The Origins of Murals in the Buddhist World

Mahinda Somathilake

Department of History, University of Peradeniya

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Abstract

In the oldest Indian texts the art of painting is attributed to god Vishnu thereby clearly indicating its divine origin. Although this reflects the Brahmanical ideals, it clearly indicates that the painting tradition was foremost among other artistic activities during the ancient period. As in the case of the views of the Brahmanical canon, the Buddhist tradition also held the same view that " there is nothing finer in the world than the art of painting " As India was the birthplace of Buddhism it may be assumed that it was also the birthplace of the Buddhist school of painting. Although it is difficult to speak with any precision as to the beginnings of Indian painting on account of non-availability of relevant evidence, it is certain that at least in the second or first century BC the Buddhist painting tradition was a fairly developed art as represented by some of the murals of caves at Ajanta, Ellora and Bagh etc. Some scholars have concluded that " it is no exaggeration to say that the history of painting in Sri Lanka is also the story of the spread of Buddhism in the island " while some others have concluded that the 'knowledge' of Buddhist painting tradition of India along with the Vinayarules would have been introduced to Sri Lanka with the formal adoption and spread of Buddhism somewhere in the third century BC, during the reign of Devanam Piyatissa. Nevertheless, it is evident that the extant Buddhist paintings of Sri Lanka belong to a much later period than the official introduction of Buddhism as this paper discussed the matter in detail .

Keywords: Origin of Buddhist paintings, Indian murals, Sri Lankan paintings

1. Introduction

According to the ancient Indian literature, divine origin is envisaged for art, and as mentioned in the Visnupurāna, Visvakarma, the son of Prabhāsa,is termed Silpaprajāpati, foremost among artists and master of a thousand arts (Vettam, 1993:592; Mahābhārata, 1;66,28-31, 1 ; 213 , 15 -18; Rāmāyana, 1931 :4,51,10-12 ; Nyāyakusumānjalī, 1912:1).In fact, according to the text Prabhāsa is a son born to Dharmadeva of his wife Prabhatā and he is considered to be one of the astavāsas; and his wife was the sister of Brahaspati, a widely travelled, virtuous woman of renowned chastity and great yogic attainments. Of the various kinds of arts, painting was one of the most important and the Citralakshanam, an ancient document, the chronology of which is uncertain, recounts a similar long legend of the origin of painting, ascribing it to Nagnajit, although some critics believed that he must be much older than the fifth sixth centuries AD (Sastri, 1987 : 1-60; Bose, 1926:79). It is to be noted at this point that the text of Citralakshanam is believed to have been written by Nagnajit, one of the earliest exponents of the ancient Indian vāstuvidyā. Nevertheless, it is not found in its original Sanskrit text or any Indian manuscript, and only its Tibetan Tanjur version of the medieval period is available (Shukla, 1993: 365; Sastri, 1987: vii; Goswamy and Dollapicela, 1976: vii.). However, it should also not be forgotten at this point that although the Citralakshanam of Nagnajit was not of Buddhist origin, later it came into Buddhist hands in Tibet (Goswamy and Dollapicela, 1976: 18-19). Hence, it is believed that this is the earliest authentic Buddhist text on Indian art (Sastri, 1987:vii).

A different legend is told, however, in the Visnudharmōttarapurāna, an ancient Indian canon of painting of the seventh century AD (Kramrisch, 1983:264; Coomaraswamy, 1934; Anand, 1957:107; Shah, 1958: xxvi)[1] According to this text, two mythical sages, twin manifestations of Vishnu, whose

[1] Nevertheless Nagpall believes that this belongs to the sixth century AD. JC Nagpall, Mural paintings in India, Gain Publishing House, Delhi, 1988, p.3.

names were Nara (man) and Nārayana were the pioneers in the field of art (Sastri, 1987:80; Zimmer, 1955:383-385). Thus, in the Indian texts the art of painting is attributed to Vishnu thereby clearly indicating its divine origin (Mahābhārata, 13 , 135 , 139; VisnudharmottaraMahāpurāna, 1912 , 3 , 35 , 2-5 ,35 , 2-5 ; Mitra, 1951:37-51). In addition, it is maintained in the Visnudharmōttarapurāna that as Sumeru is the chief of the mountains, as Garuda is the chief of those born out of eggs, as the king is the chief of men, even so in this world is the practice of painting, the chief of all arts (Visnudharmottara-purāna, 1961:39; Sivaramamurti, 1962:1-16) . As the Visnudharmōttarapurāna distinguishes the kinds of painting appropriate to temples, palaces and private houses and applies the theory of rasa to painting, it is evident that the art of painting occupied a very important place during the ancient period.In addition, it has been mentioned in the Visnudharmōttarapurāna as the giver of all the deeds, i.e, Dharma, pleasure, wealth and emancipation. It can lead to auspiciousness and prosperity too (Visnudharmottara-purāna, 1961:45-48 ,1, 43 ; 38).

