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Analytical Study on Decorative Sinhala Letter Forms Used in Kandyan Buddhist Mural Paintings

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Abstract: Kandyan Buddhist mural paintings are the traditional paintings which can be found in Buddhist temples of 18th and 19th centuries. The Kandyan painter has cleverly blended the written captions with the paintings by making the letter forms decorative and also by adding other decorative elements along with the sentences.

The author intends to discuss about the balance between traditional Sri Lankan identity and the legibility of these letter forms in Kandyan paintings. Further, this paper discusses on the subtle decorative elements the Kandyan painter has used with the letter forms to maintain the consistency and unity with the painting style and at the same time keeping the essence of the original Sinhala letter forms. The identity of the Sinhala letter forms and even the uniqueness of traditional Buddhist painting style are nicely blended in Kandyan Buddhist mural paintings.

Key words: *Sinhala, traditional, Decorative, type, identity, mural paintings, motifs, aesthetic harmony, original forms, continuous narrative strips, letter forms, verbal communication, visual language.*

Introduction

Kandyan mural paintings are in horizontal strips as continuous narrations depicting Buddhist religious themes. There are more than three hundred temples with some part of their traditional paintings still preserved. Kandyan era is one of the most significant periods in Sri Lankan art history. Unlike the classical art style in Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa eras, Kandyan mural paintings are very stylistic and abstract. Thus, the Kandyan painter has been clever enough to add a small description below the longitudinal painting strips to assist the viewers comprehend the content better. One of the most important facts the author noticed is that the type used in Kandyan mural

paintings communicate pictorially. The type used in Kandyan mural paintings inherently fits in its surroundings.

According to Bandaranayake (2006) another distinctive phenomenon common to mural, manuscript and many cloth paintings is the elongated strip composition and its most developed expression, the narrative register. He also states that unlike the centralized compositions or other types of paintings which can be taken in at a glance, the registers require the active participation of the observer and detailed scrutiny in the interpretation of successive scenes and the unraveling of the narrative content. Thus, the Kandyan painter has been clever to include small description or caption in Sinhala script below the horizontal narrative strips to assist the viewer in better understanding the visual content depicted. (Figure.1)

“*Vihara* walls are usually covered with *jathaka* subjects, in long panels of continuous narration, set close together, one above the other, the narrow space between sufficing for a short explanatory note; or a label may be inserted in the picture itself.”

Coomaraswamy, 1979, p 167

The author intends to analyze the techniques used by the Kandyan painter in order to blur the boundaries between the type and image in Kandyan mural paintings. Sinhalese script has been used very effectively in Kandyan paintings to enhance the traditional Buddhist painting style in the Kandyan era.

The researcher aims to explore the diversity of typography in the context of culture. Typography has subtle changes according to the medium also. For example, type in mural paintings has smoother curves than in stone inscriptions. It is really interesting to explore the subtle blend of typography and decorative art in Sri Lankan tradition and culture. The author intends to discover the subtle relationship between Sinhalese visual and verbal languages. Coomaraswamy(1979) states that the traditional representations were summarized in mnemonic verses and were visually represented through paintings. Thus, no one can deny the relationship between visual and verbal communication in Sri Lankan tradition and culture.

Even today, the letters play a dual role as mediums of verbal and visual communication. They operate as images while functioning as linguistic signs.



Figure.1 longitudinal painting strip with small explanations in Kandyan mural paintings

2. Importance of type in Kandyan Paintings

Buddhist mural paintings at Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa eras which belongs to the classical styles are painted throughout the wall and the scenes of the stories are planned all over allowing the audience grasps the content at once. Nevertheless, an apparent change occurred in Kandyan era and developed into a continuous narrative style which depicts the scenes of the stories in chronological order within longitudinal registers. According to Bandaranayke (2006) the narrations in horizontal registers require active participation of the observer to comprehend the storyline than understanding the centralized compositions in classical era.

The Kandyan painter has been clever enough to understand the requirement and has inserted a short explanatory note beneath the longitudinal strips or in some cases a label within the painting itself. The Kandyan painter has used the space cleverly when placing the type without disturbing the picture, yet giving the necessary importance (Figure.2). The painter has located the short explanatory note at the bottom of the pictorial strip in most cases allowing the observer easily relate the picture with the text. Continuity and smooth flow is there in both verbal and usual languages. Sometimes, the painter has used the picture frame itself to locate the text block. In such cases, the Kandyan painter has nicely balanced the picture frame using the text within it.



