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A study of an iconic representations of textile designs in temple paintings of Sri Lanka

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ABSTRACT

Since ancient times textiles have become a rich cultural heritage. Textile designs convey a rich textile tradition in Sri Lanka in the maritime region mural paintings which are significant in their stylistic, elegant and complex nature. This iconic representation of Sri Lankan art produced an elaborate textile tradition that blended with an important visual, cultural expression and a distinctive craftsmanship. These design motifs are different compared to the other temple mural tradition in Sri Lanka showing originality and response to a well formed social economic structure. It is, in terms of textile design, aesthetic of artistic value, visually intense, as a priority and has a wide range of design placement types. The objective of the study is to identify the textile design patterns and its unique design formats depicted in the Southern school of art with a view to identifying its iconic features. The present study adopted the qualitative research method and data were gathered from the three selected temples in the Southern province and one temple from the Western province; *Purvaramaya* at Kataluwa, *Sunandaramaya* at Ambalangoda, *Thotagamuwa* temple at Telwatta, *Sri Subadhraramaya* Balapitiya and *Subodharamaya* at Karagampitiya, Colombo (Western province) This study reveals the sophistication of textile design composition, its characteristics and the rising demand for such flora and fauna for print designs.

Keywords: Floral Design, Motifs, Temple paintings, Layout, Traditional Expression, Aesthetic values

1. INTRODUCTION

Textiles of a country transmit the rich traditional expressions of people, and also represent the traditional technology of the craftsmen of society. Textiles are two dimensional objects which belong to material culture are part of the tradition of society. In Sri Lanka the Southern province mural tradition includes a variety of textiles design which show multiple combination of floral, geometrical and mixture of both motifs depicted in the long lower dress of elite known as *somana*, elite female upper body dress known as *Mottakkiliya*, elite males and females both utilized a common dress article known as Kerchief(shawl) and elite male upper body dress was *kamisa* (shirt). Sri Lanka is a country with rich traditional mural paintings incorporating subtle hints of a print heritage.

2. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The main objective of the study is to collect and document all the textile design motifs and preserve them in visual formats from the textile designs which are depicted in 5 selected temples. Also it is identifying the textile design and characteristics in the Southern school mural paintings with a view to tracing the design chronology and reveals the rich expression of the textiles of the Southern school of mural painting tradition of Sri Lanka.

3. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study adopted a qualitative research method. Historical details of the Southern school of textile designs are well documented in a visual array in many temples located in the Southern province of Sri Lanka compared to other provinces. Also there are plenty of visual records to study the background of this study setting. Materials for this research was gathered from 5 selected temples belonging to the Southern school of mural tradition of Sri Lanka which 4 are located in the Southern province and one temple located in the Western province. The researcher was a participant observer and recorded textile design motifs of the selected temple murals. Original paintings were systematically observed in-depth to capture the unique patterns. The researcher recorded each design motif by hand drawing using exact colours. Design motifs were categorized according to the layout of the walls of the temples such as inner wall and outer wall. Male and female figures were categorized by considering textile designs according to upper garment and lower garment. Textiles depicted a varying array of design motifs including natural motifs, geometric and stripes. Natural motifs were sub divided into three groups floral, creepers and fauna. Categorized data were sorted in seven different ways, design on the primary colour background, design on the white colour background, floral designs of two colours, floral design on plain colour, black outlined designs, non-outline designs and design composed in squares and the border designs. Original historical literary records, texts, and pictorials from temple murals and museum exhibits pertaining to the period were systematically utilized to obtain further data. Validity of data was confirmed at the beginning of the study by cross checking the recorded visuals and comparing with the existing literature. Gathered data were sorted and analyzed in a systematic manner to collect and record all the textile designs depicted in the 5 selected temples.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4. 1. An Iconic Representations of Textile Designs

Kataluwa Purvaramaya temple:

An endless variety of decorative designs fill the garments and other textiles and these consist largely of flowers in various stylistic and realistic shapes in different combinations. The ornate textile border with triangles and creeper designs, represents the most decorative part of the clothing.

Ambalangoda Sunandaramaya temple:

Among the paintings, the procession painting consist of ornamental coloured clothes. Contemporary Portuguese and Dutch clothes can be seen in some of the paintings. Different floral, geometric, checked designs can identified.

Telwatta Totagamuwa temple:

Decorative motifs on the textile consist of many flower creepers. Flower twigs and geometrically formed floral design in red and green. Borders, consisting of rows of repetitive triangles are common. Flowering parallel lines representing pleats of scarves and sashes constitute distinctive details.

Karagampitiya Subodharamaya temple:

The floating flowers, which are part of the traditional and local concept, now become bunches of flowers and leaves such as are commonly seen in European art. Different types of foreign floral motifs can be identified.

