

Ritual Symbolism and Sacred Placement of the Sapu Flower in Kandyan-Era Temple Murals: A Visual Analysis of Ritual Hierarchy and Theological Meaning in the Kandy District, Sri Lanka

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Abstract

Temple murals in Sri Lanka from the Kandyan period are visual representations of Buddhist phenomenon. Their use of color, line, shapes, and spatial disposition is considered divine. In this phenomenon, the *Sapu* flower is of particular ritual importance and symbolizes purity, enlightenment, and devotion. Despite the motif's prominence, the ritual context of its placement and its aesthetic characteristics have been little scrutinised. This paper employs a visual semiotic and aesthetic-phenomenological approach to *Sapu* motifs in seven temples. The temples are in the Kandy District and include: *Danthure*, *Diyakelinawala Kithsiri Mewan*, *Sooriyagoda*, *Hindagala*, *Degaldoruwa*, *Medawala*, and the Temple of the Tooth Relic (*Sri Dalada Maligawa*). High-resolution photographs were analyzed through a matrix of placement, manifestation type, color, line work, and other associated flower motifs. Patterns were derived, and relationships were established between visual elements and the underlying theology. *Sapu* motifs were mostly located in ritual proximity to figures of the Buddha, bhikkhus, deities, royal patrons, and pagodas, while their decorative usage was almost non-existent. All temples presented the flower in a naturalistic style, which supported canonical fidelity. The prevailing colours of yellow and golden yellow were understood to symbolize enlightenment, while white was associated with purity, and earthy red with spiritual grounding. The thin, rhythmic lines suggested some monastic discipline and meditative calm. Lotus and *Sapu*, along with other floral motifs such as *Na*, *Wetakeyya*, and *Parasathu*, ranked lower. *Sapu*, as depicted, is considered a ritual and theological emblem, rather than an ornamental feature. Its positioned placement, natural depiction, and lack of chromatic and linear vitality support Kandy as the ritual and artistic center of Sri Lankan Buddhist muralism.

Keywords: *Magnolia champaca*; Kandyan murals, ritual symbolism, Buddhist art, aesthetics.

1. Introduction

The Kandyan temple murals from the 18th to the 19th century represent the peak of Sri Lankan Buddhist art. Rather than the murals serving as decoration, the artists viewed them as a medium to express theology. In Buddhist visual culture, these works serve as rituals, each with a different image, color, and line, and each serving a different aspect of Buddhist teaching, ethics, and political philosophy. In this context, the *Sapu* flower (*Magnolia champaca*) emerges as a readily identifiable symbol of sacredness, devotion, purity, offering, and enlightenment. The *Sapu* flower's constant presence on temple shrine walls, pagoda enclosures, and other annexed spaces suggest that it serves a purpose that transcends mere decoration. It functions as a theological representation that unifies ritual symbols within the metaphysical framework of Theravāda Buddhism. In spite of the numerous occurrences of the *Sapu* motif in Kandyan mural art, it is surprising that the *Sapu* motif has been the subject of very few studies. The works of Coomaraswamy (1979), Paranavithana (1956), Hewapathirana (2012), and Somathilaka (2013, 2021), while covering the philosophical and stylistic roots of sacred paintings in Sri Lanka, remain foundational but largely descriptive, with limited inter-site visual analysis. Their focus in most cases is overarching narratives and they tend to ignore the actual inter-site data, evidence, and analysis of the data that could help describe the visual motifs and the role they play in the spiritual and ritual grammar of temple art. As a result, the description of the *Sapu* and the manner in which it is spatially arranged, formally expressed, and coloristically expressed in relation to the dominant focus of the mural to which it is anchored, and the interconnection of the dominant and subordinated focal points in the context of inter-iconography of the santic and metaphysical relationship to the mural's structure, has not been attempted.

This research attempts to fill the gap in the literature by using a ritual-semiotic approach, interpreting the *Sapu* flower as a sign within a scaffolding system that bridges doctrinal teaching and aesthetic form. Following Geertz's (1973, 93p) idea regarding symbols as "models of and for" the religious life, the research analyzes the *Sapu* flower as a coded image embodying the sacredness of Buddhism. Through a rigorous visual analysis, the research illustrates how the *Sapu* motif's spatial placement, naturalistic rendering, chromatic hierarchy, and line discipline evoke the ritual restraint ethos of the Kandyan culture. It employs a cross-temple comparative method, recording *Sapu* motifs in seven principal temples of the Kandy District: *Danthure*, *Diyakelinawala*, *Kithsiri Mewan*, *Sooriyagoda*, *Hindagala*, *Degaldoruwa*, *Medawala*, and the Temple of the Tooth Relic (*Sri Dalada Maligawa*). The study focuses on the *Sapu* flower and identifies it as a primary semiotic element in the Kandyan visual theology by applying four analytical dimensions: placement, manifestation type, colour usage, and line quality. The results reconstruct the visual syntax with which ritual hierarchy and doctrinal purity were articulated, thus further confirming Kandy's status as the canonical Buddhist mural orthodoxy center in Sri Lanka. Using visual semiotics and aesthetic phenomenology, the research shows the role of Buddhist art in stabilising doctrine, sanctifying space, and doctrinally expressing the interdependence of faith, kingship, and moral order.

