

Historical Visual Records of Music and Art in Sri Lanka

Dr. Leena Seneheweera

Senior Lecturer, Department of Fine Arts, Faculty of Arts, University of Peradeniya, Sri Lanka

Abstract

This paper analyzes the importance of visual records of musical instruments, garments, ornaments, hair styles, music gestures, expressions, musical events of musicians and the artistic values and figurative records of paintings as well. The study focuses on selected visual records of paintings from Buddhist shrines in Mulgirigala, Kathaluwa and Panadura Rankoth Vihara in the Down South of Sri Lanka. Those visual records appeared at the end of 18th century and during the 19th century. The shrines were developed by the Dutch under the guidance of the British government as well. Therefore, some visuals represent Western musical entertainment as well as Buddhist religious atmosphere with an artistic value and aesthetic sentiment. Some musical themes and other compositions revealed the Western musical Instruments, features of Western figures, its background and Western life style. The problem of the study focuses on how to consider those factors to develop Sri Lankan music and art. Qualitative evaluation methods were used to build the study and primary data were collected from selected shrines. The result of the study discusses about adding a new path to develop music and art through pleasing visual records such as Western culture of some Buddhist shrines in Sri Lanka.

Key words: *Music, painted compositions, visual records, Western culture, Buddhist shrines*

Introduction

The goal of the study is to identify the historical visual records of music and art in the ancient Asian and Western multicultural concept of Buddhist people in Sri Lanka through the religious

visual art of painted shrines. The selected shrines are *Mulgirigala*, *Kathaluwa* and *Panadura Rankoth Vihara* which are located in Southern Province of Sri Lanka and developed in the 18th century under the British rule. Its sophisticated visual art works such as paintings, sculptures and architectural designs reveal the religious, social, economic, political, ethnic and cultural cohesion between Western and Asian communities. Those kinds of visual records cover a vast geographical location in painted Buddhist shrines in the down South of Sri Lanka (Bandaranayake 1986). The study will attempt to identify the impact of the multicultural artistic concept on the development of art and music culture among the Sinhalese in the Island. Particularly, the paintings of the temple depict the special occasions of the Buddha's moral character through *Jataka* stories. However, the earliest evidence of *Jataka* (birth) story depicted in the chamber of *Ruvanvalisaya* in Anuradhapura by the king Dutugemunu (161-137 B.C.). Except *Jataka* stories selected shrines depict *Defeating Mara* (evil), the composition of the heaven and hell etc. with integration of the Western cultural adaption to the Sinhala Buddhist society. Those records have contributed to develop the ancient art and music culture in Sri Lanka. Currently the paintings of the shrines have faded away and few compositions are even unable to recognize. Therefore, this study will help to record some visual evidences of Sri Lankan art and music. In this study, *Mulgirigala* and *kathaluwa* shrines are observed to discuss visual records of music and *Panadura Rankoth Vihara* is observed to discuss about the visual records of art.

There are sophisticated visual records in painting compositions on the walls and ceiling in those shrine rooms. Until today the compositions have been preserved with bright colors as figurative records and the narrations as written records on the walls. It is confirmed by the following preserved evidences.



Figure 1: Wedding of the Prince Siddhartha and Princess Yashodara, Shrine room at Rankoth Vihara

Figure 2: Handover the golden figure to King, from Shrine room at Rankoth Vihara

Those compositions depict the creative works with artistic and religious expressions and reveal the talents of artists who have painted them at the time. Moreover, the themes of some compositions depict the religious and secular life style. Particularly few compositions of paintings represent the Western secular music culture and luxurious life style. During the late 18th century there was a Buddhist revival in Sri Lanka. It has influenced to change the religious adaptation with European secular life style into the works of art particularly, for building shrines of the temples. Apart from that, with the emergence of nationalism, the social content in the society changed. These changes in the social status were dramatically enhanced and as a result of Buddhist temples with painted compositions of Western features such as; human figures, their garments and ornaments, fashion, customs and events were built. There are some compositions which depict the invention of household items from Europe for their luxurious life such as electric lamps¹. However, the Sri Lankan high-class people who had high status such as planters, renters, distillers contributed to develop the painted shrines. "Dias family" from Panadura provides the best example. They funded to develop the Buddhist shrine *Panadura Rankoth vihara*.²

The content of paintings depicts the Buddhist Doctrines such as ethics, morals, etc. but the figures and the form of other motifs represent the Western style. However, those contents of the painting compositions reveal the depth of spiritual and intellectual religious atmosphere, political situation, and secular life in the colonial period of Sri Lanka.

