

Influence of European Diaspora on Sri Lankan Buddhist Art¹

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Abstract

Buddhism and Buddhist art in Sri Lanka, which is the backbone of the Sri Lankan culture, is believed to be a Sri Lankan manifestation with a strong influence from India. The role of the British diaspora in Sri Lanka which gradually changed the face of Buddhist art is not given much attention. This is a study on Sri Lankan Buddhist art between the eighteenth to the twentieth centuries to identify the influence of the British diaspora. This paper studies the diaspora influence on architecture, paintings styles and clothing styles and the reasons for such absorption by the Sri Lankan society.

Introduction

The circulation of cultural expression as reflected in the eighteenth to twentieth century Buddhist art of Sri Lanka portrays a tapestry of contemporary culture. This was explained by Prof. Senake Bandaranayake (2006: 105) while discussing the Late Period Murals:

Relationships between artistic traditions or other cultural phenomena have in the past been rather simplistically explained in terms of diffusion from common source of origin and influence from a 'parent' culture, with the latter role often being attributed to the oldest or grandest tradition. Accordingly, historical or artistic development was seen as a unilinear process, moving in a chronological

hierarchy. While such ideas are still deeply ingrained in contemporary thinking, modern scholarship has begun to treat historical development as a far more complex and essentially a multilinear and multicentral process, in which the internal dynamics and resources of a given society or culture form the principal sources of its historical evolution. Thus, the distinctive character and attributes of a localized tradition and the processes that have given rise to that distinctiveness – i.e. the history of its internal development – are now seen to be the most important focus of historical investigation.

The distinctive features of the localised traditions, reflecting the internal historical and cultural changes brought forth due to centuries of European rule are reflected most distinctively in Buddhist art works of Sri Lanka between eighteenth and twentieth centuries. The European influence on Buddhist art predates eighteenth century CE in Sri Lanka. However, as the existing examples mostly date from post eighteenth century CE, this paper will highlight the influence between the eighteenth to twentieth centuries CE.

Early studies on Buddhist art carried out by erudite scholars such as T.W. Rhys Davids, Ananda Coomaraswamy, Stella Kramrisch, Senrath Paranavitana, Siri Gunasinghe, Nandadeva Wijesekara, L.T.P. Manjusri, etc., show the eighteenth to twentieth century Buddhist art of Sri Lanka as part of the Kandyan tradition and the obvious European influence on culture reflected on the paintings was ignored. The more recent detailed studies on Kandyan art by Senaka Bandaranayake, M. Somathilake, etc., too only refer very vaguely to the prevalence of European influence. Senake Bandaranayake has analysed the Buddhist mural paintings of Kataluwa Poorvarama (**Fig. 1**), an ancient temple, abundant with paintings reflecting European

cultural traits that fall into 4 stylistic categories. The style he refers to as D contains European clothing, jewellery, etc. However, other than discussing the overall composition and other stylistic details, no reference to European traits is made (Bandaranayake 2006: 204-13).



Figure 1: The Story of Mahadhana Sitano, Kataluwa Poorvarama Ancient Temple

M. Somathilake (2002: 142-66) refers to the European cultural traits discovered among the Buddhist art of the Southern coastal region of Sri Lanka. Somathilake too does not refer to the European cultural characteristics which are abundant in paintings of the Ratnapura district which was part of the Kandyan kingdom, and the minor details of European origin identified in Kandyan temples such as Lankathilake have been disregarded.² Leena Seneheweera (2011), another proponent of a Southern sub school of paintings in Sri Lanka states that British rulers of Sri Lanka promoted the inclusion of their cultural traits in Sri Lankan Buddhist art and architecture.³

Sri Lankan maritime regions were ruled initially by the Portuguese (1505 to 1656 CE) and subsequently by the Dutch (1656 to 1798 CE) and the British (1798 Maritime Regions and

