Chapter 5

Colonial Buddhist Murals: Modernity and Liminality

We are one blood and one nation. We are chosen people. The Buddha said that his religion would last for 5500 years. That means that we, as the custodians of religion shall last as long.

D. S. Senanayaka, First Prime Minister of Ceylon

5.1 Introduction

The murals painted in the ‘image houses’ of Buddhist temples, between the 1880s and 1930s in the surrounding areas of present Colombo, bring an interesting twist to our discussion on cultural specificity of colonial modernity. The newly decorated temples in Kelaniya, Karagampitiya, Kataluva, Panandura, Botale, Grand Pass, Maligakanda, Bambalapitiya, Pothupitiya, Kiribathgoda, Mathugama, Warkagoda, Bomiriya, Thammita and Boralla, with their narrative panels of historical and mythological content, became a new exhibitionary space for representing the ‘enduring images’ of the Sinhalese race and their religion as is made apparent through the above cited quotation from D. S. Senanayaka. Buddhist revivalism that soon transformed into Sinhala nationalism at the turn of the century fuelled temple building activities as well as mural decorations. Their pictorial programming displayed the ideology, code of conduct and aesthetic preferences of a new form of Buddhism derived from colonialism and Christianity. Unlike portrait and landscape paintings, historical or mythological paintings, as a genre, were never as popular among the elitist practitioners as they were in the religious domain. Available temple mural traditions became a site for relativization of this genre. It led to a crystallization of historical and mythical narrative content within popular taste, as well as religious and nationalist needs.

1 Ceylon Daily News, April 4, 1939.
Although these paintings epitomize a highly intoxicated nationalist sentiment, they occupy an ambiguous position in contemporary art discourse. Art discourse, constructed along the lines of exclusive elitist formalist aesthetics of nationalism, has considered these as 'derivative', 'degenerate' improvisations of an earlier tradition or an awkward imitation of the European style. These writings created an inexhaustible tension between elitist art discourse and popular taste. The pioneering work of Senake Bandaranayake on these murals recognized the 'significance' and 'originality' of these works in structuring a linear history of 'Sinhalese painting' from historical periods to the modern era. However, his project falters in judging the artistic 'quality' of these works due to his evolutionary approach, notion of purity and his orientalist aesthetic preconceptions. Many nationalist historians like Coomaraswamy consider the Kandyan (eighteenth century) murals as a 'purer,' more authentic 'school' of art. They see these later developments as being derivative or degenerate. Coomaraswamy complains about the declining standards of colonial murals.

In repainting viharas nowadays the chief errors lie in the bad colours used; ill judged attempts at the introduction of perspective; careless and ignorant, nay often irreverent work, and the introduction of unsuitable objects; I say bad colours because the old way of making colours has been given up, and with it all restraint in the use of colour, so that where a few colours only were once used (mainly red, yellow, black, white and grayish green), the painting now displays all the colours of the rainbow; and at the same time the beautifully conventionalized and restful traditional style is abandoned in favour of a weak and ineffective realism, so that the inside of vihara whose walls were once covered with worthy and decorative paintings are now as much like an ill drawn Christian Christmas card as anything.

No wall painting can satisfy that has not beauty of colour and restfulness of form, and these are no longer given...the most unsuitable objects are often seen in new paintings, such as picture of street lamps, clocks and what not that sort, and in one of the worst cases (at Ganegoda Vihara) a picture of a clerk at his table with topee and pipe beside him.

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3 I have touched upon the idealization of Kandy in nationalist art discourse in Chapter 2 of this dissertation.
Bandaranayake’s identification of colonial paintings in the southern coastal region as ‘Southern’ and ‘Transitional’ schools also emerged from the hegemonic, benchmark positioning of Kandy as the site of purity. Yet even a cursory look at the murals suggests that on the contrary the development at Kandy, was influenced by narrative murals of the Vijayanagara style of south India channeled through the Nayakar legacy. Similar regionalization of Vijayanagara-Nayakar style took place in the other regional courts of south India in the same period. Comparable transformations were probable in the Ceylonese southern coast as well, incorporated with active European influence. In this context, his idea of dispersion of the Kandyan School towards the end of the twentieth century in the southern coastal belt is highly contestable.

Westernization brought about a differentiation between painting styles of the coastal region and the central hilly areas of the island (Kandy) that were remote from European colonial influence. This process continued till M. Sarlis, the bazaar artist who produced a distinguishable popular realism, appeared on the scene. Here, westernization includes the adaptation of Europeanized lifestyle into the existing traditional mode of living and transformation in the narrative painting style with the assimilation of western representational art. But Bandaranayake’s differenciation between the Southern and Transitional schools shows that his categorization is based upon the idea of westernization as a process of adoption of the realistic mode. Because the so called Southern school registered the colonial influence by incorporating images from the colonial hybrid lifestyle, the division between the Southern and the transitional is based purely on the degree of representationalism.

In his evolutionary reading of style, he sees Euro-Asian hybrid style as an intermediate between the traditional (Kandyan and Southern school) and modern artistic mode (academic realism). The term ‘Transitional’, though ambiguous and imprecise, is used here to indicate a stage of stylistic evolution and artistic development, sometimes of varied nature, lying between the distinctively pre-modern mural paintings of Kandyan and Southern Schools and the

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5 For a detailed stylistic account on Vijayanagara paintings, see C. Sivaramamurthy, *Vijayanagara Paintings* (Delhi: Publications Division, Government of India, 1985); and also *South Indian Paintings* (Delhi: National Museum, 1968).

new representational art of the twentieth century. These transitional styles often display a combination of elements belonging to traditional and modern artistic modes. What is important to remember here is that the Europeanization of the mural paintings of the coastal region and the transplantation of Victorian art practices into the ‘white town’ were simultaneous processes. While the easel painting tradition gained popularity among the educated urban elite class and received colonial institutional recognition, Buddhist temple murals were patronized by the new capitalist class. While easel painting practices and academic realism dispersed from the white town to the natives, the temple murals emerged in the black town influenced by the colonial material and visual culture. The temple murals show how, without the direct involvement of the colonizer, trafficking of ideas, material and representational modes through port culture and Christianity, gradually relativized into the existing aesthetic convention and cultural and social needs. They also signify the constitution of popular taste. Along with westernization, the process of Indianaization culminated in the Kelaniya Raja Maha Vihara and Gotami Vihara murals. The popular style and the elitist style are twin incarnations of modernity and both contradictory and complementary to each other. Being situated on the periphery of art discourse and but at the centre of popular taste, colonial murals challenged the Kandyan (traditionalized) and Europeanized elitist power centres visually and thematically. They produced an intrinsic tension within colonial and postcolonial modernity.

My reading does not follow Bandaranayake’s stylistic categories since historically, thematically and aesthetically they spilled into each other. Further, his idea of the Transitional style is highly problematic as it produces a homogeneous and hegemonic reading of diverse, mult centred, multicultural art worlds. My reading cuts across these two divisions and attempts to engender a broader understanding of Ceylonese modernity involving the processes of westernization and Indianaization, elitist and popular tastes and the domain of amateur and professional art practices. By reading the ideological and aesthetic fix and interplay between them in the condition of modernity, this chapter attempts to posit popular tastes vis-a-vis modernist art practices. This chapter looks at how modernity operated differently in the production of ‘kitsch’ in

7 Senake Bandaranayake and Albert Dharmasiri, Sri Lankan Painting in the Twentieth Century (Colombo: The National Trust, 2009), 15.
the religious domain. Through stylistic and thematic readings, it also tries to further our earlier discussions on art discourse, tactics of realism, tradition, and representation of landscape and figuration in the popular domain.

5.2 Buddhist Revivalism and Sinhala Buddhist Nationalism

Most scholars are in agreement that colonialism reached its climax in the early decades of the twentieth century. However, in Ceylon, the local revival movements at the end of the nineteenth century, through their tactics of mimicry, appropriation as well as indigenization—significantly reworked the project of colonialism. Although historically the ‘Saiva revival movement’ of Jaffna was a generation older than the Buddhist revivalism of southern Ceylon, in the context of Colombo the impact of the latter was imperative. After an immense struggle for survival under European colonialism and Christianity for more than three centuries, Buddhism began its revival at the turn of the nineteenth century. The revivalist movement was directed against ‘Christian’ power rather than against British colonialism. Jayawardena argues that ‘even if this was a tactic to avoid charges of sedition, it had the effect of arousing Buddhists to a “holy war” instead of an anti-colonial struggle.’ The colonial government disassociated itself from its earlier commitment to Sinhalese Buddhist polity in the Kandyan convention after 1850, due to strident objections from Protestant evangelists. This contributed to the emergence of the popular laity movement, distanced from both the state and Buddhist monasteries. Gombrich and Obeyesekere identify the ‘close contact with the west; the arrival of modern knowledge and the western type of education, printing and the increased use of literacy, and the rise of Sinhala middle class and the embourgeoisement

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8 As a resistance to Christian religious conversion and missionary control of education, a movement of Saiva revivalism rooted in the Saiva Siddhanata variety in Jaffna in the 1850s, under the leadership of Arumuga Navalar (1822-1879).

9 The change in the Buddhist institution in colonial and postcolonial Ceylon is elaborately discussed in the writings of Obeyesekere and Richard Gombrich, Malalgoda, Tambiah and Kumari Jayawardena.


11 The Kandyan Convention promised that the religion of Boodhoo professed by the Chiefs and Inhabitants of this province is declared inviolable, and rites, Ministers and places of worship are to be maintained and protected. Cited in Kitsiri Malalgoda, *Buddhism in Sinhalese Society 1750–1900: A Study of Religious Revival and Change* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 109.
of Sinhala society’ as the general course for this quite ‘idiosyncratic fallout’ in the Buddhist context.\textsuperscript{12}

An anti-Christian movement of English educated monks like Migettuwatte Gunananda and Hikkaduwe Sumangala evolved through different stages as a Buddhist revival movement between 1860 and 1885, and transformed into the exclusively Sinhala Buddhist nationalist movement after 1920. The earlier public debates between the Buddhist monks and the Christian missionaries, gained international support and led to the formation of Buddhist organizations with the arrival of Colonel Olcott, an American theosophist and the Russian émigré Madame Blavatsky in 1880. They organized the Buddhist theosophical society to promote Buddhism and Buddhist education by emulating the Christian missions. Jayawardena observes that the Buddhist schools attempted to offer the new generation an education which fused Buddhism with nationalism and other radical ideas from the West.\textsuperscript{13} Olcott further ‘invented [the] Buddhist flag, formulated a Buddhist “catechism”, persuaded the government to declare Vesak a public holiday, and encouraged Buddhists to celebrate it with songs modelled on Christian Carols—whence further developed the custom of sending Vesak cards on the analogy of Christmas cards.’\textsuperscript{14} Later, young mens’ and womens’ Buddhist associations and Buddhist Sunday schools were initiated.\textsuperscript{15} Olcott’s symbolic transformation and activism received an ideological facade with the emergence of the charismatic Anagarika Dharmapala (1864–1933).\textsuperscript{16}

Dharmapala, born as Don David Hevavitarana in a Buddhist family and educated in a mission school, politicized and socialized the Buddhist doctrine. He drafted a code of conduct in 1898 for the laity in order to revive their pre-colonial sense of self. While the

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., 205.
\textsuperscript{16} At this point, it may be relevant to look up the usage of the word ‘Anagarika’ in this context. ‘The Pali term means “homeless” and is a classical epithet of monk. Dharmapala used it, however, to denote an interstitial role that he created to stand between layman and monk as traditionally conceived: he used it to mean man without home or family ties who nevertheless lived in the world, not in the isolation of a monastery.’ Ibid., 205–206.
Buddhist doctrine lays down in detail a code of conduct for the Sangha, there was no specific code of ethics for the laity. His code consisted of 200 rules, as many as the code for the Sangha. Tambiah summarizes the major features of Dharmapala’s revivalism as follows.

