

A Heritage Preserved In Pages

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The Sinhala publication on paintings associated with Sri Lanka's Buddhist shrines

Years of research, a 100 temples and a cultural history spanning 2,200 years, all encapsulated in the volume “c” (Paintings associated with Sri Lanka's Buddhist shrines) - the most complete work on the Buddhist visual art of Sri Lanka, to date.

Words Prasadini Nanayakkara **Photographs** Damith Wickramasinghe

The 568-paged tome serves as a comprehensive representation of the aesthetic and spiritual sphere of Buddhist cultural heritage. And the sheer wealth of information is accompanied with photographic documentation preserving history and heritage within its pages. “It is not a religious book but a combination of spiritualism and aesthetics, which form the basis of our culture,” explains Dr Daya Hewapathirane.

An endeavour ventured by the President's Office, Dr Daya Hewapathirane, Advisor to the President, took on the monumental task of putting forth a publication of this

nature. The release of the book marked many firsts in the sphere of Sri Lankan fine arts and culture. “There are many books on the subject published by prolific names but they are all published in English. When we approached the President, he suggested that we first publish the book in Sinhala,” states Dr Daya Hewapathirane. Moreover, while many other publications feature a handful of temples, this book features temple paintings or murals of 100 ancient Buddhist sites.

Thus the book is all encompassing in its content covering artistic styles and traditions, themes, painting surfaces and historic periods of Buddhist visual art and culture. Each of these aspects is exemplified with images that include the most renowned and the most remote and isolated temples amongst its collection. For instance, the famous frescoes of Sigiriya, Tivanka Pilimage in Polonnaruwa, Pulligoda Caves in Dimbulagala and Hindagala paintings of Kandy. Photographs of each have been taken on site by Dr Hewapathirane himself and his son Dr Sesath Hewapathirane.

“We have studied possibly every article ever published, in any language on this topic and used them as references for the book,” states Dr Hewapathirane on the mammoth task of developing the content for the book. These references can be found at the end of the book — a compiled list of 667 references, which on its own is a valuable resource to anyone with an interest in the subject. Featuring art from the third century BC to the 21st century, the book has been hailed as the most complete work on Buddhist art by those with a deep appreciation and knowledge on the topic.

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The book stands as a valuable educational resource and is thus suitable not only for students but is a comprehensive guide for teachers as well. Accordingly a license from the Department of Education certifies the book for school libraries as recommended reading. At present, free copies of the book have been given to public libraries, all universities and many public school libraries. “One of the main reasons for writing this book is with the younger generation in mind. For 13 years they learn the history of Sri Lanka in school. Buddhist art is just one aspect that is elaborated in this book. When children are exposed to the depth and scope of one topic it opens their minds to pursue others,” he explains.

The book also serves to preserve history for generations to come. Seeing that ancient murals will in time succumb to the natural course of deterioration, the book will remain a valuable record. Dr Hewapahirane reveals that some of the paintings photographed in the 1990s are no longer in existence but the book would be proof that they did once exist and in turn holds long-term value. The English language edition of the book, 'The Heritage of Buddhist Art' has already been written and slated for release at the end of this year. "Art is universal and tourists have an appreciation for our ancient art forms. The income generated from tourism can in turn be utilised to preserve our heritage. We also hope to have the English version in all Sri Lankan embassies and consulates, in order to share our heritage with the rest of the world," he states. The Tamil version of the book is also in the works and would further the endeavour of instilling the value and importance of Sri Lankan heritage and culture in the younger generations.

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