1815 Kandyan Kingdom to 1948 CE). The European cultural traits were strongly absorbed into the maritime regions by the eighteenth century with Sri Lankans adopting European architecture, clothing, words, food and other cultural traits. The Portuguese, the earliest Europeans to rule the maritime areas were instrumental in introducing European art, architecture, clothing, food, music, etc., to Sri Lanka. Portuguese officials, soldiers, crafts people, etc., who came to Sri Lanka and married Sri Lankans initiated the construction of churches, fortifications, etc., and worked with local crafts people in the construction of buildings. The introduction of *Pise de Terre*,⁴ use of terracotta floor bricks, half round tiles, etc., were a part of the Portuguese influence on architecture (De Vos 2002: 399-437). The Portuguese also introduced the *Cabaya* or coat to males, *Juan hatte* (a jacket with long sleeves) for women, *saya* (skirt), *kabakurruttu* (a short, long sleeved cotton jacket edged at the side with dainty pillow lace), shoes and sandals, etc., all of which have now become a part of Sri Lankan culture and considered Sri Lankan rather than European (Wimalaratne 2002: 543). The Dutch East India Company which took over from the Portuguese was more interested in trading and profit making rather than colonising. However, the Dutch East India Company had a Department of Artisans where master craftsmen were sent to Dutch colonies to train local craftsmen and create European style goods including furniture for the European market (Silva 2002: 343-67). These Portuguese and Dutch craftsmen along with local craftsmen designed and created architecture replicating European architectural styles with slight modifications in Sri Lanka. By early eighteenth century European art, architecture, sculpture, clothing, foot ware, food and many other aspects had penetrated the Sri Lankan culture. The absorption was gradual and became so deeply embedded

that Sri Lankans accepted it as a part of culture rather than something forced by the colonial rulers (Kelegama and Madawela: 2002). This paper is an endeavour to portray the circulation of European cultural traits in Buddhist art.

Buddhist Architecture of Sri Lanka

Sri Lankan Buddhist architecture had evolved for more than a millennium by the time the first Europeans arrived in the island in early sixteenth century CE. The architectural design of Buddhist *stupa* and *Bodhighara* continued to flourish with very few structural or ornamental changes despite the European influence. However, the Image Houses, Preaching Halls, Residence of the monks etc., absorbed many European cultural traits. A new and significant introduction to Buddhist architecture was the Bell Tower, hitherto an unknown element in Sri Lanka.

Architectural Details

The Image Houses were created to house a figure of Lord Buddha in a seated, standing or recumbent posture. The early Anuradhapura period's rectangular shaped simple Image House of the Samadhi statue (**Fig. 2**) evolved into an intricately decorated building with stucco on the outside as proved by the Tivanka Image House of Polonnaruwa period and Lankathilaka Image House of Gampola Period (**Fig. 3**).

The traditional Buddhist Image House of Sri Lanka had evolved into 3 distinctive architectural designs by the eighteenth century. These are (1) Cave Temple Image Houses which is the continuation of the ancient cave temple tradition in Sri Lanka, (2) Temple on Pillars and (3) Solitary Image House with an

inner chamber for the main statue of Buddha and an outer chamber surrounding it (**Fig. 4**).



Figure 2: Samadhi Statue



Figure 3: Lankathilake Image House

By early eighteenth century while these traditional types were still existing and being constructed, a new facade for the temples gradually started evolving. This facade was in many aspects similar to the facade of churches in Sri Lanka which were created with arches and gables very similar in style to European churches (**Fig. 5**).

It is interesting to note that these eighteenth century church facades in Sri Lanka, although European in style and design, were of a simpler design than their European counterparts. These churches predate the facades of the Buddhist temples and were created by local craftsmen under the instructions of Europeans.⁵

**a****a****b****b****c****c**

Figure 4: a. Dambulla Cave Temple, b. Pelmadulla Temple on Pillars, and c. Kathaluwa Solitary Image House with Inner Chamber for the Main Statue and a Circumambulatory Outer Chamber

Figure 5: a. Dutch Reformed Church inside the Galle Fort, b. Wolfendhal Church in Pettah, and c. A Church in Torino, Italy

The stucco designs on the churches, albeit simple, were the precursor to the elaborate designs which adorned the facades of Buddhist temples. It should be noted that these Buddhist temples added an elaborate facade but the interior design remained unchanged with an inner main chamber surrounded by a circumambulatory outer chamber. The earliest European style Buddhist temple facades date back to the nineteenth century and it is probable that creation of these facades was initiated earlier. However, these early facades no longer survive or have changed their appearance and hence cannot be properly dated. These Buddhist temple facades have gables, arches and elaborate stucco designs creating a complex design of the facade (**Fig. 6**).

