Moonstone Step into Sanctuary

Posted on

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Of all the many mediums through which the versatile craftsmen of yore sought to express themselves, sculpture is just one. Try as he may, however, the craftsman can never escape his environment; it is always either consciously or unconsciously reflected in his work.

It does seem incredible that ancient sculptors, working with crude hand tools, were able to turn out objects of rare beauty from rough stone. The beauty and originality of Sri Lankan art is renowned the world over, and dates back well over 20 centuries in time, to the birth of Buddhism in Sri Lanka.

Buddhism was introduced in 247 B.C. by Arahat Mahinda, son of Emperor Asoka of India. It is written in the ‘Mahavamsa’, the chronicle of the Sinhalese, that Prince Mahinda met the king of Anuradhapura while the latter was on a hunting expedition, and preached to him the Buddhist precepts, thereupon converting the king and his

subjects to Buddhism and laying the foundation of a faith that formed the backdrop to Sinhala culture. The spirit of Buddhism thus pervaded the daily lives of the masses and most works of art were created for the glorification of the faith.

Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa, the capital cities of ancient Sri Lanka, were the most influenced by this growing Buddhist consciousness. Buddhist culture flourished for about 15 centuries, in these two cities. Anuradhapura, Sri Lanka's first capital, was founded in the 4th century B.C. and held sway as a city rich in culture for over 10 centuries. It was a city populated by a people of rare intelligence and creativity. Many of its exquisite works of art are preserved to this day, and rank among the world's most beautiful artefacts. Polonnaruwa rose to fame in 1170 after the decline of Anuradhapura, and remained a capital city for two centuries, reaching a period of prosperity known today as the Augustan Age of Sinhalese Art. Many kings have been associated with the arts, and it is because of their keen interest many thousands of years ago, that Sri Lankan craftsmanship survives today. Many examples of Buddhist architecture exist in the two ancient cities – 'dagobas' or shrines which housed Buddhist relics, sculptures of the Buddha himself in diverse stances, as well as many examples of secular architecture influenced by Buddhism, like palaces, pavilions and ponds. Of all this architecture, perhaps the most original and the most exquisite, is the moonstone architecture. Although its very name evokes visions of romantic heavenly bequests, the moonstone in Buddhist architecture serves a more definite purpose. The moonstone embodies the essence of the doctrine of Buddhism, in a unique and aesthetically pleasing manner.

Moonstone architecture is unique to Sri Lanka in its evolution and development. No tradition anywhere in the world can lay claim to sculpture of this shape and style, although overtones of South Indian temple architecture are manifest in the over-all design. Its embellishments and intricacy of design, however, can be attributed to the creativity of the ancient Sinhalese craftsmen. The moonstone is a semi-circular slab of stone, half moon in shape known as 'sandakada pahana' in the Sinhala language. Although its name was derived from its appearance, it was from the shape of the half open lotus flower that the original craftsmen of the moonstone drew inspiration. The lotus in Buddhism, is a symbol of permanence, since the lotus bulb is believed to have a long life-span and continues to propagate for centuries. The circular design of the moonstone symbolises the circle of life, the process of birth and re-birth which is the lot of every Buddhist. In order to appreciate the originality of this piece of sculpture, one must acquaint oneself with the Buddhist precepts.

According to Buddhist beliefs, man is the master of his own fate, and must work out his salvation for himself. Thus, the life of a good Buddhist should, from start to end be consumed in a single-minded search for truth, leading finally to the attainment of ‘nirvana’ or transcendental enlightenment, the Buddhist’s ultimate goal. Buddhism is based on the belief that all things in the universe are impermanent, and that every aspect of life consists of some form of suffering, which stems from the sins of hatred and desire. Escape from these sins is possible only by following the ‘eightfold path of goodness and virtue’.

The moonstone is strategically positioned at the foot of the image house in a manner which compels devotees to step on the stone before ascending the flight of steps leading to the image house. The moonstone consists of five or six concentric belts, elaborately embellished with motifs of fauna and flora. Each concentric belt is the width of a man’s foot, and the pilgrim steps on each in tum before entering the shrine room which marks the end of his journey. With every step he symbolically overcomes one of the perils and pitfalls that awaits him in life.

The four steps leading up to the shrine represent the four noble truths of Buddhism. They are suffering, the cause of suffering, cessation of suffering and the way to the cessation of suffering. It is by achieving each of these stages through discipline, wisdom and meditation that they devotee finally ends his pilgrimage by attaining nirvana, the final victory over mortality, symbolized by the pilgrim standing on the monolithic landing stone at the entrance of the shrine.

