



**Unveiling The Intricacies of Artisanal Mastery: Investigating Central
Kandyan Temple Mural Paintings
(With Specific Emphasis on Medawala Rajamaha Viharaya)**

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ABSTRACT

Ancient visual art can be described as a valuable archaeological tool that brings the objective and non-objective knowledge of past human culture to the present. It can reveal a multifaceted body of information about the knowledge, skills, technology, cultural relations, ethical activities, individual and social ideologies, social stratification and the nature of social institutions possessed by humans at that time. The temple mural art of the Kandyan tradition, which spread from the late seventeenth century AD to the nineteenth century AD and centered on Kandy, is a unique milestone in the history of visual art in this country. This article focuses on whether the painting art of the Central Kandyan style is truly just a visual art, or whether it was created with some conscious political, cultural, and social understanding. Furthermore, the article investigates a number of diverse areas such as the narrative of the paintings, the use of colors and lines, the creation of human figures, the creation of symbols and motifs, the means of continuous narration, the grammar used by the artist, and the technical skills of the artist, and through this, the uniqueness and mutuality of this art movement. This study will provide an analytical commentary based on the paintings of the Medawala Tampita Viharaya, which is one of the most prominent temples in the Kandyan tradition in terms of aesthetic value. The qualitative research method will be employed as the primary method, drawing information from painting studies, museum observations, interviews with art historians, and secondary sources such as books, magazines, and internet articles

1. Introduction

The phenomenon of Central Kandyan style incorporates temple mural paintings that spread in the Central Province, originating from the Kandyan Kingdom in the late 17th century. This art form provides insights into historical knowledge, artistic techniques, cultural interactions, regional identities, moral values, power dynamics, societal ideologies, social structures, and institutional frameworks of the past. Identifying the archaeological significance of these works, this study centers on examining murals at Medawala *Rajamaha Viharaya*, which are representative of the Central Kandyan style in the exact sense. The research probes whether such paintings were mere visuals or whether they carry social, political, and cultural significance. It investigates the artists' technical expertise and artisanal perfectionism in composition, narrative planning, use of color, decorative motifs, and thematic disposition. Highlighting that even more has to be achieved in terms of current visual art perceptions, the research sets this tradition as an art answering society's needs, Buddhist faith, and showing cross-cultural effects while serving as an archeological visual source for reconstructing history.

The temple mural art of the Kandyan tradition, which developed from the late 17th century to the 19th century, originated in the highlands before eventually spreading to other regions. This period marks a significant chapter in Sri Lanka's visual arts history (Bandara, 2017:17) (Wijesekara, 1984:124). In contrast to the earlier Polonnaruwa tradition, the Kandyan tradition of mural painting evolved formally, emerging as a vanguard art style and the subject of analysis. Scholarly studies have extensively examined various facets of this tradition, including painting techniques, narrative subjects, thematic applications, and skill formation.

This study aims to reveal the deep significance and unique characteristics of this artistic tradition. Known as "*Mahanuvara*

Sampradaya," "*Udarata Sithuwam*," or "*Sinhale Art*," (Somathilake, 2002:105) the murals from the Kandyan Kingdom not only spread throughout the Upcountry but also reached the Lowcountry, Sabaragamuwa, North West, and Uva regions. This shared artistic practice remains a feature of Sri Lankan arts. "Central Kandyan Style" is a term used for the first time by Senaka Bandaranayake. In his work "The Rock and Wall Paintings of Sri Lanka," he has described it as a tradition centered to a limited number of temples in the Kandyan Kingdom (Bandaranayake, 1986:112).

Kandy era, extending from King Wimaladharmasuriya's reign during 1592 AD to that of King Keerthi Sri Rajasingha, was marked by efforts to undermine Buddhism, temples, and monastic practices through the influence of foreign powers. Despite these efforts, Buddhism was able to persist due to the efforts of a number of kings, with King Keerthi Sri Rajasingha playing an important role in promoting such artistic heritage (Somathilake, 2002:97). The revival of the arts during the Kandy kingdom, and especially by *Welivita Saranankara Thero*, facilitated the growth of Buddhism significantly, leading to the building and renovation of temples and monasteries round the clock (Bandaranayake, 1986:112). These contributed to evolving and sharpening Buddhist mural art extensively over centuries.