Although this reflects Brahmanical ideals, it clearly indicates that the painting tradition was foremost among other artistic activities during the ancient period. Besides, in early Sanskrit literature, there are several references to the secular aspect of art, with the further information that it was in wall painting that the ancient artists largely excelled (Saxena, 1988; Sivaramamurti, 1934 ; 1955 ; 1930 - 32:40-57; Chaitanya, 1960). Nevertheless, despite these above mentioned literary references, which are often contradictory to one another from their appearance itself the absence of any actual creations of the art of the most ancient times, it is indeed impossible to say with absolute certainty what its fundamental character was. Similarly, it is difficult to identify the source of inspiration, i.e, whether it was religious and hieratic or secular in its origin (Anrobindo, 1947:80).

2. Buddhist Tradition

However, as in the case of the views of the aforesaid Brahmanical canon, it is noteworthy that the Buddhist tradition also held the same view that "there is nothing finer in the world than the art of painting " (Attasālinī, 1897:64). This clearly establishes the fact that Buddhism not only encourages but was also appreciates the painting tradition to a large extent as in the case of the Brahmanical texts too. Consequently, it is generally assumed that with the advent of Buddhism, a new idea was introduced into the tradition of painting, and religious subjects became the main theme of the artists of the time(Brown, 1927:20). Nevertheless, it should not be forgotten that comparatively a few references are available in Buddhist texts relating to this ancient Buddhist tradition of painting in South Asia. In this context, it is significant that the word cittakamma or pictorial art is referred to in Buddhist literature only rarely. Nevertheless, interesting passages occur, particularly in the Samyutta Nikāyāya and the Attasālini,in this regard (Attasalini, 1897:64, 85-86). According to the text, there is a question. "Brethren, have you ever seen a masterpiece of painting" ? and the reply is "Yes lord". Then Buddha says that Brethren that masterpiece of art is designed by the mind. Indeed, brethren, the mind is even more artistic than that masterpiece"· (Samyuttanikaya, 151 , 128) Accordingly, the answer to the question " How does the mind *(citta)* produce its diverse effects" is provided with a play on the words *citta,* (mind) and *citta,* (painting) both thought and art. The answer is "Just as the painter by his imagination (*cintetvā*) creates the appearance of many forms and colours in a picture (*citta*)."

It is to be noted at this particular point that Coomaraswamy has pointed out that the early translation of the text of Attasālinimissed the point and confused the issue to a large extent. Thus, the use of the word "artistic" is indefinite and does not bring out the parallel between the general

consciousness and the special functioning of aesthetic intuition (Coomaraswamy, 1981:208-209). Hence, he suggested that the translation of the answer to the question as stated in the Attasālini should be corrected as follows: (cittakarana), there is no kind of decorative art *(cittakamma)* in the world more various and pictorial *(cittatara)* than painting *(citta)*. And therein is there anything so multifarious *(aticitta)* as the kind of painting called caran? A mental concept *(cittasaññā)* rises *(uppajjati)* in the (mind of the) painters (cittakarānām) of such a work that such and such forms *(rūpāni)* should be made (katabbanī) in such and such ways" (Coomaraswamy, 1981:208-212). In accordance with this mental concept (cittasaññā), by drawing cittasaññā), by drawing (lēkha), colouring (raṅjana), adding highlights (ujjotanā) and shading (vattanā), etc. duly performed, the finished painting *(cittakiriya)* arises *(uppajjanti)* (Coomaraswamy, 1981:208-212).

