VAILJAYANTA TANTRA

(A Sanskrit Treatise on the Arts and Crafts of Medieval Sri Lanka, with a word-for-word paraphrase in Sinhala.)

Edited by Nandasena Mudiyanse
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Ananda Cumaraswamy in his monumental work Medieval Sinhalese Art mentions a triad of Śāstra or textbooks on the fine arts as practised in Sri Lanka down the ages, supplying the craftsmen and artists. Referring to a verse character, they were codified in Sanskrit Ślokas (verses), as was the custom in India, and apprentices were required to learn them by heart. Cumaraswamy did not have the good fortune to study these texts himself; he came to know of them through a contemporary colleague, Madaliyar E. R. Goonearatna who supplied him with English translations of extensive chapters of at least two of them, the Śīrīputraṇa which deals with the iconometry of the Bodhia image, and the Rāpāvaliṇī which deals with the art of the ancient Sinhala painter. The third of this triad is the Vailjayanta, the translation nor edition of which ever saw the light of day during Cumaraswamy’s lifetime, and which remained so right up to the present day until the appearance of the work under review, which is the first ever edition in print of this important text.

Like the Śīrīputraṇa, the Vailjayanta Tantra abounds in errors. The Sanskrit is very corrupt and does not conform even to the elementary rules of Pāṇinian grammar. In many instances, even the Sinhala same (paraphrase) fails to make sense. Madaliyar Goonearatna says that he had great trouble with the Śīrīputraṇa, getting the verses corrected and put into proper metre before commencing the translation. Prof. Mudiyanse, who has spared no pains in editing this text, has collated as many as ten old leaf manuscripts which he had obtained from various temple libraries besides consulting several other fragmentary and incomplete ones. However, he has not dared to correct the verses and put them into proper metre, as a colossal task which would have delayed the publication further. We should be grateful to him for presenting the material as it is, drawing attention to variant readings in the footnotes.

Cumaraswamy has noted that this text used by Sinhala jewellers describes the sixty four kinds of royal ornaments, and many other kinds of jewellry and metal work. Thanks to the present edition we now know that it deals with much more besides. It is a veritable mine of information regarding a vast spectrum of the arts and crafts of medieval Sri Lanka. The intricate techniques of making and carving designs on jewellry, crowns, thrones, swords, fore-head bands and other ornaments, of the casting of images of Hindu deities, coins etc., are here described in detail. The picture is that of a society where art and aesthetics were woven into the fabric of peoples’ lives – such relatively trivial objects as the daṭ-kutura (tooth pick) and kāsa-holda (ear-cleaner) and poṇhinda (stylus) being ornately carved with intricate designs. Not only the students of medieval arts and crafts, but also the archaeologist and the sociologist will no doubt find this to be a text of absorbing interest.

Furnished as it is with a valuable introduction by the editor, which provides the student with a ‘bird’s eye view’ of the work’s content and an exhaustive index, this edition of the Vailjayanta should serve as a firm basis for future indepth studies on the fine arts and crafts, and as aptly observed in his foreword by Prof. S. L. Kekulawala, the Vice Chancellor of the Kelaniya University which has sponsored this publication, it should serve to lend a true Sinhala character to our modern artistic creations and innovations, by ensuring the continuance of our own traditional roots.

While we congratulate Prof. Nandasena Mudiyanse on the publication of this work, we wish to say that he would be rendering a great service to the study of fine arts in Sri Lanka if he now directs his attention to a similar edition of the Rāpaṭaḍa, hitherto known only by name.

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