

Polonnaruwa

Civilization

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Next important element of Polonnaruva culture is its wall paintings. We propose here to discuss only the wall paintings found within the ancient city of Polonnaruva, because we feel that they reflect the marked character of the time. Wall paintings are found in Tivanka image house, and in the rock-cut walls of Viddhadhararagaha of Galvihara. Besides this, there are some traces of paintings on the exterior walls of Lankatilaka image house and on the interior walls of Potgulvehara. Here we are more concerned with the paintings of Tivanka Image house because they are in a better state of preservation. Wall paintings found on the walls of the sanctum, entresol and the vestibule of the Tivanka Image house, present a marked difference from each other in composition, and design, character and form, in presentation and expression. Wall paintings of the sanctum contains an episode in the life story of the Buddha depicting his descent from Tavatimsa heaven to the city of Sankassa in India. This is a large panel composition which contains three golden ladders of which the one in the middle is larger than the two on either side. Buddha is depicted on the central ladder coming down to the earth, while on the right hand ladder is God Sakra, the chief of the gods, holding a parasol over the Buddha and on the left ladder is supposed to be the Brahma, holding a flower. The figure of the Brahma is completely disappeared except the hand holding the flower. At the end of the east wall of the sanctum are five figures emerging from clouds, four of whom have haloes around their heads. Four figures of these have been identified as the four guardian deities.

On the walls of the entresol between the sanctum and the vestibule is depicted a scene which Paranavitana has identified as the episode of the supplication of the Gods. i.e.

the Devas of the Thusita heaven entreating the Bodhisattva to be born as the Buddha. In this scene a number of figures of Gods are depicted in a magnificent style. These figures are clad in exquisite jewellery and a head dress. Above these figures is shown a part of a Vimana or divine mansion with decorative embellishments. In this scene on the south wall of the entresol the Buddha is seated on a dais holding his hands in the Dharmachakra mudra. There are two persons with their arms laid across their breasts similar to that of 'Ananda statue' at Galvihara. In the lower section of this presentation there are five persons. Bell has noticed several Gods in worshipping attitude in one and another section of the wall the Buddha in a pavilion erected on a river-craft with five other persons including the two who paddled it.

Next we come to the vestibule on the walls of which one encounters beautiful paintings. The composition and the presentation of these paintings are quite different from those of either the entresol and the sanctum. These paintings are depicted on horizontal bands in a narrative form. Now one can notice three such bands on the wall. In the uppermost band the paintings have been almost disappeared. In the surviving patch of paintings there is a figure of a person facing left on a dais. This figure rests on its left shoulder a staff which is held in the left hand. There is another person seated on a dais facing left. Some parts of two other persons standing in front of him are seen.

The painting bands are separated by a leafy motif about four inches thick. In the central band episodes from the Vessantara Jataka are depicted. According to Bell the left and right halves of the fragment are two stages of the story. The man who reads an ola book at the extreme right is the Brahmin Jujaka. The chariot and a horse gifted to other Brahmins are shown in the back-ground. Queen Madri, the consort of King Vessantara feeds a deer and the son and the daughter stand at the top left of the fragment of the painting.

In the lowest band is now mostly faded seems to depict a scene of the Asanka Jataka. The part of the painting depicting a man and a woman in the sex-act has been damaged since Bell saw the paintings.

On the vestibule of the south wall out of the three bands the paintings are faded away in the upper band since Bell saw them. At that time Bell had noticed a part of the body of a man seated cross-legged on a dais, but now only the bare indication remains. Two persons stand on either side of the seated figure. Formerly a sword had been noticed in the hand of the person on the right hand side of the seated figure. The other standing figure holds his hands in gesture which manifests that he is conversing with the seated person. The story depicted in the central band is the Sasa Jataka. In the bottom band a scene from the Tundila Jataka is depicted.

On the south wall of the vestibule one can notice on the upper band a seated figure on the dais and two other persons. Now, these two persons are faded away. The small carriage and the yoke of small horses tied to it are seen today. At the centre of this area appears to be depicting a scene from the Vidhura Jataka. Even in this presentation, too, some of the details have been lost.

In the bottom band of this area the scene portrayed may be from Guttala Jataka. Even in this scene much of the details have now been defaced. Next in the third bay of the south wall of the vestibule the bands are continued. Of the three bands the upper one is faded away while the central band depicts an incident from the Chullapaduma Jataka. In this scene the king is within the pavilion with his consort. In the bottom band the painting shows a scene from the Maitribala Jataka.