As in the case of the passages of Attasālini quoted above, it is evident that almost all the references in the Buddhist texts relating to paintings are in the sense of idiomatic phrases rather than mentioning or appreciating actual existing painting traditions. Hence, in this context although it is not necessary to focus attention on such references, it must be emphasised here that in addition to the extant murals, this idiomatic usage also clearly indicates a highly utilised stage of paintings of the Buddhist tradition during such an early period. Besides these phrases, according to a legend, narrated in the Mūlasarvasti vādinVinayatoo, Buddhist painting tradition appears to have been in use during the time of the Buddha himself. This legend states that faced with the task of announcing to King Ajātasatru that the Buddha had passed away and fearing a violent reaction, Mahākassapa came up with a novel way of gently breaking the news. He instructed the minister Varshakāra to have a painted scroll prepared with depiction of the four great miracles of the Buddha's life, i.e, the birth, enlightenment, first sermon and the great decease (Schopen, 1992:1-39).

In fact, though the chronology of this legend is uncertain it should not be forgotten that according to the general acceptance the representation of Buddha in the human form is not found on the pre-christian monuments of ancient India, such as those at Bodh Gaya, Sānchi, Bhārhut, Amarāvatī and, caves 9 and 10 of Ajanta (Dehejia, 1997:7). Instead, we find the Bōdhi tree, wheel, chatra, paduka, etc., on or behind the altar clearly designated in the inscriptions as 'Bhagavato,' meaning Buddha, and worshiped as such. Thus, it is obvious that in elaborate scenes from the life story of the Buddha too, he is represented only through symbols, though later on, the figure of the Buddha takes its place upon their throne (Chattopadyaya, 1977:230; Coomaraswamy, 1965:45). It is interesting that in this period of transition, particularly at Amarāvatī and other similar sites in the Andhra region, one finds the Buddha represented in human form along with his representations in terms of well-known symbols (Ray, 1983:131). In this context, it is generally believed that the origin of the Buddha image was in the Bactro-Gandhāra and Mathurā regions during the Kushāna period and its earliest representation on the coins of Kanishka was also available during the second half of the first century AD (Chattopadyaya, 1977: 230; 1987:34-35; Bhandarkar, 1989:16; Huntington, 1993:627,630; Foucher, 1917:111-139 ; Coomaraswamy, 1927:287-328; Krishan, 1996). Nevertheless, the textual evidence as well as the existence of a Chinese Buddha image datable to 36 BC indicates that the representation of the Buddha in human form occurred before the first century AD (Huntington, 1985:113). Hence, the origin of the story mentioned in the Mūlasarvastivādin Vinaya relating to a drawing of the Buddha figure most probably belongs to a later period, at least after the first century BC.

However, besides this story, another statement in the **Cullavagga** of the **Vinaya Pitaka** also may be noted here. It states that the Buddhist monks who then lived in rock caves were permitted to plaster the walls of their dwelling

caves and to embellish them with paintings by the Buddha (The book of discipline, 1952:212). It is obvious that in these instances, they were only permitted to execute the paintings of flowers and creepers but were prohibited from drawing the figures of human beings since they were not pleasure seeking persons (The book of discipline, 1952:212). Nevertheless, this indicates that there were paintings suited for the non-professional also. The term Patibhānachitta has been applied for such paintings. It signifies creations of aesthetic imagination. This condition undoubtedly contradicts the story described in the **Mūlasarvastivādin Vinaya**. However, it is interesting to note that this rule of **Vinaya Pitaka** has not strictly been followed by the later Buddhists as suggested by the various murals of Ajanta, Bāgh, Hindagala, Dimbulāgala, Polonnaruva and elsewhere in the two countries of India and Sri Lanka. Nevertheless, it is important to note that apart from these references in the Buddhist canonical texts, there is more material pertaining to the ancient techniques of paintings. For instance, in the **Vinaya Pitaka** there are some references to adhesives such as gum used for plasters of the walls and also descriptions of some ingredients, which were used for the mixing of clay, as found in the **Dhammapadattakathā** (Commentary on **Dhammapada**) compiled in the fifth century AD (The VinayaPitakam, 1880:4, 151; Davids and Oldenberg, 1885:170; Dhammapadattakatha, 1912:219; Burlingame, 1921:4,9,25).

