

Making the Buddhacarita visible: visual translation, sacred temporality, and Buddhist visual vulture in contemporary Bali

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Article

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Abstract

This article analyses a contemporary Balinese narrative scroll based on the *Buddhacarita*, produced in 2024 by a traditional Kamasan painter. Consisting of twenty-eight interconnected scenes organised around the “Eight Great Events” (aṣṭamahāprātihārya), this newly commissioned scroll provides a rare opportunity to examine how Buddhist scripture is translated into visual form in a contemporary Southeast Asian context. Drawing on the Sanskrit *Buddhacarita*, its Chinese and English translations, and Javanese–Balinese textual traditions, the study adopts a text–image comparative approach to investigate the transformation of Buddhist biography from verbal narrative into visual form. The analysis shows that the Balinese artist does not simply illustrate the canonical text. Instead, through an approximately 1.5 × 8 metres scroll and a compositional strategy comparable to “continuous narrative” (different moments represented within a single pictorial space), key episodes ranging from the Buddha’s descent into Queen Māyā’s womb and miraculous birth beneath the tree to his final nirvāṇa (final liberation) are arranged within an open and continuous visual field. This process transforms linear narrative time into a spatialised visual experience. At the same time, traditional Buddhist motifs—including the white elephant, lotus, sāla tree (*Shorea robusta*), and scenes of nirvāṇa—are reconfigured within a Javanese–Balinese artistic framework, generating a visual symbolic system that combines the universal themes of Buddhism with local cultural aesthetics. Rather than treating visual translation as the outcome of artistic adaptation, this article argues that it constitutes a process of Buddhist knowledge production. Through artistic interpretation and visual organisation, the scroll transforms literary narrative into sacred temporality and contemporary Buddhist visual culture.

Keywords: *Buddhacarita*; visual translation; literary adaptation; Kamasan painting; Buddhist aesthetics; narrative scroll

1. INTRODUCTION

Buddhist visual culture has emerged as a significant area of inquiry for understanding how Buddhist narratives are continually reinterpreted through literature, artistic practice, and visual experience¹. Rather than functioning merely as illustrations of scripture, Buddhist images actively shape religious knowledge, sacred experience, and cultural memory across different historical and cultural contexts. Across Asia, Buddhist narratives have been reconfigured through murals, illustrated manuscripts, sculptures, narrative scrolls, and, more recently, contemporary artistic media, generating new visual forms that extend beyond their textual origins. Yet the mechanisms through which artistic production transforms Buddhist narratives into visual knowledge remain insufficiently understood.

Existing scholarship on Buddhist visual culture has substantially advanced our understanding of iconography, adaptation, intermediality, and religious images. More recent studies have shifted attention from representation to visual mediation, material religion, and embodied viewing. Nevertheless, these discussions continue to focus primarily on how images represent Buddhist texts, while paying comparatively little attention to the artistic processes through which Buddhist visual knowledge is generated.

The contemporary Balinese *Buddhacarita* scroll, commissioned in 2024 and documented throughout its production², provides a rare opportunity to investigate this question. Unlike historical Buddhist paintings whose production histories are largely inaccessible, the entire creative process of the scroll—from textual interpretation and preliminary sketches to artistic execution and museum exhibition—was documented through fieldwork. The project therefore enables visual translation to be examined as an ongoing creative process rather than solely through the completed artwork³.

Drawing on fieldwork, textual comparison, and visual analysis, this article argues that visual translation should be understood not merely as a adaptation of literary narratives into visual form but as a process of artistic interpretation through which Buddhist visual knowledge emerges. More specifically, it asks how artistic production transforms Buddhist literary narrative into forms of visual knowledge that remain meaningful within contemporary public culture, and proposes a theoretical framework for conceptualising how artistic interpretation generates sacred temporality, Buddhist visual culture, and heritage-making. By addressing this gap, the framework developed here is intended not only to interpret the contemporary Balinese case but also to provide a transferable model for understanding Buddhist visual traditions across Asia. Rather than explaining only how literary narratives become images, the study examines

how artistic interpretation generates Buddhist visual knowledge and, through that process, contributes to the formation of Buddhist visual culture.

2. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

2.1. *Buddhacarita* in Maritime Southeast Asia

The importance of the *Buddhacarita* in maritime Southeast Asia can be traced back to at least the seventh century. Yijing's *Nanhai Jigui Neifa Zhuan* (《南海寄归内法传》) records that the *Buddhacarita* was gained currency among Buddhist communities in the South Seas and was regarded as a significant vehicle for transmitting Buddhist teachings (Yijing, 2020: 28-30). Through regional networks of transmission, it entered the Javanese–Balinese cultural sphere, where it was reinterpreted through local languages, literary traditions, and visual practices.

These adaptations not only testify to the profound influence of Indian Buddhism in Southeast Asia but also provide valuable evidence for examining the processes of cultural translation and reconfiguration that accompany the movement of religious texts across regions.

Although Java and Bali followed different religious trajectories after the thirteenth century, they remained closely connected through the circulation of texts, artistic traditions, and religious ideas. The term “Javanese–Balinese” is therefore used here to denote a shared cultural sphere within which Buddhist narratives continued to be adapted and reinterpreted.

2.2. Kamasan Painting and Narrative Representation

This tradition of Buddhist visual narration reaches a particularly sophisticated form in Balinese Kamasan painting. Through large-scale narrative scrolls and the compositional technique often described as “continuous narration”, Kamasan artists transform textual narratives into expansive pictorial spaces. The Javanese–Balinese *Buddhacarita* scroll explored in this study, measuring approximately 1.5×8 metres, represents one of the most extensive surviving visual cycles of the Buddha's life in Southeast Asia (Figure 1). Executed in the Kamasan style, the scroll combines stylised figures, mineral pigments, and conventionalised motifs inherited from the “wayang” tradition (Vickers, 2012). Through this artistic framework, episodes from the Buddha's life are reorganised into a continuous visual field in which multiple temporal moments coexist simultaneously.

This article addresses four interconnected issues: (1) how Buddhist narrative is translated into visual form; (2) how visual organisation constructs sacred temporality; (3) how artistic production generates Buddhist visual culture;

(4) how these interconnected processes contribute to theories of visual translation. It argues that the scroll constitutes a process of visual translation through which Buddhist narrative is transformed into both sacred temporality and contemporary Buddhist visual culture. Through the simultaneous presentation of multiple moments of sacred history, the scroll enables viewers to experience Buddhist memory as an active and recurring presence. Moreover, its contemporary production and museum circulation position the work as a heritage-making project through which Buddhist narratives are reinterpreted and publicly rearticulated within contemporary Indonesia (Figure 2). Drawing on fieldwork, text–image comparison, and visual narrative analysis, this study contributes to current scholarship on visual translation, sacred temporality, Buddhist visual culture, and heritage studies by demonstrating how artistic practice transforms Buddhist narrative into sacred temporality, visual culture, and heritage.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

3.1. Visual Translation

Recent scholarship on adaptation and intermediality has increasingly recognised that narratives undergo processes of reinterpretation rather than simple reproduction when they move across media. Rather than functioning as secondary representations of literary texts, visual forms reorganise narrative structure, symbolic meaning, and aesthetic experience within new cultural contexts⁴.

These perspectives are particularly relevant to Buddhist visual culture. As a Sanskrit Buddhist epic poem (mahākāvya), Aśvaghōṣa's *Buddhacarita* originally communicated religious meaning through poetic description, metaphor, and narrative progression. When translated into visual form, however, these literary qualities must be transformed into pictorial composition, symbolic motifs, and spatial organisation. The resulting image is consequently not a secondary illustration of the text but a new interpretive work that reshapes narrative meaning through specifically visual means.

However, these discussions remain primarily concerned with representation. Even when adaptation is understood as reinterpretation, the principal question continues to be how images represent literary narratives rather than how artistic production generates new forms of religious knowledge. Recent scholarship in visual culture and material religion has therefore shifted attention from representation towards mediation, materiality, and visual presence. Images are increasingly understood as active media that interact with texts, shape religious experience, and acquire meaning through the relationship between image, medium, and viewer. This perspective provides an important theoretical

foundation for understanding visual translation not merely as image-making but as a process through which Buddhist visual knowledge becomes materially realised⁵. The transformation of the *Buddhacarita* into Kamasan painting may be understood as a process of visual translation through which literary imagination assumes new aesthetic, religious, and cultural forms.

Building on these developments, this study reconceptualises visual translation as a process of artistic interpretation rather than a mechanism of textual adaptation alone. Rather than explaining only how literary narratives become images, the present study examines how artistic interpretation generates sacred temporality and Buddhist visual knowledge, thereby contributing to the formation of Buddhist visual culture.

