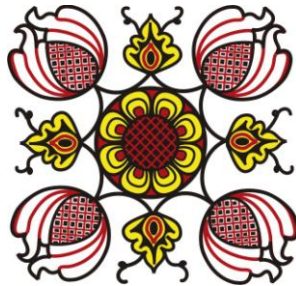


Quarterly Tours – No. 11



National Trust – Sri Lanka

29th August 2009

Compiled by Nilan Cooray

National Trust – Sri Lanka

Quarterly Tours – Saturday, 29th August 2009.

Programme

- 0700 hrs. Leave PGIAR
- 0730 hrs. Visit Keleniya Rajamaha Vihara
- 0900 hrs. Visit Veheragodalla Vihara at Sedawatte
- 1030 hrs. Visit Gotami Vihara at Borella
- 1200 hrs. Visit Kotte Rajamaha Vihara
- 1330 hrs. Lunch at Mount Lavana Hotel
- 1500 hrs. Visit Rankoth Vihara at Panadura
- 1630 hrs. Visit Bellanvilla Temple
- 1800 hrs. Visit Karagampitiya Temple at Dehiwala
- 1930 hrs. Arrive PGIAR

Introduction

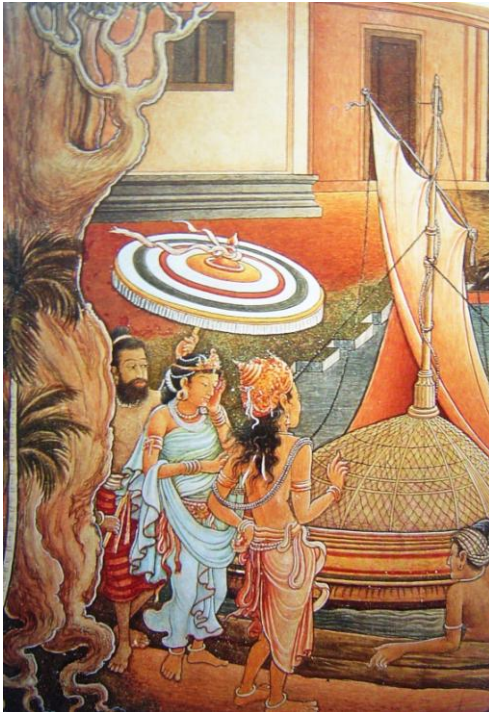
The object of the present tour is to provide an overview of the 19th century maritime mural traditions covering the last phase of Sri Lankan's long heritage of painting, together with, the 20th century overlay of local and foreign influences upon the prevailing, by visiting selected sites in and around Colombo along with an authority on the subject.

Commenting on the origin of the southern and maritime tradition Prof. Senake Bandaranayake says: *‘What is not yet clear is whether the southern murals are a provincial offshoot of the Kandyan school, branching off in the late 18th century; or a continued and late development of that same tradition, as most observers view it; or a partly independent school or sub-school, with its own history and character.....The murals at temples constitute some of the richest and most extensive artistic treasures that remain of Sri Lankan pictorial art in its final period of efflorescence, on the threshold of the 20th century. Painted almost within living memory, they give access to an imaginative world that is no longer available to us, and provide insight into the ideological and semiological structures of an important segment of Sri Lankan society, in a way that is not easily paralleled by any other form of documentation’.*

The Buddhist paintings of the early 20th century, on the other hand, constitute an impressive diversity in styles as can be seen from the temple murals of the time. Several centuries of colonial domination of the country, and the

resultant exposure to various art traditions and also the rise of nationalism and the quest for an authentic art tradition can be considered as the root cause for this dynamism in art styles in the Buddhist mural tradition of Sri Lanka.

Kelaniya Rajamaha Vihara



Situated on the banks of the Kelani River, Kelaniya was the capital of a provincial king named Kelani Tissa (2nd century B.C.) whose daughter, Vihara Maha Devi was the mother of king Dutu Gemunu the most illustrious and revered King of Sri Lanka.

Buddhists tradition in Sri Lanka is that Lord Buddha visited Kelaniya in order to quell a quarrel between two leaders of two warring factions. The names of the two

leaders are Chulodara (Small bellied One) and Mahodara (Big bellied one). They were quarrelling for a throne full of jewels. Lord Buddha brought them to their senses and preached to them the futility of their quarrel. They both became Buddhists and thereafter offered the throne to the Buddha. It is believed that the Dagoba at Keleniya retains this throne as the main relic inside. Around the 15th century, Kelaniya is described in the Sandesa Kavyas as a beautiful city. Of late, Kelaniya Temple has become famous due to its recent revival especially after the additional shrine was painted by Solias Mendis depicting various events in the history of Sri Lanka.





