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The Symbolic Use of the Lion in Indian and Sri Lankan Sculpture: A Cross-Cultural and Historical Analysis

E.M. Mahesh Chathuranga Ekanayaka (Sri Lanka)
PhD Scholar, Faculty of Fine Arts, University of Lucknow
Uttar Pradesh, India

Correspondence: emmcekanayaka@gmail.com

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Abstract

The lion, long revered as a symbol of power, sovereignty, and spiritual authority, holds a prominent place in the sculptural traditions of both India and Sri Lanka. This study explores the historical evolution and cultural significance of lion imagery in these regions, examining its transformation across dynasties and religious contexts. Through visual and stylistic analysis, archaeological investigation, and comparative cultural study, the research identifies several key findings: First, lion representations in Indian sculpture evolved from highly stylized imperial symbols during the Mauryan era such as the Lion Capital of Ashoka to more naturalistic and religiously integrated figures during the Gupta and post-Gupta periods. Second, Sri Lankan lion sculptures, deeply rooted in mythological and national narratives, developed unique aesthetic features while also reflecting Indian artistic influences, especially during the Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa periods. Third, the lion motif functioned not only as a religious guardian and divine vehicle but also as a political emblem, representing royal legitimacy and spiritual authority. Finally, the study reveals a dynamic pattern of cross-cultural artistic exchange between India and Sri Lanka, with lion imagery acting as a conduit for the localization of imported iconographic themes. These findings contribute to a deeper understanding of how symbolic motifs like the lion serve as both cultural connectors and identity markers in South Asian art. Accordingly, the research aims to offer a holistic understanding of lion symbolism as both an artistic and ideological expression, highlighting the continuity and transformation of this motif in Indian and Sri Lankan sculptural traditions.

Keywords: Cultural exchange, Historical analysis, Indian lion sculpture, Lion symbolism, religious iconography, Sri Lankan lion sculpture.

1. Introduction

The lion has been an emblematic figure in Indian and Sri Lankan art, often associated with religious, political, and mythological themes. As a representation of strength and divine authority, the lion appears in various artistic forms, from temple guardians to royal insignias. Its presence in sculptural traditions reflects a broader cultural and historical narrative that intertwines religious belief, political power, and artistic expression.

In India, the lion has been a crucial element in Buddhist, Hindu, and Jain iconography, symbolizing both the protective force of the dharma and the fierce aspect of divine intervention. Similarly, in Sri Lanka, the lion holds a special place in national identity, linked to the mythological origins of the Sinhalese people and the island's royal lineage.

This paper aims to investigate the symbolic meanings of lions in sculptural representations, tracing their historical roots and cultural significance. It explores the stylistic and thematic developments in lion sculptures across different dynasties and artistic periods, considering their role in religious, architectural, and political contexts. Furthermore, this study examines how artistic exchanges between India and Sri Lanka influenced the depiction of lions, leading to both shared and distinct visual traditions. By analyzing these factors, the paper contributes to a deeper understanding of the artistic and cultural connections between the two regions.

1.1 Research Methodology

This research employs a qualitative, interdisciplinary methodology grounded in both art historical and cultural analytical approaches. The study integrates formative analysis, visual interpretation, site-based observation, and comparative cultural analysis to examine the evolution of lion symbolism in sculptural traditions across India and Sri Lanka.

Formative and Stylistic Analysis - A detailed visual analysis of lion sculptures was undertaken to assess stylistic features, iconographic elements, and compositional techniques. This involved examining sculptures from key historical periods, including the Mauryan, Gupta, Anuradhapura, and Polonnaruwa eras. Attention was given to posture, expression, scale, and integration within architectural contexts to interpret symbolic meaning and aesthetic evolution.

Archaeological and Epigraphic Sources - The study draws upon archaeological findings, such as temple ruins, palace complexes, and monastic sites, to contextualize lion sculptures within their physical and ritual environments. Epigraphic evidence, including inscriptions and historical chronicles (e.g., the Mahavamsa and Ashokan edicts), was reviewed to correlate symbolic uses of the lion with political and religious narratives.