The study attempts to examine various aspects of Kandyan tradition with special emphasis on how the tradition is an active medium that communicates to the people's interests, settles social conflicts, and provides insights into cross-culture and cultural influences and a visual medium for raising society's awareness. The study will outline the idealistic character of the strategy of the artist in this tradition, which has been portrayed in the complexity and significance of this painting tradition, merging various types of complicated demands. Lastly, this research aims to enhance academic insight

into the interaction between the visual beauty of the Central Kandy tradition and the art proficiency of the Kandyan artist, specifically with reference to Medawala Rajamaha Viharaya. By this research, the layers of meaning, their awareness and consciousness of space and time, and their imaginations that lie hidden in their work are revealed. The revival of the arts during the Kandy kingdom, notably under *Welivita Saranankara Thero*, significantly advanced Buddhism, leading to the ongoing construction and renovation of temples and monasteries (Bandaranayake, 1986:112). These efforts greatly contributed to the advancement and enhancement of Buddhist mural art for centuries.

Literature Review

Kandyan-period mural paintings have been investigated throughout the decades through abundant research work, mainly in terms of stylistic and iconographic analysis. Among those, M. Somathilaka's *Mahanuwara Sampradaye Bauddha Sithuwam Kalawa Pilibanda Wimasumak* (2002) is a comprehensive account of the artwork features, narrational trends, and design facets of Kandyan murals. This book critically analyzes the interaction between the conventional art and mural painting during the Kandy period, its extension beyond the central kingdom to coastal regions, and the resulting transformation in the techniques of painting. While Somathilaka's work is very insightful in analyzing the formal composition of Kandyan mural painting, it is primarily focused on aesthetic and stylistic attributes and stops short of critical examinations needed to understand the underlying socio-political and cultural forces embedded in these paintings. The interconnection between patronizing murals, caste and class, and shifting societal ideologies are not discussed. Additionally, the larger meaning of these murals as expressions of historical power structures and regional identity still has to be mapped out by researchers. Addressing these gaps,

this study moves beyond official analysis to investigate the ways in which Kandyan mural paintings functioned as visual histories infused by socio-political reality. By examining their function in the building of cultural memory, support of social hierarchies, and negotiation of regional influences, this study provides a more intricate understanding of the murals as complicated historical documents rather than uncomplicated works of art.

A study of Kandyan mural paintings has expanded with mass academic interest, and scholars have explored numerous aspects of art tradition, social elements, and stylistic issues. Among these, Mahinda Somathilaka's *Sri Lankeya Siththaru saha Samajaya* (2006) is notable for describing the artist's life, his inspirations, patrons, and art ancestry. He emphasizes that although artists gained social recognition, their artwork was subject to the requirements of the ruling class. Patronage influenced thematic and spatial organization in murals, with major questions arising as to how much artistic freedom was dictated through elite intervention. Nevertheless, while Somathilaka's work defines the artist-patron relationship, there is room for exploring how these relationships affected evolving artistic forms through the ages.

Similarly, S.P. Charles' *Paramparika Sinhala Serasili Mosthara* (1999) investigates ancient Sinhala designs of ornamentation through detailed diagrams and written references. His research provides one with a foundational appreciation of cultural symbolism in ancient frescoes and carvings. While this book is useful for establishing design continuity, it doesn't fully account for the socio-political and regional elements that may have shifted decorative patterns through time.

The other important contribution is by Siri Gunasinghe in his article *Mahanuwara Yugaye Bithusituvam* (1960), published in the Ceylon Arts Council's Art Magazine. Gunasinghe dispels the general notion that Kandyan

paintings were the output of untutored craftsmen designing for a common, unrefined clientele. In his opinion, evidence speaks otherwise, indicating the profession of highly skilled *sittaru* (artists) with expertise in multiple fields like painting, sculpture, and architecture. Citing artists like *Devaragampala Silwath Thena* and *Devendra Moolachari*, he defends the idea that these artists were not merely performing decorative art but were actively participating in the intellectual and aesthetic development of the era. Though Gunasinghe highlights the technical competence of these artists, the controversy is even more centered on artistic competence rather than the broader socio-cultural implications of their art. Although these are valuable contributions, recent studies have focused on formal artistic conventions and the impact of patronage but is sparse in a full explanation of how murals functioned as visual narrations of larger socio-political ideologies. This research seeks to address that shortcoming by exploring how Kandyan mural paintings were shaped not only by artistic conventions but also by the evolving dynamics of power, identity, and regional influence. Through such repositioning within the cultural and historical context of the murals, this study will attempt to analyze the inner meaning and understanding contained in the murals and offer a more in-depth analysis of the legacy of the murals.

Scholarly work on the study of paintings during the Kandy period has been shaped by numerous important works by scholars who each contributed toward learning about this rich art legacy. Piyasena Ulluisahewa's Department of Culture-authored 1993 publication, *Udarata Sithuwam Maga*, stands out in having seriously taken into account the developmental path of murals during the Kandy period. Ulluisahewa's work follows the socio-political and historical basis of Kandy painting and incorporates interesting facts on patronage systems, the first-generation artists of the art form, and single

architectural achievements of single kings. His elaborate discussion of painting material, preparation of colors, and description of character, clothing, and traditions illuminates the entire style of Kandy painting. Ulluisahewa's analysis further touches on how the different modes of art left their mark and provides a relevant historical background of understanding how societal, cultural, and political events influenced the progression of Kandy murals. However, in as much as Ulluisahewa's study adds to our knowledge of Kandy tradition's creative processes and cultural milieu, it would have been further enriched by an intensified analysis of how these were shaped by the prevailing general political and economic forces of the time.

