Keeping a Colorful Legacy Alive

Posted on

Ena de Silva was too large a creative genius to be forgotten. Hers was a generation-spanning influence on rebirthing and reconstructing batik and embroidery, pushing design boundaries fearlessly, using her creative flair to cater to the native sensibilities, to opine the immense space that Sri Lanka offers to carve a niche for herself. Paying tribute to her work, Ena’s designs and projects in collaboration with some of Sri Lanka’s prominent artists are displayed as “Imagining New Natures: Collaborations with Ena” at the Barefoot Loft Gallery, which continues until November 9, 2023.

Words Jennifer Paldano Goonewardane.



Ena de Silva – the quintessential queen of fashion.

Her designs transcended the ordinary and birthed a new culture in the visual arts. Ena de Silva was the artist extraordinaire who revolutionized the design palette of batiks and embroideries for good. She leads a legion of women in Sri Lanka who, in a post-independent landscape, brought a breath of fresh air into local art and crafts, reimagining and asserting an ostentatious and trendy design ethos that has endured and continues to influence artisans in the country. She personified the artistic revolution she pioneered, flamboyant in style and unaffected by the

trivialities of external conjectures. Her circle of friends was so numerous that they would speak fondly beyond her creative enterprises to her adventurous and never-say-never nature in living life to the fullest on her own terms.

Ena was more of a breakout artisan whose talent blossomed later as she closed in on her forties. It all started small in 1961 with a sale outside her Colombo home that led her to embark on a stupendous career in textile printing. For that, she collaborated with her son, Anil Gamini Jayasuriya, and artist Laki Senanayake. Ena had an inborn gift for designing, which she nurtured by reading Mediaeval Sinhalese Art by Ananda Coomaraswamy and receiving training in textile printing. She was unstoppable from her first collaborative project. She officially launched her textile design and printing career with a shop in Colombo and a factory in the suburbs until she moved to her native Matale in the 1980s to share her knowledge with the locals.

Today’s comeback of batik-based clothing and other accouterments in Sri Lanka is traceable to the trailblazing efforts of women like Ena, who did everything to make batik mainstream and popular. For that, she departed from the mundane, choosing the universe and its microcosms for inspiration. The zodiacs, the sun, the moon, fauna and flora, birds and animals, indigenous drawings and motifs, shapes, and anything interesting she stumbled upon were stylized and set amid a miscellany of colors and forms. The Ena identity in batik is inimitable and shows a deliberate departure in her technique. Her brilliant embroidery designs reveal the beauty of color, design, and storytelling, exposing the infinite possibilities of expression on a canvas of cloth.

> And so lives on Ena’s legacy, a colorful one no doubt that she would want to be continued, so that the fresh breath she infused into batik and embroidery would be carried on, more intensely through a generation of fearless innovator-designers…

She was a 20th-century catalyst and torchbearer for future innovations who undertook to rewrite the design handbook with an inventive masterstroke immersed in a potpourri of colors and sketches and gave them a modern twist. Her creative mischief was embedded in the Kandyan Osariya sari designs, which were distinctly quirky, flamboyant, and original. Her penchant to reconceive everything within the innovative ambit would see her wave her magic wand to transform traditional

clothing into glamorous outfits. She didn’t spare the plain sarong in the wake of her disruptive design trajectory, making them into colorful ensembles that men would choose to wear for special occasions. As an avid traveler, those who knew her testify to her penchant for absorbing design and craft ideas from other countries, which she did slickly. Ena was a modernist in her approach to work, experimenting with new designs and techniques to offer her audiences variety. Yet, her native culture was the most inspiring source of creativity.

Upon her passing, Ena de Silva was too big an influencer in the creative sphere to be relegated to history or the inanimate works that bear her name. The Aluwihare Heritage Centre, managed by her family, keeps this visionary designer’s memory alive by showcasing her work to continue her pioneering and inspiring involvement in Sri Lanka’s “artscape” for the future. Hers was an outburst of life and newness that she transferred to surfaces, interpolating beautiful color schemes to make design cavalcades in clothing, banners, standards, wall hangings, ceiling panels, and embroidery.

