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## **THE INFLUENCE OF TRADITIONAL ART ON ART NOUVEAU INDUSTRIAL DESIGN IN AN ASIAN CONTEXT: SRI LANKA-A PRELIMINARY SURVEY**

### **Abstract**

Sri Lanka inherits complex art traditions from historic times, with many changes at different periods. Under strong European influence in the 19th century, *Art Nouveau* designs affected the applied arts of the island's maritime region mixing *Art Nouveau* with Lankan elements, displaying 'the convergence and combination syndrome', especially in areas where European dominance was most powerful. Other areas retained indigenous styles. After the mid-19th century, we see a mixed vocabulary of decorative motifs, using traditional craftsmanship and new, industrial production methods. Thus, Sri Lanka's 'industrial art' was born, providing an interesting footnote in the global spread of *Art Nouveau* design.

### ***Art Nouveau* in Sri Lanka**

A complex and continuous art tradition coming down from deep historic times, which had undergone variations during different periods, is found in Sri Lanka. Before the dawn of the *Art Nouveau* style - mainly in Europe and the United States of America in the latter half of the 19th century and the early half of the 20th century (Grove 1996, Sterner 1982) similar design motifs and concepts can be seen in the Sri Lankan tradition. It underlines the eternal principle that similar artistic creations could manifest in various cultures without necessarily drawing from one another. This is clearly in evidence in Sri Lankan art in the 18th and 19th centuries. On the other hand, owing to the European colonial dominance in the 19th century, *Art Nouveau* style had affected Sri Lankan architecture and art giving rise to a new indigenous art tradition.

This style had taken root in Sri Lanka in the coastal region where the political and economic power of the Europeans was mostly felt. The inspiration received from the *Art Nouveau* style is clearly visible in buildings and the Buddhist temple murals in the region. This inspiration is sometimes direct and sometimes mixed with the indigenous tradition. The style has been directly used in Catholic churches, Government buildings, commercial buildings and dwellings. In the case of Buddhist temples and certain catholic and Anglican churches, a mixed European-Sri Lanka style has been adopted. A special feature that could be locally identified in Sri Lanka is that a mixed European-Hindu style is adopted in non-religious buildings belonging to the *Art Nouveau* period in the northern province of Sri Lanka where a Tamil-Hindu culture is prevalent. Artworks in other areas of Sri Lanka, which did not come under European dominance, retained those features similar to the *Art Nouveau* style.

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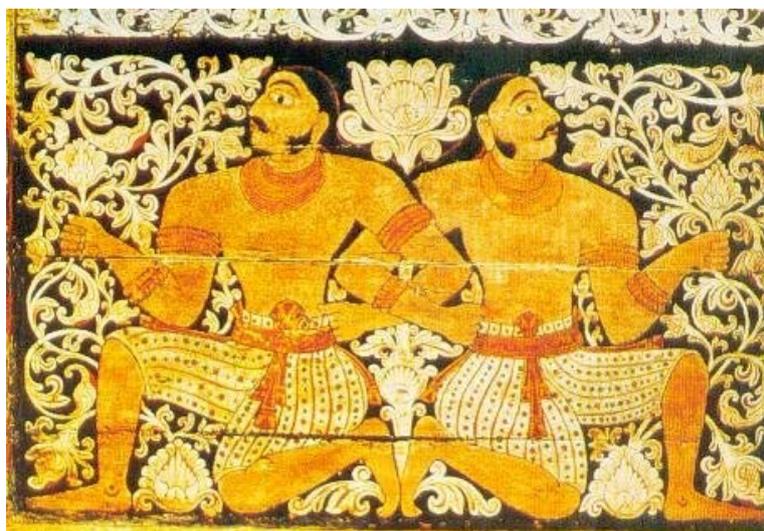
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Artworks of *Art Nouveau* tradition in Sri Lanka are not as complex and large-scale as those in Europe. This style has been used in various ways for external embellishment of Buddhist temples and buildings in the coastal region. Apart from this, there are a few examples of small-scale artworks of this style. The prevalence of the *Art Nouveau* style in Europe ended in the early decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century but in Sri Lanka, which was a colony, the style was prevalent up to the 1940s.