2. Methodology

This study adopted a visual semiotic and aesthetic-phenomenological approach to examine the ritual symbolism and aesthetic representation of the *Sapu* flower (Magnolia champaca) in the murals of a Kandy District temple. The approach combined semiotic interpretation, which involves the ritual, symbolic, and theological meanings, with aesthetic-phenomenological analysis that explores the spatial and compositional divisions of form and the role of color and line in evoking spiritual perception. Informed by Coomaraswamy's (1956/1979) concept of spiritual realism and Geertz's (1973, pp 87-125) interpretive anthropology framework, sacred art, in this case, was not considered to be a mimetic representation but a medium of revelation, art of the Buddhist spirit rigorously disciplined in form (Somathilaka, 2013, 2021).

Purposeful sampling was conducted in order to maintain the historical authenticity and the stylistic variety of the Kandyan mural corpus. The exclusion criteria included (a) identifiable *Sapu* motifs within the mural compositions; (b) original 18th-19th century layers of the painting preserved; (c) formal clearance granted by the custodians of the temple; and (d) proof of inherited aesthetic criteria of proportion, linear rhythm, and color restraint. The *Danthure Raja Maha Viharaya*, *Diyakelinawala Kithsiri Mewan Raja Maha Viharaya*, *Sooriyagoda Raja Maha Viharaya*, *Hindagala Raja Maha Viharaya*, *Degaldoruwa Raja Maha Viharaya*, *Medawala Raja Maha Viharaya*, and the Temple of the Tooth Relic (*Sri Dalada Maligawa*) in the Kandy District formed the sample. Collectively, they encompass the ritual and artistic orthodoxy of the Kandyan school of muralism. More than 350 digital, high resolution photographs, spanning the borders, ceilings, narrative panels, and adjoining iconographies, were acquired. Each image was organized and filed under the temple name, spatial context, and the composing order.

Photographic observations were conducted with little interference, which involved taking pictures in natural lighting to preserve the pigments and surfaces. With the assistance of concentrated observations, the pigments were able to be sorted by the dominant colours and their gradients, especially with Buddhist color symbolism meaning—Yellow and golden yellow meaning enlightenment and sacred radiance, white meaning purity, and earthy red meaning devotion (Hewapathirana, 2012; Nishanthi & Neththasinghe, 2021). Using archival manuscripts and previous restorations and catalogs (Chutiwongs, Prematilake, & Silva, 1990; Somathilaka, 2013), along with temple manuscripts, restoration records, and previous art-historical catalogues acquired from previous research, allowed for the murals to be confirmed in regard to their history and iconography. The field notes observed the surrounding environment along with the subject, capturing the relationships that existed between the *Sapu* motifs and the ritual figures, including the Buddha, bhikkhus, deities, and royal patrons.

A coding matrix was created to analyse and classify five interrelated dimensions: (1) Placement (Near Buddha, Near Bhikkhu, Near Deity, Near Royal Figure, Near Pagoda, Decorative, *Sapu* Tree): spatial or contextual positioning of *Sapu* motif in mural composition; (2) Manifestation Type (1 = Naturalistic

depiction, 2 = Stylised or Inspired motif): realism in depiction of plants; (3) Colour Usage (Yellow, Golden Yellow, Earthy Red, Bluish Black, White, Dark Green): dominant colour or tone; (4) Line Quality (Thin, Bold, Rhythmic, Straight): stylistic attributes of contour and outline; and (5) Associated Motifs appraised for iconographic and ritualistic interrelation, which include the lotus, Na flower, Wetakeyya, Parasathu, and water lily. Each motif was Binary coding (present = 1, absent = 0) was applied. Thresholds were pre-tested in a pilot subset to balance sensitivity and specificity and to support inter-coder agreement ($\kappa = .86$)

Inter-coder reliability was achieved through double-coding 10% of the image dataset resulting in an agreement of 92% with a Cohen's κ of .86, exceptionally high levels of agreement. Symbolic interpretations were validated for Cultural accuracy by expert triangulation with three senior art historians and two temple custodians. Comparisons with the canonical literature, which includes Coomaraswamy (1979), Chutiwongs et, al. (1990), Hewapathirana (2012), and Somathilaka (2021), to ensure that the traditional aesthetic philosophy of the Kandyan period was not violated.