Sri Subadhraramaya Balapitiya:

Different floral, geometric and creeper designs were identified. Most of the designs cannot be identified due to the bad condition of the paintings.

4. 2. Significance of Sri Lankan Mural Painting Tradition

These paintings were highly elaborate, crowded in style, with a great deal of detail and decoration. These murals are not flat or static, despite the predominantly two dimensional technique of the pictures and the set formulae adopted in the representation of figures, buildings, trees and decorative details. They are first drawn in outline and then filled with colour and decorative detail. They are textile designs employing a wealth of floral and geometric motifs. The action in each register takes place on a continuous picture plane, against a monochromatic backdrop, the solid background colour being invariably red or black. This background colour constitutes a symbolic rather than a visual rendering of space, although the visual effect of brightly painted elements set against this background creates an effective sense of spatial depth. Some element of tonal or colour modeling is used to give a sense of volume to faces and limbs.

4. 3. Specialty and Foreign Influences

According to Siri Gunasinghe, these deviations may have been influenced by the European painting works introduced to the maritime areas by the Portuguese and the Dutch. Painting in the Southern province exhibits influence of European civilization over the local society. European furniture; equipment and dress styles are frequently seen in these paintings. It would not be surprising therefore if these people had paintings done by European artists at their residences and these paintings influencing the artists in the area.

Another factor is that the Southern school of painting tradition may have been influenced by Bali art. The people in the low country areas seemed to have been more inclining to seek the help of this type of rituals than their fellows in the hill country.

4. 4. Textile Expressions of Sri Lankan Mural Painting Tradition

The expression of textiles is depicted in elite male and female dress and female's shawls. The *somana* is a long lower dress made up of 12 cubits in length and a width of 6 cubits. It is a geometric shaped dress which is draped over the waist. The *somana* dress reveals more about its pragmatic function. The textile also reveals its intelligent design, aesthetic in the way of composition in design motifs according to the vertical, horizontal and diagonal lines. Flat surfaces of the *somanas* act as a great canvas for intricate and colourful prints. The printed *somanas* and shawls allow the wearer to dress in a way that elevates his/her social status confidently. The pieces of textile designs convey beauty, intelligence and elegance. The rich expression of textiles conveys a colour spectrum, rich design composition and flattering shapes.

4. 5. Printed *Somana* dress, printed jackets, printed *mottakkiliya* and printed shawls

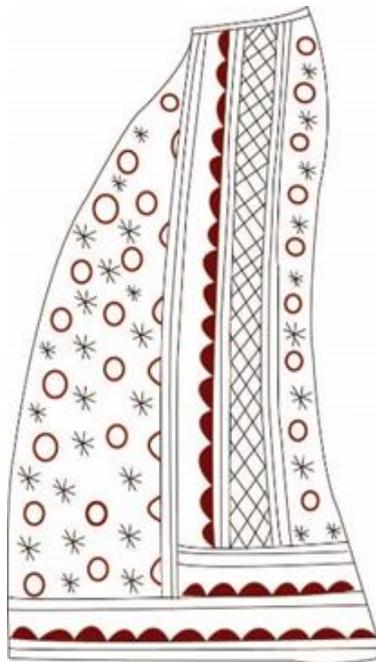


Figure 1. Somana



Figure 2. Somana with mottakkiliya (Kataluwa temple)



Figure 3 & 4. Somana dress, jacket and shawl (Kataluwa temple)

4. 6. Motifs and Designs

Coomaraswamy divides all motifs in to 4 categories, namely divine, animal, vegetable and inorganic. Motifs are interpreted through an artistic imagination which goes deep in to the soul of the object.

Motifs of the third category are divided into two groups, one containing mythical flora such as *narilatha*, *kadipul*, *parasathu* and *kalpavriksha* and real flowers like lotus, jasmine, champak and screw pine. Inorganic objects are designs made of such objects as dot, line, curve, circle, triangle, chevron, arch, cross and *svastika*.

4. 7. Design Category

Design motifs can be categorized as realistic or natural, geometrical and stylized. Natural motifs portray as direct replicas of things as they exist in nature. (Study of motifs, Fashion garment making, 81)

There are more than 50 types of floral designs identified at the *Kataluwa Purvarama* temple. Some of the designs are mixed with geometrical shapes like lines, circles and squares. Creeper designs combine with floral motifs. There are 09 types of floral motifs identified in *Totagamuwa Telwatta* temple. Some are combined with geometric shapes.

