

Words: Sharmini Luther

Photography: Suresh de Silva



It would be very difficult to move around Colombo without bumping into a creation by Senaka Senanayake. As Sri Lanka's best-known painter, locally and abroad, Senaka's work adorns practically every major building in the city. These include five-star hotels such as the Hilton International, Ramada Renaissance, Hotel Ceylon Inter-continental and the Lanka Oberoi. In the sphere of public buildings, the new Parliament at Kotte, the President's House, the Central Bank and several other major commercial banks have all commissioned paintings, and occasionally a sculpture, from Senaka Senanayake. When still in his thirties, Senaka enjoyed the distinction of having held over 95 one-man exhibitions in 18 countries around the world. His first exhibition, which was sponsored by the Ceylon Society of Arts, took place in 1959 when Senaka was only eight years old. A couple of years later, he was invited to exhibit at the Festival of Arts in New York and the Fine Arts Gallery in San Diego. A further series of exhibitions followed through the sponsorship of UNICEF and the State Department. Over the next few years, Senaka's work was taken to London, Berlin and Rome. Back in the United States, the Asia Society and Metro Media 1V invited Senaka for more exhibitions in New York and Washington D.C. On this tour, he was invited to visit the White House as well.

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The publicity which Senaka generated during his very successful American tour in 1965, resulted in a special commission from the United Nations Secretary General, U. Thant. His work hangs at the East Entrance of the General Assembly Hall in the U.N. Building. Following the United States tour, Senaka held another successful exhibition at the Upper Grosvenor Galleries in London. The Galerie de Jeune in Paris, the Neu Berliner Galerie in East Berlin and the Palac Dunag Galerie in Prague provided additional exposure for the work of sixteen-year-old Senaka on the invitation of their respective governments. Closer to home, Senaka was honoured by the Indian government as a guest of state. In 1967, he executed a large painting for the Ceylon Pavilion at Expo '67. The work was selected by Canada as a centenary gift from Ceylon, as Sri Lanka was then called.

During this decade of feverish activity and continuous travel abroad, Senaka continued his school career at Royal College in Colombo. When he was eighteen, Yale University awarded Senaka a scholarship to study Art and Architecture. This proved to be a watershed point in the career of the young artist. “This was the most important period for my work,” says Senaka looking back. “The exposure I got at Yale was very critical. “The university sponsored many visiting artists whose work provided valuable insights for art students. Senaka also speaks highly of his teachers, including Richard Lytle who had been taught by the famous colour theorist Albrecht. Another teacher, William Bailey, was a pioneer in neo-realism working from photographs to create his paintings. Although it seems incredible, Yale University provided Senaka with his first formal training in art. Up to this period, he had been completely self-taught. In addition to his painting, Senaka also picked up the techniques of silk seed and lithography. Samples of these works can be seen at the Hilton and Ramada hotels in Colombo.

As an undergraduate, Senaka continued to exhibit. In 1969 he was invited to the National Library Gallery in Ottawa, Canada, while in 1970 he represented the modern period in Ceylonese painting at a National Geographic exhibition. Called “Ceylon Through the Ages,” the exhibition displayed 26 oil canvases by Senaka on Buddhist themes. Incidentally, when asked what influences have affected his style of painting, Senaka replies: “I don’t fall into any school of Sri Lankan traditional painting. Of course, Sri Lankan temple paintings display very decorative motifs which are circular and not angular forms. However, while Senaka’s later paintings evoke the “rhythm and movement” of such circular forms, the works that came out of his years in America are inspired by the Cubists. “The paintings from later

paintings evoke the “rhythm and movement” of such circular forms, the works that came out of his years in America are inspired by the Cubists. “The paintings from When he graduated from university, Sen aka returned to Sri Lanka. Few expected him to try to make living a off his paintings. In fact, Senaka was offered a place at Clare College, Cambridge, to study architecture. “I never really wanted to be an architect but it seemed the most suitable career.” Fortunately for Senaka, his decision to try things out for awhile in Sri Lanka was the right one. The Sri Lanka Ceramics Corporation appointed him as designer cum advisor to the Corporation. Two years after graduation, the Commonwealth Institute invited him to participate in an exhibition in London. More exhibitions followed in San Diego, West Germany, Nova Scotia and a Smithsonian travelling exhibition. In 1980, Senaka visited Japan and a year later he was commissioned to do a painting for the National Panasonic Board room.