3.2. Visual Narrative and Sacred Temporality

A second body of scholarship examines how visual narratives organise temporality through spatial representation and viewing practices. Unlike literary narratives, which generally unfold through sequential reading, images possess the capacity to present multiple temporal moments simultaneously within a single visual field. This characteristic has led scholars of visual culture to investigate how narrative meaning may be structured through spatial arrangement, repetition, juxtaposition, and symbolic association (Bal, 2009; Wu Hung, 2016).

Existing scholarship on visual narrative has increasingly challenged the assumption that images merely depict stories. Instead, visual narratives are understood as narrative structures in their own right, in which meaning emerges through spatial organisation, the viewer's movement across the image, and the relationships established among visual elements. Such perspectives are particularly relevant to narrative scrolls, where temporal connections are constructed through acts of viewing rather than through linear textual progression⁶. Collectively, these perspectives demonstrate that visual organisation enables different moments of a narrative to remain simultaneously accessible, transforming narrative succession into spatial coexistence and allowing time to be experienced as visual presence rather than chronological sequence (Wu Hung, 2016)⁷.

However, studies of visual narrative have primarily examined temporal structure rather than religious temporality. While existing scholarship explains how images reorganise narrative time, comparatively less attention has been paid to how artistic interpretation transforms literary chronology into sacred temporality within Buddhist visual culture (Eliade, 1959)⁸.

Recent scholarship on South Asian visuality has further shifted attention from iconography towards practices of seeing, embodied viewing, and visual experience. As Ghosh and Sohoni further argue, South Asian art is produced

through culturally situated practices of seeing, remaking, and material engagement rather than through iconographic representation alone. This perspective further supports the present study's argument that sacred temporality emerges through artistic interpretation and visual experience rather than through textual illustration (Ghosh and Sohoni, 2024). Taken together, these perspectives suggest that religious images do more than depict sacred events; they create the visual conditions through which sacred time becomes continually present through acts of viewing. Building on these developments, the present study approaches sacred temporality as a visual phenomenon generated through artistic interpretation rather than as a theological concept alone. It examines how the *Buddhacarita* scroll reorganises literary chronology into a spatial experience in which multiple moments of the Buddha's life coexist within a single pictorial field, thereby generating sacred temporality as one of the principal visual mechanisms through which Buddhist visual knowledge is produced.

3.3. Cultural Memory and Religious Images

A third body of scholarship examines the relationship between visual culture, collective memory, and religious images. Existing scholarship has demonstrated that cultural memory is sustained not only through texts but also through images, monuments, rituals, and other forms of material culture. Within this perspective, visual media play a central role in preserving, transmitting, and continually reconstructing shared understandings of the past (Assmann, 2011).

Recent scholarship in material religion and Buddhist visual culture further shows that religious images communicate meaning not only through textual reference but also through visual experience, embodied viewing, affective engagement, and material practice. Rather than functioning merely as illustrations of doctrine, religious images actively shape ritual practice, collective remembrance, and religious experience (Morgan, 2020).

However, these discussions continue to explain how religious images preserve collective memory but provide comparatively little insight into how visual translation continually reconstructs Buddhist memory through artistic interpretation.

Building on these developments, the present study approaches the *Buddhacarita* scroll not only as a medium of cultural memory but also as a process through which Buddhist memory is continually reconstructed through artistic interpretation and public viewing. In this sense, cultural memory is understood as a dynamic process through which Buddhist visual knowledge is continually reproduced, renewed, and transmitted within contemporary visual culture.

This perspective establishes a conceptual foundation for examining how the contemporary *Buddhacarita* scroll transforms cultural memory into Buddhist visual knowledge through artistic interpretation and visual experience.

3.4. Towards a Theory of Buddhist Visual Knowledge

Taken together, these three strands of scholarship suggest that Buddhist visual culture cannot be adequately grasped by considering representation, temporality, or cultural memory in isolation. Instead, visual translation, sacred temporality, and cultural memory constitute complementary dimensions through which Buddhist visual knowledge is generated, experienced, and continually renewed. Building on these perspectives, the present study develops an analytical framework for examining how artistic interpretation transforms literary narratives into Buddhist visual knowledge through the interconnected processes of visual translation, sacred temporality, and cultural memory, thereby contributing to contemporary Buddhist visual culture (Figure 3).

4. MATERIALS AND METHODS

4.1. Fieldwork Materials

This study is based on original fieldwork conducted in Bali between February and March 2024. During the fieldwork, a traditional Balinese Kamasan painter was commissioned to produce a complete visual cycle of the *Buddhacarita* consisting of twenty-eight scenes⁹. The research materials comprise four interrelated components:

- (1) the completed narrative scroll;
- (2) the artist's preliminary sketches;
- (3) photographic documentation of the painting process;
- (4) semi-structured interviews conducted with the artist regarding iconographic choices, narrative organisation, and local interpretations of Buddhist themes.

These materials open a window onto not only the finished artwork but also the process through which Buddhist narratives are converted into pictorial imagery. Unlike previous studies, the present research documents the entire production process from text to finished painting. The fieldwork further recorded the workshop environment in which the painting was produced (Figure 4). Particular focus is paid to the interaction between inherited Kamasan conventions, local artistic knowledge, and the artist's interpretation of Buddhist narratives. The resulting dataset, which combines visual, textual, and ethnographic materials, enables a multi-layered analysis of artistic production in contemporary Bali.

4.2. Text–Image Comparison

The visual narrative represented in the scroll is explored in relation to multiple textual traditions associated with the *Buddhacarita*, including Aśvaghoṣa's Sanskrit *Buddhacarita*, its Chinese and English translations, Buddhist biographies, and Javanese–Balinese literary adaptations.

Moving beyond the assumption of a direct correspondence between text and image, the analysis investigates how narrative episodes are selected, condensed, expanded, or transformed during the process of visual translation. Special scrutiny is devoted to key episodes such as Queen Māyā's dream, the Buddha's birth, enlightenment, the first sermon, and final nirvāṇa. By comparing literary descriptions with visual representations, the study identifies the strategies through which narrative elements are translated into symbolic motifs, compositional arrangements, and pictorial sequences.

This comparative approach reconstructs the process through which textual narratives are transformed into visual compositions and offers an empirical foundation for the subsequent analysis of artistic interpretation, sacred temporality, and Buddhist visual culture.

4.3. Visual Narrative Analysis

The second methodological component consists of visual narrative analysis. Drawing on approaches developed in visual culture studies and narrative theory, this paper frames the scroll as a narrative system that configures meaning through spatial arrangement rather than verbal sequence.

The analysis centres on four interlinked visual strategies: flattened pictorial space, iconographic repetition, vertical and horizontal compositional structures, and ornamental movement. These elements are treated not merely as stylistic features but as mechanisms through which the scroll constructs narrative relationships and guides the viewer's experience of time.

This study foregrounds the Kamasan technique of continuous narration, which is particularly significant because it enables multiple episodes from different moments of the Buddha's life to coexist within a single pictorial field, thereby restructuring chronological succession into sacred temporality. In this way, this compositional strategy transforms linear chronology into a spatial experience. The analysis thus explores how visual form restructures narrative temporality and enables sacred history to be encountered through acts of viewing.

In addition to the completed scroll, the artist's preliminary sketches are investigated as evidence of the visual translation process itself. The comparison between sketches and final compositions reveals how narrative episodes are

selected, condensed, expanded, or transformed during visual production. The sketches, therefore, provide direct evidence of artistic agency and creative decision-making.

5. MAKING *BUDDHACARITA*: VISUAL TRANSLATION IN PRACTICE

5.1. Production Context and Kamasan Visual Tradition

Fieldwork suggests that visual translation is not a straightforward process of illustration but an extended process of artistic interpretation, shaped by the material, technical, and cultural conventions of the Kamasan painting tradition. The 2024 commission thus brings a Buddhist narrative into direct dialogue with an established Balinese visual tradition, creating sustained negotiation between inherited artistic conventions and a new narrative subject.

Rather than inventing a new pictorial language, the artist translated the *Buddhacarita* through established Kamasan conventions, including stylised figural types, flattened spatial organisation, and continuous narrative composition. Field observations reveal that the painting process involved continual movement between textual interpretation and visual composition. Narrative episodes were selected, transformed, and reorganised to meet the spatial requirements of the scroll, while established Kamasan conventions guide the representation of figures, landscapes, and sacred events. Preliminary sketches further show that compositional decisions evolved throughout production as the artist negotiated between narrative clarity and the visual coherence required by the Kamasan tradition.

