

A MEETING OF CULTURES:  
THE UNIQUE VERNACULAR CHAPEL AT TRINITY COLLEGE  
KANDY, SRI LANKA

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*KANDY!*

The very name is redolent of history, culture, festivals, dances, caparisoned elephants, and historic rituals. Ancient temples nestle in remote corners of this *Cande Udarata* – the old Kandyan Kingdom. The architecture, hipped roofs, frescoes, wood carvings and antiquities of these places of worship provide a veritable feast for the eyes, vying for attention with the surrounding vistas of cloud capped mountains, rivers, waterfalls and verdant plateaus.

Kandyan architecture has a sublime beauty all its own, adroitly captured into words by the savant Dr. Ananda Coomaraswamy when in 1905 he wrote his famous ‘Open Letter to the Kandyan Chiefs’, telling them that; *"Architecture needs for its complete expression, the reasonable intelligent co-operation of all the arts; and in the days I speak of it did not lack this amongst the Kandyans; the stonemason and carpenter, the blacksmith and silversmith, the painter and potter, even the weaver combined to produce buildings of a lovely and harmonious character, part as it were of the very soil they grew from."*

Dr. Coomaraswamy had been alarmed at the deterioration of the historic buildings in the Kandyan provinces and lamented that in *"the repairs and alterations which have been made in ancient buildings in modern times...the incompetency attained is nothing short of appalling"*.

Thus it was that ninety years after the fall of the Kandyan Kingdom, not only were no new buildings of aesthetic value being put up, but the existing ones too were being ruined.

Eighteen years after Dr.Coomaraswamy's sad lament, the visionary Rev. Gaster at Trinity College Kandy decided to make a difference. In the year 1923, on the slopes of a hill having glorious views of the Kandyan peaks, work began on the construction of a building that would take more than fifty years to complete, and was designed and built for 'eternity', using materials and techniques from Lanka's ancient and long forgotten era of great lithic monuments. This was to be the Chapel at Trinity College Kandy, a Public School for boys run by the Church Missionary Society and styled in the manner and traditions of the great Public Schools of England. The school was celebrating its fiftieth anniversary in 1923. Its centenary would pass before the chapel could be fully completed. No building of this scale and artistic grandeur, made of massive hand-carved granite columns, had been attempted in Sri Lanka for the better part of a thousand years, and none have been attempted since.



On the slopes of a hill having glorious views of the Kandyan peaks



At the beginning, when Trinity College decided to build a chapel, there was much discussion on the design, and various preferences were discussed: Byzantine, Classical,

and even Gothic. But the Rev L. J. Gaster, the then Vice-principal of the school, had the breadth of vision and the architectural background to conceive of a building that would, in his words, *"express in stone the ideas and aspirations that were in the air and set out to build a thing of beauty, to build for posterity and to build, so to speak, in the vernacular"*.

Rev. Gaster had been to Polonnaruwa and had returned awe inspired. Not enough survived in that historic city to show what the buildings looked like in their entirety, but there was a wealth of detail, graceful pillars, massive and deeply moulded plinths and platforms, richly carved moonstones and balustrades, and majestic shells to show the scale on which the ancients had built and the skill with which they had decorated their buildings. It had made a deep impression on him. It was said at the time that, *"As he stood amidst those remarkable ruins in all their grandeur, their massiveness and their loveliness, his thoughts went back through the centuries and saw these wonderful buildings in their former completeness with the citizens of that remarkable city gazing with pride and pleasure on those wonderful achievements in stone."*



Polonnaruwa: The inspiration from circa 1100 AD

Though these achievements of Sri Lanka's ancient civilization had been allowed to go to ruin, Rev. Gaster was convinced that no effort should be spared to inculcate in the young minds of generations of schoolboys to come, the appreciation of what is lasting, what is beautiful, and what inspires the mind to strive for greatness. He wanted to raise the most beautiful of buildings on the most beautiful of sites in the school. When arguments were made as to the impracticability of his dream and the costs of the venture, he would say that the traditions of Lanka demonstrated that the Palaces of the Kings had always been subsidiary to the Temples, and that it was on the Temples that all the resources of art and architecture had been lavished in the past.

When work commenced on the chapel there were no contractors willing to tender for the contract, and no estimates could be prepared either. There were no written specifications for the kind of work that had to be done, nor were there any living souls with the requisite building experience. Rev. Gaster wanted to use the same old granite, hewn in blocks as gigantic as in the olden days. He envisioned a forest of stone pillars, fifty four in number, each sixteen feet high and two feet square, intricately decorated and capped with bell like carved wooden *"pekadas"*. They were to stand on a stone platform four feet high – *"high enough for shelter, but not too high to look across, whether seated or standing, through the avenue of columns, to the sunset glow on the hills beyond"*.





The sketches of Rev. Gaster, and the completed works today..



..providing contemplative views through the avenue of columns to the sunset glow on the hills beyond”