Literary and Religious Textual Analysis - Primary religious texts from Buddhist, Hindu, and Jain traditions were analyzed to uncover the theological and mythological frameworks that inform the lion's symbolism. The 'Sinha Nada' (Lion's Roar) metaphor, Vishnu's Narasimha avatar, and the lion's role as Durga's vehicle were explored to understand the lion's doctrinal significance.

Comparative Cultural Framework - The methodology incorporates a comparative analysis to trace cross-cultural exchanges and regional adaptations. By juxtaposing Indian and Sri Lankan sculptural motifs, the research identifies shared iconographic themes and local innovations. This approach reveals the transmission of ideas through religious, political, and trade networks between the two regions.

Field Observation and Visual Documentation - Where accessible, site visits to key archaeological and religious locations were conducted, including Sarnath, Sanchi, Anuradhapura, and Polonnaruwa. These visits enabled firsthand observation of sculptural details, spatial relationships, and preservation states. Photographic documentation and sketching were employed as visual tools for comparative analysis.

Scholarly Discourse and Consensus Analysis - The study incorporates the perspectives of established scholars in South Asian art history through the review of secondary sources, including works by Harle, Dehejia, Kinsley, Bandaranayake, and Paranavitana. These interpretations were critically compared and synthesized to build a coherent analytical framework and to ensure academic rigor.

Through this multidisciplinary methodology, the research aims to offer a holistic understanding of lion symbolism as both an artistic and ideological expression, highlighting the continuity and transformation of this motif in Indian and Sri Lankan sculptural traditions.

2. Historical Background of Lion Symbolism

Lions have held symbolic importance in South Asia for millennia. Their representation in sculpture is deeply intertwined with religious, political, and cultural identities across India and Sri Lanka. The lion has been associated with strength, protection, and divine power, making it a recurring motif in temple architecture, royal insignia, and artistic traditions (Dehejia, 1997).

In India, one of the earliest depictions of lions can be traced to the Indus Valley Civilization, where they appeared in seals and terracotta figurines. However, it was during the Mauryan Empire (321–185 BCE) that the lion gained prominence as an official state symbol. Emperor Ashoka, a patron of Buddhism, used the lion to represent the Buddha's teachings, as seen in the famous Lion Capital of Ashoka at Sarnath (Harle, 1986). This depiction of four lions sitting back-to-back later became the national emblem of India. Additionally, lions were featured on Ashokan pillars across the subcontinent, reinforcing their association with dharma and royal authority (Thapar, 2001).

In Sri Lanka, the lion's symbolic significance is deeply rooted in mythology. The island's name, 'Sinhala,' is derived from the word 'Sinha,' meaning lion, highlighting the animal's integral role in national identity. The legend of Prince Vijaya, the mythological founder of the Sinhalese people, describes his descent from a lion, further reinforcing its cultural importance. Lion imagery is prevalent in Sri Lankan temple architecture, palace reliefs, and royal emblems, emphasizing its role as a guardian figure and a symbol of kingship (Bandaranayake, 1974).

Both India and Sri Lanka adopted lion imagery in religious and political contexts, demonstrating its enduring presence in their artistic traditions. The historical evolution of lion symbolism highlights the cultural exchanges between these regions, shaping their respective sculptural styles. By examining these artistic expressions, we gain insight into how the lion motif was adapted and reinterpreted across different periods and dynasties.

3. Lion Representation in Indian Sculpture

The Mauryan period (321–185 BCE) saw the emergence of highly refined lion sculptures, such as the Lion Capital of Ashoka at Sarnath, which later became India's national emblem. Mauryan lion sculptures were characterized by their polished surfaces, stylized forms, and symbolic significance in Buddhist art. The Ashokan pillars, adorned with lion capitals, served as markers of dharma and royal authority, emphasizing the emperor's role as a righteous ruler (Harle, 1986).



