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Lewke's Cannon: A Visual and Political Dialogue Captured in Gold and Silver

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The island of Sri Lanka, centrally situated in the Indian Ocean, has experienced a consistent history of cultural and religious exchange with neighbouring regions. The island is also one of the places in the world that witnessed three turbulent waves of European colonialism. Its history is marked by Portuguese colonial infringement from the early sixteenth century until the mid-seventeenth century, followed by Dutch (1656/58-1795) and then British colonial occupation (1796-1947). Until the arrival of the Portuguese, various kingdoms had ruled the island side by side. After years of violent expansion and political intrigue, the Kingdom of Kandy (1469-1815), mostly located in Sri Lanka's mountainous interior, was the last to survive. Kandy eventually ceased to exist as a political power after it was conquered by the British in 1815, but its cultural legacy has remained vibrant to this day.¹

This contribution seeks to reconstruct the visual and political world of a canonical Kandyan object: the small but lavishly decorated ceremonial cannon that goes by the name of 'Lewke's cannon' and is part of the permanent display in the Rijksmuseum (fig. 1).² The object originally arrived in the collection as a gift to Dutch Stadholder William v in 1767, after a violent siege of Kandy

< *Lewke's Cannon*
(fig. 1) in carriage,
see also p. 304.

in 1765. Initially it was presented in the Stadholder's cabinet of curiosities as war trophy, but this violent history of the ceremonial cannon was forgotten after the Napoleonic era and a range of different meanings have been attributed to it since. Sri Lanka has asked for the return of the cannon since the nineteen-nineties, while nowadays in the Netherlands it has become one of the iconic objects in debates about the restitution of looted art from the colonial period.³

In 2021 Sri Lankan and Dutch scholars worked closely together to disentangle the cannon's history in the Pilot Project Provenance Research on Objects of the Colonial Era (PPOCE).⁴ The looting of the cannon in Kandy and its afterlife in the Netherlands have been carefully reconstructed and the confusion that emerged about its provenance has been explained. Alternative histories that were founded on the idea that the cannon had been gifted to the Dutch, which haunted the cannon throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, have also been investigated and eliminated. In our quest to fully comprehend the object's history, the research team also reconstructed the history of the cannon before it was looted from the palace in Kandy in 1765.

Reconstructing the history of the object before 1765 was more complex than the researchers had expected.⁵



< *Fig. 1*
Singhalese Cannon
 or *Lewke's Cannon*.
 Bronze cast: end of
 the seventeenth
 century, the
 Netherlands;
 decorations in gold,
 silver and rubies:
 1745-46, Kandy,
 Sri Lanka.
 Length 98 x diam.
 43 cm.
 Amsterdam,
 Rijksmuseum,
 inv. no. NG-NM-1015.

> *Fig. 2*
Cannon, second
 half of the seven-
 teenth century,
 the Netherlands.
 Bronze, length
 94,5 cm.
 Royal Collection
 Trust, Windsor
 Castle,
 inv. no. RCIN 72822.
 Photograph (also
 figs. 6b and 16b):
 Royal Collection
 Trust / © His Majesty
 King Charles III 2022



The bronze cannon is decorated with a layer of gold, which contains various engravings, while other parts are overlaid with silver floral motives and precious stones. The shape of the cannon and its decoration carried both typical Kandyan and European features. This had puzzled researchers in the past. Was the object made in Kandy, in Europe, or elsewhere? An inscription on the cannon's rear end provided a date, namely the *shaka* year 1667 (1745-46 CE), which gave further directions but also led to new questions. Eventually it was through the discovery of two very similar cannon pieces in Windsor Castle that the conclusion was drawn that Lewke's cannon was actually produced and decorated not in one stage, but in two. The piece that is least decorated shows that the motifs of the winged cherub face, the acanthus leaves, the dolphin-shaped handles and the shield were integrated parts of the original casting of the bronze cannon (fig. 2). Comparative analysis by cannon experts led to the assumption that the cannon was originally cast in the Dutch Republic, some time in the second half of the seventeenth century. The Sinhala inscription on the object itself reveals that the outer layer of decoration – the gold, the silver and the rubies – was added later, in 1745-46 CE.⁶

The collective provenance research resulted in a lengthy and detailed report which can be consulted online via the NIOD and Rijksmuseum websites.⁷ This article, however, is not about the provenance, original use or further history of the cannon, but will focus on the outer 'Kandyan' layer of the cannon. Its purpose is twofold. On the one hand by analyzing the inscription and the political context in which the outer decoration was added, it will be argued that the cannon itself should be understood as an object of Kandyan political history. On the other hand, through a study of the motifs used, it is argued that the artists were rooted in a longstanding Lankan tradition

of artistic craftsmanship, that was simultaneously characterized by an openness to global artistic influences. The merging of local and global visual worlds reflects the political moment at which the lavish decoration of the cannon was commissioned.