**a****b****c****d**

Figure 6: Facades of: a. Weragampita Ancient Temple Matara, b. Wevurukannala Ancient Temple near Matara, c. Delgamuwa Ancient Temple near Ratnapura, and d. Dondanduwa Temple near Galle

The early European facade temples were probably created along the coast which had absorbed European cultural traits; gradually the style penetrated interior parts of the island. There are also instances where actual churches have been converted into Buddhist temples as in the case of Balapitiya Ancient Temple⁶ (**Fig. 7**).



Figure 7: Balapitiya Ancient Temple where a church has been converted to an Image House and Preaching Hall

Bell Towers

The Bell Tower which has become an integral part of Sri Lankan Buddhist temples was introduced by Europeans. Bell Towers have not been discovered or identified in Sri Lanka during the pre-colonial times in association with Buddhist temples. These Bell Towers are not replicas of European Bell Towers but have similar architectural details (**Fig. 8**).

The Bell Towers associated with churches in Sri Lanka were constructed by indigenous craftsmen following European styles as portrayed by the Bell Tower of the Dutch Reformed Church in Galle (**Fig. 9**).



Figure 8: Bell Towers from Europe



Figure 9: Bell Tower of Dutch Reformed Church in Galle

With the introduction of Bell Towers to churches, Buddhist temples too adapted it as an integral part of Buddhist culture (Fig. 10).

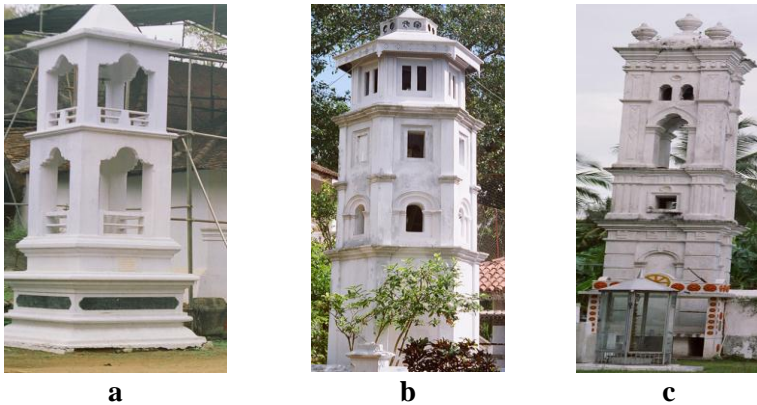


Figure 10: Bell Towers of: a. Degaldoruwa Cave Temple near Kandy, b. Gandara Ancient Temple near Matara, and c. Hittetiya Ancient Temple in Galle

It is interesting to note that these Bell Towers which served dual purposes as Clock Towers in Europe gradually changed their tower like appearances and evolved into a Sri Lankan Buddhist architectural design by the twentieth century (**Fig. 11**).



Figure 11: Twentieth Century Bell Tower from Galpoththawela Ancient Temple in Pelmadulla

European Divinity: Angels in Buddhist Art

Angles adorned Christian churches for centuries in Europe. The image of angels predates Christianity and early angels are derived from Assyrian images of ‘Winged Genies’, the *daimons*, divinities associated with ancestors, the deceased and the protector of the dead. During the Renaissance period artists started using the image of Eros or Cupid of Greek and Roman mythology to represent angels (Frongia 2005: 280). These two types of angels continued harmoniously to adorn the walls, ceilings, pillars and other architectural details of churches in Europe during the last millennium (**Fig. 12**).

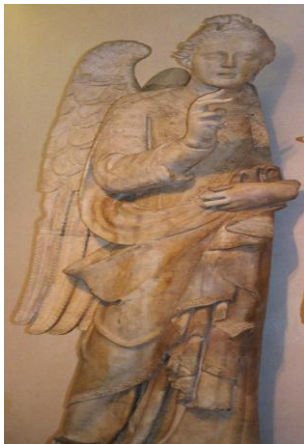
**a****b**

Figure 12: a. Assyrian Winged Genie type Angel from Florence in Italy, and b. Cupid type Angel of Greek and Roman mythology from Torino in Italy

The Cupid like angel can be identified due to its cherubic face, curly hair, fluttering wings on its back, and mostly bare genitals or genitals covered with a shawl or a scarf, playing musical

instruments, holding a garland of flowers, etc. It is this type of angels which became popular in Sri Lankan Buddhist art.

