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"Torana: Sri Lanka's Living Canvas of Convergence Art and Cultural Expression"

Abstract

This study examines the Sri Lankan tradition of *Torana* (Pandol) as a distinctive form of convergence art that combines multiple artistic disciplines into cohesive public art installations. Through analysis of historical practices, contemporary innovations, and the collaborative creative processes involved, this research demonstrates how *Torana* represents a unique contribution to global art installation practices. The investigation reveals how this ephemeral art form successfully integrates painting, electrical illumination, narrative storytelling, and live performance into immersive public experiences that transcend traditional artistic boundaries. By examining the work of key practitioners and the evolution of techniques from traditional methods to contemporary Matrix LED technology, this article argues that *Torana* constitutes a significant yet under recognised form of convergence art that challenges conventional distinctions between high and popular art while creating meaningful cultural experiences for diverse audiences.

Keywords: *Torana*, Convergence Art, Public Art Installation, Cultural Heritage, Layer Frame Art

Introduction

The tradition of *Torana*, known colloquially as Pandol/s, represents one of Sri Lanka's most distinctive contributions to the global landscape of public art installations[1] (Hu et al., 2013, pp. 430-438). These temporary structures, primarily erected during *Vesak* celebrations, embody a unique form of convergence art that seamlessly integrates multiple artistic disciplines, including painting, architecture, storytelling, lighting, live and recorded music into cohesive visual narratives. Unlike conventional art installations, which typically emerge from individual artistic visions or institutional frameworks, *Torana* represents a grassroots, collaborative art form that has evolved organically within Sri Lankan cultural practice over centuries.

The significance of *Torana* extends beyond its religious and cultural contexts to encompass broader questions about the nature of contemporary art, public engagement, and the democratisation of artistic expression. As Wijebandara (2012) noted, the habit of erecting *Torana* to celebrate and glorify significant events and to respect people of eminence has continued in the Eastern world from

[1] A public art installation is a work of art specifically designed for and sited in a publicly accessible location, often outdoors, intended to be experienced by a broad and diverse audience outside the traditional confines of a museum or gallery. It is more than just art in a public place; it is art conceived for the public realm, engaging with its context and audience in a way that transforms both the space and the experience of those who encounter it (Hu et al., 2013, pp. 430-438).

time immemorial. This longevity suggests not merely cultural persistence but rather the adaptive vitality of an art form that continues to evolve while maintaining its essential character.

Contemporary *Torana* practice demonstrates a sophisticated understanding of convergence art principles, combining traditional painting techniques inspired by the Buddhist paintings in temples (Bandara, 2020, pp. 39-42) with modern electrical illumination, recorded and live narrative elements, and three-dimensional sculptural components. This integration creates what can be understood as Richard Wagner's Concept of the 'Gesamtkunstwerk'[2] (Wolfman, 2013) - a total work of art that engages multiple senses and artistic disciplines simultaneously. Wagner theorized this concept in 1849 as a new art form that would integrate the arts of music, painting, architecture, and poetry (Rogers, 2023, p. 1). According to Wolfman (2013), Wagner's mission was to reunite the arts — music and fiction, enhanced by dance and gesture (Wolfman, 2013). According to Wagner,

> A 'Zersplitterung der Kuste'—a split between the arts—occurred in Greek antiquity. He believed that 'word, music and dance originally existed in perfect harmony' within the Greek state and its tragedies. Still, with the fall of the *'Athenian Polis*', the arts began to diverge. This explains his youthful revolutionary feeling: one should aspire to create a perfect society in which the ideal harmony of the work of art could again exist (ibid.)

The relevance to *Torana* practice is profound- contemporary *Torana* installations demonstrate a sophisticated understanding of Gesamtkunstwerk principles, combining traditional painting techniques with modern electrical illumination, recorded and live narrative elements, and three-dimensional sculptural components. This creates what Wagner envisioned as a total work of art that engages multiple senses and artistic disciplines simultaneously (Wolfman 2013; Rogers 2023). The temporal nature of these installations, which exist only for the duration of religious festivals, adds another layer of artistic significance that aligns with contemporary discussions about ephemeral art (Martet, 2023) and the relationship between permanence and meaning in artistic practice. However, the ephemerality of *Torana* is not primarily an artistic choice but a religious and cultural one. This raises questions about whether applying secular ephemeral art theory fully captures the spiritual and ritual significance of these installations.

