

Title

A Note on Sri Lankan Buddha Image: its Independent Origin and Evolution

Background

The origin and evolution of the Buddha image is always on dispute among scholars. India is mostly accredited for its evidence evolved in Gandhāra (Foucher, 1917, p.24), and Mathurā (Coomaraswamy, 1927, p.11-14), during the Kushan reign. Scholars of Sri Lankan Art have sustained three assumptions: 1) an Indian prototype (Paranavitana, 1959, 266), 2) imported from India (Schroeder, 1990, 99), 3) made by Indian artisans (Coomaraswamy, 1914, 6), based on the preceding theories. Only a few scholars assumed of its independent origin (Rahula, 1956, 122-24; Devendra, 1957, 37). The two-way cross-pollination and the artistic transactions between India and Sri Lanka have been hardly investigated. Thus, this study aims to examine the facts and evidence rendering the independent origin of Sri Lankan Buddha image.

Research Problem/Issue

The present study expects to address the research question: **“How does the Sri Lankan Buddha image differ from its Indian prototype?”** The developed hypothesis for this study is thus, **“The Sri Lankan Buddha image displays iconographic characteristics different and distinct from the Indian prototypes suggesting an independent origin.”**

Objectives of the present study

The present study aims to examine whether

1. The Sri Lankan Buddha image displays different and distinct iconographic characteristics advocating an independent origin.
2. The iconographic differences resulted from the improvements, or refinements made to the Indian prototypes.
3. Any similarities between Indian and Sri Lankan Buddha images could be explained as a result of two-way cross-pollination rather than borrowing from India.

Theoretical consideration and empirical evidence

The present study mainly consulted and applied both Eastern and Western perspectives of art from different dimensions. Thus, the study mainly bestows with Meister Eckhart's theory of *Relationship between Aesthetics and Human Life* (Eckhart, Vol. I & II. 1956, p, 268, 366-9), and R.G. Collingwood's theory of *Religion Vs Art* (Collingwood, 1938, p. 11). Eckhart insists that art is religion and religion is art. He believes that the image in the object and that in the artist's mind are the same. Whereas the artist attempts to represent the religious values through the image, the follower sees the religion through the same image. Collingwood's emphasis is that the religious values and practices are obvious, though the images are hidden and unseen in tombs. He exemplifies from Egyptian sculptures, and Roman portraiture (Collingwood, 1938, p.11). Both these theories are equally important to the present study in reviewing the scholarly stipulations. Eckhart's theory of mind image is equally stressed in *Sukranītisāra*, a leading Indian text on law, order, and society. Accordingly, the artist should first accomplish the visual-formulation of the image; only an expert of the subject can visualize the image. (*Sk.* Ch. IV, p.70-1). The particular standpoint attests that concept is formed in the mind cognition of the craftsman.

Additionally, the theories relating to *influential* or *inspirational* was taken into consideration when analyzing the cultural and geographical inter-relationship in art since the tradition of image making in each religion has its own roots and processes reflecting numerous factors: cultural and geographical inter-relationships, inspirations, influences, and well-developed native craftsmanship. The particular cultural distinctions always inspire the neighboring traditions *vice versa* thereby evolving distinctive styles, traditions, techniques, and skills that may never coincide with its predecessor (Van Dyke, 1887, p. 173).

Primary sources of data/ Empirical Evidence

Sri Lanka has a wide variety of original primary sources relevant to the study in question. The Pāli chronicles, *Dīpavaṃsa*, *Mahāvaṃsa*, and the Pāli commentaries on the *Tripitaka* are significant in this respect. Equally consulted sources were the *vaṃsa*-literature (*Bodhivaṃsa*, *Thūpavaṃsa* and *Dhātuvavaṃsa*) describing the sacred *Bodhi Tree*, the *stūpas* and the relics. Also studied within this category were the Brāhmi and later rock inscriptions of Sri Lanka and in India

such as those at Nāgārjunakoṇḍa and Bodh Gayā, as published in the *Epigraphia Zeylanica* and *Epigraphia Indica*.

Methodology

This study primarily followed the historical research methodology in that literature survey and a field study were performed. The literature survey included library surveys, map studies, archival and museum studies consulting primary sources and scholarly studies. Field study was performed to seek any iconographic evidence to identify and analyze the Buddha images belonging to relevant periods. These visits enabled the exploration of distinct iconographic elements of Sri Lankan Buddha images which were not previously examined by scholars.