The Political World of Lewke Disawe

The current reference to the cannon as ‘Lewke’s cannon’ is derived from the Sinhala inscription on the cannon,⁸ which reads as follows (fig. 3):

This is the cannon made by Lewke, who received the Disawe post of the Satara Korale, during the last Vinsathiya of this year, which was called Krodha, which came in the shakawarsha [year] one thousand six hundred and sixty-seven.⁹

The inscription allowed us to date the period in which the decoration was added: the terms Vinsathiya and Krodha refer to specific moments in the sixty-year cycle of the planet Jupiter and the *shaka* year 1667 refers to the period 14 April 1745 to 14 April 1746. It will also have been within that same year that the cannon was presented to King Sri Vijaya Rajasinha (r. 1739-47). This is inferred from its

sighting in 1749 when a Dutch visitor to the court of Kandy saw the object placed prominently on the palace grounds, in front of the king’s audience hall.¹⁰

Lewke was an important political figure on the island, and the inscription mentions his name as donor of the object. But why had he ordered the decoration of the small cannon at this particular moment in time? Throughout history, the Lewke family played a major role in the Four Korale Province (or *Hatara Korales*/Sabaragamuwa Province), but they were not among the social-political apex of the Kandyan nobility.¹¹ The Lewke referred to in the inscription was Lewke Wijesundera Rajakarunanayake Seneviratne Herath Mudiyanne Lewke Bandara (c. 1680/90-1751), born in the place Lewke in the Four Korale. He reached a top administrative position in 1739 or the early seventeen-forties when Sri Vijaya Rajasinha raised him to the dignity of the Disawe of the Three and Four Korale (*Tun* and *Hatara Korales*).¹² These districts bordered the territories in the coastal provinces that were occupied by the Dutch. In 1744, he obtained from the king a substantial endowment in fully transferable property (*paraveni*), while governors were generally only given

Figs. 3
Inscription on
Lewke’s Cannon
(fig. 1).

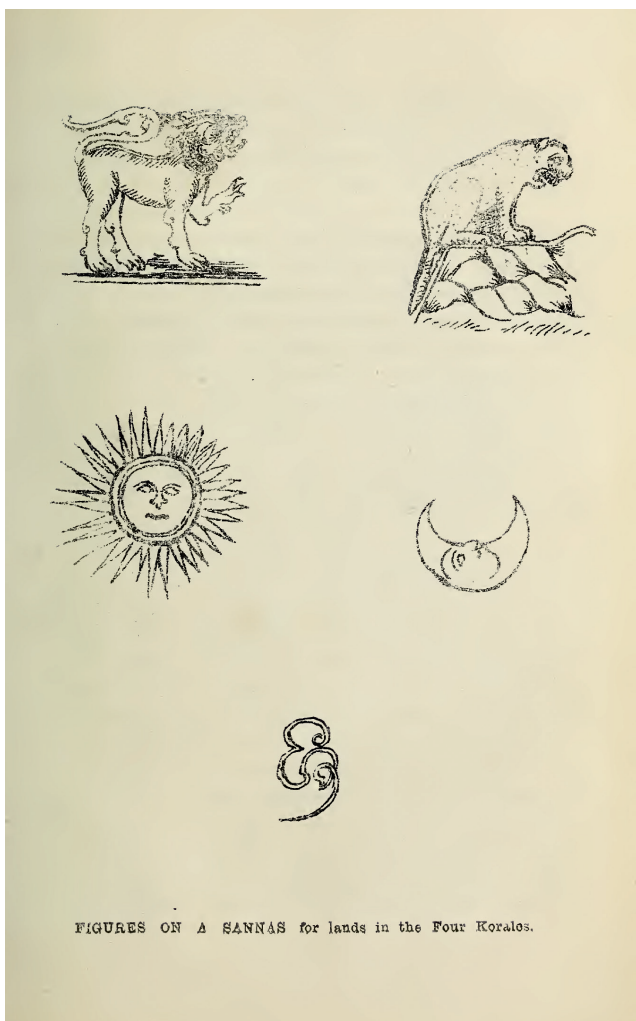


ශක වෂර් එක්වාදහස් සසිය හැටහතට පැමිනි ක්‍රෝධ නම් වූ මෙම වෂර්ගෙහි ඊෂ්වරාධිපති වූ අන්තිම එංගනියෙහිදී සතර කෝරලේ දිසාව ලැබී තිබෙන ලෙටුකෙ තෙ නැන්තැහ විසින් වැඩකරවා දක්කවාපු කාලතුවක්කු වයි.

land for the duration of their mandate, and this donation testified to Lewke's loyalty to the king. The *sannasa* Lewke received, a copper plate with a donor inscription engraved on it, has been lost, but through a scholarly description and partial copy made in 1871 the content is saved and it is known what the charter looked like (fig. 4).¹³

The *sannasa* and the embellishment of the cannon together mark a high political moment in which Lewke cleverly negotiated his position vis à vis the Dutch and King Sri Vijaya Rajasinha. In 1742 Lewke had supported a rebellion against the Dutch in the lowlands, which would have added to the esteem from the king that found its expression in the *sannasa* of 1744.¹⁴ As we have seen, in 1745-46 Lewke emphasized his personal appreciation of and loyalty to the king by gifting him the lavish decoration on the cannon. Subsequently, he helped the Dutch to quell a strike by the cinnamon peelers in 1747. This surprising move has to be understood in relation to Lewke's long quest to help revive the Buddhist order in the Kandyan kingdom. In 1741, 1745 and 1747, with the help of the Dutch governor and advised by his senior Sinhalese collaborators, he helped organize missions to Burma (Myanmar) and then to Siam (Thailand), to bring monks (*bhikkhus*) over to Sri Lanka, aimed to ordinate them during an *Upasampada* (Great Ordination) and thereby to restore the *sangha*, the Buddhist community.

Clearly, Lewke was a smart politician, who knew how to navigate between local and global political power: between the Dutch governor and the Kandyan king. Having the cannon embellished was part of this strategy and was meant to underline his loyalty to the king just before he was to turn his attention once more to the Dutch. If we look closer at the embellishment itself, a visual world that was equally locally and globally oriented, presents itself.



FIGURES ON A SANNAS for lands in the Four Korales.

