

STAMP BULLETIN No. 38

Office of the Postmaster-General and
Director of Telecommunications,
Posts and Telecommunications
Headquarters,
Duke Street, Colombo 1,
Sri Lanka, (Ceylon),
15th August, 1973.

THE Posts and Telecommunications Department of Sri Lanka, (Ceylon) will issue on the 3rd of September, 1973 a set of four commemorative stamps depicting some of the Rock and Temple Paintings of Sri Lanka, in the denominations of Re. 1.55, 90 cents, 50 cents and 35 cents. A Souvenir Sheet containing these four stamps will also be issued on this date.

In common with the other Asian civilizations, painting was an art practised by the people of ancient Sri Lanka from the earliest times, both at the Royal Court for the edification of the leisured class and as an aid to religious expression. As a medium of religious instruction its refining influence reached the masses of the country. Not only were the walls of palaces and shrines decorated with paintings ; there were also painted cloths which were carried in religious processions, or used by religious preachers to emphasise significant points. All paintings were not executed on durable material ; therefore, many of the specimens of ancient paintings undoubtedly have perished.

The few extant examples have been preserved in sheltered places or through fortuitous circumstances. What we now possess may not be the best that had been produced, but Sri Lanka possesses sufficient examples of the pictorial art of ancient times, which are of a high standard of aesthetic quality.

The oldest and the best preserved of these ancient paintings are at Sigiriya, although some scholars claim that earlier specimens do exist as, for example, at Karambagale in Situlpavuva.

Besides these Sigiri paintings, other paintings of religious inspiration as the term is usually understood, are found in ruined shrines or caves used for religious purposes. What we possess of religious paintings of the earlier period are a few fragments which, however, suffice to prove that this art was of the same technique as that represented by the Buddhist paintings of Ajanta.

Not far removed in date from the paintings of Sigiriya are those in a cave at Hindagala, which is about six miles south-west of Kandy. From what had been preserved of the original line work and the colouring, the art that is represented in the cave at Hindagala is seen to be akin to the later work at Ajanta.

Dating from the twelfth or the thirteenth century there are on the walls of the Tivanka Shrine at Polonnaruwa a series of paintings illustrating scenes from the life of the Buddha and the Birth (Jataka) stories. These paintings show that even in mediaeval times the Sinhalese painter was capable of expressive and delicate line work, could give plasticity to his figures and understood the principles of balanced composition.

No substantial examples of Sinhalese paintings exist after the fall of the Polonnaruwa kingdom in the thirteenth century. It is from the 17th to 18th centuries that we have, once again, examples of the work of indigenous painters. This school does not seem to have had its roots in the artistic traditions which created the masterpieces of Sigiriya and Polonnaruwa. Its style is purely two-dimensional, and in its compositions it does not exhibit the skill of the masters of the earlier epochs. In its conventions, particularly in the decorative designs and in the representations of trees and creepers, there appears to be some affinity with the school of painting which flourished in the Deccan under the patronage of Muslim dynasties. Here and there in Kandyan art, one may even detect European influences.

The subjects painted by Kandyan artists, however, have much in common with those by the earlier masters. The representations of Jataka stories

were as popular then as at any other epoch in the history of Buddhism. Paintings of this school are found today at Degaldoruwa near the ancient hill capital, Kandy ; at Dambulla in the Matale District, an impressive cave temple dating from pre-Christian times, but re-decorated in the 18th century ; and at Ridi Vihara and Kebellalena shrines of similar historical character, in the Kurunegala District. Artists of this school were employed to paint shrines built in the Maritime Provinces in Dutch and in early British times ; for instance, Mulgirigale in the Hambantota District and Telwatta in the Galle District. Although Western influences are considerably felt, this classical tradition has influenced the artists of the present day and they are striving to bring about a synthesis as well as a cultural renaissance in the new-born Republic of Sri Lanka.

Sigiriya Painting (5th Century A.D.)

Denomination—Re. 1·55 : depicts a painting from Sigiriya Frescoes of two female figures.

The Sigiriya paintings, which are dated in the 5th century A.D., are in the Matale District about 100 miles from Colombo. In order to execute the paintings, the rock surface which is rough and uneven had been plastered with the local liver red alluvium reinforced with vegetable fibres and rice husks. Over this is a layer consisting

of a buff coloured composition, containing sand as the principal ingredient, besides some clay, lime and vegetable fibres. Probably some adhesive substances were mixed with this composition, but these have perished by decomposition. The third or uppermost layer, about an eighth of an inch in thickness is composed of sand and lime mortar. It has been worked up to a smooth and even surface with a superficial application of pure lime in order to receive the brushwork. The total thickness of the composite plaster varies from three-eighths of an inch to an inch according to the contour of the rock surface. The colours employed in the painting are red, yellow, green, black and white. The colours are affected by water ; the painting method appears, therefore, to be tempera.