Selectives retrieval of norms from canonical Buddhism; a denigration of alleged non-Buddhist ritual practice and magical manipulations (an attitude probably influenced by Christian missionary denunciation of ‘heathen’ beliefs and practices); enunciation of a code for lay conduct, suited for the emergent Sinhalese urban middle-class and business interests, which emphasized a puritanical sexual morality and etiquette in family life; and, most important of all, an appeal to the past glories of Buddhism and Sinhalese civilization celebrated in the Mahāvamsa and other chronicles as the way of infusing the Sinhalese with a new nationalist identity and self respect in the face of humiliation and restrictions suffered under British rule and Christian missionary influence.

By infusing and transforming selected older practices based on Protestant Christianity and Victorian ideals, Dharmapala reshaped traditional Buddhism to fit it into the modern conception of religion. Unlike other nationalists of the Indian subcontinent, he was not against capitalism or modernity. In fact, he welcomed them, and constantly emphasized that the Sinhalese could only arrest their decline and regain their ‘glorious past’ by developing their economic strength through the openings offered by colonial capitalism.

Gombrich and Obeyesekere characterized this change by terming it as ‘Protestant Buddhism.’ They labelled it ‘Protestant Buddhism’ ‘not only because of its incorporation of protestant values but also because of its ethical values [and] its radical protest against traditional Buddhism, which in Ceylon was essentially geared to a peasant society and

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19 For an interesting discussion on the Christian notion of religion and Saiva revivalism and Buddhist revivalism in Ceylon, see Bernard Bate, “Arumuga Navalar, Saivite Sermons, and Delimitation of Religion, c.1850,” The Indian Economic and Social History Review 42 no. 4 (2005).
economy and a peasant moral code. Paradoxically, Dharmapala was highly critical of the ‘hybrid’ and ‘lumpen’ elements and insisted upon the need for maintaining ‘purity’ of the Sinhala race and nation based on the idealized image of a precolonial past. Jani de Silva points out that ‘despite his fear of hybridity, Dharmapala’s new Sinhala persona emerges as a creative hybridization of elements of a perceived past infused with selected aspects of an urban, industrialized society.’ Hence, within the transformed Buddhist culture, there was an innate tension between hybridity and purity in personal and public domains which was reflected in other forms of cultural production and discourses.

Dharmapala’s teachings had a long lasting impact on the modern Sinhala persona. As Michael Roberts and Obeyesekere reveal, large numbers of the middle-class intelligentsia in fact adopted the new national dress code, after reading Dharmapala’s columns or hearing him. They also changed their names to those of pure Sinhala or Buddhist origin. By the 1930s, says Obeyesekere, most Sinhala parents, including Christians, were giving their children Sinhala or Buddhist first names even if they did not change their own. These changes, while indicating the self respect that the Buddhists gained from this revivalism also symbolically demarcated the colonized body through the cues of nationalism.

In Ceylon, Jayawardena argues, the most radical section of the bourgeoisie expressed their patriotic feelings through religious and cultural movements, especially through the revival of Buddhist and Sinhala identities. Thus, the seed of nationalism was embedded in the projects of religious revivalism. The temperance movement of 1904 and 1912, the dress reform movement in the 1930s, Mahajana Sabhās and trade union agitations, further contributed towards mass mobilization of Sinhala polity. This mobilization, with the growing sense of majoritarian politics of democracy and the growing competition among the different ethnic groups for economic resources, later

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took the form of Sinhala Buddhist nationalism. Dharmapala's campaign against British colonialism and the search for a pure Aryan Sinhala Buddhist heritage later configured as ethno-religious nationalism against the minorities through the claim that the Sinhala Buddhists were the only legitimate heirs of Ceylon. Further, the Sinhala Buddhist movement adamantly believed that the minorities were aliens who exploited the Sinhalese economically, politically and culturally akin to the European colonialists.  

5.2.1 The Economics of Buddhist Art Activities

In the absence of traditional state patronage, the laity emerged as a major force in Buddhism in the latter part of the nineteenth century displacing the earlier role played by monks. This laity comprised of newly educated bourgeoisie belonging to various professions. The Buddhist order traditionally distributes among its members two duties: to preserve the doctrine mainly by preaching, and to meditate. These activities were traditionally the prerogative of monks alone, but now laymen encroached upon both preserves. Henceforth, lay protestant Buddhist activity included other aspects that originated in the imitation of Christianity: to advance social welfare in general and the Buddhist cause in particular.  

The voluntary participation of Buddhist laymen in religious activity and organization was customarily in the capacity of dāyakas (literally ‘donors’). The dāyakas supplied the material requisites of the monks at their local temple and made contributions as and when the need arose, for the building and maintenance of shrines, dwelling-houses, libraries and so forth attached to the temple. Historically, dāyakas played a

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25 This feeling was manifested from 1880 in the riots and hostility towards Christians, and from the turn of the century, against Indians and local Muslims. In 1915, a riot erupted against Muslims, fanned by the Sinhala Buddhist trading class, composed of bourgeois and petty-bourgeois elements. Similarly Sinhala-Malayali animosity had reached its zenith in the 1930s. After independence, there were anti-Tamil riots in 1953, 1977 and 1983. See Kumari Jayawardena, Ethnic and Class Conflict in Sri Lanka—The Emergence of Sinhala-Buddhist Consciousness, 1883–1983 (Colombo: Sanjiva Books, 1985).

crucial role in the development of Buddhist monastic institutions in the low country and gained new importance in the absence of official state patronage.

From the 1860s, new Sinhala Buddhist capitalists and merchants became the dāyakas of the Buddhist cause and revivalism. The most lavish financial support for the Buddhist movement came from the Karāva planters, distillers and renters of Panandura. The money earned in a ‘non Buddhist way’ by the distillers and arrack renters was spiritually encashed and purified through its investments in the Buddhist cause. On the other hand, Buddhist revivalism gave new agency to the newly emerging non-goviyagama elites to display their identity in the public arena. Patrick Peeble argues that wealth was less valid as an index of social status in the colonies than in the colonizing nations. Their status was founded on the prestige, difference and honour accorded to them, rather than on their political power or wealth. The social advancement of these new classes was endorsed by transacting economic profit into cultural capital and this gave a new edge to their progressive identity.

In 1887, to mark the diamond Jubilee of Queen Victoria’s coronation, the colonial government permitted the local Buddhist temples to utilize funds for their own development. That decision played a decisive role in the mushrooming of Buddhist temples and their decoration programmes in the Colombo district. Further, orientalists’ invented history of the island glorified and romanticized the role of ancient kings in protecting Buddhism, by building temples and decorating them with paintings and sculptures. The orientalist and nationalist search for authentic art practice located in the past, in a way, raised the importance of the mural painting tradition. The archaeological findings of the remains of frescos and murals in Sigiriya, Thivanka, Dambulla and Kandy endorsed orientalist imagination. In this context, Buddhist wall paintings emerged as an exhibitionary site of new aspirations of city-based Buddhist bourgeoisie. Based on invented Sinhala Buddhist heroes from ancient chronicles, the nationalists set up new

29 The three main non-Goviyagama castes are Karāva, Durāva and Salāgama.
31 I am grateful to Jagath Weerasinghe for sharing this important information with me.
notions of ideal masculinity and manliness that included the protection of religion, race and language. A combination of an imagined Sinhala Buddhist golden age, duties of lay Buddhists, and the economic capital and cultural aspirations of the new middle class instrumentalized artistic productions within the religious domain.

5.2.2 Colonial Colombo as a New Centre of Buddhism

Gombrich argues that the Sinhalese were, in the latter part of the colonial period, 'divided into two classes of very unequal size: a small urbanized and largely English educated middle class and a traditional peasantry.' While Protestant Buddhism attracted the urban class, the Sangha was popular among the rural populace. In the course of the nineteenth century, the ancient temples in Kelaniya and Kotta were supplemented with newer Buddhist temples built in the vicinity of Colombo. The most important ones situated in Dematagoda and Kotahena became the residence of prominent monks who led the revival movement. In the early decades of the twentieth century, the network of temples expanded along the border zones of the colonial city with funding from the new bourgeoisie. In addition to monastic educational institutions like Vidyodaya Perivena at Maligakanda and Vidyalamkara Perivena at Paliyagoda, Buddhist printing and publishing houses and Buddhist schools and associations also emerged to challenge the colonial presence. These developments indigenized the colonial city as a new centre of Buddhist activity in post-traditional Ceylon.

The architectural style of these buildings displays an unexpected blend of Rococo, Romanesque and 'vernacular' styles (Plate 5.1). Visually, the image houses in the temple complex emerged as a 'Buddhist church' with architectural features that drew upon arches of villas, Doric pillars and bell towers. The sculptural schemes of the facade suggest direct borrowings from Victorian architecture. Images of Queen Victoria and the lion symbol from the official emblem of the imperial government occupied the facade or the top wall of the entrance as an acknowledgement of the Queen's generosity in allowing local religious practices. Wall paintings became a significant component in the

34 Ibid.
architectural programmes of this new Buddhism. Most of the newly built temples were decorated with polychrome stucco sculptures and paintings. In a few instances, the older murals were removed in order to accommodate the new ones in hybrid style. They displayed the new ideology and taste of their bourgeois patrons and the urban class.

5.3 Colonial Temple Paintings

Chronologically as well as stylistically, the colonial murals exhibit three subsequent stages of development displaying varying degrees of westernization and Indianaization. They also signify the stages of emergence of the charismatic individual artist, who was a professional and catered to the popular taste. Three broader categories of colonial murals could be identified: Anglo-Ceylonese murals between 1890 and 1930; popular murals of Richard Henricus and M. Sarlis; and neo-classical murals of Solious Mendis and George Keyt.

The new visual decorations in the temples profited from new social positions and the collaboration among lay patrons, monks and painters. Colonial murals represent a phase where Buddhist murals were produced without royal patronage for the first time in documented Ceylonese history. The eclectic culture of that period including Buddhist revivalism, western education, exposure to Christian imagery, studio photography, printed images from India and the Europe, Victorian and Parsi theatre, fashioned the new visual aesthetics (Plate 5.2).

Colonial Theatre

There was a triangular relationship between temple murals, theatre and Buddhist religious nationalism in the period between 1880 and 1930. The colonial period temple murals evolved with the popular theatre tradition. Visual realism, I would say, entered the popular domain mainly through theatre with all its ambiguities. Temple murals and the colonial theatre developed as a genre of the urban middle class by influencing each other. Modern theatre enamoured large sections of the population through its technological, communicative and thematic possibilities at the turn of the nineteenth century. Simultaneously employed in both production of backdrops and screens for the theatre and murals for temples, painters easily crossed the borders of the two media while catering to
the aspirations and tastes of their middle class patrons. These different communicative media, as Pinney argues in the Indian context, 'cross each other through the process of inter-ocularity—a visual inter-referencing and citation that mirror the more familiar process of inter-sexuality.' As K. G. Subramaniyan argues in a different context:

Eclectic passage comes readily to non-professionals or low professionals as they are limited in their skills repertory and predisposing and (sic) are pushed by this very limitation to their resourceful use by way of cross-grafting motifs and styles. Like light armed soldiers, they are able to cross borders and change tactics without much effort.