The Visual World of the Artists

In our analysis of the motifs, this contribution connects to the expanding literature on 'connected art history'; in particular it echoes observations made by other art-historians, such as Sujatha Arundathi Meegama. Her research has focused on the visual world that is represented through a set of elegantly carved ivory caskets from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries that are dispersed across museums in Europe. She has shown how these ivory objects should be understood as dialogic objects that give artistic expression to the encounter

Fig. 4
Drawings of the emblems placed on Lewke's lost copper *sannasa*, 1744, in Lionel F. Lee, 'Notes on a Sannas', *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society Ceylon Branch* (JRASCB) 4/5 (1870-71), p. 8-11.

between different visual worlds.¹⁵ The Kingdom of Kotte (1412-1597), of which Kandy had initially been a client kingdom,¹⁶ was a place of intense cultural exchanges, which set the stage for a period in which valuable works of art with hybrid cultural features were created.¹⁷ This hybrid art, influenced by Arabic, Kerala, Chinese, Portuguese and Dutch trade and maritime connections was evident in more or less all industries. The ivory caskets studied by Meegama, for example, reveal an intense interaction between the local visual world of the Kotte and Kandyan kingdoms and that of Catholic Europe. She explains how temple structures, part of the built environment of the artists who made the caskets, as well as European prints, served as examples and contributed to unique creations where these visual worlds became mixed in these typical yet distinctive Sri Lankan ivory caskets.¹⁸

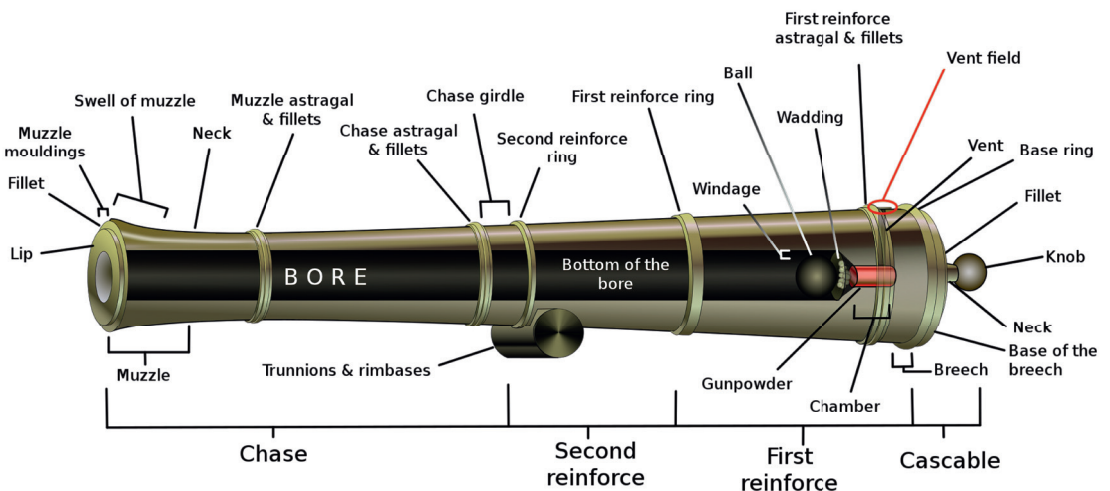
This is the case, too, for the embellishment on the cannon, which consists partly of engravings on the cannon's gilded layer and partly of silver decoration placed on top of the gilded layer. Even if there are also clear indications of stylistic merging, it speaks directly to the Lankan visual world that has been canonically described by Ananda Coomaraswamy.¹⁹

Nowadays, traditional Sinhala decorative designs are classified according to their design features: divine, fauna, flora, inanimate and conceptual.²⁰ These five categories are found to be applied in the designs on the cannon. Typically, the full length and breadth of the cannon's surface were decorated and the space is used in optimal terms. It is clear that the designs stand out for their aesthetic composition, which makes it a pleasure to look at. At the same time the objective of the decoration – the cannon was to function as a gift – is clearly taken into account when the artists applied certain motifs. There follows a discussion of the different motifs found on the cannon, starting at the cannon's muzzle and moving backward towards the knob at the rear (fig. 5).

The Chase

The muzzle shows seven tiers or rings (fig. 6a). Four of the rings are without designs and are used to highlight the edges. There are three alternate tiers, equal to each other in breadth, with silver relief designs. On the first and second tier of the muzzle is a design that occupies a special place among the old traditional designs that have been used on the cannon: the repeated motif of the pineapple flower (*annasi mala*).

Fig. 5
Diagram of a cannon.
Photograph:
Wikipedia, KDS444





Figs. 6a, b

a. *Lewke's Cannon*, detail of the muzzle with two tiers of pineapple flowers (*annasi mala*) and one with a winged cherub face (fig. 1).

b. *Windsor Cannon*, detail of the muzzle with one cast tier with a winged cherub face (fig. 2).

The middle section of this flower motif is designed in the shape of a pineapple, created by looking at nature itself. The entire motif, however, is an imaginary floral design, which is a specialty that was widely used in metal, ivory, stone, wood and painted designs in Sri Lanka (fig. 7) and is still in use today.

As noted, not all decorations on the cannon were added by the Kandyan artists who worked on Lewke's commission. This was, for example, the case with the third tier of the muzzle, which stands out most, as it is decorated with a winged cherub face and flower motifs. A comparison with one of the two Windsor cannons made in the late seventeenth century shows that this motif was part of the initial casting (fig. 6b).²¹

The presence of this cherub face should thus not be confused with processes of cultural mixing or appropri-

Fig. 7
Painting of pineapple flower (*annasi mala*), c. 1832, in the Buddhist temple Dodanthale Sri Senevirathnarama Uposhatha Raja Maha Viharaya, MAWANELLA, Kegalle District, Sabaragamuwa Province, Sri Lanka. Photograph: Jeewana Manaram Koodagoda





Fig. 8
Engraving of
nari-latha, one of the
four plant-women on
the sides of Lewke's
Cannon (fig. 1).



