

## Evolution of Sinhalese Painting

(From the earliest up to twelfth century A.D.)

THE art of painting may have co-existed with the art of magic and religion from early times in Ceylon since the images of demons and planetary godheads could not have been realistically fashioned without colour. A reference to painting is found in the Jātakas<sup>1</sup>. If the relevant passage can be accepted to have been written in Ceylon this is the earliest mention. As fine arts seldom find expression in isolation it may also be inferred that painting co-existed along with other branches of art. Painting in some manner or form is a concomitant of the dance specially in primitive societies. The dramatic art is also enhanced by the use of paint. The dance<sup>2</sup> is mentioned in Paṇḍukābhaya's time for the king is said to have sat with Cittarāja witnessing the dance. Even otherwise that society could not have remained ignorant of the art since the social amenities, and artistic abilities did not differ much from the advanced society of a later day. Writing, art and architecture were well developed. The allied art of painting has no reason to be absent from a society that needed fulfilment of aesthetic, magical and religious needs.

There was then at this period a school of art or a tradition of art that was coming down from ancient times as a necessary social factor catering to the magical and religious needs of the then existing society. To what extent it was an indigenous expression of the people and how far influenced by the art of the mainland none can be too sure. One may surmise that to be compatible with the advanced state of society this art of painting should also have been similarly advanced during the third-fourth century B.C. In all likelihood it was professed by the one and the same group of persons in the capacity of priest or magician. Perhaps two persons functioned in the two offices responsible for the religious and magical welfare of the community. Two castes may have then existed. Other phases of art such as utilitarian and decorative may also have been in use under separate castes or groups.

Then as we know a new religious art swept across the country with the introduction of Buddhism and its island wide influence. At this stage may have arrived from the continent a highly developed art including painting. This was in the third century B.C. This was a literary form in all its phases. The popular art obtaining in the island would have subsided but not faded away. There was a bifurcation if it had not already occurred. The magical phase continued as a special feature of the social life.

1. Cowel and Rouse, 1907. Jātaka, No. 546.

2. Mv. Ch. 10 v. 87.

And the religious may have fused with the new religious form as introduced from India of the third century B.C. Mutual borrowing was still possible but it was the new Indian art that influenced the other most. Thus were born two traditions of art in Ceylon, viz., (a) popular religious art, (b) magic art. The other phases of the popular tradition continued.

This popular tradition<sup>3</sup> runs through the whole course of Sinhalese painting from the day it evolved during the third century B.C. and makes its appearance whenever the literary form loses its hold on the people or even exist side by side as its complement. Other new movements combine or influence this tradition to put forth sweet blossoms at times. But these are mere flashes across the horizon. They are sufficiently powerful to suppress the people's movement. The literary form holds the floor for a period and shines in court or palace or even temple but in the end the popular tradition reappears.

During the Reign of King Duṭṭhagāmani the earliest genuine reference to painting occurs. "They made a drawing of it with red arsenic upon a linen cloth."<sup>4</sup> As no mention of brush or paint is recorded this may have been a line drawing. Jātaka tales have also been depicted<sup>5</sup> says another passage. Other scenes from the life of the Buddha were painted around the Great Dagoba. At this period one can expect the prevalence of the literary form and the popular form side by side. And it can verily be asserted that the Andhra tradition crept in at this stage from South-East India, for then Amarāvati was at its zenith and Ceylon contacts considerable. But we have no evidence except from sculpture.

The later texts<sup>6</sup> in India recognise painting to be the principal art and architecture only secondary. Therefore the presence of master builders<sup>7</sup> (sthapati) numbering 500 at this time shows that arts had attained rapid progress. That decorative designs depicted in cloth were in use is seen by another reference which says the figures of sun, moon and stars and different lotus flowers made of jewels were fastened to the canopy.<sup>8</sup> Again it is recorded that King Duṭṭhagāmani<sup>9</sup> commanded the scenes of Jātakas and incidents from the

3. Popular art even to-day has many branches practised in different castes. These are religious, demonological, utilitarian and decorative. Two of them may be still found closely resembling tempera painting, but are struggling for survival. One is the 'Citra' work which is actually fresco painting on cloth or wall. The other is the method used in demonological figures called 'bali.' Here the colours are applied on moulded clay figures whilst they are damp. The method is tempera. The caste of this artist is very low even lower than that of the other.

4. Mv. Ch. 27, vv. 18-20.

5. Mv. Ch. 27, v. 24.

6. Vishnudharmottaram.

7. Mv. Ch. 30, v. 5.

8. Mv. Ch. 30, vv. 68, 69.

9. Mv. Ch. 30, vv. 78-88.

life of Buddha to be depicted in the relic chamber of the Mahāthūpa. Here we see the appearance of the popular movement in a vigorous form as a people's demand for religious edification side by side with the literary form as a court demand. In every such national regeneration the brightest facet of this art shines more than ever before as it were in a new light. Yet another interesting reference to painters and a thūpa that was painted with lacquer is found in the Mahāvansa.<sup>10</sup> As a result of the king's patronage and the public zeal, the artists found considerable scope for success.

For a period the course runs smooth. Next mention is made in the fourth century A.D. that Jeṭṭha Tissa was said to have been experienced in ivory carving and also that he carried out other works of art.<sup>11</sup> Religious paintings—500 representations of the Buddha in his previous births—presumably on cloth or silks brightly coloured and grandly executed have been witnessed by Fa-Hian.<sup>12</sup> Here we see the popular phases, one in the decorative element and the other in the religious. This tradition continues. It progresses all long as a religious manifestation associated with great festivals but never so far as a secular demonstration for the joy of observers. That idea may have subsided or was a still later introduction.