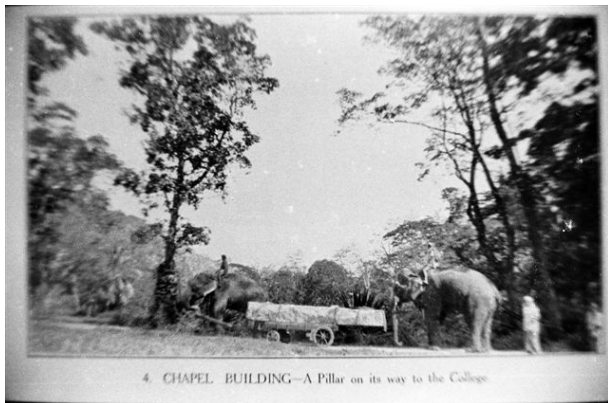
In an age before the availability of electric granite cutters, mechanized cranes, and heavy haulage trucks, the task of quarrying, shaping, and transporting the granite called for imagination and determination on an epic scale. Once a suitable quarry had been found about three miles away, the rock face had to be split with human muscle power aided by

steel wedges, sledgehammers, and crowbars, as blasting would have merely shattered the rock into pieces. The monolithic pillar blocks had to be *eighteen feet long and three feet square* with no cracks or major blemishes. Each of these massive blocks, weighing about three tons, had to be loaded onto a simple but sturdy trolley with iron wheels, and hauled by two elephants, one pulling and one pushing, for a distance of three miles to the school premises; and then another three hundred feet up the slope of the hill to the site. It is not surprising then that the pillars were brought in at the rate of only about two a month, when it was not raining! Then began the arduous task of cutting the blocks to their exact dimensions, smoothening them, carving them, and erecting them on site. The skilled and dedicated workmen involved were brilliant. They were practicing a dying art and their names are recorded elsewhere in the Archives of Trinity College Kandy. It was to be the last great swan song of a unique and historic skill, handed down, not in textbooks, but literally from hand to hand, from father to son, from generation to generation, across the many centuries of Lankan history.

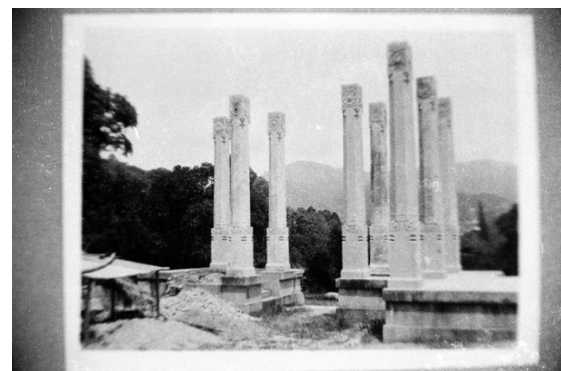


1. CHAPEL BUILDING—Rough Hewing Pillars.

Quarrying, hauling, and erecting a unique stone edifice, built to withstand the ravages of the centuries



4. CHAPEL BUILDING—A Pillar on its way to the College.







Today you see the complex work completed, each monolith of a pillar square based and square capped, with the main, gently tapering stem, octagonal in shape. There are mouldings on the square faces at 9" and 3'6" and an elaborate leaf and tendril design called "*Liya Patha*" at a height of 4'. A "pineapple" design is carved on the eight faces at the base of the octagonal stem. A cobra hood design tops off this section at 13' 6". The final 2' 6" is carved with elaborate designs of large flowers, animals, birds, crests and other traditional motifs with decorative margins. Altogether, nearly a thousand granite faces had to be carved. The intricate corbel like *pekadas* made of *gammalu* hardwood, hand carved into inverted lotuses, give solidity and support to the whole structure.



A forest of intricately carved, gently tapering stone pillars, capped with ever lasting *gammalu* wood corbels





The lofty Kandyan hipped-roof of the Chapel commences at a height of 20 feet and tops off at 55 feet above the aisle; as high as a five-story building. The Capitals on ten of the pillars looking down on the nave are carved with the Coats of Arms of British educational institutes, which in the 1920s and 1930s contributed the then princely sum of Rs. 1000 each towards the cost of one pillar. Some of these institutes are Balliol College and New College at Oxford, Eton, Repton, Marlborough, and Winchester Colleges.

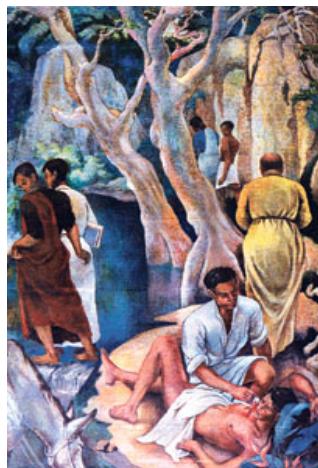




The completed Chapel at Trinity is full of works of other artisans too, from authentic Kandyan lacquered windows to carved marble slabs, and a beautifully carved wooden pulpit and doorway.



The final works of art were the four marvellous murals painted by David Paynter O.B.E, a Member of the Royal Academy, and an old pupil of Trinity. He began his labour of love in 1929 when only the side chapel was roofed and completed. The murals, as seen today, are all in his inimitable style, and though the scenes are Biblical, they have a tropical colour and a unique local setting to match the Kandyan architecture itself.







The skill and labour involved in raising such a structure with intricate artistic designs, lovingly and laboriously carved by hand on solid granite and hardwood, was so difficult that it eventually consumed the efforts of hundreds of individuals and spanned the lives of two and a half generations of Trinitians and craftsmen. Since that time, no one in Sri Lanka has even dared to attempt such a mammoth task, even with the help of modern machinery. Sad it is that the Ceremonial Hall at the Independence Square in Colombo, a national monument of the new era, has had to make do with pillars of cement concrete, a cheap and unimaginative shortcut to the grandeur of lithic monuments.

But upon a hill in Kandy, amidst a school named Trinity, men of vision did it the Trinity way, and translated their dreams into reality with the help of generations of dedicated craftsmen and artists. They laboured for over fifty years to erect and decorate a hallowed building, lavishing upon it all their resources of art and architecture as in ancient times, reviving skills not practiced on such a scale for a thousand years. Thus did they leave something inspiring for generations of Trinitians yet to be born. It will stand as testimony to their vision, their labour of love, their skill, and their dedication, for a millennium to come.



*Kandy, Sri Lanka, December 1994  
Revised October 1999, Island of Mahe, Seychelles,  
Revised March 2010, Vancouver, BC,, Canada*