Workshop observations indicate that artistic decisions are shaped not only by textual interpretation but also by inherited technical practices, discussions during production, and established Kamasan compositional conventions (Figure 5). The workshop therefore functions as a site where literary interpretation, inherited artistic practice, and collective technical knowledge converged. The *Buddhacarita* is consequently not simply transferred from text to image but reconfigured through the visual language of Kamasan painting, generating a locally situated form of Buddhist visual knowledge within contemporary Balinese visual culture.

5.2. From Text to Sketch: Translating *Buddhacarita* into Visual Form

Field observations reveals that the artist repeatedly returned to the Old Javanese¹⁰ and Indonesian versions of the *Buddhacarita* throughout the production process. He did not treat the text as a fixed script to be copied visually but approached it as a narrative source requiring interpretation. Interview data with this artist indicate that repeated rereading of the *Buddhacarita* led to successive reinterpretations of particular episodes, resulting in substantial revisions between the preliminary sketches and the completed scroll (Figure 6). These compositional adjustments

reveal a consistent principle of visual translation: narrative significance is determined less by textual length than by visual recognisability and ritual importance. The comparison between the textual sources and the completed scroll points to a process of selective condensation. Several episodes that occupy substantial narrative space in literary versions of the *Buddhacarita*, including extended courtly descriptions, doctrinal discussions, and episodes involving secondary characters, were either abbreviated or omitted altogether. During interviews, the artist explained that such scenes were difficult to communicate visually within the limited space of a narrative scroll and were less immediately recognisable to contemporary audiences. By contrast, episodes associated with the Buddha's birth, enlightenment, first sermon, and nirvāṇa were expanded because they were considered visually powerful and spiritually significant. These decisions indicate that narrative selection is governed by visual intelligibility and ritual salience rather than by fidelity to textual sequence. The completed scroll, therefore, represents not a visual reproduction of the *Buddhacarita* but a new visual articulation of Buddhist knowledge shaped through artistic interpretation, narrative selection, and cultural judgement.

5.3. Interpreting the Buddha: the Adult-Like Newborn

Comparison between the preliminary sketch (Figure 7) and the completed painting (Figure 8) reveals that the adult-like representation of the newborn Buddha remained consistent throughout the production process, suggesting that the compression of birth, enlightenment, and Buddhahood is not introduced during execution but formed part of the artist's original conceptual interpretation of the *Buddhacarita*.

Interview data indicate that sustained engagement with the *Buddhacarita* led the artist to interpret the Buddha's birth not as the beginning of a biography but as the manifestation of Buddhahood already present within the world. This interpretation influenced his depiction of the newborn Buddha with the bodily characteristics of an enlightened adult instead of as an ordinary infant. The image visualises a theological understanding developed through close reading rather than inherited iconographic conventions.

Interview evidence further indicates that the artist regarded the Buddha's enlightenment as inseparable from birth¹¹. Buddhahood is therefore understood as already present from the moment of appearance in the world, leading to the visual compression of birth and enlightenment through conceptual interpretation rather than formal design alone.

During interviews, the artist also explained that the initial sketch was prepared chiefly from established Kamasan compositional conventions and familiar Buddhist iconography. However, subsequent readings of the Old Javanese and Indonesian versions of the *Buddhacarita* led him to reconsider the relative importance of particular episodes.

Ultimately, he visually condensed several scenes that occupy a considerable proportion of the text, making birth and nirvāṇa become more prominent—changes he described not as aesthetic adjustments alone but as responses to what he increasingly perceived as the central spiritual message of the Buddha's life. Temporal compression thus functions as a strategy of visual translation through which theological interpretation is transformed into pictorial form. The preliminary sketch, the completed painting, and the interview evidence demonstrate that visual translation is an observable process of artistic interpretation rather than a retrospective explanation imposed on the finished image.

5.4. Constructing Sacred Authority through Visual Hierarchy

Interviews with the artist show that compositional adjustments made during the painting deliberately strengthened the Buddha's visual authority by reorganising the visual hierarchy, most notably through the enlargement of white parasols and the redistribution of crowds.

a. White Parasols

Rather than narrative details derived from textual descriptions, the white parasols operate as markers of sacred presence. Through repeated placement, the artist visually separates the Buddha from the surrounding crowd and establishes a hierarchy of attention within the composition. Comparison between the preliminary sketch (Figure 9) and the final composition reveals that these parasols become progressively larger and more centrally positioned during painting, transforming them from narrative details into visual markers of sacred authority. Thus, the artist enables viewers to identify the Buddha immediately within the densely populated pictorial field.

b. Reorganising Crowds

A similar process of selective emphasis governs the representation of crowds. Comparison between sketches and the completed scroll suggests that attendants, disciples, and devotees were progressively restructured during execution. The artist did not depict a homogeneous gathering, but divided figures into distinct clusters surrounding the Buddha. During interviews, he explained that such separation was intended to ensure that viewers could immediately recognise the Buddha as the visual and spiritual centre of the composition.

The resulting arrangement generates a dual effect: enhancing narrative clarity by preventing visual congestion, and creating a symbolic field in which all figures orient themselves towards the Buddha. The crowd therefore functions not solely as a narrative background but as a visual mechanism for expressing devotion, authority, and religious community.

These interventions reveal that visual translation involves far more than transferring textual information into pictorial form. Through the selective enlargement of parasols and the redistribution of crowds, the artist reorganised the visual hierarchy of the composition, reshaping narrative authority according to contemporary understandings of Buddhist significance.

The production process further suggest that visual translation operates through continuous negotiation between Buddhist literary tradition and Kamasan visual conventions. Rather than converting textual descriptions directly into images, the artist translated Buddhist narratives through an existing Balinese visual language, allowing inherited narratives and local aesthetic traditions to become mutually constitutive. These interventions reveal that visual hierarchy constitutes another mechanism through which artistic interpretation transforms literary narrative into Buddhist visual knowledge.

5.5. Sacred Presence and Buddhist Aesthetics

The production process shows that visual translation in the *Buddhacarita* scroll extends beyond the adaptation of literary narrative. Rather, artistic interpretation progressively constructs an aesthetic system through which Buddhist visual knowledge becomes perceptible.

Rather than pursuing naturalistic representation, the scroll consistently privileges symbolic visibility over descriptive realism. Simultaneously, the repeated compression of multiple narrative moments into single pictorial fields transforms chronological succession into visual simultaneity. Together with the elevation of sacred figures and the restrained emotional atmosphere of major scenes, these compositional strategies produce an aesthetic oriented towards transcendence and contemplative serenity.

These observations suggest that the scroll develops a distinct Buddhist aesthetic centred on sacred presence. Rather than presenting the Buddha as a historical figure located in the past, artistic interpretation renders Buddhahood visually accessible within the present experience of viewing. Visual translation, therefore, operates not only as narrative adaptation but also as aesthetic transformation.

From this perspective, Buddhist aesthetics is not limited to questions of artistic style or visual beauty; it concerns the aesthetic organisation of religious experience itself. Through composition, rhythm, symbolic visibility, and visual continuity, the scroll enables viewers to encounter Buddhahood as an immediately perceptible presence. Aesthetic form, therefore becomes an epistemic medium through which Buddhist knowledge is experienced rather than merely represented.

6. SACRED TEMPORALITY AND VISUAL PRESENCE

Following Mircea Eliade, sacred time differs fundamentally from historical time, which proceeds irreversibly from past to future. Sacred time is characterised instead by repetition, reactualisation, and the “eternal return”: sacred events remain accessible in the present through ritual, memory, and symbolic representation. From this perspective, the *Buddhacarita* scroll functions not as a record of Buddha’s completed life but as a visual technology through which sacred history becomes continually accessible.

The visual tendencies identified in the production process—symbolic visibility, simultaneity, transcendence, and serenity—acquire their full significance when considered in relation to temporality and reshape the viewer’s experience of sacred history. This chapter therefore examines how the *Buddhacarita* scroll transforms narrative succession into spatial presence and constructs what may be described as sacred temporality (Table 1).

Dutch scholar P. J. Zoetmulder observes that Balinese perception is shaped by the Hindu-Balinese ontological distinction between *sekala* (the visible world) and *niskala* (the invisible or spiritual realm) (Zoetmulder, 1983: 17-22). Rather than separate domains, these dimensions coexist within a unified cosmological order—a conception that provides the cultural framework for understanding how multiple temporal moments coexist with supernatural presences within the *Buddhacarita* scroll’s single pictorial field. The juxtaposition of different episodes from the Buddha’s life within one composition reflects a broader Balinese understanding of reality in which visible and invisible worlds, past and present, sacred and mundane dimensions remain simultaneously accessible.