The figures of women, somewhat less than life size, are depicted in three-quarter profile as rising from the clouds. Some are in pairs, a fair-complexioned lady being attended by a dark-hued one, while others are single figures. The golden coloured ones have an appearance of nudity above the waist due to probably the transparency of the jacket material, while the dark damsels are wearing breast-bands. All are wearing jewellery in profusion, and have elaborate coiffures. In the pair depicted here the dark-complexioned attendant is holding a tray of flowers while the fair damsel holds a single flower. The Sigiriya paintings are

supposed to be the only example found in Ceylon where the concept of art for art's sake is found. The identity of these damsels is a matter of controversy among scholars.

Polonnaruwa Period (12th Century)

Denomination—90 cents : depicts a painting from Galvihara—Bearded old man holding a flower probably a Brahma paying homage to the Buddha.

At Galvihara in Polonnaruwa, there are a few traces of paintings, still extant of the murals which covered the cave. In the painting depicted here, Brahma with a drooping moustache and long white beard holds up, between the forefinger and thumb of his right hand, a small fruit with leaves, while on the open palm of his left hand lies a small chank shell. A single string necklet and a Brahmanical cord decorate his bare body. The Brahma is worshipping the Buddha during His Enlightenment.

Denomination—50 cents : depicts a painting from the Tivanka Shrine at Polonnaruwa.

This painting is from Tivanka Shrine in Polonnaruwa built by Parakramabahu I. It depicts a scene from Mugapakkha Jataka in which a prince, looking back to his previous births sees

how the luxuries of kingship in a previous birth bore evil fruit in a subsequent birth. He, therefore, pretends to be blind, deaf and mute and impervious to all outside influences. The king, his father, having failed in all his attempts to make him alive to the world, commissions a man to carry him to the jungle, do him to death and bury him. When the man sets about digging a grave for the prince he arises from his assumed lethargy. The picture shows the prince once inside the cart and again in front of the grave-digger.

Kandyan Period (18th Century)

Denomination—35 cents: depicts a painting from the Degaldoruwa Temple near Kandy.

This eighteenth century painting from Degaldoruwa Temple, near Kandy depicts a scene from the Vessantara Jataka. It is the story of the boundless liberality of a King (Vessantara) who gave away everything he had in worldly goods and departed to the forest with his wife and the two children. In the scenes shown here, the King (now a hermit) gives away his son and daughter and in the next sequence they are led away by the evil-tempered Brahmin (Jujaka). This is a story that has captivated the imagination of the Sinhalese for several centuries as the tradition of painting this story is current up to this day.

In the fifth century paintings at Sigiriya the three-dimensional grouping is shown, whereas later it is only two-dimensional. Benjamin Rowland comments as follows on the Sigiri paintings : “ We have here the immense advantage of dealing with works of art that, thanks largely to their inaccessible position, are almost perfect preservations. We are struck at once by the robust strength of both drawing and colour. That the drawing was absolutely freehand becomes apparent when we note the many corrections, change not only in the contours but complete alterations in the positions of the hands in certain figures ”.

When we come to the Polonnaruwa and Kandyan periods, the Sinhalese art is more decorative in execution and more didactic in aim.

During the course of its history of over two thousand years there was considerable artistic activity among the painters of Sri Lanka, and the old masters, mostly anonymous, have succeeded in creating works of a high aesthetic standard. This series of stamps bearing colour reproductions of the pictorial art in ancient times will certainly result in making them known not only in this island home of ours, but to all philatelists everywhere in the world.

*(By courtesy of the Ministry of Cultural Affairs,
Sri Lanka)*

TECHNICAL DETAILS

<i>Denominations</i>	Re. 1.55—Two female figures 90 cents—Bearded old man 50 cents—The Prince and the grave-digger 35 cents—King Vessantara giving away his children
<i>Designer</i>	.. P. Wanigatunga
<i>Colours</i>	Re. 1.55—Blue, Yellow, Ma- genta, Black and Blue- Grey 90 cents—Blue, Yellow, Ma- genta, Black and Brown 50 cents—Blue, Yellow, Ma- genta, Black and Dark- Grey 35 cents—Blue, Yellow, Ma- genta, Black and Neutral Grey
<i>Format</i>	.. Verticle
<i>Date of issue</i>	.. 3rd September, 1973
<i>Size of the Souvenir</i>	.. 115 × 140 mm.
<i>Sheet</i>	
<i>Size of Stamp</i>	.. 39 × 48.4 mm.
<i>Printers</i>	.. Messrs. Thomas De La Rue & Co. Ltd., England
<i>Printing Process</i>	.. Delacryl
<i>Sheet Composition</i>	.. 50 Stamps per sheet.
<i>Paper and Gum used</i>	.. Special TR 4 and Synthetic based adhesive.

FIRST DAY COVER SERVICE

Official First Day Covers will be available for sale in two sizes. The price of a large cover is 40 cents and a small cover 25 cents.

TERMS OF SALE

Overseas orders for the supply of the new stamps, souvenir sheets and first day covers should be addressed with full particulars to the Director, Philatelic Bureau, 4th Floor, Ceylinco House, Colombo 1, Sri Lanka (Ceylon), and should be accompanied by Mail Transfer, International Money Order or Bank Draft payable to the Postmaster-General, Colombo, Sri Lanka.