Senaka Bandaranayake's 2006 work, *The Rock and Wall Paintings of Sri Lanka*, extends the range of Sri Lankan traditions of painting to an extremely broad chronological scope from prehistory to Kandy period murals. Bandaranayake redates the Kandy tradition in the wider context of Sri Lankan art history with a focus on the Low Country style and the following transitional period. His contribution sheds precious light on the tradition of Kandy, and particularly on the era of King Keerthi Sri Rajasingha's rule, and analyses the evolutionary development of Kandy mural painting, particularly from an examination of the fragmentary murals and ivory carvings. Bandaranayake's focus on the socio-political reasons for the revival of Kandy mural painting is of priceless worth. However, his research of the Kandyan tradition is somewhat superficial and does not examine closely the regional and social forces that controlled the content and shape of the murals.

Anand Coomaraswamy's *Medieval Sinhala Arts* (1994) is a sophisticated study of Sinhala art since the 18th century in the broader political, economic, and cultural framework. In chapter four, Coomaraswamy discusses the origins of Sinhalese decorations and designs, underlining the cross-cultural influences of

Kandy period murals. His observations regarding the unique upland Sinhalese styles of the 18th century and their classification of motifs into divine, animal, botanical, and imaginal types help to enhance the understanding of the decorative features of Kandy murals. Coomaraswamy's study is useful in setting out the influences which controlled the design and ornament of murals, but it lacks sensitivity to how these themes were influenced by the changing social and political context of the Kandy period.

W.M.P. Sudarshana Bandara's *Buddhist Painting Art of the Kandy Tradition: A Source Study*, published in *Medarata Vamsaya* in 2015, is crucial to enhance our understanding on stylistic and thematic features of Kandy mural paintings. Bandara's account of the spread of Kandy painting beyond the highlands has valuable observations on regional differences in landscapes, backgrounds, and adornment. His study discovers the ways in which the socio-political, economic, and cultural conditions of the period influenced the evolution of Kandyan era Buddhist paintings. Bandara's article is important to understand the religious and cultural aspects that constituted Kandy murals, and further illustrates on how these aspects were connected with evolving power dynamics in the period.

In his 2017 publication *Sri Lankeya Mahanuvara Yugaye Sithuwam Sampradaya Saha Ehi Nawa Prawanatha*, W.M.P. Sudarshana Bandara writes of the chronological progress of Kandy mural painting and examines the socio-economic, political, and cultural conditions that gave rise to it declining in mid-nineteenth century. Bandara's elaborate explanation of Buddhist symbols as well as culture signifiers featured in Kandy paintings is the significant foundation from which to develop an understanding about the changing face of Kandy mural painting. Still, despite its breadth, Bandara's study presents a chance to conduct more research on how such cultural

markers integrated with the greater regional and international forces operating at the time.

Even if such studies complete a lot of contexts regarding the history of Kandy painting, there is a fundamental gap to enjoy fully the interplay between socio-political power, regional identity, and creative artistry in these works. My study tries to fill this gap by examining how Kandy murals were not just works of art but also potent visual narratives based on the societal, cultural, and political realities of the respective period. By investigating the relationship between artists, patrons, and the wider sociocultural context, this research tries to find the underlying meanings of motifs in Kandy mural art for a richer understanding of how it reflects and reconfigures the culture of the period in Kandy.

Objectives

The creative design known as the "Grammar of art," in use in the case of Kandyan tradition paintings, has been deliberately laid out in order to convincingly communicate specific thoughts to a given audience. The approach involves a prudent consideration of the intellectual boundaries of audiences, in keeping with the overall aim of temple murals. Hence, the "Grammar of art" in the Kandyan tradition can be understood as a systematic method designed strategically to optimize the impact of conveying intended meaning through visual structures. Kandyan Tradition mural paintings are multi-dimensional, exhibiting an advanced system of approach to art and civic involvement.

These artworks are mostly so created to attract a certain audience-the common and uncultivated masses. Through their iconography, the murals seek to have a profound connection with this audience, being understandable and contextual in narrative. The most significant aspect of the mural paintings is the way they serve as channels for Buddhist values to modern

society, responding to the religious crisis occurring in times of colonialism. The distinctive art grammar applied here in the murals acts as a crucial factor in summarizing advanced Buddhist philosophical concepts into a visual idiom well-liked by the masses and thus as a powerful religious education and enlightenment tool.