3. Indian Buddhist Murals

Evidently the descriptions that occur in the Buddhist canonical texts basically belong to the Buddhist tradition of painting in the early period of South Asian history. In fact, as Percy Brown has pointed out, as India was the birthplace of Buddhism it may be assumed that it was also the birthplace of the Buddhist school of painting (Brown, 1927:28). Although it is difficult to speak with any precision as to the beginnings of Indian painting on account of non-availability of relevant evidence, it is certain that at least in the second or first

century BC the Buddhist painting tradition was a fairly developed art as represented by some of the murals of cave nos. 9 and 10 at Ajanta. For the chronology of these murals, an inscription, on the front to the right of the great window in cave no.10, which records the gift of the facade by one VāsatiputaKatahādi may be considered (Luders 1912:138; Somathilake, 2007:123-148; Somathilake, 2002 172-178). The palaeography of the inscription indicates the beginning of the second century BC as the date of the cave, although some scholars have wrongly concluded that these marvellous temples and monasteries date probably from a little before the reign of the great Buddhist emperor Asoka (272-231 Bc) (Mitra, 1996:43; Dey, 1986:49).

In addition, two more donative records of the same period, one painted and the other engraved, exist inside the cave on the left wall. Of these, unfortunately, only a few letters now remain of the painted inscription. These, however, show that the painted record is also to be dated to an earlier period, probably about the middle of the second century BC mainly on the basis of its palaeography. Accordingly, the painting on which this inscription is found seems to be coeval with the inscription and therefore it is reasonable to believe that these belonged to the second century BC (Chakravarti, 1942:88; Yazdaniet al., 1952:48; Mitra, 1996:43). It is generally accepted that the architectural evidence is also corroborative on this point (Dhavalikar, 1968:147-153).

On account of such considerations many scholars have accepted the second century BC as the date of the earliest paintings of Ajanta (Yazdani, 1941:8; Yazdani, 1983:3 Yazdani, 1983:1, 31; 1983:2; Yazdani and others, 1952:48-51; Mitra, 1971:175; Deshpande, 1967:18; Barrett and Gray, 1963:24; Swarup, 1957:17; Sivaramamurthi, 1970:24; Craven, 1976:79, 122; Rawson, 1961:21; Hurlimann, 1996:132; Anand and Bharadwaj, 1971:7; Agravala, 1965:197; Randhawa and Galbraith, 1968:4; Upjohn and others, 1949;421;

Goetz, 1956:87; Abbate, 1972:64; Deshpande, 1989:18; Mookerjee, 1966:23; Dhavalikar, 1968:148; Deneck, 1967:24; Brown, 1927:35; Codrington, 1986:11). Accordingly, it is obvious that these are not only the earliest paintings of Ajanta but also the oldest surviving paintings of the entire Buddhist world (Zin, 1996:455). Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that one of the engraved inscriptions of the second century BC, earlier completely covered by a thick coat of mud plaster, was revealed after the peeling off of the plaster. It shows that when the cave was first finished it was devoid of paintings, since this inscription records only the gifts of the wall. In addition, if it was then intended to be adorned with paintings there was no need to smooth the wall surface too. Therefore, it appears that the cave that was finished in the second century BC was embellished with paintings sometimes in the later period instead of being painted in the wake of its excavation at least in the first century BC though some others have concluded that the oldest caves of Ajanta were painted during the first century AD, i.e, after two or three centuries of their initial excavations (Dhavalikar, 1968:147-153; Swarup, 1968:133; Brown, 1927:30-31; Iyer, 1958:66; Smith, 1969:86; Bagchee, 1977:26; Ghosh,301).

However, it is significant that substantial fragments of the older paintings, superimposed at some places by later ones, can also be seen on the right wall of cave no. 10. It is believed that on the ground of palaeographic evidence or technical developments of the murals these later ones may be assigned to the fourth century AD (Brown, 1927:30; Anand and Bharadwaj, 1971.11; Anand, 1973:14; Yazdani and others, 1952:51).Besides, most of the scholars believe that cave no. 9 was excavated a century later than cave no. 10 at Ajanta, i.e, in the first century BC (Deshpande, 1967:19; Agravala, 1977:92; Dehejia, 1997:212; Khandalavala, 1974:26; Fisher, 1993:59; Swarup, 1968:133; Solomon, 1923:17; Dhavalikar, 1968:148). It is also suggested that the earliest fragmentary paintings surviving in cave no. 9 belong to the same century,

though some others have believed that these belong to the first, second or third century AD (Mitra, 1971:176; Gupta and Mahajan, 1962:43; Yazdani and others, 1952:48; Fabri, 1955:65; Yazdani, 1983:16,23; Goetz, 1956:86-92; Rawson, 1961:35).