Though the walls and ceilings of living caves and other monastic as well as secular establishments had been once covered with paintings no examples survive. That some at least pertained to secular subjects may be inferred from the Pāli Commentaries<sup>13</sup> which state that the resident monks had not seen the paintings in the caves though they had lived in them for years. They were meditating monks and perhaps disdained the paintings on secular themes.

Then the numerous South-East Indian contacts quickened the pace of the course of Sinhalese art. The Gupta School of painting was too powerful to leave unchanged anything that came under its influence. And thus Sinhalese painting in its most developed literary form was born. Its direct antecedents remain unknown but there is no doubt that it was inspired by the great literary revival in India under the Guptas. This is a court art and by its very nature should exist isolated as the work of a literary School who created it for a limited few. Its aloofness from the rest of the traditions both in spirit and expression is to be expected then. Other examples may have existed but none remains. Thus Sīgiriya stands out clearly as a great School of painting belonging to the court. More than one tradition seems unified in this art and most of it was perhaps derived from the Kistna area and the Ajaṇṭa School.

10. Mv. Ch. 32, v. 4, 6.

11. Mv. Ch. 37, v. 101.

12. Legge's Translation. *Travels of Fa-Hian*, p. 105-107.

13. Early commentaries of the fifth century A.D. speak of paintings on cave walls, roofs etc.,

From now onwards the two traditions run almost a parallel race contending for generations until after a period, the literary effort fades away leaving in the field the other as the sole competitor. Nevertheless when favourable periods of literary awakening appear, the popular art itself when impregnated with powerful art influences becomes the genesis of the literary form.

During a subsequent period we hear of image houses (paṭimāgehas)<sup>14</sup> art galleries or (cittasālas)<sup>15</sup> two types of building intended for the exhibition and display of art. Such institutions formed an adjunct of a palace or court.<sup>16</sup> It is mentioned that paintings were repaired<sup>17</sup> from time to time and even restored by kings. Hence the old paintings came to be tampered with. Clever painters by effecting improvements may have diminished or added to the merit of the extant work. Fresh layers were painted superimposed over the already existing paintings. This fact explains the presence of layers of paintings underneath some of the surface ones. By about the eighth century<sup>18</sup> master painters and apprentices may have visited Sīgiriya. This was the practice and the process of learning may have been by actual observation. Thus Sīgiriya may have acted as a great influencing factor in Sinhalese Art.

The brightest star of the literary style had set with Sīgiriya and was perhaps never to rise again. A few bright spots in the literary form still reappear but these bear popular traits as well. One such is the art at Hindagala. It is similar to that of Sīgiriya but not identical. Here is seen the oldest religious painting extant in Ceylon in a style showing both literary and popular elements. During this period many such frescoes existed. Pulligōḍa, Anurādhapura decorations and perhaps Dambulla came to be painted in this mixed style.

In style, Anurādhapura can be far removed from Sīgiriya but not in respect of the designs. At Anurādhapura the decorative designs had luxuriated into ornamentation of leaves, flowers and buds. The structural basis of the composition was the same in principle. Nature in free play seems to be predominant. A revival of linear ability can be noticed. The designs breathe an air of energy in diffusion as at later Ajaṇṭa designs.

In the tenth century A.D. the social status of the painters themselves was undergoing a transformation which in turn may have reacted on the art. This was a period of degeneration. Even as there was an assimilation in the communities of the society, one may expect an admixture in the work of artists as well. The literary tradition had lost all esteem and hold over the people. The popular

14. Cv. Ch. 37, v. 183.

15. Mv. Ch. 20, v. 52.

16. Even so there existed attached to every temple an image house containing painting for serving the needs of the people. Here was to be seen popular paintings whilst at the court only the literary form prevailed.

17. Cv. Ch. 42 v. 56, *Ibid.* ch. 41, vv. 95, 96.

18. *Sigiriya Graffiti* p. 334.

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form was also suffering in turn. One hears of mendicant artists.<sup>19</sup> Most probably some had adopted painting as a peripatetic profession. The other artists too could not have been distinguished men. There were also retainers attached to each temple. Some of them are mentioned as receiving annual benefactions for their services<sup>20</sup> as painters.

When we come to the twelfth century many references<sup>21</sup> to painting occur and actual examples of drawing belonging to this period are also found. The art tradition which had subsided is revived along with the national revival. As was customary with the people, the court, temples, palaces and halls demanded beautified sanctification. The literary art is created once again. Along with it appears also the popular tradition. It is a great period of artistic activity. A new spirit of religion dominates the frescoes of the time. The Sigiriya traces are also there, and one is reminded of the ancient glory in a new form. South Indian specially Pallava and Chola elements that were not there before have come in. Colour as a plastic quality loses its effect. Emotion is the key note and worship is the theme. Once again perhaps for the last time, Sinhalese art bursts out into flower reminiscent of the aroma of Sigiriya finally to whither away and survive with the common people as a mere tradition.

A natural exuberance similar to an earlier mentioned phase of Anurādhapura develops at Polonnaruwa and Dimbulāgala, but lacks that chaste profusion. This stage of the evolution stands prominently in view. In its final phase Sinhalese painting comes to rest at Polonnaruwa. Here one sees both stylisation and degeneration, once again the popular and the literary forms appear together. Then comes the impending end,—the product of an over-ripe civilisation.

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19. Cv. Ch. 52, v. 3.

20. E.Z. Vol. I p. 109 mentions ālināvaka head painters (āli meaning painter and nāvaka = head). *Ibid.* p. III, sittarak = painter. In modern Sinhalese painters are called sittaru and considered of low caste. The change of status may be seen in the terminology as well. See E.Z. Vol. IV, p. 260.

21. Cv. Ch. 73, vv. 61-83, 86, 88, 121, 122, 131, Cv. Ch. 78, vv. 89, 94.