English dramas, particularly Shakespearean theatre and their local adaptations, were very popular among the English educated class from the 1860s (Plates 5.3). Touring companies of Parsi theatre first came to Ceylon in 1882. Parsi theatre, itself a hybrid form of Indian and Victorian theatre, reached its zenith between 1850 and 1930. The name owes in great measure to its Parsi patrons, Zoroastrians of Persian origin who had settled on the Indian western coast. The proscenium arch, brought to India by the British in the 1750s, replaced the earlier open stage. Parsi theatre popularized the use of the proscenium arch among the Indian audience. Anuradha Kapur charts its hybridized performance modus operandi as follows:

The Parsi theatre drew on the singing and performing traditions of 19th century Indian courtesans, including the forms like ghazel, thumri, dadra, hori. It drew on Victorian melodrama and its complex stage machinery, on Shakespeare as enacted by western touring companies, European realistic narrative structure, British amateur theatrical pageants and local forms, as also on the visual regime of the celebrated Indian painter Raja Ravi Varma (1848–1906). The mix was enormously successful in the subcontinent and beyond, and may be seen as India’s first truly profitable modern commercial theatre.

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38 She further says that by the 1890s, Parsi companies employed full time writers and troupes of salaried actors, built their own theatres, and also began to publish their own plays. Their patrons, financiers and actors belonged to various communities and different regions. This was especially true for their artists, writers and performers. Although Parsi theatre survived till the 1940s, a large number of the theatre companies transformed into cinema studios in the 1920s after the Indian cinema industry was inaugurated in 1913. Anuradha Kapur, “Parsi Theatre,” in *The Oxford Companion to Indian Theatre*, ed. Ananda Lal (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004).
‘Elphinstone Dramatic Company of Bombay, under the leadership of Baliwallah, came to Ceylon in the 1880s and was popular for its stage technique and gorgeous sets. Other important companies that visited Ceylon include: Victoria Natak Mandali in 1916–1917, and ‘Isai Nādagam’ (Music Theatre) or ‘Campany Nādagam,’ a Tamil manifestation of the Parsi theatre from Madras Presidency. These forms used elaborately painted backdrops, decor, fancy costumes and enchanting tales of magic to provide spectacular theatre fare.

In the closing decades of the nineteenth century, Sinhala modern theatre registered its presence against the existing folk theatre traditions, Parsi companies and English theatre. Although the beginning of modern Sinhala theatre was rooted in the earlier Nādagama form, it was deeply influenced by British colonial theatre, Bengali nationalist theatre and the touring Parsi theatre from Bombay. It marks a significant transition in Sinhala theatre from traditional to modern as it transformed from being rural, ritualistic, stylized and offertory to being urban, secular, naturalistic and commercial. An amalgamation of the earlier theatre form, Nādagama and the forms of Parsi theatre developed as a distinctive theatre style called Nūrti. The earliest writer in this tradition was C. Don Bastin (b.1852), a pupil of revivalist Hikkaduwe Sumangala. His first play was published in 1879. When the Vesak full Moon Day was declared a public holiday by the government in 1885, Don Bastin, together with one Andrew Pereira, started Vesak carols. With this, the new custom of decorating the house during Vesak also evolved and ‘at the request of Don Bastin, one Muhandiram N. S. K. Fernando imported paper decorations and lamps to decorate the Vesak night.’ Nūrti, as a theatre form with a larger component of prose and dialogue, was divided into acts and scenes like the European plays. Nūrti emerged as a new urban form of Sinhala theatre from the 1880s

39 E. R. Sarachchandra, Folk Drama of Ceylon (Colombo: Department of Cultural Affairs, 1966), 130.
41 Neloufer de Mel, Women and the Nation’s Narrative: Gender and Nationalism in Twentieth Century Sri Lanka (Colombo: Social Scientist Association, 2001), 64.
42 Ibid., 57.
43 Ibid.
44 E. R. Sarachchandra, Folk Drama of Ceylon (Colombo: Department of Cultural Affairs, 1966), 131.
46 Ibid.
and became a powerful medium of nationalist ideology. *Sarasavi Sandaarasa*, the Sinhala newspaper, welcomed the birth of a local theatre group in Colombo and argued that it would provide 'uncorrupted indigenous entertainment' and also prevent foreign groups taking money out of the country. 47

John de Silva and Charles Dias, both lawyers by profession, developed the young *Nūrti* tradition into a full-fledged national and nationalist theatre by the early 1920s. 48

John de Silva's aim was to rescue *Nūrti* from being merely a vehicle of hybrid Anglo-Oriental culture to a medium for the propagation of Sinhala national and religious sentiments among the people. His project reflected the concerns of the nationalists. Anagarika Dharmapala, while inaugurating the Tower Hall as Ceylonese national theatre in 1911, said: 'May this theatre hall be of great assistance to the furtherance of the religion and the nation.' 49

John de Silva drew his themes largely from episodes in Sinhalese history and legend, and tried to recreate the splendour of the past. He attempted to create fictional role models by imagining patriotic heroes and heroines, invented from literature and chronicles. His productions include *Sri Vikrama Rajasimha* (1906), *Devanampiya Tissa* (1914), *Viharamahadevi* (1916), and *Dutagamini*. He also produced plays on Hindu mythology, *Sakunthala* and *Vessantara Jātaka*. 50 De Silva's plays dramatized nationalist pride through the use of language, royal lineage, traditions, customs and artistic heritage. Charles Dias followed De Silva's style, interspersing the prose dialogue with songs based on Hindustani ragas. His popular plays include *Sri Vikrama Rajasimha, Othello, Naganand, Kusa Jātaka, Bhuridatta, Vidhura, Dharmasoka* and *Padmavati ‘Chandra’*. 51

These plays were a mixture of typical Victorian picture-frame stage, local content, with popular music set to Hindustani tunes, European realistic narrative mode, and Victorian-Mughal costume.

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48 Ibid., 133.
51 Ibid., 135.
5.3.1 Anglo-Ceylonese Murals (1850–1900)

With exposure to western culture through trade, Christianity and colonization, the traditional narrative painting underwent a drastic change after 1850 in the southern maritime districts, close to the ports of Colombo and Galle. These areas produced an Anglo-Ceylonese style by assimilating European realism and the colonial lifestyle into the earlier narrative register. The Anglo-Ceylonese style developed in two phases: depicting colonial lifestyles in the narrative; and moving beyond traditional two dimensional depictions by naive attempts at illusionism.

The first phase saw the introduction of colonial lifestyles of dress, furniture, architectural settings, vehicles, and other accessories into the existing narrative structure. Here, the commodities of a growing consumer society were transformed into images that formed a spectacle of urban modernity. The utility value of commodities was displaced by their exhibition value. An early stage of this development could be traced to the older paintings of the site of Kelaniya Raja Maha Vihara (1850–1851). Paintings in the inner wall of the ambulatory corridor of the image house in Subodharamaya, Karagampitiya (1850) (Plates 5.4) and on the walls of Purvarama at Kataluva (1880) (Plate 5.5) exhibit rich and intricate examples of Anglo-Ceylonese style. Senake Bandaranayake describes the picture plane of the Purvarama murals as follows:

The characters in the stories are deployed very much like actors on a stage, the setting being provided by architectural form—palaces, mansions, pavilions and so on—or out door and forest scenes. The architectural settings, in particular, are theatrical being composed of roof facades, balconies, arches and doorways and predominately, interior separated into rooms and compartments by columns. A sense of spatial depth is created in buildings by presenting successive roofs in elevation with balconies set back from the roof line, gable windows and projecting arches.\(^53\)

As his observation suggests, the inclusion of colonial architectural elements and architectural settings of the theatre contribute to an abstract division of pictorial space into planes. Lacking perspective and tonal variation, these divisions obstruct the viewing of volume and perspective in two dimensional planes. The division of pictorial space into small plots and architectural units

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\(^{52}\) A rudimentary stage of westernization through the inclusion of day-to-day objects and European dress code could be seen in the older paintings of Kelaniya Raja Maha Vihara (1850–1851).

simplifies the artist’s task of dealing with the larger space. Further, it gives him scope for meticulous work. He complicates the picture by interlocking and overlapping these planes to produce an effect of inner and outer, upper and lower spaces. The whole scene is depicted as a view directed from the street, towards dwelling apartments as in the theatre sets. Similar compositional tactics could be identified in Karagmpitiya, particularly on the inner wall of the ambulatory in the image house. Their attempt to paint buildings was probably derived from the existing built environments of Dutch and British colonial white cities. Further, important accessories like clocks, chandeliers, Victorian and Dutch furniture, European horse carriages, curtains, ceramic ware represent a cosmopolitan, upper class urban lifestyle. Images of wealthy local communities populated the idealized world of Jātakas with their excessive exhibition of material earnings (Plates 5.6, 5.7). The imagery is similar to the furniture described in Denham’s 1911 report of the house of a villager in the Colombo Mudaliyar division. It included a satinwood almairah and jackwood bed, mirrors, wine glasses and clock.  

The second phase is clearly visible in the image houses of Rankoth Vihara, Panandura (1888), Poorvarama Vihara, Panandura, Keselwatta (1888), paintings on the inside wall of Darmasalava (1880–1890) and Ummagga Jātaka frieze on the outer wall of the ambulatory in Subodharamaya, Karagampitiya (1897). They show a major breakthrough in the traditional two dimensional forms of depictions through a naive attempt at illusionism. Attempts were made to liberate human anatomical representation from the earlier symbolic, emblematic canonization, giving the figures a sensual volume. The melodramatic bodily postures and gestures, architectural setting and the Indo-Victorian hybrid dress codes in these paintings, reveal explicit influences of Parsi or local Nūṛti theatre’s visual vocabulary. The environment for the episodic narration of the Jātakas is constructed akin to a theatre set or backdrop (Plates 5.8, 5.9, 5.10). An eccentric combination of illusionism, contemporary life and mythological content, leads to ambivalence in physical and temporal experience. These images are placed in mixed settings where we find an overlap of the natural and the supernatural, the mythic and the real, the continuous and the episodic as well as worldliness and otherworldliness. All these polar categories are in constant flux and often merge into one another. They

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represent a possibility, at the same time impossibility, of an imaginative world in colonial modernity.

By becoming a reference point for later painters, this Anglo-Ceylonese style persists in the later formations. Its continuation may be seen in temples situated in the present-day districts of Colombo, Gampaha and Kalutare including Purana Rajamaha Vihara, Botale (1930).

5.3.2 Popular Style
Illusionism, now integral to the Anglo-Ceylonese style, transformed into full blown popular realism with the influence of academic oil painting, the impression of the vocabulary of Indian bazaar art or calendar art (particularly the images of Raja Ravi Varma) on to Ceylonese visual culture, the emergence of a national theatre and increasing sentiments of ethno-nationalism. The popular aesthetics of familiar printed images of landscapes, Christian and Hindu gods, the British imperial royal family that adorned the interiors of the domestic space, further extended to the temple space via these murals. Images of Richard Henricus and M. Sarlis are considered to be the trendsetters of this popular mode.55

Richard Henricus
In conjunction with the popular religious movement, the dharma text and Jātaka stories were printed in the letterpress to make them accessible to a wider reading public. These publications followed the book layout with illustrations like the Christian publications.56 Richard Henricus and J. Wijaesinghe are two important names associated with book

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55 My biographical information of Richard Henricus and M. Sarlis are based on the pioneering work of Gamini Jeyantha Mendis on these painters. His writing and personal interaction became the prime source of inspiration and information for my research. I am grateful to him for sharing valuable information.
56 Meditation became important in personalized religious practice. And here, meditation was learnt from the books, not from the teacher. This emphasized textual religion. With written text, the visual gained new dimensions. The Buddhist illustrations in European manner, while refashioning the middle class imagination of Jātakas and history of Buddhism, brought a new code of aesthetics into existence. It also helped evolve a new sense of time, rationality and scientific spirit. These aspects which transformed the phenomenology of every experience, in a way, contributed to the shift from a two dimensional, symbolic, ahistorical, continual narrative register of painting into a more realistic one.
illustrations at the end of the nineteenth century. Richard Henricus and his elder brother Charles Henricus worked in a wide range of media from book illustrations to theatre backdrops and temple murals, and catered to the needs of Christian and Buddhist institutions. These different modes of material and circulative possibilities of images were linked together by an eclectic visual language, characters and legends. Richard Henricus (active between 1890 and 1920) emerged as one of the first known sign board painters with an individualistic style and an illustrator of the written history of Ceylon. Protestant Buddhism benefitted from his Buddhist characters cast in the European romantic and neo-Classical visual mode with a Christian outlook (Plate 5.11). Hikkaduwe Sumangala, the most important leader of Protestant Buddhism and C. Don Bastin’s teacher who instrumentalized Nūrti theatre tradition, recognized Henricus’ contribution by awarding a certificate. Thus, his hybrid idiom became a norm for the revivalist movement.