Methodological Considerations: Cross-Cultural Theoretical Application

This analysis acknowledges the methodological complexity of applying Western art theoretical frameworks[3] to non-Western cultural practices[4]. As Katipommarat (2021, pp. 354-355) found,

[2] 'Gesamtkunstwerk' is a German term meaning "total work of art," referring to the synthesis of multiple art forms into a unified, immersive experience. It was popularised by Richard Wagner in the context of opera but has since influenced architecture, performance art, and multimedia installations (Wolfman, 2013).
[3] Western art theoretical frameworks refer to the philosophical, historical, and critical frameworks developed in Western cultures to analyse, interpret, and evaluate art. These theories have evolved over centuries, shaped by cultural, social, political, and technological changes (Tractinsky, 2010).
[4] Applying Western art theoretical frameworks to non-Western cultural practices can be problematic and unfair for several reasons, including issues of cultural hegemony, misrepresentation, and the neglect of indigenous epistemologies (Elkins, 2014, p.63).

> Theravada Buddhism views art practices as related to morality; however, the relationship is not direct, and therefore, art then has value and is not only a tool to serve morality.

While concepts such as *Gesamtkunstwerk*, installation art theory, and ephemeral art provide valuable analytical tools for understanding *Torana* practice, their application requires careful consideration of cross-cultural theoretical appropriation and the potential limitations of external analytical frameworks. Despite these concerns, this study employs Western theoretical frameworks for several reasons, including the installation art genre, which provides robust analytical tools for exploring complex and multifaceted artistic practices and highlights both commonalities and differences. Cultural appropriation occurs in various forms, with different levels of exchange, dominance, exploitation, and transculturation. The above categories are derived from cultural models and relations (Rogers, 2006). However, this application is undertaken with explicit recognition that these theories emerged from cultural contexts and may not capture all dimensions of *Torana* practice that would be visible through indigenous analytical frameworks. Stolnitz (1961, pp. 131-143) explains,

> Kant (1790) establishes the concept of "disinterestedness" – aesthetic judgment should be free from personal desire, utility, or morality. This separates the art object from its social context and elevates pure formal appreciation. Defines the "autonomy" of the aesthetic sphere.

However, using these frameworks can also help highlight the innovative and sophisticated aspects of *Torana* that might otherwise be overlooked in local discourse. It can facilitate international dialogue and recognition, allowing Sri Lankan art to be appreciated on a global stage. While narrative art is a recognised category in Western theory, the specific cultural and religious context of *Torana* adds layers of meaning that secular frameworks may not fully capture.

This analysis recognises its limitations in fully representing the cultural complexity of *Torana* practice through external theoretical lenses. Future research would benefit from collaborative approaches that integrate local knowledge systems and indigenous theoretical traditions with broader cross-cultural analytical dialogue.

Historical Foundations and Cultural Context

The historical roots of *Torana* extend deep into South Asian cultural practice, with documented evidence of similar structures in ancient Buddhist contexts (Mahalakshmi, 2010, pp. 245-255). Archaeological evidence from sites such as *Sanchi* provides material testimony to the antiquity of these practices (Chakravarty, 1966, pp. 24-31). This historical precedent establishes *Torana* not as a recent innovation but as part of a continuous tradition of Buddhist artistic expression (Martet, 2023) or Buddhist art[5] that has adapted to changing technological and social circumstances.

> Cultural exchange recalls an ‘‘innocent’’ era or context in which cultures freely and without power implications mutually share cultural elements, perhaps with the effect of greater cultural understanding and creativity (Rogers, 2006, p. 499).

[5] Buddhist art in Buddhism is not emphasised. However, various Buddhist artifacts such as Buddha images, pagodas are considered as Buddhist art (Hoeurn and Yeavya, 2024, p. 139).

The evolution of *Torana* from permanent stone installations to temporary fabric, iron, and electric constructions reflects broader changes in Sri Lankan society, particularly the introduction of electricity and modern materials. Historical accounts describe how 'when *Deepankara Buddha* arrived at *Rammagama,* the people there had erected a beautiful *Torana* as a mark of respect to the *Buddha*' (Wijebandara, 2012), indicating that the practice of creating temporary decorative structures for religious commemoration has ancient precedents. This historical continuity lends legitimacy to contemporary *Torana* practice in Sri Lanka, while also demonstrating the form's capacity for innovation and adaptation.

The transition to modern *Torana* practice occurred gradually, with the introduction of electricity marking a particularly significant watershed. The introduction of electricity has led to the practice of erecting large *Torana* for Vesak celebrations, featuring pictures and lights in various colors (ibid.). This technological integration did not simply add new capabilities to existing practices. Still, it fundamentally transformed the artistic possibilities of the medium (Ryan, 2006, pp. 1-30), enabling new forms of narrative expression and audience engagement that were previously impossible. However, rapid technological change can also risk alienating older generations or diluting traditional craftsmanship. There is a delicate balance between innovation and preservation.