Eight types of floral motifs were identified at the *Ambalangoda Sunandaramaya temple*. There are 15 types of floral motifs traced from the *Karagampitiya Subodharamaya* temple. Geometric motifs include lines in various forms, such as vertical, horizontal, diagonal and curved. Geometric design leads the eye in the design or pattern that is created by them. (Study of motifs, Fashion garment making, 80)

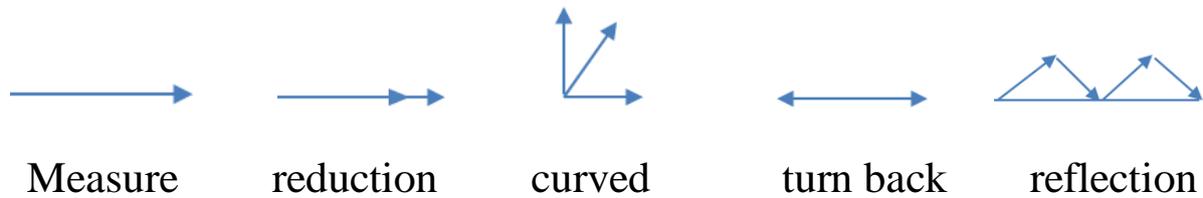


Figure 5

There are 03 characteristics utilized to create designs, circle, rectangle and lines. Besides, there are 12 types of circles, lines (straight, wavy, curved, zig zag), and squares that were identified at the *Kataluwa* temple. Most of the designs are created within the squares. Three types of geometric shapes were found at *Totagamuwa Telwatta* temple. There are about 05 types of geometric motifs at the *Sunandaramaya* temple. In the *Subodharamaya* temple there were 03 types of geometric designs identified.

4. 8. Construction of Textile Design



Figure 6. Checked design



Figure 7. Linear design



Figure 8. Rosette design



Figure 9. Diagonal design



Figure 10. Overall designs

The construction and technicality of engineering in design has really informed the design direction with colourful prints. Linear methods of accumulating designs on *somana* cloth shows accuracy of mathematical and technical aspects envisioning a 3D shape around the body, sculpting a second skin for males and females. There were 06 design composition found from the paintings, such as composition of checked designs, linear design composition, rosette design, composition, diagonal design composition, overall design composition and composition of border designs. Layout design plays a pivotal role in arrangement composition. Layout in a pattern is described as the arrangement of the motif, whether it is spaced widely or closely on the ground, in neat order or apparently at random, or in rows that form stripes. (Study of motifs, Fashion garment making, 3)

4. 9. Layouts of Textile Designs

There are 4 types of layouts found from the selected temple murals. They are side layout, half drop layout, border layout and all over layout.



Figure 11. Side layout



Figure 12. Half drop layout



Figure 13. Border layout



Figure 14. All over layout

Instead of layouts there are 14 repeat types of the designs identified.



Figure 15. Block repeat design



Figure 16. Blockpillar repeat design



Figure 17. Block stripe repeat design

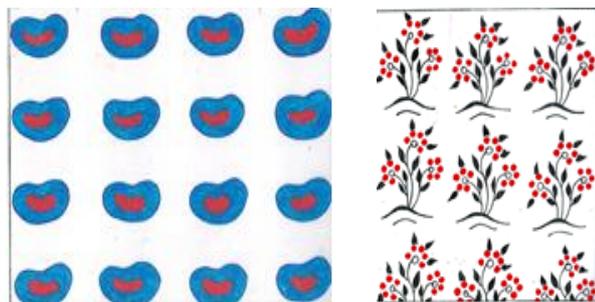


Figure 18. Open block repeat design

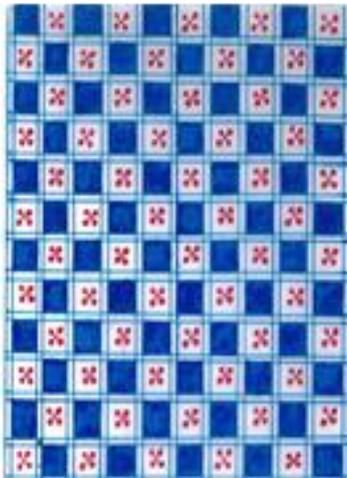


Figure 19. Block diaper repeat design



Figure 20. Block repeats with vertical mirror diaper arrangement design

There are 7 types of border designs such as narrow floral, stripe, creeper and wavy designs.

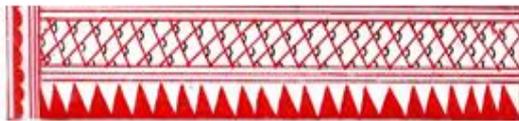


Figure 21.