The scroll’s visual language belongs to the Javanese–Balinese *wayang* tradition, which suppresses perspectival depth, replacing naturalistic spatial illusion with a symbolic narrative field in which multiple episodes remain simultaneously visible. Consequently, temporally distinct events coexist within a unified pictorial space, transforming narrative time into sacred temporality and spatialises sacred history. This study conceptualises this visual logic as a sacred spatio-temporal model, structured through the interaction of a horizontal narrative axis and a vertical cosmological axis (Figures 10 and 11).

6.1. Symbolic Visibility and Flattened Space

One of the most distinctive characteristics of Kamasan painting is its flattened pictorial structure. Rather than creating the illusion of three-dimensional depth through linear perspective and *chiaroscuro*, Kamasan artists organise visual space through stylised outlines, geometric forms, and flattened pictorial structure organised through stylised

outlines, geometric composition, and symbolic spatial hierarchy. Such a visual language derives from the broader Javanese–Balinese “wayang” tradition, in which narrative clarity and symbolic hierarchy take precedence over naturalistic representation.

The birth scene of the *Buddhacarita* scroll provides a representative example. Queen Māyā is rendered through an elegant S-shaped contour, while her raised arm forms a triangular compositional structure that visually highlights the sacred nature of the event. The facial features of the figures in the image are reduced to a limited set of stylised signs, and social hierarchy is communicated through differences in bodily scale, posture, costume, and spatial placement. The artist does not construct depth, but relies on overlapping figures and layered positioning to structure visual relationships.

This flattened spatial system has vital implications for temporality. Because perspectival depth is largely absent, viewers are not encouraged to move through the image as if traversing a realistic space. Instead, multiple figures and events appear equally present within a shared pictorial field through the flattened pictorial structure, thereby enhancing symbolic visibility and allowing sacred events to remain continuously accessible to viewers. The suppression of depth therefore contributes to the suspension of chronological time. Different moments of sacred history coexist visually rather than unfolding sequentially.

6.2. Simultaneity and Transcendence: Horizontal Continuity and Vertical Cosmology

The most striking temporal effect of the *Buddhacarita* scroll lies in its visual simultaneity: birth, enlightenment, preaching, and nirvāṇa are distributed across the composition yet remain visually accessible at the same moment. As Wu Hung has argued, pictorial representation possesses the capacity to transform temporal succession into spatial coexistence. By presenting multiple temporal moments within a single visual field, images differ fundamentally from literary narratives, which depend on sequential reading to unfold.

This simultaneity is organised through two intersecting spatial axes: a horizontal narrative axis and a vertical cosmological axis. Horizontally, the scroll unrolls as a continuous narrative¹² extending from the Buddha’s conception and birth to enlightenment, preaching, and final nirvāṇa. The twenty-eight scenes are arranged sequentially across the length of the scroll, allowing viewers to follow the Buddha’s life through visual movement. Vertically, figures are arranged according to religious and social hierarchy: Gods, celestial beings, and manifestations of sacred authority occupy the upper sections, while kings, nobles, attendants, and ordinary devotees are distributed below. Such spatial

ordering reflects Javanese–Balinese cosmology closely related to the *sekala–niskala* distinction earlier discussed, height within the pictorial field signifying proximity to the sacred and participation in the cosmic order.

The significance of this arrangement, however, lies not simply in narrative sequence. As all scenes remain simultaneously visible, viewers can take in multiple temporal moments at once. Birth and *nirvāṇa*, origin and completion, coexist within the same frame. The horizontal axis represents historical progression; the vertical axis introduces a transcendent cosmological dimension exceeding ordinary historical time. Together, these axes transform biography into a sacred temporal landscape in which human history and cosmic order intersect.

6.3. Serenity and Visual Flow

A further characteristic of the *Buddhacarita* scroll is the use of flowing ribbons, textile extensions, and elongated ornamental forms that visually connect otherwise separate narrative episodes. Rather than functioning merely as decorative motifs, these repeated forms establish a continuous visual rhythm across the scroll and guide the viewer's movement through the pictorial field. Visual continuity therefore complements narrative continuity, allowing different episodes to be experienced as parts of a unified sacred landscape instead of as isolated scenes.

This visual flow also contributes to the contemplative quality of the scroll. Compositional balance, restrained gestures, and the absence of dramatic emotional expression reduce the sense of narrative urgency and encourage sustained visual attention. Even scenes depicting birth, departure, or death are structured through harmony rather than emotional intensity. Instead of emphasising historical action, the painting invites viewers into a mode of contemplative perception in which sacred presence gradually emerges through the act of viewing.

Taken together, symbolic visibility, visual simultaneity and transcendence, and contemplative serenity constitute complementary dimensions of the scroll's sacred spatio-temporal structure. Rather than simply illustrating the Buddha's biography, these visual strategies reorganise historical narrative into a spatial experience of sacred presence. Their operation becomes most clearly visible in the birth and *nirvāṇa* scenes, where the temporal boundaries between beginning and fulfilment, life and transcendence, are deliberately reconfigured through artistic interpretation. The following sections therefore examine these two episodes as the clearest demonstrations of how visual translation generates sacred temporality within the *Buddhacarita* scroll.

6.4. The Birth of the Buddha: Sacred Origins and Sacred Presence

The birth scene most vividly demonstrates how sacred temporality is spatialised through visual translation. Through temporal compression, symbolic visibility, and compositional organisation, the image enables viewers to

encounter Buddhahood as already present at the moment of birth. Sacred origin is therefore experienced not as a distant historical beginning but as an enduring visual presence.

Unlike literary narratives, which unfold chronologically, the birth scene restructures multiple temporal moments within a single pictorial field. Across Buddhist literary traditions, including the *Buddhacarita*, *Lalitavistara*, and *Fobenxing ji jing* (《佛本行集经》), the Buddha's birth marks the chronological beginning of a life culminating in enlightenment. In the Kamasan scroll, however, birth and enlightenment no longer remain temporally separated. The image collapses narrative succession into visual simultaneity, allowing the beginning and fulfilment of the Buddha's life to coexist within one sacred composition.

The most striking manifestation of this temporal reorganisation is the newborn Buddha represented as an adult-like enlightened figure (Figure 12). Rather than an ordinary infant, the painter presents the Buddha with mature bodily proportions, a halo, and the gesture proclaiming "Above the heavens and below the heavens, I alone am honoured." The newborn consequently appears simultaneously as infant, enlightened teacher, and Buddha. Birth is transformed from a biological event into the visible manifestation of realised Buddhahood.

Evidence from the production process confirms that this temporal compression is conceptually intentional rather than stylistically incidental. Comparison between the preliminary sketch and the completed painting reveals that the adult-like representation remained consistent throughout production. Interview material further indicates that the artist regarded enlightenment as inseparable from birth, interpreting the Buddha's appearance in the world as the visible manifestation of Buddhahood already present. Temporal compression thus emerges through artistic interpretation rather than inherited iconographic convention alone.

For viewers, the significance of this image lies not in reconstructing the historical sequence of the Buddha's life but in experiencing sacred origins as visually present. Viewing unfolds through simultaneous perception rather than chronological narration, allowing birth and enlightenment to be encountered within a single sacred image. The birth scene therefore reconfigures the temporal experience of Buddhahood, making sacred origins continually accessible through visual experience, showing that Buddhist visual translation generates sacred temporality by transforming literary chronology into an immediately perceptible form of sacred presence.

6.5. Nirvāṇa and the Dissolution of Temporal Boundaries

Comparison between Figures 13 and 14 reveals that the artist intentionally elevated the reclining Buddha during the planning process, transforming the final moment of the Buddha's life into a spatial symbol of transcendence.

According to the *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra*, the Buddha travelled to Kuśinagara¹³ and instructed Ānanda¹⁴ to prepare a couch between two śāla trees¹⁵. Lying on his right side with his head facing north, Buddha entered final nirvāṇa while consoling the gathered Malla clans and delivering his last teachings. The Javanese–Balinese *Buddhacarita* preserves this framework while reinterpreting it through local visual conventions. Rather than maintaining the original compositional balance, the artist repositioned the Buddha towards the upper section of the pictorial field, disrupting conventional spatial expectations and strengthening the visual expression of transcendence. The nirvāṇa scene thus constructs sacred temporality through spatial reconfiguration rather than narrative sequence.

This compositional choice influences the act of viewing. Whereas textual narratives unfold through reading, the scroll guides attention through spatial orientation. Encouraged to raise their gaze towards the Buddha's elevated figure, viewers experience a symbolic movement from the earthly realm towards a transcendent sphere (Figure 14). Although the Buddha appears physically present within the scene, his position suggests a movement beyond the ordinary human realm. The enlarged spatial distance between the Buddha and the mourners reinforces this effect. Sacred temporality is therefore enacted through viewing: transcendence becomes visible, allowing nirvāṇa to be experienced as continuing sacred presence rather than disappearance.