The analysis was done in three steps. The quantitative analysis, first, recorded the occurrence, distribution, and co-occurrence of motifs at the surveyed temples. The second step was an aesthetic–phenomenological reading which, in this case, analysed the formal aspects of symmetry, rhythm, chromatic dominance, and visual balance in each mural composition (Somathilaka, 2021). The last stage was a semiotic synthesis, which in this case was combining the aesthetic information with Coomaraswamy (1979)'s spiritual realism and Geertz (1973)'s symbolic anthropology. With this synthesis, the *Sapu* motif was understood in the context of Theravāda Buddhist art as a visual expression of ritual purity, royal patronage, and cosmological harmony.

The research was granted ethical approval by the University of Sri Jayewardenepura Ethics Review Committee (Ref. No. ERC-HSS/FGS/2023/02/04) and subsequently, the Department of Archaeology, Sri Lanka, and the custodians of the respective temples also provided the requisite permissions. Every piece of fieldwork complied with non-intrusive recording of heritage procedures and cultural etiquette, and custodial clearance was granted prior to the publication of the work. This work maintained honesty and openness in research and writing and cultural sensitivity and protection of the Kandy District of Sri Lanka and the mural heritage which is considered sacred.

3. Results

The following table presents an integrated summary of the *Sapu* flower's ritual placement, artistic manifestation, colour usage, line quality, and associated motifs across seven major temples in the Kandy District. It captures how spatial positioning reflects ritual hierarchy, how naturalistic depiction upholds

canonical purity, and how controlled colour and line express spiritual discipline. The inclusion of companion motifs especially the lotus illustrates symbolic interdependence within Buddhist cosmology. Together, these variables reveal the *Sapu* as a central emblem of purity, enlightenment, and ritual devotion in the Kandyan-era visual tradition.

Table 1 - Floral Border Motif Featuring the Sapu Flower in Kandyan-Era Temple Paintings

Temple	Placement									Manifestation		Colour						Line quality					
	Near Buddha	Near Bhikkus	Near Deities	Near Pagoda	Held by Bhikku	Near Royal Figures	Near Bodhisattva	Decorative Purpose	Sapu Trees with Sapu Flowers	Sapu Baskets	Sapu Flower as it is	Sapu Inspired Flower Motifs	Yellow	Golden Yellow	Earthy Red	Bluish Black	White	Dark Green	Pink	Thin	Bold	Rhythmic	Straight
Danthure Raja Maha Viharaya	1	1	1			1					1		1		1						1		1
Diyakelinawala Kithsiri Mewan Raja Maha Viharaya				1		1					1		1		1	1					1		1
Sooriyagoda Raja Maha Viharaya				1							1		1		1	1	1			1		1	
Hindagala Raja Maha Viharaya	1				1						1		1		1					1		1	
Degaldoruwa Raja Maha Viharaya	1	1	1	1	1	1					1		1		1	1	1	1	1	1		1	
Medawala Raja Maha Viharaya	1		1	1	1		1				1		1		1				1		1		
Temple of Tooth Relic	1				1						1			1	1	1	1	1	1	1			1

3.1. Placement of *sapu* flower

The Kandy District of Sri Lanka features several temples using *Sapu* flowers in their murals (as seen in Table 1). The *Sapu* flower was frequently painted around primary figures of worship, such as the Buddha or the bhikkhus, with minimal attention given to decorative placement. This shows that the *Sapu* flower was considered to be of religious in nature, rather than decorative, affirming the religious importance of the *Sapu* flower within the Kandyan *Sapu* murals. All seven temples of the Kandy District incorporated *Sapu* motifs within sacred narrative and ritual contexts. The flower was frequently depicted in proximity to images of the Buddha, indicating the profound symbolic association with spiritual illumination and purity. In contrast, the *Sapu* placed close to the bhikkhus enhanced the continuing importance of the monk community in ritualistic practices, whereby the *Sapu* was offered as a visual and devotional presentation. Temples, including *Danthure*, *Sooriyagoda*, *Degaldoruwa*, and *Medawala*, contained *Sapu* flowers positioned close to deities, suggesting a common visual analogy within Buddhist and transcendent iconography. This demonstrates the flower's ability to function across cosmological bounds, connecting ritualistic domains of the sacred and profane. The *Sapu* motifs in proximity to the figures of royalty in temples *Danthure*, *Degaldoruwa*, and *Medawala* displayed the cultural convergence of royal iconography with ritualised *Sapu* offerings.