### **The indigenous art tradition before the Art Nouveau style**

The history of the art tradition with similar features in places that the *Art Nouveau* style did not reach runs as far back as 5-7 centuries AD. The terracotta decorative motifs found at Sigiriya, a World Heritage Site, may be cited as examples. These stylised artworks with floral or leafy designs may be identified as those used in monastery architecture. (Kusumsiri 2000) Another artwork that shows features similar to *Art Nouveau* is the tree and other floral elements seen in the cave of the Boulder Gardens in Sigiriya. Prof. Senake Bandaranayake believes that this painting belongs to the 5-6 centuries AD. (Bandaranayake 1986) Moreover, among the stylised doorframe carvings in ancient Sri Lanka, decorative motifs similar to *Art Nouveau* are present. A fine example is the stone doorframe belonging to the 13<sup>th</sup> Century AD at the Galapata Vihara, Bentota, in the Galle District of the southern province in Sri Lanka. It is an artwork depicting a beautiful bird-woman creeper design (Godakumbura 1982).

Another two such artworks are the ceiling painting of the wrestlers that may be assigned to the 18<sup>th</sup> century and the painting of King Kirti Sri Rajasinghe (1741-87 AD) in the Tooth Relic Temple in Kandy. These may be referred to as unique creations of an indigenous art tradition where human figures are shown bound to the creeper designs that run freely.



1. Ceiling painting. Tooth Relic Temple, Kandy, circa 18<sup>th</sup> c. AD.

In the art tradition that was prevalent in Sri Lanka in the 18-19 centuries artworks similar to the *Art Nouveau* are frequently seen. This tradition comprising floral and leafy designs and stylised animal figures are similar to the Victorian decorative motifs. For instance, the creeper or the continuous branch is similar to the Undulate, the cresting border (*Valpotha*) to the akrotes and antefix, lotus to the rosette (Mayer 1894 ).

In addition, a number of floral elements similar to *Art Nouveau* were used in the indigenous art tradition. (Coomaraswamy 1908 / 1970, de Silva 2009).

### **The influence of *Art Nouveau* style on indigenous art tradition**

The Buddhist temple murals in the coastal region of Sri Lanka can be cited as explicit examples demonstrating the influence of *Art Nouveau* on the artworks of Sri Lanka. These paintings are known as belonging to the Southern Style in the contemporary painting tradition of the island (Bandaranayake, 1986). *Art Nouveau* features could be identified in the decorative motifs in the background of the paintings and in the buildings depicted therein. A special feature is that above the entrance to the shrine rooms of this tradition, the British state emblem is depicted surrounded by decorative motifs and the picture of Queen Victoria in the centre. As a distinctive example that had been inspired by the *Art Nouveau* style, the two frames of paintings on the canopy of the Raja Maha Vihara in Kelaniya near Colombo may be pointed out. The paintings, which are a delicate blend of animal, bird, serpent and human figures and flora, may belong to the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Similarly, this style has contributed towards many fields such as exterior embellishment of buildings, furniture designs, etc.

### **Industrial Heritage and Art**

Although Sri Lanka is a country with an agricultural base, within the economy that evolved on the plantation industry introduced by the British, an industrial heritage has been conferred based on the plantation industry and its infrastructure. Particularly, this includes factories, transport network, communication and common amenities. The above industrial heritage very often embodies creative features. Sri Lanka's 'industrial art' was born, significantly based on *Art Nouveau* aesthetic.



2. Ceiling painting, Kelaniya Temple, near Colombo. Latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> c. (after de Silva, N. 2009: Plate 80).

For these artworks plaster, wood and cast iron had been used. Wood and plaster artworks had been produced locally while cast iron artworks are mostly of foreign origin, notably Britain. Artworks of stone are also seen among them but only rarely.