The Convergence of Artistic Mediums

The concept of convergence art[6] (Lim, Lee, and Jung, 2020, p. 1) finds its most sophisticated expression in contemporary *Torana* practice through the integration of multiple artistic disciplines such as painting, lighting, music, and singing that maintain their identities while contributing to a unified aesthetic experience. This concept refers to the process of different artistic movements, styles, or philosophies coming together to influence one another and create new forms of expression (Pinot's Palette Naperville, 2024). Convergence of art operates on several levels (Lee, Olson and Trimi, 2010, pp.1-12), beginning with the fundamental integration of static visual art and dynamic illumination.

> Any artwork that attempts to engage with senses other than just the images, is called multimedia[7]. The various media that could be included in multimedia are images, text, sound, video and animation. The emerging and most dominant forms of multimedia today include animation and the digital art industry (Art Buzz, 2021).

[6] Convergence art is an artistic practice and concept rooted in the integration and hybridisation of diverse disciplines, media, technologies, aesthetics, and cultural forms (Jenkins, 2006, pp. 1-24). It emerges from the broader cultural phenomenon of media convergence (Jenkins and Deuze, 2008, pp. 5-12), where boundaries between previously distinct areas (art, science, technology, entertainment, communication) blur and interact dynamically. The theoretical foundation of convergence art emerged from broader cultural shifts that began in the 1960s, when artists started experimenting with interdisciplinary approaches (Art Buzz, 2021).

[7] Multimedia art, a closely related concept, aims at combining different content types such as images, text, audio, video or animation into a single piece of creative work. The term 'multimedia art' was coined by American showman, songwriter and artist Bob Goldstein, when he inaugurated his show 'Lightworks at L'Oursin' in Southampton, Long Island, New York in July 1966 (Zuras, M. Tech Art History, 2010 cited in Burkitbaev and Kunzhigitova, 2014, p. 36)

As experienced practitioners explain, the relationship between painting and lighting requires careful coordination. According to Gallage[8] (2024), "Firstly, the artist of the *Torana* does a sketch and discusses with the electrician regarding the illumination".

The complexity of this convergence becomes apparent when examining the specific technical challenges involved. Gallage (2024) describes the process:

> I find a story that aligns with my presentation or props such as a ship, wave, peacock, elephant or cart. In other words, the presentation is not according to the story. Then I discuss with the story writer, who will develop a detailed script like a film script.

This description reveals how convergence art in *Torana* practice requires negotiation between different artistic visions and technical capabilities, resulting in collaborative works that could not be achieved through individual artistic practice. Premalal[9] (2019) explains this process as,

> This is primarily the work of the artist. His idea is the key. If the lighting designer does not understand the idea, the outcome may be a failure. In the past, expert lighting designers worked according to the plan with understanding. They improvised the idea with lights. But it happens rarely.

The integration of narrative elements represents another dimension of convergence within *Torana* practice. The inclusion of both pre-recorded and live storytelling components creates layered temporal experiences that engage audiences in multiple ways simultaneously. The storyteller "narrates a *Dhamma* story in an interesting way through devotional songs and poetry mixed with music" (Kaviratne, 2015), while the visual components provide corresponding imagery that illustrates the narrative progression. This multimedia approach anticipates contemporary digital art practices while maintaining connection to traditional oral narrative traditions. Multimedia art brings together elements from distinct mediums into one creative element (Art Buzz, 2021).

Perhaps most significantly, contemporary *Torana* practice demonstrates the successful convergence of abstract and realistic artistic elements. This achievement represents a significant artistic accomplishment, as the successful integration of seemingly incompatible artistic approaches requires sophisticated understanding of visual composition and audience perception. The fact that this convergence has been achieved by practitioners without formal artistic training speaks to the intuitive aesthetic sophistication that characterises *Torana* practice.

The Collaborative Creative Process

The creation of *Torana* installations involves unprecedented levels of artistic collaboration that challenges conventional notions of individual artistic authorship.

> For a big 18-meter *Torana*, at least 100 skilled and unskilled laborers are needed, including welders, mechanics, wood craftsmen, painters, designers, electricians, builders, scriptwriters, dramatists, musicians, announcers, promoters, event managers, security, catering, and many more (Chaturanga, 2023; Campbell, 2018; Dissanayake, 2025).