The latest exhibition marks the conclusion of the centenary celebrations of Ena de Silva’s birth anniversary, held in 2022. This year’s program focuses on the early stages of her career while opening the audiences to a universe of never-before-seen designs and projects produced in collaboration with artists Anil Gamini Jayasuriya, Laki Senanayake, Ismeth Raheem, Hema Dharmasena, and Padmini Jayasinghe. Living in a period of shifting trends where creativity is becoming the domain of technology, Ena’s individual works and her collaborative projects are an ode to the power and longevity of traditional crafts while also demonstrating the immense ability of humans to challenge the confines of conventional crafts through innovation and experimentation, in this case, to produce new textile art, which expands the offering beyond the mundane to make it exciting and stunning.

It is in this spirit that the range on display – drawings, templates, maquettes, paintings, and complete textiles shed more light into the renaissance that Ena and her collaborators breathed into Sri Lanka’s modern landscape of heightened art and cultural progression, the “new natures” of the island, where they reflect on societal and environmental changes in post-independent Sri Lanka, the exhibition directing the public to “reimagine nature with its intersections among Sri Lanka’s varied ecologies as a metaphor for the ways that Ena de Silva and her collaborators reflected on societal and environmental changes in a post-independent Sri Lanka”, an exposition of new natures through a delicate harmony of spirit and conscious intervention in their reimagined aesthetics that include the changing face of textile

and batik design embraced in nearly six decades of work undertaken by the Ena de Silva Fabrics' workshop. Her collective productions are like short stories written on cloth through beautiful imagery. They convey the profundity of the exhibition's theme and show how artists communicate their feelings and interpretations about the events and changes happening around them through art. And Ena may have been the first to tell those stories in batik.

> Today's comeback of batik-based clothing and other accouterments in Sri Lanka is traceable to the trailblazing efforts of women like Ena, who did everything to make batik mainstream and popular.



The Anteater elephant by Anil Gamini Jayasuriya with Ena de Silva Fabrics.



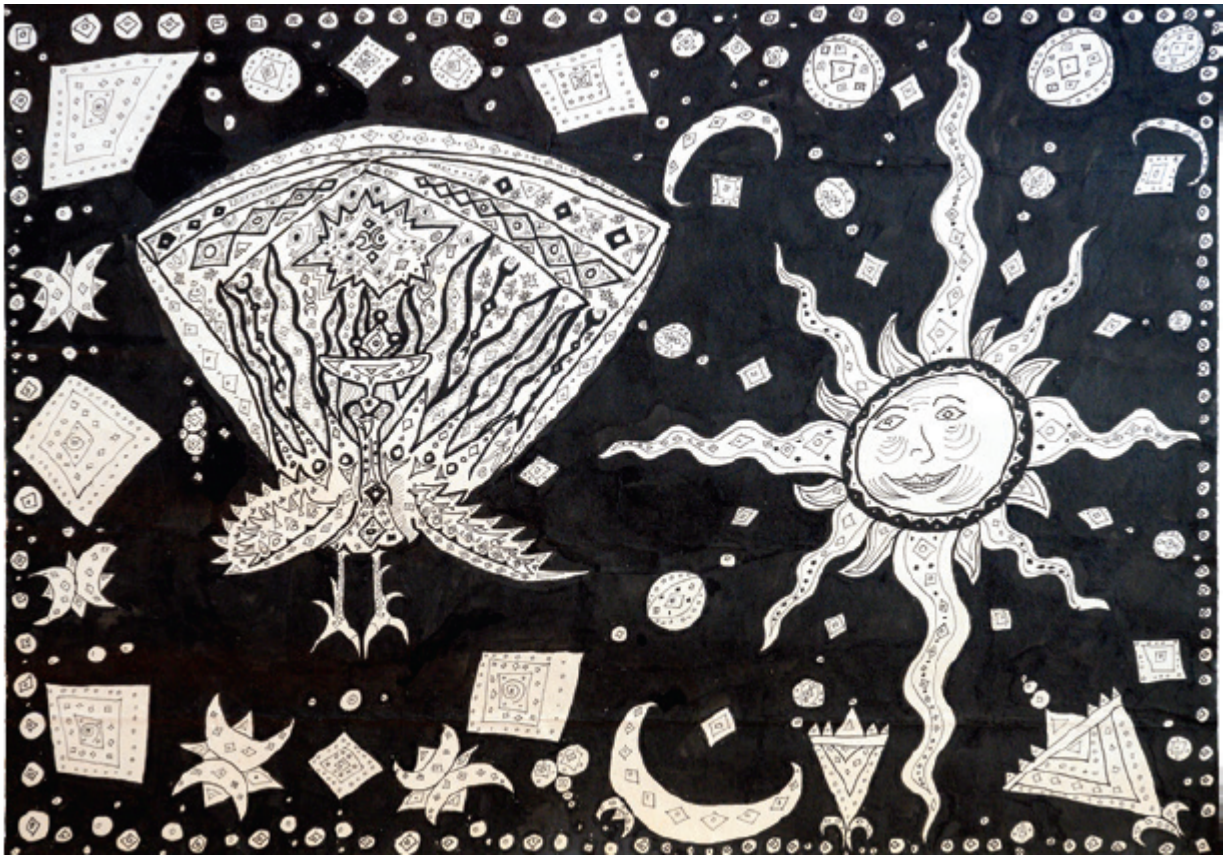
Ira Handa Kodiya by Padmini Jayasinghe, 1970's .