Key findings, Conclusions and Recommendations

The following research findings are significant to the present study;

1. The phase of aniconic or non-human representations of the Buddha

The evidence traced from the Indus valley civilization proves that the portrayal of human figure was known to India over several millennia prior to the phase of Buddhist art. In Buddhist sites contrary, the Buddha was depicted symbolically with the Bodhi tree, the footprint, the wheel of Dharma, the flame of fire, the parasol, and the lotus etc. Significantly, this phase of aniconic representation of the Buddha is totally absent in Sri Lanka except a few examples of *footprint* carved in monolithic stones which were supposedly used as decorative elements.

2. Evolution of the Buddha image as an object of worship.

The image of the Buddha in Gandhāra and Mathurā became popular as an object of worship, or an act of merit making with the introduction of Mahayana Buddhism. Thus, it was made with certain iconographic elements portraying the divine or supra- mundane aspects. All these supra- mundane qualities are absent in the early Sri Lankan Buddha images.

3. Origin and Development of Buddhist art in Sri Lanka.

As evident in chronicles, Mauryan technicians accompanied Saṅghamittā on her way to Sri Lanka would perhaps introduce certain characteristics to Sri Lankan Buddhist architecture as seen in stūpas, and monastic complexes (*Mahāvihāra, Cetiyaḥabbata*). Yet, the Buddha image was unknown to Mauryan Buddhism.

Contrary, Sri Lankan chronicles provide evidence about making the Buddha images that were either placed in the monastic complexes or deposited in the stūpa relic chambers. The two main instances are;

I Moving the “Great stone image of the Buddha” (*ūrusilā patimā*) of King Devānampiyatissa (247 BCE-207 BCE) by the king Jetṭhatissa I (323 CE-333 CE) to the Pācīnatissapabbata Vihāra, and its transfer to the Abhayagiri Vihāra by the king Mahāsena (334 CE-361CE).

II Placing of a seated Buddha image by the king Duṭṭhagāmaṇī (101 BCE-77 BCE) in the relic chamber of Mahātūpa.

Wall paintings in the relic chambers of the stūpas at Mahiyangana, Demaḷa Mahā Sāya, and Tivaṅka Image House, Polonnaruwa, testify to the practice of illustrating scenes of the Buddha's life ‘here and there’ on the interior walls of the stūpa, and painting all the images (of the Buddha) in wrought gold. This again is a Sri Lankan innovation.

Significantly, none of such evidence does not resemble to early Indian Buddha images.

4. Epigraphic Evidence supporting the Sri Lankan contribution towards the evolution of Buddhist Art in the Indian sub-continent

There are two important references;

I A Prākṛit inscription datable to the 2nd-3rd centuries CE at Nāgārjunaḷaṅḷa describes that they had established Sinhala monastery with Sri Lankan architectural elements i.e. *cetiyaḷhara* and *bodhiḷhara*, which was donated in credit of their service to promote Buddhism in various parts of the Indian subcontinent, and in China.

II Ratuboka inscription of Indonesia praises the Abhayagiriya viḷhāra for its eminent and well disciplined monks (*Jinas*).

Sri Lankan Buddhist works were also translated into Chinese as Cie-tao-lung (*Vimuttimagga*) and Shan-jian-lu-piposha (*Vinaya commentary*). These are some references to look for Sri Lankan influence on art and architecture in Asian region *vice versa*.

5. Iconographic Evolution of the Sri Lankan Buddha Image.

The iconographic characteristics between Sri Lankan and Indian Buddha images reveal that they are entirely opposed to each other. (See: Table 01& 02). The distinctive characteristics

of Sri Lankan Buddha images would perhaps coincided with the contemporary native artistic influence.

Following conclusions were obtained;

1. The Buddha image in India originated under the influence of Kushans in Gandhāra and Mathurā with distinctive characteristics. None of those were influential in making the Sri Lankan Buddha images.
2. The iconographic characteristics employed in the two traditions are distinct to each other. Whereas the images in Gandhāra display elements of Graeco-Bactrian deities, those of Mathurā demonstrate the characteristics traceable from native cult images of *yakṣas*. Buddhist sites at Amarāvati and Nāgārjunakoṇḍa apply the Buddha image in reliefs or motifs on the exterior walls of the stūpa dorm (*garbha*) as a decorative element, prior to the making of image as a free standing sculpture. None of these characteristics are evident in the Sri Lankan Buddha images.
3. While India evolved the Buddha image from the aniconic symbols to that of the icon, this stage is skipped in Sri Lanka.

