

An investigative study on the subject of objects associated with Sri Lankan Buddhist painting during the Anuradhapura period

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Abstract

Buddhist painting is a prominent aspect of Buddhist art in this country and originated during the Anuradhapura period. Some paintings from this period are no longer extant and are only mentioned in literary sources. It is said that King Dutugemunu painted Jataka stories in the Ruwanweli Temple and inside the Lowamahapaya. In addition, sources such as the Vishuddhi Magga, the Fahian Pilgrimage Report, and stone inscriptions also mention paintings from the Anuradhapura period. However, paintings from the Anuradhapura period can be identified at places such as Hindagala, Karabagala, Sigiriya, Vessagiriya, Sithulpawwa and the Mihintale relic site. The research problem here is what the subject matter was like for Sri Lankan Buddhist art during the Anuradhapura period. The objectives of the research are to identify Buddhist art of the Anuradhapura period and to study the subject matter associated with it. In examining paintings from the Anuradhapura period, the main subjects are the Buddha's character, the Bodhisattva's character and Jataka stories. For example, the seven weeks of the Ruwanweliseya womb, the preaching of the *Dhammacakkapavattana Sutta*, the Yasapavidda, the taming of Jatila, Bimbisara's approach to the palace of Nirindu, the journey to Kimbulwata, and the Yama Maha procession are depicted. The subjects of the Hindagala paintings from the Anuradhapura period are events from the life of the Buddha. The fact that Venerable Fahian Thero mentioned that he had seen five hundred Jataka stories painted in the Lowamahapaya suggests that Jataka stories were the subject matter for paintings during the Anuradhapura period. The qualitative research method is used as the study methodology. Academic articles and books on Buddhist art were used as secondary sources to collect data. This research emphasizes that Sri Lankan Buddhist painters of the Anuradhapura period used themes that directed people towards Buddhist moral principles.

Key words: *Anuradhapura period, Sri Lanka, Buddhist art, subject matter, Jataka stories*

Article History: **Received:** 29.03.2026 **Accepted:** 30.06.2026

1. Introduction

Buddhist painting can be identified as a prominent element of Buddhist art in Sri Lanka. It began during the reign of Devanampiyatissa King. (250-210BC). It happened as a result of the introduction of Buddhism to Sri Lanka. The introduction of Buddhism to the country soon established itself and the arrival of eighteen artisans, including Sanghamitta, the daughter of Emperor Ashoka, shortly thereafter, led to the development of the country's cultural elements. Among those cultural elements, Buddhist art has existed from the Anuradhapura period to the present day. The aim here is to examine the subject matter of objects used in paintings during the Anuradhapura period. The Anuradhapura period can be considered the beginning of Buddhist art in this country. Some paintings from that era are no longer extant and it is said that King Dutugemunu painted Jataka stories in the Ruwanweli Temple and inside the Lowamahapaya. In addition, sources such as the Visuddhi Magga, the Fhahian Travel Report and stone inscriptions also mention paintings from the Anuradhapura period. However, the paintings at the Hindagala Temple, Karabagala, Sithulpawwa and Mihintale relic site can be identified as paintings belonging to the Anuradhapura period. These paintings can be identified as representing a distinguished artistic tradition.

2. Literature Review

Chutiwongs, Prematilleke and Silva (1990), in *Paintings of Sri Lanka: Sigiriya*, present a detailed study of the Sigiriya paintings, discussing their artistic style, iconography, colour composition and cultural background. The publication, enriched with photographic documentation, provides valuable evidence for understanding the visual representation of objects and artistic conventions in early Sri Lankan Buddhist painting. Although the study mainly focuses on Sigiriya, it offers important insights relevant to the present research.

Martis (2014), in his work *The Evolution of Sri Lankan Painting from the Pre-Buddhist Period to the Twentieth Century*, provides a chronological account of the development of Sri Lankan painting traditions from the pre-Buddhist era to the twentieth century.