Study of Berunda Pakshiya by Anil Gamini Jayasuriya.



From left to right: Mock up for Zodiac banner by Anil Gamini Jayasuriya with Ena de Silva Fabrics,1970’s. Deer by Anil Gamini Jayasuriya, 1988.
Modern Batik from Graphic drawing for Batik of a peacock by Anil Gamini Jayasuriya with the Aluwihare Heritage Centre, 2023.
Graphic drawing for Batik of a Peacock by Anil Gamini Jayasuriya, 1960’s.



Study of Peacock and Sun by Anil Gamini Jayasuriya.

Ena’s collaborators are no strangers to the art world, all well-known peers in their field whose work speaks of their creative virtuosities. They drew for Ena de Silva Fabrics, bringing their distinct styles and variety to the wall hangings and ceiling panels, representing the “new natures” in the societal and environmental changes of post-independent Sri Lanka, which the exhibition explores. Three of them were her earliest companions when she launched as a designer. Anil Gamini Jayasuriya, Ena’s son who predeceased her, was her close collaborator from the start and has exhibited his paintings abroad, even collaborating with architect Geoffrey Bawa when he designed Saint Thomas’s Preparatory School and the Bentota Beach Hotel. Laki Senanayake, artist, and sculptor, also worked with Ena de Silva from the beginning alongside her son Anil, helping them design creations that included several large-scale projects, the ceiling of the Bentota Beach Hotel being one of the most iconic displays attributed to Ena in which Laki had played a collaborative role. Architect, artist, and art historian Ismeth Raheem’s association with Ena de Silva could be traced to her early days in batik, when she collaborated with Laki

Senanayake to print textiles through the Ena de Silva Fabrics, where he assisted in her dyeing workshop. This relationship endured and progressed into creative collaborations with Ena.

When Ena returned to her ancestral home in Aluwihare, Matale, in the early 1980s, she established the Matale Heritage Centre to help local women, school leavers, and young men acquire skills in batik production, needlework, brass casting, wood carving, eventually setting up a batik factory and embroidery unit, a brass foundry, and timber workshop, providing job opportunities for many while ensuring empowerment and economic independence for women in her village. The Matale Heritage Centre that she set up continues her work, now as the Aluwihare Heritage Centre, whose work will be enhanced and advanced through the newly established Ena De Silva Foundation, a not-for-profit and public trust that intends to strengthen and sustain the livelihoods of the craftspeople at the Aluwihare Heritage Centre through research, education, and innovation initiatives. As part of preserving Ena’s legacy, the Foundation has launched the documenting of oral histories of her family, friends, and collaborators, while the exhibition will also showcase short essays.And so lives on Ena’s legacy, a colorful one no doubt that she would want to be continued, so that the fresh breath she infused into batik and embroidery would be carried on, more intensely today through a generation of fearless innovator-designers, who like her would seek to push boundaries in design to reflect the new natures and give people the opportunity to savor variety and the beauty of diversity. If there was anyone who embodied the guts and the gall to be the quintessential alchemist of the arts field, it was indeed Ena de Silva, and her contribution should live on with the energy that she showed during her life to seek the limitless opportunities in her field of work.

At Barefoot Loft Gallery

Until November 9, 2023.



Wall hangings with village scene by Laki Senanayake, 1967.



Tree of Life by Padmini Jayasinghe, 1970’s.





Left and right photo: Peacock and snake by Padmini Jayasinghe, 1970’s.