

PAINTED JATAKA STORIES OF ANCIENT SRI LANKA

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It is an accepted fact that Sri Lanka has a long Buddhist mural painting tradition at least starting from the second century BC¹ or fifth century AD.² It is also an accepted view that Sri Lankan painters at least up to the twelfth century AD have practised this “classical mural painting tradition.”³ Although a large portion of these wall paintings of the pre-modern Sri Lanka has now been destroyed, mainly through the effect of nature, human vandalism and neglect etc, several of them are available which give a fair idea of what they must have been. These survive at a large number of sites, namely Karambagala in Southern province of the second century B.C; Sigiriya in Central province of the fifth century A.D; Hindagala in Kandy also in Central province of the seventh century A.D; Anuradhapura (vestibules of few stupas) in North Central province ascribed to the eighth century A.D; the relic chamber paintings of Mihintalé near Anuradhapura in the same province belonging to the eighth century A.D; the painting remnants at Gonagolla near Ampara in Eastern province and the paintings of Pulligoda cave near Dimbulagala in North Central province belonging to the eighth century; the relic chamber paintings of Mahiyanganaya stupa in Uva province belonging to the eleventh century; the cave paintings at Maravidiya at Dimbulagala in North central province of the twelfth century; the painting series at Northern temple or the Tivamka image house and the painting remnants found at Galviharaya and Lankatilaka temples of Polonnaruwa in North Central province which belong to the twelfth century A.D; the relic chamber paintings of Dadigama in Kegalle district of the 12th century and other places of Kandalama, near Sigiriya in Central province; Vessagiriya of Anuradhapura and Situlpahuva in Southern province where the chronology of paintings are uncertain.⁴

Although these paintings of Sri Lanka belong to a long period which covers about fourteen or seven centuries from second century BC or fifth century AD to the twelfth century AD, it is reasonable to conclude that these form a part of one particular tradition or style based on their special features and characteristics. It is also evident that there is no essential difference in the techniques, particularly in the sphere of methods and materials of the wall paintings even in the later phase of the period concerned. Certainly, there is a

¹ D.B. Dhanapala, *The story of Sinhalese painting*, Maharagama, 1957: 3; *Buddhist paintings from shrines and temples in Ceylon*, Colins, UNESCO, Milano: Amilcare Pizzi, 1964:10; Nandadeva Wijesekara, *Early Sinhalese painting*, Maharagama: Saman Press, 1959:1; L.T.P. Manjusri, *Design elements from Sri Lankan temple paintings*, Colombo: Archaeological Department, 1977:20; Ravindra Pandya believes that the pictures painted in Karambagala cave can be easily accepted as the oldest paintings of Sri Lanka. See *Cave paintings of Sri Lanka*, Ahmadabad: Shree Jagat Dhatriyata Trust, 1981: 14&37; Senaka Banadaranyake, *The rock and wall paintings of Sri Lanka*, Colombo: Lake House Bookshop, 1986:25.

² S Paranavitana, *Sinhalayo*, Colombo: Lake House Investments, 1967:20; “Arts and crafts,” *Anuradhapura era*, ed. A. Liyanagamage and R. Gunawardana, Kelaniya: Vidyalankara Press, 1961: 175, 245; Senaka Banadaranyake, *The rock and wall paintings of Sri Lanka*, Colombo: Lake House Bookshop, 1986:26.

³ M Somathilake, *Ancient Buddhist mural paintings of India and Sri Lanka*, Wellampitiya: Godage International Publishers, 2002; For further details please refer to Senarat Paranavitana and W.G. Archer, *Ceylon paintings from temple shrine and rock*, UNESCO, Paris: New York Graphic Society, 1957; D.B. Dhanapala, *The story of Sinhalese painting*, Maharagama, 1957; Nandadeva Wijesekara, *Early Sinhalese paintings*, Maharagama, 1959; D.B. Dhanapala, *Buddhist paintings from shrines and temples in Ceylon*, London: Collins, UNESCO, 1964; C.E. Godakumbura, *The Kotavehera at Dadigama*, Memoirs of the Archaeological Survey of Ceylon, Vol.VII, Colombo, 1969; Senaka Banadaranyake, *The rock and wall paintings of Sri Lanka*, Colombo: Lake House Bookshop, 1986.

⁴ M Somathilake, *Ancient Buddhist mural paintings of India and Sri Lanka*, Wellampitiya: Godage International Publishers, 2002.

continuity of similar technique from the earliest times up to the 12th century AD and the only conspicuous difference in this last phase is that in addition to the rock supports, there survive paintings on brick walls too.⁵ Nevertheless, it has to be realized that though the wall painting tradition of Sri Lanka continue even after the twelfth century AD up to the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries AD, these do not display such a complexity or similarity to the ancient tradition of paintings in Sri Lanka. Though this tradition continues to be Buddhist and similar themes like Jatakas and the life story of the Buddha have predominantly been used, yet in the later period a rather simple, narrative style is present. Besides these superficial appearances, it is evident that this is an almost different tradition even from the technical point of view and the social background of the paintings too.

It is necessary to understand at this juncture that at the beginning of nineteenth century, the trend as exemplified by Foucher was that in order to better appreciate works of art, it is necessary to understand them and that the first thing one has to do, after having duly admired their beauty, is to identify the subjects they represent.⁶ This notion very clearly indicates that themes were considered one of the major aspects of any artistic creation. Without doubt, this feature is particularly applicable to the Buddhist wall painting traditions of the pre-modern Sri Lanka as well. Nevertheless, it has to be noted at this point that one of the drawbacks to the identification of themes is that unfortunately many of the Buddhist wall paintings of Sri Lanka, which belong to the period concerned have peeled off or deteriorated, due to various reasons, as mentioned above.⁷ In addition, it is obvious that a majority of the paintings at the sites consisted of narrative cycles containing numerous individual scenes though only small portions of the original paintings are extant. Taken collectively, these cycles are not so difficult to identify if the whole story is well preserved. Nevertheless when large sections of these stories have been destroyed or perished, as already noted above, the identification of the themes is often extremely difficult.⁸ Besides, problems of another kind are presented by the paintings, in particular those at Dimbulagala and Tivamka shrine where narrative cycles are available. Here a complex series of events in the narrative are reduced to only a few scenes in the picture and as a result in interpreting them, the main difficulty is in determining the remaining individual scenes based on parallels in literature and iconography.

However, it is obvious that a number of themes have been utilized by the pre-modern Buddhist mural painters of Sri Lanka and these can be mainly divided into the following subdivisions: the Jataka or the former birth stories of the Buddha; the Buddha *caritaya* or the life story of the Buddha; the concepts of thousand Buddhas or the *Buddha sahasa*, Bodhisattvas and divine beings; and the decorative motifs etc.⁹ Of these themes, it is apparent that the representations of the Jataka stories are prominent to a great extent.