[8] Sarath Gallage started as an electrician and now a leading *Torana* creator in Sri Lanka.
[9] Ananda Premalal is a talented artist who has been involved in *Torana* art practice for many years (Premalal, 2019).

This scale of collaboration approaches that found in major film productions or opera performances yet operates within community-based organisational structures rather than institutional frameworks.

The collaborative process begins with conceptual development that involves multiple artistic disciplines from the initial planning stages. The coordination between painters and electricians exemplifies this collaborative approach, as the electrician knows viewers are counting the numbers of the art patterns while concentrating on the paintings. The illumination of the *Torana* is a key factor (Gallage, 2024). This interdependence means that neither the visual nor the lighting components can be fully developed independently, requiring constant negotiation and mutual accommodation throughout the creative process.

The role of narrative development within this collaborative framework demonstrates another dimension of the artistic process. Script writers must coordinate with visual artists to ensure narrative coherence while accommodating technical constraints and audience expectations. The storyteller holds an important place in the spectacular pandal and must possess sufficient knowledge of the history of Buddhist literature as well as the Buddha's *Dhamma* (Senaratne, 2016). This requirement ensures that narrative elements maintain religious and cultural authenticity while contributing to the overall artistic impact of the installation. Hence, Buddhist art as representations and symbols of Buddhist spirituality, it is essential to study, analyse, and interpret them according to Buddhist principles (Hoeurn and Yeavya, 2024, p. 137)

The democratic character of *Torana* collaboration extends beyond professional artistic roles to include community participation in construction and support activities. This broad participation creates a form of collective artistic ownership that differs significantly from conventional art world practices. While this model fosters inclusivity and social cohesion, it may also raise issues of artistic quality control and creative direction. Large-scale collaboration can sometimes lead to compromises in aesthetic coherence or thematic clarity.

The fact that it was not necessary to be a Buddhist to take part in a *Torana* creation project, but you must understand your viewer who comes from all over the island with different background indicates how these collaborative processes transcend religious and ethnic boundaries while maintaining cultural specificity.

Technical Innovation and Artistic Evolution

The technical evolution of *Torana* practice demonstrates sophisticated understanding of the relationship between technological capability and artistic expression. The transition from simple illumination to complex lighting systems has fundamentally transformed the medium's expressive possibilities. Early practitioners used 5V bulbs; even during the daytime, people could enjoy it (Gallage, 2024). They employed RGB (Red, Green, Blue) colours; now, pink has been added as well (ibid.). This technical progression has enabled increasingly sophisticated color palettes and lighting effects that enhance narrative expression and visual impact.

The development of Matrix LED technology has particularly revolutionised *Torana* practice by enabling more complex programming and energy efficiency that supports extended display periods (Kanchana, 2025). Contemporary practitioners utilise these technological advances to create the timing of blackout illumination, which should be in a rhythm (Gallage, 2024), demonstrating how technical innovation enables new forms of artistic expression. The rhythmic qualities of

contemporary *Torana* lighting anticipate developments in video art and digital installation practices while maintaining connection to traditional aesthetic principles.

The materials and construction techniques employed in *Torana* creation have also evolved significantly while maintaining essential characteristics of the art form. Traditional painters utilise lacquering paint on thick cotton sheets while ensuring the paint is waterproof, bright, economical and available in the corner hardware shop (Denipitiya, 2024). This practical approach to materials reflects the grassroots character of *Torana* practice while also demonstrating sophisticated understanding of technical requirements for outdoor installation and nighttime visibility.

The integration of three-dimensional elements represents another area of technical innovation that has expanded the expressive possibilities of *Torana* installations. Contemporary practice includes three-dimension creations to elaborate the story such as moving giant snake, devil, elephant or a bird (Gallage, 2024). These mechanical elements require additional technical expertise and coordination while contributing kinetic dimensions to installations that were previously limited to static visual and lighting effects.

The revolutionary contributions of individual artists have marked significant moments in the technical and artistic evolution of *Torana* practice. Motagedara Vanigaratne's 1956 innovations exemplify how individual artistic vision can transform established traditions (Dewasurendra, 2017).

> His creation of a pandal with a completely different form that departed from conventional symmetrical designs marked the beginning of an innovative tradition that was embodied in traditional pandal art, entering a different path (ibid.)

This example demonstrates how technical innovation, and artistic vision can combine to create new possibilities within traditional frameworks.

Torana as Contemporary Art Installation

The recognition of *Torana* as legitimate contemporary art installation requires examination of the medium's compliance with established criteria for installation art. Contemporary art theory recognises installation art[10] (Josephine, 2012) through several key characteristics, all of which are demonstrably present in *Torana* practice (Visualflood Magazine, 2025; MasterClass, 2020).