The author discusses the characteristics of painting during the Pre-Buddhist and Anuradhapura periods, including the world-famous Sigiriya murals, as well as the artistic developments of the Polonnaruwa, Kandyan, colonial, and modern periods. The study highlights the stylistic evolution, artistic traditions, and historical development of Sri Lankan painting. However, it does not provide a detailed analysis of the objects depicted in Buddhist paintings of the Anuradhapura period. Therefore, the present study seeks to address this research gap by undertaking an investigative study of the objects associated with Sri Lankan Buddhist paintings during the Anuradhapura period.

Nandadeva Wijesekera (1980), in his book titled "Buddha Chithra Kalawa" (Buddhist Painting), provides a significant contribution to understanding the historical development and artistic background of Sri Lankan art, with a specific focus on the Buddhist mural tradition. However, a detailed and structured analysis regarding the specific objects depicted within the Buddhist paintings of the Anuradhapura period is not presented in this work. Therefore, the present study aims to conduct an investigative analysis of the objects associated with the Buddhist paintings of this particular era, thereby addressing and filling this existing literature gap.

Gunasinghe (1977), in his monograph *Sigiri Bithusithuwam* (Sigiriya Murals), provides a critical analysis of the style, technique, and thematic elements of the Sigiriya paintings, which represent a significant aspect of Sri Lanka's artistic tradition during the Anuradhapura period. The study offers valuable insights into the cultural and aesthetic context of these murals. However, while it examines the overall composition and figural representation, it does not provide a systematic classification of the material objects—such as ornaments, vessels, and floral offerings—depicted within the broader framework of Anuradhapura-period Buddhist paintings. Therefore, the present study seeks to address this gap by focusing specifically on the objects associated with Buddhist art of this period.

Therefore, it can be observed that studies focusing on the material objects in the painting tradition of the Anuradhapura period are limited. This research aims to address this existing gap in the literature.

3. Research Problem

The fundamental question of this research is what was the subject matter of Sri Lankan Buddhist painting during the Anuradhapura period?

4. Research objectives

The primary objective of this research is to identify Buddhist art of the Anuradhapura period and study the subject matter associated with it. In addition, other objectives can be listed as follows.

- Studying the technical techniques used by the artist in painting.
- Investigating the social and cultural background of the time through paintings from the Anuradhapura period.
- Investigating the influence of contemporary Indian classical art traditions on the mural art of the Anuradhapura period.

5. Research methodology

In this study a qualitative research methodology was adopted to examine the subject matter of Sri Lankan Buddhist art during the Anuradhapura period. Secondary sources were used and research articles published in Google Scholar were also used. Research works and papers written by various researchers on Buddhist art in Sri Lanka were consulted.

6. Discussion

Buddhist painting can be identified as a prominent element of Buddhist art in Sri Lanka. There is evidence of this from as early as the 2nd century BC. Painting is an art form that is likely to perish very quickly. Although it is unlikely that living evidence of this can be obtained from a period more than 20 centuries ago, it is not difficult to gain some understanding from the oldest remains found so far and from literary Sources.

During the lifetime of the Buddha, monks were forbidden from painting images of men and women (pratibhana chitra). (*Na Bhikkhawe patibhanachiththan kaarapethabban iththiroopakan purisaroopakan, yo karapeyya apaththi dukkatassa..*) However, drawing aesthetic paintings such as Malakamma and Latakamma is not prohibited.(Anujanami bhikkawe maalakamman lathakamman makaradanthakan panchapatikanthi). Accordingly, it should be understood that art is not a concept rejected by Buddhism.