Although trained under his elder brother George Henricus who was sent to Italy by the Christian missionaries to learn painting, Richards’ pictorialism drew heavily from the paintings in Poorvarama Vihara, Keselwatta. He also evolved the theatre backdrops for the Tower Hall Theatre established in 1911. Gamini Jeyantha Mendis identifies decorative motifs in the ceiling of the Jayatilakarama (1909) in Grand Pass as the only surviving wall painting by Henricus. The only other surviving work by Henricus are the black and white book illustrations printed in the half tone technique in Britain. Judging from these illustrations, paintings in Poorvarama Vihara (Plate 5.12), Keselwatta and the very early painting style of his apprentice M. Sarlis (Plate 5.13), one can easily imagine his style of mural paintings. The cover pages and the illustrations of books based on Jinarajavansaya, Kusa Jātakaya and Kusa Jātaka Kavyaya made Henricus popular among the Sinhala Buddhist readers. The wide circulation of the illustrations, in a way, determined the popularity of the image among the middle class and constituted the new idea of art.

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58 Ibid.
59 These illustrations were printed and published by K. D. Perera, Vidyaadarsa Press, Colombo.
His visual style shows a direct influence of Christian imagery, European romanticism or neo-classicism and Parsi theatre tradition. By introducing Doric columns, rococo furniture, heavy royal drapery curtains into the pre-modern Buddhist context, he evolved a popular style that appealed to the bourgeois taste of that period. His preoccupation with naturalist rendering introduced a temporal quality in the mythological themes, as in the case of Raja Ravi Varma. His associations with the popular theatre become an asset in introducing illusionist theatre techniques into the murals. Henricus' illustrations of the Buddha's life, published by K. D. Perera in the late 1880s, became the norm for later painters. His influence on the works of later painters clearly shows the popularity and viability of his images among the local Buddhists. In addition, his interest was confined to religion rather than the nation in the years of Buddhist revivalism.

Maligawage Sarlis

John de Silva's theatre, Piyadasa Sirisena's novels and Sarlis' paintings, by representing Buddhist nationalist ideology in a realistic mode, became the symbols of Sinhalese bourgeois modernity in the early twentieth century. Maligawage Sarlis began his career as an apprentice to Henricus in 1909, to paint Jeyatilakaramaya Vihara. In a way, his apprenticeship under Henricus and his admiration for Mudaliar Amarasekara produced a delicate synchronization of his themes with his technical preoccupation. Later, Sarlis was commissioned to paint many temples located in the vicinity of Colombo. That shows the popularity of his style among the upwardly mobile class as well as their competition to patronize him. By engaging in multiple possibilities available through the production and circulation of visual images through modernity, the versatile Sarlis consolidated and popularized the hybrid style of Henricus by creating a visually believable reality for the consumption of the Sinhala masses. He was popularly known as 'Sarlis Master', and his

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60 Sarlis was born in 1880 in the southern coastal town of Ambalangada. His father was an astrologer. Sarlis learned Sinhala, Pali and Sanskrit. He worked as art director in the first Sinhala feature film Rajakeeya Wikramaya and ran his own art institution Lanka Chithrakarma Vidyalaya. Gamini Jeyantha Mendis, "Artist M. Sarlis: Contributor to Buddhist Awakening," in The Popular Art of M. Sarlis, ed. S. Wijesuriya et al. (Kotte: Participatory Development Fund, 1991).

61 These temples include Maligakanda Pirivena, Ashokaramaya, Isipatnamaramaya, and Vajiramaya in Bambalapitiya, Veluvanaramaya, Pujaramaya in Pothupitiya, Kiribathgoda Iriyawewtiya Sudarshanaramaya, Thissamaharama temple, Mathugama Panthiya Sri Mangala Viharaya, Warkagoda Temple, Bomiriya Ganewatte Viharaya and Thammita Induruwa Yalegama Viharaya.
style became synonymous with the popular idea of painting. Through the production of mural paintings, book illustrations, and popular lithographic prints, portraits, cinema set designs and Vesak pandal hoardings, he initiated a dialogue within the visual domain of painting, the theatre performances and the emergent nationalism informed by Buddhism. His art epitomized the new collaboration among capitalist economy, modern technology of image production, nationalism and the charismatic artist as an individual. Sarlis' enterprise also marked the birth of a popular professional or 'star artist'. He achieved this position by clearly differentiating himself from the traditional artist and the gallery-based self expressionist or modernist painter.

In the 1920s, his art transformed the temple space into an exhibition space of the Sinhala nationalist imagination of nation, religion, language, race and history (Plate 5.15). His clever blend of European representational methods and traditional content, on the other hand, produced a 'desired realism' of the bourgeoisie that concomitantly represented modernity and tradition. The visual grandeur created by the extravagant combination of stucco-monochrome sculptures, painted bodies in dramatized actions, frozen scenes of Tower Hall Theatre, and decorative ceilings, reminiscent of popular Parsi set designs, became characteristic of his style (Plate 5.16). His art transformed the entire physicality of the interior as the other world situated in morals, beliefs, myths and invented history of Protestant Buddhism. Here, Buddhism's history, Ceylonese history and the Buddhist myths gelled together to produce a 'painted' world, akin to 'Indian magical realism', a phrase proposed by Christopher Pinney to describe Indian popular visual culture. 62 His paintings went hand in hand with the developments in theatre by John de Silva and Charles Dias both visually and thematically. Many of Sarlis' temple projects encompass the Buddha's life story. These depictions literally follow Henricus' style in the selection of plot and compositional articulation. They may vary in colour scheme and the illusionist rendering which has traces of Raja Ravi Varma. One could argue that Ravi Varma's influence distinguished Sarlis' visualizations from that of Henricus(Plate 5.14). But Sarlis did not stop at painterly illusionism. As in the case of Rococo interiors and the Dhunhuang Buddhist caves of

China, he sculpted the mass of the main characters, and brought actual volume into play. His sculpted images painted with glossy, monochromatic palate, are placed against the painted background. This combination of painting and sculpture reflects the relationship between the actor and the backdrop in the picture frame of the Victorian theatre tradition. Maha Mangala Image House, Mathugama Panthiya (1930) has a sculptured life-sized image of Vishaka, a courtly patron of Buddhism. She is shown being received by a group of noble men, women and children in the side wall of the sculpture (Plate 5.17). Here, the illusionist interplay between two dimensionality and three dimensionality brought an element of theatricality. Furthermore, this theatricality connects every single sculpture with the larger narrative mood of the temple.

As a backdrop, picturesque representation of landscape gained new momentum. As Christopher Pinney observes about chromolithographic prints of India, these landscapes represent a non-tropical land with foreign species of vegetation. I have detailed in Chapter Three how picturesque views of landscapes were connected with class interest and the imagination of a nation based on geographical territory. Situating mythical characters within picturesque landscapes further complicates elitist personal claims about the ownership of physical land through the nationalist appropriation of the genre to imagine into being a ‘holy land’.

Sarlis’ paintings entered the popular realm through the lithographic prints. With the help of a Buddhist entrepreneur, selected paintings of Sarlis were printed in Germany and circulated in Ceylon and Burma. He emerged as the Ravi Varma of Ceylon. These printed pictures, while serving the new requirement of personalized religious practice, indigenized domestic interiors by replacing the European prints depicting the British Royal family, English landscapes and Christian iconography as well as the Hindu iconic and mythical images of Ravi Varma. In 1923, with the help of Sinhala nationalist writer and the editor of the Sinhala Jatiya, Piyadasa Sirisena, the William Pedries Company advertised the production of 36 Buddhist prints by Sarlis. These include: ‘Invitation of the Gods’, ‘The Establishment of Buddhism in Ceylon by the Ven. Mahinda’ ‘Incidents

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from the *Buddha Carita* (Plate 5.8), *Jātaka* stories, several portraits of Sīvalī Thero etc. Later in 1925, Bastin and Co. and H. W. Cave and Co. published lithographs with themes such as the myth associated with the origin of the Sinhalese race and the death of Madduma Bandara, a heroic Kandyan aristocrat during British colonialism, replete with strong ethno-nationalist overtones. His lithographs were further popularized through the *Vesak* greeting cards, a new invention of Protestant Buddhism. Sarlis’ Buddhist spectacles in the form of *Vesak* pandals, grew out of the temples and entered the main junctions of the city in the month of May to mark the birth, enlightenment and passing away of the Buddha. These are religious paintings in an impermanent structure with colossal cut-outs and kinetic sculptures and colourful illuminations.

Sarlis reformulated mythical and historical content in a representational mode. He infused the nationalist rhetoric of Ceylonese history into popular visual culture. But the attempt at representing the myth and images of the unseen ancient rulers in a realistic mode brought an inherent contradiction within the representation. However, the introduction of theatrical elements, on the other hand, helped bring out the anti-realistic nature of the supernatural world. Further, the iconicity produced by the frontality and tableau formations of the Tower Hall Theatre, harnessed conventions of realism to convey the unreal. While following Henricus’ popular visualization, he introduced a theatre-like visual space and illusionist rendering, thereby skillfully making them look like handmade photographs. In his pictorial space, mythic palaces were modelled in the fashion of Victorian mansions or courts with Mughal arches and domes. Similarly, the human figures were dressed in the Victorian-Mughal costume of the Parsi theatre. In a few instances, he attempted to Sinhalize the female mythical characters by making them don the newly invented national dress. These icons, with melodramatic bodily postures,

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66 Ibid.

67 Before Sarlis’ intervention, the structure was made of tender and green coconut leaves decorated with badalvanassa creeper and did not contain paintings.
appeared in front of the scenic mansions, streets and parks. While literally following the visual illusionism of Victorian theatre by transforming the background as backdrop, these paintings missed the illusionist possibility of painting and divided the space into foreground and background without a middle ground.

5.3.3 Indigenization and the Making of Neo-Classical Tradition
Growing awareness about the nationalist art of Bengal school among the city elites, and the infiltration of Sarlis’ popular style into the lower stratum of society, in a way encouraged the cultural elites to distance themselves from this style. Driven by the British orientalist’s antiquarianism, these elites searched for their artistic identity in ancient classical art. Here, the revivialist idea of the oriental past could be read as a tool of difference. The neo-classicism of the late 1930s erased the evocative elements of the Anglo-Indian Parsi theatre from the colonial murals. Solious Mendis’ (1897–1977) Kelaniya Vihara murals and George Keyt’s Gotami Vihara murals became hallmarks in the process of Indianization. What is more interesting is that Sarlis, Mendis and Keyt painted temples in close proximity of Colombo in three different styles in the 1930s. That shows how multiple approaches to modernity and individual styles coexisted within the religious popular domain.

