

THE GRAMMAR OF ART IN BUDDHIST MURAL PAINTINGS OF THE KANDYAN TRADITION AS A METHOD OF EXPRESSION

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Abstract

The Buddhist mural paintings of the Kandyan tradition, produced between the late seventeenth and nineteenth centuries, represent a highly sophisticated visual system developed to communicate Buddhist doctrine, ethical values, and cosmological concepts to a predominantly non-literate society. This study examines Kandyan temple murals not as a stylistic decline from earlier Sri Lankan painting traditions, but as a consciously constructed grammar of art, a regulated visual language designed for effective religious and social communication. Drawing upon selected case studies from Central Kandyan temples, the research analyses how narrative sequencing, compositional structure, colour usage, line, symbolism, and spatial organisation operate collectively as a coherent system of visual expression.

The study situates Kandyan mural painting within its historical context, particularly the religious revival under royal patronage during the Kandyan Kingdom, emphasising the role of temple art as a pedagogical instrument during periods of political instability and colonial influence. Through a semiotic and visual communication framework,

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the research demonstrates how complex Buddhist philosophical ideas such as karma, rebirth, moral causality, and liberation were translated into accessible visual narratives. The murals functioned as “visual scriptures,” employing simplified forms, continuous narration, symbolic motifs, and controlled colour palettes to ensure clarity, memorability, and doctrinal accuracy.

Rather than prioritising naturalism or aesthetic illusion, Kandyan artists deliberately privileged intelligibility, audience cognition, and didactic purpose. The findings reveal that the so-called simplicity of Kandyan mural art reflects intellectual discipline and conceptual depth, shaped by Buddhist epistemology and social responsibility. This research contributes to Sri Lankan art history by re-evaluating Kandyan mural painting as a dynamic, experimental, and intellectually grounded tradition, governed by an internal grammar of visual communication that effectively integrated art, religion, and society.

Keywords: Kandyan murals, Visual semiotics, Narrative grammar in art, Buddhist iconography

Introduction

The temple mural art linked with the Kandyan tradition, extending from the late seventeenth century AD to the nineteenth century AD, represents a highly significant phase in the visual art history of Sri Lanka (Bandaranayake, 1986, p.112). Following the Polonnaruwa period, the mural practices within the Kandyan tradition gradually transformed in form, developing into a distinctive artistic school that became a space for experimentation among numerous art critics. So far, many scholars have thoroughly examined the elements such as painting grammar, narrative

structures, themes, and the developing craftsmanship of the period, all with the intention of revealing the deep meaning and unique characteristics of this artistic tradition.

Known by terms such as “*Mahanuvara Sampradāya*,” “*Udarata Sithuwam*,” and “*Sinhalese Art*,” this tradition emerged during the Kandyan Kingdom and expanded not only throughout the Upcountry but also toward the Lowcountry, Sabaragamuwa, North-west, and Uva regions. Its broad influence continues to mark it as a unique and defining feature within Sri Lanka’s visual arts. Although studies on ancient visual culture frequently emphasise admiration and respect for historical aspects, many such writings often lack engagement with the philosophical foundations of art, which risks diminishing the understanding of several visual archetypes inherited from ancient traditions.

This research attempts to explore the knowledge embedded in the craftsmanship of artists connected to the Central Kandyan style by closely examining temple murals. The Kandyan era, beginning with King Wimaladharmasuriya in 1592 AD and eventually concluding under King Keerthi Sri Rajasingha, was a time when Buddhism, temples, and Sangha lineages faced challenges from external influences (Holt, 1996, pp.47–52). Nevertheless, the religion survived due to the interventions of various rulers, with King Keerthi Sri Rajasingha playing a particularly influential role in sustaining this artistic and religious heritage. The revival of artistic activity in the Kandy kingdom, especially under the guidance of Welivita Saranankara Thero, greatly strengthened Buddhism and encouraged continual temple and monastery construction and renovations (Somathilaka, 2002, p.12).

The artistic methodology known as the “Grammar of art,” applied in Kandyan tradition paintings, is deliberately

constructed to ensure that intended concepts are communicated effectively to a specific audience. This special method functions through a careful awareness of the viewers' intellectual capacity, which directly aligns with the purpose behind temple mural creation. Therefore, within the Kandyan tradition, the "Grammar of art" can be understood as a purposeful and strategically organized system, designed to strengthen the visual transmission of ideas.

Mural paintings of the Kandyan tradition function as multi-layered creations, reflecting a sophisticated balance between artistic expression and social engagement. These works are crafted intentionally to appeal to a particular audience, the common and unsophisticated masses. And through this visual approach, the murals aim to build a meaningful connection that maintains both relevance and accessibility in their narratives. One of the most significant aspects of these murals is their function as a mode for communicating Buddhist values to contemporary society. This need arises in response to the religious crisis occurring under colonial influence.

The distinctive grammar of art found in these murals fulfils an essential role by translating complex Buddhist philosophical ideas. Such as enlightenment, lust, sin, merits, and demerits, into a visual form that the wider population can understand. Through this transformation, the murals serve not merely as aesthetically pleasing artistic expressions but also as potent instruments for spiritual instruction and enlightenment.

Within this context, this study aims to uncover the layered dimensions of the Kandy tradition, demonstrating how it served as a dynamic medium addressing the interests of the majority community, resolving social tensions, reflecting

cross-cultural encounters, and operating as a visual educational strategy that elevated public awareness. The research also seeks to clarify the artist's idealistic vision visible in the complex and meaningful nature of this painting heritage, which responded effectively to a wide range of cultural and social needs. Ultimately, this study strives to expand scholarly understanding of the relationship between the visual aesthetics of the Kandy tradition and its larger socio-cultural importance, revealing the multiple layers of meaning embedded in its artistic expressions.

Research Objectives

1. To identify and analyse the visual grammar of Kandyan Buddhist mural painting with particular reference to narrative structure, colour usage, line, figure representation, spatial organisation, and decorative design.
2. To examine how this visual grammar functions as a deliberate method of communication, intended to transmit Buddhist doctrinal, ethical, and cosmological concepts to a predominantly lay and non-literate audience.
3. To interpret Kandyan mural paintings through semiotic and visual communication theories, to understand how visual signs, symbols, and narrative devices generate meaning and guide viewer perception.
4. To compare the Central Kandyan and Southern Province mural traditions, identifying shared grammatical principles as well as regional stylistic adaptations within a unified visual system.

5. To investigate the socio-psychological and cultural context of the Kandyan period and assess how audience cognition, religious practice, and political ideology influenced the formal construction of temple murals.
6. To evaluate the potential of Kandyan temple murals as visual-historical and archaeological sources, particularly for reconstructing religious practices, social values, spatial organisation, and material culture of the Kandyan era.

Literature Review

Ancient visual art can be described as a tool of archaeological value that brings both objective and absolute knowledge to the present from the past of human culture. It reveals a wide variety of information about humans of those days, including their knowledge, skills, technology, cultural relations, moral activities, individual and social ideologies, social strata, and the nature of social institutions, etc. Subsequently, it seems that ancient art is already the focus of archaeologists, art critics, and historians. There is a lot of academic research going on about the temple mural art of the Kandyan tradition and the socio-cultural background associated with it. Many researchers who have focused on various traditional Sri Lankan arts have studied the socio-cultural background and the nature of individual social thought patterns and their evolution.

Senaka Bandaranayake and Nandadeva Wijesekara focused on discovering the process by which Buddhist wall paintings from the Kandyan tradition were created to convey ideas through the grammar of art (Bandaranayake, 1986a, p. 32). It is very important to investigate the studies of the researchers who have studied the subject so

far. Also, it is very important to understand the contribution that can be made to this research from those studies and the subject area of those studies, as well as to identify how my study differs from those studies.

An extensive analysis of mural paintings within the Kandy tradition is delineated in the publication titled '*Mahanuvara Sampradāye Bauddha Situvam Kalāva Piḷibanda Vimasumak*,' a historical survey of Buddhist painting in the Kandy tradition, authored by M. Somathilaka in 2002. The inaugural chapter of this work meticulously scrutinises the stylistic attributes, narrative elements, and subject matter of Kandy tradition paintings, while concurrently exploring the interplay between ancient classical art and mural art during the Kandyan period. Subsequent chapters offer a lucid examination of mural art throughout the Kandyan kingdom, its extension to coastal regions, and the ensuing alterations in painting techniques. Somathilaka's aforementioned treatise serves as a valuable resource for acquiring a formal comprehension of Kandy traditional art, encompassing its dissemination and design principles. This scholarly inquiry is directly pertinent to this academic pursuit as it delves into the societal, caste, class, and cultural dynamics unveiled through specific chapters' depictions.

Furthermore, Mahinda Somathilaka's work *Śrī Lāṅkeya Sittaru saha Samājaya* (Sri Lankan Painters and Society), published in 2006, constitutes another noteworthy contribution to this research domain. Preliminary to the study of paintings, an imperative lies in acquainting oneself with the muralists of the Kandy tradition. This work accentuates salient aspects concerning the social background of painters, their sources of inspiration, patrons, and the intergenerational relationships among them, all of which exert discernible influences on the

resulting artworks. An in-depth comprehension of the painting style and historical context of the Kandy era can be gleaned from this treatise. Somathilaka underscores that despite artists attaining social standing since antiquity, their service was invariably oriented toward fulfilling the exigencies of the societal superstructure. Notably, the influence of patronage is interrogated, discerning whether it precipitated alterations in conceptual frameworks. Patronage emerges as a potent force shaping both the thematic content and spatial allocation of ancient paintings within temple premises. Evidently, the participation or intervention of elite caste entities in aspects such as character and attire is discernible. Consequently, this work proves invaluable for investigating the intricate relationship between artist and art, shedding light on how these dynamics influenced creative expressions. Given that the artistic approach assumes a paramount role in symbolically constructing personal and social status within designs, this exploration enhances comprehension of the nuanced interplay between the designer and patron.

