

This is the text of the presentation made by Senaka Bandaranayake at the launch of his book,  
*Rock and Wall Paintings of Sri Lanka*

## ROCK AND WALL PAINTINGS

Senaka Bandaranayake



A book like this is always a collective effort and I have duly acknowledged all the inputs to the original publication, as well as in the new 'Afterword'. But this is an occasion to remember once again the team that helped to put the book together in the 1980s: Thanks are due to Victor Walatara, my former teacher, who was the originator of the project and the moving spirit behind the book, determined to make it a quality production; Gamini Jayasinghe, whose photographs formed the basis that made such a book possible; Prof. Albert Dharmasiri, who spent nearly three months or more with me over long evenings, designing each and every page, ably assisted by Mr. Gamini Jayantha Mendis; Maal Fonseka, whose research and editorial contribution was of such an order that I offered her co-authorship, duly refused; Mrs Nalini Wickremasinghe and Mr E. F. C. Abeysekera, from the publisher's Board of Directors, who were amongst the initiators of the idea and who were patient advocates of the tolerance of the author's failure to meet deadlines; and the Lever Cultural Conservation Trust, who commissioned Gamini Jayasinghe's photo-documentation of the murals. (Of course there were many others, a long list, who are duly acknowledged in the book.)

### The Beginnings of Art Historical Studies in Sri Lanka

This is also an opportunity to recall those pioneers who began art historical studies of Sri Lankan painting. In 1895 H. C. P. Bell wrote what is probably the first piece of modern art historical writing on Sri Lankan painting – his detailed description of the Sigiriya apsaras. About twelve years later Ananda Coomaraswamy published his chapter on painting in *Medieval Sinhalese Art*, bringing into focus the Late Period murals.

These and other writings of Bell and Coomaraswamy are almost the only work on the subject we have from the first half of the 20th century. There are a few other things: an article by the famous Austrian art historian, Stella Kramrisch, on the Kelaniya murals in 1925; Senarath Paranavitana's note on the Dimbulagala 'frescoes' in 1933; a few colour plates and observations by

Benjamin Rowland in his 1938 album *The Wall Paintings of India, Central Asia and Ceylon*; photographs by Lionel Weardi; a short article or two in the *Observer and Times of Ceylon* annuals, initiated by Weardi – for half a century, very little else!

### 1950's and 60s

The 1950s and 60s mark the real beginnings of more focussed art historical research and writing – dominated – illuminated I should say – by three persons: Senarath Paranavitana, L. T. P. Marjuri and Siri Gunasinghe. Paranavitana wrote his first article on the Sigiriya paintings in 1947 – the beginnings of a new interpretation of Sigiriya itself. In the same year Nandadeva Wijesekera completed his Ph.D. on *Early Sinhalese Painting at the Calcutta University* (ultimately published in 1959). In 1950 Paranavitana published *Sigiri-Abode of a God King* based on his interpretation of the symbolic meaning of the paintings. Paranavitana and Wijesekera confined themselves to early painting.

1957 saw D. R. Dhanapala's small popular guide *The Story of Sinhalese Painting* and also the big UNESCO album edited by Paranavitana and Archer, *Ceylon. Paintings from Temple Shrine and Rock*. The second edition of Coomaraswamy's *Medieval Sinhalese Art* was published in 1956 making a rare book readily available, while a Sinhala translation appeared in 1962.

Marjuri, who has started his studies and copies of the murals in the 1930s and 40s, wrote a series of articles on the Late Period paintings in the *India Lankadipa* and the *Sūramā* through the 1950s. In 1956 Siri Gunasinghe wrote a key article on 'Kandyan painting' in Ralph Pieris's *Aspects of Sinhalese Culture*, followed in the 1960s by a series of articles in the *Kala Sangaraha*. Siri Gunasinghe's work in the 1960s culminated in the publication (many years later) of his important article in *Spatiala Zeylanica* in 1978, 'Buddhist Paintings – an art of enduring simplicity,' and the museum publication of his *An Album of Paintings* in 1980.

Two foreign scholars also contributed their views: W G Archer (from the Victoria and Albert Museum) who with Paranavitana edited the big UNESCO album, and Philip Rawson (from the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford), who made penetrating observations on the Sigiriya paintings in his book *Indian Painting* in 1961. In 1962 Raja de Silva completed his doctoral dissertation at Oxford: *The Evolution of the Technique of Sinhalese Wall Painting; a Study Employing Museum Laboratory Techniques*.

A list of publications in the 1950s dramatically illustrates the extraordinary surge of activity in research and publications on paintings during that decade:

- 1950 - Paranavitana: Sigiri-Abode of a God-king
- 1950s - Manjusri articles in *Irida Lankadipa* and *Silumina*
- 1956 - Second edition of Coomaraswamy's *Mediaeval Sinhalese Art*
- 1956 - Siri Gunasinghe: 'Kandyan Art'
- 1957 - D.B. Dhanapala: *The Story of Sinhalese Painting*
- 1957 - UNESCO volume edited by Paranavitana and Archer
- 1959 - Nandadeva Wijesekera: *Early Sinhalese Painting*

### The Third Period

After a break of about ten years the third period in the study of the paintings began, I like to think, in 1975 with a new and ambitious documentation and research effort under the aegis of the Archaeological Society of Sri Lanka. This period saw an expansion and systematisation of the work that had gone before. 1975 also marked the beginnings my own structured study of the paintings. In that year we formed a study group of the Archaeological Society, 'invented' the wall plan recording technique, formulated a survey data sheet, and began to study narrative sequence, which we called *siddhi bedim*, and patronage. There are many people in this room and three of the four speakers on this occasion, who were part of that project. We met in the Faculty Club of Colombo University, and intensely studied temples such as Kelaniya and Kataluva.

A special project was the survey of Karagampitiya temple murals with architectural students from Katubadde – many of whom are now senior architects – but in the end the Archaeological Society project fizzled out, produced no direct results. But it played a

key role in putting the Late Period murals once more on the agenda of art historical research.

One indirect result of the Archaeological Society's work was the trilingual publication of Manjusri's *Design Elements from Sri Lankan Temple Paintings* (edited by a committee from the Archaeological Society); another was the Lever Cultural Conservation Trust's photo-documentation project with Gamini Jayasinghe, which ultimately formed much of the illustrational material for *Rock and Wall Paintings*. This Lever Trust program also anticipated Roland Silva's grand Central Cultural Fund project of large format photo-albums of 30 selected temples and sites, published in the 1990s – authored by Nandana Chutiwongs, P. L. Prematilleke and Roland Silva.

The last three decades – the 1980s, 1990s and 2000s have seen a great deal of studying, documentation, writing and publishing on the paintings of all periods – much of which has been listed in the additional bibliography in the 'Afterword' of this new reprint.

### The Fourth Phase ?

The questions that arise are: when does the fourth phase in the study of the paintings begin? Has it already begun?

I can think of four issues that the new generation research should address:

1. Regional and atelier variations in style and the *sittara parampara*, the artists' lines of pupillary succession;
2. The sociology and semiotics, the social and symbolic significance underlying the paintings, and the nature of patronage;
3. The narrative sequences – how they operate and their sources and structure;
4. The relationship between our late period murals and those of South and, especially, Southeast Asia.

I hope that on-going and future research will address questions such as these. But one must also say that while research is essential, the documentation and conservation of the greatly endangered cultural treasure of the 'one thousand' painted temples must not be forgotten. Research and publication must serve as one of the major motivators of that historic national task. ■

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