> Installation art came to prominence in the 1970s but its roots can be identified in earlier artists such as Marcel Duchamp and his use of the readymade and Kurt Schwitters' Merz art objects (Rosenthal, 2007, p. 33).

The intentional design and aesthetics (Tractinsky, 2010) evident in *Torana* creation reflect meticulous design with a strong focus on visual appeal, theme, and overall aesthetic impact (Dhar, 2010, pp.151, 251). This aesthetic intentionality distinguishes *Torana* from merely functional or decorative structures and aligns with contemporary installation art practices.

[10] Contemporary art theory recognises installation art through several key characteristics, including site-specificity, immersive and sensory-rich environments, the use of mixed media, temporality, and active audience engagement (Josephine, 2012; Visualflood Magazine, 2025; MasterClass, 2020).

The theoretical four characteristics of installation art include intentional design and aesthetics[11], narrative dimensions[12], immersive character[13], experimental use of materials[14] and ephemerality[15]. The narrative dimensions of *Torana* installations correspond directly to contemporary installation art's emphasis on thematic coherence and conceptual development (Combrink and Allen, 2019; Kelly, 2010; Sentient by Elysian, 2024). *Torana* mainly depict stories (mainly *Jataka* stories[16] (Husain, Zaidi, and Bhalla, 2015)), social issues (such as slaughtering cows, ill-treating parents, drug menace), cultural themes (such as the arrival of the tooth relic and Buddhism), or even replicating famous landmarks (such as *Sri Pada, Mihintalaya, Sri Dalada Maligawa*). This narrative element is a core aspect of many art installations". The requirement that *Torana* narratives draw from *Jataka* stories ensures cultural authenticity while providing rich source material for visual and dramatic interpretation. Sri Lanka has a long, continuous tradition of decorating Buddhist temples and public spaces with elaborate paintings and murals (Bandaranayake, 1974). These creations often depict *Jataka* stories, the life of the Buddha, and other religious themes, much like *Torana* installations. Using this storytelling technique *Torana* translates theory into practice involves applying theories, principles, rules, and concepts (Hoeurn and Yeavya, 2024, p. 141).

The immersive character (Sethi, 2022; Robertson, Mansfield, and Loke, 2006) of *Torana* installations represents one of their most significant contributions to contemporary art practice. These installations create an immersive environment (Cleek, 2024) for viewers, engaging multiple senses (Voto, 2006) through elaborate decorations, lighting, soundscapes including pre-recorded music tracks with narration and live singing (*Viridu)*, and even interactive elements[17] (Kluszczynski, 2010). The scale and complexity of major *Torana* installations can accommodate thousands of simultaneous visitors while maintaining narrative coherence and visual impact, demonstrating

[11] Installation art rejects passive viewing, demanding deliberate spatial orchestration. The aesthetics are not merely visual but relational, involving the viewer's bodily presence and the site's architecture (Bishop, 2007, p.56). *Torana* engages viewers through donations, reinforcing its participatory nature. Though a three-dimensional installation, it is designed for front-facing interaction, with spatial aesthetics guiding focus toward the Buddha's portrait and halo, emphasising intentional design and engagement.

[12] The narrative dimensions of *Torana* installations correspond directly to contemporary installation art's emphasis on thematic coherence and conceptual development. This alignment is evident in how *Torana* practice integrates storytelling, audience participation, and thematic symbolism—key features recognised in installation art theory (Combrink and Allen, 2019; Kelly, 2010; Socratica, 2024; Parker, 2017).

[13] Immersion character transforms viewers from observers to participants within a total environment. This disrupts traditional art-viewing hierarchies (Bishop, 2007, p. 112). *Torana* fosters immersion by transforming viewers from passive observers into active participants within a total environment. Exhibited free of charge in a public space, it challenges traditional art-viewing hierarchies, where external disturbances—weather, traffic, and noise—become integral to the experience, reinforcing its dynamic and participatory nature.

[14] Installation art privileges materiality as conceptual language. Everyday ephemeral, or industrial materials challenge art's permanence and commodification (Foster, 2008, p.23). *Torana* creators mainly use household bulbs after colouring, cheap cloths instead canvas, printing ink or lacquer paint instead oil paint, Acrylic or water colours. *Torana* structure is made of areca nut trees. The idea of using low cost materials in this art project is to keep expenses under control (Gallage, 2024).