The upper placement of the Buddha carries temporal implications that complement the birth scene. If the birth scenes compress future enlightenment into the moment of origin, the nirvāṇa scenes dissolve the boundary between ending and transcendence. Death marks a transition into a different order of existence rather than a terminal point: historical time reaches completion while sacred time remains open.

Paradoxically, the nirvāṇa scene visualises absence through presence. Although the Buddha has departed, his body visually dominates the composition. Through scale, elevation, and visual centrality, physical death becomes enduring sacred visibility—the Buddha remaining present within the pictorial space even as he transcends historical existence. In Mitchell's terms, the image does not merely illustrate an event but actively constructs a visual form of religious knowledge, allowing transcendence to become visible through representation.

The visual logic of the nirvāṇa scene also forebodes the scroll's cyclical structure, collapsing the distinction between ending and continuation. Beginning and ending are thus transformed into mutually reflective moments within a larger sacred cycle. Viewed together, birth and nirvāṇa function less as chronological boundaries than as complementary points within a continuously reactivated sacred temporality. The end of the Buddha's earthly life simultaneously opens the possibility of continual return through memory, ritual, and viewing.

Together the two scenes dissolve the chronological boundaries that normally structure biography. The Buddha's life is consequently presented not as linear progression but as a sacred continuum in which origin and transcendence illuminate one another. In this sense, the scroll creates conditions through which Buddhist memory can be publicly transmitted, transforming biography into a continually accessible sacred presence, allowing viewers to participate in Buddhist temporality rather than merely observe it.

7. CULTURAL MEMORY AND HERITAGE RECONSTRUCTION

7.1. Cultural Memory and Public Recollection

Cultural memory provides the social context through which Buddhist visual knowledge extends beyond artistic production into collective remembrance. While traditional Buddhist images primarily function within ritual settings, the contemporary *Buddhacarita* scroll enters public culture through museum exhibition, where viewing becomes a practice of cultural recollection rather than ritual devotion.

The museum display of the *Buddhacarit* scroll should be understood not merely as a change of exhibition context but as a transformation in the social production of cultural memory. Once placed within public exhibition, the scroll no longer addresses only ritual communities but becomes a medium through which Buddhist narratives are collectively remembered, interpreted, and transmitted across generations. In this context, the scroll acts simultaneously as a work of art, an educational medium, and a form of Buddhist visual culture. The museum does not solely preserve religious images but opens a space in which Buddhist narratives acquire renewed social visibility. Museum display extends the cultural life of the scroll by bringing Buddhist narratives into contemporary public space.

7.2. Heritage as the Outcome of Visual Translation

The reconstruction of Buddhist heritage should therefore be approached as the consequence rather than the starting point of visual translation. By translating the *Buddhacarita* through the visual language of Kamasan painting, the artist creates a new cultural object that simultaneously reactivates Buddhist narrative traditions and Balinese artistic heritage. Heritage is thus produced through artistic practice instead of merely being preserved. It is not inherited unchanged but continually reconstructed through artistic production, public exhibition, and collective cultural memory. Viewed from this perspective, the scroll shows that visual translation is not only an aesthetic process but also a cultural mechanism through which religious knowledge enters contemporary public culture. Museum exhibition completes

this process by transforming an individual artwork into a collectively remembered cultural object, allowing Buddhist narratives to remain socially meaningful through the continual reconstruction of cultural memory.

8. DISCUSSION: VISUAL TRANSLATION AS BUDDHIST KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION

8.1. Visual Translation Beyond Illustration

The empirical findings presented above suggest a broader reconsideration of visual translation within Buddhist visual culture. Existing scholarship on adaptation and intermediality has largely interpreted translation across media as a process of representation in which images reproduce or reinterpret textual meaning. The evidence presented here, however, points towards a different conclusion. Throughout the production of the *Buddhacarita* scroll, artistic interpretation continuously reshaped narrative sequence, symbolic emphasis, spatial organisation, and theological meaning. The movement from text to sketch, from sketch to painting, and finally from painting to museum exhibition demonstrates that visual translation is itself a productive cultural practice.

Far from preserving an already completed Buddhist narrative, the painter actively reconstructed it. Narrative episodes are selected, condensed, expanded, and visually reorganised according to Kamasan artistic conventions and contemporary understandings of Buddhist significance. Visual translation therefore functions less as illustration than as interpretation. It is through this interpretive process that new forms of Buddhist knowledge emerge. The knowledge is not simply transferred from scripture into image; it is generated through artistic decision-making.

This perspective shifts attention away from finished artworks towards artistic production itself. The significance of the *Buddhacarita* scroll therefore lies not only in the completed painting but also in the creative process through which Buddhist knowledge is continually reconstructed.

8.2. Why Visual Media Produce Buddhist Knowledge

Comparable observations have been made in Alexandra Green's study of Burmese Buddhist wall paintings, which argues that mural programmes function simultaneously as rhetorical, ritual, and mnemonic systems rather than merely as illustrations of Buddhist biography. The present study extends this claim by demonstrating that artistic interpretation itself generates Buddhist visual knowledge through visual translation (Green A, 2018). This further raises a broader theoretical question: why are visual media particularly effective in producing and transmitting Buddhist knowledge? Traditional Buddhist studies have privileged canonical texts as the primary carriers of religious authority. However,

the production of the *Buddhacarita* scroll shows that religious knowledge also emerges through visual forms that reshape how sacred narratives are perceived, remembered, and experienced.

Unlike literary narratives, which require sequential reading and linguistic competence, visual representation allows multiple episodes, symbolic relationships, and theological meanings to coexist within a single pictorial field. As Mitchell (1994) contends, images should not be regarded as subordinate illustrations of texts but as autonomous systems of representation capable of generating their own forms of meaning. The *Buddhacarita* scroll confirms this: through spatial organisation, symbolic visibility, and compositional hierarchy, it produces interpretations of Buddhahood that cannot be fully expressed through textual narration alone. Temporal simultaneity, for example, allows birth, enlightenment, and nirvāṇa to remain visually interconnected, thereby transforming chronological biography into a continuously accessible sacred presence.

David Morgan's studies of religious visual culture further suggest that images acquire significance through embodied practices of viewing rather than through iconography alone (Morgan, 2012; 2018). The meaning of the *Buddhacarita* scroll therefore arises not only from what is depicted but from how viewers move across its surface, reconstruct narrative relationships, and participate in the visual reactivation of Buddhist memory. In this sense, viewing itself becomes an epistemic practice through which Buddhist knowledge is generated and continually renewed.

Hans Belting likewise insists that images possess social lives independent of textual traditions because they operate through the interaction between image, medium, and viewer. Applied to the present study, the *Buddhacarita* scroll reveals that visual translation relocates religious knowledge into a new visual medium where meaning is continually reconstructed through artistic production, exhibition, and public reception.

Consequently, visual translation should be understood not simply as the movement of narratives across media but as a process of epistemic transformation. As Buddhist narratives pass from literary text to pictorial form, they acquire new spatial structures, aesthetic meanings, and modes of public engagement. Visual media therefore do more than communicate Buddhist knowledge; they constitute epistemic environments in which Buddhist knowledge is generated, experienced, and continually transformed.

The present findings also suggest a broader theoretical reconsideration of visual translation itself. The Balinese *Buddhacarita* scroll demonstrates that visual translation is not a secondary act of representation but a primary process of Buddhist knowledge production. Narrative selection, spatial composition, symbolic amplification, and public

exhibition collectively reshape how Buddhist knowledge is generated, experienced, and transmitted within contemporary visual culture.

8.3. Museum Display and the Public Reconstruction of Buddhist Narratives

The museum display constitutes an equally crucial stage within the process of Buddhist knowledge production. Once removed from exclusively religious settings, the *Buddhacarita* scroll enters a new social environment in which Buddhist narratives are encountered through exhibition, education, and public interpretation. Museum display thus alters both the function and the audience of Buddhist images.

Rather than replacing religious meaning, public exhibition expands it. Visitors who may possess little prior knowledge of Buddhist scripture are nevertheless able to engage with Buddhist narratives through visual experience. Images communicate across linguistic boundaries, allowing Buddhist ideas to circulate beyond communities capable of reading Sanskrit, Pali, Chinese, or Old Javanese texts. Visual culture thus becomes a vital mechanism through which Buddhist traditions participate in contemporary public life.