Apart from their religious and philosophical foundation, temple mural paintings are pictured as participants in efforts at bringing about the betterment of society. They represent an effortful attempt at raising awareness on a collective basis by making more understanding of Buddhist religious lore among different sections of society, particularly for the benefit of the illiterate. Further, the murals serve as cultural critique of the then-prevailing British colonial culture. By employing Buddhist art forms, the paintings serve as a sustained critique, presenting a visual debate on the reality and challenge posed by the colonial expansion.

The aim of this research is to analyze the inherent nature of Kandy painting tradition, establishing whether the art is primarily a visual medium or if it must be constrained by the deliberate awareness of the prevailing society, politics, and religion during any period in time. This research will strive to analyze the technical proficiency of artists, including the utilization of color, compositional procedures, narratives of design, motifs of ornamentation, and subject matters of the piece. There is much emphasis on interpreting the Kandyan tradition in terms of non-modernist painting, progressing that it must be interpreted as a type of art meant to appeal to modern society.

2. Materials and Methods

This study employs a primarily qualitative research approach, using primary and secondary sources in order to extract data. It involves analyzing temple paintings and conducting interviews with historians, archaeologists, art critics and to obtain

valuable insights. Secondary sources, including books and academic articles, offer different perspectives and contextual information.

Modelist Method of Study:

The research utilizes the modelist method, which focuses on the formal elements or visual grammar of artworks. This approach examines how the art is structured and perceived, prioritizing the form and construction over content. For the Kandy tradition murals, this method explores the specific formal characteristics that define this artistic style.

Contextual Study Methodology:

The second method used is contextual study, which explores the artist's background, the influences shaping the artwork, and the socio-political or religious contexts of the time. This approach investigates the philosophical aspects, societal targets, and the physical environment of the artwork to uncover deeper meanings and influences.

3. Results and Discussion

The Kandy period introduced a distinct narrative structure, differentiating it from earlier traditions, as seen in sites like Sigiriya, Polonnaruwa, and Thivanka Pilimageya. The Central Kandyan style, initially outlined by Senaka Bandaranayake, is evident in surviving works in Degaldoruwa, Gangaramaya, Suriyagoda, Medewala Tampita Vihara, and Dambulla Ridhi Viharaya (Bandaranayake, 1986). Opinions on the Kandy tradition's themes, evolution, style, and contemporary relevance vary among art critics, painters, and archaeologists (Gunasinghe, 2003). Manju Sri and Siri Gunasinghe highlight the aesthetic value of paintings in the Degaldoruwa, Madewala, and Gangarama temples by emphasizing their characteristics. Some critics, like Sarath Amunugama, criticize it as crude, while others see it as accessible rather than

intellectual (Amunugama, 1980). However, these critiques often overlook the tradition's purpose, socio-political influences, and the audience's cognitive capacity (Gunasinghe, 1960).

The earliest murals associated with the Central Kandy tradition, dating back to the 18th century, are found in the Gangaramaya temple (Paranavithana, 1955). Although there were paintings in the Temple of the Tooth prior to Gangaramaya, none have survived. Medawala Viharaya is also one of the prominent sites where the earliest paintings of the Kandyan tradition can be found.

According to legends regarding the construction of Medawala Vihara, its origins are traced back to the reigns of Kings Paethis II and Valagamba. However, historical records indicate that the temple was destroyed during a conflict in the era of King Parakramabahu IV of Kurunegala, as noted in the 'Medawala Vihara sannasa' (Godakumbure, 1961). An inscription from the reign of Vikramabahu III of Gampala reveals that the temple was a two-story structure, with the upper floor and canopy featuring a total of 1,196 Buddha images, while the lower floor was adorned with deities associated with Jataka Katha. Between 1673 and 1677, the temple was re-established by King Kirti Sri Rajasingha, following the 'Tempita' Vihara structure (Somathilake, 2002:131). This reconstruction marked a significant moment in the promotion of Buddhism and the arts during his reign, including mural commissions. The Medawala Temple's murals represent a crucial development and preservation of mural painting during the Kandy era.

Mural structure

Kandy tradition artists demonstrated an adept understanding of temple mural structure, including their placement. Temples usually follow a model where Jataka Katha stories are depicted on the outer wall of the

ambulatory (*pradakshina pathaya*) starting from the left and ending on the right. These murals symbolize moral consequences, guiding viewers through a narrative journey from joy to misery. The inner wall often depicts moments from the Buddha's life, and the statue house features divine figures and related narratives. These paintings serve as a visual guide to liberation, akin to scripture. The artists' technique of continuous storytelling which is known as '*Akanda Kathanaya*' on the same surface, without spatial separation, helps the audience a proper understanding. This style was created to cater the viewers' cognitive abilities while at the same time showcases the artists' skill in simplifying complex concepts.

