Spiritual Temple Art and Architecture of the Kelaniya Raja Maha Viharaya

Posted on



Kelaniya Raja Maha Viharaya evokes a sense of reverence

Upanda sita karapu pawu netha warak wandoth Kelaniye (the sins of a lifetime disappears if you worship once at the Kelaniya Temple), describes a Sinhala poem. Kelaniya Raja Maha Viharaya is a centre of spirituality and also continues to protect the cultural and traditional values of this island nation.

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Photographs Menaka Aravinda

Kelaniya Temple is undeniably a spiritual place of worship. In sixth century BC, the Buddha arrived in Sri Lanka on his third and final visit and at the invitation of Maniakkika, a Naga King, he visited Kelaniya, where he preached the Dhamma while seated on a gem-studded throne. The throne is said to be enshrined within the stupa at the temple premises, designed in the shape of a heap of paddy. Since then, Buddhists have regarded Kelaniya as a hallowed ground. Within the temple premises, visitors find tranquility and serenity, regardless of differences in culture, nationalities, race or faith.

However, the importance of the Raja Maha Viharaya is manifold. Not only is it a place of deep reverence, it is also a centre where Sri Lankan art and architecture prosper. On a visit to the Kelaniya Temple, we immersed ourselves in the temple paintings, murals and the architecture.

“Kelaniya is not just an important religious place,” Ven K Mahinda Sangharakkhita Thero, Chief Incumbent of Kelaniya Temple explained, “It is also significant for its arts and architecture. If you wish to discover the culture and traditions of Sri Lanka, Kelaniya is an ideal learning place. Here, traces of the Polonnaruwa and Kandyan era can be found”.

Throughout its history, Kelaniya Temple has been destroyed, renovated, neglected and rediscovered once again. It has experienced periods of turbulence from Kalinga Maga of South India in the 13th century to the Portuguese, Dutch and British. And yet, devout Buddhist Kings from centuries ago to modern-day philanthropists have helped the Kelaniya Temple to overcome adversities and remain strong. Following the defeat of Kalinga Maga, King Valgamba III repaired the damages to the temple. In 1767, King Kirthi Sri Rajasinghe of Kandy renovated the temple, neglected since the arrival of the Dutch. The temple experienced a period of tranquility before it again succumbed to disrepair. Lady Helena Wijewardena took the initiative to restore the temple to its former glory in 1927. Periods of destructions have erased much of the original structures. What we observe now can be traced back to the Kandyan era and the early 20th century. Nevertheless, the architecture and art narrate a compelling tale.



The painting depicts the invasion of the Kelaniya Temple by Kalinga Maga and its restoration by King Valagamba III

The temple art painted on the walls of the Image House of the Kelaniya Temple are therefore influenced by the artistic styles of the 18th and 20th century. Built by Helena Wijewardena in 1927, the façade of the Image House contains murals of gods, animals and traditional designs. Inside, it contains four chambers.

The two halls of the King’s Image House dates back to the Kandy era. Here, the scenes depict Jathaka stories, Arahants and Gods. The Kandyan era paintings were done by a team of artists known as the Gorana Guru Kulaya. The limited colours available at the time had been used to paint the various figures, deities, and traditional designs while the ceiling features astrological signs and other protective symbols. The New Temple House section contains a separate hall and a shrine room and was built in 1927. The paintings are the work of artist Solias Mendis, who painted the history of the temple, the three visits of the Buddha, Jathaka stories and scenes of religious importance on the walls.

In the Image House, visitors can find some of the most recognised Buddhist images

such as the first visit of Buddha to Sri Lanka where he preached Dhamma to the Yaka (indigenous tribe) in Mahiyanganaya, the arrival of Sangamitta Theri with the sacred Bo sapling and the arrival of the Sacred Tooth Relic, hidden in the coiffure of Indian Princess Hemamala who was accompanied by Prince Dantha.



The elaborate murals in the main shrine dating back to the Kandyan era

A statue of Avalokiteshvara stands near the white stupa. The beautiful bell donated by Japan is located in front of the Bo tree. As we slowly walked towards the area allocated to lighting oil lamps, the soothing chiming of the bell serenaded us.