In the publication authored by S.P. Charles in 1999, titled *Pāramparika Sinhala Særasili Mostara* (Traditional Sinhala Decorative Designs), an elucidation of Sinhala decorative designs and styles is proffered through diagrams and sources. Charles's inclusion of information ranging from fundamental decorative motifs to intricate traditional embellishments proves instrumental in discerning the cultural signifiers embedded in these motifs. Each design featured in his compendium is a deliberate selection from the frescoes and carvings of ancient temples, thereby enabling a comparative analysis. The compilation of sketches by Charles holds particular significance, providing a profound understanding of the patterns of utilisation in ancient visual art and its cultural milieu. The scholarly

article titled *Mahanuvara Yugaye Bitusituvam*, compiled by Siri Gunasinghe in 1960 for the 8th edition of the Ceylon Arts Council's Art Magazine, assumes significant relevance in the context of this research. Gunasinghe contends that Kandy era paintings often suffer undervaluation by art enthusiasts and archaeologists due to the misconception that they were executed by unsophisticated individuals for an audience similarly lacking in sophistication. In refutation, Gunasinghe asserts that historical evidence highlights a cadre of skilled artisans, known as '*Sittaru*,' who mastered diverse artistic disciplines, including architecture, sculpture, painting, and music. He buttresses his argument by referencing the accomplishments of *Devaragampala Silwath Thana* and *Devendra Moolachari*, artisan scholars of the time, thus establishing that the artists of the Kandy tradition were not devoid of knowledge but rather conscientious practitioners who applied their expertise in both design and painting.

Moreover, Siri Gunasinghe delves into an analysis of the murals from the Kandy period, underscoring their value and aesthetic appeal based on their resonance with the broader populace. Contrary to perceiving the population as inferior from an artistic standpoint, Gunasinghe posits that the societal value of these murals originates from concerted efforts rather than mere coincidence. He directs attention to the individual knowledge, social roles, lineage, colour palettes, and drawing styles of craftsmen, elucidating their impact on the artistic charm of the murals. This perspective, as presented by Gunasinghe, assumes paramount importance in the research, particularly in elucidating the design grammar of temple mural art within the Kandy tradition. The article underscores the comprehensive understanding and skill exhibited by artists of that era,

suggesting a nuanced approach to design work comparable to the creation of stories and concepts.

Furthermore, Piyasena Ulluisahewa's 1993 work, *Uḍaraṭa Situvam Maḡa*, published by the Department of Culture, emerges as a valuable resource in charting the development of the Kandy period. Covering the historical underpinnings, patronage dynamics, and pioneering figures influencing painting during the Kandy period, Ulluisahewa's work offers chronological insights into temples constructed by various kings. The book's subsequent chapters provide a detailed exploration of the evolution of Kandy period paintings, including discussions on decoration, standard designs, painting materials, colour preparation, depiction of characters, and attire in the context of the painting style of that era. Moreover, the work delves into the influence of diverse artistic styles, the perspectives of scholars, and a comprehensive presentation on artists and their descendants during the Kandy period. The inclusive treatment of topics such as regal attire, ceremonial practices, transportation, traditional customs, and the attire of common people during various occasions enhances the utility of Ulluisahewa's work for gaining authentic insights into the art of painting within the Kandy tradition.

Senaka Bandaranayake, in his 2006 publication *The Rock and Wall Paintings of Sri Lanka*, comprehensively examines the diverse painting traditions in Sri Lanka, spanning from prehistoric paintings to the Anuradhapura, Polonnaruwa, Gampola, Kotte, and Kandy periods. The work reclassifies the Kandy tradition and extensively discusses the Low Country style and later transitional period paintings. Abundant paintings from the reign of King *Keerthi Sri Rajasingha* during the Kandy period are explored, with particular attention given to the evolutionary aspects

facilitated by fragmentary paintings and ivory carvings discussed in the *Puskola pot* (palm-leaf manuscripts). Bandaranayake asserts that the Kandy tradition, experiencing a decline since the Polonnaruwa period, underwent a revival during the Upland Kingdom, primarily influenced by socio-political dynamics. Notably, the author provides detailed insights into the central Kandy tradition, conducting an investigative study on temple paintings, focusing on their designs, originality, and creativity. The work includes an extensive commentary on the art of the Kandy tradition, addressing regional disparities and various social factors influencing it.

Anand Coomaraswamy's 1994 publication, *Medieval Sinhalese Arts*, emerges as a valuable resource for the research field, offering comprehensive information on Sinhala arts post the 18th century, encompassing political, economic, social structures, religion, and culture. The fourth chapter, "Sources of Sinhalese Designs and Decorations," suggests potential influences on certain decorative elements. Coomaraswamy's exploration of cross-cultural contacts, influencing styles and decorations pertinent to the study, proves instrumental. The delineation of upland Sinhalese styles of the 18th century, distinct from Jātaka, painting and statuary art, further enhances the analysis by categorising motifs into divine, animal, botanical, and inanimate.

The article "Buddhist Painting Art of the Kandy Tradition as a Source Study" by W. M. P. Sudarshana Bandara, published in the first volume of *Mædarāṭa Vaṃśaya* in 2015, contributes significantly to understanding the painting style of the Kandy tradition. The article emphasises the spread of painting beyond the highlands to various parts of Sri Lanka and highlights differences between traditions in natural scenes, background design, colour palette, image

configuration, and decorative designs. Sudarshana Bandara provides insights into the religious, social, political, cultural, and economic factors influencing the evolution of Buddhist painting in the Kandy tradition, crucial for understanding cross-cultural contacts impacting paintings.

In W. M. P. Sudarshana Bandara's 2017 book, *Śrī Lāṅkeya Mahanuvara Yugaye Situvam Sampradāya saha Ehi Nava Pravaṇatā* (Temple Mural Art of Kandy Tradition in Sri Lanka and its New Trends), the author chronicles the chronological transformation of Kandy mural art. The book investigates the socio-economic, cultural, and political factors that led to the demise of Kandy temple mural art in the mid-nineteenth century. The first chapter delves into an in-depth exploration of Buddhist painting art within the Kandy tradition, examining symbols and cultural signifiers in murals. Sudarshana Bandara's work is deemed crucial for its thorough examination of these aspects within the field of study.

In summary, existing scholarship provides substantial insight into the historical development, socio-cultural context, patronage systems, stylistic evolution, and symbolic content of Kandyan temple mural art. However, while these studies acknowledge compositional structure and narrative organisation, relatively little attention has been paid to Kandyan murals as a systematic visual language governed by an internal grammar of design. The present research seeks to address this gap by examining how visual elements such as composition, spatial hierarchy, narrative sequencing, and symbolic repetition function collectively to communicate meaning within the Kandyan Buddhist mural tradition.

The Central Kandy Style

The murals, recognised as the earliest examples of the Central Kandyan tradition, originating in the eighteenth century, are located in the Gangaramaya Temple. Which was the first temple was built by King Kirti Sri Rajasingha (Somathilaka© 2002, p.67). His major contributions to Buddhism and the arts included the reconstruction of temples, the restoration of ruined structures, and the production of murals. Within Gangaramaya Temple, these murals stand as representations of the beginning and preservation of mural paintings during the Kandy era (Paranavithana, 1955, p.90). Before the establishment of the Gangaramaya Temple, historical sources mention paintings in the Temple of the Tooth in Kandy, though none of them have survived.

From the 5th to the 12th centuries AD, paintings frequently portrayed both religious and non-religious themes, as seen in places such as Sigiriya, Polonnaruwa, and Thivañka Pilima Geya. A different narrative pattern in painting emerged during the Kandy period, marking a departure from earlier traditions (Bandara, 2017, p.19). Senaka Bandaranayake first introduced what came to be known as the 'Central Kandy Style', and this tradition expanded with distinct painting styles visible in surviving artworks in Degaldoruwa, Gangaramaya, Suriyagoda, Medawala Tæmpita Vihara, Dambulla, and Ridi Vihāraya (Bandaranayake, 1986, p.113). According to Manju Sri and Siri Gunasinghe, the most aesthetically important paintings of the Kandyan tradition appear in Degaldoruwa, Medawala, and Gangaramaya temples. Various art critics, painters, and archaeologists have presented differing (Gunasinghe, 1960, p.11) views on the Kandyan tradition, debating its themes, stylistic evolution, and social background. Some critics, such as Sarath Amunugama,

describe it as crude and underdeveloped (Amunugama, 1980, p.38), while others regard it as a visible rather than intellectual art. However, many of these criticisms overlook the tradition's purpose, its socio-political background, and the cognitive level of its audience. The artists working within the Kandyan tradition demonstrated a strong understanding of the structural organisation of temple murals, including their placement. Temples tend to follow a general model in which the *Jātaka* stories are commonly painted on the outer wall along the *pradakṣiṇā patha* (worshipping path), beginning on the left side and ending on the right. These depictions represent the effects of human actions, leading either to heaven or hell. While this approach appears in many temples, some show variations; the inner wall of the *pradakṣiṇā patha* is often separated to portray different stages of the Buddha's life. Inside the statue house, *devamaṇḍala* (the group of gods) and related stories are usually included. Serving as symbolic representations of the movement from the human world toward *nirvāṇa*, these temple paintings also work as a visual map of the path to liberation, similar to a scripture. The artists' abilities are visible in the way they simplified moral consequences, showing transitions from joy to suffering through narrative sequences that could be understood by people without literacy, arranged from left to right.

By presenting the narrative continuously on a single surface without spatial division, the artist's method improves the audience's ability to understand the story. This intentional technique, shaped according to the cognitive level and awareness of the viewers, functions as a way to simplify complex ideas. It is fair to recognise Kandyan artists as individuals with highly developed technical skills,

achievable only by those who possess a deep understanding and knowledge of both the subject and its social context.

The tradition of Kandyan painting as a continuous narrative from left to right makes it easier for the audience to follow incidents and stories. This reflects the craftsmanship of those artists, allowing profound Dharma concepts to be communicated to a wide audience, including people without reading skills. Through this practice, the tradition developed into a clear visual narrative, distributing knowledge to society because the Kandy craftsmen created their work in alignment with the intellectual capacity of the audience and the context of their time.