At many sites, especially at *Sooriyagoda*, *Hindagala*, *Degaldoruwa*, *Medawala* and even at the Temple of the Tooth Relic, the *Sapu* was depicted in the hands of bhikkhus, which showed its application in the worship rites. These illustrations represent the *Sapu* not only in its floral form but also as a liturgical element. By contrast, ornamental examples were almost non-existent which accounts for the preference of the Kandyan painters for sacred purpose and meaning rather than mere decoration.

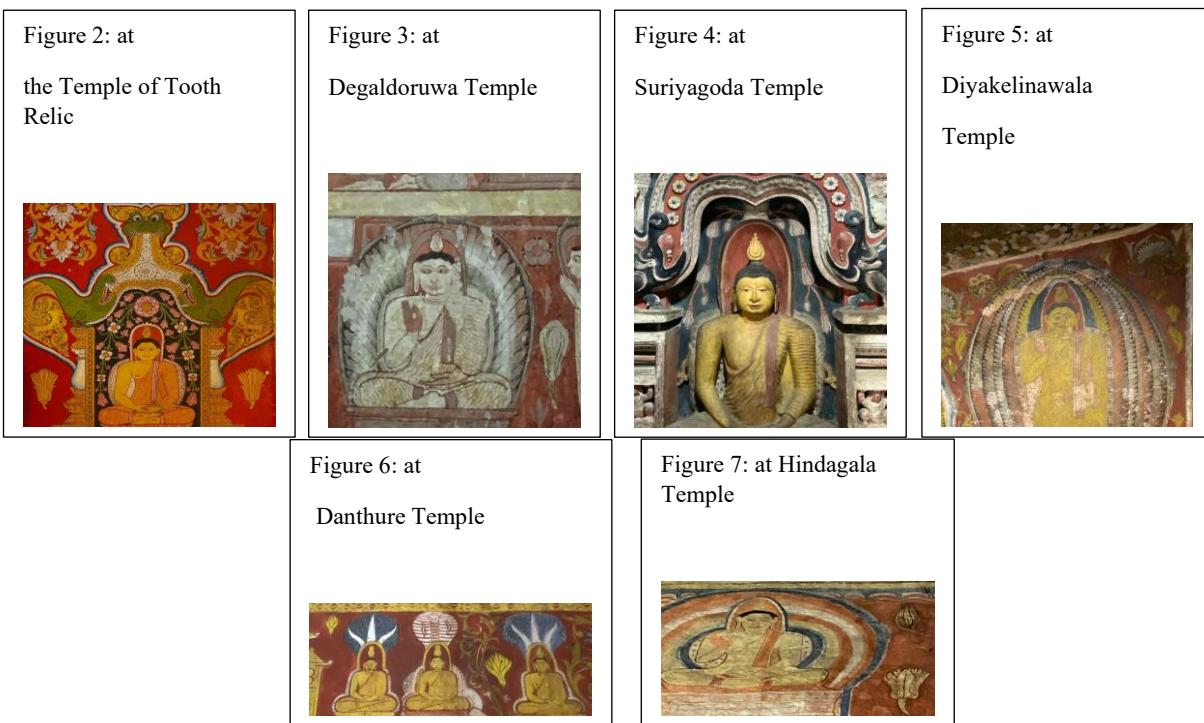
There was a certain pattern in compositions featuring pagodas, in which *Sapu* flowers were incorporated into visual contexts that expressed the fusion of the sacred built environment with nature. Their closeness to the pagoda reinforced the idea of sacredness, associating the physical structure of the stupa with the metaphysical notions of purity and transcendence. In the visual data, *Sapu* motifs were generally absent from narrative scenes; however, a notable exception occurs in the *Vessantara Jātaka* panel at *Medawala Viharaya*. One remarkable example is from the *Vessantara Jātaka* panel at *Medawala Viharaya*, in which *Sapu* motifs are positioned in a zone of the image of King Vessantara, metaphorically representative of compassion and moral discipline. This shows that the *Sapu* was still considered to be sacred in the more narrative contexts. In general, spatial analysis illustrates a uniform ritual hierarchy: *Sapu* motifs were most often positioned in relation to the Buddha and bhikkhu figures, then to deities, royal personages, and pagodas. Contexts of almost exclusive decoration were highly uncommon. This arrangement of space designated Kandy as the ritual and symbolic center of *Sapu* representations in the Sri Lankan mural tradition. The absence of exterior ornamentation, the positioned

dominance of sacred spacing, the peripheral incorporation of the *Sapu* into devotional royal and religious imagery, all spatially and contextually interlinked, emphasize the flower having canonised significance as a visual representation of ritual devotion in the Kandyan period.