Critics believe that art, like all aspects of Sri Lankan culture in general, has developed through Indian influences. Talented Sri Lankan artists honed their skills by following Indian art. Buddhist art was established in Sri Lanka as a result of the introduction of Buddhism to Sri Lanka during the reign of Dewanampiyathissa (250- 210 BC). The introduction of Buddhism to the country soon established itself, and the arrival of eighteen artisans, including Sanghamitta, the daughter of emperor Ashoka, shortly thereafter, contributed to the development of the country's cultural elements. Among those cultural elements, Buddhist art has existed from the Anuradhapura period to the present day. Here, we hope to examine the moral value of the subject matter associated with the art of painting during the Anuradhapura period. The Anuradhapura period marks the beginning of a golden age in Buddhist art in Sri Lanka. The oldest evidence of art from that era can be further corroborated by the Mahavamsa, archaeological ruins, and painting remains. The Mahavamsa states that King Dutugemunu had various scenes of the Buddha's life, such as the Vessantara Jataka and the defeat of Mara, painted in the reliquary of the Ruwanweli Seya. Archaeological ruins and paintings have been found in places such as Sigiriya, Sithulpawwa Wessagiriya, Hindagala, Karabagala and the Mihintale relic site.

Major sites where paintings from the Anuradhapura period are found

There are several major sites where paintings and their remains from the Anuradhapura period are found. These are spread around cave temples, stupas, reliquaries and forts.

- Sigiriya - World-famous paintings from the middle of the Anuradhapura period (5th century AD) are located here. The main subject of these paintings, commissioned by King Kashyapa, is the Anganas or Lalanas. This is the main place where worldly objects are depicted.
- Paintings at Hindagala Viharaya - Although located near Kandy, the murals here belong to the Anuradhapura period (6th - 7th centuries AD). The Buddha's preaching of the Dhamma to Sakadevindu and stages of the Buddha's character are depicted here.
- Pulligoda - The paintings in the Pulligoda cave near Dimbulagala are important works from the Anuradhapura period. Here, a series of images of gods are mainly seen for worship.
- Vessagiriya - Located within the city of Anuradhapura, several cave paintings can be seen here. Most of these are line paintings and there are inscriptions that can be identified as Buddha images or Bodhisattva images.
- Gonagolla - A unique painting from the Anuradhapura period has been found at the Gonagolla Cave Temple in the Ampara area. It depicts a figure of a nymph and a Brahmin, and it shows a style similar to the Sigiriya paintings.
- The reliquaries of stupas - The most important evidence of paintings from the Anuradhapura period is found in the stupas.
 - Ruwanweli Seya - The Mahavamsa states that the reliquaries contained detailed depictions of Jataka stories and the Buddha's character.
 - Mihintale - A stupa here was found with images of gods emerging from the clouds in its nave.

- Mahiyanganaya - Remains of Buddha images and deities from the latter half of the Anuradhapura period have been found in its nave.

The subject matter of Buddhist paintings of the Anuradhapura period should be examined next. In examining paintings belonging to the Anuradhapura period, the main subjects are the Buddha's character, the Bodhisattva's character and the Jataka stories. For example, the seven weeks of the Ruwanweli Seya Garbhaya, the preaching of the Damsaka Patavatham Sutta, the Yasapavidda, the subduing of Jatila, the arrival of Bimbisara at the palace of Nirindu, the journey to Kimbulwata, the ordination of the princes Rahula and Nanda, the acceptance of Jetavana, the procession of Yama Etc. has become the subject of the object. The Hindagala paintings from the Anuradhapura period are based on events from the Buddha's life. King Sakradeva, at the end of his life, came to the Buddha and begged him to extend his life, Thapassu Bhalluka. Many paintings are found here, such as the merchant brothers offering honey to the Buddha, the seventh week, etc. Similarly, the fact that Venerable Pahiyan Thero mentioned that he had seen five hundred Jataka stories painted in the Lowamahapaya, which also belonged to the Anuradhapura period, is also important evidence that Jataka stories were the subject matter for paintings in the Anuradhapura period.

1. Scenes from the Life of the Buddha

The main subject of painting was the depiction of special moments in the life of the Buddha. In depicting scenes from the life of the Buddha, the artist adopted a very respectful and pious style. Some key examples of this are shown below.

- The Defeat of Mara - This is the main subject of early painting in the Anuradhapura period.

It is said that this vividly depicts how Mara and his army came to disturb the Buddha while he was sitting at the Bodhi tree, and how the Buddha finally defeated Mara. According to the Mahavamsa, King Dutugemunu painted this in the reliquary of Ruwanweli Seya.