This observation also contributes to current discussions of museum studies and religious heritage. Museums should not be regarded solely as institutions preserving historical objects. They actively join in the contemporary production of religious knowledge by shaping how sacred narratives are interpreted, remembered, and circulated. The exhibition of the *Buddhacarita* scroll therefore extends visual translation beyond artistic production into the sphere of public culture. As Macdonald maintains, museums are not neutral institutions of preservation but active spaces where cultural meanings are continuously produced, interpreted, and negotiated (Macdonald, 2023). Seen from this perspective, the exhibition of the *Buddhacarita* scroll extends Buddhist knowledge production beyond artistic practice into the public sphere.

8.4. Contemporary Commission as Heritage-Making

The commissioned production of the *Buddhacarita* scroll indicates that cultural heritage is not simply inherited from the past but actively created in the present. Heritage emerges through artistic production, curatorial practice, and public circulation. The contemporary commission documented in this study represents a process of heritage-making in which Buddhist narratives and Balinese artistic traditions are simultaneously revitalised. Rather than preserving tradition unchanged, contemporary artists participate directly in producing the cultural heritage that future generations will inherit.

Although developed from a contemporary Balinese case, the analytical framework proposed here is not restricted to Kamasan painting. Similar processes of visual translation, knowledge production, and heritage reconstruction may also be observed in Buddhist mural traditions at Dunhuang, Ajanta, Borobudur, Bagan, and East Asian illustrated sutras. Future comparative research may therefore employ this framework to investigate how Buddhist visual culture continually reconstitutes sacred knowledge across different historical periods and cultural regions.

8.5. Towards a Theory of Buddhist Visual Knowledge

The findings presented in this study support a broader theoretical proposition: Buddhist visual culture is not merely the material expression of religious doctrine but a generative epistemic system through which Buddhist knowledge is continually produced, experienced, remembered, and publicly reconstructed. The analytical sequence proposed in this article—visual translation, sacred temporality, cultural memory, Buddhist knowledge production, and heritage reconstruction—describes interconnected processes through which Buddhist narratives from literary tradition into public cultural knowledge (Figure 3). Visual translation initiates the transformation of Buddhist narratives; sacred temporality reorganises religious experience within visual space; knowledge production emerges through artistic interpretation; and heritage reconstruction extends these newly produced meanings into public culture through exhibition and collective cultural memory. Together, these stages do not describe a linear chain but a dynamic and cumulative model through which Buddhist visual culture continually renews itself across historical and cultural contexts.

Although developed through a contemporary Balinese case, this framework is potentially applicable to a much broader range of Buddhist visual traditions, including mural painting, illustrated manuscripts, narrative reliefs, ritual scrolls, and digital Buddhist media. Rather than treating these materials as discrete artistic forms, future research may approach them as interconnected mechanisms through which Buddhist knowledge is continually translated, materialised, and socially reproduced.

9. CONCLUSIONS

This study has argued that the contemporary Balinese *Buddhacarita* scroll demonstrates how Buddhist visual culture continually generates new forms of religious knowledge through visual translation. Drawing on fieldwork, artist interviews, preliminary sketches, and text–image comparison, the study shows that artistic production involves creative interpretation rather than mechanical reproduction. Ultimately, this study proposes a broader theoretical

understanding of Buddhist visual culture. Rather than treating visual translation as the adaptation of literary narratives into visual form, this study reconceptualises it as a generative epistemic process through which Buddhist narratives are transformed into sacred temporality, cultural memory, and public heritage. The framework developed from the contemporary Balinese *Buddhacarita* scroll, therefore, offers a transferable analytical model for investigating Buddhist visual traditions across Asia and demonstrates that visual culture is not solely a medium for preserving Buddhism but one of the principal mechanisms through which religious knowledge is continually created, transformed, and transmitted.

However, this study still has some limitations and areas for improvement. First, this study focuses on a single contemporary *Buddhacarita* scroll produced within the Balinese Kamasan tradition. While the combination of fieldwork and visual analysis provides an unusually detailed account of artistic production, the conclusions should not be understood as universally representative of Buddhist visual traditions across Asia. Second, the present study primarily examines processes of visual production rather than audience reception. Future research may therefore explore how different communities—museum visitors, Buddhist practitioners, and local audiences—interpret and respond to such visual narratives. Comparative investigations of Buddhist murals, temple paintings, illustrated manuscripts, sculptural programmes, and emerging digital Buddhist media will further test the broader applicability of the analytical framework proposed here.

More fundamentally, this study suggests that images produce Buddhist knowledge because they make multiple sacred relationships visible simultaneously in ways that linear textual narration cannot. The *Buddhacarita* scroll presents conception, birth, enlightenment, preaching, and nirvāṇa within a single visual field, allowing temporal, cosmological, ritual, and symbolic relationships to be perceived simultaneously. Rather than following a chronological sequence, viewers encounter an interconnected sacred world in which different moments of the Buddha's life remain visually co-present. Images therefore do not merely represent Buddhist narratives; they reorganise the structure of religious knowledge itself by transforming textual succession into visible relationality.

This epistemic capacity depends not simply on the visual medium but on the authority of the Kamasan tradition as a classical narrative system. For centuries, Kamasan painting has served as Bali's principal visual language for narrating the *Rāmāyaṇa*, the *Mahābhārata*, and other canonical religious traditions, enabling complex sacred narratives into coherent pictorial worlds. The contemporary *Buddhacarita* is therefore not merely painted in the Kamasan style; it enters an already canonical visual tradition whose authority legitimises the visual interpretation of

religious texts. In this sense, Kamasan functions not simply as an artistic style but as a classical narrative medium through which Buddhist knowledge becomes publicly visible, culturally intelligible, and ritually meaningful.

Seen from this perspective, Buddhist visual knowledge emerges through the interaction of two complementary forms of canonicity: the canonical authority of Buddhist scripture and the canonical authority of a classical visual tradition. The former provides doctrinal legitimacy, while the latter provides visual legitimacy. Their interaction transforms literary narrative into a visible, shareable, and enduring system of sacred relationships. Visual translation is therefore more than the movement of narratives across media; it is a process through which classical visual traditions continually authorise, renew, and reproduce Buddhist knowledge across changing historical and cultural contexts.

NOTES

¹ In this article, visual translation refers to the interpretive transformation of literary narratives into visual forms rather than the literal illustration of textual content.

² Kamasan painting refers to the classical painting tradition originating from Kamasan village in Klungkung, Bali. Closely associated with the visual language of “wayang” theatre, it is characterised by flattened composition, stylised figures, mineral pigments, and continuous narrative representation.

³ Unless otherwise noted, references to the *Buddhacarita* in this article are based primarily on Āśvaghoṣa, Handaka Vijjananda, and I Made Sesangka, *Buddhacarita–Perilaku Buddha* (Ehipassiko Foundation, 2023). Relevant passages have been checked against E. B. Cowell’s translation (1894), Patrick Olivelle’s translation (2008), and Huang Baosheng’s Sanskrit–Chinese edition of the *Buddhacarita* (2022). Although later translations are available, Cowell’s edition remains the standard reference in English-language scholarship.

⁴ For Werner Wolf, intermediality draws attention to how literary works gain new significance when translated into visual, performative, or material forms (Wolf, 2011). Similarly, Linda Hutcheon argues that adaptation should be understood as both repetition and recreation, in which existing narratives are reconfigured within new cultural and aesthetic contexts (Hutcheon, 2013: 7-9).

⁵ W. J. T. Mitchell further contends that images and texts should not be regarded as separate representational systems but as media that continually interact and transform one another (Mitchell, 1994: 89-95). Mitchell’s conception of the image as an autonomous representational system has recently been complemented by scholarship in material religion. Rather than viewing images as representational objects alone, Birgit Meyer argues that religious images operate as media of presence, actively mediating religious experience.

⁶ Mieke Bal maintains that visual narratives should be interpreted as narrative structures in their own rights rather than as static illustrations of stories (Mieke Bal, 2009: 5-8).

⁷ The temporal implications of visual representation have been further explored by Wu Hung, whose discussions of the spatialisation of time reveal how images can transform narrative succession into spatial coexistence (Wu Hung, 2016: 45-50)

⁸ These observations resonate with Mircea Eliade’s distinction between historical time and sacred time (Eliade, 1959: 68-113)

⁹ The *Buddhacarita* scroll examined in this article was specially commissioned by the author as part of original fieldwork conducted in Bali, Indonesia, between February and March 2024. The complete production process—from preliminary sketches to the finished scroll—was documented through participant observation, interviews with the artist, and photographic records. The artist’s name is omitted for reasons of research ethics and privacy. Unless otherwise indicated, all photographs, fieldwork

documentation, interviews, sketches, and the commissioned *Buddhacarita* scroll are part of the author's original fieldwork materials.