[15] Ephemerality refers to the temporary or short-lived nature of an artwork, which exists only for a limited duration before disappearing (Claus-Bachmann, 2002; López-Bertran, 2018). *Torana* installations exist only during religious festivals like Vesak and are dismantled afterward.

[16] *Jataka* stories illustrate general Buddhist moral ideals, including honesty, wisdom, kindness, generosity and detachment (Appleton, 2015).

[17] *Torana*, features interactive elements, such as allowing people to share Vesak greetings in Sinhala, Tamil, and English via digital screens or boards (Lakpura, 2025).

sophisticated understanding of audience engagement (Jilcott and Price, 2020) and experiential design.

The experimental use of materials in contemporary *Torana* practice aligns with trends in contemporary installation art toward incorporation of non-traditional media and found objects. While maintaining traditional elements such as painted cotton panels, contemporary practice incorporates a vast array of materials, from recycled items and found objects to complex Matrix LED lighting systems and digital projections (Gallage, 2024). This material experimentation reflects artistic innovation while maintaining accessibility to community-based creators working with limited resources.

The public character of *Torana* installations positions them within broader discussions about public art and community engagement. These installations serve as a form of public art, bringing creative expression to a wide audience outside of traditional gallery spaces. Phillips (1989) explained that public art seeks to embody public or universal concepts rather than commercial, partisan, or personal concepts or interests.

> The ability to attract massive audiences from diverse social and economic backgrounds demonstrates the democratic potential of installing art practices that operate outside institutional constraints, making art accessible to everyone and embodying public concepts through extensive community involvement (Sustainability Directory, 2025; Reid, Reeve and Curtis, 2002; Phillips, 1989; Chaturanga, 2023; Campbell, 2018; Premalal, 2019)

Torana installations exemplify democratic art principles through their public accessibility, community involvement, and grassroots collaborative creation processes.

Recognition and Critical Assessment

The critical assessment of *Torana* as legitimate art form has been complicated by social hierarchies that privilege formal artistic training over community-based creative practice (Paldano, 1997; Dissanayake, 2025; Gallage 2024; Denipitiya 2024). Premalal (2019) explained that *Torana* was constructed with extensive community involvement, with individuals contributing through labour or financial means according to their capacity.

The artistic sophistication evident in *Torana* practice challenges conventional distinctions between high[18] and popular art (Bublitz et al., 2019). The visual composition skills demonstrated by community-based painters exhibit a profound ability to address the specific challenges associated with large-scale outdoor displays. These artists ensure that the proportions of figures are accurate for long-distance viewers[19] (Dissanayake, 2025), while showcasing creative expertise in selecting the most dramatic moments of a storyline like the techniques employed by comic strip artists. They carefully utilise mid-shot frames with the precision of seasoned cinematographers (Chaturanga, 2023). Claus-Bachmann (2002) analysed the macro-structure of embodiment through visualisation

[18] High art that is exhibited inside a museum or on the walls of an art gallery, everyday aesthetics—community-based murals and sculptures—form the streetscape of daily life in a locality (Bublitz et al., 2019, p. 313).

[19] This technique could be influenced from the temple paintings. Bandara (2020, p. 40) described the practice as involving *Kandyan* style, lines of use, concepts of light and darkness, proximity and distance within the painting, direct visual elements, and partial rules. These techniques are also used for paintings in various successive areas.

(eyes) of moving *Torana*, like the sequence of paintings on temple walls. However, their artistic practice is dedicated to highlighting Buddha's values to the public, inspired by Buddhist paintings found in temples. Bandara (2020, p. 40) found this as, the image of the Buddha of temple paintings are larger than the normal size of a human which is a clue of 'Maha sampradaya' style in Hindu. However, the lack of institutional recognition for *Torana* can limit its visibility and critical engagement in the global art world. This raises questions about the mechanisms through which community-based art gains legitimacy. Furthermore, the use of Layer Frame Art (WhiteWall, 2024) or Shadow Box Art (Ceesay, 2020) transforms the visually two-dimensional *Torana* into a three-dimensional presentation, thereby facilitating the lighting designers in creating depth and dynamic visual effects. Lighting designers contribute their expertise by crafting intricate decorations synchronised to the rhythmic blinking of thousands of bulbs in the outdoor night-time setting, enhancing the visual impact of the *Torana* (Gallage, 2024). Pre-recorded storytellers creatively align their narration with the frame-by-frame presentation of the *Torana*, employing techniques like radio drama production, such as the use of voice actors and sound effects to connect individual artistic frames (Gunawardena, 2025). These recordings, typically running for 30 minutes, serve as fillers that can be paused and replayed throughout the day. The background music, composed to accompany the narrative, is deliberately serene to foster a religious ambience, often featuring a theme song to enhance the emotional engagement of viewers (Hewawitanagamage, 2025). Claus-Bachmann (2002) examined this practice as an embodiment achieved through auditory realisation. The role of the *Viridu* singer (De Zoysa, 2017), who creates instant poetic verses, is pivotal in fostering audience interaction and encouraging donations. These performers, often presenting as duets, integrate their live poetic renditions with pre-recorded storytelling, using only a small hand drum *(Rabana)* to create musical accompaniment in varying rhythmic patterns (Claus-Bachmann, 2002). Further explained,