Murals of the Kelaniya Rajamaha Vihara, painted by Solius Mendis in the 1930s and early 1940s were an attempt to revitalize the Sri Lankan classical painting tradition. The result, however, is not a reinvention of the classical mural tradition, but an amalgamation of several Indian and European visual idioms, into a style that recalls the classical naturalism of Sri Lankan Mural paintings. However, it is a style, which is entirely a product of the 20th century.

Veheragodalla Vihara



Located at Sedawatte in Kolonnawa, and executed by Prof. Albert Dharmasiri during 1960's as a young painter, the murals of Veheragodalla Vihara showcase the furthest development of the 20th century mural tradition.

Gotami Vihara



Murals of Gotami Vihara at Borella, painted in the 1930's by George Keyt, one of Sri Lanka's most outstanding modernist painters, presents a Buddhist mural style that has successfully synthesized Pablo Picasso's cubism, the linear beauty of the Sri Lanka's classical painting tradition (Anuradhapura and Polonnaruva) and the sensuality of the traditional Indian sculptures into a sumptuous artistic language. The Gotami murals are Keyt's true masterpiece and indeed, his dower to the nation that is visible to all - unlike his other artistic attempts squirreled away in private homes or hidden in secluded galleries.

Kotte Rajamaha Vihara



Although the temple has originated during Kotte period, the modern temple is of a later date. The shrine room of the temple with the murals could be dated to the 19th century and assigned to the southern tradition.

Rankot Vihara, Panadura

This is the temple where Ven. Migettuwatte Gunananda Thera, a Buddhist orator of the second half of the 19th century had resided. He is known to have led the Buddhist views at public debates that occurred between the Buddhists and the Christians in such venues as Baddegama, Udanwita, Waragoda, Liyanagemulla,

Gampola, and in the most famous of them all in the debate at Panadura. Consequent to these debates, Buddhism in Sri Lanka saw a significant revival. After reading a pamphlet on these debates published in the United States, that Henry Steel Olcott arrived in Sri Lanka in 1880. The paintings within the image house have two phases; those belong to the southern tradition of the 19th century and to the style initiated by the painter Sarlis in early 20th century.

Bellanvila Rajamaha Vihara

The temple is situated in the outskirts of the city of Colombo, in the village of Bellanwila, just three kilometers from the city limits. Bellanwila temple has a long and hallowed history. The great sanctity attached to the temple is due to its sacred Bodhi-tree. There is authoritative and literary evidence in ancient texts like the Sinhala Bodhivamsa which records that this Bodhi-tree is one of the thirty two saplings that sprang from the sacred Bodhi-tree at Anuradhapura and was planted here in the 3rd century B.C. In the 15th century, Bellanwila is once more mentioned in literary works when Kotte, which is in close proximity to Bellanwila, became the capital. In the Kotte period, Buddhism rose to great heights with the royal patronage of King Parakramabahu VI (1412-1467). But even during this period, Bellanwila is cast into some shadow as Sunethradevi Pirivena was nearby, the latter shrine being built by the king himself.

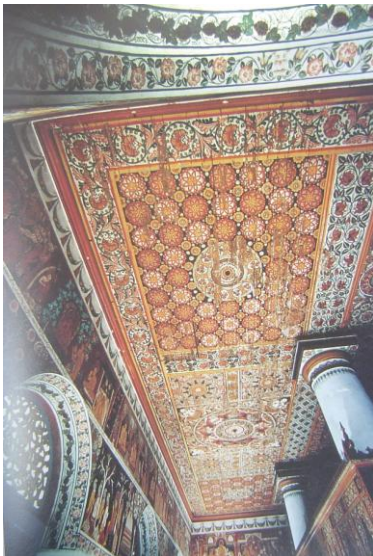


The shrine room was painted in the mid-20th century by Somabandu Vidyapathy, the paintings within the temple has three themes: life of the Buddha (both before and after enlightenment), Story of King Asoka and the history of Buddhism in Sri Lanka. The paintings executed in oil colours on the wall surface, reflect a sublime religious ecstasy. The interlocking and mutually dependent lines, shapes and colours of the compositions provide emphasis and clarity to the painter's expression