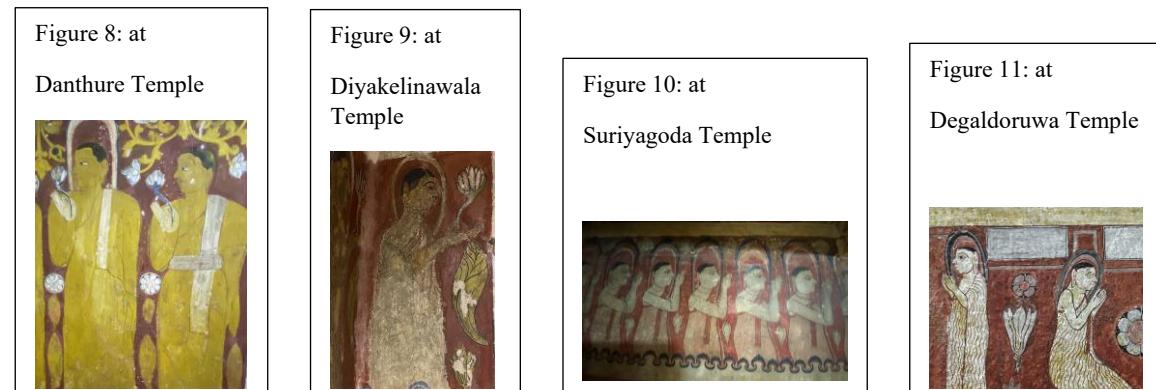


Figure 1. *Sapu* flower motif integrated in the upper border near the Bodhisattva (Vessantara Jataka scene) at Medawela Raja Maha Viharaya, illustrating the Kandyan-era floral symbolism in narrative mural composition.

Sapu flower depiction near Buddha:



Sapu flower depiction near Bhikkhu:



***Sapu* flower depiction near Pagoda:**

Figure 12: at

Diyakelinawala Temple



Figure 15: at Medawela Temple



Figure 13: at

Suriyagoda Temple



Figure 14: at

Degaldoruwa Temple



Figure 16: at Hindagala Temple



***Sapu* flower depiction near Deva:**

Figure 17: at

Danthure Temple



Figure 18: at

Degaldoruwa Temple



Figure 19: at

Medawela Temple



***Sapu* flower held by Bhikkhu:**

Figure 20: at

Medawela Temple



Figure 21 at

Degaldoruwa Temple



Figure 22: at Temple of
Tooth Relic



***Sapu* flower depiction near Royal Figures:**

Figure 23: at

Danthure Temple



Figure 24: at

Diyakelinawela Temple



Figure 25: at

Degaldoruwa Temple



3.2. Manifestation Type

From the temples in the Kandy District, all seven temples represent the *Sapu* flower in a naturalistic way (see Table 1). None of the temples adopts stylised, abstract, or decorative alternatives of the motif. The fact that all seven temples chose naturalism exclusively shows the profound ritual and symbolic reverence the *Sapu* flower holds in Kandyan visual culture. Each portrayal is a meticulous copy of the flower in nature, with its layered petals having reverberating stamen and its form as a whole being beautifully balanced, demonstrating not just a botanical fidelity but devotional intention as well. The artists captured the *Sapu* in its true form, not for the sake of being a naturalistic render, but for the preservation of its sacred essence and spiritual enterprise in the context of Buddhism. The rigour of this methodology places it squarely within the domain of accepted orthodoxy. Painters on these temples adhered to a shared visual discipline, which curtailed innovation and embellishment. The absence of stylised motifs or hybrid approaches implies a wilful restraint on creative expression within transcendental parameters, guaranteeing that every representation preserved the ritual and doctrinal sanctity of the temple complex. Even though these works were produced in different temple settings, the naturalistic uniformity across the sites implies that the artists subscribed to a collective ritual philosophy rather than independent or regional stylistic approaches. This unified commitment on stylistic reverence reinforces the argument that Kandy is the ritual center of Buddhist mural painting in Sri Lanka, where religious veneration overshadowed decorative innovation. The opposite is true of the Galle District, where strong decorative pluralism is evident, with floral motifs frequently integrated into bordering and ceiling adornment. The Kegalle District illustrates a transitional stage, combining both naturalistic and stylised features. The rest of the Kandy District, in contrast, perpetuates a continuous, unbroken naturalistic canon, earning the title of the most ritually orthodox in Sri Lankan mural painting. The Kandyan temples, in this case, serve to perpetuate the legacy of the unbroken naturalistic representation in the depiction of the *Sapu* flower, and thus, serve to erode the narrative that these works were the adornment of the temple.