Thus, the overall conclusion of the present research is that: **“The Sri Lankan Buddha image displays iconographic characteristics different and distinct from those of India suggesting an independent origin unrelated to either the Graeco-Roman model of Gandhāra or the yakṣa type in Mathurā, or those of Amarāvati and Nāgārjunakoṇḍa, all of which influenced the development of Indian Buddha image.”**

The following study areas are recommended for further examination:

1. The chronological sequence of the Sri Lankan Buddhist sculptures with an attempt to date early Buddha images with greater certainty;
2. A detailed study of the Sri Lankan śilpa texts that describe the iconography and iconometry of the images, in order to examine the typical techniques that involved in establishing a distinctive tradition of Buddha image.
3. An in-depth study of socio-cultural and political relations between ancient Sri Lanka and India evaluating the international role of the Sri Lankan Saṅgha.

Table 1: Comparative examination of the early standing Buddha images of Sri Lanka with the Amarāvati Buddha images of India.

Iconographic elements of the Buddha image	Standing Image Ruvanvālisāya No.1	Standing Image Ruvanvālisāya No.2	Standing Image Avukana	Standing Image Māligāvila	Standing Image Amarāvati
Protuberance or the Skull (<i>uṣṇīśa</i>)	No <i>uṣṇīśa</i> on top of the head.	No <i>uṣṇīśa</i> on top of the head. The <i>ketumālā</i> with slightly knotted hair	No <i>uṣṇīśa</i> on top of the head. The head is decorated with <i>Siraspata</i>	No <i>uṣṇīśa</i> on top of the head. The head is decorated with <i>Ketumālā</i>	<i>uṣṇīśa</i> with knotted hair of snail-shell coils
Halo (<i>prabhā maṇḍala</i>) around the head	No Halo surrounding the head	No Halo surrounding the head	No Halo surrounding the head	No Halo surrounding the head	No Halo surrounding the head
The circular mark in between the eye brows (<i>ūrṇā</i>)	No <i>ūrṇā</i> between the eye brows	No <i>ūrṇā</i> between the eye brows	No <i>ūrṇā</i> between the eye brows	No <i>ūrṇā</i> between the eye brows	<i>ūrṇā</i> between the eye brows
The distinctive physical appearance [eyes, eye brows, smile, ear lobes]	No smile, half-closed eyes, no long ear-lobes, no muscular emphasis in the body	No smile, half-closed eyes, no long ear-lobes, no muscular emphasis in the body	No smile, half-closed eyes, slightly long ear-lobes, no muscular emphasis in the body	No smile, half-closed eyes, slightly long ear-lobes, no muscular emphasis in the body	No smile, fully opened-eyes, slightly long ear-lobes, slight indication of the physical heaviness
Monastic garment	Light weight garment with double channeled grooves that extends up to the ankle covering only the left shoulder.	Light weight garment with double channeled grooves that extends and covers up to the ankle, covering only the left shoulder.	Light weight garment with single line channels that extends and covers up to the ankle, covering only the left shoulder.	Light weight garment with single line channels that extends and covers up to the ankle, covering only the left shoulder.	Heavy garment with single channeled grooves that covers up to the knee height covering only the left shoulder

Hand gestures (<i>mudrā</i>)	Both hands are broken (Indicates having the <i>abaya mudrā</i> in the right hand with that of cock comb (<i>kataka hasta</i>) in the left hand	Gesture of fearlessness (<i>abhaya</i>) in the right hand with that of cock-comb (<i>kataka-hasta</i>) in the left hand	Gesture of fearlessness (<i>abhaya</i>) in the right hand with that of cock-comb (<i>kataka-hasta</i>) in the left hand	Gesture of fearlessness (<i>abhaya</i>) in the right hand with that of cock-comb (<i>kataka-hasta</i>) in the left hand	Both hands are broken (While the remains of the right hand does not give any clue of the gesture, that of left hand suggests the boon-giving (<i>varada</i>))
The posture, (<i>āsana</i>) or (<i>bhaṅga</i>)	Standing upright (<i>samabhaṅga</i>)	Standing upright (<i>samabhaṅga</i>)	Standing upright (<i>samabhaṅga</i>)	Standing upright (<i>samabhaṅga</i>)	Standing upright (<i>samabhaṅga</i>)
The pedestal (<i>pīṭikā</i>),	No Pedestal	No Pedestal	Lotus Pedestal	Lotus Pedestal (found later from the site).	No Pedestal
Symbols or the auspicious marks	No Symbols or auspicious marks	No Symbols or auspicious marks	No Symbols or auspicious marks	No Symbols or auspicious marks	No Symbols or auspicious marks
Decorative elements such as attendant deities, canopy of the branches of the Bodhi tree, the fly whisks, the crown	No Decorative elements	No Decorative elements	No Decorative elements	No Decorative elements	No Decorative elements
Height of the Image	8.6ft	8ft	43ft	47ft	8.3ft
Stylistic Criticism	Resembles the characteristics of Amarāvati images, and more impressive in size than those of Amarāvati and Nāgārjunakōṇḍa				

Table 2: Comparative examination of the early seated Buddha images of Sri Lanka and the Mathurā and Gupta images of India.