Figure 22. Narrow floral

4. 10. Colour of the Mural Painting

The low country artists have used a wider range of colours. The colours are according to the varied pigments using deep and light shades of the same colour. The Southern artists show clothing by way of many floral and geometrical patterns drawn using different pigments. They used red, white, black, yellow, green, brown, blue and gold. These colours were mostly used for the motifs. Primary colours were used for background of the design. Eg: red, blue. Artists of the *Kataluwa* paintings mostly used primary colours for the background. Secondary colours such as orange, violet and green were used for the motif designs. Contrasting colour combinations such as yellow, violet and red, green blue-orange were used for background of the design. These colour combinations were mostly used in the *Purwaramaya* at Kataluwa paintings.

4. 11. Contemporary Textiles of the 19th Century

Percival (1797), described that a female dressed in a piece of fine cotton cloth wrapped round the body, and fastened under the arms formed an under dress. Furthermore he says that she had worn a jacket of fine “*muslin or calico*” and a *petticoat* of the same material. As such

based on the details of the 17th and 18th Century European influenced costumes, the various lace collars, cuffs, frills and hemlines became the stylized items of costumes of the day. With regard to the material used for the dress, there is evidence that fabrics were largely imported from South India, Bengal and Indonesia. It is evidence that fabrics were largely imported from South India, Bengal and Indonesia. During the 17th and 18th Centuries, it is said that foreign vessels with varieties of textiles, silk and muslin sailed in to Galle. *Somana* constitutes a long cotton printed cloth worn by *Mudaliyars*. A characteristic feature of the garment is the use of a rich array of Indian or Sri Lankan art motifs of the 18th and 19th Centuries. The *comboy*, a brightly coloured cloth was worn by men and women in the maritime provinces. The Dutch introduced the printed cotton fabric, which they imported from Indonesia. The use of this became the fashion among both males and females of the Sinhala community. In the meantime, the learning of the art of making various lace products from the Dutch, made the Sinhalese female dress even more elegant.



Figure 23. *Somana* cloth in Colombo National museum (floral background, borders at the edges, length and widthwise have floral creepers, widthwise borders also have rows of springs and *Dathi-paturu* (tooth pattern))

Social and Cultural Situation

“In the 19th Century, political leadership of Sri Lanka was taken by the Dutch”. The new job opportunities in the contemporary society due to the development of agriculture and commerce had inevitably come into being as a result of the traditional caste obligations. The people of Rada *Badda*, hitherto provided linen for the rest houses of the Dutch. Dutch were mainly working with export and import trade. Galle was an easy location, as vessels from Bengal and Coromandel sailed into Galle. The Dutch introduction of a new coinage to the territory such as silver, guilders, *ducat*, *ducatoon* and *rix-dollar* also paper currency.

According to Percival, the dress was called a *Kubey*, with sleeves fitted close to the arms and reaching down to the wrist, together with prominent buttons of gold, silver or precious stones. Men had apparently preferred to wear *pantaloons* and *breeches* with jackets,

while the women continued the fashion of the skirt with short coloured *tunics*. *Gingham* skirts, matched with long white bodies, also become popular. There were customs to be observed with child birth, puberty, wedding celebrations, funerals and even everyday visits by friends and relatives.

Some of the Sinhala *sandesa* poems indicate the cultural, economic, political and social situation in the Southern tradition. The following poem describes the trading methods in the Southern province of Sri Lanka.

“By swimming all over the vast ocean collecting all the gold, gems and pearls, have decorated the shops. Observing these glittering shops, pass through the town of Galle”. Primary data and secondary data confirm that the Southern school of mural tradition was influenced by the contemporary social, cultural, political and economic situation. That the Portuguese and Dutch influences were vital in shaping the social situation is evident in clothing styles, trade and occasions they participated in. Elites with decorative printed garments show high social status depicted in the murals. It can be assumed that bright coloured *somanas* of the elite class of the period gave tremendous inspirations to the mural painters of the period. The floral and geometric motifs of *somanas* and other clothes originated by the influence of the Dutch tradition and Bali culture.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The institutional based continuity of these design motif traditions is eroding with the appropriation of source aspects of these tradition for commercial purposes. This brings about severe changes to the traditional forms of design and motifs. On the other hand increasing secularization of the society alienates Southern motifs from their earlier context and thereby aggravates the risk of this distinctive design and motifs forms being carried to the next generation in its original form-visual and functional features of design and motifs in printed dresses.

Therefore this study proposes to collect and document all visual formats of the design and motif patterns depicted in *somana* and other clothes respectively in the murals of the Southern school of art in their original setting. These visual formats (colour drawings of design motifs) will be archived in the library of the Fashion Design Degree course, Department of Textile and Clothing Technology of, University of Moratuwa. The archives will save the whole design range of motifs in the Southern school of painting. This will be used as learning materials for graduates and undergraduates of the Fashion Design Degree course who will specialized in the field of textile designing.

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