Fig. 9
Painting with four
nari-lathas, or plant-
women, c. 1765, in the
Buddhist temple
Pusulpitiya Raja Maha
Viharaya, Pusulpitiya
village, KOTHMALE,
Nuwara Eliya District,
Central Province,
Sri Lanka.
Photograph: Jeewana
Manaram Koodagoda

> Fig. 10
Relief of the *Iiyawela*
on the chase of
Lewke's Cannon
(fig. 1).



tion described above. Yet, when we look at the four figures engraved on the sides of the cannon, flanking the main design, we observe a detail in this motif that echoes that of the cherub: these figures are clearly recognizable as *nari-lathas*, or plant-women (fig. 8). Their head and crown, as well as the vines from which they merge, correspond with other Kandyan depictions of this popular motif, found on murals and in wood and ivory carvings (fig. 9). Yet what is highly uncommon is that here on the cannon the *nari-lathas* do not have upper bodies and are instead given wings that resemble the wings of the cherub on the muzzle. The artist must have done this intentionally to allow the earlier decoration to merge with the new layer. It represents a variation of the dialogic process that Meegama observed on the ivory caskets.²²

Between two tiers of gilded acanthus leaves cast in bronze, the central section of the cannon is covered with a layer of silver relief decorations (fig. 10). The design is enclosed by a square-edged, diagonal net-like border that is also commonly used in the lacquer (*laksha*)²³ industry to mark the beginning and end of such a section. The lattice-shaped border moving inwards is chosen to enhance the design in the centre, following its shape and emphasising its symmetry. Intricate lattice-shaped (*velpata*) designs vary from industry to industry in which they are used. Though these designs are a common feature in painting and in the lacquer industry, the fact that they were combined with a vine design existing of diagonally placed leaves and flowers can be recognized as a distinguishing feature. Developing a geometric template is the basic foundation of a vine design or *liyawela*, which is often applied in silver ornamental decorations in Sri Lanka. This *liyawela* is arranged in such a way that the entire surface is divided into a geometric pattern and



Figs. 11a, b
 Paintings of traditional *liyawela*
 a. mid-eighteenth century, in the Buddhist temple Galayaya Sri Sudarmarama Purana Viharaya, PANNALA, Kurunegala District, North Western Province, Sri Lanka.
 b. mid-eighteenth century, in the Buddhist temple Minigamuwa Purana Tampita Viharaya, Minigamuwa village, THUMPANE, Kandy District, Central Province, Sri Lanka.

extends upwards from a vase. The Lankan traditional *liyawela* designs have been categorized by Ananda Kumara Dissanayaka into three types: *liya, kola, wela* (vine, leaves, stem), *liya, geta, wela* (vine, knot, stem) and *liya, malwela* (vine and chain of flowers).²⁴ Here, it is applied as a vine and chain of flowers. The vines are thus formed by the combination of flowers and leaves. The *seeni mala*²⁵ and *kathuru mala*²⁶ motifs we see are widely used as the flowers.

The artistry of this *liyawela* compares well with the craftsmanship skills of the *liyawela* designs at the Buddhist temples Galayaya Tampita Viharaya (fig. 11a) and Minigamuwa Tampita Viharaya (fig. 11b), and the *liyawela* on the ivory boxes, dating from the Kotte period. The quality and creative features are common in Kandyan art, which still reflects the visual world of the Kotte period. Interestingly, the year 1753 marks a turning point in Kandyan art, as by that time *liyawela* design became less subtle. This is usually explained by the influence of the craftsmanship that became popular

with the Buddhist monks who were part of the Siam *Upasampada* (*Bhikku* Higher Ordination) after 1753. This makes the cannon an important object from an art-historical perspective. It is one of the significant pieces of art that still stand in the early medieval Kandyan artistic tradition.²⁷

Second Reinforce

This section (see figs. 5, 12) begins and ends with two semi-elevated margins. The most special feature here are the two handles to lift the cannon. These handles were attached at the time the cannon was made. Their dolphin shape was often used for handles of European cannons in the early-modern period. What stands out however is the delicate wave pattern on either side of the dolphins' heads. These engravings and the addition of gems served as an enhancement of the simple dolphin design. In this way the dolphins were made to resemble the head of the dragon (*makara*) or serpent (*serapendiya*), which required only minor modifications. We come across the *makara* and *serapendiya* designs used for handles



Fig. 12
Makara (dragon) handles and the kalpavrukha or eternal tree engraving on the second reinforce of Lewke's Cannon (fig. 1).

on the *kaipudi* rings (fig. 13), ring pulls used for temple doors. In the latter half of the eighteenth century this motif changed into *makara kata* (dragon's mouth). This design was seen in all sorts of metal works at the time. Thus, while the handles were part of the original casting, they have been adapted in dialogue with the Lankan visual world.

In contrast, on the sides next to and between the handles, we find engravings that form part of a long-standing Sri Lankan tradition and carry symbolic meaning. The middle section has a design that is known among traditional designs as the 'flower plant' (fig. 14). We will discuss this motif by focusing on the decorations from two eras to show-

Fig. 13
Kaipudi rings, mid-eighteenth century, in the Buddhist temple Kolambagama Sri Miyugunarama Rajamaha Viharaya, Kanathewawa, Kolambagama village, WARIYAPOLA, Kurunegala District, North Western Province, Sri Lanka. Photograph: Jeewana Manaram Koodagoda



Fig. 14
Flower plant between the handles on the second reinforce of Lewke's Cannon (fig. 1).