¹⁰ Old Javanese (Kawi) was the principal literary language of pre-Islamic Java and Bali and played an important role in transmitting Sanskrit religious and literary traditions throughout the Indonesian archipelago.

¹¹ Interview with I Made Sesangka, Bali, 12 March 2024.

¹² Continuous narrative is a pictorial strategy in which multiple moments of a story are represented within a single visual field while the same protagonist may appear repeatedly.

¹³ The ancient city where the Buddha attained final nirvāṇa, Present-day Kushinagar, Uttar Pradesh, India, one of the four principal Buddhist pilgrimage sites.

¹⁴ Ānanda is traditionally regarded as one of the Buddha's closest disciples and the principal transmitter of many early Buddhist discourses.

¹⁵ Da banniepan jing [Mahōparinirvāṇa Sūtra] (1924). In: Takakusu J, Watanabe K (eds) Taishō Tripiṭaka Vol. 1, No. 7, pp. 1c-2a.

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Data Availability: The research materials supporting the findings of this study include field photographs, image documentation, anonymised interview records, scene catalogues, text–image comparison tables, and metadata relating to the production of the *Buddhacarita* scroll. These materials have been provided as supplementary information for editorial assessment and peer review. Additional supporting materials are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Competing Interests: The author declares no competing interests.

Ethical Declaration:

Ethical approval

This study involved voluntary interviews with adult participants concerning artistic practice and did not involve medical research, clinical research, or vulnerable populations. Therefore, formal ethics committee approval was not required under the institutional research practices of Guangxi Minzu University.

Informed consent

Written informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to the interviews, including permission for the publication of identifiable images. The artist's name has been omitted to protect privacy. No sensitive personal information was collected. Signed consent forms are retained by the corresponding author and can be made available to the editor upon request.

Tables

Table 1. Visual Strategies and Temporal Effects in the *Buddhacarita* Scroll.

Episode	<i>Buddhacarita</i> Text	Visual Strategy	Temporal Effect	Function
Māyā’s Dream	white elephant dream	symbolic compression	temporal foreshadowing	condenses narrative information
Birth	narrative beginning	temporal simultaneity	temporal compression	merges multiple moments into a single image
Great Departure	sequential event	narrative transition	sequential movement	connects sequential episodes across space
First Sermon	doctrinal transmission	spatial expansion	collective transmission	extends sacred experience to collective audiences
Nirvāṇa	narrative ending	transcendence	temporal transcendence	dissolves temporal closure

Figures legends

Figure 1 Produced in Bali in 2024, the scroll serves as the primary case study for examining visual translation, sacred temporality, and Buddhist visual culture. (I Made Sesangka, 2023)

Figure 2 The exhibition forms part of the broader process through which Buddhist narratives are translated into contemporary Buddhist visual culture. Image source: <https://photodharma.net/Posters/Life-of-the-Buddha-by-Sesangka/index.htm>

Figure 3 Rather than depicting a linear adaptation from text to image, the framework conceptualises Buddhist visual culture as a dynamic process in which artistic interpretation transforms literary narrative through visual translation, sacred temporality, and cultural memory into Buddhist visual knowledge, which is continually renewed through viewing, museum display, and public heritage.

Figure 4 The workshop environment suggests the interaction between Buddhist narrative heritage and Balinese artistic heritage that underlies the production of the *Buddhacarita* scroll. Rather than merely preserving inherited traditions, the artist actively reinterprets Buddhist narratives through Kamasan visual conventions, illustrating artistic reinterpretation in practice. Photograph by the author.

Figure 5 The signature documents the completion of the scroll within its original workshop context, providing field evidence that the scroll is produced within the living tradition of Kamasan painting. Photograph by the author.

Figure 6 Comparison with the completed scroll shows how narrative episodes were selectively condensed, expanded, and reorganised through artistic interpretation during visual translation. Photograph by the author.

Figure 7 Comparison with the completed painting shows that the adult-like representation of the newborn Buddha was established at the conceptual stage of production, providing evidence that temporal compression originated from artistic interpretation rather than later stylistic revision. Photograph by the author.

Figure 8 The adult-like representation visually compresses birth, enlightenment, and Buddhahood into a single sacred image, offering visual evidence that sacred temporality emerged through artistic interpretation during the process of visual translation. (I Made Sesangka, 2023)

Figure 9 Comparison with the completed scroll provides visual evidence that sacred authority was progressively constructed through compositional hierarchy during the process of visual translation. Photograph by the author.

Figure 10 It illustrates the interaction between horizontal narrative progression and vertical cosmological hierarchy in the *Buddhacarita* scroll. Through the coexistence of multiple episodes within a single pictorial field, sequential biography is transformed into a spatialised experience of sacred temporality. (I Made Sesangka, 2023)

Figure 11 Analytical framework illustrating the transformation from artistic interpretation to Buddhist visual knowledge through visual translation, sacred temporality, cultural memory, and public heritage. (I Made Sesangka, 2023)

Figure 12 Queen Māyā's raised arm, celestial attendants, and the adult-like newborn Buddha transform literary narrative into a visual expression of sacred origins, temporal simultaneity, and sacred presence through the process of visual translation. (I Made Sesangka, 2023)

Figure 13 The sketch documents the initial compositional arrangement prior to the elevation of the reclining Buddha in the completed painting, providing evidence of artistic decision-making during visual translation. Photograph by the author.

Figure 14 The increased elevation of the reclining Buddha in the final composition reflects a conscious attempt to visualise transcendence and to transform the narrative ending into a symbol of continuing sacred presence. (I Made Sesangka, 2023)



Figure 1. Produced in Bali in 2024, the scroll serves as the primary case study for examining visual translation, sacred temporality, and Buddhist visual culture. (I Made Sesangka, 2023)



Figure 2. Exhibition of preliminary *Buddhacarita* paintings at Ubud Diary Gallery, Bali, December 2023. The exhibition forms part of the broader process through which Buddhist narratives are translated into contemporary Buddhist visual culture.

Image source: <https://photodharma.net/Posters/Life-of-the-Buddha-by-Sesangka/index.htm>

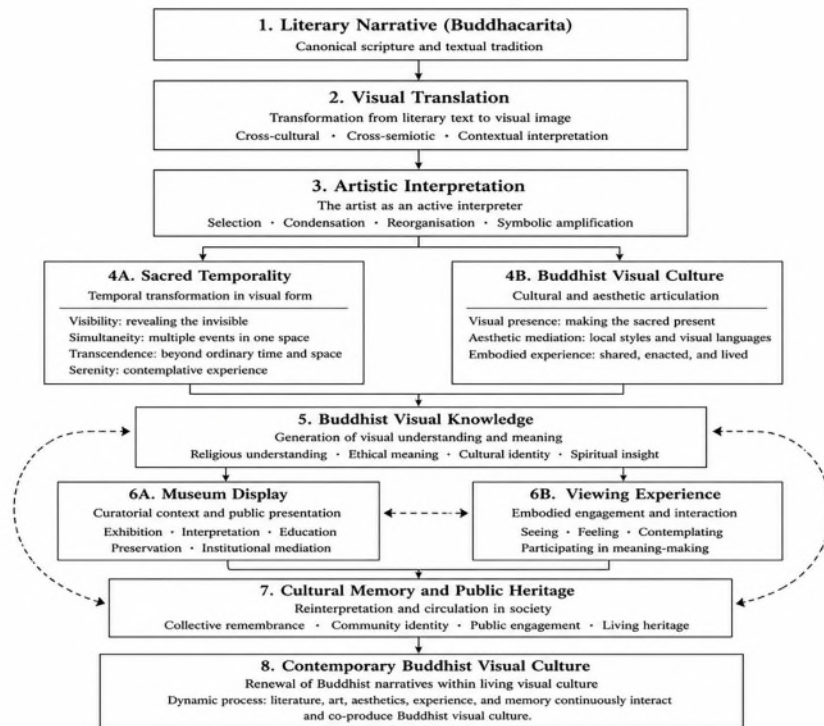


Figure 3. Analytical framework of Buddhist visual knowledge. Rather than depicting a linear adaptation from text to image, the framework conceptualises Buddhist visual culture as a dynamic process in which artistic interpretation transforms literary narrative through visual translation, sacred temporality, and cultural memory into Buddhist visual knowledge, which is continually renewed through viewing, museum display, and public heritage.



Figure 4. The Balinese Kamasan painter in his workshop during fieldwork in February 2024. The workshop environment suggests the interaction between Buddhist narrative heritage and Balinese artistic heritage that underlies the production of the *Buddhacarita* scroll. Rather than merely preserving inherited traditions, the artist actively reinterprets Buddhist narratives through Kamasan visual conventions, illustrating artistic reinterpretation in practice. Photograph by the author.