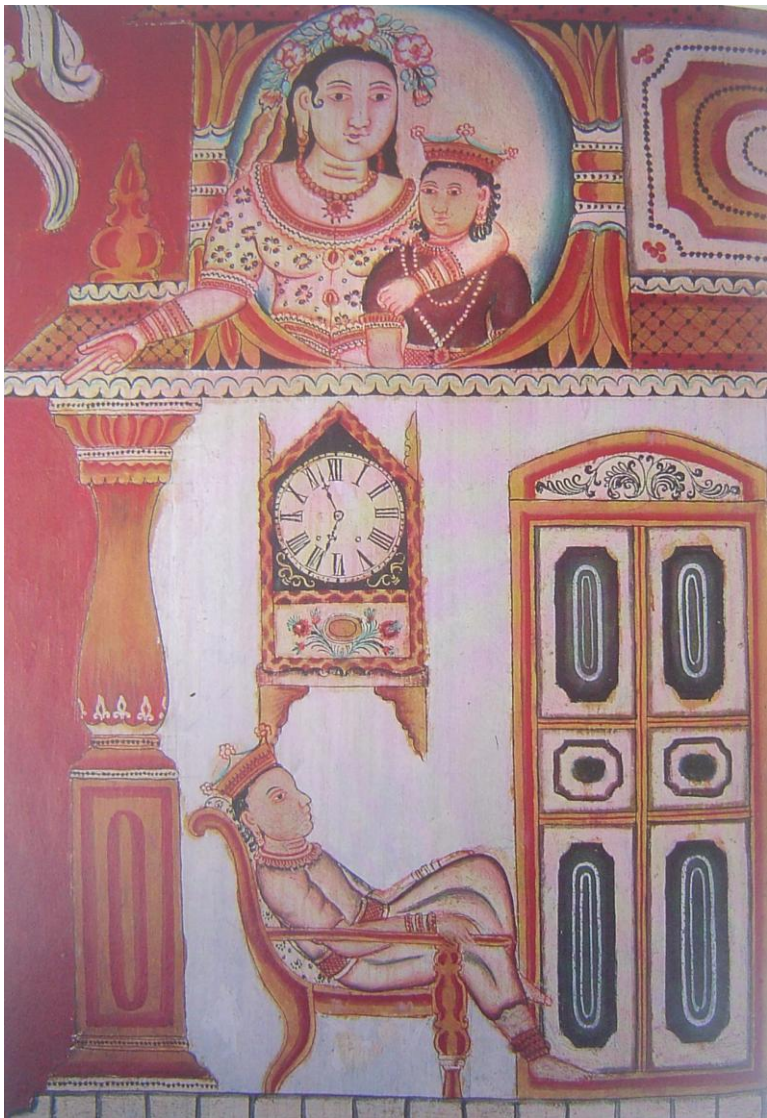
of ideas. The pictorial representations correspond along with the literary descriptions record the last details of this didactic narrative. With regard to the style and technique of the paintings, Prof. Albert Dharmasiri comments thus:

‘The dramatic handling of the human figure, the meticulous rendering of colour effects, the emphatic outline with a clear aim of increasing the plastic effect, the unequivocal expression of feeling, the expressive treatment of the hands are the dominant characteristics of the style.....The use of perspective is complex. Shading and highlighting are used not to indicate any source of light, but to impart a sense of three dimensionality to the figurative form’.

Karagampitiya Temple



The Subodharama vihara is located at Karagampitiya, Dehiwala. It has a complex array of paintings; the ‘inner murals’ of the image house have been executed in the 1850’s, a series of wall paintings and mosaics in the 1890’s and two final phases of painting activity is seen in the mid - 20th century. The paintings in the inner shrine and on the inner



walls of the corridor of the image house date from the 1850's and are the best preserved and the most interesting murals at Karagampitiya, and have fortunately not been re-touched in recent times. The paintings within the preaching hall executed in 1890's show elements of a heightened, European influence towards realism. However, it still shows a fresh and vigorous stylization, giving the new configuration a dominantly traditional character. The outer murals of the ambulatory of the image house, dated to 1897, show the first major departure from the traditional 'flat' style, marked by the use of perspective, extensive tonal modeling and an entirely new range of colours. This is the earliest dated manifestation of the transitional style of the modern period. The major panels of the *sat-sati-ge* contain some of the compositions based on the well-known Sarlis printings and probably date from the 1930's. The Vessantara diorama rendered in a highly naturalistic style, which was popular in mid - 20th century, within a small room at the southern edge of the same building has been executed using glossy, commercial paints, and they are of poor artistic quality. Apart from the wall paintings, the floors of the image house and the *sat-sati-ge* are all decorated with a ceramic mosaic, displaying animal, geometrical and other motifs.