On the north wall of the vestibule another series of paintings begin. In the upper band a portion of the plaster had fallen off. However four persons standing at the left end of the picture are seen. In the next part of the same band are the figures of several persons, a man running away from the scene, another person armed with a sword while another standing beside him. This painting had not been identified. The upper band continues even in the gap in the north wall created for an entrance. The paintings of the upper band cannot be identified due to its obscurity.

In the central band is perhaps the best preserved of all the paintings on this wall. Mugapakka Jataka is depicted in

this band. Continuing in the same band Mahasudassana Jataka is portrayed. Then on the same central band is seen the dream of Mahamaya. and at the end of the same wall the story of Kalagola is painted.

In the bottom band of the north wall of the vestibule appears to have depicted the Sama Jataka. The next scene in the same band possibly be from the Kusa Jataka. Beyond this the paintings cannot be identified with certainty.

Besides the paintings, described above the following patches of paintings may be noticed: the pattern drawing on the pseudopillars in the vestibule, the leafy decoration between pilasters below the ledge of the vestibule, and some other patches of paintings in some other places, of the Tivanka Image House.

The paintings described above falls into the period of Parakramabahu I (1153 - 1186 A.D.) and probably to the period of Parakramabahu II (A.D. 1236-1270) who in his effort to resuscitate the vanished glory of Polonnaruva, effected some repairs to this shrine. Since there are two layers of paintings it is quite possible that the paintings belong to the both these periods. As Bandaranayake observes that there is clear evidence to show that Tivanka paintings belong to more than one phase of painting activity. The building itself shows that the shrine and the vestibule belong to two periods different in architectural construction, evidently the interior and the entrance added to altered at various times, forming altogether about four different phases of construction between the late 12th and late 13th centuries.¹

This obviously shows that the paintings of the sanctum and the entresol belong to the period of Parakramabahu I whose reign provided favourable atmosphere for regeneration of Sinhala culture with all its aspects. It is worthwhile here to note what Siri Gunasinghe, one of the reputed art historians says about the murals of the Tivanka image house. "The epic grandeur of the murals in the Tivanka sanctum is also thoroughly consonant with the accepted aesthetics of the Polonnaruva times. The baroque exuberance pervading these murals and the monumental properties of the divine personages depicted there are perfectly in keeping with the

grand dimensions and the ostentatious embellishments that encounters in the architecture and the sculpture of Polonnaruva. The art of Polonnaruva is an art of the elite classic in its tenor, and dignified in its form. The graceful expressions on the faces of the gods, the dramatic poses in which their bodies have been cast and the delicate fingers held in equally dramatic mudras are all elements of this idiom which speaks clearly of a sophisticated social milieu. The technical completeness of the artist as can be deduced from every detail in these large murals depicting a paradisiacal scene is certainly of the highest order; it is the kind of competence that can be expected only in artists living in a society such as one that Vijayabahu I and Parakramabahu the great had built on the ruins of the classic Anuradhapura civilization."² Siri Gunasinghe's view can be shared when one considers the tone and modelity of the age of Parakramabahu. All his works were massive and grand in conception and execution, adroit and finesse in accomplishment and finish, sublime and elegant in expression and appearance. Further Siri Gunasinghe, in his evaluation of Tivanka paintings says "the murals of the sanctum are clearly the work of more sophisticated artists working with greater technical competence. Here the compositions are in a more ambitious scale as evidenced by the human figures which are larger than life-size. The better educated pictorial sense, displayed by the balanced disposition of groups of figures on large wall areas, the line work which is more delicate, controlled and masterly the colours which are calculated and subdued, showing a virtuoso refinement and above all, the characters that express clearly stated, though subtle feelings."³

In selecting the themes for this colossal panel compositions, there is room for one to think that the authors of the paintings would have been guided by the whims and fancies of the ruling monarch, Parakramabahu I whose aspiration was to achieve greatness and glory. Both these compositions are related to the heaven and Gods. In one, the Buddha, is depicted descending from the Thusitha heaven to Sankassa flanked by God Sakra and Brahma, holding a parasole over the Buddha. In this, the message is conveyed to the people that the Buddha is above the God Sakra, the God of the

Gods and the Brahma, the creator of the world. One has to note that this age experienced a strong wave of Hindu influence which pervaded strongly in art and architecture. Does this message tell the people that Buddhism stands above all the other religions or is it an insinuation to demean Hinduism and convince the people that Hinduism cannot stand on par with Buddhism. Perhaps the artists and the patrons of this work may have had such motives behind in selecting this particular episode of the life story of the Buddha. At the same time one may note the secular aspect of depicting this particular episode. Perhaps the artists of the day may have had the intention of glorifying the king's greatness and majesty. This panel of painting is formed in the sanctum, the most important part of the edifice. It would have been the main attraction of the Tivanka image house. The life-size standing Buddha image in Vitarka mudra betrays a unique sense of elegance and majesty. Some suggest that the idea of the image of the walking Buddha which is very common in Thailand, has been copied from this figure at the Tivanka sanctum. But the view is yet to be established.

