



An open letter to the Kandyan Chiefs

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SIRS,

There is a subject which has for a long time greatly occupied me, and which appears to me of the greatest importance, and I therefore hope that you will pardon me for addressing this letter to you as a body; a letter setting forth some ideas on the Preservation of Ancient Buildings in Ceylon. It is mainly to buildings of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (the Kandyan Period) that I refer; the much older buildings of Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa are not at present, of course, in much danger of neglect or injudicious restoration. There are three kinds of buildings that must be specially mentioned, perhaps I should say four; these are Viharas, Dewalas, private houses and Ambalams.

In the Kandyan districts are the Sinhalese or Sinhalese-Hindu style of architecture prevailed until the end of the eighteenth century, during which not a few of the best of the surviving buildings were erected. At the end of that period a radical change set in, a change only comparable with that which took place in England and throughout Europe at the time of the Renaissance when the beauty and restraint of Gothic architecture yielded to an unrestrained and classical style which one may like or dislike as one pleases, but which spelt the doom of Gothic architecture, a doom rendered irrevocable by the steadily progressing industrial revolution which has since taken place. At the present time there is no architectural style in Europe, but buildings are put up of all sorts, from mechanical reproductions of Gothic churches, to the last jerry-built villa of the suburbs. The fundamental change, whose architectural expression I have just referred to, has taken place in Ceylon in one hundred, instead of the four hundred years it occupied in Europe; and it is therefore the easier here both to realise the former life of men in simpler times, and to measure the greatness of the change, of the very existence of which so many of us are nevertheless quite unconscious.

So then, there was a Kandyan style of architecture which flourished till the end of the eighteenth century; this Kandyan style having many obvious Hindu features but yet with a character all its own. Architecture needs for its complete expression, the reasonable intelligent co-operation of all the arts; and in the days I speak of it did not lack this amongst the Kandyans; the stonemason and carpenter, the blacksmith and silversmith, the painter and potter, even the weaver combined to produce buildings of a lovely and harmonious character, part as it were of the very soil they grew from, and perfectly harmonious in style from the finials on the roots to the inlaid key plates on the doors, and from the carved Moonstones at the entrance to the woven chatty covers (gahoni) used for the procession starting out to fetch in new rice from the temple lands.



TEMPLE OF THE TOOTH RELIC, KANDY. *Image: Valerie Magar.*



MOONSTONE IN ANURADHAPURA. *Image: Valerie Magar.*

Well, during the last two years, I have given my spare time to studying old Kandyan work in architecture and all the crafts that flourished in those times that seem now so far away. I have seen old buildings and new; and in the minor arts it has not been once or twice only that I have attempted to get made for myself someone or other of the wares that were once produced so easily and so well, and of which a little of the wreckage survives in its new museums and private collections; and it has been again and again borne in upon me as the result of bitter experience both in the remotest villages and in Kandy itself, that the character of steady competency which once distinguished the Kandyan artist craftsman has gone for ever: a change such as the industrial revolution has brought about almost all over the world.



PAINTINGS IN THE TEMPLE OF THE TOOTH RELIC.
Image: Valerie Magar.

Still more evident is the change when one passes from the personal efforts referred to, to the consideration of modern Kandyan buildings, and still more to that of the repairs and alterations which have been made in ancient buildings in modern times. In this latter sort of work, the level of incompetency attained is nothing short of appalling; and the sad part of it is, that while the wholly new buildings do no permanent harm, the ill-done and often quite needless redecoration of old work destroys what is at once a work of art such as can be no longer produced, and at the same time effaces what is often a valuable historical document.