Figure 1. *Lion Capital, Ashokan Pillar at Sarnath, Archaeological Museum Sarnath, India*



Figure 2. *Leoglyph, Gupta Period, 5th century CE, Sarnath, Uttar Pradesh, housed in National Museum New Delhi.*



Figure 3. *Lion Standing on a Pillar Capital India, 5th–6th century, Mathura*

During the Gupta period (4th–6th century CE), lion sculptures evolved into more naturalistic and intricate forms. The artistic refinement of this period is evident in temple architecture, where lions were sculpted as guardian figures at entrances, friezes, and columns. Gupta sculptors integrated lions into the decorative elements of temples, often portraying them in dynamic poses, symbolizing both protective power and divine strength.

3.1. Lion in Hindu and Buddhist Traditions

In Hinduism, the lion plays a prominent role in mythology and temple iconography. The most significant example is

Vishnu's Narasimha avatar, in which the deity takes on a half-lion, half-human form to destroy the demon, Hiranyakashipu. Sculptures of Narasimha appear in temple reliefs across India, particularly in regions influenced by the Pallavas and Chalukyas, demonstrating the lion's divine aspect in Hindu tradition (Kinsley, 1988).



Figure 4. *A Statue of Narasimha disemboweling and killing Hiranyakashipu, National Museum, Delhi*

Goddess Durga, another important deity in Hinduism, is frequently depicted riding a lion, signifying her power to defeat evil forces. Sculptures of Durga slaying Mahishasura (the buffalo demon) while seated on a lion are common in temple carvings, emphasizing the animal's role as a divine vehicle and symbol of protection.

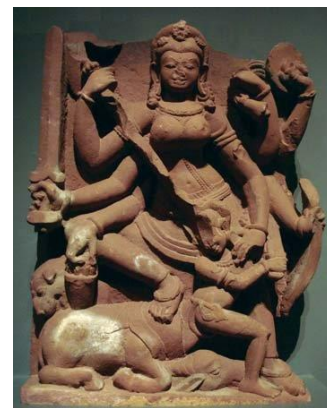


Figure 5. *Hindu goddess Durga depicted slaying the buffalo demon Mahishasura, 850–900 C, red sandstone sculpture from Rajasthan, India*



Figure 6. *Durga slaying the buffalo demon*, carved stone relief depicting a battle between the goddess Durga astride a lion and the demon buffalo-headed Mahishasura (armed with a club) on the north wall in the Mahishasuramardini cave temple, c. 7th century, Mamallapuram (also called Mahabalipuram), Tamil Nadu, India.

In Buddhist art, the lion represents the Buddha's teachings, often referred to as the 'lion's roar metaphor for the spread of dharma. Buddhist stupas, such as those at Sanchi and Amaravati, feature intricately carved lion sculptures, either as freestanding figures or as part of decorative railings. These lions often serve as guardians at entrances, reinforcing their protective and symbolic significance.



Figure 7. *Lions, Sanchi Torana*, The Great Stupa at Sanchi Madhya Pradesh, India



Figure 8. *Lions, Amaravathi stupa illustration*. Casing slab. Satavahana, National Museum of India, Delhi.

Additionally, Jainism also integrates lion imagery, particularly in depictions of Jain Tirthankaras, where lions symbolize strength and spiritual resolve. Temple architecture from medieval India includes lion sculptures as part of ornamental motifs, highlighting their widespread significance in Indian religious traditions (Shah, 1987).



Figure 9. *Lion*, Jain Temples of Khajuraho, Madhya Pradesh.

By examining the representation of lions across different artistic and religious contexts, we gain insight into their evolving symbolism in Indian sculpture. These depictions reflect the deep cultural and spiritual associations of lions in Indian art, emphasizing their role in both divine and royal narratives.

4. Lion Representation in Sri Lankan Sculpture

The Anuradhapura Period - During the Anuradhapura period (3rd century BCE–10th century CE), the lion emerged as a significant symbol in Sri Lankan art and architecture. The Anuradhapura kingdom, one of the earliest and most influential in Sri Lankan history, integrated lion motifs into temple structures, palace decorations, and religious artifacts. Stone-carved lions served as guardians at the entrances of Buddhist monasteries and stupas, reflecting their protective and spiritual role. Some of the most notable lion sculptures from this period can be seen in the Ruwanwelisaya and Abhayagiri monasteries, where intricately carved lion figures stand as sentinels at staircases and gateways (Liyanarachchi, 2012).