Preparing the Wall Surface

Artists of the Kandy period displayed remarkable craftsmanship, as they produced nearly all the tools required for their paintings and also formulated the dyes used for colouring their artworks. Their ability to prepare plaster, colours, and brushes using locally sourced materials demonstrates their adept technical skills. Since the paintings of this era were executed on temple walls, the preparation of the wall surface required careful attention. Historical records show that the artists possessed advanced technical proficiency in both the preparation of walls for painting and the creation of durable plaster. Lime mortar was produced using locally available materials such as lime, sand, bitter gourd, and a cost-free liquid. Additionally, a mixture composed of *kurumbā* peels, rice husks, bitter gourd peels, *æsatu (bo)* peels, and *godapara* fruit peels, combined with water and allowed to stagnate for about a month, was used after the necessary water was extracted. Another mixture included three parts fine sand and two parts chalk or stone chalk, which was soaked for nearly twenty days and then blended with *kithul* treacle, castor oil,

and sesame oil, before being moistened with mortar. These methods reveal the artists' commitment to producing long-lasting mortars. A particularly effective technique used to protect paintings from moisture was the application of '*valitti*', a varnish medium made by mixing pure resin powder with *doraṇa* oil, melting the mixture, and filtering it several times. The resulting high-quality *valitti* not only protected the paintings but also enhanced their aesthetic appeal, reflecting the artists' concern for both preservation and beauty (Coomaraswamy, 1907, p.105).

The plaster used on temple walls also displayed specific characteristics. Modern laboratory studies have revealed the various methods employed to increase the durability of the mortar. The plaster, consisting of multiple thin layers only a few millimetres thick, contained sand and cotton integrated with light-colored clays such as brown, white, and grey. Research indicates that a two-mm-thick white clay plaster (Maranzi, 1972, p. 6; Witharana, 1984, p.26), composed of hydrous magnesite (Maranzi, 1972, p.6), served as the surface on which paintings were executed. Conservation expert Luciano Maranzi referred to this technique as 'Gum Tempera' (Maranzi, 1972, p.6). Historical sources also mention the use of *makuḷu mæṭi* (Godakumbure, 1966, p.472) in the *Medawala Vihāra Sannasa* and *Dambulu Padavi Sannasa* of King Keerthi Sri Rajasingha. Analysis of mortars from different regions confirms the artists' awareness of durability, as they modified the compositions to adapt to varying environmental conditions. These findings highlight the precise craftsmanship that characterised the era.

Coloring

Alongside plaster preparation, the artists of the Kandy period achieved a high level of self-sufficiency by producing

their own dyes, as described by Ananda Coomaraswamy in “Medieval Sinhala Arts” (Coomaraswamy, 1962, p. 163). Their formulation of colours using locally sourced materials reflects their careful approach to colour preparation. *Ōdāta*, or white colour, was produced from pipeclay (*Makuḷu-mæti*), obtained from the ‘*Makulu Gallena*’ cave in Watakgama Village of Mathurata area, and was sometimes blended with other pigments to create light red and brown shades. *Lohita*, unfamiliar in Ceylon and imported from abroad, was used for red backgrounds (Coomaraswamy, 1962, p.105). Yellow, or *pīta*, came from the milk of the *Gokutu* tree. For wood and pottery, artists preferred hyaline or mud hyaline. The black dye, known as dark lattice, was produced by grinding coconut milk, jackfruit juice, coconut oil, and husk resin together with cotton cloth pieces, which were then heated in an earthen pot. Rare Blue was obtained from the leaves of the *Nil-Avariya* plant or occasionally imported from Holland. Green was produced by mixing blue and yellow, symbolising tattoos. Apprentices typically handled the preparation of these dyes, which contributed significantly to their eventual mastery over colour composition (Charles, 1950, p.61).

Beyond dye-making, artists created their own brushes using materials such as animal hair, grasses, flower stamens, and roots. Brushes intended for intricate line work were made from soft cat and squirrel hairs, while fibres like ‘*teli taṇa*’ and ‘*tuttiri*’ and *wæṭacēyā* roots were used for other brush types. The painting technique they employed, known as ‘*Varṇa Pūrṇa*,’ involved filling the outer lines of the template with colours. This technique infused life into the paintings through the use of exterior lines rather than relying solely on colour. Their consideration of brightness and contrast is evident in their

preference for white, yellow, and red, enhanced by black outer lines. The unity of the paintings depended on the harmonious integration of both line and colour.

One distinctive feature in Central Kandy tradition paintings is the deliberate use of red spaces, which helped viewers identify characters and narrative moments immediately. Since temple interiors lacked electric lighting, artists deliberately selected bright colors for visibility, especially shades like red, black, green, white, and blue, which were often used without blending (Somathilaka, 2002, p.325-327). This ensured clarity under low-light conditions. The mastery of line and colour is clearly visible in scenes from Degaldoruwa temple, such as Almsgiving and the *Sutasomajātaka*, which display delicate linework and refined handling.

These paintings also reveal information about the social structures of the time. Artists embedded caste patterns and social distinctions through clothing and body colouring. Dark colours signified lower castes, servants, and demons, while yellow or gold denoted elites and deities, each group maintaining a distinct colour convention (Somathilaka, 2002, pp.325-327). These symbolic uses of colour convey the artists' clear understanding of cultural meanings. Their ability to employ colours effectively even in dark caves further demonstrates their exceptional craftsmanship.

Training and Teaching Process

In the Kandyan tradition, individuals such as architects, painters, and planners were expected to possess comprehensive painting knowledge (Coomaraswamy, 1962, p.67). The training of disciples followed a systematic method, usually involving students who were the children of master craftsmen. Although these techniques might be seen as inherited, formal instruction and practice were

essential for true professionalism. Training began with the drawing of '*vaka deka*,' where the student repeatedly copied foundational patterns from the teacher's notes. Once the form became familiar through practice, the student began drawing it from memory. Great emphasis was placed on precision and on generating the correct sentiment through careful drawing. As skill increased, petals were added to the design, eventually developing into motifs such as *Katuru Mala*, *Mottakkarappuva*, and *Tirigitalaya*, all of which were built upon the initial pattern (Coomaraswamy, 1962, pp.64-66). These painters, trained formally and in detail, moved from simple to complex designs, incorporating symbols and significant events. Their aim extended beyond visual storytelling to the creation of intellectual art.

Another essential practice of this painting tradition was dividing broad wall surfaces into long, narrow strips measuring around 16–30 inches in width, within which the painting unfolded. The stories were presented in columns from left to right, making them easy for the general public to understand. While some paintings lacked clear divisions between events, Kandy artists sometimes used trees, houses, raised designs, or vertical lines to separate narrative moments. Titles were occasionally added at the bottom of the strip to clarify episodes, such as '*Ali-ætun dan dun vaga*' or '*vankagiriya*.' The famous depiction of *Vessantarakjātaka* in Degaldoruva Vihāra illustrates the entire sequence of almsgiving, river scenes, births, reign based on *Dasarāja Dharma*, and the gifting of elephants all in a single column (Somathilaka, 2002, p.222).

The artists also prioritised the depiction of events rather than adhering to conventional scale principles. Instead of following strict naturalistic or abstract traditions, they emphasised conveying ideas accurately. Their precise attention to colour and space allowed them to construct a

subtle painting grammar. Empty spaces around human figures made it easier for viewers to grasp the story quickly and clearly. To support both literate and non-literate audiences, short descriptions were written beneath the panels (*Boradam panelaya*), providing clarity about each scene. This demonstrates the artists' capacity to make their work accessible to a wide audience.

According to Marie Gatellier, major themes in the Kandy tradition included *Jātaka-katās*, *Sūvisi-Vivaraṇaya*, *Soḷasmasthāna*, *Vijayāgamana*, *Buddhāgamana*, and *Mahindāgamana*, with particular emphasis on *Vessantara*, *Dhammasoṇḍa*, *Chulladhammapāla*, and *Devadhamma Jātaka* stories (Gatellier, 1991, p.35). These themes conveyed moral principles and addressed social and political concerns of the period. Some temples depicted kings humorously in *Jātaka* stories, possibly highlighting weaknesses in the ruling elite and using semiotics and symbols to express political criticism. These works preserved a religious tone while subtly addressing social issues.

Exploring the innovative style of Kandy art, painters created a wide range of works related to Buddha's past lives. Such as *Vessantara*, *Sutasoma*, *Kurudhamma*, *Guttīla*, *Ummagga*, *Vidura Paṇḍita*, *Uruga*, *Telapatta*, *Sattubhatta*, *Sasa*, *Sāma*, *Andhabhūta*, *Mahāpaduma*, and others. They also depicted *Sūvisi-vivaraṇa*, the Ten *Pāramitās*, and significant episodes such as the *Māra-parājaya*, *Sat-satiya*, and *Nālāgiri-damana*, along with stories about important figures like *Paṭācārā*, *Macchhariya Kosiya*, *Soreyya Vata*, and *Mahā Kappita*. Representations of sacred locations such as *Aṭamasthāna* or *Soḷasmasthāna*, royal elites, temple benefactors, famous *theras*, and deities like Śakra, Upulvan, Saman and Nātha also appear. Depictions of the planets, zodiac, and scenes of hell further characterise this artistic

era. Scholars argue that this style served particular objectives and was intentionally distinct from earlier Sri Lankan painting.

Unlike previous traditions, the Kandy style appears to have been designed to provide illumination and quick comprehension for Buddhists entering a statue house. These paintings served as a form of Dhamma book, presenting *Jātaka* stories, *Sūvisi Vivaraṇa*, *Māraparājaya*, *Sat-satiya*, *Dasa-pāramitā*, and Buddhist historical events to guide society toward happiness. By using flat, bright colours, the artist created enchanting visual narratives. The focus on divine worlds and celestial beings encouraged devotion to Buddhism among the illiterate masses. Scenes of hell on the outer walls conveyed Dharma messages regarding the fate of those who performed virtuous or immoral acts. Through this fusion of narrative and distinctive stylistic choices, the Kandy tradition transmitted purified teachings to both monks and laypeople.

