

## **VANDALIZED PAINTINGS IN SIGIRIYA, SRI LANKA, 1967**

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### **Introduction**

Sigiriya is an ancient rock palace with a water garden located near Dambulla Central Province, Sri Lanka. It has a historical and archaeological significance which is dominated by a massive column of rock. A series of galleries and staircases emerging from the mouth of a gigantic lion constructed of bricks and plaster provide access to the site. Sigiriya was built during the years of the reign of Kassapa I. Local as well as international visitors have visited the site of the 'Lion Mountain' from the 6th century AD up to the present days. The frescos of Sigiriya which are similar to Ajantha are among the most attractive attributes of the rock. The poems inscribed on the rock by the visitors known as the 'Sigiri graffiti,' are among the most ancient texts in Sinhalese language, and subsequently show the considerable influence exerted by the abandoned city of Kassapa I on both literature and artistic thoughts. The site was inscribed as a World Heritage Site by UNESCO in 1982 under the criteria ii, iii and iv. On October 15, 1967, serious vandalism took place in the site. Famous Sigiri frescos were destroyed

while applying some commercial green paint by a mad person. In response to Sri Lankan government's request, an international rescue mission was organized by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the International Centre for the Study and Preservation of Cultural Property, Rome (ICCROM). It was decided to get the services of the best available expert to restore the paintings. Dr. Luciano Maranzi, an alumnus of ICCROM, was selected and has arrived Sri Lanka for a period of two weeks to rescue Sigiriya paintings. However, no records or color photographs available in Sri Lanka on this international rescue mission. The main purpose of this research is to identify how the international heritage community approached in a critical situation to rescue a priceless heritage site in Sri Lanka.

### **Methodology**

Archival research has been conducted within the ICCROM institutional archives. Primary records linked with the international mission on vandalized Sigiriya paintings were collected as scan copies. Unpublished

manuscripts and records, printed and published materials and visual materials, including original photographs were studied. Reference works and secondary sources for background information were collected from the ICCROM library and the internet.

### Experimental results



Figure 1. Dr. Luciano Maranzi and Dr. Raja de Silva restoring the vandalized paintings

On October 15, 1967, an act of vandalism took place in Sigiriya, and the priceless paintings were applied with a commercial green paint. Dr. C. E. Godakumbura, Archaeological Commissioner at that time instructed Dr. Raja de Silva to take necessary action to remove the green paint. At the sametime, Sri Lankan government requested from the ICCROM and UNESCO for the services of a best available expert to restore the paintings. on 27<sup>th</sup> October 1967, UNESCO requested from the Smithsonian institution in Washington DC, United states of America, for the possible contribution on this mission.

Under the Special Foreign Currency Grant No. SFC-8-7013, Smithsonian Institution agreed to give 4540 US Dollars for the mission. Dr. Luciano Maranzi, a skilled painting conservator was selected and had arrived Sri Lanka for a period of two weeks. Maranzi, together with Dr. Raja de Silva and his technical staff could complete the initial part of the programme and return to his country on 4<sup>th</sup> November 1967. Maranzi returned to the country on November 1968 to complete the remaining restoration works. According to Dr. Raja de Silva, the restoration was undertaken in several phases. It includes removal of vandal's paint layer, consolidation of plaster and application of preservative coating.

Maranzi's restoration works on Sigiriya paintings were mentioned in several mission reports in ICCROM archives. In 1974 Harold J. Plenderleith mentioned in a report that the problems presented by the wall paintings in Sigiriya have been successfully overcome by Maranzi. In 1986 and 1990 two other ICCROM mission reports mentioned about the results of Maranzis' restoration works.

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### References

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