Figure 10. *Lion*, entrances of Buddhist monasteries, Anuradhapura period, Anuradhapura



Figure 12. The king's lion throne, Council Chamber of King Nissankamalla (1187-1196 AD)

Another striking example is the Moonstone (Sandakada Pahana), a semi-circular stone carving found at the entrances of Buddhist temples. The moonstones of the Anuradhapura period often feature a row of lions, symbolizing strength and guardianship, alongside other sacred motifs representing the cycle of life and spiritual enlightenment.



Figure 11. *Lion*, Moonstone in the fields to the south of Thuparama, Anuradhapura.

Lion images can be found at the entrances and exits of temples and palaces of the Polonnaruwa period. This symbolizes protection for the palace or temple.



Figure 13. Steps and *lion* carvings, ancient audience hall, part of the ruins of the former capital Polonnaruwa, Sri Lanka

Polonnaruwa Period - The Polonnaruwa period (11th–13th century CE) marked a further refinement of lion sculptures, with more detailed and expressive carvings. The most notable example from this period is found in the Royal Palace of Polonnaruwa. This throne, with its majestic lion figure, symbolizes the ruler's authority and the Sinhalese people's connection to the mythical lion lineage. The craftsmanship of Polonnaruwa-era lion sculptures exhibits a blend of Indian and indigenous artistic influences, highlighting the cross-cultural interactions that shaped Sri Lankan art.

In the history of Sri Lankan art, art history extends through many periods starting with the Anuradhapura period and another milestone in it is the Yapahuwa period. The lion can be identified in the architecture found in the Yapahuwa period. Several sculptures of lions sitting solemnly can be seen near the entrance to the Yapahuwa palace, which is more famous in Sri Lankan history as the “Yapahuwa Lion” (Paranavitana, 1953).



Figure 14. Stone *Lion Figure*, 13th Century CE, Yapahuwa, Sri Lanka

4.1. The Lion in Sri Lankan Royal and Religious Contexts

Beyond temple architecture, the lion has been a central symbol in Sri Lankan royal iconography. The presence of the lion on ancient royal banners, coins, and inscriptions indicates its role as a marker of kingship and legitimacy. The Sri Lankan flag itself, which features a lion holding a sword, traces its origins to these historical traditions, reinforcing the enduring power of the lion as a national and cultural emblem.

In Buddhist art, the lion is often depicted alongside the Buddha, either as a guardian figure or as a representation of the Buddha's strength and authority. The concept of the 'Sinha Nada' (Lion's Roar) in Buddhist teachings, symbolizing the fearless proclamation of truth, further enhances the lion's spiritual significance. Sri Lankan stupas and temple reliefs frequently incorporate lion motifs to reinforce these ideas, illustrating the deep integration of lion symbolism in both religious and state-sponsored art.

Additionally, later periods saw the emergence of more stylized lion sculptures, often blending artistic influences from South India and Southeast Asia. These representations showcased intricate detailing, dynamic postures, and elaborate ornamental elements, reflecting the evolving artistic landscape of Sri Lanka. The continuity of lion imagery in modern Sri Lankan art and architecture further underscores its lasting cultural and national significance.

5. Cross Cultural Influences and Comparisons

The artistic traditions of India and Sri Lanka have been deeply interconnected, with lion sculptures serving as prime examples of shared iconographic themes and stylistic

adaptations. These cross-cultural exchanges can be observed in temple architecture, royal insignia, and religious art, where the representation of lions evolved through mutual influence while retaining unique regional characteristics.