Solious Mendis
Solious Mendis, inspired by the paintings of Sarlis, started his career as an apprentice to M. Monis de Silva, a painter who imitated the popular style of Sarlis. In the first phase of his development, Solious Mendis struggled to master the realism of Sarlis. Later, Sudharsana Bandara argues, he assimilated the aspects of ancient paintings in Sigiriya and Polonnaruwa. His mural project in Kelaniya started in 1932, took 15 years to complete and is celebrated for its oriental look. His fame rapidly overtook that of Sarlis.

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68 Anuradha Kapur mentions that the most popular curtains in Parsi theatre were the street, the jungle or the garden, the camp and palace. These entailed representing architecture, furniture, plants, trees, paths, birds and animals which had at least some sort of likeness to the real thing. Anuradha Kapur “The Representation of Gods and Heroes: Parsi Mythological Drama of the Early Twentieth Century,” *Journal of Arts and Ideas* 23–24 (1993).


70 Ibid.
In 1930, when restoration work at Kelaniya Vihara was in progress, Mendis was assigned to paint the walls of the new Vihara by Helena Wijayawardene. He was sent to tour Ajantha, Ellora and the Bagh caves for inspiration. Considering the particular historical moment in the rise of the nation state and Wijayawardene's political ideology, the selection of ancient Buddhist sites in India was inspired by the nationalist and orientalist notions of identity, authenticity and art, and the Sinhalese imagination of Aryan legacy. Thus, the nationalist and orientalist discourse of revivalism would now also be reflected in the artistic formulation of this project. Between them, Wijayawardene and Mendis 'purified' the western elements in the Anglo-Ceylonese murals and the paintings of Henricus and Sarlis.

In this renovation/rebuilding project, the large building in Kelaniya Vihara was enshrined in a much acclaimed neo-Polonnaruwa facade. The adaptation of neo-classical style, though a contrast against the popular Anglo-Vernacular architectural style, synchronized in the mural style of Mendis. This produced a sense of remoteness that revalidated and authenticated the present construction as ancient. Mendis' style is not a replication of ancient Buddhist art from India and Ceylon but a delicate amalgamation of the ancient and contemporary, local and alien, elite and popular. By turning to ancient Buddhist art for inspiration and reference, his paintings discontinued the earlier exchange between murals and theatre. Through his remote looking neo-classical style, the artist brilliantly merged myth with history and produced the history of Buddhism as the history of the country and authenticated his narration as fact. Hence, it could be read as a visual outcome of the disciplinary collaboration between archaeology, history, mural painting and nationalism in the nineteenth century that was undertaken to produce the nation.

Detailed studies of nature, traces of the classical sculptured body of Amaravathi, Anuradhapura, Polonnaruwa and Bagh, monochromatic palate with earthy colours,

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71 The genealogy of the Wijewardene family is documented back to Portuguese times because they were always part of the official (and wealthy) scene, first as Roman Catholics, then as Dutch Calvinists, then as Anglicans and finally, of course as Sinhala Buddhists. Helen's husband, Don Philip Tudugala made his fortune in lumber and real estate. Her son, Don Richard Wijeyewardene, founded the Associate Newspapers of Ceylon, Ltd. One of her grandsons was J. R. Jayawardena, former President of Ceylon. The present opposition leader and former Prime Minister, Ranil Wickremesinghe is her great grandson.


72 The architectural project was a contrast to the painting project ideologically. The nationalist idea of going back to tradition fell into its own trap since the 'classical' architecture style has a strong Dravidian imprint. Further, the outer walls were decorated with the images of Hindu deities.
three-dimensional modelling without the logic of source of light, elongated figures and oriental costumes, produced a tricky combination of realism and classicism. The presence of neo-traditionalism of the Bengal school, particularly the art of Abanindranath Tagore, Nandalal Bose and Sharada Ukil,73 is evident in these paintings (Plate 5.19). It is also important to remember here (as discussed in Chapter 1) that the influence of Indian revivalism was at its peak in Colombo’s art world of the 1930s. Both Bose and Mendis drew and painted the image of Sangamitta bringing the bodhi tree to Ceylon in a similar elongated linear style around the same time.

The wall paintings in the first three galleries narrate a linear popular history of the Sinhala Buddhist nation.74 On the upper portion of the three walls of the chamber located opposite the reclining Buddha statue, are murals depicting the three Buddha visits to Ceylon, mentioned in Ceylonese Buddhist texts. The lower registers trace the descent of Kalani Tissa from the mythical episode of Devanamapiyatissa’s conversion to Buddhism. The painting narrates the dispute with Tissa’s brother, the execution of the innocent arhat and the destruction of the kingdom, destruction of the temple by the Tamils in the thirteenth century and the Portuguese demolition of the rebuilt temple in the sixteenth century. Behind the Golden reliquary is a portrait of Mrs. Wijayawardene, her children and grandchildren. The painting itself elaborates the modern official discourse of history, art and the nation.

In the above mentioned group portrait, Mendis interestingly used the realistic mode and distinguished it from the general narrative style by placing it in actual time and space. Unlike Sarlis who placed the ancient patrons of Buddhism alongside contemporary ones to authenticate the latter, Mendis depicted Mrs. Wijayawardene’s family engaging in time travel by placing them within a temporal setting of the ancient past. This positions the patron as a unique preserver and protector of the Buddhist religion and the nation without a prior parallel in history. This also underscores the confidence of the culturally elite patron vis-a-vis the new capitalist sponsor.

73 It is relevant to note here that Ukil was associated with All India Fine Arts Society and its publication called Rooplekha, and Key was involved in its activities.
74 Starting with Prince Siddhartha’s conception, renunciation, and followed by the mythical narrative of the origin of the Sinhala race with the coming of Vijaya, Asoka’s missionary Mahinda’s visit and the conversion to Buddhism of the king Devanamapiyatissa, establishing Maha Vihara in Anuradhpura, The coming of relic and bodhi tree, compilation of Buddhist scriptures or canons Buddhagasacariya translating commentaries into Pali, reformation of Buddhism under the Kandyan king Kirtti Sri Rajasimha.
George Keyt

The Gotami Vihara mural by George Keyt represents a different artistic position within the tradition of colonial mural painting. Keyt's preference for the mythical in his oil paintings effortlessly stretched into a grand epic narrative language in the six feet high murals on the lime plaster walls of the ambulatory corridor. His earlier modernist preoccupations, apparent in the stylistic interpretation of Hindu and Buddhist characters, completely merged with the episodic narration in the Gotami murals. It registers an elitist aesthetic response to the popular murals of Sarlis. In Colombo, artists operated within a tightly knit network between elitist art practitioners, buyers and patrons that included their kith and kin and friend circles. I had earlier mentioned in Chapter 1 that the viewership was confined to the same social circle as that of the artist. Keyt was given an opportunity to paint this mural in a private temple that belonged to his brother-in-law, Harold Peris. Keyt accepted only food and the expense incurred on materials for this historic project. It is obvious that Keyt was influenced by the romantic orientalist ideology of the artist as a non-professional that influenced his decision to paint without a commission. On the other hand, the family connection allowed the artist immense freedom that one could not expect in a traditional society or in the popular realm. For example, the artist was allowed the liberty to change the order of the Buddha's life story and he introduced a cubist vocabulary in the scene depicting Mūra Yuddhaya. On the other hand, both Sarlis and Mendis were in constant negotiation with the interest of the emerging competitive market and consumer society. Thus, though Keyt's paintings extended into the public domain in temples, they still remained within the secluded exclusive domain of elitism. Here, one needs to consider the elitist position of the particular temple. The artist's family ties with the patron and the latter's ownership of the particular temple property gave the artist a powerful, extraordinary position. This

75 George Keyt's brother-in-law Harold Peris, was a lover of art and social worker and the grandson of Sir James Peris. Sir James Peris was a distinguished member of the State Council and his mother Alpolonis de Soysa donated the land for building the Gotami Vihara in 1900. Anuradha Seneviratna, Gotama Buddha Murals by George Keyt (Colombo: The George Keyt Foundation, 1993).
76 Ibid.
position, on the other hand, sanctioned the hetero-erotic gaze of the male artist that resulted in the rendering of voluptuous female bodies in a Buddhist shrine context.

The artist has depicted scenes from the Buddha’s life in Gotami Vihara. The selection of themes from the life of Buddha prevented the artist from slipping into the nationalist mode. As a convert to Buddhism, Keyt’s reaction to the popular murals differentiated him from other muralists not only aesthetically but also politically and spiritually (Plates 5.20, 5.21).

Keyt painted this mural in 1939–1940 after his first visit to India. It is important to note here that around the same time Mendis had progressed well in his neo-Classical style which showed in the murals at Kelaniya, five miles from Gotami Vihara, for another wealthy nationalist elite patron. This shows how the neo-Classical style was projected in the elitist imagination of modern and national culture against popular realism. Keyt’s classicism is different from that of Mendis’ Orientalism of the antiquarian gaze. His Orientalism was framed by the modernist formalistic frame, as in his oil paintings on canvas. Postures and gestures, the twists and turns of the human body, especially the female body, became the subtext and the thread of connection in the narration. The interplay between various postures of the human body connected the different episodes and allowed a free flow of the movement of the eye. By creating a rhythmic eye movement along the lines and designs, Keyt broke with the episodic narration derived from European theatre. This gave a quality of perpetuity and otherworldliness to the whole mural visually. The artist’s approach and handling produce contemporariness against the remoteness or ‘museumness’ of the Kelaniya murals. This difference signifies the subtle variations operating within the elitist modern. Harmonious line work, flat application of colour and the interlocking planes and bodies, direct reference to the classical sculpting and painting tradition of India and Ceylon and the superimposition of planes and figures help the artist move away from the facticity of representational art. This brought a mythic quality—a fiction like, dreamy reality to the paintings.

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77 Scenes of life of the Buddha in Gotami Vihara includes: gods and Bodhisattvas to be born in the human world, the dream of Mahamayadevi, the birth of Siddhartha, the ploughing festival, Siddhartha’s skill in the art of archery; his marriage ceremony, dancing girls, his disgust with worldly life, the four signs: seeing his new born son, the great renunciation, crossing the river Anoma, cutting off his hair, meeting King Bimbisara, meeting the spiritual teachers, his defeat of mar, the first sermon, and his passing away.
5.4 Themes

Although the styles of these temple murals vary in the degrees of realism and other sources of reference, one could easily observe the consistency in the selection and articulation of themes. Themes ranged from life of the Buddha, stories associated with life of the Buddha, former lives of the Buddha (Jātaka), history of Buddhism in Ceylon, süvisi vivarana, atamasthāna (8 sacred Buddhist sites in Ceylon) or solosmsthāna (16 sacred Buddhist sites in Ceylon), arahants (standing figures carrying springs of flowers), Buddhist pantheon of gods, celestial world/heavenly scenes,78 to various folk and Hindu deities now part of the Buddhist pantheon, and portraits of patrons. Although most of these themes are common to the colonial and pre-colonial era post-sixteenth century, the selection of stories or episodes has varied throughout. The local cultural politics of a period, class interests of the patrons, the period vision of the artist and his creative calibre collectively influenced the selection of a Jātaka, scene, episode or character. Since the making of the mural was interwoven with revivalist politics, ethnic and religious riots and the emergence of an exclusively Sinhala Buddhist nation state in the colonial/postcolonial period, the murals go beyond merely making religious or aesthetic statements.