Secondly, the painting depicted on the south wall of the entresol identified the supplication of Gods is clearly a product of an artist with a greater experience and maturity than the artists who painted Jataka scenes. This painting indicates that the artists who were responsible for this work definitely had a clear understanding of the form and the movements of the human body and the rhythm and grace of its elegant and beautiful poses and postures. The faces are extremely pleasant, attractive and charming. The beautiful and charming head-dress conforms to and harmonizes with the face. The restraint, precision and finesse are the qualities that have contributed this painting to be so aesthetically appealing. The jewellery and ornamentations harmonize with the body and they add beauty and elegance to the gods. The faces are expressions of moods of the Gods. The arms and the fingers are so flexible that they meaningfully betray the feminine charm and the grace. The upper part of the body which is naked is covered by the appropriate application of jewellery. The lower part of the body is covered with a dress decorated with elegant and charming motifs. In de-

lineating the motifs that brought the dress the artist have very liberally employed the lines. There appears to have a faint similarity between these paintings and those of the Sigiriya tradition. But the facial features such as the shape of the nose, lips and eyelids speak of different tradition followed. One may notice in creating this scene the artist have followed a court-art tradition on a religious theme. However this painting of the supplication of Gods on the south wall of the entresol has been drawn in the same tradition as that of the painting in the sanctum.

As we described above, the paintings on the walls of the entrance and the vestibule have been depicted recording a quite different tradition. As Siri Gunasinghe observes, the Jataka paintings of the Tivanka are a resurgence of the oldest Buddhist art tradition exemplified by the bas-reliefs of the Bharhut and Sanchi.⁴ Though we have no continued sculptural and pictorial tradition either in India or in Sri Lanka, we know that there existed a 'citrabhasa' which contains the principles of composition and technics of art narration. Jataka murals of the Tivanka shrine have adopted this method of "citrabhasa". Hence Jataka paintings follows completely a different tradition from that of the entresol and the sanctum. Siri Gunasinghe is explaining the difference in tradition observes that the results of the two different types of workmanship cannot be over emphasized notwithstanding the fact that the two styles could flourish contemporaneously, it would be difficult to assume that in a case like that, the present one where a single monument is in question, two groups of artists of two different levels of achievements (one highly accomplished and possibly also learned in the classical tradition and the other belonging to a class of craftsmen much less sophisticated) were employed at the same time. It is more likely that the Jataka murals, at least those that are clearly different from the paintings of the sanctum, belong to a later renovation undertaken at a time when the only talent available was that of the folk craftsmen.⁵ The painters of the Jataka episodes of Tivaka image house still remains unrevealed. As Siri Gunasinghe states, they were of a more popular character The Jatakas are intended simply to inculcate what by tradition had become and remains to the code of ethics expected to be ob-

served as a first step by all those striving to attain ultimate emancipation. Meant as they are for the edification of all devotees irrespective of their intellectual and spiritual attainments, the Jatakas do not go beyond human dimensions and cover no more than the simplest ethical propositions; there is little of the divine and even less mystic in them.⁶

In composition and in presentation, the paintings in the vestibule and the entrance of the Tivanka image-shrine betray a vast difference from those of the sanctum and the entresol. Former is illustrative and narrative in character and form, while the latter is eloquently portrayal and impressive. The technique of presentation of paintings is the most simplest and uncomplexed mode. The wall is divided into three or four horizontal bands of one meter in width. The paintings have been drawn on the dry plaster, and filled in subsequently in colour. The outlines are drawn in red and the colours used are red, yellow and green. The three dimensional effect has been achieved by the variation of the thickness of the outlines and the shading with small thick lines. The principal virtue of this age - old continuous method of narration is that it facilitates understanding without the aid of any kind of exegesis. This is the most popular form of art presentation, and it is generally known as popular art form, which helps everybody, irrespective of their intellectual and spiritual levels, to acquire an understanding of the story depicted, and that would have been exactly what the authors had in mind. They were not charged with any gross sentiments. The stories of the Jatakas were selected as themes, because usually the ordinary devotee learnt Buddhism mostly through Jatakas which enshrine didactic values. The Buddhist monks explained the same Jataka stories through the medium of words and the same function has been done in more effective manner by the artist through paintings.) The Jataka story is so depicted in a manner with selected significant episodes that the denouement of the story can be followed easily by the most ordinary devotee who will see things as if they are happening before their very eyes.