In repainting viharas nowadays the chief errors lie in the bad colours used; ill-judged attempts at the introduction of perspective; careless and ignorant, nay often irreverent work, and the introduction of unsuitable objects; I say bad colours because the old way of making colours has been given up, and with it all restraint in the use of colour, so that where a few colours only were once used (mainly red, yellow, black, white and a greyish green), the painting now

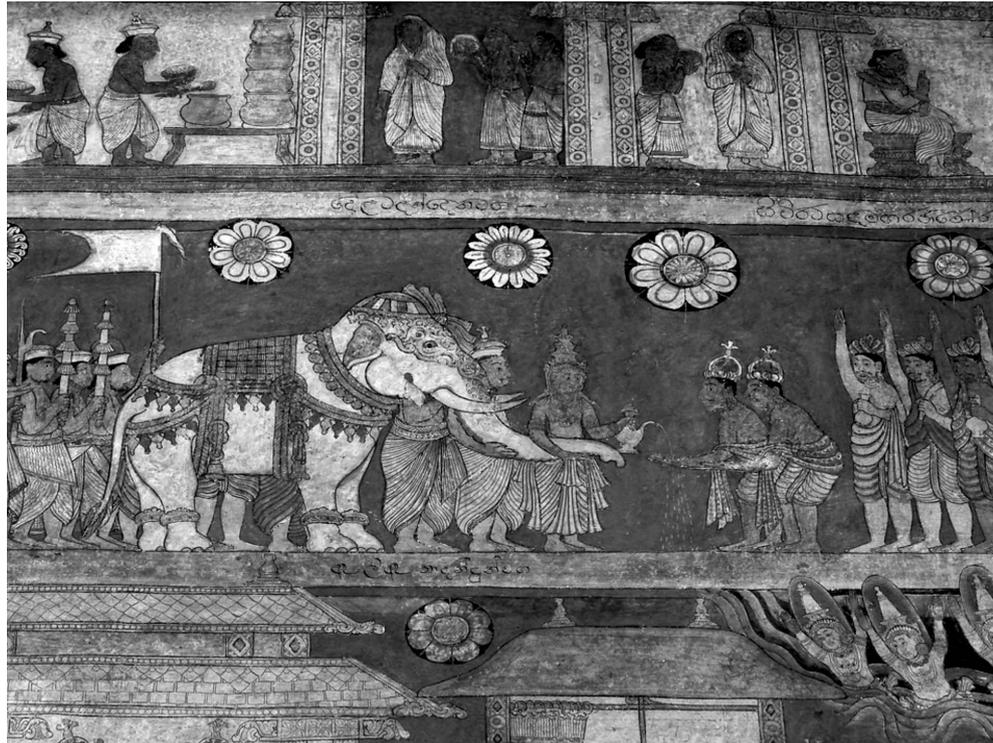
displays all the colours of the rainbow; and at the same time the beautifully conventionalised and restful traditional stylelets abandoned in favour of a weak and ineffective realism, so that the inside of a vihara whose walls were once covered with worthy and decorative paintings are now as much like an illdrawn Christmas Card as anything.

No wall painting can satisfy that has not beauty of colour and restfulness of form, and these are no longer given. In the old days the pictured wall 'was a wall still, and not a window; nay a book rather, where, if you would, you might read the stories of the gods and heroes and whose characters, whether you read them or not delighted you always with the beauty of their form and colour. Moreover, the expression of these great things being so well understood and so limited, it was not above the powers of execution of numbers of average workmen, and there was no danger of the holy and elevating subjects being treated absurdly or stupidly, so as to wound the feelings of serious men' (William Morris, speaking of Egyptian decorative art). Instead of this the most unsuitable objects are often seen in new paintings, such as pictures of street lamps, clocks and what not of that sort, and in one of the worst cases (at Ganegoda Vihara) a picture of a clerk at his table with topee and pipe beside him.

It is not at all unlikely that under the new Ordinance larger funds will be available for the upkeep of Devalas and Viharas than are now devoted to these purposes: if that is so, the danger of injury by injudicious redecoration and rebuilding will be not a little increased. I beg you to use your great influence in this matter and to see that these funds are devoted rather to the protection than to the unnecessary redecoration of these buildings. A little care and thought only are required to preserve what are sometimes priceless historical documents, and almost always works of art, such as cannot in the nature of things be produced under modern conditions.

Let me take one instance as an example, that of Degaldoruwa. I see with alarm that this vihara is specially mentioned in the petition as being in a dilapidated state, and urgently in need of repair. I know this vihara pretty well as I have lately spent 15 or 20 hours in copying part of the frescoes there. Let me recall to your minds the pictures stories on the walls, right and left of the inner door. Immediately on the left is the Wessantara Jataka, pictured in the worthiest and most beautiful manner imaginable. The wall is divided horizontally in panels wherein the story is set forth in order, the chief scenes being specially indicated by a few words of Sinhalese beneath. One of the grandest is that of King Wessantara riding on his elephant with all the insignia of state; the elephant is drawn with the greatest skill, the slow movement of the lifted feet and the swinging bells give just the right idea of dignified slow progress; immediately afterwards the elephant is seen again but King Wessantara has climbed down and is walking in front, with one hand pouring water into the hands of the Brahmans from Kalinga, betokening the gift of the elephant, and with his other arm round the elephant's trunk; the elephant has stopped the while, and the swinging bells are still. The gorgeous trappings of the elephant, the king's and the attendants' dresses and the royal insignia are drawn with very great care and just like the early illuminated manuscripts of Europe are invaluable records of past manners and customs. Two other scenes I must refer to; the first is the scene at the well, where Jujaka's wife Amittatapa is scoffed at by the other women fetching water: this scene is a fine piece of drawing: beside the well are two coconut trees, the conventional decorative treatment of which is quite perfect.

In yet another scene we are shown Madridewi and the two children walking, and next thereto, falling down and worshipping the late King Wessantara, now a hermit monk. The drawing of the trees, (chiefly nuga trees) is most lovely; and we have also a broad river flowing by tilled with fishes, and a lotus tank with six hansas swimming in it and two others marching solemnly along the road from the river to the tank.



PAINTINGS IN DEGALDORUWA. Image: Public domain.

On the right side of the door is shown Sutasoma Jataka; tracings of part relating to King Baranas, who, as you know became for a time a cannibal, lie before me now. The picture of the king's cook preparing food in the royal kitchen is a valuable historical record; the man is seated on a combined vegetable slicer and coconut scraper and is slicing up a human arm for the king's repast. On one of the posts of the kitchen is hung a pingo, with a gaboniya hanging from each end, covering the chatties in which the king's provisions had been brought that morning. Further on, we see King Baranas in the jungle, seated beneath a nuga tree with a great thorn in his foot; and he vows to offer a hundred king's sons to the Ruk-deviyo who appears in the branches above if he will cure him. He recovers and thinks the deviyo has cured him, and in another scene is shown hanging the king's sons to the deviyo's tree, as he had vowed. Ultimately of course all these are released and the wounds in their hands healed by rubbing with the bark of the tree, and King Baranas is converted by the preaching of lord Buddha, in his then reincarnation, and he is restored to his kingdom; most of which is faithfully depicted.

All these pictures are drawn in a perfectly flat decorative style: the only colours used as red, black, yellow, white and greenish-grey. These colours, as you know, were made by the artists themselves. The wall appears to glow with colour, though it is now some hundred and twenty years since the work was done. There are two other jatakas on the left and right of those already told of; these are not in quite such a good state of preservation, owing to leakage between the outer roof, and the overhanging rock, leakage which could easily have been avoided by a little care and attention. Inside the rock chamber are also very fine pictures of the life of lord Buddha; some part of the painting inside too was never completed, as if the artist had left but yesterday. Well, you will see that here are a series of paintings of great artistic and historical value: and if they are once destroyed or injured by complete or even partial repainting, nothing can replace them.

Is it not worthwhile to preserve even one memorial of the steady competency of by-gone Kandyan artists? These are the best paintings I have yet seen in Ceylon, but there are many other good ones, that is, so far as they have survived the danger of repainting — work often entrusted not even to traditional Kandyan craftsmen, but allowed to be done by men from the towns or the low country, who have picked up a smattering of perspective and lost their traditional instinct for flat and dignified decorative treatment of mural decoration. Even if the painter be a Kandyan, who sees to it that he uses the right colours in the right way? The repainting of the Dalada Maligawa, now in progress, reveals the greatest possible neglect in this respect. For instead of the traditional home-made colours with their quiet richness, are used cheap paints bought in the boutiques, and these (especially the new fangled green and blue) put on with little or no care and taste. It is just the same everywhere; for example the good old painting of the Potgulkanda Vihara near Ratnapura, was being quite spoilt when I last saw it.



DALADA MALIGAWA TEMPLE OR TEMPLE OF THE TOOTH RELIC. *Image: Valerie Magar.*



POTHGUL RAJAMAHA VIHARAYA. *Image: Public domain.*

So far I have spoken chiefly of paintings, but all that I have said is equally true of every branch of architecture; the building is either altogether neglected, or repaired and restored in such a way as to make it a veritable eyesore; if the roof is not actually mended with corrugated iron as sometimes happens, it is at least usual for the old flat tiles to be thrown away, and new semi-cylindrical ones or even Mangalore tiles to be substituted; no one dreams of getting new flat tiles made, an easy enough tiling one would think; but it would mean just a little more trouble, and no one cares enough about the matter for that.

But let us turn for a moment from the effects of injudicious restoration to those of neglect. The ruinous state of many ancient buildings, not only of Dewalas, which have indeed suffered most in this respect, but even of Viharas and those the most beautiful and important, is a crying shame. The beautiful Poya Maluwa at Kandy is fast spoiling for want of a few tiles and a little care to the woodwork to keep off the white ants: what were once great massive adze-hewn beams are eaten through and through, and scarcely hold together; parts of the gone capitals are quite destroyed. In fact, this specially lovely building could scarcely be in a worse state; it may fall to pieces any day. Every day and in every district, some such memorial of your national ideals and your national art is rotting before your eyes, and you do nothing to save it.

The delicate stonework, too, is plastered over with whitewash: but thank heaven, that is not a permanent injury, but one that can be amended any day. But once more as to the structural repairs (and they ought to be taken in hand at once), it is worse than useless to try and get such a building as this repaired by contract; the work must be done under the constant supervision of someone in full sympathy with, and with full knowledge of Kandyan architecture. We should rest satisfied with nothing less than the protection and preservation of all good work remaining — protection alike from ruin at the hands of would-be friends, and destruction at the hands of evident foes such as damp and ants.



TILES, TEMPLE OF THE TOOTH RELIC. *Image: Valerie Magar.*



WOOD STRUCTURE, TEMPLE
OF THE TOOTH RELIC.
Image: Valerie Magar.

Speaking generally; the ancient temples have fallen into a state of disrepair, and some of them are partly in ruins and a considerable number of the valuable gifts and ornaments have been stolen away. The revenues of temple lands have been misappropriated by trustees, members of the District Committees and others (Petition of 29.12.1904). Some examples are given — “In the Dambulla Vihara... the historical architectural facade at the entrance has been allowed to fall into a state of disrepair. Some parts of the interior are in a dangerously dilapidated state. Most of the valuable works of arts, being gifts made by the Kings of old to the priests of the temples, have been stolen. From the Ganga Rama Vihara... two golden alms bowls and thirteen silver ones, and silk shawls ... have all been stolen away.” “The Biguslena Vihara is in ruins” and so forth (I am not personally acquainted with the last named Vihara, and it is several years since I saw Dambulla myself – but the list might be added to *ad libitum* from any district). The case of Dewalas is even worse. In Uva and Sabaragamuwa, for example, the ancient Dewala buildings at Horagone. Alutnuwara, Ammaduwa and elsewhere are in a ruinous condition; they are used as cattle sheds, the floors are thick with bats’ dung, the timbers are eaten by white ants, the movable belongings taken away and sold by those who should have been their guardians.



