

Legacies

Posted on



Lionel Wendt



George Keyt



Richard Gabriel



H A Karunaratne



Tilak Samarawickrema



Senaka Senanayake



Jagath Weerasinghe



Chandraguptha Thenuwara

Celebrating the contributions of eight pioneers of Sri Lankan art, *Legacies* features a tightly curated selection of artworks created between 1930 and 2020. Sri Lankan modern and contemporary art practice resulted from the many encounters it had with its immediate cultural environment.

Similar to developments in visual culture worldwide, art production in Sri Lanka was shaped by the political, social, and economic aspirations of the 20th-21st centuries.

Showcasing works by Lionel Wendt, George Keyt, Richard Gabriel, H.A. Karunaratne, Tilak Samarawickrema, Senaka Senanayake, Jagath Weerasinghe and Chandraguptha Thenuwara, *Legacies* pays homage to their indelible imprint and far-reaching influence on the landscape of visual art in Sri Lanka.



Photograph by Lionel Wendt.



Painting by George Keyt.

The advent of modernism in Sri Lanka is often associated with the 43 Group, a collective of young artists united by their fatigue with the conservative style endorsed within artistic circles in pre-Independence Sri Lanka (formerly Ceylon). Their exposure to Impressionistic and Post-Impressionistic movements in Europe and the freedom of expression inherent to them encouraged them to experiment with the visual medium and develop individual styles.

In George Keyt's reinterpretation of medieval-period Indian paintings, one can observe the coalescing of distinct worlds. The mythological themes imagined through sinuous lines that characterize Sri Lankan murals morph into thick, bold strokes that mimic the Cubist forms. Keyt's practice not only bridged idioms separated by time and space into the folds of a syncretic style, but also mirrored the osmosis of cultures. Like him, his contemporary, Lionel Wendt, exhibited a proclivity for experimentation, going beyond the scope of the camera to create surreal vistas of imagination through photomontage.

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Notably remembered for convening the artists who later formed the 43 Group, Lionel Wendt was a pioneering photographer whose images of male nudes remain radical in the context of their production. While an element of exoticism remains, the laboring body, captured through Wendt's lens, brims with vigor and power, becoming images of quiet defiance against colonial control. As Sri Lanka transitioned to an independent nation-state and sought economic and political

freedom, it also faced ideological challenges.



Painting by H. A. Karunaratne.



Etching by Richard Gabriel.

Richard Gabriel's bucolic visages, in their measured naivety, gesture towards an ideal of freedom, dignity and compassion. His depictions of the struggle between man and nature reflect an aspiration to preserve utopian values in a rapidly changing world.

Senaka Senanyake's 1978 painting of verdant pasturelands, which prefigured his depictions of tropical rainforests, echoes similar sentiments in response to the pressures of urbanization and the expanding tourism industry. Thus, the image of pastoral life encapsulated an idyllic past untouched by industrialization and capitalism, which had arrived with colonial rule, and later became the preoccupations of a newly formed country. As the nation sought its place in an increasingly globalized world, artists readily experimented with previously unfamiliar forms of aesthetic expression, often resulting in shifts in art and craft practices on the island. Informed by his experiences in Europe and America, Tilak Samarawickrema revitalized Sri Lankan crafts by reimagining them through the visual sensibilities of the Bauhaus and the Memphis Group. Samarawickrema also unpacked the sensuousness of the Sinhala script, as he sought a contemporary global landscape for the moon-faced characters inspired by Sri Lankan folk to coexist within.



Etching by Tilak Samarawickrema.

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Similarly, Karunaratne transformed the established approach to image-making at

the institutional level during his tenure as a lecturer at fine arts academies in Sri Lanka. Under Karunaratne's tutelage, the academic curriculum, largely defined by figurative practice, underwent a pedagogical shift as artists were encouraged to explore alternative materials and modes of expression.

As a printmaking student in post-World War II Japan, H.A. Karunaratne found himself in a nation still in the process of redefining itself, leading visual artists to adopt innovative new methods. Deeply influenced by Buddhist and Zen philosophies and by American Abstract Expressionist works, Karunaratne explored the interplay between diverse materials, ranging from fabric to metal. As fissures in ethnolinguistic issues in Sri Lanka became increasingly pronounced, much of contemporary Sri Lankan art came to be defined by artistic responses to the volatile socio-political climate from the 1990s onward.



A painting by Senaka Senanayake.

In this increasingly militarized environment, Chandraguptha Thenuwara's practice dealt with the glorification of war, confronting a collective obliviousness to its impact, through figures of dead bodies concealed amongst military camouflage and soldiers dancing in wanton abandonment despite being amputated.

Jagath Weerasinghe's Broken Stupa confronted the potency for violence when religion, otherwise admired for its values of Ahimsa, becomes intertwined with nationalism. Their practice, along with that of their contemporaries, paved the way for active discourse on social realities within the fine arts.



A painting by Jagath Weerasinghe.



An etching by Chandraguptha Thenuwara.

The exhibition, Legacies, meanders through the decades, tracing moments in the island's social and political history to identify the nodes that have shaped the visual art landscape of contemporary Sri Lanka.

*Till February 15, 2026
Saskia Fernando Gallery
41, Horton Place, Colombo 7*