The Christian churches in Sri Lanka too featured these angels on walls, on stained glass windows, tombstones, etc. These were created by local craftsmen who copied these figures from sketches, books or other portable art material. Some of these angels lack the fluidity and the elegance of their European counterparts but they can be identified very distinctively as angels (**Fig. 13**).



Figure 13: a. Angels carved on a Tomb stone at the Dutch Reformed Church in Galle, b. Stucco Angels at the Dutch Reformed Church in Galle and c. Angel carved on a Tombstone at the Wolfendhaal Church in Colombo

Sri Lankan Buddhist art has its own pantheon which has developed over the centuries. This pantheon includes Hindu gods as well as other divine beings such as *Naga Raja* (or the 'King of Snakes') often depicted in Buddhist art belonging to the Anuradhapura period (**Fig. 14**).

Sri Lankan divine beings can be identified by their elaborate headdress, numerous necklaces and other jewellery, etc. The iconography of Sri Lankan Buddhist divine beings adheres to this basic concept as seen by the *Bodhisattva* figures at Buduruwagala, divine beings in Polonnaruwa Tivanka Image House and Galvihara Temple as well as in the post-sixteenth

century paintings of the divine beings at the Temple of the sacred Tooth Relic in Kandy.



a



b

Figure 14: a. Naga Raja Guardstone at Sri Maha Bodhiya in Anuradhapura, and b. A divine being at the Temple of the Sacred Tooth Relic in Kandy

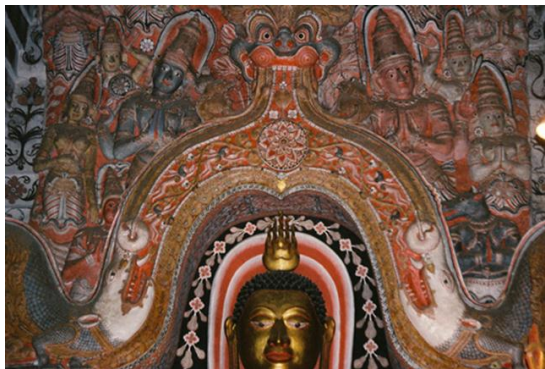


Figure 15: Makara Torana surrounded by guardian divine beings at Lankathilake Temple near Kandy

These divine beings were always portrayed as protectors or guardians of Buddhist sites. Hence they were placed at the entrance of the temple, etc. During the Polonnaruwa period the Hindu pantheon of gods or divine beings were gradually absorbed into Buddhist art and during the post Polonnaruwa period this pantheon of divine beings were mostly found decorating entrances adorned by the *Makara Torana* (or the 'Dragon Archway') (**Fig. 15**).

However, since the European colonial era, angels have claimed a unique place in Sri Lankan Buddhist art. The angels with wings have evolved into a Buddhist divine beings and have developed their own iconography. The Mirissa Veheragalle Samudragiri ancient temple is a treasure trove of paintings where the changing appearance of the angels can be studied in detail. Most of these angel figures appear on the circumambulatory outer chamber which has sculptures of Buddha who preceded the *Sakyamuni* Buddha, predicting the person who will be the next Buddha (**Fig. 16**).

Most of these angel figures appear between the statues of Buddha and above the head of the next predicted Buddha. These angels have somewhat cherubic faces with puffed cheeks, always holding a musical instrument or a flower garland. However, unlike their European counterparts, Buddhist angels are all wearing short pants which end above their knee and appear to be more robust. It is interesting to note that not all figures have wings but they share enough characteristics to be identified as angels. Thus, a Buddhist angel has evolved to a figure which has curly hair, puffed cheeks or a cherubic face, wearing short pants above the knee and holding a flower garland or a musical instrument (**Fig. 17**).