Figure 26: Sample of *sapu* motif at Suriyagoda viharaya



Figure 27: Sample of *sapu* motif at Degaldoruwa viharaya



Figure 28 : Sample of *sapu* motif at the temple of Tooth relic



Figure 29: Degaldoruwa artists' style



Figure 30: Suriyagoda artists' style



3.3 Colour Usage

In the temples of the Kandy District, the depictions of the *Sapu* flower are chromatically dominated by yellow and golden yellow, with white as a subordinate tone and earth red as a background color (Table 1). The chromatic hierarchy also aligns with a symbolic one, where yellow and gold represent enlightenment and sacred light, white embodies purity and transcendence, and red signifies spiritual grounding. The exquisite golden yellow tone always found exclusively within the Temple of the Tooth Relic magnifies the atmosphere of sanctity and divine illumination associated with the relic. Six temples also contain yellow, and golden yellow takes the painting of the Temple of the Tooth Relic, denoting its elevated ritual and symbolic status. Gold shines through white in Degaldoruwa and Dalada Maligawa, suggesting a tone of spiritual purity and reciprocating the white gold's radiance. Earth red is present in all temples as a supporting color, compositional, and balancing the luminous tones. The subdued,

abstract representations of dark green and bluish black characterize the Kandyan aesthetic tradition. The suggested wording demonstrates that Kandyan artists operated from a defined set of colours that matched Buddhist philosophy rather than merely decoration. For example, yellow and gold dominance illustrates the ‘inner light’ and the theme of awakening, while the intentional restraint of darker colours supports compositional unity and ritual focus. Overall, the use of color within *Sapu* motifs from Kandy demonstrates an orderly and disciplined devotion, rich in symbolic meaning, and expresses the artistic and spiritual devotion that characterize Kandyan art. The harmony within art and religion is a profound element that defines the Kandyan mural form.

Figure 31: White *Sapu* motif around the Buddha image at the temple of Tooth Relic



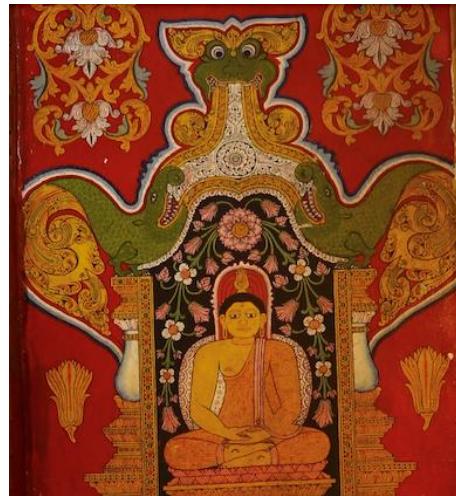
Figure 32: White *Sapu* motifs at Degaldoruwa Viharaya



Figure 33: Golden colour *Sapu* motif at the Temple of Tooth Relic



Figure 34: Golden and pink colour *Sapu* motif at the Temple of the Tooth Relic



3.4. Line Quality

Within all seven temples located in Kandy District, the quality in the lines of the *Sapu* flower illustrations appears delicate and controlled, revealing skilful application and devotional restraint (Table 1). Fine and sensitive contours comprise the majority of the strokes in *Sooriyagoda*, *Hindagala*, *Degaldoruwa*, *Medawala*, and the Tooth Relic Temple. These lines depict veins, petals, and contours in a soft and delicate manner, triggering a feeling of peace and concentration. Rhythmic curves can be found in the petals depicting subtle movement that suggests life and motion within stasis, a tribute to the meditative phase of samadhi. Bold or straight strokes found only in the temples of *Danthure* and *Diyakelinawala* are structural, serving to stabilise the composition more than ornament the structure. These fine, controlled lines in every illustration suggest the strong visual culture of Buddhism. Each line also carries a spiritual quality, suggesting the artist's observation of restraint and mindfulness. The gentle organic flow of the rhythmic strokes, albeit sparse, offers balance between the sacred stillness and dynamic life that surges through the illustration. This dynamic resonates more with meditative awareness than emotional flourish; it suggests controlled motion and composure. In the works of *Danthure* and *Diyakelinawala*, differences from the sculptural rigidity and minimal bold strokes reflect divergent local workshop interpretations which do not breach the Kandyan definition. The artists of Kandy had the ability to take a line and transform it into a meditation, a physical and visual embodiment of mindfulness and purity. In this case, the *Sapu* motifs position Kandy as a locus of disciplined practice, functioning as a centrepiece of moral restraint paired with artistic ambition. It illustrates a preserved form of Kandy's echoing the district's devotion as the ritual and formal remain of Sri Lankan mural art.