Iconographic elements of the Buddha image	Seated Buddha Image Abhayagiriya	Seated Buddha Image Toluvila	Seated Buddha Image Pankuliya	Seated Buddha Image Katrā Mathurā (Kushan period)	Seated Buddha Image Makuvar (Gupta Period)	Seated Buddha Image Sārnāth (Gupta Period)
Protuberance or the Skull (<i>uṣṇīśa</i>)	No <i>uṣṇīśa</i> on top of the head.	No <i>uṣṇīśa</i> on top of the head. The <i>ketumālā</i> with slightly knotted hair	No <i>uṣṇīśa</i> on top of the head. The <i>ketumālā</i> with slightly knotted hair	<i>uṣṇīśa</i> with knotted hair of snail-shell coils	Shaven hair covered with a turban.	<i>uṣṇīśa</i> with knotted hair of snail-shell coils
Halo (<i>prabhā maṇḍala</i>) around the head	No Halo surrounding the head	No Halo surrounding the head	No Halo surrounding the head	Halo surrounding the head with decorative elements.	No Halo surrounding the head	Halo surrounding the head decorated with floral designs and worshipping dwarfs on either side
The circular mark in between the eye brows (<i>ūrṇā</i>)	No <i>ūrṇā</i> between the eye brows	No <i>ūrṇā</i> between the eye brows	No <i>ūrṇā</i> between the eye brows	<i>ūrṇā</i> between the eye brows	No <i>ūrṇā</i> between the eye brows	No <i>ūrṇā</i> between the eye brows
The distinctive physical	No smile, half-closed eyes, no long ear-lobes, no muscular emphasis in the	No smile, half-closed eyes, no long ear-lobes,	No smile, half-closed eyes, no long	Slight smile, fully-opened eyes, long ear-	The image shows slight smile, half-	The image shows slight smile, half-

appearance [eyes, eye brows, smile, ear lobes]	body	no muscular emphasis in the body	ear-lobes, no muscular emphasis in the body	lobes, severe indication of the muscular emphasis in the body	closed eyes, and long ear- lobes	closed eyes, and long ear-lobes
Monastic garment	Light weight garment clings to the body which is shown by a single line crossing over the left shoulder.	Light weight garment clings to the body which is shown by a single line crossing over the left shoulder.	Light weight garment clings to the body which is shown by a single line crossing over the left shoulder and hanging down from the left elbow.	Light weight garment clings to the body covering both the shoulders and up to the elbow of the left hand, which is shown by single channels.	Light weight garment clings to the body which is shown by a single line around the neck indicating the drapery covering both the shoulders. The under garment is shown by a line above the umbilicus.	Light weight garment clings to the body which is shown by a single line around the neck indicating the drapery covering both the shoulders. The under garment is shown by a line above the umbilicus.
Hand gestures (<i>mudrā</i>)	Gesture of Meditation (<i>dhyāna/ samādhi</i>)	Gesture of Meditation (<i>dhyāna/ samādhi</i>)	Gesture of fearlessness (<i>abhaya</i>) in the right hand, that of blessing (<i>āśīrvāda</i>) in the left hand.	Gesture of fearlessness (<i>abhaya</i>) in the right hand, while the left hand is placed on the left leg.	Gesture of fearlessness (<i>abhaya</i>) in the right hand along with that of meditation (<i>dhyāna/ samādhi</i>) in the left hand	Gesture of Teaching (<i>dharmacakra</i>)
The posture,	Relaxed Posture (<i>vīrāsana</i>)	Relaxed Posture (<i>vīrāsana</i>)	Relaxed Posture	Cross-legged posture	Cross-legged posture	Cross-legged posture

<i>(āsana)</i> or <i>(bhāṅga)</i>			<i>(vīrāsana)</i>	<i>(padmāsana)</i>	<i>(padmāsana)</i>	<i>(padmāsana)</i>
The pedestal <i>(pīṭikā)</i> ,	No Pedestal	No Pedestal	Rectangular pedestal.	Rectangular pedestal supported by circular pillars of which the frontal piece is decorated with three lions: one in the middle in frontal position while two lions looking either side	Rectangular pedestal supported with two lion-heads in frontal position, and the Wheel of Dharma (<i>dharmacakra</i>) in the middle with two seated figures in the gesture of meditation on either side.	Rectangular pedestal supported by circular pillars of which the frontal piece is decorated with the wheel of dharma (<i>dharmacakra</i>) in the middle, worshiped by six seated figures—three on each side—in the gesture of reverence (<i>namaskāra</i>).

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