Creating Human Figures

Kandyan painters used three primary methods when rendering human figures: the full-frontal view of the entire face, following the direct-view rule; the three-quarter view showing half of the face; and the side view according to the partial-view rule. Artists consistently avoided portraying figures facing backwards (Bandara, 2017, p.101). This approach ensured clarity in identifying human figures and allowed for the construction of continuous narratives, revealing the artist's skill.

Uniformity also characterised human figure depictions, especially in *Jātaka* stories. Main characters were given more prominent placement and slightly larger forms. Their attire included distinct designs and patterns to differentiate

them (Somathilaka, 2002, p.327). Through such design grammars, the artists communicated their intentions in ways easily understood by the audience.

Regarding the creation of animal images, two methods were used: a naturalistic depiction based on real animals and an imaginative portrayal of mythical creatures. Animals such as elephants, horses, cows, buffaloes, deer, monkeys, parrots, and others were illustrated with colours closely matching their natural tones (Gunasinghe, and Manjusri, 1960, p.11). Mythical creatures like the *Bheruṇḍa pakṣiyā*, *Āt ka~da lihiṇiyā*, *sarapeṇḍia*, and *Gajasimha* were formed by combining various body parts taken from natural animals. Through this process, the artist's skill in observing and studying the unique features of each species becomes evident.

In the area of botanical images in Kandy paintings, a separation is made between natural botanical representations and fictional botanical creations. Natural depictions include trees such as the *bodhi* tree, banyan tree, coconut tree, date palm tree, *kitul* tree, mango tree, and many smaller fruit trees. The uniqueness of each tree was established by the artist with great skill, using distinctive characteristics and applying them for design purposes. The artist's awareness can also be seen in assigning particular shapes, colours, and designs to each tree, making them easily identifiable. This same understanding extends to the way leaves are portrayed, where symbolic forms are used to represent entire groups of trees. It is notable that the artist clearly distinguished between trees that required individual identity and those that did not. The stylised painting tradition further revealed the artist's ability to create coconut trees, illustrate coconuts falling from *Kitul* trees, and form floral designs to fill empty spaces. Decorative motifs such as flowers, petals, geometric shapes,

and scroll patterns were included to enhance visual appeal. Rather than simply filling space, the artist's intentional use of fragrant flowers like *Binara*, Lotus, *Wætake*, and *Sapu* conveyed subtle meanings, such as indicating the presence of fragrance inside a statue house. The presence of these floral motifs, along with the capacity to create thousands of lotus flowers in varying patterns, demonstrates the refined craftsmanship of the Kandy artist.

Rivers and Other Irrigation Systems

Symbolic treatment is visible in the depictions of fields, lakes, ponds, rivers, and irrigation channels by artists of the Kandyan tradition. Irrigation-related elements are portrayed using an aerial perspective, showing the viewer a view from above. Rivers are drawn with two parallel lines that spiral downward from the top of the painting surface, and the direction of water flow is clarified by including fish swimming against the current. This thoughtful, creative method appears clearly in a painting of the conversion of three *Kassapa* monks to Buddhism at Gangaramaya Temple, where both the fish swimming against the river and the flowing hair of the *Kassapa* brothers are drawn with precision and imagination.

Using a simple system of symbols, the artist represents various objects, as seen in the depiction of *Vaṅkagiriya* in the scene "Queen Mantri going to *Vaṅkagiriya* to pick fruit" from the *Vessantarajātaka* at Medawala Tæmpita Vihāraya. The skilful use of symbols to express complex elements on a two-dimensional surface highlights the artist's academic ability and imaginative strength.

These artists, known as "*Sittaru*," mastered several ancient arts such as house design, sculpture, painting, music, and others. Therefore, describing them as ignorant is inappropriate, because each of these art forms follows

specific traditions and rules. Although the term “*Ate paye vāda*” may have referred to ordinary village artists, it does not imply a lack of knowledge. Siri Gunasinghe states that individuals such as Devaragampala Silwath Thæna and Devendra Mulāchāri, who painted temple walls in the Central Kandy tradition, were highly intellectual and creative. He claims that these artists, despite their complex work, understood traditional artistic methods deeply and were probably educated in manuals such as *Māyāmataya*, *Vaijayantatantraya*, *Śāriputra*, *Rūpāvaliya*, along with subjects like mathematics and astrology (Gunasinghe, 1960, p.8). In a period in the Kandy era when even nobles had difficulty with signatures, artists like Devaragampala Silwat Thana emerged as scholars within lay society.

In Medawala Tempita Vihāraya paintings, the detailed portrayals of *Jātaka* stories and specific events from the life of the Buddha have attracted the interest of many scholars. One remarkable feature adding to the uniqueness of these works is the careful depiction of various artefacts originating from European culture. Records state that in the eighth year of Buddhahood, Buddha arrived in Sri Lanka at the request of Maṇi Akkhika Nā Raja, placed the footprint at Samantakūṭa mountain, and rested in the Divāguhāva. The temple artist, attentive to this moment of repose, illustrated the Divāguhāva as a natural rock cave, adding a mosquito net above the Buddha’s bed to protect him from flies and mosquitoes.

Although the “mosquito net” may appear unusual within the Sri Lankan cultural setting, it had long existed in Portuguese, Dutch, and English traditions. Having entered local society through cultural exchange, it is included naturally by the Kandyan painter, who clearly understood its purpose and placed it in the painting to protect the Buddha from insects in the open cave. This adoption of a

cross-cultural item into traditional art highlights the recognizable influence of European culture (Bandara, 2017, p.76).

The Central Kandyan mural tradition represents a sophisticated synthesis of theological purpose, technical ingenuity, and social awareness. Emerging under the patronage of King Kirti Sri Rajasingha, this school of art successfully transitioned from the naturalism of earlier eras to a didactic, continuous narrative style specifically engineered for the cognitive accessibility of its audience. By employing a "visual grammar" characterised by two-dimensional clarity and symbolic spatial organisation, the *Sittaru* (traditional painters) created a "visual scripture" that translated profound Buddhist philosophy into a medium accessible to both literate and non-literate devotees.

The technical mastery of these artists is evident in the complex formulation of durable mortars such as *makuḷu mæti* and the strategic application of high-contrast, indigenous pigments, which underscore an advanced understanding of materials, science, and environmental aesthetics. This expertise ensured that the spiritual and iconographic messages remained vivid even within the low-light conditions of temple interiors.

Furthermore, the tradition is distinguished by its selective and thoughtful integration of contemporary social signifiers and European artefacts. Unlike the more cluttered compositions of the lowland regions, the Central Kandyan style maintained a disciplined incorporation of cross-cultural items, such as mosquito nets or European-style utensils. This reveals an artistic community that was not isolated, but rather intellectually engaged with the material and cultural shifts of the era.

Ultimately, the Central Kandyan style stands as a testament to a period of cultural resurgence where art functioned not merely as decoration but as a vital instrument for social education, subtle political critique, and religious preservation. It represents a highly experimental and intellectually constructed "grammar of painting." Consequently, the following investigation explores the primary objectives of this creative framework, examining how the specific techniques and stylistic choices of the *Sittaru* reflect a formalised system of visual communication.

Discussion

Narrative Style of the Paintings

The Buddhist mural paintings of the Kandyan tradition represent one of the most intellectually coherent visual systems in Sri Lankan art history. Far from being a stylistic decline from earlier classical traditions, these murals constitute a deliberately constructed narrative grammar, designed to communicate Buddhist doctrine, ethical values, and cosmological ideas to a predominantly lay and non-literate audience. This section critically examines the narrative style of Kandyan temple paintings through the combined lenses of semiotics and visual communication theory, supported by selected examples from Central Kandyan and Southern traditions.

A defining feature of Kandyan mural painting is its commitment to sequential narration. Unlike the murals of the Anuradhapura (Plate 01) and Polonnaruwa (Plate 02) periods, where multiple narrative fragments often coexist on a surface without linear continuity, the Kandyan murals present stories in a structured, orderly progression. This transformation signals a shift from visual simultaneity toward narrative clarity and didactic precision.

Bandaranayake observes that Kandyan painting consciously abandons classical naturalism in favour of a stylised idiom that privileges intelligibility and communicative efficiency over illusionistic depth (Bandaranayake, 1974, pp.112–114). From a semiotic perspective, this reflects a transition from open-ended iconic representation to a more controlled symbolic system, where visual signs are organised to minimize ambiguity and ensure doctrinal comprehension.

The division of mural surfaces into horizontal registers, typically measuring 12, 16, or 18 inches, is one of the most distinctive narrative devices of the Kandyan tradition. These registers function as semiotic frames, each enclosing a discrete narrative episode. The murals of Degaldoruwa Cave Temple (late 18th century), particularly the *Vessantarajātaka* scenes (Plate 03), exemplify this system with remarkable clarity. Each register isolates a specific Moment in the story, guiding the viewer's attention and preventing narrative confusion. In Roland Barthes' terms, these registers operate as syntactic units' visual equivalents of sentences structuring meaning through segmentation (Barthes, 1977, pp.79–80). From the perspective of visual cognition, Rudolf Arnheim's theory of perceptual organisation helps explain the effectiveness of this approach. Segmentation reduces cognitive load and enables viewers to process complex narratives incrementally, a crucial consideration in a religious context intended for mass comprehension (Arnheim, 1969, pp.102–105).

The left-to-right narrative flow consistently employed in Kandyan murals further reinforces their communicative intent. This directionality corresponds with South Asian reading and writing habits, transforming the act of viewing into an intuitive process of visual reading. At the Medawela Tæmpita Vihāra (Plate 04), where Kandyan-period

repainting is prominent, narrative sequences unfold horizontally from left to right across the registers. According to Kress and van Leeuwen, such directional structures form part of a culture's visual grammar and are learned social conventions rather than neutral compositional choices (Kress, 199, pp.40–43).