Figure 16: Angels in the Mirissa Veheragalla Samudragiri Ancient Temple

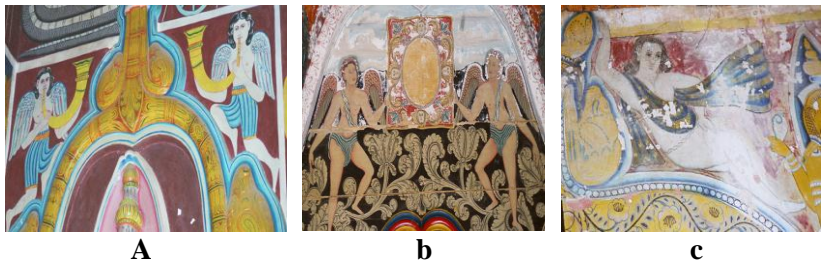


Figure 17: Angels in: a. Meegahagoda Ancient Temple, b. Pelmadulla Ancient Temple, and c. Nakandawala Ancient Temple

The shawl which appeared on the angels of Europe to cover their genitals have evolved into a shawl covering the upper body. The Sri Lankan style Angels appear on doors, doorways, entrances, on either side and below the *Makara Torana* (Dragon archway), etc. (**Fig. 18**).

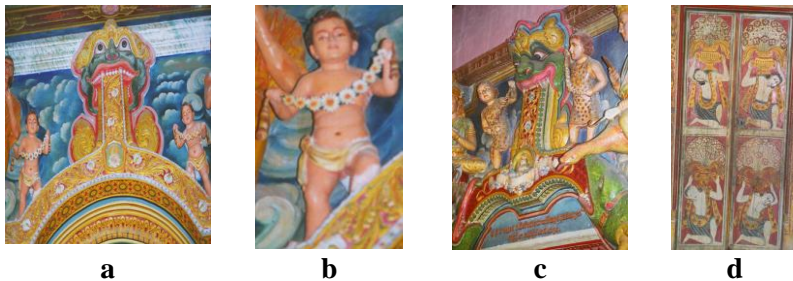


Figure 18: a. Balapitiya Ancient Temple Sri Lankan style Angels with Flower Garlands on either side of the Dragon Archway, b. Details of the Angel, c. Hellala Ancient Temple, and d. Mirissa Veheragalla Samudragiri Ancient Temple Door with Angels

These are typical places where Sri Lankan Buddhist divine beings, garbed in traditional attire are depicted. These Angels appear together with other divine beings of the Buddhist Pantheon.

Furniture in Buddhist Paintings

Very little is known about pre-colonial furniture of Sri Lanka. The large stone seat at the Audience Hall Rock in Sigiriya Terrace Garden and the stone carved seat on top of the Sigiriya rock provide evidence of traditional seats of Sri Lanka which were probably made comfortable with woven mats and cushions. The ordinary homes of Sri Lanka used different types of mats to sit. As the Sinhalese words for *Almairah* (cupboard),

Lachchuwa (drawer), *Kanappuwa* (Stool), etc., were derived from Portuguese and Dutch, it can be assumed that these items were not a part of Sri Lankan furniture. The semi-circular burgomaster chair, hat stands, book cabinets, writing desks, etc., were also items introduced to Sri Lankan craftsmen by the Europeans (Silva 2002: 343-67). By the eighteenth century, this type of European furniture with Sri Lankan traditional motifs or European motifs such as grape vines, etc., was found among wealthy families and temples. This changing style of furniture too is reflected in Buddhist Art (**Fig. 19**).

Clothes and Accessories

The most significant influence of the European diaspora on Sri Lankan culture was the introduction of different types of clothing which became a part of Sri Lankan culture as described in the introduction of this paper. The Portuguese introduced the coat to male attire, and a jacket with long sleeves, a short jacket with long sleeves edged with pillow lace, skirts, etc., to women's attire. Shoes, sandals, hats, fans, etc., all gradually became a part of Sri Lankan culture. As culture is reflected on art, craftsmen of Buddhist temples incorporated changing cultural ideas and details into temple frescos. The most interesting characteristic of paintings with European clothes is that they are always a part of a general scene where there are other figures wearing traditional clothes (**Fig. 20**).

The only exception discovered so far is the narrative scenes from *Mahadhana Sitano Jataka* story at the Kataluwa temple where a few scenes depict all figures in European clothing as shown in **Fig. 1**. In many scenes minor details such as a fan held by a woman in traditional clothing, a man in traditional local clothing but with a European hat or shoes, etc., have been

artistically mingled creating a harmonious painting with both local and European characteristics.