4. Sri Lankan Murals

Some scholars have concluded that " it is no exaggeration to say that the history of painting in Sri Lanka is the story of the spread of Buddhism in the island " while some others have concluded that the 'knowledge' of Buddhist painting tradition of India along with the Vinaya rules would have been introduced to Sri Lanka with the formal adoption and spread of Buddhism somewhere in the third century BC (Silva et al., 1973; De Silva, 1990:3-39). Nevertheless, it should not be forgotten that the extant Buddhist paintings of Sri Lanka belong to a much later period than the official introduction of Buddhism as discussed later in detail. Hence, it is necessary to focus attention, at this point, at least briefly, on available earliest information in Sri Lankan literature on Buddhist paintings to understand the actual period of commencement of the Buddhist mural painting tradition in the island. In this connection, a reference in the **Mahāvamsa** to an incident in King Duttagāmini's period somewhere in the second century BC is significant. It has been mentioned that several important scenes of Buddha's life were beautifully painted on the inner walls of the relic chamber of the *Mahāthūpa* or the Ruvanvälisäya in Anuradhapura. According to this description the paintings executed there included the life story of the Buddha, particularly the seven weeks spent by the Buddha after his enlightenment, to his attainment of *parinirvāna;* the *VessantaraJātaka;* and the realm of the Tusita heaven, etc (Mahavamsa, 1912:30;78-89v).

Of these, the life story of the Buddha precisely contains the main events of the request of Brahma to preach the Doctrine; setting in motion the wheel of

Dhamma; admission of Yasa into the order; *pabbahjjā* of the Baddavaggiyas; subduing the Jatilas; the visit of King Bimbisāra; entry into Rajagaha; accepting the Vūluvana temple; the eighty disciples; Journey to Kapilavastu; miracle of the jewelled path; *pabbajjā* of Nanda and Rāhula; acceptance of Jētavana; miracle at the foot of the mango tree; preaching in the heaven of the gods; miracle of the descent of the gods; assembly with the questioning of the *Thera; Mahāsamayasuttanta;* subjugation of the elephant Nālāgiri; subduing of the YakkhaĀlavaka of the robber Angulimāla; of Nāga king Apalāta; meeting with Rajagaha Brahmins; the giving up of life; accepting of the dish of pork; two gold coloured garments; drinking of the pure water; *parinibbāna;* lamentation of gods and men; the revering of the feet by the *Thera;* the burning of the body; quenching of the fire; the funeral rites and the distribution of relics of Drōna and the Jātaka stories.

During the sixth century AD, or even a little later, when the author of the **Mahāvamsa** thus described the relic chamber of the *Mahāthūpa* of the second century BC, he seems to have followed some of the ancient descriptions particularly mentioned in the **Porāna Sīhalattakathā Mahāvamsa** (Gunawardana, 1957:1979: 4; Adikaram, 1953:64). According to the accounts given in the **Vamsattappakāsinī**, the commentary of the **Mahāvamsa**, which is assigned to a period between 1000-1250 AD, further details of the paintings of the relic chamber of the *Mahāthūpa* can be obtained by reading **Cētiyavamsattakathā**, which is now lost (Vamsattappakasini, 1955:cv-cvi, 548). Although the accuracy of the reference has not yet been confirmed by archaeological evidence, it is noteworthy that archaeologists have found some remnants of paintings in the other relic chambers of Mahiyanganaya, Mihintale and the Dädigamastupas of subsequent periods (Paranavitana,1972:75; ASCAR, 1951:16, 241;1959:409; 1971:28,140; Ward, 1952:108-113; Godakumbura, 1969:5-6; Bandaranayake, 1986:74; Somathilake, 2004:695-722). Nevertheless,

it is interesting to note at this point that this particular tradition is totally absent in the Indian mainland throughout its history. All these indications, however, reveal that the aim of some of the Buddhist paintings during the ancient period of Sri Lanka was quite different from what it is today. After the closure of the relic chambers and the construction of the stupas over them no one was able to see those paintings.

Another important statement in relation to the Buddhist paintings of Sri Lanka appears in the **Visuddhimagga** said to have been compiled by Buddhaghōsa during the fifth century AD (Adikaram, 1953:2-5). According to the description given there, somewhere in the second century BC, a certain monk named Cittagutta lived in the cave named Kurandaka that had been embellished by attractive paintings. It is said that the concentration on meditation by the monk was so exemplary that he lived there for sixty years without seeing the paintings on the canopy of the cave (Visuddhimagga, 1956:38-39; Davids, 1920:38). Interestingly enough, though precise evidence is not available, some scholars have identified this particular Kurandaka cave with the present Kārambagala cave situated close to Ambalantota in the southern province where the remnants of painting can still be seen, as will be seen later (Dhanapala, 1964:10; 1957:2-3; Manjusri, 1977:20).