The continuous narrative style in Kandy paintings aids in comprehending incidents and *jathaka* stories, reflecting the craftsmanship of Kandyan artists. This method conveys intricate Dharma concepts to a broad audience, including those who are illiterate. The tradition has evolved into a straightforward visual narrative, enabling society to access knowledge through art designed to suit the audience's intellectual capacity and context.

Preparing the Wall Surface

During the Kandy period, artists showcased an exceptional craftsmanship by creating their own tools and dyes. They prepared the wall plaster, colors and brushes using locally sourced materials. The particular preparation of temple walls was essential. Artists showcased advanced skills in preparing durable plaster using lime, sand, bitter gourd, and other natural materials. A mixture of *pothu*, *dahaiyya*, and other organic substances was left to ferment to create a durable plaster. This process ensured the longevity of the murals. A varnish medium called '*Valitti*' was used in order to protect and enhance the paintings, demonstrating the artists' attention to preservation and beauty (Coomaraswamy, 1907).

Coloring

Kandyan artists were very self-sufficient in the creation of dyes. They derived some of the colors from local materials, for instance: 'Odata' (white) from Makul, Lohitha (red) from imported substance, and 'peetha' (yellow) from the Gokutu tree. Other colors like blue and green, were produced by local methods. Brushes were also created by the artists themselves from animal hair, grasses, and roots. The 'Varna Poorna' method of painting (Gunasinghe, 1960:10) was to paint in templates and create energy with outer lines. The use of bold, primary colors, especially red, allowed for identification and understanding within dimly lit temple interiors. Selective color and placement reflect the artists' understanding of visual clarity and symbolism.

The paintings also yield data on the societal structures and social standings of the times. They used color to delineate caste and social distinctions, reserving darker tones for the lower castes and yellow or gold for elites and deities. This convention provided symbolic representation and demonstrated the artists' appreciation of color intensity and quality. That they were sensitive to color symbolism, particularly in dark environments, speaks to their sophistication as craftsmen. In the comic strip of *Uruga Jatakaya* in Medawala Viharaya, the female slave is painted in light brownish pink, while the other characters are yellow (Image 01 & 04). The application of brownish pink here is a deviation from the general convention where lighter and brighter color use denotes higher status. The application here may be founded on local beliefs about complexion and social standing.

Technique Overview

In the Kandy tradition, painting was a skill required in professions ranging from architects to painters and planners (Coomaraswamy, 1962). Training of the disciples in this tradition was formally conducted, typically involving children from

the families of master craftsmen. Though these skills were possibly inherited techniques, professionalism was required to be developed through formal practice and training. The disciples would practice first by drawing 'Waka deka,' repeatedly sketching the basic features from teacher notes. With proficiency, as they memorized the pattern, they began to draw from memory. Elaborate drawing was stressed to achieve the desired emotional impact. When expertise was achieved, drawings took the form of complex motifs like *Kathuru Mala*, *Mottakkarappuwa*, and *Tirigitalaya*, which were complex patterns evolved from simple designs (Coomaraswamy, 1962). Kandy artists combined imagination with rigorous training, moving from simple to intricate compositions, using symbols and significant events to make both visual and intellectual art.

One of the most striking aspects of Kandy painting was the division of large wall areas into long thin strips, usually 16-30 inches wide, where the narrative was conducted. Episodes proceeded generally from left to right, allowing onlookers to easily keep the sequence. Although some paintings did not define events clearly, Kandyan artists used trees, houses, vertical lines, or raised motifs to indicate transitions. Titles below each event also helped maintain narrative coherence. For example, the painting of the *Vessantara Jatakaya* showed an entire sequence within one column, including key events.

The artists preferred the representation of events to adherence to precise scale, with a focus on conveying the essence of the story rather than strict adherence to naturalistic or abstract conventions. This was a deliberate choice to promote narrative legibility and significance. The artists were sensitive to spatial and color composition, evolving a visual grammar by which the audience could make sense of the action as it progressed.

In order to cater to literate and illiterate audiences, artists incorporated short descriptive lines on the *Boradam panelaya* (panel) under the paintings, marking important moments with such phrases as '*Ali athun dan dun waga*' and '*Wankagiriya*'. In doing so, this method highlighted how the artists managed to make the art accessible to diverse audiences.