Figure 36: Heavy and monotonous lines at *Diyakelinawala* Temple



vs

Figure 37: slender and rhythmic lines at *Diyakelinawala* Temple



Figure 38: *Sapu* motif at Degaldoruwa temple



Figure 39: *Sapu* motif at Medawala temple



Figure 40: *Sapu* motif at Temple of Tooth Relic



3.5. Associated Motifs

The *Sapu* flower frequently appears in conjunction with other floral motifs in the murals of the Kandy District temples, forming sacred symbolic pairings that reinforce Buddhist doctrinal meaning. Among these, the lotus emerges as the most consistent and dominant companion, creating a visual and spiritual dyad where the lotus represents awakening and enlightenment, while the *Sapu* embodies purity and devotion. This recurring partnership underscores their complementary roles within the Theravāda Buddhist cosmology and artistic canon.

Table 2: Associated Floral Motifs with the *Sapu* Flower in Kandy District Temples

Temple	Other Flowers
Danthure Raja Maha Viharaya	Lotus, Wetakeyya, Parasathu
Diyakelinawala Kithsiri Mewan RMV	Lotus, Wetakeyya, Parasathu
Sooriyagoda Raja Maha Viharaya	Lotus, Water Lily, Na Flower
Hindagala Raja Maha Viharaya	Lotus, Na Flower, Wetakeyya
Degaldoruwa Raja Maha Viharaya	Lotus, Wetakeyya, Na Flower, Parasathu, Water Lily
Medawala Raja Maha Viharaya	Parasathu, Na Flower, Wetakeyya
Temple of the Tooth Relic (Sri Dalada Maligawa)	Lotus, Parasathu

Note. Table shows the variety of floral motifs associated with the *Sapu* flower in Kandyan temple murals.

The association of the *Sapu* and the Lotus continues to flourish and become the most dominant element of the floral compositions in the temples of the Kandyan period. Other secondary flowers included in the na, wetekeyya, parasathu, and water lily are in the secondary position and do not disrupt the dominance of the *Sapu*–Lotus combination. The degree of embellishment in floral compositions in temples also never exceeds the *Sapu*–Lotus combination. The touch of floral ornamentation present in Kandyan art reveals a great sense of artistic restraint; each addition serves a ritual or symbolic purpose rather than mere artistic embellishment. Regionally, Kandy shows great discipline, unlike the Galle district temple paintings with decorative profusion with the European influence. Kandy, in turn, has spiritual orthodoxy with minimalism, where each motif maintains coherent and hierarchical symbolism congruent with Buddhist cosmology. The atmospheric floral arrangement in these murals reflects the Buddhist cosmology of the supreme order: the lotus representing the Buddha is above the Devas, who in turn are above the Royals, and the Royals above the Laymen. Within these murals, the lotus and *Sapu* represent enlightenment and devotion, standing as the sacred counterparts in the corpus of Kandyan murals. This sense of compositional and symbolic restraint supports the view that Kandy, more than any other city in Sri Lanka, is the centre of ritual and doctrinal practice in mural art, where the spiritual and artistic expression is considered compositional purity.

Figure 41: at Danthure Viharaya



Figure 42: aDiyakelinawela Viharaya



Figure 43: at Suriyagoda Viharaya



Figure 44: at Degaldoruwa Viharaya



Figure 45: at Viharaya



Figure 46: at Temple of Tooth Relic



Figure 47: Parasathu Flower



Figure 48: Na Flower



Figure 49: Wetakeiya Flower



Figure 49: Wetakeiya Flower



4. Discussion

The *Sapu* (Magnolia champaca) motifs were visually and spatially analyzed across seven major temples of the Kandy District. A systematic theological visual order in which the ritual symbols decoratively transcended intention was established. The *Sapu* motifs were consistently allocated next to the Buddha, bhikkhus, deities, pagodas, and royal figures. Thus, transcendent socio-political order was visually encoded in a sacred hierarchy of devotion, exemplifying what Coomaraswamy (1979) described as the “visual liturgy” of Kandyan muralism, in which the painter “serves ritual, not vanity” (p. 114). The proximity of the *Sapu* to the Buddha conveys enlightenment and purity, and the devotion of the *Sapu* near bhikkhus represents the monastic and transience of existence. In the Sooriyagoda, *Hindagala*, and *Degaldoruwa* temples, monastic depictions of the *Sapu* were illustrated, affirming active participation in puja and meditation, richly embodying Dhammananda’s (1978) art concept, “an embodiment of the Dhamma”.