By aligning narrative direction with cultural habit, Kandyan artists demonstrate an acute awareness of viewer reception, ensuring that the mural can be “read” without textual mediation. The temple wall thus functions as a visual manuscript, accessible to devotees regardless of literacy.

Another significant feature of Kandyan narrative style is the selective depiction of a single episode from a *Jātaka* story, rather than illustrating the entire narrative cycle. This is particularly evident in the *Vessantarajātaka* murals at Degaldoruwa, where the focus rests on the climactic act of generosity, the giving away of Vessantara's children (Plate 05).

Rather than indicating narrative incompleteness, this practice represents semiotic condensation. As Barthes argues, certain images function as “privileged signs,” concentrating ideological meaning into a single visual moment (Barthes, 1972, pp.115–117). Through metonymy, the chosen episode stands for the entire narrative and its moral universe. This strategy closely parallels Buddhist sermon traditions, where monks emphasise a single exemplary incident to convey broader doctrinal truths. The mural thus reinforces oral pedagogy, serving as a permanent visual anchor for ethical reflection.

The murals of Mulgirigala Cave Temple in the Southern Province demonstrate how Kandyan narrative grammar adapts regionally while maintaining its core communicative

principles. Although Southern Kandyan murals exhibit slightly more decorative detailing and fluid line work, the fundamental narrative devices, register division, linear sequencing, and episodic focus remain intact. Bandaranayake identifies the Southern tradition not as a deviation but as a stylistic modulation within a unified grammatical system (Bandaranayake, 1989, pp.213–215). This confirms that Kandyan mural painting was governed by a shared visual logic, flexible enough to accommodate regional aesthetics while preserving narrative clarity and ideological intent. Beyond storytelling, the narrative grammar of Kandyan murals functions as a vehicle for ideological transmission. In the Kandyan kingdom, Buddhism operated as both a religious doctrine and a political foundation. As Panofsky notes, visual forms inevitably embody a culture's symbolic values and worldview (Panofsky, 1955, pp.14–16).

The orderly sequencing, moral emphasis, and hierarchical composition of Kandyan murals reflect the Theravāda Buddhist conception of karmic causality and social order. By structuring perception and guiding interpretation, these murals shape religious consciousness and reinforce doctrinal orthodoxy (Ex: *Jātaka* Stories, *Satsatiya*, *Sūvisi vivaraṇa*, Defeat of Māra and Hell and Heaven). Thus, Kandyan mural painting operates not merely as religious illustration but as a form of visual pedagogy and ideological discipline, embedding Buddhist ethics into the daily devotional experience of the community.

When examined through semiotic and visual communication frameworks and grounded in concrete mural examples, the narrative style of Kandyan temple paintings emerges as a highly sophisticated system of visual communication. The rejection of classical naturalism is not evidence of artistic decline, but a conscious reconfiguration

aligned with pedagogical necessity, audience psychology, and religious function. Kandyan mural art should therefore be repositioned within Sri Lankan art history as a distinct visual epistemology, one that privileges meaning over mimesis, narrative clarity over illusionistic realism, and collective comprehension over elite aesthetic refinement.

Use of Colours

In the Buddhist mural paintings of the Udarata (Central Kandyan) tradition, colour functions not as an ornamental enhancement but as a systematic visual language integral to the transmission of religious narratives and ethical concepts. The restrained chromatic palette, dominance of flat colour application, and preference for warm, primary hues indicate a deliberate artistic strategy aimed at clarity of communication rather than aesthetic naturalism. This section critically examines colour usage in Kandyan temple paintings through semiotic theory, visual communication principles, and historical context, demonstrating that chromatic restraint was an ideologically and pedagogically motivated choice. A defining characteristic of Central Kandyan mural painting is the consistent use of flat, unshaded colour planes, with minimal tonal gradation or modelling. This feature is clearly observable in the Kandyan-period repainting of the Dambulla Cave Temple (Plate 06), where figures, architectural elements, and landscapes are rendered through clear colour boundaries rather than depth-inducing techniques.

From a semiotic standpoint, flat colour suppresses illusion and prioritises symbolic legibility. As Arnheim argues, depth illusion introduces perceptual complexity that may distract from conceptual understanding, whereas flatness stabilises visual form and enhances readability (Arnheim, 1969, pp.137–140). Kandyan painters appear to have

consciously rejected illusionistic depth to prevent the viewer's attention from shifting away from narrative and doctrinal content.

This chromatic flatness transforms the mural surface into a didactic field, reinforcing the sequential narrative grammar of Kandyan painting and supporting its role as a visual teaching medium within the temple environment. Central Kandyan murals typically employ a limited palette dominated by red, white, yellow, black, grey, and green. This restraint is particularly evident in the murals of Degaldoruwa Cave Temple, where *Vessanthara* or *Sutasomajātaka* (Plate 07) narratives are articulated through a dominant red ground against which figures are rendered in light, highly visible colours.

The red background functions as a unifying chromatic field, creating strong figure-ground contrast. White, yellow, and grey figures emerge clearly against this field, ensuring immediate narrative recognition even in dimly lit interiors. From a visual communication perspective, such high-contrast design significantly enhances visual accessibility and narrative comprehension (Dondis, 1973, pp.62–65). Similarly, at Medawala Tæmpita Vihāraya (Plate 08), the limited chromatic range ensures continuity across small interior surfaces. Despite spatial constraints, the restrained palette allows narrative elements to remain distinct and legible, reinforcing the communicative efficiency of Kandyan colour grammar. The use of primary and basic colours in Kandyan murals reflects a commitment to structural clarity rather than expressive nuance. At Ridi Vihāraya (Plate 09), Kandyan-period murals demonstrate how primary colours are strategically assigned to figures, costumes, and architectural forms, creating visual differentiation without chromatic excess. Rather than evoking naturalistic colour relationships, these primary

hues function within a symbolic and structural system, marking narrative roles and spatial divisions. This approach confirms that colour in Kandyan painting operates as a grammatical element analogous to punctuation in language, organising visual information for efficient reception.

The predominance of warm colours, particularly red, yellow, and white, is a consistent feature across Central Kandyan temples such as Sūriyagoda and Gangarāmaya. Visual communication theory identifies warm colours as visually advancing, attention-directing, and psychologically engaging (Kress & Leeuwen, 1996, pp.160–163). In Kandyan temple interiors, warm colour dominance serves multiple functions: it heightens narrative immediacy, maintains viewer focus, and creates an immersive devotional atmosphere. At the same time, the absence of cool colour modelling prevents visual distraction, reinforcing the murals' pedagogical intent.

This calculated chromatic strategy suggests that Kandyan painters prioritised conceptual transmission over aesthetic pleasure, ensuring that moral and doctrinal messages remained central to the viewer's experience. In Kandyan mural painting, colour operates as a semiotic code rather than a decorative embellishment. Following Barthes' framework, colour here contributes directly to ideological signification, shaping how narratives are perceived and internalised (Barthes, 1972, pp.109–112). The consistent chromatic treatment of figures, often without individualised tonal variation, reduces emphasis on personal identity and instead foregrounds ethical action. This visual approach aligns closely with Theravāda Buddhist principles, which discourage attachment to sensory illusion and individuality. Thus, chromatic restraint functions not only as a visual strategy but also as a

philosophical expression, embedding Buddhist epistemology within artistic form.

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The colour grammar of Central Kandyan mural painting must be understood within its broader socio-political and religious context. Under Kandyan royal patronage, Buddhist art played a key role in reinforcing religious orthodoxy and communal values. As Panofsky emphasises, stylistic choices inevitably reflect a culture's symbolic worldview (Panofsky, 1955, pp. 14–18). By limiting colour variety and avoiding illusionistic depth, Kandyan murals promote ideals of moral clarity, restraint, and doctrinal stability. Colour becomes an instrument of ideological discipline, guiding perception toward collective Buddhist values rather than individual sensory gratification.

The use of colour in Udarata (Central Kandyan) Buddhist mural paintings constitutes a highly disciplined visual grammar designed to enhance narrative clarity, psychological engagement, and doctrinal communication. Flat colour application, restricted palettes, warm colour dominance, and primary colour usage collectively support

a pedagogical agenda that privileges meaning over ornamentation. Examples from Dambulla, Degaldoruwa, Medawala Tempita Vihāraya, Ridi Vihāraya, Gangaramaya, and Sūriyagoda confirm that Kandyan colour usage was intentional, consistent, and ideologically grounded. When examined through semiotic and visual communication frameworks, colour in Kandyan mural painting emerges as a central mechanism of religious education and cultural transmission rather than a sign of artistic limitation.

Use of Line

Among the formal elements that constitute the artistic grammar of Kandyan Buddhist mural painting, the use of line occupies a central and highly distinctive position. Line in Kandyan painting is not merely a descriptive tool for defining form, nor is it employed to achieve naturalistic modelling. Instead, it functions as a structural, semiotic, and communicative device, essential to narrative clarity, figure articulation, and ideological transmission.

In Kandyan mural art, line precedes colour in both conceptual and practical terms. The composition is first established through a network of firm, continuous outlines, which define figures, objects, architectural elements, and spatial divisions. Colour is subsequently applied within these boundaries, reinforcing rather than dissolving the linear structure. From a formalist perspective, this primacy of line aligns Kandyan painting with traditions that privilege structural clarity over optical realism. Heinrich Wölfflin's distinction between linear and painterly modes is instructive here: Kandyan painting belongs firmly within the linear mode, where form is apprehended through contour rather than tonal modulation (Wölfflin, 1950, pp. 14–18). The dominance of line ensures that each visual element retains autonomy and recognizability, supporting

the narrative and didactic functions of the murals. One of the most striking features of Kandyan mural painting is the consistent use of black outlines against a dominant red background. This combination is particularly evident in the Kandyan-period murals at Degaldoruwa Cave Temple, where human figures, animals, and architectural motifs are sharply delineated through dark contours.