Figure 5. Signature on the completed *Buddhacarita* scroll, printed version, in the Kamasan workshop. The signature documents the completion of the scroll within its original workshop context, providing field evidence that the scroll is produced within the living tradition of Kamasan painting. Photograph by the author.



Figure 6. Preliminary compositional sketch produced during the initial planning stage. Comparison with the completed scroll shows how narrative episodes were selectively condensed, expanded, and reorganised through artistic interpretation during visual translation. Photograph by the author.

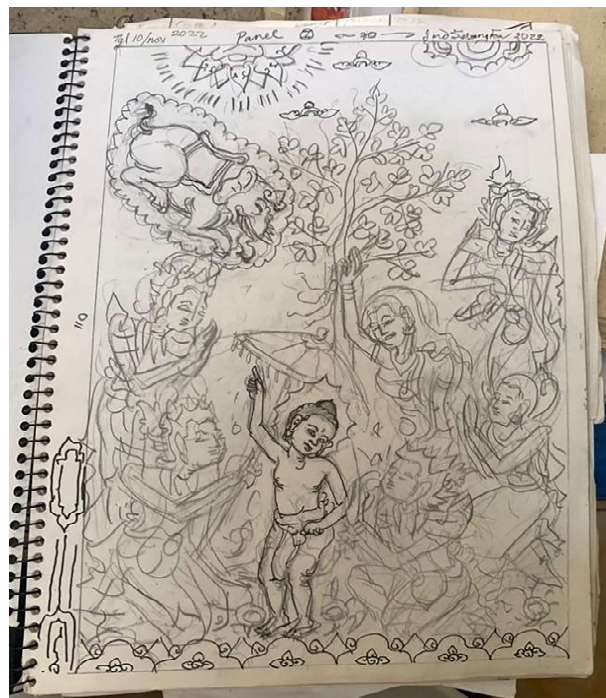


Figure 7. Preliminary sketch of the newborn Buddha. Comparison with the completed painting shows that the adult-like representation of the newborn Buddha was established at the conceptual stage of production, providing evidence that temporal compression originated from artistic interpretation rather than later stylistic revision.

Photograph by the author.



Figure 8. Detail of the newborn Buddha in the completed birth scene. The adult-like representation visually compresses birth, enlightenment, and Buddhahood into a single sacred image, offering visual evidence that sacred temporality emerged through artistic interpretation during the process of visual translation. (I Made Sesangka, 2023)

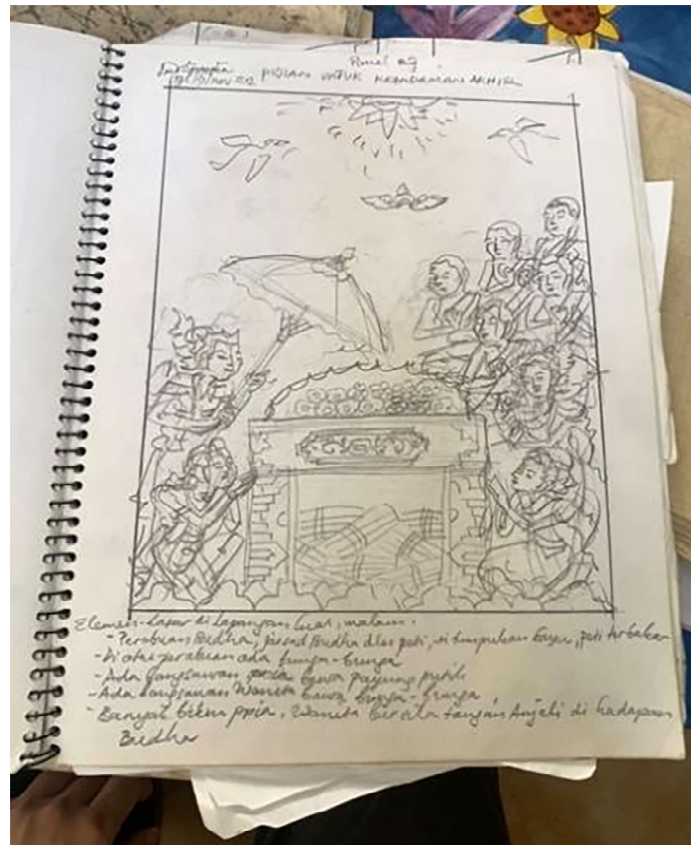


Figure 9. Preliminary compositional sketch illustrating the enlargement of white parasols and the redistribution of surrounding figures. Comparison with the completed scroll provides visual evidence that sacred authority was progressively constructed through compositional hierarchy during the process of visual translation. Photograph by the author.



Figure 10. Visual structure of sacred temporality in the *Buddhacarita* scroll. It illustrates the interaction between horizontal narrative progression and vertical cosmological hierarchy in the *Buddhacarita* scroll. Through the coexistence of multiple episodes within a single pictorial field, sequential biography is transformed into a spatialised experience of sacred temporality. (I Made Sesangka, 2023)

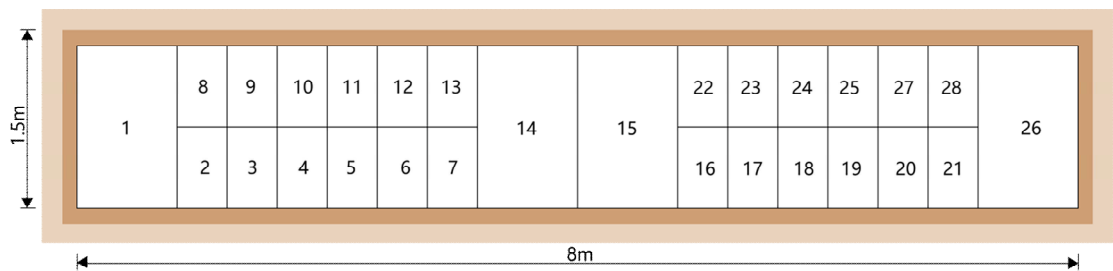


Figure 11. Analytical framework illustrating the transformation from artistic interpretation to Buddhist visual knowledge through visual translation, sacred temporality, cultural memory, and public heritage. (I Made Sesangka, 2023)



Figure 12. Birth of the Buddha in the completed scroll. Queen Māyā's raised arm, celestial attendants, and the adult-like newborn Buddha transform literary narrative into a visual expression of sacred origins, temporal simultaneity, and sacred presence through the process of visual translation. (I Made Sesangka, 2023)

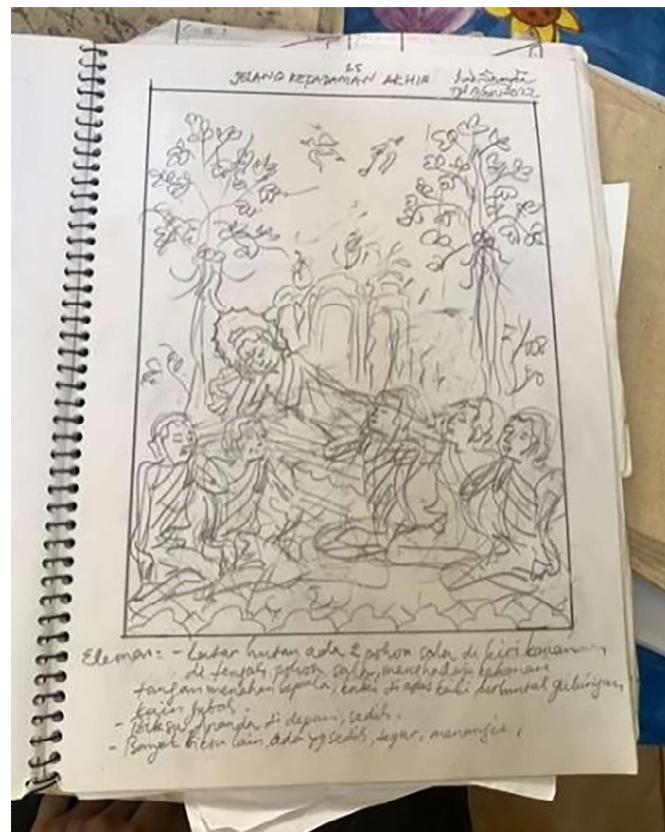


Figure 13. Preliminary sketch of the nirvāṇa scene. The sketch documents the initial compositional arrangement prior to the elevation of the reclining Buddha in the completed painting, providing evidence of artistic decision-making during visual translation. Photograph by the author.



Figure 14. The completed nirvāṇa scene. The increased elevation of the reclining Buddha in the final composition reflects a conscious attempt to visualise transcendence and to transform the narrative ending into a symbol of continuing sacred presence. (I Made Sesangka, 2023)

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