Visual Records of Music

The rock temple of *Mulgirigala* is one of the ancient Buddhist temples in Sri Lanka since the second century B.C. (Nandana et al., 1990). It is located in Hambantota District and funded by king Kawantissa (205-161 B. C). However, the visual evidence of paintings was composed in the

¹ Wichramasingha said, "For effecting a cultural synthesis Ceylon is better suited than other countries of the East" (Wickramasingha 2006).

² "The link between Sinhala merchants and Buddhist causes became strong from the 1860s onwards, when financial support begun to flow into the Buddhist revival movement" (Wickramasingha 2006).

18th century. There are two important jataka stories depicted on the walls of cave shrine; *Telapatta jataka* and *Sivi jataka*.

The "*Telapatta jataka*" is depicted on the wall in the cave number two called "*Paduma Rahat Vihara*". The color and other grammar of paintings represent rich color and high-class life pattern of the people at that time. The paintings use horizontal registers along the wall. They depict key incidents in the life of Buddha and have used different decorative forms, symbols, thematic content in their own southern school of painting tradition in Sri Lanka. Few visual records of music could be found in the "*Telapatta jataka*" story. According to the story of the composition, *Telapatta* is the name of Bodhisatta. He has entered the forest with his five companions. When they were walking in the forest they have met beautiful girls who were attractive to males. The figures clearly show that they are musicians. They are playing musical instruments to evoke musical rhythm and beat as well as dancing movements. This composition reveals the significant historical music records such as musical instruments, the fashion of female musicians such as their garments, ornaments, hair styles, music gesture, expressions and musical events as well.

They are playing percussion and wind instruments while dancing. There is a figure of a female dancing drummer and it reveals the profession of the early female drum musician and her contribution. This is not the only composition which represents this kind of performance. The ancient Sri Lankan female artists appear in most of the visual records of paintings, sculptures and architectural designs. This can be recognized as a sign of Western female musician's figure, fashion and artistic value. It is shown through visible shape of lines and patterns of color combination.

Moreover, those artists lead to a musical performance in a beautiful landscape. There were red, brown and black colored natural leaves in the background and these visuals symbolize a forest. The forest symbolizes cool, quiet and beautiful scenic environment to play music. They are playing percussions and wind instruments and they produce high pitched sounds. This painting composition reveals the link between musical sounds and a suitable environment for percussion performers. However, the composition depicts a group performance in Asian music. The evidences are proved by its own distinctive character of colors, lines, figurative forms and thematic concept.

It is shown that one female musician plays a drum called *davula*³ (cylindrical drum) and even today *davula* is used in Buddhist processions, *Hevisi puja* (homage of the drums) or *Śabda puja* (offering of the sounds) and as a musical instrument played in funerals. Today, the male drummer plays this instrument in the above occasions. But this composition shows a female drummer playing *davula* and shows her strength of playing the drum. However, this instrument is being used since the Anuradhapura period (137 B.C.-1000A.D) until today and it reveals Buddhist customs and rituals as well as "Sabaragamu" dancing tradition in Sri Lanka. Different drum notations signify different Buddhist customs. For instance, the listener can identify the custom according to the drum notation.

Another female musician plays a kind of oboes. It is called "*Horane*" and today, it is played by male musicians in Buddhist rituals and in folk theatre genre which is called "*kolam*" in Southern Sri Lanka. Contrasting this illustration with today's performance, this is a significant visual record involving female performers in specific musical occasion. *Horane* player and drummer express their skillful manipulation of very strong breathing practices for blowing this instrument and strength of playing drum. And there are two musicians who are playing hand drums in this group. It is a musical instrument called *rabana* (hand drum) which was popular at that time and today as well. However, the hand drum or *rabana* was a famous musical instrument in the Southern part of Sri Lanka in that time period (kulathilake 1974). The history of music says that the *Rabana* is accompanied by *vannam* (praise song). In *Vannam*, phonetic sounds in the lyric create the sound of a movement i.e. horse-trot or the elephant etc. Also, the *Rabana* was used for *viridu* and *prasasti* (panegyrics) in the Kandyan period. This visual record of composition represents orchestral music activities such as instrumental gesture, creative practices and folk musical factors of female musicians.

