

n a New Art Order

ity that you don't find in Indian art: it's serenity, it's dignity."

But there are also unmistakable differences: While Indian artists depicted the Buddha's bliss by lowering his eyelids, Sri Lankans opened them and placed cryatals on the irises. They may have ribbed the robe in the Indian style, but then they

dangling, the other pulled in so that the foot rests flat on the bench. His torso is supported by his left arm, giving his body an elegant, relaxed attitude. The pose relates to one used sparingly in Indian bronzes. But in those the arms are lifted and the torso stiff and rigid by comparison to this bodhisattvsa.

So isn't this piece provincial, since it deviates from standards set by the artistic superpower? "That's one way of looking at it," Ms. Bolon says. "But they've created a masterpiece. It is because of that pose that you get such a graceful line."

The question entails more than a clash of perspectives; it spills over into the tricky matter of attributing dates. The dreamy Shiva and Parvati bear more resemblance to ninth-century South Indian pieces than to the more detailed, sharper images of the 11th century.

This might mean that Sri Lankans kept or revived classical elements long after they were supplanted in India. But what if the piece is in fact older and was brought to the island by Chola conquerors? It's impossible to date bronzes scientifically, as only organic matter can be carbon-tested. So ideology will continue to dictate attributions until archeologists unearth enough pieces to forge a chronology.

The new order, meanwhile, has been gaining support in academia. Vidya Dehejia, an associate professor at Columbia University and author of numerous books on the art of South Asia, three years ago described some Hindu pieces from Sri

Lanka as "clearly provincial . . . though not without interest."

Today, those words give her pause: "It is not fair to call these works provincial, as I have done," she says. "Perhaps what we need to do is speak of a Sri Lankan school that flourished at the time of the Cholas."

In line with the new thinking, Ms. Dehejia refers to the Sri Lankan "contribution," as illustrated by the exhibit's bronze of Hindu Saint Sundaramurtisvami. His stance, his hairstyle, his very conceptualization contain elements that she sees as uniquely Sri Lankan. "They are not even borrowed from the Buddhist art," she says.

She also speculates that the flame that typically projects from the crown of Sri Lankan Buddhas (representing enlightenment) may have traveled from the island to the mainland.

Of course, it may have been the other way around. Nobody will know for sure until a complaint issued in 1957 by Sri Lankan scholar Nandadeva Wijesekera is heeded. "No serious attempt has been made to discover the canons of Sinhalese art," he complained in "Early Sinhalese Sculpture." Perhaps this exhibit should be viewed as Mr. Wijesekera's call to battle.

Ms. Lawrence lived in India for four years and is now a free-lance writer based in Washington.

"We could have made it an entirely Buddhist show," Sri Lankan Ambassador Curuge says. Thus does the exhibit consciously counter the government's reputation of subjugating the Hindu Tamil minority.

stretched it taut over the Buddha's knee and exposed part of his calf. In the Hindu statues of Parvati, the breasts are rounder, more life-like than what Ms. Bolon calls the "half-grapefruits" found on Indian works.

Sri Lankans also appear to have taken some liberty with poses; a masterful Bodhisattva in gilt bronze sits with one leg