It is however, important to note at this point that the ancient Buddhist paintings of Sri Lanka have been referred to not only in these indigenous literary sources, but also in some accounts of foreign travellers. For instance, in FaHsien's record of his journey in the fifth century AD. There is an account of an exposition of the Tooth relic at Abhayagiriya temple in Anuradhapura and on the same occasion a number of canvas paintings of the Jātaka stories are said to have been displayed on either side of the route leading to the temple (Beal, 1869:155; Legge, 1886:105-107). As FaHsien had come to Sri Lanka and

consequently gained first-hand information, these descriptions appear to be comparatively reliable. This allusion is particularly important since it is obviously a description of an itinerant Buddhist painting tradition of which we do not have any surviving examples (Somathilake, 2002: Chap. 3).

5. Chronology of Murals

However, in addition to all these literary references are the ancient Buddhist wall paintings presently found at the sites of Ajantā, Aurangabād, Ellōrā and Bāgh in India and Hindagala, Vessagiriya, Mihintale, Gonāgolla, Mahiyanganaya and Tivamka shrine, etc., in Sri Lanka. Of these, as we have already noted, the earliest datable paintings of India are primarily at Ajanta in Mahārāstra State dated to the second century BC and also fifth, sixth or seventh century AD which covers a long period of time;[2] the paintings of Aurangabad in the same state probably belong to the end of seventh century AD; Ellōrā, also in the same state, where the chronology is uncertain; and Bāgh caves in Madhya Pradesh belonging to the fifth, sixth or seventh century AD (Sivaramamurti, 1970:25, 30-34: Chaitanya, 1976:10,27,43; Barrett and Gray, 1963:24; Mukerjiee, 1966:23; Schlingloff, 1987:1; Weiner, 1977:4-6; Brown, 1927:29; Rawson, 1961:51; Fabri, 1955:63; Nagpall, 1988).

Nevertheless, it should also not be forgotten that the above places would not have been isolated instances of contemporary Buddhist paintings. When these caves were painted evidently there must have been many other artists decorating many other Buddhist sites but these have long perished. The caves of Pitalkhōrā can be cited as a good example. These belong to the first century BC, and still contain some minute remnants of paintings (Codrington, 1986:11). It is obvious that in front of the main cave, there were eight pillars and

[2] Thus, it is clear that the Ajanta wall paintings not only offer some of the most important ancient masterpieces of Indian art, but also give a comprehensive picture of nearly eight hundred years of rich history of the paintings of India.

twenty-four pillars were in the inner cell on which the figures of Buddha and Bodhisattvas were drawn. Unfortunately, although some local ruler damaged these figures while cleaning the site it is interesting to note that these remnants of paintings are similar to those of Ajanta (Saxena, 1998:93). However, since the chronology of these remains is uncertain some scholars like Deshpande believe that these caves were embellished with paintings in the fifth century AD while some other scholars suppose that these Buddhist wall paintings were executed in the eighth century AD (Deshpande, 1989:21; Fabri, 1955:63).

In addition, remains of paintings in other Buddhist caves like Kanhērī near Bombay, Kārlē[3], Nāsik and Junnār are also available. Of these, the Nāsik caves belong to the first and the second centuries AD, and it is noteworthy that an inscription at the site mentions even a donation made for the painting (Wauchop, 1933:44-45, 61; Codrington, 1986:11; Ray, 1986:190). Besides, the pillars of the chaitya caves at Bhāja were also decorated with paintings of the Buddha in various mudras during the Mahayana phase (Weiner, 1977:7; Deshpande, 1989:21; Dhavalikar, 1983:36). Likewise, the painting remnants at the cave of Bedsā resemble the early Sātavāhana examples, but represent a late phase towards the end of the second century AD (Wauchop, 1933:53-54; Bussagli and Sivaramamurti, 113). Although the pillars of the caitya hall at Bedsā were thus originally painted, they were unfortunately whitewashed late in the nineteenth century AD (Coomaraswamy, 1972:40). Consequently these paintings have become very faint, but their outlines are still very clear.