The Industrial Art in Sri Lanka based on the *Art Nouveau* style may be divided into five categories:

1. Plaster decorative motifs
2. Cast iron artworks
3. Wood artworks
4. Stone decorative motifs
5. Miscellaneous

#### **1. Plaster decorative motifs**

Embellishments done in relief employed as a decorative methodology on walls of buildings belonging to the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century are commonly seen in regions of Sri Lanka that have come under European influence. A majority among these decorative motifs are crowns, leaf festoons and akroters. Among the buildings in Colombo belonging to the British period, decorative motifs on the gable façade of the Cargills and Millers building built between 1902 and 1904 could be identified as special plaster decorative motifs of the *Art Nouveau* style. Among them are the bouquet, floral designs, and the centralised caduceus medical symbol (symbol of short rod entwined by two snakes), festoons and monograms.



### 3. Plaster decorative motifs. Cargills and Millers building. Colombo Fort.1902-04

The plaster decorative motifs on other buildings by comparison do not seem to be as complex as those in the Cargills and Millers building. On the gable façade of the Colombo Fort Railway Station built in 1908, a mixed decorative motif of akroters and festoons is seen. The wall above the portico of the building of the university now known as the College House displays a mixed decorative motif of festoons.

Two unique decorations among plaster decorative motifs are seen on the bell tower of the St. Thomas Church in Jaffna and on the Whiteaway Lady Loch building in Colombo Fort. The decoration on the bell tower of the St. Thomas Church built in 1930 consists of a crown, two keys placed cross-wise under it, and flowers, foliage and two branches. The decoration on the Whiteaway Lady Loch building in Colombo Fort belonging to the 1905-1908 period displays a centralised shield (?) and a flora pattern. In the Chatham Street and the Mel Building in Colombo Fort there is a floral design surrounded by an oval.



### 4. Symmetrical plaster designs:

a. Bell Tower. St Thomas Church, Jaffna. 1930      b. Whiteaway Lady Loch, Colombo Fort.1905-1908

The decoration on the Matthew Building in Colombo Fort built in 1896 displays an entirely different form by comparison with all the above artworks. It contains symbols more inclined towards the indigenous culture. In the centre there is an elephant bearing a casket. On either side there are two coconut trees and above, the picture of a ship. This is considered as the old emblem of the institution. (Manatunga 2000)

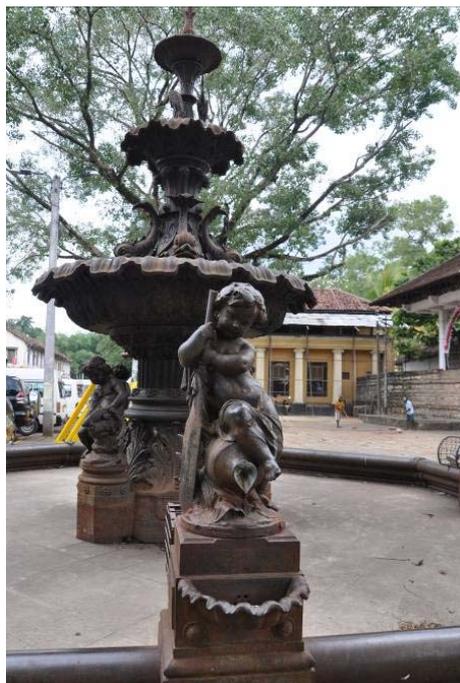
In *Art Nouveau* styles used for exterior embellishment of buildings in Sri Lanka artworks with festoons are commonly seen. However, embellishments in buildings of the Art Nouveau

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style in the Jaffna peninsula in the northern province of Sri Lanka where Hindu culture is prevalent display the figures of elephant, ox, and other symbolic representations connected with Hinduism. This could be identified as a sub-cultural phenomenon in the Art Nouveau style in Sri Lanka.