Figure.2 Usage of type in Kandyan mural paintings

The author noticed that the Kandyan painter has used good proportions between the visual and verbal languages. The type is not over powering the picture but blending with the picture while enhancing the meaning of the visual. Sometimes, when there is type at the bottom of the image as well as within the image, the Kandyan painter has considered the visual hierarchy among the elements. For instance, the text below the image has given

more importance than the text within the picture frame (Figure.2). It has avoided the type or verbal language over power the picture or the visual language.

Another important fact is that, the Kandyan painter has used good contrast when inserting text among longitudinal painting registers. In most of the cases, the text blocks used in paintings are black type in white background. Thus, the text is visible enough to be read even from a distance. That makes the observer easily go through the narration both visually and even verbally when required.

3. Relationship between the visual and the verbal languages

It is noticed that the subtle variations in certain characteristic of type has enhanced the pictorial narration. In Kandyan Buddhist mural paintings boundaries between type and image are blurred effectively. Moreover, the letter forms in Kandyan paintings also communicate pictorially through motion of the narrative strips.

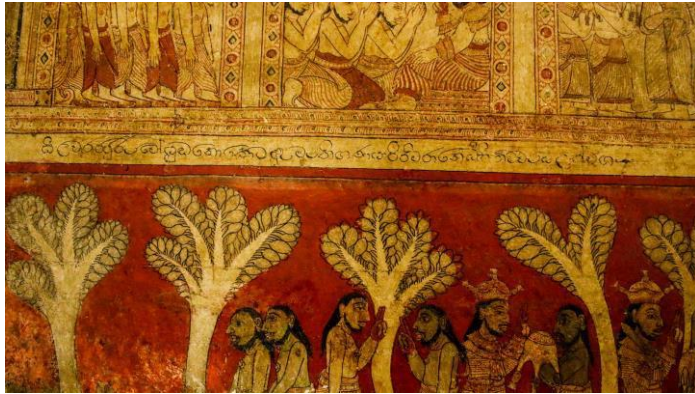


Figure.3 Type in Kandyan mural paintings blends with the paintings

The type used in Kandyan mural paintings has two simultaneous meanings; they operate as pictorial subjects, while still functioning as linguistic signs.

The author intends to analyze the subtle relationship between the pictorial language and the verbal language. In order to blend the images with the type, the Kandyan painter has mainly done subtle changes to the strokes, curves and proportions of type. Further, the Kandyan painter has added small decorative elements along with type to maintain consistency with the pictorial style and to blend the type with the pictorial language.

3.1 Decorative elements included along within text

Being a decorative art form the Kandyan paintings have lots of decorative elements or motifs. Thus, the Kandyan painter has included external decorative elements with text also to blend type with the painting. Further, these elements depict the continuation of the narration. And also, The Kandyan painter has repeatedly used these decorative elements at the end of each explanatory note beneath the picture. Eventually, repetition of these decorative elements has resulted in maintaining the unity and consistency throughout. Further, it is noticeable that the painter has used those decorative elements in such a way to avoid them over powering the text.




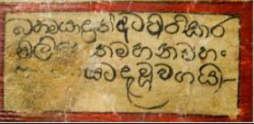
Some decorative elements commonly used in Kandyan paintings along with type	Example of usage of decorative elements along with type
	
	
	
	
	
	
	

Table.1 some commonly used decorative elements along with type in Kandyan paintings

3.2 Subtle changes in letterforms

The author noticed that the Kandyan painter has done subtle changes to the terminals or the endings of some letterforms. It is apparent that the space left after composing the image has been used to locate the text. Depending on the space left the painter has managed to include the text. In doing so, the sizes and even the proportions of the text have also changed according to the limitations of space. Moreover, the ascenders and descenders of type have been slightly changed in order to make the letterforms more decorative blending with the visuals and also to locate in the limited space.











Letter	Subtle differences in visualizing the letter forms
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ම	
ත	
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ස	
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Table.2 Subtle differences in letter forms used in Kandyan paintings

The thin and thick stroke of the letter forms used in Kandyan paintings is blending nicely with stroke or the outline used for the objects within the paintings. And the painter has changed the size, shape and proportions of the letter forms at times depending on the limited space within the paintings. (Figure.5)



Figure.4 changes in the size of the letter forms according to the space

4. Conclusions

There is very limited number of researches done on Sinhala typography even though there are some on Sinhala Orthography. Some researchers have studied on ancient Sinhala Ola leaf manuscripts and Sinhala stone inscriptions. But, hardly any research has been done on Sinhala letter forms in traditional Sri Lankan mural paintings.

The author studied the subtle relationship between Sinhalese visual and verbal languages. This analytical study will be useful to contemporary design as well because boundaries between type and image are blurred even in contemporary typography.

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