⁵ RH de Silva, "The evolution of the technique of Sinhalese wall painting and comparison with Indian painting methods," *Ancient Ceylon*, Journal of the archaeological Survey of Ceylon, No.1, January 1971:94; "Rock painting in Sri Lanka," *Conservation in archaeology and the applied arts*, (reprinted of) the contribution to the Stockholm Congress, London, 1975: 69-73. For the detailed accounts of the techniques of the paintings of Sri Lanka during the ancient period, as revealed by the scientific tests please refer to Raja de Silva, "Painting: Early period 247 BC to 800 AD," *Archaeological Department centenary (1890-1990) commemorative series*, Volume five -painting, ed. Nandadeva Wijesekera, Colombo: State Printing Corporation, 1990: 21-25 & 31-34; For further details please refer to M Somathilake, *Ancient Buddhist mural paintings of India and Sri Lanka*, Wellampitiya: Godage International Publishers, 2002.

⁶ A Foucher, (tr. MSA Hydari), "Preliminary report on the interpretation of the paintings and sculptures of Ajanta," *Journal of the Hyderabad Archaeological Society*, 1919-20: 50-111.

⁷ For instance see BB Lal, "Preservation of mural paintings," *Ancient India*, No.22, 1966, Archaeological Survey of India, (reprinted) 1973: 83-100; JC Nagpall, *Mural paintings in India*, Delhi: Gian Publishing House, 1988: 30-35; Mohamed Sana Ulla, *Report on the treatment of the Sigiriya frescoes and suggestions for the preservation of paintings in the various shrines and old monuments in Ceylon*, Ceylon Sessional Paper, No. XXI, September 1943, Colombo: Government Press, 1943: 3-6; L Maranzi, *Ceylon; Preservation of mural paintings*, Feb-May 1972, Paris: UNESCO Serial no 2721, 1972: 2-8.

⁸ See Dieter Schlingloff, *Studies in the Ajanta paintings: Identifications and interpretations*, New Delhi, 1987:59.

⁹ M Somathilake, *Ancient Buddhist mural paintings of India and Sri Lanka*, Wellampitiya: Godage International Publishers, 2002: 421-528.

These have been predominantly used and painted on the spacious, whitish walls of the front portions of the temples, close to the main entrance, where enough sunlight is available to observe the paintings easily.

It is to be noted at this point that these Jatakas, the births of the Bodhisattva are said to be five hundred and fifty although the Pali Jataka collection contains only five hundred and forty seven Jatakas.¹⁰ In these former lives, the Buddha was an ascetic eighty-three times; a monarch fifty-eight; the *Deva* of a tree forty-three; a religious teacher twenty-six; a courtier twenty-four; a *purohita Brahman* twenty-four; a prince twenty-four; a nobleman twenty-three; a learned man twenty-two; the *Deva Sakra* twenty; an ape eighteen; a merchant thirteen; a man of wealth twelve; a deer ten; a lion ten; a swan eight; a snipe six; an elephant six; a fowl five; a slave five; a golden eagle five; a horse four; a bull four; *Mahabrahma* four; a peacock four; a serpent four; a potter three; an outcast three; a guano three; twice each a fish, an elephant driver, a jackal, a crow, a woodpecker, a thief and a pig and once each a dog, a curer of snake bites, a gambler, a mason, a smith, a devil-dancer, a scholar, a silver smith, a carpenter, a water fowl, a frog, a hare, a cock, a kite, a jungle fowl and a *kindura*. Nevertheless, it is observable that this list is also imperfect.¹¹

It is implied that each Jataka story exemplifies the efforts that the Bodhisattva made to develop one of the ten virtues or *dasa paramitas*. These *paramitas* are considered virtues like *Dana* (liberality), *Sila* (moral precepts), *Kshanti* (forbearance), *Virya* (energy), *Prajna* (knowledge), *Satya* (truthfulness) etc.¹² As in the case of the aspiration of the Jatakas, it is noticeable that the pre-modern artists or the painters also selected the necessary themes carefully to display such virtues. For example, the Chaddanta Jataka to demonstrate the Bodhisattva's boundless generosity, the Vessantara Jataka to show his charity, the Vidhurapandita Jataka to display his wisdom etc. Thus, it will be seen that the narrative elements of painting also play a dominant part as the intention was to emphasise the importance of virtuous living rather than the doctrinal aspect of Buddhism.¹³

At the same time, according to the main contour or framework of these stories, it is apparent that the Jatakas were meant for illustrating the effect of Karma on the repeated births of man, ultimately leading to heaven or hell according to whether it was good or bad.¹⁴ As a result, the Jataka stories of these previous existences of Buddha through which the perfect Bodhisattva had passed provided the subject for an immense quantity of Buddhist art. Certainly, each of them offers a moral example of Buddhist behaviour and illustrates the kind of complete self-abnegation for the good of others, which leads ultimately to Buddhahood.¹⁵ Thus it is evident that there is a strong reason for presenting these Jatakas in the special form of illustration on the walls of the temples. It is indeed noticeable that no subject could achieve this purpose better than stories from these previous lives of the great master, where the would be Buddha, in his career as the Bodhisattvas, outshone others by his supreme intelligence, the nobility of his character, his spirit and selfless service and sacrifice and his boundless compassion, no matter whether he was born as a human or a celestial being, a small animal or a mighty elephant.

Nevertheless, a series of Jataka paintings are no longer extant, except those found at Tivamka image house at Polonnaruva and Maravidiya in Dimbulagala both belonging to the twelfth century AD. Although

¹⁰ See EB Cowell, *The Jataka or stories of the Buddha's former births*, tr. EB Cowell, WHD Rouse and others, (first published 1895), Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 1990, 6 vols.

¹¹ P Thomas, *Epics myths and legends of India: A comprehensive survey of the sacred lore of the Hindu and Buddhists*, Bombay: DB Taraporevala Sons, (n.d.): 118.

¹² MN Deshpande, "Ajanta: The Kaleidoscopic enigma of art historians," *The art of Ajanta: New perspectives*, ed. Ratan Parimoo and others, New Delhi: Books and Books, Vol.I, 1991:19.

¹³ MN Deshpande, "The murals: Their theme and content," *Ajanta murals: An album of eighty-five reproductions in colour*, ed. A Ghosh, Archaeological Survey of India, 1967:35; "Ajanta: The Kaleidoscopic enigma of art historians," *The art of Ajanta: New perspectives*, ed. Ratan Parimoo and others, New Delhi: Books and Books, Vol.I, 1991:19.

¹⁴ De MA Gokuldas, *Jataka gleanings bearing on ancient Indian civilisation*, (reprinted from the) *Journal of the Department of Letters*, Calcutta University Press, Vol.XXV, 1934:1.