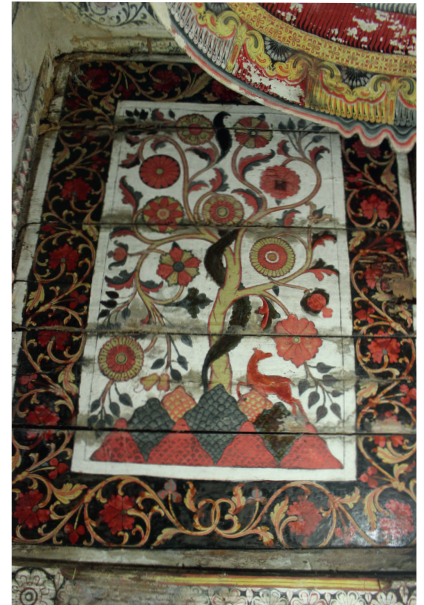


case the traditional Lankan form in the use of this design. The first example is the Kantaka Chaitiya or Dagoba (*stupa*) in the Buddhist monastery complex of Mihintale (Anuradhapura District, North Central Province) which was built by King Suratissa in the first century BCE during the Anuradhapura period and later reconstructed by King Lajjitissa. The flower plant on the pillar of the ruined *dagoba* shows a closely related appearance to the flower plant image on the cannon. The Kantaka Chaitiya flower plant is depicted as a tree with two birds on top, reminiscent of the bird on top of the cannon's flower plant. The second comparison is with the official seal of the famous Kandyan chief Ehelepola Senevirathne Senanayake Chandrathilake Wijesundera Dissanayake Amarakoon Wasala Panditha Mudiyanse (1773-1829). The carvings surround a circular seal with the name Ehelepola Wijesundera, as if handwritten, and in the centre there is a tree set in a vase. There are no birds here, though. During the Kandyan era, a top official must have had specific reasons for using a bird, a symbol for the elite bureaucracy and/or a culmina-

tion of anticipation. The flower plant thus was an application that has been used continuously throughout the Sri Lankan decorative arts.

The second motif in this section of the cannon, on the outer sides of both handles, is traditionally known as the *kalpavruksha* or eternal tree (see fig. 12). This is a popular motif used during the Kotte and medieval Kandyan periods, which also spread to the post-Kandyan era. It was not used for ground level decorations or to fill any vacant space, but only on canopies or elevated places (figs. 15a, b). Apart from the elements that are necessarily included in the eternal tree, a wide range of animals are added to it according to the creative practice of the time. On the cannon we see a deer, a giant squirrel and birds, besides flowers and leaves. Such animal figures can be seen in all forms of media like metal, stone and carved or painted wood from the Kotte era to around 1750 and they have a shape nurtured by regional art exchanges. Used regionally in many countries such as Indonesia, Burma (Myanmar), and India, this tree motif is also a decorative design connected

Figs. 15a, b
Two mural paintings of the *kalpavruksha* or eternal tree, late eighteenth century, in the Buddhist temple Dapane Sri Jayasumanarama Viharaya (Tampita Viharaya), near URUBOKKA, Ratnapura District, Sabaragamuwa Province, Sri Lanka.





to Buddhism, Jainism and Hinduism, known as the 'Divine' or 'Eternal Tree', used to fulfil one's wishes. Although the artist had many decorations to apply to this surface of the cannon, the *kalpavruksha* with various animal figures was used here, explicitly because it was a gift. It must have been related to what the donor Lewke wished to achieve with the gift, in wishing its receiver good fortune.

First Reinforce

This final section (see fig. 5) starts with a field of vine embellishments similar to that on the chase and ends with a floral border design on the front edge of the cannon that echoes the one on the muzzle. The most important part here is the shield with logo between the vines (fig. 16a). In the centre of the shield, we see the divine motifs of a gilded sun and to the left a silver crescent moon, both with facial features. There is no debate about the use of the sun and crescent moon as symbolic figures. These have been used as symbols of sovereignty in various contemporary countries as well as in Sri Lanka.²⁸ Beneath the sun is a lion wielding a sword facing right. While a

lion holding a sword in its paw was used on ancient Kandyan flags, this motif seems to have changed occasionally over time. One can get an idea of the Sri Lankan social role of these symbols, for instance through the early nineteenth-century flag of *Satara* Korale (Kegalle District) and the carved throne of Sri Wickrama Rajasinha (r. 1798-1815, see fig. 12, p. 313). The lion in the royal emblem used by Vimala Dharma Suriya II (r. 1687-1707, fig. 17) and on the royal wax seal of Kirti Sri Rajasinha (r. 1747-82, fig. 18), and the lion in the wood carvings of the Buddhist Embekka Devalaya Temple (fig. 19), all bear a resemblance to the lion on the cannon. The lion also figures on the cannons from Windsor Castle (fig. 16b), but, while extremely similar in design, stands out in subtle differences. The most important one might be that the lion on the Rijksmuseum cannon is the only one holding a sword.

Enclosing the lion, sun and moon is a silver wreath of blooming flower and buds. It is found in contemporary regional design, as well as in Dutch prints and has been used in Sri Lankan ivory carvings. It is actually no surprise

Figs. 16a, b
 a. Embellished shield on the first reinforce of *Lewke's Cannon* (fig. 1).
 b. Cast shield on the first reinforce of the *Windsor Cannon* (fig. 2).



Fig. 17
Lion (*sinha*) on the wax seal of Vimala Dharma Suriya II of Kandy, on a letter to Dutch Governor Cornelis Jan Simons, 1702-07. Lontar leaf, approx. 260 x 75 mm. Stichting Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen, inv. no. TM-A-9018.