- The Seven Weeks - The seven weeks spent after attaining enlightenment are depicted.

The strongest evidence that the Seven Weeks were painted during the Anuradhapura period is found in the Mahavamsa. It is said that King Dutugemunu had every important moment of the Buddha's life painted in the reliquary of the Ruwanweli Seya. It describes the story of Buddha's enlightenment and the seven weeks that followed, in order. In particular, the main subject here is the liberation that the Buddha experienced after his defeat by Mara.

One of the cave paintings at Hindagala Viharaya, dating to the late Anuradhapura period (6th-7th centuries AD), shows the Buddha sitting near the Bodhi tree, and is considered to represent the first or second week of the seven weeks.

Characteristics of the Seven Weeks Painting:

- Bodhi Tree - The Bodhi tree was used as a main symbol in depicting the Seven Weeks.
- Dignity - To show the supremacy of the Buddha, it is a specialty to draw his image very large and the images of his entourage small.

When examined experimentally, during the early Anuradhapura period, detailed depictions of Buddha's life, such as the Seven Weeks, were common in the reliquary, and later it spread to the walls of cave temples.

2. Instances of the Bodhisattva Character

Literary and archaeological evidence confirms that the depiction of the Bodhisattva as a subject was very popular in the art of the Anuradhapura period. The main purpose of painting these scenes depicting the Bodhisattva fulfilling the paramitas to become Buddha was to develop faith and morality among the common people. Below are some of the main examples of the Bodhisattva character's portrayal.

Example: Paintings in the Ruwanweli Temple's relic chamber

This is the oldest and most important evidence that the Bodhisattva figure was painted during the Anuradhapura period. According to the thirtyth chapter of the Mahavansa,

- **Vessantara Jataka:** It is said that the Vessantara Jataka, which depicts how the Bodhisattva completed the perfection of giving, was painted in detail in the Dhatu Garbhaya.
- **Thusita Bhavana:** This painting depicts the Bodhisattva's residence in the divine world before he came to the human world, and the invitation extended to him by the gods.

Example: Paintings at Hindagala Viharaya

Scholars point out that in addition to scenes depicting the Buddha's life, there are also paintings related to the Bodhisattva stage.

- **The Bodhisattva's Difficult Actions** - The difficult times that the Bodhisattva went through before his enlightenment and the events surrounding them are depicted to some extent here.
- **Divine images** - The divine images surrounding the Bodhisattva reveal his supreme qualities.

Example: Mihintale Dhatu Garbha Paintings (8th century AD) The paintings on the walls of a reliquary found near the Kanthaka pagoda in Mihintale are indirectly related to the Bodhisattva tradition. Here, the main deities are depicted emerging from the clouds.

3. Jataka Tales

When examining the use of Jataka tales as subjects in the art of the Anuradhapura period, it can be identified as not just a religious art form but also a major medium that formed the moral and educational foundation of the society at that time.

Objectives of using Jataka stories as a subject:

- ❖ Explaining the Paramita Dharma - Showing the people how the Bodhisattva made sacrifices (alms, virtues, virtues, etc.) to attain Buddhahood.
- ❖ Generating faith and devotion - increasing respect for the Buddha.
- ❖ Giving the Dhamma message to the illiterate people. - Teaching the Buddha's teachings through visual media to ordinary people who cannot read books.

The strongest documentary evidence of the art of Jataka story painting during the Anuradhapura period is the Ruwanweli Temple reliquary. As mentioned in the Mahavansa, the Vessantara Jataka was drawn in great detail. It has been given priority because it is considered the Maha Jataka among Jataka stories.

Techniques used by the artist of the Anuradhapura period in painting:

The artist of the Anuradhapura period used a number of highly advanced and scientifically based techniques in creating paintings.