¹⁵ Philip Rawson, *Indian painting*, Paris: Pierre Tisue, Editenr, 1961:26.

these are now in a dilapidated condition it is obvious that the main themes of these two places were also the Jātaka stories. Of the Jataka stories thus painted at Tivamka shrine, so far only a few have been identified.¹⁶ They are the jatakas of Vessantara,¹⁷ Asanka,¹⁸ Sasa,¹⁹ Tundila,²⁰ Vidhurapandita,²¹ Guttila,²² Cullapaduma,²³ Maitribala,²⁴ Mugapakka,²⁵ Sama, Mahasudassana,²⁶ Kusa,²⁷ Mahaummagga²⁸ etc.

¹⁶ GA Joseph, "Demalambahaseya paintings, 1164-1197 AD," *Ceylon Administration Reports for 1918*, Colombo: Government Printer, 1919: D3-D4; CE Godakumbura, *Murals at Tivamka pilimage*, Colombo: Archaeological Department, 1969:15; Nandadeva Wijesekara, "An introduction to the 550 Jataka stories," *Selected writings*, Dehiwala: Tisara Press, Vol.I, 1983: 128-137; Sarkis Katchadourian, *Catalogue of the exhibition of Sinhalese frescoes from Sigiriya and Polonnaruwa*, ed. RV Leydon and HLM Williams, Bombay: Art Society Salon, May 17- 27 1940, Nos. 17-51.

¹⁷ The painting in the middle panel, according to Bell's belief, depicts the Vessantara Jataka story. HCP Bell, *Archaeological Survey of Ceylon: North Central, Northern and Central provinces Annual Report for 1907*, Government Printer, 1911: 33. Nevertheless, Godakumbura does not agree with Bell's identification. CE Godakumbura, *Murals at Tivamka pilimage*, Colombo: Archaeological Department, 1969: 16-17. In fact, for the Sinhalese Buddhists, the Vessantara Jataka story has occupied a special place among the paintings from earliest times up to modern period. See Margaret Cone and Richard F Gombrich, *The perfect generosity of prince Vessantara*, Clarendon Press: Oxford University, 1977. This story involving a series of difficult situations regarding the Dana paramita (preparation for perfect generosity) has a strong impact in stimulating pious intentions and emotions. It is therefore capable, in every way, of arousing an intense delight and satisfaction among devotee. The message given to devotee by this Jataka painting is, that the Buddha made all those sacrifices not merely for his own emancipation but for the purpose of liberating other humans and gods undergoing incessant suffering in Samsara. This story can contribute towards increasing faith in Buddha as well as motivating people to follow the path shown by Buddha. Thus, the Vessantara Jataka painting was intended on the one hand, to bring enjoyment to devotee and on the other to enhance their religious faith. Nanda Wickramasinghe, "Mural paintings: 800 AD -1200 AD," *Archaeological Department centenary (1890-1990) commemorative series*, Volume five - Painting, ed. Nandadeva Wijesekara, Colombo: State Printing Corporation, 1990: 57; EB Cowell, *The Jataka or stories of the Buddha's former births*, tr. EB Cowell and WHD Rouse, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, Vol.VI, 1990: 246-305.

¹⁸ The Asanka Jataka is painted on the right wall of the building, which forms a part of the access to the vestibule near the entrance. See HCP Bell, *Archaeological Survey of Ceylon: North Central, Northern and Central provinces Annual Report for 1907*, Government Printer, 1911: 33. At present, this painting has been affected to a great extent. The summary of the story, which relates of a heavenly being born as a girl in a lotus growing in a lotus pond and brought up by a Brahmin the Bodhisattva. The king of the country who aspired for her hand was set to guess her name as a condition. The king, after having spent three years making futile efforts to guess the elusive name, accidentally hit on it when about to depart in dudgeon. See EB Cowell, *The Jataka or stories of the Buddha's former births*, tr. HT Francis and RA Neil, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, Vol.III, 1990: 161-164.

¹⁹ The story of Sasa Jataka is as follows. Once upon a time, the Bodhisattva was born as a hare and had three friends, a monkey, a jackal and an otter. On a certain fast day, the Bodhisattva decided to observe the moral practices and persuaded his friends also to do the same. He exhorted his friends, particularly on the virtue of almsgiving. Sakka, king of the gods, became aware of the practice of virtue by these four animals and in order to test them, came in the guise of a Brahmin and begged for alms. The otter gave him some fish which it had for its meal, the jackal a jar of curds and some meat and the monkey some ripe mangoes. The hare alone had nothing suitable to offer and lest it should sent the Brahmin to kindle a fire and jumped into the burning flames; but by the power of its virtue and the might of Sakka, the fire did it no harm. The Sakka then revealed himself in his celestial form and in order to make the virtue of the Bodhisattva known throughout the world, he painted the figure of the hare on the orb of the moon. EB Cowell, *The Jataka or stories of the Buddha's former births*, tr. HT Francis and RA Neil, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, Vol.III, 1990: 34-37.

²⁰ The summary of Tundila Jataka runs as follows. An old woman reared, as children, two young pig deserted by the sow, naming the elder Mahatundila and the other Cullatundila. Unwilling when sober to sell either, under the influence of "strong drink" she consented to part with Cullatundila to certain persons of the baser sort. Bringing food to entice the young porker to the trough thirty fellows stood by with nooses in their hands ready to seize it. Cullatundila being called by the old woman and seeing the preparation for his capture, in fear of death turned back, shaking, to his brother Mahatundila who was no other than the Bodhisattva. Then the great being expounded the law in a sweet voice with a Buddhist charm. The drunkenness left the old woman and the lewd fellows throwing their nooses away stood listening. His voice extended over twelve leagues, even to Benares. Thereupon the king and the courtiers came to the spot. Taken to the capital the old woman was honoured and the brother Tundila treated as the king's sons. On the death of the king, the Bodhisattva, after preaching with zeal to the people, returned to the forest with Cullatundila. Ibid, Vol.III, Jataka No.388, pp.80-103.

²¹ Bell has identified the paintings in the middle panel as depicting the Vidurapandita Jataka. He has also identified the figure with a head like hat of a dog, as the demon Purnaka. HCP Bell, *Archaeological Survey of Ceylon: North Central, Northern and Central Provinces Annual Report for 1907*, Government Printer, 1911. Nevertheless Godakumbura is reluctant to accept the interpretation given by Bell to this panel of painting. CE Godakumbura, *Murals at Tivamka pilimage*, Colombo: Archaeological Department, 1969:18.