From the standpoint of visual communication theory, black outlines on red grounds create maximum figure-ground contrast, ensuring immediate visual separation and legibility. As Dondis explains, strong contour lines stabilise visual perception and guide the viewer's eye, especially in complex narrative compositions (Dondis, 1973, pp.74-78). In the dimly lit interiors of Kandyan temples, this outlining strategy significantly enhances visibility. The black line acts as a visual anchor, preventing colour forms from merging into the background and ensuring that narrative actions remain intelligible from a distance. At Dambulla Cave Temple (Plate 09), Kandyan-period repainting demonstrates how line contributes directly to narrative sequencing. Figures are consistently enclosed within clear contours, allowing the viewer to follow actions across registers without confusion. Even when multiple figures occupy a single scene, the linear articulation prevents visual overlap from obscuring narrative meaning.

Similarly, at Degaldoruwa, the *Jātaka* narratives rely heavily on line to separate episodes, gestures, and symbolic elements. Facial expressions, hand movements, and bodily postures are emphasised through contour exaggeration rather than anatomical modelling. This confirms that the line functions as a narrative clarifier, directing attention to meaningful actions rather than physical realism.

Semiotically, the line operates as an index of significance: what is outlined is what must be seen and understood. Natural forms are simplified and abstracted. At Medawala Tempita Vihāraya, figures are reduced to essential outlines, with minimal interior detailing (Plate 10). Trees, buildings, and animals are similarly rendered through schematic linear patterns. This abstraction is not arbitrary. As Arnheim notes, simplification through line enhances conceptual grasp by eliminating incidental detail and foregrounding essential structure (Arnheim, 1969, pp.120–124). Kandyan painters employ line to distil visual information, ensuring that the viewer apprehends the moral and narrative essence of the scene rather than its sensory complexity. Thus, the line functions as a cognitive filter, transforming visual perception into moral comprehension.

While the line primarily serves structural and narrative functions, it also contributes to the decorative rhythm of Kandyan murals. At Ridi Vihāraya and Sooriyagoda, repetitive linear patterns are evident in costume borders, floral motifs, cloud forms, and architectural details. These rhythmic lines generate surface movement without creating spatial depth. They reinforce the flatness of the pictorial plane while maintaining visual interest. From a semiotic perspective, such decorative linearity supports the Buddhist emphasis on impermanence and repetition, embedding philosophical concepts within formal design.

Bandaranayake observes that the Kandyan decorative line derives from indigenous craft traditions, including textile design and wood carving, further grounding mural painting within a broader cultural matrix (Bandaranayake, 1989, pp.208–212 and see this article: *Training and Teaching Process*). The Kandyan emphasis on line over modelling carries significant ideological implications. By rejecting

volumetric realism, Kandyan mural painting discourages sensory immersion and emotional identification with individual figures. Instead, it promotes detached contemplation, consistent with Theravāda Buddhist values.

Panofsky's assertion that form embodies worldview is particularly relevant here (Panofsky, 1955, pp.14–16). The linear clarity and stylistic restraint of Kandyan painting reflect a philosophical orientation toward order, discipline, and moral causality. Line becomes a means of regulating perception, guiding the viewer toward ethical understanding rather than aesthetic indulgence. In this sense, the line functions as an instrument of visual discipline, reinforcing doctrinal orthodoxy through formal means. When considered alongside colour usage and narrative structure, the use of line emerges as a core component of Kandyan artistic grammar. Outline, colour, and register division work together as an integrated system, each reinforcing the others' communicative functions.

The black contour line, in particular, serves multiple roles simultaneously: structural framework, narrative guide, decorative element, and ideological marker. Its consistent application across Central Kandyan temples confirms that line was not a matter of individual style but a shared grammatical convention. The use of line in Central Kandyan Buddhist mural paintings represents a highly intentional and conceptually sophisticated visual strategy. Through strong black outlines against red grounds, Kandyan painters achieved narrative clarity, visual accessibility, and ideological coherence without recourse to illusionistic depth. Examples from Dambulla, Degaldoruwa, Medawala Tæmpita Vihāraya, Ridi Vihāraya, Gangaramaya, and Sooriyagoda demonstrate that linear emphasis was a defining feature of Udarata mural art, integral to its

pedagogical and religious function. When examined through formalist, semiotic, and visual communication frameworks, the line in Kandyan painting emerges not as a technical simplification but as a deliberate grammar of expression, central to the tradition's enduring communicative power.

Human Figures

The depiction of human figures in Udarata Buddhist murals follows a highly regulated system that prioritises narrative clarity over anatomical realism or expressive individuality. Figures are consistently rendered in either full-frontal or profile views; conversely, rear-view depictions are almost absent. Furthermore, within a single narrative cycle, most notably in the *Jātaka* tales, protagonists are repeatedly portrayed with consistent facial features, physical proportions, and attire across successive scenes. These representational conventions are not the result of artistic limitation or formulaic repetition. Rather, they represent a deliberate visual strategy rooted in audience psychology, narrative intelligence, and Buddhist educational objectives. By maintaining visual consistency, the *Sittaru* ensured that the viewer could easily track characters through complex, continuous storylines, thereby reinforcing the moral and philosophical lessons inherent in the art.

One of the most consistent conventions in Kandyan mural painting is the exclusive use of frontal and profile orientations for human figures. At sites such as Degaldoruwa Cave Temple and Dambulla Cave Temple, figures engaged in narrative action, whether royal donors, Bodhisattvas, monks, or laypersons, are always presented in orientations that expose the face and bodily gesture clearly to the viewer (Plate 11). From the standpoint of visual cognition, the face is the primary site of recognition

and meaning-making. Arnheim notes that frontal and profile views provide maximum informational value, while back views reduce perceptual certainty and narrative clarity (Arnheim, 1974, p.94–97). Kandyan painters, addressing a largely non-literate audience, avoided back-facing figures precisely because they obstruct immediate recognition of identity and action. In narrative terms, the absence of back views eliminates ambiguity. Every figure remains visually “available” to the spectator, ensuring that narrative progression is understood without confusion or interpretive hesitation.

Another defining feature of Kandyan human figure representation is the deliberate repetition of the same character with identical visual features throughout a series of scenes depicting a single story. At Degaldoruwa, for example, the protagonist of a *Jātaka* story appears repeatedly across registers with unchanged facial type, posture conventions, and costume design. Rather than indicating a lack of creativity, this repetition functions as a visual identification system. In semiotic terms, the repeated figure operates as a stable signifier, enabling the spectator to track the narrative agent across time and space. Barthes’ concept of narrative continuity is relevant here: repetition ensures coherence by anchoring meaning to recognisable visual signs (Barthes, 1977, p.87–89). This strategy parallels oral storytelling traditions, where repeated epithets and formulaic descriptions reinforce memory and comprehension. Kandyan mural painting thus translates oral narrative logic into visual form.

The uniformity of human figures in Kandyan murals also reflects deeper philosophical and ideological considerations. Individual psychological expression, anatomical variation, and emotional nuance are systematically minimised. Figures function as ethical types

rather than individualised portraits. This approach aligns closely with Theravāda Buddhist epistemology, which emphasises impermanence (*anicca*), non-self (*anatta*), and detachment from ego-centred identity. By suppressing individuality, Kandyan painters visually reinforce Buddhist doctrine, discouraging emotional attachment to personal identity and emphasising moral action over personal character. Panofsky's assertion that artistic form embodies worldview is particularly applicable here (Panofsky, 1955, p.15–17). The standardised human figure becomes a vehicle for doctrinal values, not personal expression.

Although Kandyan human figures lack anatomical realism, they display highly legible gestural language. At Ridi Vihāraya and Medawala Tæmpita Vihāraya, hand positions (Plate 12), body orientation, and spatial relationships between figures are clearly articulated through simplified forms. Gestures are exaggerated and stylised to communicate narrative action, giving, receiving, preaching, walking, or worshipping rather than to represent physical realism. According to visual communication theory, such exaggeration enhances semantic clarity by directing attention to meaningful action (Kress & Leeuwen, 1996, p. 66–69).

Thus, the Kandyan human figure is best understood not as a natural body, but as a semiotic body, constructed to convey narrative and ethical meaning efficiently. The consistency in figure depiction across narrative sequences reflects an intuitive understanding of audience cognition. Dondis emphasises that repetition and consistency are fundamental to visual learning, particularly in instructional imagery (Dondis, 1973, p. 78–81).

By repeating identical figures, Kandyan painters reduce the cognitive effort required for recognition, allowing

spectators to focus on the unfolding moral lesson rather than deciphering visual identity. This is particularly important in temple settings, where murals functioned as visual companions to sermons and ritual practice. The mural thus becomes a visual memory aid, reinforcing doctrinal messages through repetition and clarity.

The depiction of human figures in Kandyan Buddhist mural paintings constitutes a deliberate and intellectually coherent visual strategy rooted in narrative clarity, cognitive accessibility, and Buddhist philosophical values. The exclusive use of frontal and profile views, combined with the repetition of identical figures within narrative sequences, ensures unambiguous communication and reinforces moral comprehension. Rather than reflecting artistic inadequacy, these conventions reveal a sophisticated understanding of visual cognition, audience psychology, and religious pedagogy. Human figure representation thus emerges as a central component of Kandyan artistic grammar, integral to the tradition's enduring effectiveness as a medium of Buddhist visual communication.

The Perspective of the Objects

The representation of spatial elements such as rivers, ponds, paddy fields, and landscapes in Kandyan (Udarata) mural painting follows a conceptual rather than optical approach to perspective. Unlike the Western linear perspective, which seeks to replicate visual perception, Kandyan painters employed high-angle (bird's-eye) views combined with symbolic indicators to ensure immediate recognition of objects and their narrative functions. A striking feature of Kandyan mural painting is the depiction of natural and architectural elements, particularly paddy fields, water bodies, and rivers from a high-angle or bird's-

eye view. At Degaldoruwa Cave Temple, for instance, agricultural landscapes within *Jātaka* narratives are consistently rendered as flattened, elevated planes rather than as receding spaces.