The moonstones in Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa vary in size, but their main composition and design are similar. Each motif carved into the concentric belt of the moonstone symbolises the nature of man’s existence on earth, and illustrates a particular aspect of it. The meanings of the individual motifs are said to be folkM • The outer-most bonier□□ ,iolent and agitated tongues of flickering flame. These are the flames of sinful desire and hatred. co v.bich e’\·ery human being is subjected. Its position in the outer-most border serves to illustrate that the emire world is influenced by these sinful emotions. The next border depias a row of animals in ceaseless motion. There are four pes of animals, each beast symbolising the four perils of the world which everybody experiences at some &age of their lives; the elephant represents birth, the horse decay, the lion disease, and bull death- All animals are shown in profile. The elephants are remarkably lifelike and differ from one another in detail. Their trunks are depicted in different positions, and the sculptor’s touch has given a clever twist to the tail and trunk. The horses too are well sculptured, but the bull and the lion are carved with less precision and lack the

attention to detail that contributes to the sculptured beauty of the elephant and horse.

The next band is laced with a lacey creeper, its tendrils entwining the band. It is totally devoid of fruits and flowers and its stylised roots begin at the left-hand comer and spread out towards the right, looping themselves into a loose knot. This creeper symbolises an unproductive life which is enmeshed in cravings for sensual pleasures.

Into the fourth band is carved a graceful procession of swans swimming in dignified retreat from the creeper, towards the lotus flowers depicted in the next band. It is believed that swans carry in their beaks, provisions sufficient to sustain a spartan life, and that they possess a wisdom and skill that enables them to separate life-giving nutrients from the water. Thus the swans symbolise wise men who rise above the desires of the flesh in their search for purity and truth.

The lotus flower is widely used in Eastern mythology, because of its picturesqueness and its significance as an emblem of perfection. Thus, the wise man steps from the circle of life, completely purified in mind and body, of which he is now the master. Most moonstones were hewn from gneiss, a hard type of rock which permits sharpness of detail, which is not possible in sculpture carved from crystalline limestone and granite.

The evolution of moonstone architecture is fascinating. The origins of the most perfect specimens can be traced to the plain semi-circular stone to be found near the Ruwanweliseya dagoba in Anuradhapura, which is totally devoid of embellishments and bears little resemblance to its ornate successor. From the plain slab evolved the moonstone carved with an expanded lotus in its centre, an intermediary stage in the process of evolution, an example of which can be seen at the Thuparama dagoba. The finest example of the highly ornate moonstone is at the Mahasen pavilion at Anuradhapura. The moonstones at the ‘hetadage’ and the ‘vatadage’ pavilions in Polonnaruwa can also be attributed to the latter stages of development.

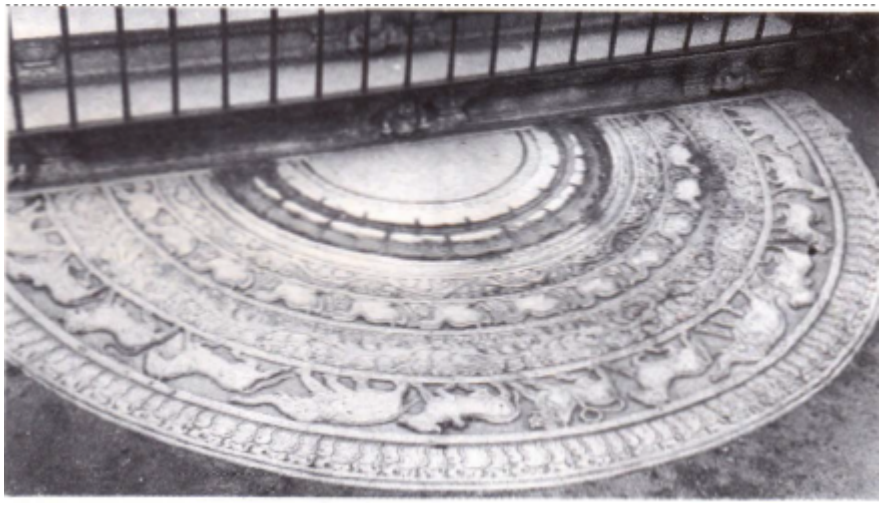
The more ornate for01s seem to have developed around 850 A D. The moonstones are carved both in high and low relief.

When tracing the development of moonstone architecture, it is noticed that the moonstones in Polonnaruwa are inferior in quality to those at Anuradhapura. In the

Anuradhapura era the sculptor seems to have exercised a degree of fine-tuned precision and skill which made him the master of his craft, enabling him to mould unyielding stone to his wishes, with ease. However, the moonstone craftsmanship of the Polonnaruwa period, though the artistic precision guiding the chisels of the Anuradhapura sculptor had been lost somewhere along the way. Ancient art forms are indeed the gem of Sri Lankan culture, a worthy legacy bequeathed by generations past, now immortalised by their contributions to the richness of Sri Lanka’s cultural heritage.



A moonstone at Kelaniya temple patterned with elephants and geometric designs.



The moonstone near the Abhayagiri complex at Anuradhapura, the best example of this special form of art.



Rows of swans, elephants and horses on the moonstone at the Vatadage at Polonnaruwa