> In contrast with the spoken version, the sung version has a dramatic quality which highlights the epic expression. It can be presumed (even in the absence of material documented evidence) that this drum narration originally belonged to an old tradition of *Jataka* interpretation, particularly because of its archaic musical pattern. (ibid., p. 123)

Additionally, an anchor presenter, as part of the creative team, provides announcements and explains the artistic efforts involved, ensuring a cohesive and immersive experience (Wijelal, 2023). Creators are sensible of the fact that audiences may not engage with the *Torana* installation as a holistic artwork but may appreciate individual segments of the creative presentation. Given that these installations are displayed in public spaces during nighttime, external factors such as traffic, street vendors, and weather conditions—such as rain or wind—can disrupt the viewing experience. They concur that their artistic contribution is driven more by devotion than by commercial gain. The technical and aesthetic proficiency exhibited by these practitioners rivals that of formally trained professionals, underscoring the cultural and artistic significance of *Torana* practice in Sri Lanka. Hoeurn and Yeavya (2024, p. 140) explained this practice as,

> Buddhist art influenced by the teachings of Buddhism, expressed through architecture. Buddhist art is fundamentally about beauty, captivating the mind to inspire devotion and access to goodness and truth. It serves as a source of inspiration for faith in virtuous things, fostering inner peace and mental stability.

The innovative contributions of master practitioners like Jayasiri Semage and Motagedara Vanigaratne have gained increasing recognition within Sri Lankan cultural discourse. Semage's

critique that it is time we introduce some changes to this monotonous form (Wijebandara, 2012) reflects a sophisticated understanding of artistic development and the need for continued innovation within traditional frameworks. This critical perspective demonstrates the presence of artistic discourse and aesthetic debate within *Torana* practice that parallels developments in contemporary art.

International recognition of similar practices in other South Asian contexts suggests growing appreciation for the artistic merit of traditional public art forms. The explicit recognition of pandals, especially in places like Kolkata, India during *Durga Puja* as massive, temporary art installations (Gupta, 2024) provides precedent for similar recognition of Sri Lankan *Torana* practice. This international context suggests that the artistic significance of *Torana* extends beyond local cultural value to encompass broader contributions to global art practice.

The involvement of art critics, designers, and even organisations like UNESCO in recognising the artistic merit and cultural significance of pandals indicates growing institutional support for recognition of these practices as legitimate art forms (Agrawal, 2024; UNESCO, 2022). This institutional recognition provides important validation while also raising questions about the relationship between community-based art practices and formal cultural institutions.

Future Directions and Contemporary Relevance

Torana appears in various forms like *Gok Torana*[20], *Mal Torana*[21], *Gedi Torana*[22], *Bulath Torana*[23], *Ramba Torana*[24] *(Wijayawardena, 2021), Laser Torana*[25] or *Digital Torana*[26], but this article focuses on Vesak *Torana*. Crafted during Vesak Poya, it uses art, illuminated patterns, and music to depict a story. Live singing accompanies the *Torana*, providing both education through *Dhamma* and entertainment during the Vesak festival.

Torana, traditionally created to align with the Vesak Poya, narrates a specific story rooted in Buddhist teachings. These stories are brought to life through vibrant paintings by skilled artists, synchronised light patterns, and pre-recorded music that elucidates and enriches the narrative. In some instances, live singing accompanies the display, further elevating the experience with a dynamic auditory element. The blend of visual and auditory storytelling serves the dual purpose of imparting *Dhamma* knowledge while offering entertainment, fostering a cultural atmosphere of reflection and celebration.

Its creation demands significant effort, skill, and financial investment, as noted by Premalal (2019). Despite the challenges, the *Torana* remains a vital cultural tradition, showcasing Sri Lanka's artistry and devotion. It stands as a testament to the country's ability to unite varied artistic disciplines into a single, cohesive expression.

