

A Cross-Cultural Critique Revealed in Murals Found in Temples belonging to the Kandyan Tradition in Colonial Sri Lanka

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When Sri Lanka was named a colony of the British Empire in the year 1815, evident transformations could be seen taking place in the social, political, economical and cultural sectors. The art of mural painting or temple painting in viharas received influence as well. The Kandyan art tradition, which evolved throughout the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries in the Hill Country, was subject to change mainly due to colonization. From being a traditional art form, mural paintings gradually became very similar to European Naturalistic art. Some of the initial changes thereafter were to expand the colour scheme originally used for temple paintings and include an array of colours; a touch of shade to give it a dark effect was also introduced to these temple paintings at the same time. Secondly, the paintings portrayed culturally European objects, clothing, homes, vehicles and trees. Thirdly, the traditional form of Kandyan art that was one of simplicity completely transformed into European Naturalism art. These changes are quite apparent in temple paintings in the Kandyan and Southern regions.

The features in these transformations have been subject to various studies and research work carries out by historians, artists, aestheticians and archaeologists. However no research has been conducted on the subtle manner in which local or home-grown artists protested or showed their contempt towards the Euro-centred tradition of art being infused into the local tradition, colonization and its culture in general. This study was to indicate how the local artist utilised murals or temple

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paintings belonging to the Kandyan tradition as a medium through which to criticise the British cultural network.

An instance for this criticism aimed at the colonizer by the local artist can be found in the “Mahadaana Sitano” narration, the mural painting of which can be found in the Kathaluwapurwarama vihara down South; the painter depicts the scene of a joyous celebration, specifically speaking a British celebration. The artist captures moments of bribery, people consuming alcohol and wasting their wealth. Women dressed in Victorian dresses, men in top hats can be seen drumming and drinking. These details are indicative of the fact that European culture was ever so subtly being criticised. Moreover the fact that the artist has used European objects and portraits for this scene alone further stabilizes the idea of it being a criticism. While depicting the darker side of the European culture, the artist educated the locals on the repercussions of trying to imitate such a lifestyle.

Hence this study reveals several factors; that mural or temple paintings were not confined to the functions of being a stress-reliever for people but also functioned as a social critic. It looked at the negative impacts of cross-cultural influence and the local artist’s capability to be an intelligent critique.

This research is based on data gathered from primary and secondary sources. Primary sources were the relevant temples and observations on paintings found in them. Secondary sources were reference books based on British culture

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