As in the case of the Buddhist paintings in India, it is generally accepted that Sri Lanka has a long Buddhist tradition of mural paintings at least starting

[3] It seems probable that the sidewalls of Karle cave were originally painted. There are obvious signs that there has been some sort of plaster and at the left side near the stupa is more than suspicious painting of rail pattern some 10 feet above the floor level. See RS Wauchop, Buddhist cave temples of India, The Calcutta General Printin co, Calcutta, 1933, pp.44-45.

from the second century BC (Dhanapala, 1957:3; Wijesekara, 1959:1; Manjusri, 1977:20; Pandya, 1981:14,37).[4] As already mentioned above, some scholars believed that the earliest paintings of the island survive at Kārambagala, near Situlpauva in the southern province but precise chronological evidence is not available (Dhanapala, 1957:3; Wijesekara, 1959:1; Manjusri, 1977:20; Banadaranayake, 1986:25). Nevertheless, according to these critics, in the **Visuddhimagga** written by Buddhaghōsha during the first part of the fifth century AD, there is an indication about the time of the execution of this piece of painting, and accordingly CittaguttaThero mentioned in the **Visuddhimagga** is thought to have lived in southern Sri Lanka during the reign of Saddātissa (137-119BC) (Visuddhimagga, 1956: 38-39; Dhanapala and Dissanayake, 1958:2-3; Manjusri, 1977:20). Based on this fact, some have identified this place as the " Kurandaka cave" mentioned therein (Dhanapala and Dissanayake, 1958:2-3; Wickramasinghe, 1976:164; Dhanapala, 1964:8-10). If this uncertain identification is in fact correct, the paintings of Kārambagala should have been executed at least during a time before the fifth century AD. But, according to the opinion of some critics, these are still older by two or three centuries and some have regarded them even as belonging to the second century BC (Wickramasinghe, 1976:169; Manjusri, 1977:20). A few other scholars like Wijesekara, Pandya, Dhanapala, Dissanayake, Pant and Gunasinghe have also accepted that date (Wijesekara, 1959:1; Pandya, 1981:37; Dhanapala, 1964:8-10; Dhanapala and Dissanayake, 1958:2-3; Gunasinghe, 1980:479-588; Pant, 1970:20-21).

Nevertheless, although it is possible that the wall painting tradition had existed during such an ancient period in the island as already mentioned, the

[4] It is to be noted here that Ravindra Pandya believes that the pictures painted in Karambagala cave can be easily accepted as the oldest paintings of Sri Lanka.1981:14,37 .

survival of those remnants in the country is certainly doubtful. Hence, the eminent art critic Paranavitana is of the opinion that there is no painting in Sri Lanka older than the period of King Mahāsēna of the fifth century AD (Paranavitana, 1961:245). If not, no paintings older than the Sigiriya murals are available in any part of the island (Paranavitana, 1967:20; 1961:175,245; Nicholas and Paranavitana, 1961:182). Recent archaeologists have also accepted this view and concluded that the Kārambagala painting is probably coeval with or somewhat later than Sigiriya and of a similar character as the paintings at Gonāgolla and Vessagiriya, which belong to a similar period (Bandaranayake, 1986:13,25,36; Gunasinghe, 1980:479-588). Even so, this discussion should also take into account that though the paintings of Sigiriya, are the earliest datable paintings of Sri Lanka, they are the product of a mature tradition around the fifth century AD, which was undoubtedly preceded by several centuries of development.

However, it is to be noted at this point that though the paintings at Sigiriya are likely to be a representation of a secular tradition of painting,[5] at first

[5] Some scholars believe that the theme of the Sigiriya paintings is secular. The descriptions of Devendra, Rowland Silva, SiriGunasinghe, Ravindra Pandya and Chutivongs are conspicuous in this respect. Among them Devendra says that all the extant paintings of note in the island are connected in some way with the Buddhist church. Nevertheless, the Sigiriya frescoes are entirely different from them in this respect. 1948:10; Rowland Silva observes that the fifth century paintings at Sigiriya are an exception since they have no religious significance and are (according to some) portraits of ladies of the royal court. 1973; Gunasinghe states that these however, are not examples of Buddhist paintings; the Sigiriya ladies are clearly of no religious significance; the flowers they carry are not offerings to the Buddha and they are not on their way to pay homage to Him. They are pre-eminent expressions of mundane beauty (physical as well as emotional) and exist in a realm quite distinct from anything Buddhist. In any event, their non-Buddhist nature notwithstanding, the Sigiriya murals must be regarded as an example of a local tradition of painting, a decorative medium which must have been popular enough to be followed in other spheres as well, one of which much necessarily have been the religious(1980:479).Ravindra Pandya says that the Sigiriya frescoes are the only ancient paintings in Sri Lanka that do not have a religious significance (1981:8); Chutivongs states that Sigiriya, unlike most of the other sites is predominantly a secular monument with paintings related to this field. The site itself had much natural potential for design and no doubt for this reason was handpicked for the modelling of a royal abode. (1990:39).