From a visual communication standpoint, a high-angle perspective maximises informational content. Arnheim explains that elevated viewpoints reduce occlusion and allow multiple elements to be perceived simultaneously, thereby increasing narrative clarity (Arnheim, 1974, pp.212–215). In Kandyan murals, this approach ensures that essential features of an object, its shape, function, and narrative role are visible at once. Had these elements been rendered in profile or frontal perspective, much of their identifying information would have been visually concealed, especially within compressed pictorial fields such as cave or *tempita* interiors.

The Kandyan painter's use of high-angle perspective reflects a conceptual understanding of space rather than an attempt to imitate natural vision. This approach aligns with what Panofsky terms "symbolic perspective," where spatial representation is governed by meaning rather than optical accuracy (Panofsky, 1991, pp. 67–70). At Dambulla Cave Temple, rivers appear as elongated, elevated bands traversing the pictorial field, regardless of their actual depth or curvature. This abstraction allows the river to function as a narrative connector between scenes, reinforcing temporal progression rather than spatial realism. Thus, the Kandyan perspective prioritises what the object is and what role it plays, not how it appears from a single human viewpoint.

In Kandyan mural painting, objects are rarely defined solely by outline or spatial position. Instead, they are identified through distinctive semiotic markers that act as visual shorthand.

1. Rivers: Direction of flow is indicated by fish swimming upstream (Plate 13), a convention observed in murals at Degaldoruwa and Sooriyagoda. This method conveys movement and orientation without reliance on perspective depth.
2. Ponds and tanks: These are signified by the presence of lotus flowers, a culturally loaded symbol immediately recognisable to local audiences. At Medawala Tæmpita Vihāraya (Plate 14), lotus motifs function as definitive identifiers of still water bodies.
3. Paddy fields: Depicted as segmented, patterned surfaces viewed from above, emphasising cultivation rather than landscape depth.

According to semiotic theory, such elements function as indexical and symbolic signs, enabling instant recognition. Barthes notes that cultural signs reduce interpretive ambiguity by anchoring meaning in shared visual knowledge (Barthes, 1977, pp, 38–41). Kandyan painters relied heavily on this principle to ensure accessibility.

High-angle depiction also plays a crucial role in narrative sequencing. By flattening space, Kandyan murals allow multiple events to coexist within a single pictorial register. At Degaldoruwa, landscapes serve as narrative stages upon which successive actions unfold without strict spatial separation. This spatial compression supports what Kress and van Leeuwen describe as “diagrammatic representation,” where spatial relations are subordinated to conceptual relations (Kress & Leeuwen, 1996, pp. 52-55). The landscape becomes a narrative map rather than a visual environment. Such an approach is particularly effective in Buddhist storytelling, where moral causality

and temporal progression are more significant than physical realism.

The Kandyan painter's approach to perspective reflects an intuitive understanding of audience cognition. Most temple visitors were non-literate devotees who encountered murals under low-light conditions and during ritual activity. Simplified perspective and symbolic object markers reduced cognitive load, enabling rapid comprehension.

Dondis emphasizes that instructional images benefit from simplification and redundancy, especially in communal learning environments (Dondis, 1973, pp.91–94). By combining high-angle views with iconic symbols, Kandyan murals functioned as didactic visual aids, reinforcing oral teachings delivered by monks. This reinforces the argument that the Kandyan perspective is fundamentally pedagogical in nature. The elevated viewpoint in Kandyan murals also carries ideological resonance. Bird's-eye perspectives metaphorically suggest omniscience, aligning with Buddhist cosmological views that transcend individual human perception. The viewer is positioned not as a participant within the scene, but as an observer of moral order. This distancing effect discourages emotional immersion and instead encourages reflective understanding consistent with Buddhist practices of contemplation rather than sensory indulgence. Thus, perspective in Kandyan painting is not neutral; it embodies a philosophical stance toward perception and knowledge.

The depiction of objects through high-angle perspective and symbolic markers in Kandyan (Udarata) mural painting represents a highly intentional visual communication system. By rejecting optical realism in favor of conceptual clarity, Kandyan painters ensured immediate recognition of

natural elements and reinforced narrative comprehension. Rivers, ponds, and paddy fields are not depicted as they appear, but as they are understood within cultural and narrative frameworks. Perspective thus operates as a semiotic and pedagogical tool, integral to the Kandyan mural tradition's effectiveness as a medium of Buddhist instruction.

Symbols

One of the most intellectually sophisticated features of Central Kandyan mural painting is the systematic use of symbolic representation to depict complex natural, spatial, and conceptual elements. Rather than rendering objects through descriptive realism, Kandyan painters developed a symbol-based visual grammar that condensed meaning into simplified, repeatable forms. This strategy enabled rapid *comprehension* and reinforced the didactic function of temple murals. This section argues that symbolic depiction in Kandyan painting was not a stylistic limitation, but a deliberate cognitive and communicative choice, rooted in Buddhist pedagogy and audience psychology. Through examples such as *Vaṅkagiriya* (dense forest motifs), stylised landscapes, and patterned environmental elements seen in Degaldoruwa, Dambulla, Ridi Vihāraya, Medawala Tæmpita Vihāraya, and Sūriyagoda, the analysis demonstrates that Kandyan mural art anticipates principles later articulated in modern abstract and conceptual art.

In Kandyan mural painting, a symbol functions as a condensed visual sign that stands in for complex realities. According to semiotic theory, a symbol operates through convention rather than resemblance (Saussure, 1974, pp. 66–70). Kandyan artists relied on culturally shared visual codes to communicate layered meanings efficiently. The representation of *Vaṅkagiriya* (Plate 14), a thick,

impenetrable forest, is a compelling example. Instead of illustrating individual trees with botanical accuracy, Kandyan painters devised repetitive, intertwined vegetal patterns that visually suggest density, entanglement, and inaccessibility. This motif appears consistently in *Jātaka* murals at Degaldoruwa Cave Temple, where forest settings are essential narrative backdrops. Through symbolic patterning, the painter communicates not merely “forest,” but the experiential quality of the forest danger, complexity, and moral uncertainty. From the perspective of visual communication theory, symbolic depiction enables cognitive economy in the transmission of maximum meaning with minimal visual information (Dondis, 1973, pp. 89–93). In the Kandyan context, this was crucial due to several factors:

1. Large narrative cycles compressed into limited wall surfaces
2. A predominantly non-literate audience
3. Ritual viewing conditions (low light, movement, collective attention)

At Medawala Tæmpita Vihāraya, environmental elements such as forests, gardens, and palace grounds are rendered through schematic motifs rather than detailed scenery. This allows the viewer to instantly identify the setting without diverting attention from the moral or narrative core.

Such symbolic compression aligns with what Gombrich describes as “schema and correction,” where artists rely on established visual formulas understood by their audience (Gombrich, 1960, pp.72–75). The abstraction evident in Kandyan symbolism should be understood as narrative prioritisation rather than stylistic simplification. By abstracting secondary elements, the artist ensures that primary narrative actions remain visually dominant. At Ridi

Vihāraya, forest symbols often frame episodes of exile, meditation, or moral testing. The abstracted vegetal motifs do not compete with human figures but instead function as contextual indicators, reinforcing narrative meaning without distracting detail. This hierarchical organisation of visual information reflects a sophisticated understanding of perceptual focus, anticipating principles later formalised in modern design theory (Arnheim, 1969, pp.102–106). Symbolic depiction in Kandyan murals also resonates with Buddhist epistemology, which emphasises impermanence (*anicca*), non-self (*anatta*), and conceptual understanding over sensory realism. The refusal to imitate nature illusionistically aligns with Buddhist caution against attachment to appearances. In this sense, symbolic forests, rivers, and architectural forms are conceptual representations, encouraging contemplation rather than sensory immersion. At Dambulla Cave Temple, repeated symbolic motifs across extensive mural cycles create a rhythm of recognition rather than novelty, reinforcing meditative engagement. Thus, symbolism functions not only as a communicative tool but also as a philosophical strategy.

While Kandyan mural painting is firmly rooted in tradition, its symbolic strategies reveal striking parallels with modern abstract and conceptual art. The use of pattern to signify complexity (*Vaṅkagiriya*), the reduction of objects to essential signs, and the prioritisation of idea over appearance all resonate with 20th-century artistic movements. However, unlike modern abstraction, which often foregrounds individual expression, Kandyan abstraction is collective, conventional, and pedagogical. Meaning resides not in innovation but in shared visual literacy. This distinction underscores the inadequacy of earlier art-historical critiques that dismissed Kandyan

painting as “primitive” or “decorative.” On the contrary, its symbolic grammar demonstrates advanced visual intelligence adapted to specific cultural needs.

The symbolic representation of complex objects in Kandyan (Udarata) mural painting constitutes a highly developed grammar of art, designed to communicate ideas with clarity, efficiency, and philosophical depth. Motifs such as *Vankagiriya* and *Anotatta Vila* (Pond) exemplify how abstraction and symbolism functioned as intentional tools for narrative comprehension and conceptual transmission. Far from being a limitation, symbolic depiction reflects a conscious rejection of descriptive realism in favour of conceptual clarity and didactic effectiveness. In this respect, Kandyan mural painting anticipates key principles of modern abstract and conceptual art, while remaining firmly anchored in Buddhist pedagogy and communal visual culture.

The Use of Decorative Designs

One of the most distinctive features of Buddhist mural paintings of the Kandyan tradition is the systematic use of decorative designs to occupy residual or transitional pictorial spaces. Unlike earlier Sri Lankan mural traditions, where empty areas of wall surface were often left untreated or only minimally articulated, Kandyan painters developed a highly regulated ornamental vocabulary to fill blank spaces with rhythmic floral and geometric motifs. These designs, commonly derived from natural and stylised plant forms such as *Nelum* (lotus), *Picca* (jasmine), *Annāsi* (pineapple), *Sīni*, and *Sapu* constitute an essential component of the artistic grammar of Kandyan temple painting rather than mere secondary embellishments.

