

Mimicry or Resistance: Visual Response to Colonial Politics (1820-1920) in Later Buddhist Art of the low-country

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The enigmatic presence of colonial political representations such as the depiction of the British monarch and the British coat of arms at some of the prominent locations of the temples is a unique phenomenon in later Buddhist art of the low-country region of Sri Lanka. Such depictions are not mere imitations of the originals, but reproductions with numerous modifications by local artists. Therefore, the objective of this study was to understand (a) the responses of those visual signifiers and (b) the factors that affected the artists to produce such creations. Twenty temples from the low-country were used for this study. Semiotics was adopted as the main theoretical tool in reading, decoding and interpreting the selected visual texts. It was found that the temple artists have integrated the images of British monarch and the British emblem into Buddhist art as a part of the survival strategy carried out by the low-country Buddhist establishment to counter balance the resistance of the colonizer while expanding their power-base within the colonial context. It was also found that those depictions are ‘collective responses’ emerged from the involvement of artists, monks, and patrons. The temple artists have played a crucial role in visualizing ‘collective thoughts’ in a new pictorial language with hybrid characteristics. At the first phase, the images of the British monarch and the coat of arms have been incorporated with the sense of praising the colonizer and colonial values; however, in the second phase, those signifiers have been re-used to challenge, to question or to reject the hegemony of the colonizer along with the advancements of Buddhist nationalistic movement.