

An Overview of Modern and Contemporary movements in Sri Lanka **by Shalini Amerasinghe Ganendra** (revised 2007)

Auction fever has hit contemporary art markets. South Asian contemporary art has benefited as well, as prices escalate to multiples of estimates. Notwithstanding the risks, these markets make interesting study. They have helped to establish internationally the reputations of certain South Asian talents, the South Asian contemporary market generally, and fostered a vibrant secondary market. As prices for these works escalate, the deep pocket and extensive clientele of auction houses become increasingly important, providing viable exit strategies for owners of such "new" high-end art. However, there is still minority crossover buying in South Asian Contemporary art auctions and a figure informally provided by a major auction house is that approximately 90% of the buyers of contemporary Indian art are South Asian.

Sri Lankan contemporary art, which traces its beginning to the '43 Group, has seen its share of auction exposure in the last 10 years. Martin Russell, (nephew of Lord Bertrand Russell), a significant collector and promoter of '43 Group' Sri Lankan art, first auctioned a Keyt through Sotheby's in 1995 and works with Russell provenance still command a premium.

Thus far, works by four Sri Lankan artists, George Keyt, Ivan Peries, George Claessen, and most recently Justin Daraniyagala, (all members of the '43 Group), have auction records. Keyt set a new high of GBP £57,600 at Sotheby's London Sale in May 2006. George Claessen fetched US\$9,600 at Christie's New York Sale in March 2006 and in the same sale, a Justin Daraniyagala went for US\$50,400. The highest price paid for an Ivan Peries' at auction was GBP£13,200 at Sotheby's Travel Sale in October 2003.

Though international awareness of Sri Lankan modern and contemporary art is still nascent, interest is increasing due to the efforts of writers, auction houses and significant promoters. An interesting claim made by galleries and dealers is that a significant portion of buyers of Sri Lankan art are crossover collectors.

Group of '43

The start of the modernist art movement in Sri Lanka is marked by the formation of the famed '43 Group in 1943. The ten members were Lionel Wendt, Justin Daraniyagala (aka Pieris), George Keyt, Ivan Peries, Harry Pieris, George Claessen, Aubrey Collette, L.T.P. Manjusri, Geoff Beling and Richard Gabriel (the only surviving member of the Group).

The Group's approach, creating a support for diversity and creative energy, coupled with talent, secured these artists a seminal place in Sri Lankan art history. The '43 Group is to Sri Lankan art what the Impressionists would be to Western Art - the start of something new, dynamic and internationally valuable. The artistic styles generally married Western training and influences to a local context. All the members were intellectually eager, and most were internationally versatile.

The Group of '43 provided an impetus and identity for a group of artists, but dictated little about styles. The original membership changed two years after its inception with the withdrawal of Manjusri, but the 'Group' continued to exhibit works by members for decades after, periodically including other artists' as well.

As John Berger, one of Britain's foremost writers and art critics, noted:

"...the story of the [43] Group's attempt to achieve a synthesis between the work done in Paris by Picasso and Matisse and the ancient tradition of Sigiriya (frescoes) which yet took into account the emerging power and equality of Asia in the contemporary work could be discovered through a careful, chronological study of their work."

The members varied in background and privilege. Justin Daraniyagala, an aristocrat, studied at Cambridge University and the Slade School of Art, traveled extensively and returned to Sri Lanka to live and paint mainly on a family estate outside Colombo. He is one of the most accomplished and critically acclaimed members of the '43 Group, but was the least prolific. He died young, in 1969.

George Keyt's familiar linear compositions and cubist style (influenced, so he once told this writer, mainly by Matisse - though most reviewers draw parallels to Picasso), of Sri Lankan and Hindu mythology, have adorned the pages of many a book, catalogue, walls of homes, museums and other public and private spaces. He is undoubtedly the most well known name in 20th Century Sri Lankan art history. Martin

Russell, as a collector and promoter, was passionate about Keyt's works. He wrote the first monograph on Keyt which was published in 1949, in which he observed:

"It was customary then in Colombo to think of Keyt as a sort of Gauguin... (but) the comparison with Gauguin is worthless, for what is most noticeable about most of Keyt's art ... is not primitiveness, but its sophistication, not its tropical aspect, but its combination of truly classical and truly romantic elements, with the classical usually predominating."