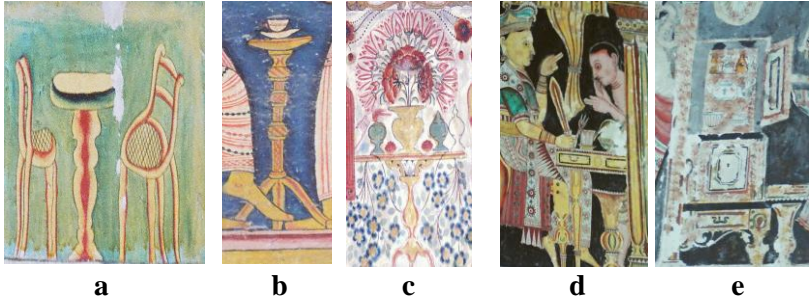


Figure 19: Kanappuwa or stools from a. Gandara Ancient Temple, b. Kotikagoda Ancient Temple and c. Mulkirigala Ancient Temple; d. Table with Drawers from Kathaluwa Ancient Temple, and e. Almairah from Kataluwa Ancient Temple

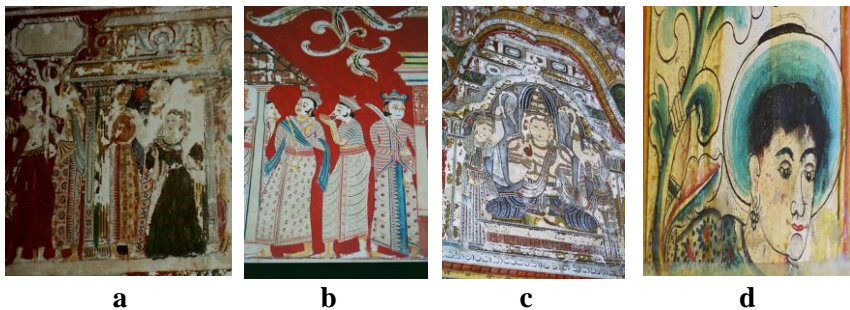


Figure 20: a. A Woman in European Clothes with Two Women in Traditional Attire from Kataluwa Ancient Temple, b. A Man in a Jacket with Two Other Men in Traditional Attire from Kotte Raja Maha Viharaya, c. Prince Saddhatissa of Sri Lanka accompanied by Divine beings in Western Dresses from Mirissa Veheragalle Samudragiri Ancient Temple, and d. A Woman in a Hat and European Clothing from Gandara Ancient Temple

A New Art Tradition

By the dawn of the twentieth century the influence of the European diaspora changed the outlook of Buddhist art in Sri Lanka. The Kandyan tradition of paintings was two dimensional with the use of red and sometimes black or dark blue in the background to contrast and to provide depth to the paintings. Another characteristic of Kandyan paintings was the use of floral and geometric designs on clothing which were very intricately detailed. Kandyan painters used natural pigments created of floral and mineral raw material. Europeans introduced oil paints and other paints used by European artists. The use of European paints meant that artisans and craftsmen had to use bigger brushes where the creation of intricately detailed floral and geometric designs on clothing became extra difficult. This change is most significant on paintings of Buddha and *arahats* where Kandyan artists used a very close wave design on the robes while the early twentieth century artists painted lines (**Fig. 21**).

The natural colour palette used by Kandyan artists was limited to available resources but the European colour palette provided the artists with an array of colours hitherto unknown in Sri Lanka. Thus the delicate floral and geometric designs gave way to bold and bright colours and shades and were widely used by twentieth century Buddhist painters (**Fig. 22**). Among these painters who were exposed to Christian and European art is Richard Henricus⁷ who is a descendent of the Dutch and a background painter for theatricals. He created the temple murals of the Jayathilakaramaya in Grandpass. M. Sarlis who worked as the assistant of Richard Henricus became a well-known painter of Buddhist temple murals and was a key figure of the Buddhist revival movement with his lithographs of Buddhist content.

These painters used an abundance of colour and paid more attention to physical form the culmination of which can be seen in the Gotami Vihara paintings by George Keyt.