## II. Cast Iron Artworks

Cast iron artworks can be classified into two categories as sculpture and decorations. An exquisite example of cast iron sculpture is the fountain near the Tooth Relic Temple in

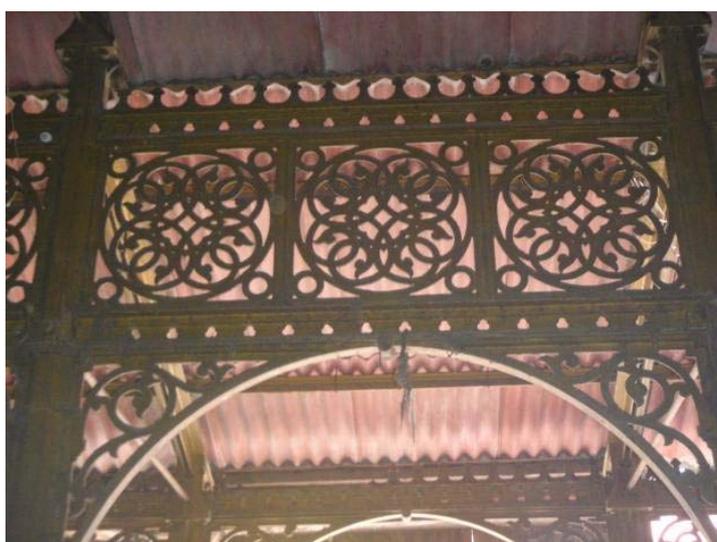


5. Cast Iron Water Fountain, near Tooth Relic Temple, Kandy 1875.

Kandy. According to inscriptions found there, the coffee planters in Sri Lanka have set it up in 1875 in connection with the visit of Prince of Wales. The fountain manufactured in England by George Smith & Company in Glasgow had been brought here and installed. The pond connected to the fountain is also made of cast iron and is octagonal in shape. The fountain in the centre of the pond consists of three planes. On the four corners at the foot of the fountain, figures of four infants with crocodiles in their hands are depicted. On the four corners of the pond, there are four other figures of infants, each carrying an oar in one hand. These infant figures are quite realistically portrayed. On the second and third planes of this fountain, figures of dolphins and cranes are depicted respectively. The mid section of the fountain displays an artificial leaf pattern in relief. (Kusumsiri 2005)

The other category of cast iron artworks, i.e. motifs are identifiable in such industrial artwork items as brackets, gates, spandrels, street lampposts and fences.

The most common occurrence of cast iron decorations of the *Art Nouveau* style are seen in the form of brackets in Sri Lanka. These brackets could be seen in industrial artwork of the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. A large amount of brackets with decorations is seen in Railway Stations of the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (e.g. the old railway terminal in Colombo, Railway station, Kandy). These brackets are decked with floral patterns and are similar largely to the *liyavala* (or creeper or continuous branch) that is a traditional decorative



6. Decorations of Edinburgh Plaza and Old Town Hall. Colombo. Later half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

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motif of Sri Lanka. The Edinburgh Plaza in Colombo and the Old Town Hall are two notable instances where floral designs have been used in spandrels too.

In the Edinburgh Plaza built in the period 1870-1873 (Alwis 1992) a series of open windows with circular decorations could be seen over the arches with spandrels. The nearby Old Town Hall building also displays a similar decorative motif.

The street lampposts built on the *Art Nouveau* style are extremely rare at present, but one such lamppost could be seen in Matale town in the central province. This also displays floral designs. Apart from this, information on such lampposts in Colombo may be gathered from old photographic records.



7. Decorative lamppost,, Matale Town.  
Central Province First half of the 20<sup>th</sup> c.

Certain buildings belonging to the British period in Sri Lanka retain some examples of how *Art Nouveau* style has been adopted for cast iron fences.

Decorations on the fences of the portico of the Queens Hotel in Kandy are one such example. They consist of artificial foliage. (Meyer 1894) Another interesting example is the fence in front of the Hatton National Bank in Kandy. The fence constructed on the panel system displays in a circular frame a flower, a leaf and a fruit growing out of the same root. There are two panels on either side. Two figures of lions turn towards the centre panel standing on two feet. This may be pointed out as an unusual artwork among those of the *Art Nouveau* style. On the fence near the St Paul's

Church in Kandy, there is a simple floral design.

Gates with decorations are a rare creation among the cast iron artworks of the *Art Nouveau* style. A fine example of this category is seen in the Lakshmigiri building near the College House of the University of Colombo. This gate consisting of a beautiful floral design also displays an attractive crest.