Furthermore, there are precerved painting compositions which belong to 19th century in the shrines in "*Purwarama at Kataluva* Gall District in the south of Sri Lanka. This study selects a composition of musical entertainment at a millionaire's residence from the "*Story of Mahadhana Sitana*". This theme is not only directly linked with *Buddha Charitha* but also represented as the relationship of Buddha's life. However, there were six jataka stories and five stories which is

³ *Davula* plays with hand and a stick. But it cannot be seen from this composition.

related to Buddha's life painted on the wall in this shrine⁴. The records of these type of stories were enhanced to discuss the entertainment culture of the community (Silva 1982). There is a composition with a female dancer and a drummer as well as three male figures who entertain their musical performance. The musical theme records the influence of Western music culture in the contemporary society and it shows the social status of high-class families in the society. The composition includes the story of "*Mahadhana Sitana*"(the millionaire).



Figure 3: Female drummer and dancer at Kataluwa Shrine

From the story of *Mahadhana Sitana*



Figure 4. Music group at Kataluwa Shrine

from the story of *Mahadhana Sitana*

It depicts a party in *Mahadhana Sitana*'s residence and European musical instruments such as *side drum*, *trumpet* and *rebequo* are used for their performance. *Baila* music came to Sri Lanka in the 16th century from the Portuguese. The word *rebequo* is derived from Portuguese language and it became *ravikinna* in Sinhala (Ariyaratne, 1985). The dancer in the figure 3 wears a European frock and the other female drummer wears a similar frock. The male musician in the illustration represents the fashion of Western artist of the music group. It is very pleasant dancing posture with erotic sentiment of the dancer. This visual record confirms the European fashion of female artists and it was transferred to the 18th century in Sri Lankan artists' fashion field. Moreover, the fashion of Western male artists is represented in the music group with their tied jacket, hat and beard. According to the story, musicians are performing at the millionaire's residence and it represents the secular sensitive manner and pluralist social status at that time through their musical entertainment.

⁴ The six jataka stories are *Vessantara*, *Katthari*, *Culla Dhammapala*, *Sutasoma*, *Temiya* and *Khandahala*. Six stories are *Patachara*, *Nandiya Upasaka*, *Sorreyya Sitano*, *Masuru Sitano* and *Mahadhana sitano* (Bandaranayake, 1986).

Furthermore, the expressions and gestures of artist in all of the above compositions represent the best visual records of Western musical identity. It emphasizes the interrelationship in their entrainment pattern and shearing experiences as professional musicians and artists. In addition, it reveals the cultural interaction between the artist and audience in Sri Lanka.

Visual Records of Art

The study selected "Panadura Rankoth Vihara" for discussing the visual records of art in Sri Lanka during the 19th century. It is located in Kalutara District in the Western province. The shrine room is decorated with murals and nowadays it is preserved with painting compositions and narrations on the walls and ceiling. Those decorative motifs are described through four *jataka* stories on the walls: *Serivaniya jataka* (the story builds to give a lesson between cheating merchants wise merchant), *Kusa jataka* (the story reveals truth and identify the wife by birth by birth), *Maha Dhammapala jataka and Mamha Khanha jataka*. At that time *jataka* stories was a very popular theme of the shrine paintings. Few compositions represent music expressions. As discussed earlier, those themes can be seen at *Kataluwa, Thelwatta, Mulgirigala, Thotagamuwa* etc. in the coastal area in the South, as well as in Buddhist temples such as *Gadaladeniya, Lankathilaka* in the up country of Sri Lanka. This section of the paper discusses how to consider visual records to develop art in Sri Lanka.

A large space of the wall depicts the *jataka story* as a separate register. These registers have been extended from one wall to another and the story is presented in a narrative style. The viewer should read the *jataka* story starting from a corner of a wall and should walk to another wall to finish his/her reading and to understand the content of the story. This tradition has introduced a new artistic and dramatic path for reading visuals in shrines. It induces the active participation in reading *jataka* stories in the Buddhist artistic culture in Sri Lanka. This opinion can be confirmed by the statement of Senaka Bandaranayake. He said that "the Kandyan painting is the art of the narrative register" (Bandaranakake, 1986). Following illustration represents the pattern of register.