Paranavitana comments that "these paintings are the work of artists who had centuries of tradition behind them

and who belonged to a school which in the days of its vigour had ramifications all through the sub-continent of India and beyond, and the maturity of which is represented by the paintings in the caves of Ajanta and Bagh. By the 12th century, the light of the tradition was flickering, if it had not been altogether extinguished, in India itself, but the paintings that we have afford proof to the fact that the traditions of the school were preserved in the island long after they had ceased to be creative in the land of their origin. The painters of Polonnaruva were capable, though it may not be to the same degree as those of Ajanta, of balanced composition their work possessed, work of beauty of lines and created forms of majestic grace. They could delineate the natural attitudes and features of men and women, with realism subordinated to ideals of abstract beauty. Their line is subtle, contrasting with the strongly and swiftly drawn lines of the Sigiriya paintings which were not meant to be seen at close range. In short this art can stand comparison with the best pictorial work of that age which we have anywhere else in the world.⁷

The names of the authors of these paintings still remain concealed. One important feature can be noticed in these paintings. They are not done only with the idea of edifying a religious motive but also endowed with aesthetic and artistic contents. As such, they differ greatly to those of Kandyan paintings. Hence, Tivanka paintings are a proportionate blending of both religious and secular aspects. These qualities could be seen very clearly in Asankavati Jataka on the south wall of the entrance, Mahamaya's dream, Sasa Jataka etc. The human body is executed in lively manner with plenty of poses and gestures. The suppleness and the daintiness of the body has given it an additional quality of elegance, grace and comeliness. Even the flora depicted is lively and natural. Display of the imagery of human figure and flora and fauna was not the only art tradition of the Polonnaruva artists. Rhythmic movement and aesthetic spirit as well pervade the entire gamut of painted scenes. Though the Jataka paintings fall short of some sophisticated artistic qualities that are found in the panels of the sanctum and the entresol, it has also some classic qualities though in a lesser degree. However it is not incorrect to assume that the

Jataka paintings too belong to a well developed tradition flourished at a time that it has reached maximum cultural heights.

After the decline of the Polonnaruva period, Parakramabahu II effected some repairs to Tivanka image house. Then it fell into decay and was covered with jungle until it was discovered by the end of the 19th century. A state department of archaeology was set up in 1880. Few years before this department began its archaeological activities in Polonnaruva. S.M. Burrows of the Ceylon Civil Service conducted a partial excavation at this site in 1885 and 1886 and uncovered two large panels profusedly covered with paintings.⁸ He says that "both figures and faces are excellently painted, and full of life; and there is only one female face, constantly recurring which may be justly thought beautiful. But the interior of the building was not completely cleared. In 1886 A. Murray, provincial engineer, Public Works Department made copies of some paintings in water colours.⁹ H.C.P. Bell, the first commissioner of archaeology completely cleared the image house and secured line drawings of the paintings and published them in Archaeological Survey Report 1909 with his interpretations of the paintings. A.H. Longhurst, another archaeological commissioner, who was the first to notice two layers of paintings at Tivanka Image House, provided a temporary roof for it.¹⁰ It was during Paranavitana's period that the protection of a more permanent nature was provided, and he made arrangements to obtain the services of Khan Bahudur Sana Ullah, the chemist of Archaeological survey of India, to treat the paintings chemically. In 1990, the Alahana Parivena excavation of the Cultural Triangle Project has carried out a copying programme and a photo - documentation of these paintings.

Foot Notes

1. University of Ceylon - History of Ceylon, Vol.1, pt.11, p.611-12
Bandaranayake, S. - Rock and Wall paintings - Colombo - 1986 - p.87
2. Gunasinghe, Siri - Buddhist Paintings in Sri Lanka - An Art of enduring simplicity, Spolia Zelanika, 35(1-2) p.486

3. Gunasinghe, Siri - An Album of Buddhist Paintings from Sri Lanka
(Ceylon - Kandy period) 1978, p.10
4. Gunasinghe, Siri - -ibid- p.11
5. Gunasinghe, Siri - -ibid- p.13-14
6. Gunasinghe, Siri - Buddhist Paintings in Sri Lanka - An Art of enduring simplicity, *Spolia Zeilanika*, 35(1-2) p.486
7. Paranavitana - Art and Architecture of Ceylon - p.37
8. Burrows. S.M. - Report of an Archaeological work in Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa - Ceylon Sessional paper x Colombo - p.10
9. Godakumbure - Charles - Murals at Tivanka Pilimage, Colombo - 1969 p.14
10. -ibid- p.15

Appendix:



