

## Garment as a Symbol of Power & Morality: Western Costumes in Buddhist Art in Late-Colonial Period of Sri Lanka

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### Abstract

*The objective of this article is to discuss the presence of Western costumes in Buddhist temple paintings and to identify the factors that influenced such integration of non-Buddhist, non-Sinhalese costumes in the Buddhist art tradition. For the present study, I have used twenty randomly selected temples in the Southern and Western maritime regions. This paper discusses that the presence of Western Costumes is a noteworthy feature in the Buddhist mural tradition in the maritime region (or low-country) - that is known as 'Southern School'. It also reveals that a number of socio-political reasons such as expansion of Western standards and social codes in the colonial society, influence of the ethnocentric (or Eurocentric) knowledge produced by the colonial rulers, passing of the traditional patronage to the hands of new elites in the low-country, changes of the work-culture of artisans and Buddhist campaigns against the colonial power etc., have caused the presence of Western costumes in the temple paintings in the maritime region.*

*Keywords: Buddhist Art, Temple Paintings, Colonial Period, Western Costumes*

The abundant use of Western costumes in the depictions of *Jataka* stories and sequences of life of the Buddha in the temple paintings of the Southern and Western maritime regions (or low-country) is one of the enigmatic issues of Sri Lankan art history. Artists in the maritime region have painted a variety of Western costumes in combination with local-styled garments, in contrary to the monotonous, simple white garments in the murals of Central Kandyan School in the Up-country. The use of Western costumes for the sequences in the *Jataka* stories and the life of the Buddha that took place in the oriental social context appears to be a contradictory phenomenon. Among such costumes, trousers, coats, over-coats, frocks, jackets, gowns, boots, shoes, socks, hats, and belts etc., are much popular. Western costumes have commonly been used for the royal or noble characters such as kings, queens, princes, princesses, *brahmins*, and ministers in the scenes of the *Jataka* stories and those of the life of the Buddha. Also, even some figures of *Bodhisattva* and some deities clad in Western garments are found in the murals of Southern school. However, some inferior characters depicted in Western garments are also found in the maritime region but the numbers are relatively low.

Among the temples in the Southern region, the Kataluwa Pûrvârâmaya has a variety of figures dressed in Western garments. The story of Mahadanasitu on the outer south ambulatory wall in the image house is one such well-known example. In the scene