

**Siri Vajiraramaya Temple Murals:
A Landmark in
Sri Lankan Temple Art**

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Illustrations from the life of the Buddha and Jataka stories adorn temples across Sri Lanka. For centuries, these temple paintings have served as a visual medium that conveyed simple Dhamma messages to the people.

The 18th century, under the patronage of King Kirti Sri Rajasinhe, witnessed a major revival of this tradition of visual storytelling. These early paintings were predominantly two-dimensional and presented as continuous narratives, allowing devotees to “read” the story from one end of the wall to the other.

The simple compositions of the 18th century gradually evolved into a more contextual, slightly three-dimensional style in the late 19th century, eventually developing into the highly detailed, realistic murals of the 20th century.

The Samudragiri Viharaya, Mirissa, contains murals of the typical Southern tradition that followed the Kandyan school. The images are two-dimensional in style, and the legend below the picture explains the events depicted.



Figure 1: Murals - Samudragiri Viharaya, Mirissa.

The depiction of the same event at Panadura Rankoth Viharaya reflects the transitional style, in which artists employed richer colour palettes and incorporated greater contextual detail.



Figure 2: Murals - Rankoth Viharaya, Panadura

The 20th century paintings, like those at Isipatanaramaya, Colombo, by M. Sarlis, moved away from the continuous narrative style of the 17th and 18th centuries. Instead, key events were presented within separate, larger panels.



Figure 3: Murals - Isipatanaramaya, Colombo

Located in Bambalapitiya, Siri Vajiraramaya is an important site in the history of Sri Lankan temple art. Although precisely dating temple murals is often difficult, the well-documented history of Vajiraramaya allows its murals to be dated to the early 1900s, most likely the first decade of the century. These paintings form a stylistic bridge between the transitional murals of the late 19th century and those of the 20th century.

The Siri Vajiraramaya murals marked a departure from the continuous narrative tradition of 18th/19th centuries. Rather than illustrating an entire sequence of events in a single narrow panel, the artists selected key moments from the narrative and presented them in larger, self-contained panels. The images had the essential features to depict the event and were less cluttered than those of earlier periods. This was probably the style that influenced the later temple artists.



Figure 4: Murals - Siri Vajiraramaya, Bambalapitiya
– the Great Renunciation



Figure 5: Mural – Sri Vajiraramaya, Bambalapitiya
– Birth of Prince Siddhartha

**Figure 6: Mural –
Siri Vajiraramaya,
Bambalapitiya –
The Wedding of Prince
Siddhartha to Princess
Yasodhara**



The murals of Siri Vajiraramaya mainly show key events from the life of the Buddha.



Figure 7: Jataka stories, Siri Vajiraramaya, Bambalapitiya
– a single square with a key event has replaced the continuous
narrative panels of 18th/19th centuries.



The original floor at the entrance to Buduge before renovations in the 1960s. The floor has been created as a mosaic using pieces of tiles. It also states the year it was probably completed. The use of mosaics and stating the year, in both Buddhist years and Shakha years, was seen in mage houses along the coastal belt during the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

Unlike in the previous period temple murals, there are only a few paintings at Vajiraramaya that depict Jataka stories. Each image depicts key events from the Jataka, while the legend above states the Perfection the Bodhisattva sought to achieve.

Interestingly, the murals currently seen at Siri Vajiraramaya, Bambalapitiya are not mentioned in the standard publications on Sri Lankan temple murals. They were hidden beneath a later layer of paintings executed during the 1960s and only re-emerged during the restoration of the image house in 2019/20.

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