²² In the panel at the bottom, there are two male figures. One of them is young, the other is an adult. They appear to be having a dialogue. Godakumbura believes that this is an episode from the Guttila Jataka. Ibid, p.18. The story of Guttila Jataka runs as follows. When Brahmadata reigned in Benares, the Bodhisattva was born in a musician's family. As he grew up he mastered all

Apart from these Jataka stories painted at Tivamka shrine, in the caves of Maravidiya of Dimbulagala too, the Jataka stories of Sasa and Vessantara were painted.²⁹ In addition to their contemporaneity, it is evident that these two Jataka stories are common to both the places. Thus, the painted Jataka stories of Sri Lanka during the period concerned consist of Vessantara (Tivamka shrine and Maravidiya), Asanka (Tivamka shrine), Sasa (Tivamka shrine and Maravidiya), Tundila (Tivamka shrine), Vidhurapandita (Tivamka shrine), Guttula (Tivamka shrine), Cullapaduma (Tivamka shrine) Mugapakkha (Tivamka shrine), Sama (Tivamka shrine), Mahasudassana (Tivamka shrine), Kusa (Tivamka shrine), Kalagola story of Mahaummagga Jataka (Tivamka shrine) and Maitribala (Tivamka shrine). It is interesting to note at this point that it has been an accepted fact that, for the paintings of Jataka stories of the pre-modern period of Sri Lanka the artists, monks and donors have predominantly followed the Pāli Jataka

the branches of music and under the name of Guttula became the chief musician in the Jambudvīpa. He married no wife, but maintained his blind parent. The skill of Musila, the musician of Ujjeni, being belittled by persons who had heard Guttula, the former decides to put himself under the tuition of Guttula. That master taught his pupil everything that he himself knew. Musila having made boastful claim before the king to be the more expert, a contest of skill is arranged between the two great musicians. Sakra then assures Guttula of divine aid and directs him, whilst playing his lute, to break every string in succession. With nothing but the body, from the ends of the broken strings the sound shall go forth and fill all the land of Benares for a space of twelve leagues. At the contest, Guttula broke all seven strings, one after another, then he played upon the body alone and the sound continued and filled the town. The multitude in thousands waved their kerchiefs in the air, in thousands they shouted applause. Nevertheless, when Musila had broken but one string of his lute no sound came out of it. Then the king made a sign. Up rose the multitude and carrying out against Musila, you know not your measure the incontinently drive him forth and beat him to death. EB Cowell, *The Jataka or stories of the Buddha's former births*, tr. WHD Rouse, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, Vol.II, 1990: 172-178.

²³ The middle panel depicts a scene from the Cullapaduma Jataka. This Jataka in which the Bodhisattva born as a prince is deserted by his consort who transfer her love to a man whose hands and feet have been cut off. The prince, his evil days over, regains his kingdom and the unfaithful woman comes with her stump of a paramour to beg for alms from the king. The king recognises the woman and drives her away. EB Cowell, *The Jataka or stories of the Buddha's former births*, tr. WHD Rouse, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, Vol.II, 1990: 81-85.

²⁴ The panel at the bottom depicts a scene from the Maitribala Jataka. According to the story, five vigour depriving spirits demons were banished by Vesamuni, the king of demons. They came to the country of king Maitribala, but could not stay incognito owing to the great merit of the king. When the king found them out he wanted to provide them with food; but they would have none other than warm human flesh laved in blood. The king cuts his own body and with a serene countenance offers it to the demons. The demons, frightened at this refuse the king's flesh as food.

²⁵ The middle panel depicts an episode in the Mugapakka or Temiya Jataka in which a prince harking back to his previous births sees how the luxuries of kingship in a previous birth bore evil fruit in a subsequent birth. He therefore pretends to be blind, deaf, mute and impervious to all outside influences. The king, his father, having failed in all attempts to make him alive to the world, commissions a man to carry him into the jungle, do him to death and bury him. When the man sets about digging a grave for the prince, he arises from his assumed lethargy. EB Cowell, *The Jataka or stories of the Buddha's former births*, tr. WHD Rouse, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, Vol.VI, 1990: 1-19.

²⁶ This story runs as follows. Queen Subadda marked how, after coming down from the palace of truth, her lord was lying hard by on his right side on the couch prepared for him in the palm-grove that couch from which he was not to rise again. Exhorted by the queen to think of mundane matters, the king predicts his death that very day. He stills the lamentations of the queen, her female retinue and the courtiers by dwelling on the transience of all component things. Weep not my queen, nor wail; for, even down to a tiny seed of sesamum, there is no such thing as a compound thing, which is permanent; all are transient, all must break up. Thus did the great Sudassana lead his discourse up to ambrosial Nirvana its goal. EB Cowell, *The Jataka or stories of the Buddha's former births*, tr. WHD Rouse, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, Vol.II, 1990: 230-232.

²⁷ EB Cowell, *The Jataka or stories of the Buddha's former births*, tr. WHD Rouse, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, Vol. V, 1990: 141-163.

²⁸ The summary of the story of Kalagola of Mahaummagga Jataka, which had been painted at the Tivamka shrine, runs as follows. There was a man called Kalagola who got the name gola, ball from his dwarfish size and kala from his black colour. He worked in a certain house for seven years and obtained a wife and she was named Digtala. Journeying together to visit her parents, they came to a stream, which was not deep, but they were afraid to cross it. A man named Digtaliya happened to come there. He concentrated to carry them across singly. Taking the woman first, he stopped when crossing the river in order to deceive Kalagola into the belief that the stream was deep. Persuading the woman to abandon her husband, Digtaliya departed with Digtala leaving the dwarf raging on the further bank. Finally, discovering the shallowness of the water, Kalagola also crossed the river and pursued the man and woman with he found them. Disputing the three appeared before the Bodhisattva and agreed to abide by his decision. Under the Bodhisattva's cross-examination, the truth was elicited and Digtala restored to Kalagola. EB Cowell, *The Jataka or stories of the Buddha's former births*, tr. WHD Rouse, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, Vol.VI, 1990: 156-246.

²⁹ Nandadeva Wijesekara, *Heritage of Sri Lanka*, Colombo: The Times of Ceylon, 1984:121.

versions as embodied in the Hīnayāna tradition.³⁰ Consequently, it is generally accepted that there are no known examples of Mahayana paintings existing in Sri Lanka.³¹ Nevertheless, it is evident that at least about twelfth century AD, the northern Indian version of Buddhism in the Sanskrit form also began to appear as can be seen from the paintings of Maitribala Jataka of Tivamka shrine, which does not occur in the Pali Jataka collection. This story unmistakably has been borrowed from the text of Sanskrit **Jatakamala**.³²

In contrast, the *Jatakas* thus depicted on the walls of these two sites reveal a narrative sequence that runs sometimes from left to right, from right to left, from top to bottom or from bottom to top. In this narration, it is noteworthy that the figures of the paintings are mainly arranged according to the importance of the characters and the central position was allocated to the most significant figure. Proportion also depended on the importance of the person of the story and it is most conspicuous in scenes showing the Buddha or Bodhisattva. For instance, at the Tivamka sanctum, various scenes from the Jataka stories with the central figures of the Bodhisattva have been drawn larger than the rest of the figures. Here, exaggeration of the limbs through colour or size was another conspicuous feature.³³ Other important elements and dramatic stages of the story were subsequently stressed.³⁴

