Buddhist Paintings of George Keyt

Posted on

Sharmini Luther

” Art is a spiritual definition of nature and when it ceases to be that it ceases to function and is useless. Bad art is nothing other than the result of direct response, where the real vision is absent, where there is a wrong kind of freedom, an obvious freedom. Painting there is the literal result of what is merely seen with the fleshly eye.” George Keyt, THE VISION OF THE PAINTER

Few artists use language as skilfully as they paint. George Keyt, perhaps the greatest Sri Lankan painter of this century, is one such exception. An accomplished poet and translator before he took seriously to painting, Keyt has been acknowledged by such art critics as Sir Herbert Read, Andre Chamson and John Berger. Chilean poet, Pablo Neruda, also an admirer of George Keyt, once wrote of him as ” the living nucleus of a great painter.” Born in 1901 in the hill capital of Kandy, Keyt was brought up in a highly westernized milieu. His parents were of mixed Ceylonese-Dutch ancestry and he was educated at Trinity College, Kandy, a boys’ school in the tradition of the English public schools. However, reponse of Keyt’s school career indicate it was a somewhat chequered one. As a boy, he is also said to have done detailed drawings of the Crucifixion as well as illustrations for Tennyson’s ” Idylls of the King”. When Keyt was fourteen, he won the College Art Prize with a pen and ink drawing. A year later, one of his drawings was included in an exhibition organized by the Ceylon Society of Ans in Colombo. Some of the most significant years of Keyt’s life came soon after he left Trinity College. He became familiar with murals in Buddhist temples around Kandy and even studied Sanskrit and Buddhism at the famous Malwatte Vihare Keyt was closely involved with a bhikkhu-poet, Pinnawela Dhirananda, who developed his knowledge of Sinhala poetry. He was also a regular contributor to Buddhist publications which lasted until he was almost forty years old.

In his early twenties, therefore, Keyt laid the groundwork for his later works on Buddhist themes. During this period in his life, too, Keyt read deeply of Tagore and

continued his interest in Bengali culture all his life. Hindu mythology also exerted a longlasting influence on Keyt’s work Keyt’s growing involvement with Buddhism and things Eastern was accompanied by a progressive rejection of his westernized upbringing. In his later years, Keyt was to retire to a quiet village off Kandy where he lived almost thirty years in surroundings of rustic simplicity.

However, before he secluded himself completely, George Keyt was to become an intrinsic part of the Colombo art circle in the late twenties and thirties. Lionel Wendt, photographer and patron of the arts, discovered Keyt’s talents and gave him invaluable support and encouragement. In fact, Wendt acted as godfather to a number of young, ” revolutionary ” painters including Justin Deraniyagala, Geoffrey Beling and Harry Pieris whose works were art refreshing promoted change by the from Ceylon the uninspired, stilted sort of art promoted by the Ceylon Society of Art. From this core of new artists sprang the 43 Group, a creation of Lionel Wendt and Harry Pieris. At the end of a decade filled with exhibitions of his work both in Ceylon and abroad, George Keyt completed his most famous work, the Buddhist murals at the Gotami Vihare in Borella, Colombo.

Buddhist themes, as a subject for his paintings, were nothing new for Keyt. There were portraits of bhikkhus, temple landscapes and other Buddhist still: life paintings. But with the monumental Gotami murals, George Keyt established himself as part of Sri Lanka’s great tradition of Buddhist painting. And no one understood this centuries-old tradition better than Keyt.

Almost all paintings in Sri Lanka are found in caves and temples around the country. Buddhism and Buddhist themes have always been the focus of painting and the best known of the classical school are to be found in the ancient city of Polonnaruwa. In particular, the Tivanka Image House us a repository of the finest depictions of the Jataka stories about the previous lives of the Buddha. Stylistically, the Tivanka murals are reminiscent of the oldest extant examples of Buddhist art in Bharut and Sanchi in India. The bas-reliefs found in these ancient cities depict the lives of the Buddha in episodic form but as a continuous pictorial narrative.

Both ancient Indian and classical Sri Lankan Buddhist art are primarily didactic. They exhibit clearly identifiable artistic symbols for the purpose of communicating the Buddhist ethos to the worshipper. These easily understandable visual conventions are combined, in the Gotami murals, with a modem energy and vigour that have led critics to acclaim them as the best twentieth century Buddhist art in the country. The circumambulatory shrine room at the Gotami Vt.ha.re is worth a

visit although, over the years, some of the murals have suffered from the effects of time and damp. Hidden down an insignificant private road, the Gotami Temple itself should be given more acclaim for housing these masterpieces. In the last year, however, there has.been an attempt by art-lovers to grant greater recognition to Keyt and his work with the setting up of a George Keyt Foundation. The threatened condition of the Gotami murals has also been spotlighted in a recent television documentary. In the years to come, perhaps the public of Sri l.anka will become more aware of the preciousness of these treasures that far surpass all other modern temple paintings in the country.

A painting of a Buddhist monk.