In their depiction of human figures, Kandy painters used three principal methods: full frontal portraits, three-quarter portraits, and side portraits, never using figures whose backs were turned towards the front. This made it easy to identify individuals and contributed to a sustained narrative. Main characters were placed centrally and dressed in extravagant clothing in order to distinguish them from the rest (Somathilake, 2002). Both Sri Lankan and world art history have, among their key methods of depicting social status, been scale (Renfrew 1984). The Medawala artist used the technique of employing scale to oppose the elites and the female slave and depicted the elites as bigger figures. This is, for example, evident in *Uraga Jathakaya* scenes; a meal scene, where the farmer is depicted as much bigger than the female figures. Wife, being the eldest woman in the story, is a bit in the back of the farmer and shorter in height. The size of the elderly women is exaggerated by the artist in the *Uraga Jathakaya* panel to highlight their high status in society, while the female servant and the younger women are in the back to emphasize their lower status (Image 01&04). And also, in Vessanthara *Jathakaya* story, two children and queen Madree were depicted in small scales to each other in reference to Vessanthara King (Image 07&08).

In analyzing Animal depiction in Kandy paintings, we come across realistic as well as creative depiction. Animals like the elephant and the horse were painted naturally, whereas mythical animals were built using fragments from real animals (Gunasinghe, 1960). Botanical depiction ranged from realistic depiction of a number of trees to

stylized depictions, by meticulous attention to color and design. Floral designs were used to give beauty and convey unstated meaning. Further, the designs filled white space in order to maintain the composition of the tale panel intact (Image 07&08).

In river and irrigation canal depictions, the artists employed symbolic shapes and bird's eye view, such as parallel lines to represent the path of the water and fish ascending the water. Together with new symbols, these techniques showcased the narrative excellence of the artists. In works such as '*Madree Gathering Fruits in the Forest*', the work depicts Madree, the queen of Vessanthara, carrying a basket and hooked rod as she heads back to the forest to pick fruit for her family. The three trees of varying heights symbolize the forest, and beyond it lies "*Vankagiriya*," a serpent-like mountain range with winding paths. The artist employs symbolic representation so that the idea of Vankagiriya is depicted, demonstrating a thoughtful and erudite means of expressing ideas that are incapable of being expressed directly by imagery (Image 03).

Although they were referred to as '*Sittaru*' or village painters, Kandyan artists like Devaragampala Silwath Thena and Devendra Mulachari were very adept at adhering to conventional procedures and were trained in subjects like mathematics and astrology (Gunasinghe, 1960). Their paintings also bore testament to their in-depth understanding regarding cultural and artistic principles, which defied myths regarding their intellectual abilities.

Medawala Rajamaha Vihara paintings tastefully combine elements of European civilization, for example, mosquito nets, which indicate cross-cultural inspirations. The use of diverse artifacts in temple paintings focused on the artists' intentional representation of cultural interactions and historical events (Bandara, 2017). Its inclusion was intentional by the artist to depict a situation of an open cave using

natural elements like mosquitoes (Image 09). It highlights the artisans' expertise and creativity in combining diverse influences and adapting them well.

Selection of Themes

Marie Gatellier's findings show Kandyan artists concentrating on such themes as *Jataka Katha*, *Suvisi Wiwaranaya*, *Solosmasthana*, *Vijayagamanaya*, *Buddhagamana*, and *Mahindagamana*, with strong emphasis placed on *Vessantara Jatakaya* and other major *Jataka* narratives (Gatellier, 1991:35). These themes were intended to teach moral values and respond to current social and political topics. Allegory was employed in some temple murals to criticize state vulnerabilities and harmonize with general *Jataka* traditions. The artists blended political observations with religious ones skillfully, managing to convey potent concepts.

These murals communicated a wide range of topics, including *Jataka* stories and important events of Buddha's life and *Suvisi Wiwaranaya* and *Ten Paramitas'* stories. The sacred places, kings and queens, temple donors, and gods were depicted, along with elements like heaven and hellish depictions. This wide range of topics and individuality of Kandy paintings serve certain purposes, distinguishing them from the preceding Sri Lankan art. The Kandy tradition was meant to shed light and insight to devout Buddhists, transmitting meaning to an illiterate majority. The paintings acted as Dhamma picture books, explaining the various Buddhist precepts and guiding people towards happiness and satisfaction.

In discussing the theme of Medawala temple paintings, the *Vessanthara* and *Uraga Jathakaya* tales are most prevalent. The artist appears to have attempted to depict political turmoil and external pressure upon the Kandyan kingdom, which saw turmoil in response to European colonial incursions. The *Uraga Jathakaya* in particular depicts the

inevitability of death. The Medawala *Sannasa* describes the temple to have been ruined by the Portuguese, and the impact of Dutch invasion is documented in history during King Kirti Sri Rajasinghe's reign (Giger 1999). Selection of sacrifice and death-themed motifs in these paintings can very much be attributed to the political and social climate then, with the uncertainty of the period likely having influenced the artist's focus on sacrifice and loss, as seen in both the *Uraga Jathakaya* and the *Vessanthara Jathakaya*. Even though the artist changed the pattern and motifs of the original plot, these changes were understandable to the local crowd due to their familiarity with the story.