However, it is obvious that each of these paintings tells its own story in subject matter, form and meaning. There is only one final goal of all the themes³⁵ and there prevails an atmosphere of spiritual fulfilment and deep religious emotion as the main aim of the paintings. Indeed, it is evident that for illustrating these fundamental Buddhist virtues with actual examples culled mainly from the previous lives of the Buddha the stories have provided material of a unique nature a mechanism unrivalled by any other type of story. In most cases, all the weaknesses and virtues of humanity have found expression in one form or another. Consequently, a host of good things of lasting benefit to parents, teachers, elders, husbands, wives, servants, neighbours, citizens and kings can be learnt by all even today. Thus, it is evident that meant as they are for the edification of all devotees irrespective of their intellectual and spiritual attainments, specially the Jatakas do not go beyond human dimensions and cover no more than the simplest ethical propositions. Consequently, the most one could see in them, beyond the limits of their immediate social significance, is the goodness of the Buddha himself who, in this case, is looked upon as prototypical of the ethical man, the ultimate symbol of all virtue.³⁶

On the other hand, it is also obvious that sometimes without detracting from the sacred purpose of the paintings they integrated the larger and fuller life of the material world into the religious themes and thereby imparted an intensely humanistic character to their paintings. There are, therefore, intimate glimpses at monasteries of the throbbing and colourful everyday life of the period, which have been painted invariably with unflinching fidelity to truth. For instance, there are scenes from the life of the crowd with all its splendour along with the life of the devotee dedicated to devotion, piety and faith. Kings and queens surrounded by wealth, power, ordinary men and women in the glory of youth and engaged in the realisation of the moral sources of life, attract spectators' attention.³⁷ Accordingly, it is obvious that these themes

³⁰ Nandadeva Wijesekera, *Early Sinhalese painting*, Maharagama: Saman Press, 1959: 47- 48.

³¹ Nandasena Mudiyanse, *Mahayana monuments in Ceylon*, Colombo: Gunasena and co, 1967:76.

³² *The Jatakamala by Aryasura*, ed. JH Kern, Boston: Lanman's Harvard Oriental Series, 1891: 41-50.

³³ Nandadeva Wijesekera, *Early Sinhalese painting*, Maharagama: Saman Press, 1959:88.

³⁴ Ibid: 100.

³⁵ Stella Kramrisch, "Introduction to the Visnudharmottara," *Exploring India's sacred art: Selected writings of Stella Kramrisch*, ed. Barbara Stoler Miller, New Delhi: Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts, New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 1983: 302. DT Devendra believes that this goal was teaching paramitas or perfections. DT Devendra, "Temple paintings," *Souvenir catalogue of international exhibition of paintings*, Colombo exhibition, 1952:45.

³⁶ Siri Gunasinghe, "Buddhist painting in Sri Lanka - An art of enduring simplicity," *Spolia Zeylanica*, Vol.XXXV, Nos. 1 & 2, 1980:486.

³⁷ Shanti Swarup, *5000 years of arts and crafts in India and Pakistan*, Bombay: DB Taraporevala sons & co, 1968: 132.

generally afforded the painter an unlimited scope for depicting the whole gamut of human life from birth to death-men, women and children of all stations of life, from the king to the slave, from the rich to the beggar, from the saint to the sinner- in the crowded drama of sublimity and coarseness, love and hatred, joy and sorrow, triumph and tribulation, compassion and ingratitude, pageantry and poverty, longing and death all pervaded by an intense religiosity.³⁸ Consequently, if a person reading the Jataka stories of Asanka, Vessantara, Sasa or any other in the Jataka book derives a certain pleasure, a person looking at the paintings depicting these Jataka stories derives the same kind of pleasure. The only conspicuous difference is literature in the old tradition is an auditory medium while the paintings are a very effective visual medium. Hence, no doubt that particularly these Jatakas are a remarkable collection of beautiful stories that have a flavour for everyone whatsoever his race or religion may be.³⁹

At the same time, it is apparent that some mundane matters, which are available among the descriptions of some of the Jatakas, have also been included in these murals. For instance, the artists who did the paintings at Tivamka image house have depicted female figures, full of sex appeal and beauty in such a way as to arouse sensual feelings in the viewers. Certainly, special attention has been paid to such aspects as the gracefulness of those figures and how beautiful the figures look when viewed from various angles. Beyond these limits, it is noteworthy that in one of the panels of the paintings considered to be part of the Asanka Jataka painted at Tivamka shrine, a man and a woman both naked are lying on the ground embracing each other though the scene is now in a defaced condition. Sometimes, a person seeing this scene will derive sensual pleasure from it. Consequently one may conclude that the subject matter of these paintings are not entirely of a religious order, a certain amount of them being of a secular nature. Nevertheless, it should not be forgotten that there is no erotic tendency at any Buddhist painting site of Sri Lanka such as we notice in the classical art of Europe or in the later Brahmanical sculpture of India. Certainly, to the artists of Sri Lanka a woman was a source of happiness and delight and her activities extended to all aspects of domestic, religious, moral and social life.⁴⁰ In addition, it is evident that all these figures are associated with some aspect of the Buddhist beliefs or rituals, which have been derived from the Jatakas. Concerning all these aspects, it can be reasonably concluded that the general atmosphere of these paintings suggests an earthly paradise, containing sacred attitudes and people with semi-divine beings.⁴¹

In this context it has to be realized that these artists had knowledge of a larger and fuller life, other than that bounded by the temples. For instance, in most of the scenes of the murals, the king is seen surrounded by the pageantry of his court, with its entire attendant opulence and circumstance. Thus, although the murals as well as the scenes are fundamentally religious, they pulsate with vitality and action, showing again an interest towards the secularism, which is distinctly marked. Consequently, the viewers have been equally at home in ably representing the dazzling magnificence of the royal court, the simplicity of rural life and the hermit's tranquil life amidst sylvan surroundings etc. In addition, costumes, customs, manners domestic life etc, appropriate to the Sri Lankan culture, have also been faithfully recorded and provide a rich source of information. Thus, it is evident that before starting their work at a temple the painters have studied life around them and natural scenes of beauty with intense sympathy and appreciation of plant and animal life. As a result, they have lovingly treated such themes of flora and fauna as they have chosen to depict on the walls. The pigs in the Tundila Jataka and rabbit in the Sasa Jataka from the Tivamka shrine may be cited as few examples of the tender approach of the painter to the themes of animals.

³⁸ Debala Mitra, *Ajanta*, New Delhi: Archaeological Survey of India, Eleventh edition, 1996:11.

³⁹ Nandadeva Wijesekara, "An introduction to the 550 Jataka stories," *Selected writings*, Dehiwala: Tisara Press, Vol.I, 1983: 128-137; *Early Sinhalese painting*, Maharagama: Saman Press, 1959:102.

