

# THE GRAMMAR OF ART IN BUDDHIST MURAL PAINTINGS OF THE KANDYAN TRADITION AS A METHOD OF EXPRESSION

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## **Introduction**

The paintings drawn in the time of *Kanda Udarata* kingdom, from the late 17<sup>th</sup> century to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, are called paintings of Kandyan tradition or *sinhale chithrakalawa*. Almost two hundred temples and *devalas* (shrines) constructed during the period, contain the paintings of this particular grammar of art; the distinctive style of the Kandyan traditional paintings which acquired trough colours, lines, shapes, figures, figure composition, narrative styles and motifs which can be seen even today. In the times of Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa kingdoms, the paintings were drawn in such a way that the fragments of one story had been depicted all over the surface without any apparent order. Due to this reason, some of the stories had become quite incomprehensible and entangled. In contrast, the paintings of Kandyan tradition were depicted in an organized manner: the wall surface had been divided into narrow strips to depict one story as a series of paintings using flat colours. There are number of features in the grammar of these paintings. Preparation of wall surface, tools and equipment, colour combination, the use of flat colours and lines, designing of human figures, animals, costumes, trees and plants, figure composition, creation of rivers and other irrigation channels, architectural designs and decorative designs are among them. These are the features which made the paintings of Kandyan tradition distinctive.

Was the grammar of art in the temple paintings of Kandyan tradition, devised deliberately to communicate ideas? (This will be analyzed in relation to the narrative style of paintings, colour combination, the use of flat colours and lines, designing of human figures, animals, costumes, trees and plants, figure composition, creation of rivers and other irrigation channels, architectural designing and decorative designs).

The main objective of this research is to study the techniques and methods used by the artist to communicate certain concepts through this

particular grammar of art, analyze the socio- psychological milieu that generated those techniques and methods. Additionally this paper will study the social, economical, political and the cultural space that prevailed during the Kandyan period, the style and the spectatorship of these paintings.

### **Methodology**

Qualitative research method was used which includes content analysis and phenomenological study. The tools such as analyzing, observation, and review of secondary data were employed to collect data. Further, descriptive and comparative data analysis was also done.

### **Results and Discussion**

A study of the grammar of the Kandyan tradition paintings show that the main objective of temple paintings was to address a particular group of spectators or viewers who belonged to the common unsophisticated masses; to make them understand the concepts of Buddhism as the real foundations for a pious society. And, in spite of that, there was a major religious crisis which had been developing due to the colonialism and that had to be inevitably addressed by the chief Buddhist offices: a tendency of many Buddhists to get converted into other religions and to get deviated from the temples. Therefore, devising a deterrent became compulsory. The artists, the committee members and the chief incumbents of the temples had to pay much attention in using visual media as a method to transmitting Buddhist values to the ordinary villagers. As a result, a new grammar of painting was devised to deliver those Buddhist concepts and values simply, clearly and effectively. It is quite understandable that this new grammar, which contains appropriate socio-psychological insights, had been devised specifically as a method of expression. Presenting the story as a series of paintings, dividing the wall surface into narrow strips (of 12, 16 and 18 inches) can be identified as the basic feature of Kandyan tradition of paintings (*Ex: Degaldoruwa temple, Medawela Tampiti Viharaya, Gangaramaya and Sooriyagoda temple*). The stories flow from left to right in the series of painting. For immediate apprehension, the *Jathaka* stories or the episodes of Buddha's previous life had been presented simply without confusing the spectators. Only one episode from one *Jathaka* story had been pictorialized instead of all, as the current practice. This method of illustration enabled the illiterate common villager to comprehend the whole story. The story was

presented from left to right as a book. This is an instance of using the most appropriate narrative style in the context of psycho-social circumstances. The habit of South Asian people to read or write from left to right, had been used by the artist to present his visual concepts simply to the viewer.

The use of colours is also a special feature in this tradition of painting. The flat and basic colours were used to give the spectator a better grasp of the story. The artist never attempted to create a depth in the paintings so that, the figures like humans, trees and plants were easily understood by spectators. He projected the story to the spectators effectively, the figures and objects using only few colours i.e. white, yellow, gray, black, green on a red background. Colours like yellow, white and gray are quite visible on a red background; use of primary colours and specific colour combinations provide enough evidence to say that the artist had used his grammar to convey the desired message explicitly to the focused spectatorship. The use of warm colours i.e. ,redwhite, yellow and black suggests that the effort of the artist was to let the viewers grasp what was intended, instantly. Flat colours too, suggest the intention of the artist to focus on delivering certain concepts rather than concentrating on the beauty of his work (*Ex: Kalaniya Temple, Kathaluwa temple, Karagampitiya Temple*).

In addition to the basic features mentioned above, the strategic attitude of the artist is demonstrated by having proportional differences of figures, outlining all the figures and objects in black, leaving plenty of blank spaces in the background, using high angle (bird's view) in designing paddy fields, ponds, rivers, etc., representing symbolically complex objects, writing the story in captions below each painting etc. too. This proves the fact that artist had devised the particular grammar of painting in order to convey his intentional ideas. *Vessantara Jathakaya* and *Suthasoma Jathakaya* pictorialized in the temple of Degaldoruwa and *Uruga Jathakaya* in the temple Medawela Tampita Viharaya furnish sufficient evidences to substantiate the argument.

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