

LEISURE & ARTS

By LEE ADAIR LAWRENCE

Washington

A new art order is emerging in our post-Cold War world. Cultural "satellites" are demanding that their artistic traditions be recognized as independent forms, even though they may have borrowed heavily from the "superpowers."

One debate over the new order is highlighted by an exhibition of 52 exquisite Sri Lankan bronzes at the Smithsonian Institution's Sackler Gallery, up until Sept. 26. Included are 26 pieces unearthed over the last 30 years at the sites of ancient monasteries and palaces. Their first trip outside Sri Lanka has taken them to the Musee National des Arts Asiatiques Guimet in Paris, the Rietburg Museum in Zurich and, finally, here.

Buddhas and bodhisattvas dominate the show. Yet it also includes 13 Hindu bronzes believed to date from the 11th century, when the island was ruled by Chola emperors from South India. These are clearly the best of Sri Lankan art, including several world-class masterpieces. The issue here is one of definition.

The old order unhesitatingly defines all Sri Lankan Buddhist bronzes as secondary imitations of those images cast in India. In his 1923 book, "Indian Sculpture at the British Museum," William Rothenstein preached the gospel: "No sculpture has been produced in the countries inspired by the Buddha's teaching superior in power and grandeur to the original conceptions of the Indian genius."

Ideology, however, is only partly to blame for many scholars' dismissal of Sri Lankan art. Most of the bronzes associated with Sri Lanka in the first half of the century were small Buddha images that generations of monks had ritualistically

rubbed with brick dust until they were featureless lumps of metal.

The old order also studies the island's Hindu art purely in relation to India, concluding that most Sri Lankan pieces are derivative or provincial. In this context, the highest compliment bestowed on a Sri Lankan Hindu work is attribution to a south Indian artist.

Not surprisingly, the first to attack this view were scholars in Sri Lanka. Sir Pon-

The Gallery

nambalam Anurachalam wrote in 1909 of "... the conscious or more unconscious assumption that Sri Lanka is a paradise of mediocrities." Some Sri Lankans go so far as to claim that their ancestors developed the very image of Buddha, traditionally believed to have originated around the third century B.C. in northern India.

At times Sri Lankan scholars border on the strident, perhaps driven as much by resentment toward their giant neighbor as by aesthetic revelations. Sri Lanka's ambassador to the U.S., Ananda W.P. Guruge, notes that "No one objected to India's takeover of Sikkim or Bhutan," referring to India's assumption of these countries' defense and foreign relations in 1950 and 1949. "And India could have taken Sri Lanka, too." He adds: Should India or anyone else attempt to destabilize or overrun his country, the respect generated by the exhibit would translate into international outrage.

Sri Lanka gets political mileage out of the exhibit in other ways. "We could have made it an entirely Buddhist show," Am-

bassador Curuge says. Thus does the exhibit consciously counter the government's reputation of subjugating the Hindu Tamil minority. Better that the government celebrate the separatist terrorists.

Ambassador Curuge mentions another political pay-off: "During the presidential campaign, Clinton made a comment about the U.S. economy being somewhere between that of Germany and that of Sri Lanka." Countering such pejorative rhetoric, Ambassador Curuge says, is well worth the \$18,000 the Sri Lankan government paid to bring the exhibit to America.

Proponents of the new order are a wee bit disappointed, however. "There has been tremendous excitement about it as a masterpiece exhibit," says Carol Radcliffe Bolon, the Sackler's assistant curator of South and Southeast Asian art. "But I haven't met any scholars of South Asian art who are having revelations" that drive them to study Sri Lankan art more closely.

Walking through the exhibit, Ms. Bolon points out the features she believes add up to a unique Sri Lankan aesthetic. Yes, they drew inspiration from India and, yes, they adopted many of the prevailing principles. "But the Sri Lankan artists took license," she says. "They made different iconographic details, different structural details, and rendered their art distinct."

Some departures are difficult to quantify. Ms. Bolon says the face of one sixth-century hollow-cast Buddha has a "nobil-

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Yokohama Holds a Vigil
For the Art Market's Return

By SCARLET CHENG

Yokohama

The just-completed second annual International Contemporary Art Fair here reflected Japan's enduring taste for elegant simplicity in everything from paintings, prints, sculpture, installations and photography. Unfortunately for the 91 galleries assembled to show their wares, the market for such things was the event's champion minimalist

how "trendy" and "shallow" contemporary art has become.

Tokyo Gallery brought several black-wood constructions by Japanese pioneer modernist Yoshishige Saito, whose 10-week retrospective show at the Yokohama Museum of Art closed this week.

Andre Emmerich Gallery prided itself on the "museum quality" pieces it brought, like David Hockney's brilliantly colored "The Conversation," a full-length portrait of two seated men caught during