1. Preparing the wall surface - Before painting on a rock wall or brick wall, it was prepared with several layers.

- First layer: A thick layer of clay, dahi, coir and glue was mixed and applied to eliminate the roughness of the wall.
- Second layer - The surface was leveled with a mixture of finely sifted sand and clay.
- Third layer: A very thin, smooth layer of white clay mixed with chalk was applied to the end.

2. Painting technique used - Chemical tests have revealed that Sri Lankan painters mainly used a mixture of two techniques.

- Tempera method - Here, after the plaster dries, paintings are painted by mixing animal glue or plant sap with the dyes.
- Fresco method - Painting is done while the plaster is still damp.

3. Color combination - During the Anuradhapura period, only four colors produced from natural soils and herbs were used.

- Red - using gurugal
- Yellow - using hirial
- Green - by mixing blue and yellow/green colored minerals
- Black - using resin or oil lamps
- White - using chalk or milk clay

Identifying the social and cultural background of the time through paintings of the Anuradhapura period

Paintings of the Anuradhapura period are not just a collection of religious or artistic creations, but can be described as a social and cultural mirror of the civilization that existed at that time.

➤ Clothing and Fashion

Paintings provide a clear understanding of the clothing worn by people from different strata of society at the time. The Sigiriya and Pulligoda paintings suggest that royal and noble women wore clothing made of very fine fabrics.

➤ Jewelry and Beauty

This is evidence of the high artistic taste and economic prosperity of the society at that time. Headdresses, necklaces, bracelets, and armlets were widely used. These jewelry are depicted in great detail in the images of the Sigiriya Lalanas.

➤ Social Hierarchy and Stratification

The social conditions that existed at the time can be confirmed by the way the figures are positioned in the paintings. The distinction between high and low in society is depicted by depicting the king or Bodhisattva in large figures and the servants and attendants in small figures.

The influence of contemporary Indian classical art traditions on the mural art of the Anuradhapura period

When studying the mural art of the Anuradhapura period, it is very important to recognize the inspiration from Indian classical art traditions. This can be described as a combination that preserves local identity rather than simply imitation. This impact can be examined through several key aspects.

1. Influence of major artistic traditions

Ajanta tradition (Gupta style) - The influence of Ajanta paintings in terms of the softness of lines, color combinations, and elegance of figures is seen in places like Sigiriya and Hindagala.

2. Use of object, subject and symbols

Hindagala Murals - Structural similarities to the Ajanta and Bagh cave paintings can be seen in the depiction of the Buddha image and the surrounding figures.

3. Stylistic Similarities

Mudras and Postures - Indian tradition is followed in making various mudras (example: Kataka Hasti Mudra) with the hands and fingers and in showing the flexibility of the body (Bhanga).

The mural art of the Anuradhapura period is a unique collection of creations that were inspired by Indian classical art traditions and innovated to suit the local cultural and religious environment.

7. Conclusion

There are several main conclusions that can be drawn from this investigative study of Buddhist art from the Anuradhapura period. During this period, considered the golden age of Sri Lankan art, the selection and handling of subject matter appears to have been built on a deep religious, political and cultural foundation that went beyond a mere aesthetic exercise.

The main point confirmed by this study is that the influence of Theravada and Mahayana

ideologies was strong in the selection of subject matter from the early to the late Anuradhapura period. Although early paintings focused more on the Buddha's character and Jataka stories, later, with the spread of Mahayana ideas, the concept of the Bodhisattva emerged as a major subject matter. It can be concluded that contemporary Indian classical art traditions (especially Ajanta and Bagh) influenced the mural art of the Anuradhapura period in terms of structure and style. However, in the depiction of objects, Sri Lankan artists have been able to build a local identity through the use of simple lines and color combinations, moving away from Indian imitation. Although the subjects of the Sigiriya paintings appear to have a secular basis, the fact that they are set against a Buddhist conceptual 'cloud' background demonstrates the uniqueness of the religious and artistic fusion. Ultimately, the subject matter of Buddhist painting during the Anuradhapura period is a collection of works with a sound philosophical foundation that marks the beginning of an independent Sri Lankan art tradition.

8. Bibliography

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