Figure 5: The Example from Kataluva Shrine

This visual register can be used for reading and understanding Dhamma and to develop the expression of visual arts techniques. Also, the narration in the bottom of register can be enhanced to understand the expressions of visual character of the story. At the same time illiterate devotees can understand the story by reading the figures of painting without reading sub titles. During that time period under the British rule, anyone couldn't get the rights of education as they wished and the majority had a very low literacy. Therefore, this type of visual records supported the development of the Buddhism and the techniques of Sri Lankan art among the local and foreign illiterate people who are unable to read Sinhala narrations.

In addition, the sub titles of those compositions show one of the techniques to preserve Sinhala language as the intangible cultural heritage in Sri Lanka. Even today, it appears as the artistic and cultural library in the field of art. There were few English letters on the wall paintings at that time. However, those sub titles on the walls of the shrines contribute to safeguard Sinhala language as the inheritance of the art and culture of Sri Lanka.

However, the artist has selected a meaningful and appropriate theme of *jataka stories* to discuss the social reality, social reform and religious revival in the 18th and 19th centuries through visual compositions. Moreover, these affinities teach compassion, patience, well- balanced family life and influence of luxurious western life on the Sri Lankan culture as well.



Figure 6: At the beginning of Serivaniya Jataka
Shrine room at Rankoth Vihara



Figure 7: Discussion of Serivaniya and
Kachchaputa, Shrine room at Rankoth. Vihara

The example of *Serivaniya jataka* describes the negative outcome of cheating the customers when doing businesses. The story conveys the message that the deceitful merchant (*kachchaputa*) was defeated by the honest merchant (*Serivaniya*) with his power of honesty. The artist conveys a good message through the expressions of *Serivaniya*. Although the artists wanted to express the Buddhist ethics and morals etc. they had shown the merchant capitalism through the theme of certain compositions in the *Jataka* story. These kinds of compositions reveal the artistic value and political order at the time. Using the architectural designs and human figurative art appears with the Western style. An artist has ability to create the social reality of his living environment through the work of art (Getlein 2013). This idea confirmed through these visuals at the time.

The visual records of *Kusa jataka* reveal the successful family life of the Buddhist society and culture. The character of *Kusa* fell in love with *Pabhavathi* and he could win the heart of his wife after several conflicts. Finally, he achieved his goal because of his constructive determination and honesty. The following two compositions depict the attempt that he made to win *Pabhavathi*'s love.



Figure 7: Kusa laid at the entrance of Pabhavathi's Palace. Shrine room from Rankoth Vihara

Figure 8: Prince Kusa works at Pabavathi's palace as a Chef. Shrine room from Rankoth Vihara

The third story is *Maha Dharmapala Jataka* and it expresses the close relationship between mother and son.



Figure 9: Mother takes care of her son

Shrine room from Rankoth Vihara



Figure10: Mother's and child's death

Shrine room from Rankoth Vihara

The composition depicts a mother who takes care of her son and her husband who gets angry with her for that. He thinks that the wife ignores him because of her son. Finally, he decides to kill his son with jealousy that he nurtured towards his wife and child. The figures of the composition clearly depict the facial expressions and suitable posture of all characters. Mother's and child's happy mood and sentiments are represented in figure 9. In addition, figure 10 depicts the expression of mother when the executioner kills her son. While the Kusa and Pabavathi's illustration represents the mutual relationship between lovers, the story of *Maha Dharmapala* shows the uncomfortable relationship between husband and wife. The gestures and the expressions of figure 10 depict the tragic moment of the human life.

Conclusion

To sum up, the selected visual records of the above three shrines represent the multicultural influence on the development of music and art in Sri Lanka in the 18th and 19th centuries. Moreover, the contribution of religious artists, their works of art and their imagination of art develops in Sri Lanka with a new aspect. It is proved from color, space and shape of figure, motifs and expressions of human, fauna and floral designs.

Furthermore, the figures of artists and the background of those compositions express the patriotic and contemporary English life style. This content is depicted on the visuals of the musicians' garments, musical instruments, gestures and their expressions. Some figures are wearing gown and taking part for the dance performance and it depicts the liberal construction of the social status and culture of Westerners and Sinhalese as well. The European garments of the male and female figures represent social status of the luxurious life style of merchants, their rich life and the gap between social classes.

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