**a****b**

Figure 21: a. Kandyan Style Painting of Buddha with Waves on the Robe from Mirissa Veheragalla Samudragiri Ancient Temple, and b. European Influenced Painting of Buddha with Lines on the Robe from Katuwana Nakandawala Ancient

**a****b**

Figure 22: a. Sculpture of Kandyan style Gurdian from Kataluwa Ancient Temple, and b. Guardian from Dowa Ancient Temple – in Bold Colours and Texture

Conclusion

The Buddhist art of Sri Lanka from eighteenth to twentieth centuries was notably enriched by European cultural traits which gradually became part of Sri Lankan Buddhist art through the centuries. Contrary to popular belief the European culture was not enforced upon the Sri Lankan population but rather there was a gradual transition to include changing cultural aspects. By early eighteenth century the craftsmen who worked in temples were also involved in creating churches under European specifications and by early twentieth century, artists who were creating church paintings were invited to create murals in Buddhist temples. The research sample used in this paper is predominantly from the Southern province and the Ratnapura district. However, European characteristics are not reserved only to the maritime areas where the European influence lasted the longest time span, but discovered in more interior temples.

The frequency of occurrence of European cultural traits among local traditional paintings remains the same whether it is interior Sri Lanka or maritime areas with the exception of the Kataluwa Ancient Temple which contains a rather extensive amount of European traits. This does not mean that Sri Lankan artists completely accepted the European diaspora or its rule, nor does it mean that there was no persecution of Buddhism, but rather that cultural acceptance of European traits had become a part of the culture to such lengths that it was no longer considered as European but as a part of Sri Lankan culture. However, there are instances in which political and social turbulences prevailing in the country influenced the content of the paintings. A prime example would be the painting of a European as the King of Hell at the Kottimbulwela Ancient Temple (**Fig. 23**).



Figure 23: King of Hell portrayed as a European at the Kottimbulwela Ancient Temple

Buddhist paintings of Sri Lanka from eighteenth to twentieth century are indeed a reflection of the society, culture and even political turbulence. It indicates a harmonious existence between the ruling European diaspora and local ethnicities despite the problems and turbulences which prevailed during this era of discord.

End Notes

¹ This paper is based mainly on field work I have carried out in the Southern province and the Ratnapura district and a few temples in Kandy. Further research is needed to have a better understanding of the absorption of European cultural traits in Buddhist art on an island wide basis.

² Senake Bandaranayake and M. Somathilake are both proponents of the Southern School of paintings in Sri Lanka during 18th to 20th century. I believe that it is still the Kandyan School of paintings with European cultural traits more prominent and accepted in the coastal region after centuries of European rule in the area and absorbed in other areas in temples which did not receive consistent royal patronage.

³ Seneheweera does not provide any textual evidence to state how the British promoted their cultural traits into these temple paintings. Her research only includes 3 temples in the Southern province and completely disregards the strong European influence which was prominent along the coastal areas of Sri Lanka becoming absorbed to Sri Lankan culture through the centuries.

⁴ Building material made by compacting and drying a stiff mixture of clay, sand or other aggregate and water. The Pre-Colonial era architecture of Sri Lanka used bricks and stone in construction of large and important edifices and clay and wattle was used in ordinary construction.

⁵ I have used the term ‘Europeans’ as there were many European nationalities who were recruited by the ruling colonial powers as sailors, soldiers and for other tasks (See Kelegama and Madawela: 2002).

⁶ The locals of this temple do not accept that it was a church before. According to them, the temple was built in the shape of a church to avoid persecution from the British colonial rulers. However, there is no documentary evidence to support this theory. Structurally not only the exterior but the interior also provides evidence that this was used as a church with a wooden balcony to house the church organ which has later being converted to an Image House with a Buddha Image and other paintings, the pulpit used as a chair for the Buddhist monks to address the lay people. The Portuguese destroyed many Buddhist temples and constructed churches on its place and it is possible that Buddhists reclaimed the original temple. Regardless of its origin it is interesting to note that architecture has been absorbed without any structural changes.

⁷ George Henricus who was trained in Italy was the brother of Richard Henricus who influenced the development of the artistic styles of Richard Henricus who created murals both in Christian and Buddhist contexts as well as in the theatre (See Bandaranayake and Dharmasiri, 2009: 21).

Illustrations

All Photo Images by: Bindu Urugodawatte.

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