The paintings of Senaka Senanayake are rooted in the Sri Lankan environment. “While my work reflects Sri Lanka, though, it is not totally localized. There is also an international appeal, says Senaka. By Asian standards, few artists from the region are able to sell in the international market. In New York alone, there are 100,000 registered artists, says Senaka. “One’s work has to be very different and exceptional to make an impact.” In the later years, Senaka finds himself experimenting technically. “Earlier my work was very spontaneous. Now I find myself using very sophisticated techniques, such as dealing with colour problems,” explains Senaka. His use of simplified circular forms, for instance, is an attempt to give a three dimensional effect through layers of colour. Instead of the usual foreground and background to indicate depth, Senaka manipulates density of colour in transparent layers.

His usual subjects are people, birds and animals. “My paintings are usually happy,” says Senaka. “I look on paintings as a form of escapism which one can use to get away from the realities of life. There are no ‘messages’, only fantasy. My themes are light. I think there is enough suffering around us without having to depict this in my work” Senaka also confesses that he has been lucky enough to lead a comfortable life. His studio is a commodious old garage complete with a small radio and bunkbed set off to one side of his home. A tranquil garden complements the secluded location, an ideal setting for any artist. Senaka points to overhead racks filled with dozens of canvases. “My mother has saved some of my best work from every period and eventually I hope to set up a gallery to house the entire collection,” says Senaka.

Senaka’s latest series of paintings concentrate on the theme of Woman and Picture. The twelve pieces in this series portray a picture within a picture which,

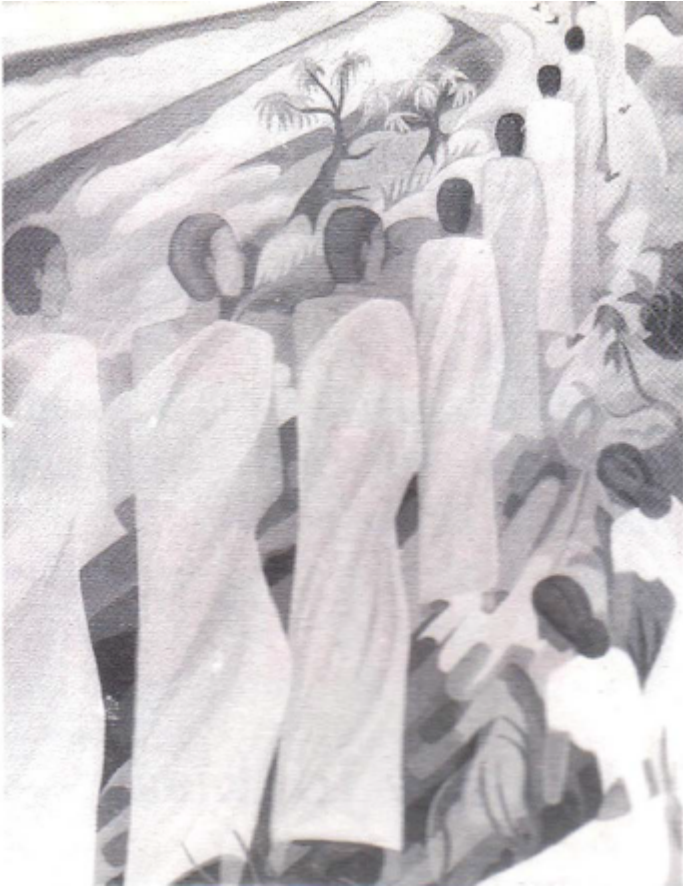
according to Senaka, is really a method for doing two paintings in one.

More of Senaka's work is on permanent display at the Lanka Oberoi where he runs a gallery. He also exhibits the work of about ten other local artists, thus providing them with a forum for their paintings and sketches. The lack of a proper museum of modern art in Sri Lanka continues to bother him. "I have been pushing the idea for the last 15 to 20 years. How can our modern painters appreciate the work of other Sri lankan painters without a proper gallery?" he asks. "The best stuff is out of the country as there is no local clientele who can develop an interest in art," deplores Senaka. He adds that he has been fortunate in gaining wide recognition through international connections. "But the majority of local artists do not get enough recognition," he says.

Senaka's latest series of paintings concentrate on the theme of 'Woman and Picture'. The twelve pieces in this series portray a picture within a picture which, according to Senaka, is really a method for doing two paintings in one. He recently completed a series of paintings for the Fun Island Resort in the Maldives as well as a very large mural for the Hatton National Bank Training Centre. The Sri Lanka Tea Centre in London also features a large mural by Senaka.

He hopes to hold three exhibitions abroad towards the end of the year. These include an invitation from the Chinese government in Beijing and two commercial shows in Singapore and Nepal. Senaka also undertakes privately commissioned painting and sculpture, although he only carries out very large sculptural pieces. His paintings can be viewed at his home, 15, Rotherfield Place, Albert Crescent, Colombo 7.

Cameo: Senaka Senanayake



*One of Senaka's recent works.*

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