⁴⁰ G Yazdani, "The wall paintings of Ajanta," *Journal of the Bihar and Orissa Research Society*, Vol.XXVII, 1941: 20.

⁴¹ Percy Brown, *Indian painting*, YMCA Publishing House, 1927: 33, 72.

Nevertheless, it must not be forgotten at this juncture that these artistic creations were not placed upon monuments because they needed to be there for the value of the monument. In addition, it must not be supposed that the object of these paintings was to provide entertainment for or to gratify the aesthetic needs of the peoples, monks or the places where there were executed.⁴² It must also not be confused that if sometimes, specially relating to some of the Jataka stories, the subjects seem to be out of keeping with the ascetic life of a monastery, it is only because the Bodhisattva before attaining Buddhahood is said to have experienced life in every phase before he obtained salvation, the perfect experience. As a result, though incidentally the paintings depict an intimate revelation of Sri Lankan life of the period, it would be a mistake to suppose that the painters intentionally recorded current events as history.⁴³ Accordingly, it is evident that the walls thus painted were the sort of picture books, which contain doctrinal and religious teachings used for instructing the lay worshipers as well as the novices of the Buddhist order in the events of the Buddha's many existences.

Nevertheless, in this context, it has to be realized that though the selected themes of these murals are purely Buddhist, especially the paintings of the Jātaka stories raise a few questions. Of these, the most pertinent questions are: Why have these few Jātaka stories been selected out of the almost 550 Jātaka collection for the paintings? Was the choice intended to convey a message to the visiting monastics and laity to the site? Were the Jātaka stories linked to an unitary theme? Who made the choice and the selection of the themes? etc. The probable answer to some of these questions is that it seems to be that the selecting authority has shown a tendency to the Jātaka stories, which extol the virtues of the kings and the elite. A statement made by Fabri is important at this stage, since he has suggested that it seems obvious that the monks and devotees of Buddhist faith had every reason to try and please the ruling king.⁴⁴ As Dehejia also pointed out, the patron's and incumbent's desire for glory was a significant motivation for the magnificent picture galleries at various places that were mostly dedications from the aristocracy including the high born priests. As a result, in most cases, the decision to decorate a temple with stories focussing on royalty may have had more to do with the patrons' prestige and their desire for reflected glory than with consideration for either visiting pilgrims or the monks' use and the monastic community's dormitory needs.⁴⁵

Consequently, it can be noted that very often, the chief character of the story was a person of nobility and to draw his figure a special effort had been made. That figure was always bigger than the rest of the figures. In addition, these figures have also been embedded with various ornamental ideas. Particularly, they had paid special attention to the costumes and the garments of these nobles and as a result even the small designs of the costumes have been executed in a subtle manner. Similarly, the painters have increasingly used ornaments for these figures and in the case of a royal or elite lady the ornaments of the head have been particularly and elaborately painted. It is also evident that the artists have attended always to demonstrate all the limbs of their body conspicuously. In this context, the very subtle manner, in which the lines have been drawn in these figures, should be contrasted with the lines of the rest of the figures to get a clear idea of the fact. According to this mentality, it is obvious that in the application of colours also painters have adhered to a special mode.⁴⁶ Consequently, the painters have applied fair, bright and shining colours to the figures of royalty and aristocrats in order to show their speciality, nobility and high birth. Similarly, when colouring

⁴² See KR Van Kooij and Van Der Vecre, *Function and meaning in Buddhist art*, New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, 1996.

⁴³ EB Havell, *The art heritage of India comprising Indian sculpture and painting and ideals of Indian art*, Bombay: DB Taraporevala Sons, 1964: 69.

⁴⁴ Charles Fabri, "Frescoes of Ajanta: An essay," *Marg*, ed. Mulk Raj Anand, Vol.IX, No.1, 1955:64.

⁴⁵ Vidya Dehejia, *Discourse in early Buddhist art: Visual narratives of India*, New delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, 1997:34.

⁴⁶ For the description of colour symbolism in Indian context see Karel Werner, *Symbols in art and religion: The Indian and the comparative perspectives*, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 1991:17.

the figures of people of 'lower status' such as servants and the other lower beings including the devils, it is evident that the artists have painted them with an apparent dark colour. For instance, the demons in the Maitribala Jataka painted at Tivamka image house display similar application of colours.

Similarly, when painting the figures of the gods the artists used the same paint of either yellow or an akin bright colour, which they used for the figures of kings or aristocrats. For instance, among the figures of gods painted at Tivamka image house and Pulligoda cave most have yellowish bright coloured bodies. But, it is noteworthy that amidst these are figures of gods having a bluish green colour too. No doubt, as there are fair and dark coloured persons among human beings (among the kings too), it was the belief of painter that there are similar coloured beings even among the gods. According to all these observations, it is clear that the artists conveyed by these paintings a very subtle political message to the devotees in order to convince them that kings and the gods are of equal social status and the servants, people of the lower rank and the devils are of a low but similar status.⁴⁷

When attention is thus focussed on the painter's perspectives, it is to be noted that the Buddhist mural artists used woman as their best decorative asset with brilliant zest and extraordinary knowledge. Certainly, woman is the finest achievement of their art and obviously its most admired theme. They cannot apparently have too much of her and introduce her on every possible occasion, whether relevant to the story or otherwise, in every possible way, but under one aspect only that of beauty.⁴⁸ But, it is conspicuous that while men are engaged in more emphatic actions such as riding, giving audience, preaching or otherwise, we find women involved in activities less poignant and yet invitingly eye-catching, expressing surprise, sorrow or some emotional output. Certainly, she is mostly in the background of a complex scene though glorifying it.⁴⁹ In most cases they painted them in repose, gossiping, sitting, standing, always with a sort of wonder akin to awe.⁵⁰ Besides, these reveal that she is always most devoted to her husband and accompanies him.⁵¹ Although the reason for this is not clear undoubtedly, these reflect the painters' view upon the ladies. Besides the social status or the social background of the ladies, which existed at the time, perhaps the notions of 'generosity' and 'donation' may also have paved the way for this specific mentality of the artists.

Moreover, it is noteworthy that the selection of Jataka stories to be painted in each place no doubt depended largely on the inclinations of the principal monks of the monastic order for whose benefit a particular temple was erected.⁵² Thus the hieratic character of several paintings also go to indicate the interest of the monastic orders.⁵³ Thus, it is obvious that apart from the aristocratic and rich donors among the lay worshippers, residential and outside patrons, especially Buddhist monks would also have intervened in the selection of themes for the paintings though their hierarchy is not possible. It has to be realized at this point that at any other Buddhist site, patronage of monks was no less important for the cause of art, since it is obvious that the religious establishments remained under their charge. Unmistakably it may have been to their advantage to advertise the temples by attracting hosts of visitors and devotees. Naturally, the visitor brought with him precious offerings to the temple. There was also a regular income accruing to the temple

⁴⁷ M. Somathilake, *The Buddhist wall paintings of the Kandyan tradition*, Colombo: Godage Publishers, 2002: 470-485.