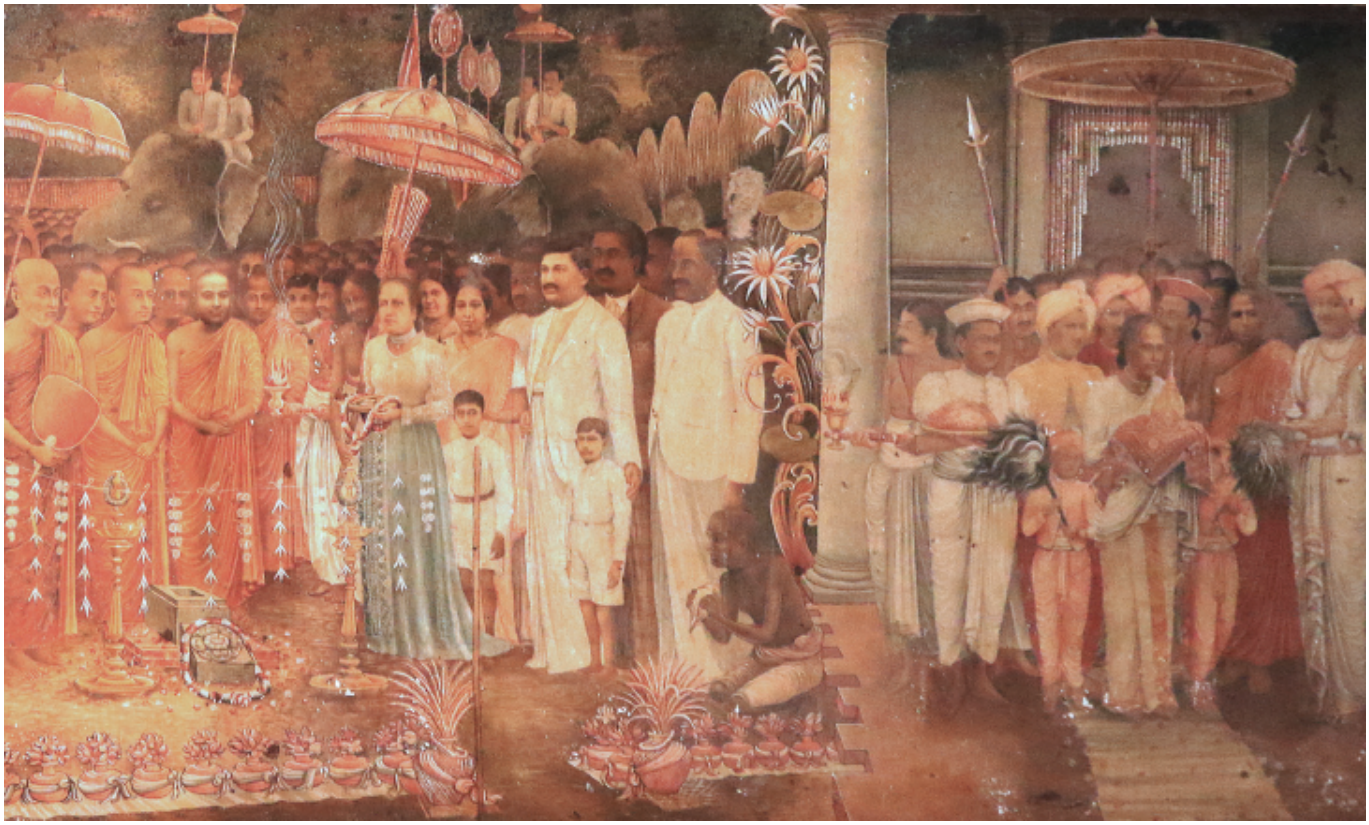
Ahead of the Duruthu Perahera in January, the temple conducts a series of 72 sermons which will be held until January 12, followed by unceasing pirith chanting until January 15th. The perahera will take to the streets on January 19th, accompanied by the processions for the guardien deities Vibishana, Vishnu and Kataragama.

A visit to the Kelaniya temple can be a spiritual experience. It is also ideal to discover intricate temple art and architecture of Sri Lanka.



The intricate detailed work of the inner shrine.





A painting inside the temple premises portray Helena Wijewardena’s contribution to the temple.



Ven K Mahinda Sangharakkhita Thero, Chief Incumbent, Kelaniya Temple



Entrance to the main shrine flanked by the guardian deities.



Solias Mendis’s painting illustrating the arrival of Sangamitta Theri with the sacred Bo sapling.