And also, on the scene of everyday life, it informs us about the political and social background of the painting and meaning conveyed. For example, in Sri Lankan tradition, women eat last, following the men. This is represented in the painting where the meal is consumed by the farmer, and no trace of the women eating in the field is to be found. The representation done by the artist aligns with historical norms and the gender practices observed in modern times (Knox 1681:87). As per Knox,

.....their wives serve them with it, when they call for it. For it is their duties to wait and serve their Husbands while they eat, and when they have done, then to take and eat that which they have left upon their trenchers. During their eating they neither use nor delight to talk to one another (Knox 1681:87).

Depiction of costumes

Clothing serves as a cultural signifier; the dresses, design motifs, patterns, and draping styles reveal a wealth of information about their respective periods. For instance, they indicate social status, rank, power, respect, class, caste, regional identity, cultural influences, craftsmanship, and social hierarchy. In building the history of ancient visual arts, it seems that the clothes and their

styles of ancient visual arts can be used as a special archeological visual source in determining the social personality of a period with and without written sources, and as well as to examine the truth and falsity of the information revealed by those written sources available.

When examining the paintings of Medawala Viharaya, especially in the *Uraga Jathakaya* we observe the identities of Sinhala elite women, commoners, and servants through their clothing. These paintings reinterpret the setting to depict a Kandyan village in Sri Lanka, diverging from their Indian origins. The artist adapts the story to resonate with the local audience, replacing the Brahmin family with a Kandyan agricultural caste, such as the *Govigama*; considered the aristocratic caste. Even though the Brahmin caste could have been shown with a traditional sacred thread, the artist opted to portray a *Govigama* family, aligning with Sri Lankan caste structures and agricultural roles. The artwork reflects social hierarchies by depicting both elite and lower-caste individuals. It is evident that the artist accurately portrayed the costumes of the era, as demonstrated by the similarity between the paintings and historical artifacts (Image 01,02,04,05,06 with Image 10,11,12). And also, the real textile design patterns of Kandyan era documented by Coomaraswamy in Medieval Sinhalese art are similar to the patterns in the textile patterns depicted in paintings (Image 04,05 with Image 06). The artists were aware of contemporary society and its clothing rituals, not just the clothes themselves. For example, women did not wear upper garments indoors but used them when going out. As Knox states,

In their houses the women regard not much what dress they go in, but so put on their cloths as is most convenient for them to do their work. But when they go abroad, and make themselves fine, they wear a short Frock with sleeves to cover their bodies of fine white Callico

wrought with blue and red thread in flowers and branches. (Knox 1681: 90)

This practice also highlights the artisans' mastery and creativity, demonstrating their thoughtful integration of diverse influences. In the scenes of the *Uraga Jathakaya*, women are depicted wearing different attire depending on the setting. While they are shown bare-chested indoors, they are dressed elegantly when going out to the fields. Although the artist could not depict the act of bathing, he could have included flowers in the women's hands to align with the story's details. The female servants are depicted with bare chests and wearing plain, inferior cloth, suggesting that low-caste individuals faced restrictions on clothing. Although their lower bodies are covered, the cloth worn by the servants is shorter (Image 01 & 04). In contrast, the noble women in the painting are shown in elegant, decorated clothing when carrying food to the field and during mealtime. They wear long garments similar to the lower part of the Indian saree style. Their upper bodies are covered with elaborately decorated, long-sleeved jackets, a style also seen in other artistic depictions from the central Kandyan style, including sculptures from Degaldoruwa, Sooriyagoda, and Gangaramaya Temples. Additionally, this attire is corroborated by historical artifacts such as ivory carvings in the British Museum (Image 12), and sketches by Robert Knox and John Davy.

The analysis clearly indicates a remarkable correlation between the textile designs and clothing representations in the paintings and the actual textile remnants from the corresponding historical period. This concordance enhances the viability of utilizing these paintings as a valuable archaeological visual source.

Not only in costumes but also in the equipment used, we observe similarities with those depicted in the paintings. For example, the *pan kendiya* that King Vessanthara holds when giving away his children resembles

artifacts from the Kandyan era displayed in the Kandy Museum (Image 12).

The artistic expressions of these paintings serve as a comprehensive representation of the events and cultural facets of society at that time. The diverse range of clothing depictions underscores the cultural diversity and complexity inherent in society, influenced not only by cultural and political factors but also by broader social hierarchy.

