Trinity College Chapel: reflecting a Sri Lankan heritage

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The design of the Trinity College Chapel, Kandy was inspired by the ancient kingdoms of the island.

Graceful and spiritual, exuding an aura of ancient Sri Lanka, the Chapel of Trinity College, Kandy brings together the best of the East and the West.

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Photographs Menaka Aravinda.

It was on August 19, 1922, on the occasion of the College Jubilee that Rev Foss Westcott, Metropolitan of India and Ceylon, laid the foundation stone of the College Chapel. The initiative was taken by Rev A G Fraser, who was the Principal of the College at that time. The students had been worshipping at Oakley's Church, which was on the school premises. However, Rev Fraser was dissatisfied as it did not fulfill the spiritual requirements of the school. Therefore, it was decided that a new chapel would be built on the former cricket grounds.

Interestingly, the architect of the Trinity Chapel was Vice-Principal Rev L J Gaster. As both the Principal and Vice-Principal appreciated and respected Sri Lankan culture and heritage, inspiration was drawn from the ancient kingdoms of the island. They wanted to create a place of worship that belonged to the country and did not seem foreign in architecture or design. It was during this time that archaeologists had uncovered historical sites from beneath the jungles. And Rev Gaster on his visits to Polonnaruwa was able to witness the beautiful, detailed, and skillful craftsmanship of magnificent structures that had been created using stone without machines. The stone pillars at Nissankalatha Mandapaya were taken as an example of the design of the Chapel.

At first glance, the Trinity College Chapel is awe-inspiring and reflects the architectural and design traditions of the Anuradhapura, Polonnaruwa, and Kandyan eras. It is for this reason that the Chapel was referred to as 'A Sinhalese Church for Trinity College, Kandy.' Fifty four pillars rise 20 feet above ground level holding the

massive clay tile roof of 75 feet. The main stem octagonal has carved panels on the square faces with wooden pekadas representing the lotus. At the time of construction, each pillar had cost 700 rupees and the pekadas cost 300 rupees. No walls are surrounding the structure; as such, the environment blends seamlessly with the interior — the cooling breeze of the Kandy hills blowing through.

To re-create the ancient splendor, large granite blocks, also known as cinnamon rock due to its lighter shade, were sourced from Aruppala situated near Katugasthota. It had taken more than 50 days to transport the large blocks. Two elephants were required, one to pull and the other to push a single piece of granite along the slopes to the construction site. Sri Lankan, as well as Indian artisans had chiseled the pillars, the detailed wooden pekadas, and other intricate carvings to create a masterpiece. The pekadas support the beams and also resemble four bells.

Each pillar has four different carvings on the sides, thus resulting in more than 400 designs. The British Colleges and University Colleges of the academic staff at that time had contributed to the building of the Chapel. Thus the crests of their schools in England have also been engraved on the pillars, totaling nine.

The initial detailed drawing by Rev Gaster indicates that the Chapel had been originally designed as two floors with the choir and organ on the upper level. However, this was later changed so that the choir and congregation were on the ground floor. Furthermore, the flat-paneled original timber ceiling was stopped at the two corners, as the massive high roof was deemed better.

The murals above the pulpit and lectern were painted by the famous Sri Lankan artist David Paynter, who was an Old Boy of Trinity College. The main mural was painted in 1933 and depicted the crucifixion, this, is believed to be one of the only paintings in which Jesus Christ is depicted without a beard. The frescoes on either side, represent the ‘Parable of the Good Samaritan’ (1957) and the ‘Washing of the Feet’ (1965). Interestingly, in the ‘Washing of the Feet’, it is believed that the people are previous teachers and masters of the school. Within the Side or Inner Chapel, the mesmerizing mural of ‘Are Ye Able,’ from the Bible encompasses the entire wall.

The Chapel of the Light of the World (Side Chapel) was consecrated on March 3, 1935, in the presence of the Bishop of Colombo, dedicating the Chapel to the Glory of God. The spirituality of the Trinity College Chapel can be felt as one steps into the premises. It is an overwhelming feeling of oneness, of belonging.

Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols



The Carol Service of Trinity College Kandy, the traditional Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols is distinctive to any other in the island held in the high sweeping-roofed open Chapel with unique acoustics. The Trinity College Carol Service is based on the traditions of British public schools. The Trinity College Choir, with a history as old as the school itself, has had great influences, notably by Major Gordon Burrows. He joined the school in 1946 following the demobilization of the Military Intelligence Section of the SEAC Headquarters that was under the purview of Lord Mountbatten in Peradeniya. The Trinity College Choir, under the leadership of Gordon Burrows had been heard on Radio Ceylon numerous times. On December 10, 1950, the Choir had the honour of being broadcast over the World Service of the BBC.

The Carol Service this year will be held on December 1, 2019, from 6.30 pm. The

Trinity College Chapel holds a unique place in the hill capital, and the Carol Service is looked forward to in the calendar as a precursor to Christmas festivities. The atmosphere is surreal, with the young choristers dressed in cassocks and holding lit candles descending along the winding path.

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