5.4.1 Moral Teaching as Cultural Politics

Timothy Mitchell sees religion as a modern and originally Christian category that formed through changes not in people’s beliefs but in the way their lives were disciplined.79 The colonial murals could be read as the visual methods of personal and collective discipline. Life of the Buddha and the Bodhisattvas supply the major content for colonial murals in continuity with past traditions. Though these murals are traditional in content, the selection of and emphasis on certain episodes displays shifting boundaries of ethos and active adaptation of a new bourgeois code of conduct. These murals were harnessed to actively discipline and reshape the ‘polluted’ soul as well as the colonized body, thereby registering an implicit value statement against the ‘evil’ nature of the colonial condition. Furthermore, the selection of themes clearly shows how the Victorian and Protestant

ideals were deeply embedded in the invented bourgeois ethics of Buddhism. For example, *Cu/le Dharmapāla Jātaka* which was depicted in the register of Purvaramaya at Kataluva and also in Sarlis' sculptures at Iriyawetiya Sudharshanaramaya (Plate 5.22) narrates the story of a king who, under the influence of liquor, ordered the death of his infant son, a Boddhisattva by beheading him with a sword. This could be read as a direct comment on alcoholism resulting from the colonial culture. Another moralistic message is conveyed through *Telapatta Jātaka* which describes the evil of sensualistic pleasures.

The Sinhala Buddhist ideologue Anagarika Dharmapala in fact blamed Christian England for the evils in society through the exercise of 'filthy lucre using the demon of alcohol and opium.' In addition, the temperance movement of the early twentieth century considered alcoholism as a non-Buddhist value. This viewpoint gained significance in the struggle against the colonial lifestyle and values. John de Silva's plays such as *Siṅhala Prabhava Nāṭakaya* (1902) and *Surā Soṭṭayā* (1917) handled this theme effectively. Neloufer De Mel argues that John de Silva repeatedly emphasized the consumption of alcohol as a betrayal of Buddhist, and therefore, national values. What is interesting to note here is that these murals were partly a byproduct of the capital earned from arrack renting and distilling.

Colonial caste politics became the subtext of *Khandahala Jātaka* that portrays a greedy king as an outcaste thereby equating the morally weak with outcasts. On the other hand, by giving agency to outcastes, it emphasizes the possibility of caste mobility based on one's own deeds. Interestingly, most of the bourgeoisie in the southern coastal areas comprise of the karāvas, a lower caste, and many of the Buddhist revivalists and nationalists of the period belonged to the karāva or other non-Goviyagama castes. Through advancement in capitalist enterprises, education and professional job positions, the karāvas emerged to challenge the Goviyagama upper caste hegemony. In a way,
it demolished the Brahminical concept of caste as birthright and destiny. It also shows how class mobility allowed a certain agency to the lower castes to evade their traditional social disadvantage.

By celebrating dāna, these murals recognized the charity and generosity of the lay patrons. Vessantara Jātaka features prominently from the Polonnaruwa to the modern period. Vessantara Jātaka narrates the story of the last Bodhisattva, a king who gave all his wealth as dāna to gain nīrṇāṇa. In the colonial materialist context, this theme provided immense possibilities for the artist to paint articles and accessories made available by the colonial port culture. Concomitantly, it was also used as a critique of the excessive, city bourgeois material wealth. While viewing dāna as a vehicle of attaining nīrṇāṇa, the Jātaka also acknowledged the merit of current capitalist donations. Interestingly, the local capitalists began to see themselves as cultural elites through Vessantara Jātaka’s assured nīrṇāṇa or by reflecting upon the dāna of the mythical king.

Scenes of hell and heaven were popular in the moralistic imagination as they were connected with the notion of punishment or karma. They could have gained greater currency among the local religions through the influence of the Christian notion of sin and their visual depiction in Christian art and literature. It is also important to note here that representations of the underworld and the celestial world became popular with the advancement of theatre craft in the same period. These visual depictions appeared as part of the Jātaka or even independently in the murals. Heaven is visualized in the form of six paradises mentioned in the sacred Buddhist texts or as a celestial pond and a ‘cosmographic landscape’ as depicted in the ceiling of Rankoth Vihara, Panandura. Euro-Sinhalese flying nymphs and cupids adorn the scene with floating clouds (Plates 5.23, 5.24). The bodily postures and movements of these celestial beings remind us of similar depictions in European Rococo ceiling paintings.

While heaven appeared on the ceilings and hell appeared on the lower registers of the mural, the in-between space symbolically and visually covered the worldly lives of the Buddha and the Bodhisattvas to narrate the Dasa Pāramitā. A Buddhist doctrine, 83

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83 Parama means the noblest, highest, or most excellent. Therefore, Paramitas are the most excellent virtues, or the noblest qualities of the Bodhisattvas. In other words, Paramitas are the line of conduct or the pre-requisites for Enlightenment. These ten virtues should be practised by every Buddhist who wishes to attain nīrṇāṇa.
Dasā Pāramitā is fully painted in the Isipathnaramaya temple. In Karagampitiya, scenes of hell are interwoven within the Nimi Jātaka story. Niraya or hell is considered to be a place of suffering, a result of evil actions (Plate 5.25). In a hell scene from Iriyawetiya Sudharshanaramaya, Sarlis depicted the living body of a woman involved in sexual misconduct being eaten up by an animal (Plate 5.26). Similarly, a surreal underworld of suffering is depicted in the paintings of Gotabhaya Rajamaha Vihara, Botale (1930s) (Plate 5.27). The scenes of Hell are meant to shock. The visual contrast between hell and heaven being so stark, heaven then becomes the only viable choice for humans.

A very popular theme that adorns the top narrative frieze in most temples is the sūvisi Vivarana (Plate 5.28). They are ‘accounts of the twenty four occasions when Buddha Gotama in his previous lives as Bodhisattva performed acts of sacrifice and obtained a “prophetic revelation” from other Buddhas, a form of legitimation enabling him to pursue his own quest of Buddhahood.’84 While examining the history of the laity movement as modern revivalism, these themes become more significant where personal sacrifices are more important to obtained ‘prophetic revelation’ rather than joining the sangha or monkhood. Dharmapala’s emphasis on meditation concurrently personalized the religious practices. Gombrich and Obeyesekere observe:

The essence of Protestantism lies in the individual’s seeking his or her ultimate goal without intermediaries. In Christianity this means rejecting the priest and the saint as essential links between men and god; in Buddhism it means denying that only through the sangha can one seek or find salvation, nirvāna. In this shift religion is privatized and internalized: the truly significant is not what takes place at the public celebration or in ritual. But what happens inside one’s own mind and soul. At the same time religion is universalized: its injunction applies to everyone at all times and in all contexts.85 Thus Sūvisi Vivarana accurately represented the ‘prophetic revelation,’ the aspirations of worldly asceticism of Protestant Buddhism and the colonial bourgeoisie. Through its continuing presence in Anglo Ceylonese murals, they reaffirmed and recognized ‘worldly

Sarlis broke away from traditional pictography and text at the Mathugama Panthiya Sri Maha Mangala image house. He illustrated the Mahā Maṅgala Sūtra on the

ceiling (Plate 5.29). *Mahā Maṅgala Sūtra* talks about the achievement of auspicious (*maṅgala*) qualities through duty, dharma and environment. The duties explained in the text, in a way, represent the civic code of modern Ceylonese Buddhism. The illustrative mode of the printed textbook is literally transformed into a mural as in the case of *Dasa Pāramitā* of the Isipathanaramaya temple. Sarlis inducted the visual mode of popular book illustration into ceiling paintings.

### 5.4.2 Patriotic Sinhala Kings and the Vicious Tamils

Buddhism provided an ideological basis for the political unity of the Sinhalese community in the colonial period. The concepts of *Dharmadvipa* (Island of Dharma) and *Sinhaladvipa* (Island of Sinhalese) from ancient chronicles, were galvanized together to make larger claims on the island as well as foment resistance against foreign invasions. Preserving the purity of Buddhism and the Sinhala Aryan race became the twin important, interrelated duties and masculine virtues of Sinhala Buddhist men. The idealized qualities of Sinhalese nationalist ideology were iconized in the form of warrior heroes and great Buddhist patrons. The iconographic programme of the colonial temples exhibited these heroes in a prominent way, as part of the larger nationalist discourse.

At the main entrance of the Iriyawetiya Sudharshanaramaya, Sarlis placed the iconic images of Dutagamunu, the ancient king who was celebrated in the nationalist historical narratives for his victory over a Tamil king and Ane Pidu who donated viharas to monks during the Buddha’s time (Plate 5.30). By placing historic and mythic heroes alongside each other in an idealized form of realism, in the costumes of the popular theatre, the artist undertook the twin tasks of the contemporary Buddhist: a fight against Tamils or colonialists and patronizing the religion. Juxtaposition of these two images also implicitly suggests that the invaders and colonialists were the destroyers of the great Buddhist tradition, and hence, the Sinhala nation. Service to the nation and religion formed the core of the discourse of dharma.

An elaborate version of a similar representation can be seen in the rows of portrait paintings in Isipathanaramaya (1921) and Ashokaramaya temples. In both temples, Sarlis painted images of Emperor Ashoka, the mythical King of Kosala, Prince Vijay the mythical ancestor of the Sinhalese race, King Dutagamunu and Parakramabahu, another
Sinhalese king celebrated for his victory over the Tamils and his building activities.\textsuperscript{86} These images appear alongside portraits of contemporary patrons of the respective temples (Plates 5.31, 5.32, 5.33). The artist's selection of heroes, juxtaposed myth with the history of Buddhism and the history of Ceylon cutting across temporal and spatial divides. Further, the juxtaposition complicates the division between mythology and history, idealism and realism, metaphor and allegory. The contemporary patrons, painted in the style of academic realism, appear dressed in European overcoats. By providing an iconic status and through a 'realistic' rendering of the mythical, historical heroes and contemporary patrons, the artist makes the invisible seeable leading to a rupture within the realistic mode. This combination, while equating the charity of contemporary middle class patrons with the service of ancient kings, actualize myth as history and past as present. These images appeared in a row with contemporary patrons placed at the centre, facing the main Buddha image. This shows how the past was invested in contemporary bourgeois cultural politics and the entire discourse on the past and Buddhism was geared towards the cultural mobilization of the newly emerging elite class.

'From 1920s onward, racialist writings in Ceylon take a vehemently anti-Tamil stance.'\textsuperscript{87} Except in the Kelaniya mural where Tamils and Portuguese are portrayed as destroyers of Buddhist monuments, there is no direct reference to the 'other' of the Sinhala Buddhist nation in the temple murals (Plate 5.34). But with foreknowledge of heroes like Dutagamunu and Parakramabahu, the viewer of the murals could readily read the image within the construction of popular nationalist discourse with Tamilians being villains, invaders and destroyers like the Europeans. The Tamils represented a threat to the historical mission of these kings, and for ever to Buddhism. Nationalist historiography selectively highlighted the medieval Saivism–Buddhism religious clashes during the Chola period and the imperialistic expansion of the Cholas into the island. It gave a racial dimension to the religious clashes while maintaining silence about the contribution of Pallava, Pandya, Nayaka kings and artisans of south India and Kerala aristocrats to Sinhalese culture in general and Buddhism in particular. In this historical

\textsuperscript{86} Parakramabahu I was the first of several strong kings in the twelfth century who, commanding Polonnaruwa, the former Chola imperial outpost, successfully unified the island, chased the Cholas away and even challenged them on the subcontinent.

context, Prince Vijaya, considered to be the mythical Aryan ancestor of the Sinhalese, was believed to have sailed from eastern India to become the ‘first settler’ in the island. The merger of mythical and historical narratives, actively made the Sinhala Buddhist the only legitimized shareholder of the ‘Ceylonese nation’.