⁴⁸ WG Gladstone Solomon, *The women of the Ajanta caves*, Bombay: The Times Press, (n.d):13.

⁴⁹ Ingrid Aall, "The murals: Their art," *Ajanta murals: An album of eighty-five reproductions in colour*, ed. A Ghosh, New Delhi: Archaeological Survey of India, 1967: 45; See also SK Maity, "Our women in Ajanta paintings," *A corpus of Indian studies: Essays in honour of Professor Gaurinath Sastri*, Calcutta: Sanskrit Pustak Bhandhar, 1980: 407-412.

⁵⁰ WG Gladstone Solomon, *The women of the Ajanta caves*, Bombay: The Times Press, (n.d):14.

⁵¹ G. Yazdani, *Ajanta: Monochrome reproductions of the Ajanta frescoes based on photography*, Delhi: Swati Publications, Vol. IV, 1946:8.

⁵² But it is to be noted that when selecting these themes for the murals the inclinations of donors and painters were also influenced to some extent.

⁵³ Karl Khandalavala, "The chronology of caves 16, 17, 19, 26, 1 and 2 at Ajanta and the Ghatotkacha cave," *The art of Ajanta: New perspectives*, ed. Ratan Parimoo and others, New Delhi: Books and Books, Vol.I, 1991:127.

by this means. Hence, bearing expenses for executing paintings of a temple is unquestionably a very good investment for the future at least to earning the necessary expenses of the relevant temple. Besides, in another way, according to their utility, paintings enhanced the reputation since nothing impressed the devotees more than a visual observation of the stories the devotee had once heard and learnt.⁵⁴ Hence, without doubt Buddhist monks' active participation and also their patronage can be applicable to the all the Buddhist sites, where the pre-modern painting have been executed.

It is to be noted at this point that there can hardly be any doubt that artists were concerned primarily with the narrative content. They were tutored and guided insofar as the stories and events were concerned by the members of the Buddhist clergy. Otherwise, the general accuracy and meticulousness of details that one sees in these narratives could not have been possible. One can also detect that those narratives that had a dramatic quality in them were given preference over others. Due to all these facts one may responsibly presume that these could not have been possible without a conscious process of selection by the society of monks.⁵⁵ In this context, it has to be realized that Buddhist monks of the temples, after completion of artistic works in their respective temples were particular to get the ceremony of fixing (colouring) the eyes of the main Buddha statues declared open by the king or the wealthy, powerful, chief patron.⁵⁶ According to their ultimate aspiration, it can be assumed that these Buddhist monks were willing to receive some 'gifts' and 'status' on these occasions at least for the sake of the temples, as is the case in modern Buddhist societies. Hence, most probably Buddhist monks would also have selected suitably praiseworthy themes for the paintings mostly centred around either royalty or the elite to suit the mentality of the chief patrons of their temples. According to the contents of the Jataka stories, which have been painted in these pre-modern shrines, it is obvious that the selecting authorities of the themes seems to have mostly concentrated on eulogising the generosity and the high qualities of the rulers and the elite, which is evident by the fact that their themes have been the Jataka stories of Vessantara, Sasa etc.

Thus, it would be possible to suggest that most of the Buddhist mural painters have enjoyed the patronage extended to them by the royalty and the elite, including the monks and the incumbents of the temples, for the meritorious acts done at the religious institutions, sometimes as wages for their labour, as distinct from the social status of the folk artists.⁵⁷ Consequently, it seems that the enthusiasm shown by the artists mainly depended on the importance of the kings and the elite who entrusted these works to them. In this context, it has to be noticed that the themes selected for the murals also indicate that the artists or the selecting authority of the themes have chosen those that depict the elite in a praiseworthy manner. For instance, besides the life story of the Buddha, which is often associated with royalty, particular attention had been given to such Jataka stories like Vessantara, Kshantivadi, Vidhurapandita and Mahaummagga in which

⁵⁴ See Nandadeva Wijesekera, *Early Sinhalese painting*, Maharagama: Saman Press, 1959:55

⁵⁵ B Ch. Chhabra, "The incised inscriptions," *Ajanta: Monochrome reproductions of the Ajanta frescoes based on photography*, ed, G Yazdani, Delhi: Swati Publications, Vol.IV, 1946:114; Amita Ray, *Life and art of early Andhradesa*, Delhi: Agam Kala Prakashan, 1983:139; J P Vogel, "Prakrit inscription from a Buddhist site in Nagarjunakonda," *Epigraphia Indica*, Vol.XX, 1929-30: no F.

⁵⁶ It is to be noted that the eye fixing ceremony of Buddha statue is one of the most important rituals popular not only among the ancient Buddhists, but also among the modern Buddhists. It is believed that an image is not honoured until the eyes are painted; it is the last work and when this is done and not before, the figure is considered sacred. See JG Smither, *Architectural remains of Anuradhapura*, Colombo: Ceylon Government Press, 1984:46; M. Somathilake, *The Buddhist wall paintings of the Kandyan tradition*, Colombo: Godage Publishers, 2002: 470-485; C Vitanachchi, "The aspirations of a Netramangalya," *Buddhism and the rituals*, ed. Kotapitiye Rahula, Ministry of Buddhist Affairs, Colombo: State Printing Corporation, 1996: 135-161.

⁵⁷ Thus, in some instances, it seems that the painters did not consider these works so much as the meritorious deeds, but they considered these as the 'state duty' entrusted to them by the high officials of the state, sometimes by the king himself.

the people of high-birth, particularly the royalty had been eulogised. This is further evident from the fact that the majority of these stories treat the human form rather than the animal incarnations of the Bodhisattva.⁵⁸

On the other hand, besides these interventions of monks and donors, Dehejia's interpretation shows that even the artists had significant freedom to execute the paintings according to their own vision, at least in the context of narrative modes. She has suggested that the allocation of space for each story and the arrangement of the legends along the walls was, probably decided by the chief artist who planned the murals in consultation with the patron.⁵⁹ In this regard, she further concludes that the choice of narrative modes is likely to have been left to individual painters and would have been largely dependent on workshop traditions while the space allotted to artists would also have influenced their choice. In addition, some of the Jataka stories have apparently been selected for the murals in order to demonstrate the world's iniquities and the tyrannous or the dictatorial nature of the kings and aristocrats. In some of the portrayals of the Jataka stories, this type of emotional feelings, sometimes including the views of the relevant artists, seem to have been given full vent. Therefore, the themes can also be considered as artists' own choice. If not, they may have been the selections of respective incumbents of the temples or the main devotees of the religious institutions other than the donors who belonged to the category of elite.⁶⁰

However, it is obvious that all these paintings while arousing the religious feelings of the devotees' teach more importantly some ethics. But, it is not unreasonable to think that hidden in the religious sentiments found in these paintings there is a certain political agenda or message which has been cloaked in a subtle manner.⁶¹ Certainly, this is directly connected to the symbolism of art.⁶² Thus, it is evident that apart from the basic religious sentiments of the themes of the Buddhist murals some form of criticism is also levelled against the kings or the elite by means of symbolic and sometimes comical representations, according to the content of the story, particularly with reference to the Jataka stories. For instance, in the Sutasoma Jātaka, the weaknesses of some kings is clearly highlighted. According to the story, Pōrisāda who had been a cannibal enjoyed royal comfort. In this case, the motive of the artists was to show that whenever necessity demanded even kings used to feed on the flesh of the humans or the citizens just as Pōrisāda did. This story also indicates the fact that even a king who was used to enjoying royal food could find it difficult to keep away from anti social habits as it had been a custom among them for a very long period.