### III. Wood Artworks

Wood artworks are often seen in association with ventilators of buildings. Before European influence, floral designs had been used in ventilators but in regions that were subject to European influence the motif of vine began to be used instead. Unlike other artworks, the vine had been used in most buildings erected during the European period, thought not necessarily with European inspiration. Moreover, wood artwork has been used for embellishment for



8. Cast iron gate. *Lakshmigiri* Building.  
Colombo. First half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

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doors and semi-circular frames over windows of Railway Stations belonging to the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. (e.g. Gampola Railway Station). The tops of arches of buildings with Gothic arches are also decorated with wood artwork. (e.g. the Old Town Hall, Colombo).

Further, wood artwork has been occasionally used for spandrels. Such artworks can be seen among the cast iron frames of the Railway Station at Slave Island, Colombo. These artworks are similar to the traditional Sri Lankan floral design.

#### IV. Stone Decorative Motifs



9. Stone gateposts with floral and leafy motif from an old building. Weliveriya, near Colombo, 1929.

Stone artworks are very rare among the works of *Art Nouveau* style in Sri Lanka. However, some such artwork can be identified among stone gateposts of the 18-19 centuries. The two stone gateposts with a floral and leafy motif done in 1929 in an old building at Weliveriya near Colombo may be cited as an example.

#### V. Miscellaneous Artworks

With the diffusion of the *Art Nouveau* style in Sri Lanka it has been adopted in the form of artwork and painting in the industrial fields. A particular point of importance is that this painting tradition could be identified in connection with the plantation industry that is the basis of the industrial heritage of Sri Lanka. These paintings are found in tea tins used for the export of Sri Lankan tea such as Castel blend Ceylon tea, Tetley's tea, Riquet's tea, and Lipton's tea. The best representations are found in the Lipton's tea tins. Scenes of tea plantations in Sri Lanka are

vividly represented on these tins. All these scenes contain frames on the *Art Nouveau* style. A Green Valley tea tin contains a miniature representation of a tea estate in a circular frame with roses in the background.



10. Decorations and Paintings of Tea Tins. First half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century

During the time Art Nouveau style was prevalent, picture cards have been created on that style with photographs of the towns of Sri Lanka. A noteworthy feature is that these artworks quite often show scenes connected with the environment of Sri Lanka. For example, the card showing the Galle Face Green and the Port in Colombo and an elephant has been ornamented with pineapple, cocoa, and coconut leaves. A card showing the Queens Hotel in Kandy has a motif of figures of upcountry women.

With the diffusion of the Art Nouveau style monograms have also made their appearance. Such artworks could still be seen in many main towns of Sri Lanka. In several artworks belonging to the period of King George VI, **GR VI** has been imaginatively portrayed in the same style as in contemporary British artwork. These monograms are common in post boxes belonging to this period. In addition, these could be seen in buildings (e.g. Police Field Headquarters, Colombo), cannons belonging to the British period (e.g. canon on the rampart of the Dutch Fort in Batticaloa). These monograms have also been used for the Municipal Council Colombo and Ceylon Government Railway.

### Conclusion

When compared with European *Art Nouveau* Sri Lankan examples are rather simple creations, but they are nevertheless an interesting footnote in the global spread of *Art Nouveau* design. Before the diffusion of *Art Nouveau* style in Sri Lanka certain similar motifs were used in Sri Lanka, and some of them mixed with the *Art Nouveau* style. It may be said that such artworks depict a Sri Lankan characteristic. And in the depiction of a Sri Lankan characteristic, certain sub-cultural variations could be identified.

Its particular interest is its contribution to the phenomenon of 'combination and convergence' in Sri Lankan art (Bandaranayake 1986: 105ff., 1992:12), as well as contributing an Asian aspect to European art traditions. The purpose of this paper is to introduce (perhaps for the first time) art historians and heritage specialists in Sri Lanka and abroad to the existence of *Art Nouveau* elements in the Sri Lankan art complex and to present a random survey of examples of this in some parts of the country.

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