Fig. 18
Lion (*sinha*) on the wax seal of Kirti Sri Rajasinha of Kandy, on a letter to Dutch Governor Iman Willem Falck, 1772. Lontar leaf 213 x 43 mm. The Hague, Huis van het boek, inv. no. 010 B 035.

Fig. 19
Carving of a lion, c. thirteen-seventies, on a wooden pillar of the drummer's hall, in the Buddhist temple Embekka Devalaya, Pilimatalawa Road, EMBEKKA, Kandy District, Central Province, Sri Lanka. Photograph: ImageBROKER / Alamy Stock Photo



that we observe possible Dutch floral motifs in the silverwork, as the line work represents the original shield applied with the original casting. So when the cannon was originally cast, the Dutch used a Kandyan design on this object that was thus in conversation with the Kandyan visual world before even leaving the Dutch forge.

The shield with a border of gilded leaves and gem-encrusted flowers is surrounded by another *liyawela* (fig. 20) that overflows with lively figures transcending the beauty of the living creatures. This *liyawela* is an intricately carved arrangement of a chain



Fig. 20
Relief of the *liyawela*
on the first reinforce
of *Lewke's Cannon*
(fig. 1).

of flowers (*malwela*) and vines. Though the *liyawela* described earlier began from a vase, this is not the case in this section; these vines grow freely. Bent leaves are prevalent in this floral *liyawela*. There are also instances where they are linked with fancy leaves. Floral designs based on the pineapple flower begin from the centre and spread both ways. The character of the leaves (*liyapatha*) makes them rotate differently and rhythmically from bottom to top. These are commonly seen in stone carvings and ivory caskets of the Kotte era. In the brass industry, they are used to mark the

border of an image, especially on brass trays. The design surface ends with a protruding semi-elevated border (*watiya*).

The tier closing the first reinforce (fig. 21) holds the inscription that marks the donation of this cannon. Its most important decorative part is the lotus flower logo on the vent field between the two parts of the inscription (fig. 22). There are similar carvings among the wood carvings of Embekka (fig. 23), in lacquer and brass shields; as such the lotus flower (*nelum mala*) is one of the most widely used royal symbols. The design of this part



Fig. 21
Rear end of Lewke's
Cannon (fig. 1) with
neck and knob.

Fig. 22
Relief of a lotus
flower (*nelum mala*)
on the vent field of
Lewke's Cannon
(fig. 1).

> Fig. 23
Carving of a lotus
flower (*nelum mala*),
c. thirteen-seventies,
on a wooden pillar,
in the Buddhist temple
Embekka devalaya,
Pilimalawa Road,
EMBEKKA, Kandy
District, Central
Province, Sri Lanka.
Photograph: Jievani
Weerasinghe / Alamy
Stock Photo

concludes with the same border design of *annasi mala* that we also encountered on the muzzle of the cannon.

The final element of the cannon is the cascabel that exists of the neck and knob (see fig. 21). The onion-shaped knob is once more engraved with a flower motive.

Conclusion

This research concludes that the cannon was gifted to King Sri Vijaya Rajasinha by Lewke in 1745/46 after it was embellished by Sri Lankan artisans in that same year. The designs on this cannon mark the pinnacle of Lankan decoration in the eighteenth century, applied in a period when Kandyan design culture started to change. The character of the design gravitates towards the earlier medieval Kandy, rather than late medieval Kandyan design, which is generally less subtle.

Curiously, the cannon was initially cast in the Netherlands in the seventeenth century and already carried

decorative elements when Lewke commissioned the extra layer of gold and silver embellishments to be added. Provenance research by the PPROCE team concluded that it was probably originally cast as a gift to, or on the order of the king of Kandy. The craftsmen involved in the original casting process included a shield with Kandyan political motifs, which was further embellished in 1745-46. The shield is but one example of where the Dutch and Kandyan visual worlds met.

From the muzzle to the knob of the cannon, it is clear that while maintaining a wide range of design practices the craftsmen possessed a high level of artistic creativity and craftsmanship that allowed for innovation at the same time. In this article we have observed that at different instances the Kandyan artists placed their work in dialogue with the European motifs already present on the cannon, for example by echoing the cherub's wings in the *nari-latha* figures. The dolphin handles were made to resemble *makara* heads



through similar simple but effective interventions.

Although the cannon thus quite literally represents a dialogue between very different visual worlds, it also forcefully uses traditional symbolism to enhance the function of the newly added decoration. The flower plant and the *kalpavruksha* both represent good luck and symbolize the nature of the gift, bestowing good fortune on its receiver. It is here that we see the artists in dialogue with Lewke himself, whose initiative to decorate the cannon was part of his political manoeuvring between the king of Kandy and the Dutch.

The Lewke cannon thus serves as a testament of the virtuosity of dual parentage and was revealed as a hybrid artwork that expresses the social, religious and political essence of eighteenth-century Sri Lanka.

ABSTRACT

The Lewke cannon was one of the selected items in the Pilot Project Provenance Research on Objects of the Colonial Era launched in 2019. This cannon has gained attention globally because of its unique and unmatched decorations. While its history of being looted from the palace of Kandy has been recorded by various historians, very little attention has been given to the actual decoration on the cannon. This article shows that the decoration and inscription on the outer surface of the cannon were applied as a gift from the prominent Sri Lankan figure Lewke to King Sri Vijaya Rajasinha of Kandy in 1745-46 and as such represents an internal political moment in the Kandyan kingdom. The research into the cannon brings to the fore the Sri Lankan craftsmanship of this eighteenth-century South Asian region. While ancient Lankan motifs have been applied, the craftsmen were able to emphasize the motifs already present in the bronze cast from the seventeenth-century Netherlands, amongst which Lankan emblems, as well as adapt their motifs to better suit the decoration already present. In all, this contribution shows how an analysis of the decoration and the inscription provides us with new insight into the mid-eighteenth-century Sri Lankan social-political and cultural context, while at the same time revealing a global history of cultural diplomacy.

