

10 Flowers for the *Dhamma*

Painted Buddhist palm leaf manuscript covers (*kamba*) of Sri Lanka

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Introduction

The majority of the wooden covers or *kamba* (singular: *kambaya*) used to enclose Buddhist palm leaf manuscripts have been painted with “floral subjects.”¹ However, previous studies have not explored important issues such as the meaning of these floral subjects, their cultural and ritual uses, the relation between the painting and the intended purpose of the manuscript to preserve and transmit the Dhamma (Skt. Dharma), or *dhammakāya* (the body of doctrine) contained in the manuscript. Moreover, current art historical interpretation has reduced the purpose of the *kamba* paintings to mere ornamentation.

This essay explores the cultural purpose of “floral subjects” that are painted or carved on the covers of Sri Lankan palm leaf manuscripts containing Buddhist scriptures. It postulates that these floral subjects were not painted or carved merely as decorations or ornamentations to beautify the manuscript. I argue instead that they represent real flowers or garlands of flowers offered in honor of the Dhamma as embodied in the manuscripts. I examine this hypothesis in the light of Sinhalese Buddhist ritual practices and the visual liturgy of Buddhist art of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. As a secondary objective, I also discuss issues such as the cultural or ritual significance of the *kamba* paintings in relation to the intended purposes of the manuscripts. Excluded from consideration are *kamba* paintings on nonreligious manuscripts as well as other forms of *kamba* paintings or carvings of nonfloral subjects, even though they may appear in Buddhist manuscripts.