Ivan Peries was born into a family of professionals. His father was a doctor. The landscapes, portraits and religious scenes in earthy shades reflect the confidence that was evident in his persona. Senake Bandaranayake writes in his book, ***Ivan Peries***:

"Driven entirely by his artistic impulses and supremely self-confident, he never doubted the intrinsic value of his work and did not seek critical endorsement other than on account of its financial consequences.... He viewed his work as part of the modern Sri Lankan tradition, which he saw in turn as a component of multi-cultural and international modern movement. For him there was no contradiction between a regional school and a global framework. ..."

Peries exhibited throughout Europe and in Sri Lanka, until his death in 1988. A retrospective solo of his works was held posthumously at the Hayward Gallery in 1989.

George Claessen migrated to England in 1949 where he spent the last 50 years of his life, exhibiting work frequently. He was self taught and pursued figurative/life painting and drawing early in his career. Later, he developed a wonderfully unique abstract style which Conroy Maddox, writing in a 1962 issue of Arts Review commented "...[Claessen's] abstract expressionist approach....bears on Monet's last period at Giverny... Beautifully toned colours applied in distinct areas, with each colour tending to sound one note in a total chord of repeated, contrasting or complimentary colours."

As is evident, there is an adequate and informative collection of literature on the Group of '43 and its various members. Unfortunately, the same cannot be said for information on the development of Sri Lankan contemporary art over the last 30 years. After the passing of the Group '43 and demise of promoters, such as Harry Pieris (member of Group of '43 and founder of the Sapumal Foundation, a Trust and museum dedicated to the preservation and promotion of Sri Lankan contemporary art), the collective steam dissipated. The pursuit of art in this generation has become a more individual endeavour which is, indeed, a sign of our times.

After the Group 1943

The last thirty years have witnessed internationalisation of aspects Sri Lankan culture. Vernacular architecture, popularised and modernised by architect Geoffrey Bawa is replicated locally and abroad. Sri Lankan landscapes attract tourists from all corners of the world to view the rich and sophisticated cultures that extend far beyond the rock paintings and ancient landmarks. Sri Lankan professional talent is recognised internationally as a Sri Lankan is shortlisted for the post of UN Secretary General. What more for Sri Lankan artists?

And all this development despite a war that has taken its toll on the collective and individual psyches of Sri Lankans everywhere. The war has impacted and disrupted education and employment. The relief that aesthetics provide in this environment and the significance of international recognition, have added relevance.

With various challenges to a unified identity and no single cause in the form of anti colonial sentiment or otherwise, what indeed is "Sri Lankan"? Some artists try to focus on the essence of being "Sri Lankan", an elusive and fuzzy mantra that most established figures, however, are not consciously pursuing. In fact, that search is becoming less relevant as artists and collectors engage in globalisation and merely ease secure identities into expanding psyches.

Painting in Sri Lanka is in a state of flux with a great deal of experimentation. It is largely a market that caters to the need of tourist hotels and tourists and has a western orientation. There has been an increased interest in installation art inspired by ritual performances in the villages for the appeasement of deities and demons.

Thus, the challenge, as part of the Sri Lankan experience, is for artists to not just identify with the security of local culture or western culture but to develop individual aesthetics with visible cultural identity. Such visual language in the form of strong and/or unusual techniques, original subject matter coupled with sheer determination and perseverance of the craft - are the criteria uniting today's most successful artists – from anywhere in the world. Sri Lanka is no different.

Though there are a few noteworthy local schools of art, the government funded University of Visual and Performing Arts and privately funded, non profit Vibhavi Academy of Fine Arts and the Sapumal Foundation, most established talents have international training. The artists mentioned below all possess strong intellect and have developed individual, but not static, styles. They have all exhibited for at least 15 years, and some for more than 40 years. This list, however, is not exhaustive.

Top and committed talents in Sri Lanka are few: Stanley Kirinde (painting and drawing) , Leela Bandaranaike Peries (sculpture), Druvinka (painting), Tissa Ranasinghe (sculpture), Jagath Weerasinghe (painting, drawing, installation), Shehan Madawela (painting).

Druvinka studied in Santiniketan, where she received a First Class honours degree in Fine Arts, and now lives in the foothills of the Himalayas. Tissa Ranasinghe studied painting in Colombo and sculpture at the Chelsea School of Art, before settling in England.

Leela Bandaranaike Peries pursued further study at Camberwell School of Art, England. Stanley Kirinde, the most senior of this group, is self taught and was in fact a career civil servant who led a productive double life as an artist. Jagath Weerasinghe was at the Institute of Aesthetic Studies and obtained a Master of Fine Arts from the American University in Washington DC. Shehan Madawela is self taught and a winner of the prestigious George Keyt Artist of the Year.