4. Conclusion and Recommendations

Kandyan tradition of painting is a witness to the mastership in art and intellectual prowess of the masters. What the present study uncovers is that the Kandyan painters were not merely painters by themselves but learned scholars who enjoyed access to higher knowledge, creative brilliance, and deep insight into society, politics, and culture. Their paintings extended beyond ornament, as a powerful means for the communication of sophisticated Dharma teachings and ethical concepts to the common people, even the illiterate. Among the characteristic features of Kandyan paintings is their formalized visual syntax, specifically formulated to convey a continuous narrative. Their compositions moved from left to right in their paintings, so that their depiction was of a running, orderly message. This self-referential positioning says it all for their need to convey religious messages in a comprehensible manner, inviting the viewer into a visual dialogue larger than the written letter.

Furthermore, the Kandyan artists had a clear idea of their audience, using time, space, and symbolism in their paintings. The paintings not only represented religious narratives but also depicted the social realities and hierarchical structures of the time. Not only did the content and form of these paintings originate from the imperatives of patronage and high social requirement, but they were assisted by them as wellsprings of ideological communication.

Beyond their artistic value to history, a study of the Kandyan paintings offers significant input to the picture of Buddhist art, visual narrative, and cultural heritage. Their narrative strategy and symbolic density make them progressively more respectful of the function of art as intellectual inquiry and populist involvement in early Sri Lanka.

Briefly, Kandyan painting is not so much a tradition of art; it is an intellectual tradition that attempts to reconcile creativity with study. With disciplined skill, learned narrative composition, and with very clear knowledge of their audience, Kandyan painters transformed temple walls into visual texts of religious philosophy and cultural identity. What they accomplished is an enduring testament to the power of art to outstrip its visual actuality and become a reflective format for knowledge and light.

5. References

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6. Appendix



Figure 01. Uruga Jathakaya (Left) **Figure 02.** Mantha Jacket (Middle) **Figure 03.** Wessanthara Jathakaya-wankagiriya (Right)

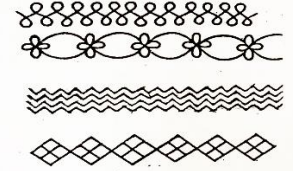
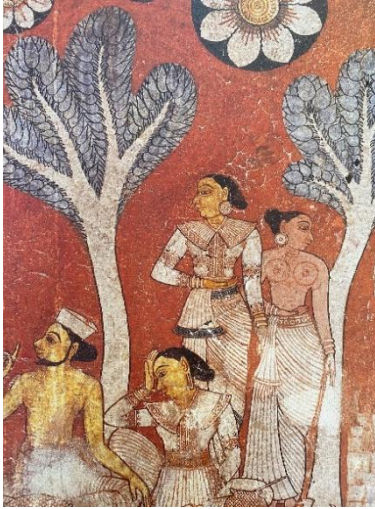


Figure 07. Wessanthara jathakaya (Left) **Figure 08.** Wessanthara Jathakaya (Middle)
Figure 09. Buddha at Diwa Guhawa (Right)



Figure 04. Uruga jathakaya (Left) **Figure 05.** Mantha jacket (Middle) **Figure 06.** Design patterns (Right)

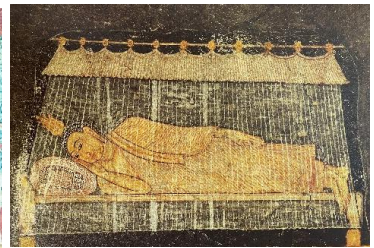
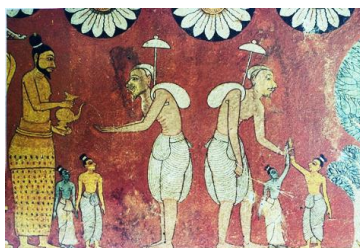


Figure 10. Tikiri Bandara Panabokke & family (Lect) **Figure 11.** Panabokke Kumarihamy mantha jacket (Middle) **Figure 12.** The attire of a Kandyan elite woman, crafted from ivory, is displayed at the British Museum (Lect)



Figure 12. Native people(around 1700-1800) (Left) **Figure 13.** Mantha Jacket (Middle) **Figure 14.** Kendi (Right)

Image sources

Figure 01,02,03,04,07,08,09 - Medawala Tempita Viharaya murals, Personal collection of the author.

Figure 05 - Researcher's illustration

Figure 06. Coomaraswamy, A. (1962). *Medieval Sinhalese art* (pp. 106–108).

Figures 10 & 11. Elpitiya Walauwa. (n.d.). *History*. Retrieved October 16, <https://elpitiyawalauwa.lk/history.php>

Figure 12 - de Rudder, L. H. (ca. 1807–1881). *A young family outside a hut - "Entre Colombo et Kandy."* [Lithograph].

Figure 13,24 - Kandy National Museum, Personal collection of the author.