Although Solious Mendis never followed the iconic project of Sarlis, he employed a grandiose, episodic narrative style to portray important incidents related to these heroes. In his depiction of the coming of Vijaya and Emperor Ashoka’s envoy Mahinda converting the local king Devanamapiyatissa to Buddhism, he actively mythified history or historicized the myth through his orientalist neo-classical style.

5.4.3 Respectable Aryan Ladies and Shameless Anglo-Asian Women

As in the case of the elitist painters, the female body became a major preoccupation of the Buddhist muralists. Selection of themes such as Maya Devi giving birth to prince Sidhartha and Sujatha feeding Buddha with milk rice, and characters like Viharamaha Devi, and Vishaka idealized the stereotypical virtues of women inscribed within the domains of the family and nation (Plate 5.35). These aristocratic blushing ladies displayed fair skinned faces, bodies fully covered in silk saris, heavily ornamented with downcast eyes as if avoiding the eyes of the outsider. They exhibited the material wealth and social respectability of the emergent bourgeois class. Many of Sarlis’ women are draped in the newly invented nationalist osariya sari or in the north Indian sari with their heads covered. The postures of the female body echo the characters of Parsi theatre.

John de Silva’s theatre idealized aristocratic women such as Sita in the Ramayana, the queen in Daskon Natakaya (1888), Sirisangabo’s queen in Sirisangabo Charitaya (1903), and Ehelepola Kumarihamy in Sri Vickrama Rajasingha (1906). Before the advent of cinema, theatre was a powerful medium that constructed the popular idea about ‘Indian Aryans’. Since most of the characters in the Jātakas or the historical characters, are believed by Aryan women from north India, the artist naturally drew upon the Parsi theatre for an authentic portrayal of the aristocratic Aryan woman (Plate 3.36).

88 Neloufer de Mel, Women and the Nation’s Narrative: Gender and Nationalism in Twentieth Century Sri Lanka (Colombo: Social Scientist Association, 2001), 58.
Sinhala-Buddhist womanhood became a key concern of Buddhist revivalism. To counteract the undesirable influence of Christianity, missionary education and western values, Buddhist revivalism restricted the women within the values and customs of reinvented tradition. Dharmapala’s laity rules focused largely on the behaviour and clothing of the Sinhalese Buddhist women. Out of his 200 rules, 30 were devised for women. Concomitantly, the movements for women’s education and women’s franchise during the 1920s and 1930s posed a challenge to the orthodoxy of Buddhist revivalism. Nationalists like Piyadasa Sirisena were highly critical about these developments and warned that it would lead to the ‘decline of the race.’ Hence, only through ‘conforming to the prevalent patriarchal attitudes in bourgeois society’ and accepting roles such as loyal wives, good mothers and virtuous partners, women were allowed to enter the public domain. Queens and aristocratic ladies drawn from historical legends and Buddhist Jātaka stories represented the idealized respectable Aryan Sinhalese women. These heroines were long suffering, dutiful wives like Sujatha, or martyred mothers like Viharamahadevi whose son Dutagamunu safeguarded the self respect of the Sinhalese race, or Sangamitta, a nun who renounced worldly life to disseminate the message of dharma. These women are celebrated because of their connection to great men who served the race and the religion or were instrumental in the great masculine project of nation building. Hence they become an ‘embodiment of the community.’ These images set up the ideals for lay women and showed how they could transform themselves into respectable women. These painted women, as Neloufer de Mel explains in the context of John de Silva’s plays, ‘are sites on which these roles are prescribed and enacted as example.’ Further, she observes:

92 Raja Ravi Varma portrays the Hindu Aryan women in a similar fashion. Karlin McLain makes similar observations about Amar Chitra Katha, comic books in India. For a detailed discussion, see Karline McLain, *India’s Immortal Comic Books: Gods, Kings, and Other Heroes* (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2009).
The aristocracy, by its very nature, was inaccessible, distant and therefore to be ‘aspired’ to. The constructions of aristocratic feminized identity were therefore formulated to fit a patriarchal framework metonymic of a larger nationalist discourse and design. They would inculcate respect for the indigenous culture, show up the foreign ones as debased and inspire the audience, through the personal sacrifice, decorum and selflessness enacted on stage, to be courageous participants in the nationalist struggle for independence. 94

These bodies of noble women, on the other hand, created a distance from the rural body thus legitimizing the urban elite upper caste women’s bodies. This process was very similar to elitist ideals being represented as the only dominant ideology for the entire nation.

Kathryn Hansen explains in a different context how through new ‘visual templates’ of mythological heroines, the ‘internal qualities’ of femininity such as purity, spirituality and servility were equated with external markers such as gestures and postures, jewellery and ornamentation, sari draping and hair style. ‘The significance of this equation is that these external markers of Indian femininity allowed the internal qualities of women to be publicly recognized, so that they could then enter into the modern public realm.’ 95 The deemed general feminine characteristics were patience, submissiveness, service, obedience and modesty. Romila Thapar observes that the female virtues were all proper Victorian virtues that Aryan women of modern Europe and classical India were seen to hold in common. 96 The Sinhalese, like other colonial subjects, accepted Victorian and Indo-Aryan values. However, to communicate these values, they found external markers that were in total contrast to the European ones. Hence, beauty, as celebrated in local Sanskrit and Sinhalese classics, was represented by long black hair, black eyes and golden hued skin. This was equated with women’s internal qualities. Kumari Jayawardena shows us that although ‘the local cultures valorized fair skin, in Ceylon as in India fairness was presumed to be from “Aryan” origin and not from any racial admixture with Europeans.’ 97 On the other hand, these physical qualities certified ‘purity’ in opposition to the polluted body of the Euro-Asian, born out of hybridity. It is also important to note here that the westernized dressing mode of the Euro-Asian and Christian women came under abusive criticism from nationalists while the invented national dress of ‘sari’ was celebrated as the traditional mode of dressing.

94 Ibid., 58–59.
In the works of M. Sarlis and Richard Henricus, the feminized content is conveyed through the theatrical convention of female impersonation or gyno mimesis. These women seem to have been directly transplanted from the theatre. Their bodies have no reference to the anatomy of real women. Like the female impersonators in theatre, these images brought into the public sphere echo the mannerisms, speech and distinctive appearance of the middle class women that they sought to portray. Neloufer de Mel points out that the heavily draped and fully covered body of the female characters in Nārti tradition was a result of the male actors' attempts to hide their male contours. Kathryn Hansen, while discussing Parsi theatre, argues that images of male heroines show the 'match between the actors' pose and the iconic posture of the feminine.' The paradox here is that the male actor in the female body not only recast the bodies of the heroines in the murals but by becoming the desired woman of the revivalist and the nationalist, mapped the ideal behaviour for real women. Hansen observes that through this, 'the female viewer is instructed to model herself on him.'

A popular theme in these murals is 'Mara's daughters' who attempt to seduce the Buddha through their dance and music; they have been shown in western attire with western musical instruments like the violin (Plates 5.37, 5.38). Their bodily presence clearly demarcates them as the 'other' of the respectable woman, the 'shameless Euro-Asian woman' or 'immoral white woman.' They were attacked as being 'ugly' and described as having 'brown hair and light eyes (popularly referred to as cat's eyes) and reddish fair skin which was linked to lobsters.' Kumari Jayawardena observes that Buddhist ideologues categorized female 'devils' into three distinct groups—the European, the Euro-Asian and the local Christian—who became the permanent 'others', subverting and undermining Sinhala Buddhist society and culture. Their westernized social habits, dress and behaviour were considered to be a bad influence, hence demonized in public and private discourses. They were often identified as shameless in

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100 Ibid.
101 Ibid., 254.
102 Ibid., 256.
terms of their sexuality. Although they were portrayed as the other of the pure Sinhala Buddhist Aryan women, their sexuality became a point of attraction (Kāntāva). We should also remember here that in the popular consciousness, the Euro-Asians were grouped with the English. Thus, ‘Mara’s three daughters’ probably represent an inversion of gaze in the British dominated cultural politics: representative instead of the Sinhala male sexual fantasy about the white woman.

By the 1920s, the touring Parsi theatre companies employed actresses for their productions. When the era of the female impersonator was over, the demonized women characters were often played by actresses from minority communities of ‘other’ ethnic origins such as Burghers and Malays. That may be the other reason for painting all these negative women characters as white or burgher women. Neluka Silva observes that the Euro-Asian women were seen as being guilty of the ‘sin of sexual permissiveness’ and bore the ‘mantle of immorality’ both of which were attributed to their ‘westernized lifestyle.’

The construction of her sexuality in the popular discourse is communicated through her overt appearance that challenges the popular imagination of the ideal woman. In a different context, Kapferer relates these attributes to Buddhist cosmology which suggests that the alien must be domesticated, subordinated and then incorporated into its hierarchical scheme. This implied that any contrarian idea was necessarily seen as evil, demonic, foreign and threatening to the very core of Sinhalese Buddhist identity and existence.

Interestingly, it was the burgher George Keyt who painted Mara’s daughter’s in the Gotarni Vihara murals. However, Keyt did not show Mara’s daughters as Euro-Asians or dancing with western musical instruments. Here, the highly sexually charged content allowed the artist the freedom to paint voluptuous female bodies. That gives an interesting twist to the colonial politics of identity.

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5.4.4 Mythical Sites as Nation's Geographical Boundaries

The other important theme in these murals is *solosmasthāna* or *atamasthāna*. The earlier pictorial convention was a symbolic representation of eight or sixteen identical images of stupas. It evolved into a photo-realistic painting of the actual sites. Interestingly, Sarlis rendered them in the realistic mode in monochrome against the polychrome decorative background of the temple. The artist may have used photographs as his reference to paint these sites. Through the genre of black and white photography, these images became a 'real document' of a mythical site. Juxtaposition of photographic images of the holy sites with mythical stories and historical characters, on the other hand, help validate the mythic as real, and the present as being as authentic as the past. These paintings gained dimension with time in the murals of Iriyawetiyas Sudharshanaramaya and Mathugama Pannthiya Sri Maha Mangala shrine as proper landscape paintings, but the colour scheme remained monochromatic. In Iriyawetiyas Sudharshanaramaya, the murals include Buddhist sites from around the world. The realistic transformation of these mythical sites into geographical locations implies the emergence of historical places in the nationalist imagination. Hence the mental, virtual pilgrimage was now given an actual, physical significance and was mapped out over the island. Interestingly, the colony was now transforming into a holy land. This transformation necessitated 'sons of the soils' to protect the age old religion as well as the nation.

Mapping, in the form of a 'geo-body' is one of the major tropes for the nationalist imagination. In the context of religious nationalism, the imagination encompasses both mythical and physical landscapes. Murals in the Kelaniya Vihara effectively implicate the mythical site as a physical place. Mendis visualized, in an epic manner, the Buddha's three visits to the island to solve disputes between the local tribal rulers, mentioned in the local myths. What is more important is that these mythical locations were located geographically in the present-day Nagadipa, situated in Tamil dominated Jaffna; Mahiyangana the home of the aboriginal community Veddas; and Kelaniya, close to the

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European colonial city of Colombo. Hence, the general *solomastana* depictions were substituted by these three sites which are important in the racial politics of the twentieth century. But the myth did not equate the tribals with the present Veddhas or the Tamil. This identification has an embedded ambiguity. Like the enlightenment mission of the European colonizers, the myth of the Buddha’s visit justified and encouraged later intervention and claims on the land as the Buddha’s land. One would argue that this myth represents the inherent nationalist attempt at creating an ideology of Buddhist domination at the expense of minoritarian positions: They actively homogenize the space and singularize the history thereby challenging the belongingness of the ‘others’, the minorities of the island and the nation.