In Kandyan murals, decorative patterns perform a crucial structural function. The narrative organisation of the wall

surface into horizontal bands or registers inevitably produced interstitial spaces between scenes, figures, architectural elements, and landscape motifs. Rather than leaving such spaces visually inert, Kandyan artists activated them through repetitive ornamental designs that unify the pictorial field. This practice is observable in temple murals dating from the late seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries, particularly in prominent sites such as the Degaldoruva Cave Temple (late 18th century), the Dambulla Cave Temple repaintings (18th century), and the Ridi Vihāraya murals (early 19th century) (Bandaranayake, 1986, pp.214–218).

The deliberate filling of empty spaces reflects an underlying conceptual belief that visual emptiness within sacred spaces should be avoided. In Buddhist temple interiors, walls function not merely as architectural boundaries but as didactic and devotional surfaces. Decorative designs, therefore, contribute to a sense of visual completeness (*pūrṇatā*), reinforcing the sanctity of the space while sustaining the viewer's contemplative engagement.

While beautification is an evident function of decorative designs, their aesthetic role extends beyond surface ornamentation. The repetitive floral motifs, executed in flat colours and bounded by strong outlines, generate a rhythmic visual flow that guides the spectator's gaze across the wall. This visual rhythm complements the narrative progression of the murals, particularly in *Jātaka* and Buddha-life scenes where sequential storytelling depends on sustained viewer attention. The lotus (*Neḷum*), one of the most frequently used motifs, carries deep symbolic significance in Buddhist thought, representing purity, spiritual awakening, and transcendence (Coomaraswamy, 1934, pp. 68–70). Its repeated appearance in non-narrative zones reinforces the religious atmosphere of the temple

while maintaining visual coherence. Similarly, motifs such as *Picca* and *Sapu*, drawn from the familiar floral environment of the Kandyan region (Plate 15), introduce a sense of cultural immediacy, making the visual language accessible to the local audience.

From the perspective of visual communication, Kandyan decorative designs function as semiotic devices that mediate between narrative content and viewer perception. The Kandyan painter operated within a cultural context where the majority of temple visitors were non-literate or semi-literate. Visual clarity and sustained attention were therefore essential. Decorative patterns served as mnemonic and affective tools, creating pauses between narrative episodes and allowing viewers to absorb and reflect upon the depicted events.

The effectiveness of decorative designs in Kandyan murals is closely linked to the tradition's preference for flat colour application and linear definition. Unlike the volumetric modelling characteristic of earlier Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa period paintings, Kandyan murals rely on strong contour lines and chromatic contrasts. Decorative motifs echo this formal logic, employing simplified shapes, repetitive outlines, and limited colour palettes. This visual consistency enhances legibility. Floral patterns do not compete with narrative scenes for attention but instead frame and stabilize them. In temples such as Degaldoruwa, decorative borders often function as visual thresholds, marking transitions between sacred narratives and architectural elements (Silva, 2005, 132–135). Such controlled use of ornamentation demonstrates a sophisticated understanding of visual hierarchy and compositional balance.

From a socio-psychological standpoint, decorative designs play a significant role in maintaining the spectator's emotional and cognitive engagement. Repetition, symmetry, and rhythm, core principles of Kandyan ornamentation are known to produce calming and meditative effects. Within the temple environment, these visual qualities support the religious objective of fostering devotion (*bhakti*) and contemplation (*samādhi*).

Moreover, the familiarity of floral motifs drawn from everyday life bridges the gap between sacred narratives and lived experience. By embedding recognizable natural forms within the sacred pictorial field, Kandyan artists created an inclusive visual language that resonated with ordinary villagers as well as monastic audiences. The strategic inclusion of fragrant floral motifs—such as *Binara*, Lotus, and *Sapu* suggests an attempt by the Kandyan artist to transcend two-dimensional visuality by invoking a multisensory experience. By populating the *paṭimā-ghara* (image house) with these specific species, the *Sittaru* mentally stimulated the viewer's sense of smell, fostering a deeper psychological immersion within the sacred space (plate 16). This olfactory association serves as a sophisticated aesthetic tool, transforming the mural from a static narrative into an evocative, "living" environment that heightens the devotee's spiritual engagement and presence.

Beyond their aesthetic and communicative roles, decorative designs in Kandyan murals also serve as valuable visual sources for archaeological and historical inquiry. Variations in motif selection, colour usage, and pattern density can offer insights into regional workshops, patronage networks, and chronological phases of mural production. For instance, the increased use of pineapple (*Annāsi*) motifs in late Kandyan murals corresponds with the introduction and popularization of certain plant species during the

colonial period (Silva, 1995, pp.89–94). Thus, decorative designs contribute not only to the visual grammar of Kandyan painting but also to its documentary value as a cultural artefact.

The use of decorative designs in Kandyan Buddhist mural painting cannot be dismissed as mere embellishment or decorative excess. Rather, these motifs form an integral component of a carefully constructed artistic grammar aimed at visual communication, aesthetic harmony, and devotional engagement. Through their structural, symbolic, psychological, and contextual functions, decorative designs reinforce the argument that Kandyan mural painting represents a deliberate and sophisticated visual language tailored to its historical audience and religious purpose.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that Buddhist mural paintings of the Kandyan tradition constitute a highly structured and intellectually grounded visual system rather than a residual or simplified continuation of earlier Sri Lankan painting traditions. Through an analysis of selected temple murals, the research has shown that Kandyan painters consciously developed a grammar of art that enabled the effective communication of Buddhist doctrine, ethical principles, and cosmological ideas to a broad and predominantly non-literate audience. Visual elements such as composition, narrative sequencing, spatial hierarchy, colour organisation, symbolic repetition, and linear articulation functioned collectively as components of an integrated visual language.

The findings confirm that Kandyan mural art was shaped by specific historical, religious, and social conditions, particularly during periods of political instability and cultural transition. Within this context, temple murals

served not merely as decorative embellishments but as pedagogical instruments, visual equivalents of doctrinal texts designed to instruct, remind, and guide devotees. The deliberate avoidance of naturalistic illusion and perspectival realism in favour of clarity, rhythm, and symbolic intelligibility reflects a conscious aesthetic choice rooted in Buddhist epistemology and social responsibility.

Furthermore, this research highlights the role of trained artists (*Sittaru*) and established artistic lineages in sustaining a shared system of visual knowledge. The so-called simplicity of Kandyan mural painting emerges, therefore, as a form of intellectual discipline, where visual restraint enhances narrative coherence and doctrinal accuracy. Patronage, social hierarchy, and ritual function are shown to have influenced visual organisation without undermining the internal consistency of the artistic grammar.

By approaching Kandyan mural painting through the lens of visual grammar and communication, this study contributes a new interpretative framework to Sri Lankan art historical scholarship. It repositions Kandyan temple murals as a dynamic, adaptive, and conceptually sophisticated tradition, in which art, religion, and society intersect through a carefully constructed system of visual meaning. This perspective not only enriches the understanding of Kandyan mural art but also opens pathways for further interdisciplinary research into South Asian religious visual cultures.

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Color Plates



Plate 01
Sigiri Frescos - 5th century AD (around 480 AD)



Plate 02
***Devāradhanā* - Tivaṅka Image House, Polonnaruwa
(12th century AD)**



Plate 03
Vessantarajātaka
Degaldoruwa Raja Maha Vihara (1786 AD)



Plate 04
Uragajātaka, Madawala Tæmpita Vihāraya (1755 AD)

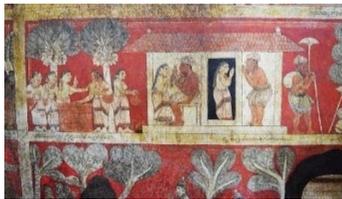


Plate 05
Vessantarajātaka, Degaldoruwa Raja Maha Vihara
1786 AD



Plate 06
Storytelling Panels, Dambulla Cave Temple
18th Century Kandyan period



Plate 07
***Sutasomajātaka*, Degaldoruwa Raja Mahā Vihāra**
1786 AD

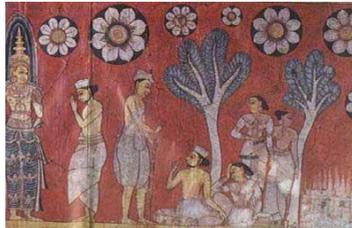


Plate 08
***Uragajātaka*, Madawala Tæmpita Vihāraya**
1755 AD



Plate 09
Sath-sathiya (Seventh week), Dambulla Cave Temple
18th Century, Kandyan period



Plate 10
**Sath-sathiya, (*Animisalocana Pūjāva*, Second week) Madawala
Tæmpita Vihāraya (1755 AD)**



Plate 11
***Vessantarajātaka*, Madawala Tæmpita Vihāraya**



Plate 12
***Vessantharajātaka*, Madawala Tæmpita Vihāraya
1755 AD.**



Plate 13
Vesantaraĵātaka, Degaldoruwa Raja Mahā Vihāra
1786 A

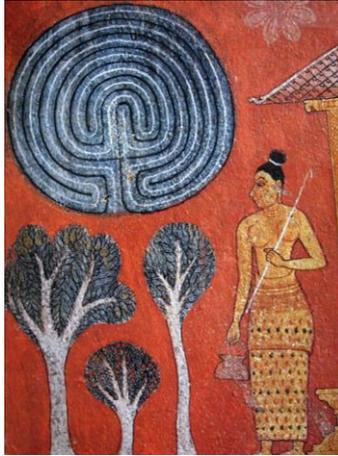


Plate 14
Vaṅkagiriya, *Vesantaraĵātaka*, Madawala Tæmpita Vihāraya
1755 AD.



Plate 14
Mythical Lake Anotatta in the Himalayas, Dambulla Cave Temple,
18th Century Kandyan Period



Plate 15
Soḷosmasthāna, Ridī Vihāraya
18th Century