The *Sapu* motif’s inclusion next to deities in *Danthure*, *Sooriyagoda*, *Degaldoruwa*, and *Medawala* reflected his symbolism and devotion, which transcended the boundary of austere Buddhist orthodoxy. Thus, the syncretic devotional culture of the Kandyan period was realized in its fullest expression.

As noted by Malalgoda (1976) and Seelawimala (2005) Hindu deities like Vishnu became incorporated into Buddhist worship. This led to iconographic hybridity, in which offerings associated with Hindu deities appear alongside *Sapu*, a Buddhist symbol of purity and merit. Its placement alongside royalty also signifies the ritualized convergence of kingship with sanctity in *Degaldoruwa* and *Medawala*. As Wijesekara (2001) points out, Kandyan muralism transformed and legitimized the sacred imagery of royal authority by rendering the cosmic order and hierarchical royal power as visual theology.

Kandyan muralism then became a landscape of restraint. “Spiritual gravity of restraint” is how Somathilaka (2021) describes the avoidance of ornamental stylization and the focus on the *Sapu*. The *Sapu* is a symbol of purity and merit, and merited orthodoxy as the *Sapu* is rendered with botanical precision, disciplined symmetry, and aesthetic austerity. Naturalism, rather than a simplistic pursuit of

realism, expresses the higher ideals of *sīla* (moral virtue) and *samādhi* (concentration). The cooler earthy reds and chromatic balance of upper levels of the palette reaching golden yellows and whites declare composition purity and enlightenment (Coomaraswamy, 1979). As Somathilaka (2021) points out, the principle of spiritual minimalism is to use colour as “illumination rather than decoration”.

The murals' linework further bolsters devotional discipline. Fine, measured strokes of the *Sapu* motif's outline are rendered with meditative precision, transforming line into a visual act of mindfulness. Coomaraswamy (1979) recognized that, in Kandyan painting, “thought disciplined by faith” was in fact the integration of faith and the “secular” discipline of painting. Illustrating a similar integration, and in reference to *Degaldoruwa*'s murals, Chutiwongs et al. (1990) remarked that the murals possessed “an exquisite balance between sacred stillness and natural vitality.” With such integrated compositional restraint, artistic process is indeed transformed into a spiritual practice.

Recurrent *Sapu*–Lotus pairings form a “floral theology.” This unites purity (*Sapu*) with awakening (lotus) and embodies the Buddhist journey from impermanence (*anicca*) to enlightenment. Having symbolic complementarity of opposites, or paradox, *Sapu* and Lotus reflect the hierarchical cosmology of Kandyan art: Buddha above deity, deity above royal, royal above lay. These relationships rendered the theological principles visible in the art and the space. The juxtaposition of the *Sapu* motif and pagodas further extended the *Sapu* flower's symbolism to the sanctity of architecture and, by extension to the harmony of natural and constructed forms as manifestations of divine order.

These findings demonstrate that the *Sapu* in Kandyan muralism goes beyond mere decoration and acts as a visual emblem of a disciplined expression of theology, purity, devotion, and enlightenment. The Kandy District now assumes the position of the premier centre of Sri Lankan Buddhist art, where, as Coomaraswamy (1956) famously noted, 'line, colour, and symbol are all acts of worship.' Future studies incorporate visual-semiotic analysis of *Sapu* and *Sapu*-derivative mural forms in less-publicized temples in Kegalle and galle, implement interdisciplinary approaches with pigment and conservation science, and assess transcending-national studies of South Asia to balance cross-cultural insights *Sapu* and *Sapu*-derivative mural forms in less-publicized temples in Kegalle and galle to offer insights on cross-cultural adaptations.

4. Conclusions

The *Sapu* flower in murals from the Kandyan period represents a flower used in rituals and theological practices, rather than a simple decorative embellishment. The *Sapu* flower proximity to the Buddha, bhikkhus, and royals maintains a structured ritual order that intertwines the spiritual and the secular with the political tiered hierarchy of the hierarchy. The flower is naturalistic, balanced, luminous, and restrained in colours of yellow, white, and earthy red, and lines of restrained quality, altogether they

stand for sacred restraint and the purity of the doctrine, a Kandyan ideal. The *Sapu* & Lotus pairs in the iconography of the *Sapu* flower and lotus in the rituals of devotion and enlightenment. The Kandy district is well proven destination for the Kandy murals, where moral order and spiritual intention are integrated with art. The flower serves as the illuminated painted metaphor of offering that reflects the intersection of faith, artistry, and kingship in Sri Lankan visual art.

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