Similarly, the story of Vessantara Jātaka, the most popular theme among the painters of the entire Buddhist world also signifies the same sentiments.⁶³ According to the story, prince Vessantara presented the white elephant, which had been the national property of the people of the entire Sivi country, to another state as a gift as if it was a personal possession of his. Because of this action, prince Vessantara as well as his father, the king of Sivi country had to face severe opposition emanating from the inhabitants of the city.⁶⁴ Thus, the painters who realised the value of public opinion have exhibited this in the murals in an excellent manner. Similarly, the painted Jataka stories of Sama, Chaddanta, Mahajanaka, Ruru, Mahakapi and so on

⁵⁸ Susan L Huntington, *The art of Ancient India Buddhist Hindu Jain*, New York: Weatherhill, 1985: 259.

⁵⁹ Vidya Dehejia, *Discourse in early Buddhist art: Visual narratives of India*, New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, 1997: 212.

⁶⁰ If these themes have chosen by the artists themselves most probably, they had to deliberate primarily with the inspirations of the chief priests of the respective temples and also with the whims and fancies of the patrons or the donors of the paintings, since it is obvious that they have 'invest' their money not only for the beneficial of next births but also for this birth.

⁶¹ M. Somathilake, *The Buddhist wall paintings of the Kandyan tradition*, Colombo: Godage Publishers, 2002: 470-485; "Artists and politics during the Kandyan period," *Sambhasha*, The Journal of the Department of Pirivena Education of the Ministry of Education and Higher Education of Sri Lanka, ed. Vijitha Welagedara, Colombo: Government Press, Vol.IX, 1998: 292-306.

⁶² For detail discussion on symbolism of art please refer to Margaret H Bulley, *Art and understanding*, London: BT Bats Ford ltd, 1937:72.

⁶³ The Vessantara Jātaka story has been painted at the ancient Buddhist mural sites of Ajanta, Tivamka image house and Maravidiya of Dimbulagala.

⁶⁴ M. Somathilake, *The Buddhist wall paintings of the Kandyan tradition*, Colombo: Godage Publishers, 2002: 470-485.

stealthily display malevolent aspects of the royalty. Thus, it seems that some artists of the pre-modern period who found it difficult to criticise the royalty directly could do it indirectly through the medium of painting and religion thereby giving the general public a special message.

On the other hand, it has to be realized that the themes of Buddhist mural paintings though mainly supporting religious sentiments, may be connected in multiple ways with the viewer, patrons and Buddhist monks. For instance, the frequent portrayal of the Vessantara Jataka, with its emphasis on generous gift giving and the negative portrayal of Brahmins may be considered in this context. If solicited by a wealthy donor, as in Tivamka image house it may have been the donor's intention to set up a parallel between his own gift giving and that of the great prince Vessantara. Probably, the monastic institutions also supported these views since such kinds of narratives were possibly intended to present typical examples to wealthy pilgrims, hoping thereby to induce them to make donations to the monastery.⁶⁵ It is apparent that most of the painted Jataka stories noticeably demonstrate similar feelings.

It was perhaps monks of the monasteries or lay devotees of the temples may have been explained these paintings to the worshippers just as modern guides of Tivamka image house explicate these to the connoisseur. A statement made by Dehejia is important at this stage since she has also assumed that it is possible that the viewer was inducted into the experience of understanding these extended narratives by a monk who held aloft oil lamps and guided the viewer through the course of narratives.⁶⁶ Certainly, it seems near impossible for a viewer to manage without such direction since these narratives are so complicated. It is to be noted at this point that being daily observers of the paintings around them the Buddhist monks must naturally be expected to cultivate an attitude of appreciation and understanding since the very buildings in which they lived. Possibly, these monks studied the paintings in detail as they, at times, were expected to explain at least certain points, which eluded the understanding of the ordinary lay visitors.⁶⁷ It is significant that this tradition still prevails among both the rural and urban Buddhist devotees of modern Sri Lanka at least on special occasions like full moon *poya* days. Hence, it is possible that the explainers or the interpreters of the paintings of a temple could also interpret these subject matters to the viewers according to their personal visions, sometimes, even including the above-mentioned political phenomena, as this exercise by the modern guides of Tivamka image.

Nevertheless, one can even wrongly conclude that these paintings are not predominantly religious⁶⁸ since these traditions, which had a religious propensity had at the same time a secular bias,⁶⁹ as already mentioned above. For example, some scenes at Tivama shrine take in an almost secular character, although all may be justified as being part of a Jataka or other Buddhist context.

Nevertheless, it is obvious that though these paintings are purely Buddhist in respect of their themes, on the one hand these provide rich material for the inventive imagination of the painters, who were more readily inspired by worldly than by depicting renunciation of the world.⁷⁰

⁶⁵ Vidya Dehejia, *Discourse in early Buddhist art: Visual narratives of India*, New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, 1997: 34.

⁶⁶ Ibid:34.

⁶⁷ Nandadeva Wijesekara, *Early Sinhalese painting*, Maharagama: Saman Press, 1959:57.

⁶⁸ Karl Khandalavala, *The development of style in Indian painting*, Madras: Macmillan, 1974: 22-23.

⁶⁹ *World art treasures*, ed. Geoffrey Hindley, London: Octopus Books, 1979: 63. It has to be realized at this point that these painters were not recluses like the monks who inhabited the monasteries and they availed themselves freely of every opportunity of the life of their times in their accustomed manner. Consequently, the Bodhisattva, which they have painted, is a benign prince, his consort a princess. In addition, palace maidens, dancers and musicians, are not unfamiliar sight to the artists. Thus, soldiers, hunters, Brahmins, parasolled processionists, jesters, beggars, horsemen, elephant riders, bathing and toilet scenes, architecture and city gateways are all derived from the contemporary scenes. Karl Khandalavala, *The development of style in Indian painting*, Madras: Macmillan, 1974: 21-22.

⁷⁰ Martin Hurlimann, *India*, London: Thames and Hudson, 1966: 132.