DAMBULLA. Image: Valerie Magar.

It may be argued that the Dewales are not connected with Buddhism, and so are of less consequence. But it is not now on religious ground that I appeal to you on behalf of ancient buildings, although so far as the Viharas are concerned, a good deal might be said on that score; it is for the buildings as works of art, which once destroyed, can never be replaced, and on account of their value as historical documents, that I appeal for their preservation. If you suffer these monuments of the Sinhalese architectural style to perish –and some of the buildings I have referred to are almost past hope– remember that no power on earth can replace them, that you can no longer build as men built then; you can no more do that, than we in Europe, by any expenditure of money and pains whatsoever, can raise tip a Gothic building, no not even a barn, such as simple unlettered men could build six hundred years ago.

It is heart-rending for so many buildings and frescoes to be ruined by mere neglect of the simplest and often quite inexpensive precautions; all that was needed being a few tiles and a few reepers here and there, a beam protected from white ants and so forth. I thought, when I was working lately at Degaldoruwa, of Robert Browning's "indignant vindication of the early mediaeval painters": here are some of his words. —

"Wherever a fresco peels and drops,
Wherever an outline weakens and wanes,
Till the latest life in the painting stops,
Stands one whom each fainter pulse-tick pains.
One wishful each scrap should clutch its brick,
Each tinge not wholly escape the plaster,
A lion who dies of an ass's kick.
The wronged great Soul of an ancient master."

I hoped too that the artist was glad to see there one to whom the remembrance of his good work will lie a lasting pleasure and who thinks of him and his fellows as "still surely living, still real men and capable of receiving love" whom "I love no less than the great men, poets and painters and such like, who are on earth now."

I have said no word of the other sorts of buildings I meant to speak of viz., private houses and ambalams. Of the latter I know but few really fine and ancient examples; of these, one is at Mangalagama near Kegalla: this ambalam was rebuilt so late as the middle of the last century from the materials of an earlier one, and is, even so, a very fine specimen of Kandyan architecture, especially as regards the timbering of the roof and the beautiful gates or drooping lotus capitals, so different from the careless modern copies that are sometimes seen, as for example in the new ambalam at Ratnapura. which is indeed built in a real Kandyan style, but much degraded in the details of its wood-work, Of private houses, walawwas and smaller houses of the old sort, with their beautiful massive doors, and stout adze-cut timbers, fewer and fewer survive each year; even if their owners feel their old homes unsuited to their present needs, may not a few of these be preserved to tell their children's children how men lived and wrought in the old days before progress and commerce changed the very face of the earth?

Things have gone the same way in Europe; sadly indeed as our English mediaeval buildings have suffered from neglect, and even intentional spoliation, they have suffered even more in the last century at the hands of the decorator and restorer. 'The ruin caused by the Puritans was light in the comparison to the wreckage that has been occasioned by churchwardens and ignorant persons' in modern times. For once more I do assure you that the day of steady competency on the part of the Kandyan craftsman, though but a hundred years behind us, is no less far off and out of reach than are the traditional art-and skill of the European craftsmen of five hundred years ago.

It is, then, in the words of the manifesto of the English Society for the Preservation of Ancient Buildings founded by William Morris in 1877, "for all these buildings that we plead, and call upon those who have to deal with them, to put protection in the place of restoration, to stave off decay by daily care, to prop a perilous wall or mend a leaky roof by such means as are obviously meant for support or covering and show no pretence of other art, and otherwise to resist all tampering with either the fabric or the ornament or the building as it stands; ...in fine, to treat your ancient buildings as monuments of a bygone art, created by bygone manners, that modern art cannot meddle with without destroying."

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