NOTES

* Research into Lewke's cannon was undertaken as part of the Pilot Project Provenance Research on Objects of the Colonial Era (PPOCE). This project was a joint initiative of the NIOD Institute for War, Holocaust and Genocide Studies, the Rijksmuseum Amsterdam (RMA) and the Stichting Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen (NMVW), carried out under the leadership of the NIOD and its Expert Centre Restitution

(ECR). Ganga Rajinee Dissanayaka is a member of the PPOCE team of the Lewke cannon. The present article is based on the report (no. 2, held in the Rijksmuseum) the author wrote to substantiate conclusions in the main provenance report, see also notes 3, 4 and 28. The author thanks Alica Schrikker for her feedback and editing of earlier versions of this article and Asoka de Zoysa as a PPOCE research team member.

- 1 Sujatha Arundathi Meegama, 'In Search of National Traditions: Mapping Sri Lanka's Art Histories', in Sujatha Arundathi Meegama (ed.), *Sri Lanka: Connected Art Histories*, Mumbai 2017, pp. 10-31; Alan Strathern and Zoltán Biedermann, 'Querying the Cosmopolitan in Sri Lankan and Indian Ocean History', in Zoltán Biedermann and Alan Strathern (eds.), *Sri Lanka at the Crossroads of History*, London 2017, pp. 1-18. For an overview of the Dutch period on Sri Lanka, also in relation to Portuguese and British colonialism, see Lodewijk Wagenaar, *Cinnamon and Elephants: Sri Lanka and the Netherlands from 1600*, Nijmegen 2016.
- 2 This type of cannon was used to heighten the pomp of the ruler. Its object history goes back to the mid-seventeenth century, the time of King Louis XIV (r. 1643-1715). Owning a cannon that can be actually used in warfare or being gifted an ornate miniature cannon had different connotations to demonstrate the power and prestige of the donor. It is from the time of the 'Sun King' that we discover the prototype for Lewke's cannon. Robert Knox's anecdote that King Rajasinha II of Kandy (r. 1635-87) had eight or nine 'small cannons' which were 'rarely carved and inlaid with brass and coloured stones' also falls into the exact timeline of ceremonial cannons gifted by the Dutch to Kandy. The decoration on the present cannon appears to be richer than any other small cannon in the world.
- 3 Alicia Schrikker and Doreen van den Boogaart, in collaboration with Asoka de Zoysa, Ganga Rajinee Dissanayaka, Ruth Brown, Kay Douglas Smith and Arie Pappot, *Provenance Report Regarding 'Singalees kanon of Lewuke's kanon'*, Amsterdam (NIOD, Rijksmuseum, Stichting Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen) 2022, see [RAP _ PPROCE_ProvenanceReport_46_SingaleesKanonLewukesKanon_NG_NM_1015_v10_202203.pdf](#); for the context of the Kandyan-Dutch war (1762-66) and spoils of the war, see pp. 22-30.
- 4 Pilot Project Provenance Research on Objects of the Colonial Era', <https://www.niod.nl/en/projects/pilotproject-provenance-research-objects-colonial-era-pproce> (consulted 4 August 2022). See the provenance report by Schrikker, Van den Boogaart et al. 2022 *Kanon* (note 3), and Doreen van den Boogaart and Alicia Schrikker, 'Wanderings: The Provenance of Six Sri Lankan Objects', pp. 302-17 in this *Rijksmuseum Bulletin*. The decoration on the carriage (affuit) has been researched by Asoka de Zoysa; the first results are in appendix 1 of the provenance report. His full-length article on the subject is forthcoming.
- 5 Schrikker, Van den Boogaart et al. 2022 *Kanon* (note 3). For the history of restitution requests from the nineteen-sixties, see esp. appendix 2 of the provenance report.
- 6 Schrikker, Van den Boogaart et al. 2022 *Kanon* (note 3). See esp. 'Part one: object analysis', pp. 5-20. The second Windsor cannon is inv. no. RCIN 72821, Windsor Castle, Royal Collection Trust.
- 7 See note 3 and <https://www.rijksmuseum.nl/en/research/our-research/overarching/provenance-research-colonial-collections> (consulted 17 June 2022).
- 8 In the Latin alphabet, the transcription reads: 'Saka warsha ekwadahas sasiya hatahathata pamini kroda nam wu me warshayehi iishwaradhipathi wu anthima winshathiyehi sataru korale disawa labi thibena *Lewke thenenneha wisin wedakarawa dakwapu Kalathuwakkuwai*.' Transcription made by the author.
- 9 Don Martino de Zilva Wickremasinghe was the first to make a translation of this transcription in 1894. He added the suggestion that the gift was made 'to the Hollanders'; this was not based on the inscription itself, but on the interpretation of the cannon's provenance by museum curators at the time. It has been the cause of much confusion. See Don Martino de Zilva Wickremasinghe, 'A Sinhalese Inscription of 1745 A.D.', *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde van Nederlandsch-Indië* 44 (1894), 3/4th issues [5th series, 10th volume], pp. 659-61. In my analysis of the inscription, I place emphasis on the etymological use of the word *thenenneha* and the phrase *wedakarawa dakwapu* which reflect the new high-ranking position of Lewke. See Harischandra Wijethunga, *Prayogika simhala sabdakosaya (Practical Sinhala Dictionary)*, Colombo 1965, p. 863; Asoka Piyarathna, personal communication, 28 August 2021; Vipuli Hettiarachchi, personal communication, 21 September 2021.
- 10 Schrikker, Van den Boogaart et al. 2022 *Kanon* (note 3), p. 10.
- 11 Early references to the Lewke (Bandara) family are found in the *Tudugala Veedagama Bandaravali*, a palm leaf book (*puskola* book), now in the collection of the Colombo National Museum, inv. nos. 2023, 2024.

