. What the stone carvings at Sanchi, at Bharut, and Amaravati, at Boro Budur and elsewhere adumbrate, often doubtfully, has been here set out in coloured fresco, with the naturalness of spirit and technique, that tell the story with unerring fidelity…" That comment still holds true, although the color of the paintings have now faded considerably, and many sections are in danger of complete destruction due to exposure to the elements.

The style of painting at Polonnaruwa shows complete mastery of mass composition. A large mural would consist of a number of small pictures done in a kind of montage of movement showing the development and unravelling of the story. The separation of one picture from another is done not by lines, but by means of a natural screen, a river or tree. Control of complex composition and movement are done with commensurate ease giving the prominent place to the highlight of the story, and all lesser and secondary incidents arranged around it, in a manner which succeeds in giving the whole vast composition a unique balance of rhythm and expression.

The fragments available in museums, of paintings from Mihintale (7th Century AD.) and Mahiyangana (11th Century), and those which still can be seen in a cave at Pulligoda (near Dimbulagala, 7th Century) all show evidence of this style dominating Buddhist temple paintings in Sri Lanka for many centuries. The classical school of Buddhist temple painting in Sri Lanka declined with the fall of Polonnaruwa, and the unsettled conditions which followed repeated invasions from South India, leading to the Sinhalese having to shift their capital from place to place. The next blossoming of temple art is seen in the 17th and 18th Centuries, when the kingdom was established with considerable security in Kandy. The comparative stability of the Kandyan period soon helped revive the indigenous school of painting. The frescoes of the Kandyan period are not drawn from the classical style of Polonnaruwa which was inspired in large measure by Ajanta in India. The styles of the Kandyan frescoes reflect more an influence of the later South India Deccan tradition, and even some traces of European influence. The latter is not unexpected because they were done at a time when the European presence was .strong in the lower maritime regions of the country. The greatest patron of Buddhist art in the Kandyan period was King King Sri Rajasinghe (1747 – 1780). There is hardly a temple in the old Kandy-an kingdom which did not benefit from his patronage. Many of the frescoes of this period were the direct result of his interest in such embellishment of the temples. The predominance of South Indian style in the Kandyan frescoes also reflects the increasing Dravidian influence in the Kandy-an Court, due to the South Indian princesses who married the Kandy-an

kings.

The temple artists of the Kandyan period used a somewhat primitive method and simple style in their work. The themes were mainly the Jataka Tales, the fables of the Buddha's previous incarnations, which are the most popular pan of Buddhist lore, and intended to give practical demonstration of the many Buddhist virtues. A recurrent theme in most temples is the Vessantara Jataka, the story of the Buddha's previous incarnation as King Vessantara who practised charity to the utmost, ultimately giving away his children and wife. This is best depicted in the cave temple at Degaldoruwa.

Another more popular temple, famous for its frescoes, and on the beaten track of tourists, is at Dambulla. This cave temple dates to the 1st Century B.C., but the extant frescoes date from the 18th Century. The roof of the huge rock temple is a vast canopy of colour and line. Once again portrayed in visual detail are many Buddhist stories, and taking prominence here is the Mara Yuddha, the battle with the forces of death, another popular theme in the paintings of temples of this period. The Dambulla Vihara is a complex of five cave temples. One part of the granite ceiling has more than a thousand paintings of the Buddha seated in meditation. It is unfortunate that some parts of this temple show the effects of attempting to restore or "improve" upon the original paintings by unskilled hands.

Episode from Vessantara Jataka – Kumara Maha Vihara, Dodanduwa.

Paintings from Suriyagoda Rajamahavihara and Medwala, Kandy.

A King worshipping the Buddha, Karagampitiya, Subodharama. A many-faced diety, Medawala, 18th century.

The interior of the Talawa Rajamaha Vihara – Marassana, Kandy.

The largest remaining examples of temple frescoes are those of the 18th and 19th Centuries, which saw the last years of the Kandyan kingdom and the complete dominance over the country by Western colonialism, with Kandy ceding to the British in 1815.

It was in this period that there was a marked revival of Buddhism in the South, seen in the considerable number of temples built, many of them painted with lovely frescoes. The best examples of the southern frescoes are seen at Kathaluwa, along the southern coast midway between Galle and Matara. This temple is a veritable treasure-house of temple art. A few kilometres to the south of Colombo, at Dehiwela, the Karagampitiya Temple has some of the best preserved frescoes of the late 18th Century. Its fame as a gallery of treasured Buddhist art has spread far and wide, just as the fame of its statue of the Buddha with blue sapphire eyes. Here the walls of the shrine room and preaching hall are all covered with panels of paintings of Buddhist stories, and it is a place one could spend several hours absorbing the beautiful use of colour and composition.

In his “Story of Sinhalese Painting”, D. B. Dhanapala, one of Sri Lanka’s prominent journalists and art critics of the 1940s, describes the temple artist thus: “In painting, the temple wall was the canvas; religion the theme; and narrative the object. The Sittara with his paint and brush turned the walls into epics of colour in which devotees could scan the ancient stories. Art for the pious peasant was only a medium through which an exemplary life could be taught to the sinner and the sacred knowledge revived in the memory of the saint. It was primarily an effort to present the spirit rather than the form, a story rather than an idea. But this story was told in as attractive a way as possible”. The temples in Colombo and its immediate suburbs have examples of temple art in the late 19th and early 20th Centuries, most of which do not rise to the artistic heights of those of earlier days. However, there is one exception: The Gothami Vihara, at Borella, has its walls painted by George Keyt, one of the greatest living artists of Asia, who has introduced a completely new style to the tradition of temple paintings.

Although there is a vast collection of temple frescoes of the highest standard still in a good state of preservation in many parts of the island, where access to art is free and the viewing is uncluttered, a large part of these artistic treasures is faced with damage and deterioration. The walls on which they are drawn are often crumbling and decayed. In some instances, like in Polonnaruwa, they are exposed to the elements. Worse still, they are threatened by a combination of the zeal of incumbent monks and the piety of laymen, who would prefer to have a fading old

painting covered over with a new drawing, done often in crude style, using garish colours and metallic paints. There are many examples of such work to shock the viewer in Buddhist temples, which should not deter those who look for the genuine thing. Often, hidden in a comer where the new artist’s brush could not reach, will be found the treasure of the past one is looking for.

There is now evidence that the trustees of some temples realise the need to take action. A welcome measure is the rule at Dambulla prohibiting the lighting of joss sticks and coconut oil lamps within the cave temple. It is a practice catching on in other temples too, thus prohibiting even the most eager devotee from touching the beautifully painted walls.

Triple lion decorative motif – Ridi Vihara, Ridigama, Kurunegala district.

Section of the paintings of the temple ac Subhodharama, Karagampitiya.