One of the most prominent examples of Indian influence on Sri Lankan lion sculptures is the stylistic resemblance to the lion capitals of Ashoka. The depiction of lions on Sri Lankan temple pillars and moonstones bears similarities to Indian Mauryan and Gupta-era sculptures, indicating the transmission of artistic traditions through religious and cultural interactions. The expansion of Buddhism from India to Sri Lanka played a crucial role in this exchange, as seen in the replication of lion motifs in monastic art and architectural elements.

Conversely, Sri Lanka also contributed unique artistic innovations that influenced Indian sculptural traditions. The stylized and highly decorative lion figures found in Sri Lankan temple reliefs and throne designs exhibit intricate craftsmanship, which, in turn, inspired certain regional variations in South Indian temple art. The lion sculptures of Polonnaruwa, for example, reflect a synthesis of Indian Pallava and Chola influences with distinct local artistic sensibilities.

Additionally, both India and Sri Lanka integrated the lion into their royal iconography, reinforcing its status as a symbol of kingship and divine authority. The use of lions in palace gateways, throne designs, and coinage in both regions underscores a common understanding of the lion's symbolic power. However, Sri Lanka's unique emphasis on the lion as a direct link to its mythological ancestry, particularly through the legend of Prince Vijaya, distinguishes its sculptural representations from those of India.

Another critical aspect of cross-cultural comparison is the role of the lion in Buddhist art. While Indian Buddhist sculptures often depict lions as protectors of stupas and dharma, Sri Lankan Buddhist art further integrates the lion into its national identity and religious symbolism. The 'Simha Nada' (Lion's Roar) concept in Buddhist teachings, representing the fearless proclamation of truth, is vividly illustrated in both Indian and Sri Lankan artistic traditions, reinforcing the spiritual significance of the lion across South Asia.

Overall, the interplay between Indian and Sri Lankan sculptural traditions demonstrates a dynamic exchange of artistic ideas, leading to the development of distinctive yet interconnected lion imagery in both regions. By analyzing these shared and divergent artistic elements, we gain a deeper appreciation of how cultural interactions shaped the visual language of lion symbolism in South Asian art.

6. Conclusion

The lion has played a significant role in the sculptural and artistic traditions of both India and Sri Lanka, serving as a

powerful symbol of sovereignty, religious devotion, and cultural identity. Through this comparative analysis, it is evident that while both regions share common artistic influences, they have also developed distinct interpretations of lion imagery that reflect their unique historical and cultural contexts.

In India, the lion has been closely associated with Buddhist, Hindu, and Jain traditions, serving as a guardian figure, a royal emblem, and a representation of dharma. The Lion Capital of Ashoka remains one of the most enduring symbols of India's rich heritage, while temple sculptures and architectural elements continue to depict the lion as a protector of sacred spaces. The evolution of lion imagery in Indian sculpture demonstrates its adaptability across different religious and political frameworks, reaffirming its status as a potent and enduring motif.

On the other hand, Sri Lanka has placed the lion at the heart of its national and mythological identity. The strong association between the Sinhalese people and the lion, as seen in historical chronicles and artistic expressions, highlights the deep-rooted cultural significance of this symbol. From ancient moonstones and palace reliefs to the grand lion statue at Sigiriya, Sri Lankan sculptures of lions not only reflect Indian influences but also embody unique stylistic characteristics that distinguish them from their Indian counterparts.

The cross-cultural interactions between India and Sri Lanka facilitated the exchange of artistic ideas, techniques, and religious motifs, leading to the development of intricate lion representations that reflect shared heritage while retaining localized adaptations. This dynamic interplay underscores the interconnectedness of South Asian art and the fluidity of artistic traditions across geographical boundaries.

By analyzing the symbolic, historical, and artistic dimensions of lion sculptures in India and Sri Lanka, this study provides valuable insights into the broader themes of cultural exchange, artistic adaptation, and ideological representation in South Asian art. The enduring presence of lion imagery in both regions highlights its significance not only in historical and religious contexts but also in contemporary cultural identity and artistic expression. Future research may further explore the role of lion symbolism in other South Asian and Southeast Asian contexts, broadening the scope of understanding regarding its influence across diverse artistic traditions.

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