Visually, the Nagas of the north and the Veddhas are derogatively represented through their dark, demonized appearance as against the more serene, sculpturesque bodies and fair complexion of the Aryans (Plate 5.39). These ‘bodily’ contrasts differentiate the inner attributes of Aryanness from the other and establish the superiority of the Aryan Buddhist identity. By painting scenes of the Kalinghas and the Portuguese demolishing the temple in the thirteenth and sixteenth centuries respectively, below the scenes of the Buddha’s visits, the artist was able to explicitly mark the prevalent hostility towards minorities. The Kalinghas and Portuguese are referred to, in popular discourse, as Tamils and Catholics, thereby suggesting that these current minorities were responsible for those ancient destructions. By avoiding references to the birthplace of Buddhism and its associated sites and upgrading the local temples through associations with the Buddha’s visit, these paintings constituted Ceylon as the only holy land of Buddhism. This move is an advancement of a narrow nationalism from the earlier phase where Sarlis painted the local sites alongside other Buddhist sites in India and elsewhere.

5.5 Conclusion

Kajri Jain argues that in India, the ‘bazaar came to enact a performative realm or ethos where moral, sacred and commercial realms were deeply interconnected.’ In India, an intermediate class between rulers and peasants emerged and were instrumental in injecting a sense of the moral across caste and sectarian lines. The ethos of this moral community was fashioned on the basis of an alternative public sphere. On the other hand,
as Kajri Jain points out, it functioned as an ‘alternative to the more “secular” liberal formation of society as well as to the post/colonial state, and has resurfaced from time to time as a socio-political presence.’ She further connects this alternative public sphere with the development of the mass cultural industry and the textual and visual print capitalism, which was crucial to the rise of Hindu nationalism.  

Though Colombo’s colonial murals share visual and thematic characteristics with the bazaar art of India and were influenced by the Indian print capitalism, they cannot be comfortably placed under the banner of bazaar art. Firstly, because these Buddhist temples in Colombo are not comparable with the Hindu temples in colonial India, where temple sites and the network of pilgrimages was interwoven with the bazaar culture. Secondly, the murals were not produced and circulated purely through visual capitalist media such as calendar art, even though there is a close connection between Sarli’s chromolithographic prints and his murals. Their singularity, size and location demanded a different kind of viewership. These murals could be seen as an attempt to convert the impermanent, fleeting, ‘kitsch’ into a permanent and stable language. The paintings, though representative of the taste of the masses, was confined to a viewership that was largely traditional or elitist and these sites were not completely accessible to all. But visually they shared their language with the popular arts. However, their popularity differs from that of the printed images. Jain’s formulation helps us to see the space created by these temples and their murals as an alternative public sphere. As in the case of the Indian bazaar, these museum-like temples existed in between the secular modernist space and the Christian colonial state and were directly connected to the rhetoric of nationalism.

Carol Duncan, in her seminal work on museum rituals, reads the modern museum space as a site of a rational past time and not sacred rites. Similarly, Timothy Mitchell points out the paradoxical nature of the museum project in its ‘claim to certainty or truth, a political decidedness.’ This contradictory nature, on the other hand, inverts the

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museum ritual as sacred and its site as ‘irrational’ past. This constant interplay between the religious and non-religious, fact and fiction is exactly the condition within which colonial Buddhist temples are located. I would argue that these murals exist in a space between oriental museums and a traditional temple. They aesthetically and politically establish a national space with selected archives of race, religion, language and land in the form of myth and history, within the temples that were situated in the colonial public space. Here, I shall use Mitchell’s concept of ‘world-as-exhibition’ to argue my point. For Mitchell, ‘world-as-exhibition’ means, ‘not an exhibition of the world but the world organized and grasped as though it were an exhibition.’ Likewise, these temples, through their painted walls and monochrome sculptures, organize and exhibit the emerging nation and its perception of the world in familiar terms (Plate 5.40). Carol Ducan states:

To control a museum means precisely to control the representation of a community and its highest values and truths. It is also the power to define the relative standing of individuals within that community. Those who are best prepared to perform its ritual—those who are most able to respond to its various cues—are also those whose identities (social, sexual, racial etc.) the museum ritual most fully confirms.

Interestingly, these temples conform to an exclusively Sinhala, Buddhist, bourgeois, masculine identity. ‘Museum like temples’ outside the ‘secular space’ of colonial museums, while challenging the colonialist monopoly over local past, invested the hegemonic colonial gaze with new stakeholders in defining the nation state, and through that, marginalizing their minorities. Their method of revitalizing and contemporizing the past though differed vastly from the colonial museum.

Ajay Sinha writes that ‘the power of a mural...lies in its immobile persistence, its seeming eternity.’ These paintings are not seen in the way one views paintings in the art gallery, movement from one frame to the other or one episode to the other is very important in producing the ‘truth’ or meaning. Each image and episode is part of the larger narrative body of the temple. Since the murals are painted on both walls of the

110 Ibid.
ambulatory, they demand a certain order of viewing. Through this, they control the
physical movement, imagination and identification of the viewer/devotee/citizen. 'The
viewing public moving along its fixed presence is subject to its quiet surveillance,'
oberves Ajay Sinha.113 This aspect of the temple murals resembles the nature of viewing
associated with museum displays.

The anthropologist Edmund Leach observes that every culture mounts some
symbolic effort to contradict the irreversibility of time and its end result, death. He argues
that the themes of rebirth, rejuvenation, and the spiritual recycling or perpetuation of the
past deny the fact of death by substituting it with symbolic structures in which past time
returns.114 The Sinhala nationalist attempts to treat ancient history as authoritative rather
than as medieval texts,115 and the building of temples for political display also emerge
from a similar symbolic effort. In colonial and postcolonial Ceylon, the Buddhist temples
are one of the prime institutions that engage in this symbolic transformation. In the wake
of Buddhist revivalism and nationalism, local temples revived their earlier pedagogic role
and become one of the prime sites that disseminated not only religiosity but also
patriotism. In the absence of proper historical research, publications and dissemination of
historical knowledge in the early decades of the twentieth century, these temples taught
history in their Sunday schools and preached dharma by juxtaposing nationalist warrior
heroes with Buddha's Dharma. The social significance and political connotation of these
temple murals cannot be separated from their larger pedagogic mission and the interest of
the Sinhalese Buddhist temples. Tambiah observes:

> Once Sinhala 'nationalism' gained momentum, its very conceptualization,
phenomenological basis, and practical realization were inseparable from the identity and
historic pride provided by the Buddhist legacy, the cultural capital that Buddhist projects
generated, and the languages in which literature was couched and transmitted.116

Modernized pedagogic roles of these temples, reflected in the mural projects, also
interfered and conflicted with the roles of the modern museum, involved with multiple

113 Ibid.
viewerships comprising of the collective body of a believer, worshipper, patriot, citizen and aesthete.

The play between spatial and temporal constructs, actual and virtual worlds in these murals became feasible through the combination of representational approaches and theatricality. 'Here’ness, rooted in linear time and physical location is a fundamental aspect of realism. When myth and history become tangible like the present, they reduce the spatial and temporal distance between the otherworld and the physical world. When a myth translated into a realistic mode metaphysical time or the circular notion of mythical time collapses; concomitantly, mythological character or mythologized historical figure attains a physical body by challenging otherworldliness; concomitantly, mythological character or mythologized historical figure attains a physical body by challenging otherworldliness; concomitantly, mythological character or mythologized historical figure attains a physical body by challenging otherworldliness. Partha Chatterjee has argued that homogeneous time—the time of Capital—is not the determining characteristic of modernity. Instead, he argues, heterogeneous time, in which the mass of the population in the non-Western world accommodated competing conceptions of time, such as lineartime and circular time, is the modal time of modernity.117 Thus gods and heroes appear understandable to us, close to us, like us. ... The gods and heroes become superhuman, able to enact our desire for omnipotence.118 Thus, the ‘here’ness became an irony, or as Geeta Kapur sees it, ‘representational dilemma’ in the context of mythological representations.119 Anuradha Kapur argues, in the context of Parsi theatre, that the attempt to present mythic material in realistic terms leads to the birth of ‘layered, sometimes refracted, even disaligned character.'120 In these paintings, theatricality fills

the gap created in the effort to strengthen unreal stories and characters with ‘real’ appearances and operates as a means of portraying the miraculous and superhuman.\(^{121}\)

As discussed earlier, colonial murals adopted realism from theatre. Therefore, there is a tone of theatricality embedded within the visual language of murals as in the case of Baroque and Rococo paintings in Europe (Plate 5.41). The element of theatricality or romanticism in the paintings of Sarlis, and neo-classicism in Mendis and Keyt transformed the real into the virtual. Thus, there is a constant interplay between actuality and theatricality that allows similar interplays between history and mythology, religion and nation. The neo-classical phase in the colonial murals, rather than replacing the theatricality of Sarlis, ‘disciplined’ it.

Spectacles of these temple interiors reaffirm the certainty of the Sinhala nation by immortalizing dharma. The iconographies reflect Sinhala nationalism’s construction of the ideal type of citizen and state, allegedly united by the fight against colonialism and the Tamils. Hence, a new subject is shaped/reshaped through subjectified past and that takes a pivotal position or role in the making of history, both individually and collectively. Christopher Pinney argues that in the struggle to define the nation, popular religion supplied a rich resource of familiar themes and images that could take on an explicitly political allegorical meaning.\(^{122}\) In the murals of Sarlis and Mendis, discreet political content of nationalism slips into religious space, in a surreptitious manner through making allegories of mythology and history. McLain notes a similar development in the Hindutva project of Amar Chitra Katha comic books in postcolonial India.\(^{123}\) I would argue that in the absence of a similar popular visual mode among the Sinhalese in colonial and postcolonial Ceylon, the mural paintings have been actively filling the gap.

Within this context, Keyt’s work on the Gotami Vihara murals add a different tone to the discussion on popular modern and elitist modern. By not sharing the ideology or ethos of popular murals, Keyt occupies the space that was created by the traditional

\(^{121}\) My argument is based on Kapur’s discussion of Parsi theatre which argues that ‘realism as a narrative mode needs to be buttressed by miracles in order to convince the audience of the reality of gods.’ Ibid.


\(^{123}\) Karline McLain India’s Immortal Comic Books: Gods, Kings, and Other Heroes (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2009).
and colonial painters. He operated between the spaces created by the modernist artistic approach, the modern artist as individual, and the colonial temple space and viewership of mural paintings. This juxtaposition seems to question the division of elitist and the popular at one level. But if we compare the Gotami Vihara and its patrons with other colonial temples, it is obvious that these murals were an extension of Colombo’s elitist art world.

James Planche uses the term extravaganza to describe the ‘whimsical treatment of a poetical subject’ in his drama in nineteenth-century Britain. Colonial murals, in their freedom of style, theatricality and pantomimic nature, represent a similar engagement. This treatment made possible an imagined Buddhist nationalist world in-between the slippages of myth and history, religion and nation, and temple and museum. By juxtaposing contemporary portraits with iconic images of medieval kings and various mythological characters, these murals construct a ‘pure Aryan space’ that is neither historical nor mythological, thus situating the viewer in a false or imaginative location. This imaginative location actively transforms the viewer to the level of a devotee of both the Buddha and the Buddhist nation. Here, religious devotion operates as a means and end to self-identification with the nation.

124 An extravaganza is a literary or musical work (often musical theatre) characterized by freedom of style and structure and usually containing elements of burlesque, pantomime, music hall and parody. It sometimes also has elements of cabaret, circus, revue, variety, vaudeville and mime. Extravaganza may more broadly refer to an elaborate, spectacular and expensive theatrical production. James Planché, The Recollections and Reflections of J. R. Planché (Somerset Herald): A Professional Biography, Volume II, (London: Tinsley Brothers, 1872), 43.