MURAL TRADITIONS IN TEMPLE ON PILLARS (TÄMΠITA VIHĀRAS) OF SRI LANKA

Ganga RājineeDissanayaka

BA, MA (Mass com) MPhil (Mass com (UNI KELA) Dip in Mgt. (OUSL), Dip in Film Making (SLFC): Research Assistant
HETC Project at the Faculty of Humanities, University of Kelaniya
gangarajinee@gmail.com

The structures built on a wooden platform resting on short granite pillars or stumps are a unique type of image houses from the 17th to 19th centuries called TämΠitaVihāras. This type of single roomed very small image house emerges in the early Kandyan Era. It has a wooden superstructure. The murals in the inner room or sanctum have a very rigid spatial arrangement. One can view the central seated image of the Buddha under a “Makara Arch” attended by fly whisk bearers and deities on entering through the doorway. The side wooden walls and ceiling have almost similar picture programs.

The TämΠitaVihārayahas only onesmall ritual space: The Vihārageya or Pilimageya is the space where the devotee could visualize the living Buddha, venerate him by reciting PaliGāthās. The innermost chamber or sanctum is the central place of worship. A seated Buddha is usually the main object of worship. The walls of the sanctum are adorned with Buddha statues, paintings of Buddhist monks (Arhats) standing in adoration. Protective Gods and other deities and future Buddhas (Bodhisattvas) face the main figure. Some mentors and donors also appear in the crowded space of the sanctum. The ambulatory narrates the Life of the Buddha (Buddhacarita) and former births.
(Jātakas), how the future Buddha perfected his virtues with great selflessness (Pāramita), and Hells, it seems have been added later.

A specially of the TämpitaVihāras, seen in the Kurunegala, Gampaha, Kandy and Matale Districts, is that statues, murals and decorative motives from the pre-Kandyan and Kandyan period of art can be studied: Under the guidance of the research team of the HETC Project at the Faculty of Humanities, University of Kelaniya a survey was conducted in 50 TämpitaVihāras which revealed interesting patterns of Visual Communication.

Justification: Even in a bad state of preservation, murals of a TämpitaVihāraya show a layer of murals that reflect the Visual Communication of early 19th century. Very little research has documented the allocation of limited space for narratives and icons in TämpitaVihāraya and establishes iconographic patterns common to all TämpitaVihārayas.

A study that encompasses the TämpitaVihāras covering both Up Country and Southern Region has not yet been conducted. I hope the Southern Phase of this project will throw new light on the Southern Tradition of TämpitaVihāras. The objective of the current research is to view the isolated the TämpitaVihāras in the South in order to ascertain if the murals follow the tradition inherited from Kandy (UdarataSampradaya) or Low Country Tradition (PahatarataSampradaya).