

## PAINTED JATAKA STORIES OF INDIA AND SRI LANKA

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Of the themes that have been used by the ancient artists of India and Sri Lanka, the representations of the *Jataka* stories are prominent. These have been predominantly used and painted on the spacious, whitish walls of the front portions of the temples, close to the main entrance, where enough sunlight is available to observe the paintings easily. Of the sites in the two countries where these *Jataka* murals were painted, the caves of Ajanta in India receive the most important place. From the extant paintings alone (from second century BC to sixth century AD) it is evident that numerous *Jataka* tales are represented on the walls of the site. The following *Jatakas* have been identified: *Sibi*, *Sankapāla*, *Kshantivādī*, *Maitribala*, *Mahākapi*, *Sāma*, *Chaddanta*, *Vessantara*, *Mahasutasōma*, *Matsya*, *Hasti*, *Mahājanaka*, *Champeyya*, *Mahaummagga*, *Hamsa*, *Vidurapandita*, *Sarabhamiga*, *Ruru*, *Matipōsaka*, *Kumbha*, *Sasa*, *Mahisha* and *Nigrōdgamiga* etc. Of these various stories, in cave nos 1 and 16, the *Mahaummagga Jātaka* story was painted twice, while the *Sibi Jātaka* has been painted in cave nos. 1 and 17. Similarly, in cave nos. 2 and 17 also the *Ruru* and *Hamsa Jataka* stories were painted twice, while the *Jataka* stories of *Mahasutasoma* and *Hasti* have been painted in cave nos. 16 and 17. In addition, the *Jataka* stories of *Chaddanta* and *Sama* have been painted in cave nos. 10 and 17.

It is obvious that except at Ajanta, the paintings of *Jataka* stories have not been preserved at other Buddhist sites of India of the ancient period. The painted *Jataka* stories of Sri Lanka, belong to the twelfth century AD, consist of *Vessantara* (Tivamka shrine and Maravidiya), *Asanka* (Tivamka shrine), *Sasa* (Tivamka shrine and Maravidiya), *Tundila* (Tivamka shrine), *Vidhurapandita* (Tivamka shrine), *Guttila* (Tivamka shrine), *Cullapaduma* (Tivamka shrine) *Mugapakkha* (Tivamka shrine), *Sama* (Tivamka shrine), *Mahasudassana* (Tivamka shrine), *Kusa* (Tivamka shrine), *Kalagola* story of *Mahaummagga Jataka* (Tivamka shrine) and *Maitribala* (Tivamka shrine). Accordingly, it is evident that there are 36 identified *Jatakas* at the sites of Ajanta, Tivamka shrine and Maravidiya of the two countries (i.e. 23 *Jatakas* at Ajanta and 13 at Sri Lankan sites).

When considering the utility or purpose of executing these religious paintings of both countries, it is clear that the objective was to earn merit and the main aim was to visualise the ideals of the Buddhist creed and to illustrate by pictorial parables some of the beautiful sentiments of the Buddhist religion. Since originally these were designed to appeal to the higher feelings of the spectator, sustained by their supreme charm the littleness of the viewer's own personality vanishes and he becomes exalted and absorbed. In other words, the paintings have been used for instilling faith and ardour; for good deeds and conduct; and avoidance of misdeeds and wickedness in the minds of both monastic and lay worshipers. In fact, painting was a lively medium through which such an exemplary life could be taught to the sinner and the sacred knowledge revived in the memory of the saint. It was also primarily an attempt to present the spirit rather than the form of religion, a story rather than an idea.