glance while only considering their superficial appearance, some critics have believed that they belong to a Buddhist tradition of painting belonging to the *Mahāyāna* (Great Vehicle) sect on the basis of their subject matter (Devendra, 1948:10; Silva and others, 1973; Gunasinghe, 1980:479; Pandya, 1981:8; Chutivongs and others, 1990:39; Brown, 1918:36-7; Francesco, 1972; Wijesekara, 1983:255; Nagpall, 1988:28; Dhanapala, 1964:10-15; Dey, 1986:199).In addition, among the opinions of other critics expressed on the themes of Sigiriya paintings, the most popular one that prevails at present is that they depict some goddesses from Tusita heaven. The main reason for that view is the fact that clouds cover the lower parts of the female figures and it is clear that the concept of Tusita heaven also signifies Buddhist ideology to a great extent (Somathilake, 1995;995; 2006:37; 2008:19-41). Besides, the paintings on the ceiling at the Cobra-hood cave at Sigiriya prove that the cave was used as a Buddhist shrine and the Asana cave also at the site contains painted fragment of a scene of which one panel depicts a worshipping scene (Bell, 1896:258). At least two figures are discernible in the painting, one being a male in the attitude of worship and the second a standing personage, apparently an attendant divinity, holding a flower and a flywhisk. These figures in the cave strongly suggest that an image of the Buddha was placed on the existing throne. This scene was evidently painted over an older layer of mural, which was part of a tree and foliage of the earlier epoch. Accordingly, it is clear that at least a later series of paintings in the Asana cave are of a religious character, dating from the time when Sigiriya had again become a monastic establishment after Kassapa's reign (Chutivongs and others, 1990:40-43).[6]

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[6] Although the chronology is uncertain, according to some scholars the worshipping scene thus painted on the ceiling of the Asana cave possibly dates to about the twelfth century AD, with the style comparable to the paintings at the Tivamka image house (Chutivongs and others, 1990:43).

6. Conclusion

According to the above discussion it is obvious that agreeing to the literary evidence, though the history of the Buddhist painting tradition of both countries goes as far back as the commencement of Buddhism somewhere in the sixth century BC, or the official introduction of the Buddhism into Sri Lanka sometime in the third century BC, the oldest extant Buddhist paintings of India and Sri Lanka date only to the second-first century BC onwards. Due to this contemporaneous development and also some superficial similarities between the two tradition, it has been a common assumption among many scholars to suggest that the earliest murals of Sri Lanka are very closely related to, if not directly derived from, those of Ajantā and Bāgh. In contrast, only a very few scholars have argued that there is no such close connection between the two mural traditions.

It is evident that this conclusion has resulted from the influence of conventional historical writings of the island, both ancient and modern, particularly on the cultural and religious interactions between the two countries. But, it has to be realized that these views were originally expressed at a time when very little was known of the extent and character of early Sri Lankan paintings and also the other archaeological sources. The situation was the same at the beginning when the Ajanta paintings were compared with other painting traditions, especially Chinese paintings and early Renaissance paintings according to the individual training and inclination of the scholar either to establish their superiority or indicate their deficiency. In this context, it is certain that there is no historical evidence of political exchange between the Vākataka rulers and Sri Lankan kings when Ajanta was an active centre of Buddhism during the fifth and sixth centuries AD. There is, conversely, evidence for the movements of pilgrims and Buddhist clergy between different regions of the two countries. However, it is obvious that this distinction between the two

Buddhist painting traditions of ancient India and Sri Lanka can only be comprehended by a detailed and analytical comparison of the two, particularly in the context of styles, techniques, themes, social conditions and material culture which formed historical background of these murals (Somathilake, 2002).

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