The future development of *Torana* as an art form faces both opportunities and challenges that reflect broader trends in contemporary art and cultural practice. The increasing availability of

[20] *Torana* created with coconut leaves (Wijayawardena, 2021)
[21] *Torana* created with fresh flowers (ibid.)
[22] *Torana* created with coconuts and king coconuts (ibid.)
[23] *Torana* created with fresh beetle leaves (ibid.)
[24] *Torana* created with bananas (ibid.)
[25] *Torana* presented with laser beams (Sri Lanka Foundation, 2025)
[26] *Torana* accessed with digitally only (Peiris, 2013)

digital technologies offers new possibilities for integration of interactive and multimedia elements that could expand the expressive range of installations while maintaining essential characteristics of the tradition. The challenge lies in incorporating these technologies while preserving the democratic and community-based character that distinguishes *Torana* from institutionally produced digital art.

The growing global interest in ephemeral and experiential art forms suggests potential for increased international recognition of *Torana* practice. Contemporary art's emphasis on temporary installations and site-specific work aligns closely with the fundamental characteristics of *Torana*, potentially opening new avenues for cultural exchange and artistic collaboration. The challenge will be maintaining authenticity and community ownership while engaging with international art networks and institutions. However, the ephemerality of *Torana* is not primarily an artistic choice but a religious and cultural one. This raises questions about whether applying secular ephemeral art theory fully captures the spiritual and ritual significance of these installations.

The documentation and preservation of *Torana* knowledge and techniques represents an urgent priority for ensuring the continuation of this art form. The fact that most practitioners haven't had an academic background apart from Veteran Artists Jayasiri Semage or Motagedara Vanigaratne, means that essential knowledge and skills remain largely within oral tradition and hands-on training systems. Developing systematic documentation and training programs while preserving the informal and collaborative character of tradition presents significant challenges.

The potential for academic study and theoretical development of *Torana* practice offers opportunities for deeper understanding of convergence art principles and community-based artistic collaboration. The sophisticated artistic achievements evident in this practice warrant serious academic attention that could contribute to broader theoretical understanding of collaborative art, public installation practice, and the relationship between tradition and innovation in contemporary art.

Conclusion

Torana is a distinctive and deeply symbolic art installation unique to Sri Lanka. These remarkable structures converge multiple art forms, blending visual artistry, intricate lighting designs, storytelling, and music into a harmonious presentation that captivates and educates audiences during the Vesak period. The *Torana* is not merely a decorative element; it is an immersive cultural expression that embodies the island's artistic ingenuity and spiritual heritage. The examination of *Torana* as convergence art reveals a sophisticated artistic practice that makes significant contributions to contemporary understanding of collaborative creativity, public art installation, and the integration of multiple artistic mediums. This tradition demonstrates that meaningful artistic innovation can emerge from community-based practice operating outside formal institutional frameworks, challenging conventional hierarchies that privilege academic training over practical artistic achievement. The successful convergence of painting, electrical illumination, narrative performance, and three-dimensional elements within *Torana* installations represent a unique achievement in contemporary art practice. The ability to integrate abstract and realistic visual elements while maintaining narrative coherence and creating immersive audience experiences demonstrates sophisticated aesthetic understanding that merits recognition within broader art historical discourse. The scale and complexity of major installations, requiring coordination of hundreds of participants across multiple artistic disciplines, approaches that are found in major institutional art projects while maintaining democratic participation and community ownership.

The recognition of *Torana* as legitimate art installation practice has implications that extend beyond Sri Lankan cultural context to encompass broader questions about the nature of contemporary art, the role of tradition in artistic innovation, and the potential for community-based art practices to contribute to global artistic development. The integration of traditional narrative sources with contemporary technological capabilities demonstrates how authentic cultural expression can evolve without losing essential characteristics or community relevance. The future development of *Torana* practice will depend on successful navigation of tensions between preservation and innovation, local authenticity and international recognition, traditional methods and contemporary technologies. The growing academic and institutional interest in this art form presents opportunities for enhanced documentation, theoretical development, and cultural preservation while also raising concerns about the potential effects of formalisation on the democratic and collaborative character that distinguishes *Torana* from conventional art practice. The study of *Torana* as convergence art reveals potential for artistic practice that goes beyond traditional boundaries between high and popular culture, individual and collective creativity, and traditional and contemporary expression. This art form demonstrates that meaningful aesthetic achievement and cultural significance can emerge from grassroots creative practice that maintains connection to authentic community values while engaging with contemporary artistic concerns. The recognition and study of such practices enriches understanding of the full range of human creative expression while challenging restrictive definitions of legitimate artistic practice.

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