- 12 L.S. Dewaraja, *The Kandyan Kingdom of Sri Lanka, 1707-1782*, Colombo 1988 (second revised edition), p. 94.
- 13 Harry Charles Purvis Bell, *Report on the Kegalla District of the Province of Sabaragamuwa*, Colombo 1904, p. 200; Lionel F. Lee, 'Notes on a Sannas', *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society Ceylon Branch* (JRASCB) 4/5 (1870-71), p. 8-11. On Lewke's political position, see esp. Eric Meyer, 'Lewuké Disawa: Un aristocrate kandyen du 18ème siècle', <https://slkdiaspo.hypotheses.org/tag/kandy> (consulted 17 June 2022).
- 14 Sophia Pieters, *Memoir Left by Gustaaf Willem Baron van Imhoff, Governor and Director of Ceylon, to His Successor, Willem Maurits Bruynink, 1740*, Colombo 1911.
- 15 Sujatha Arundathi Meegama, 'The Local and the Global: The Multiple Visual Worlds of Ivory Carvers in Early Modern Sri Lanka', in Biedermann and Strathern (eds.) 2017 (note 1), pp. 113-40.
- 16 From the early fifteenth to late sixteenth centuries, the Kandy or Udarata region (meaning 'Up-Country'), in Central Sri Lanka, was ruled by dynastic officials under the command of the kings of Kotte, which kingdom lay more to the west. Kotte was divided into three kingdoms in 1521, of which Sitawaka was the most powerful, due to the others being influenced by the Portuguese. In 1582, its king Rajasinha killed the Kandyan aristocrat who had helped him invade the Kandy territory, Weerasundara Bandara. His son, Konappe Bandara, managed to escape. Under the protection of the Portuguese, he was baptized as 'Don Juan of Austria' and studied martial arts in Goa (India). Ten years later, after returning to Sri Lanka, he defeated Rajasinha and became Kandy's first autonomous king as Vimaladharmasuriya (r. 1592-1604).
- 17 Ministry of Education [of Sri Lanka], *National Syllabus Ordinary Level & Advanced Level – Art*. Department of National Education Publication, Colombo 2005, p. 20.
- 18 Ministry of Education [of Sri Lanka] 2005 (note 17), p. 20. See also Sujatha Arundathi Meegama, 'In Search of National Traditions: Mapping Sri Lanka's Art Histories', in idem, *Sri Lanka, Connected Art Histories*, Mumbai 2017, pp. 10-31.
- 19 Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, *Mediaeval Sinhalese Art: Being a Monograph on Mediaeval Sinhalese Arts and Crafts, Mainly as Surviving in the Eighteenth Century, with an Account of the Structure of Society and the Status of the Craftsmen*, Broad Campden 1908, pp. 54-59.
- 20 While Coomaraswamy classified Sinhala decorations into four sections, this classification does not include the term conceptual, which is now more common among Sri Lankan art historians. Ministry of Education [of Sri Lanka] 2005 (note 17), p. 20. With the term conceptual we refer to imaginary creations such as animals and trees not found in the living world. Examples are *sarapendi*, *bherunda*, *narai devi* | *nari-lathas*.
- 21 Schrikker, Van den Boogaart et al. 2022 *Kanon* (note 3), pp. 6-9.
- 22 Meegama 2017 (note 15), p. 140.
- 23 The larvae of the Laksha insect, which inhabits trees like cones, masons, *kappetiya* and *thalakiriya*, are used to make *laksha*, a thick paste applied to coat pottery.
- 24 Ananda Kumara Dissanayaka, *Sinhala Sarasili Mosthara* (Decorative Motifs of Sinhalese), Colombo 2005, p. 50.
- 25 This flower created in relation to *wakadeka* (two-tone patterns) is an imaginary design. It is designed in circular, square and oblong/linear shapes. Many varieties of *seeni mala* are found in the Buddhist cave temple Dambulla Vihara (Matale District, Central Province). *Seeni mala* is widely used in wood, metal and ivory carving, as well as in paintings and in the decoration of *puskolapoth kamba* (decorated wooden book covers of palm leaf books).
- 26 This imaginative flower, which was created by the artist, is called *kathira mala*, because it has the shape of a cross; the flower is also known as *kathuru mala*. These flowers are used to create both simple and complex patterns and are used for murals, and wood, metal and ivory carving.
- 27 In recent research the Kandyan period was divided into three stages, based on shifts in political history and art history: the pre-Kandyan period, 1592-1739; the medieval Kandyan or Nayakkar period (after the Nayak dynasty), 1739-1815; and the post-Kandyan or British period, 1815-1948. See Ganga Rajinee Dissanayaka, *Bawda Viharanga sampradaye Udarata Kalagaraya; Sri lankawe Tampita Vihara* (The Upcountry Repository of Buddhist Art: The Tampita Vihara of Sri Lanka), Colombo 2017, p. 1 (English translation is forthcoming).
- 28 Ganga Dissanayaka, 'Report No:02', mentioned in Schrikker, Van den Boogaart et al. 2022 *Kanon* (note 3), held in the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, p. 102.