

Messages in Art

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Gunasiri Kolambage putting the final touches on canvas at his studio

From scribbling with charcoal on the cement floor as a child to exhibiting works of art the world over as an established artist, Gunasiri Kolambage has lived the artist's dream and continues to do so.

Words Prasadini Nanayakkara **Photographs** Damith Wickramasinghe

Sitting in the living room of his home displaying the many works of art spanning the years, Gunasiri Kolambage thinks back on the days of his childhood. He was fortunate he says despite losing his mother in those tender years, as his father was a lover of art and often encouraged his son to draw. One of his earliest inspirations was when his father invited temple artists over to draw on the walls of their house.

“Sometimes people would refer to our house as the temple,” he laughs.

The roots of his career began when Kolambage attended art classes at his village, conducted by H B Perera who also instructed at the College of Fine Arts. He studied further to eventually enter the College of Fine Arts, presently the Faculty of Visual Arts of the University of Visual and Performing Arts. Following his education, Kolambage ventured into advertising where he met many artists including his mentor, Stanley Abeysinghe. While learning the ropes in advertising, Kolambage continued painting, taking part in competitions and winning prizes and earning recognition for his art.

He honed his skills predominantly as a watercolourist producing both realistic and abstract work. During this time Kolambage also dabbled in photography as a means of expressing his creativity. And in the years that followed, he ably assumed the positions of art director and creative director at leading advertising firms in the country and in Mumbai, India and Brisbane, Australia, bestowed upon him for his creative aptitude. He thus came to be multifaceted in the creative fields with the titles illustrator, watercolourist, painter, graphic designer, and even potter to his portfolio.

However, painting has remained steadfast amongst his passions. One of his earliest exhibitions includes ‘Some poems I have read’, which comprised a collection of his artistic impressions of poems written by renowned poets both local and international. Another exhibition in the 1970s was titled Against War where he intended to express his views against all wars waged across the world. A popular exhibition that drew masses in the hundreds to view his art was a collection of paintings of the Buddha for the Buddharaja Exhibition at the Lionel Wendt which was later displayed at the Gangaramaya Temple.

Although watercolour was what Kolambage had studied in his academic years, he flourishes his brush with ease in various mediums including oil and acrylic. For his abstract work Kolambage finds that acrylic serves him best. “Rather than oil which requires layering and repeated brush strokes, acrylic allows me to capture an abstract image or idea on canvas as it dries quickly,” he explains.

His brush strokes come alive in a convergence of contrasting colours that is characteristic of his work. Although he has found abstract painting a comfortable mode of expression, he believes in producing a message that does not escape the casual viewer. “I don’t hold this belief that art is only for connoisseurs to appreciate.

I want to take my message to the lay people. I want to reach everyone," he states. One such painting selected for a corporate calendar drew much demand amongst the staff. During the construction of a key landmark building in Fort, he observed women pitching into help with the work, as they hoisted up mounds of cement. There he observed the fatigue and hunger and depicted it in his painting in abstract style. His sense of accomplishment arose from the response from people who were able to appreciate his art. A notable painting that won much recognition and was exhibited for three months at Mona Bismarck Foundation in Paris is an abstract of a woman postured in graceful lines and a merger of vivid hues. His observation of a model taking a moment's respite from posing for the camera, served as the source of inspiration for this painting. From his collection 'Some poems I have read' is a painting of an offbeat nature where a beleaguered government officer is depicted on a train ticket background to portray the mundane and incessant nature of his daily commute. The messages that seep through the canvas are equally as rich as the colours and shapes themselves.

The awards and achievements to the artist's name are a great many in number. These also include his solo exhibitions and commissioned work both local and overseas. What is more, his accomplishments extend beyond painting with awards and recognition earned for stamp designs, logo designs, an exquisitely modern collection of pottery and photography. His legacy and journey as an artist are comprehensively captured in a recent publication titled 'Devil's Palette—Gunasiri Kolambage Paintings by Juliet Coombe'. The pages chronicle his life story as an artist from the early years, through each phase and medium to an impressive index of achievements. His latest work with temple motifs are also featured in the book.

His artistic journey is indeed overwhelming to anyone who peruses through his immense collection of work. However, Kolambage describes being an artist as that of a simple and unencumbered life. "I have a very simple approach to life. I don't take life seriously, and that is how my mind remains happy to draw freely," he states. That said, he embraces

a routine of waking at four in the morning to work in hours of solitude in his studio above his home where his family resides. At other times he draws on scene with dashes of brush strokes or sketches. To his work he applies an ardent fervour to achieve perfection. "I have fulfilled my father's vision to the fullest extent," he reflects. "I believe I have achieved all that an artist can in my lifetime, travelling the world and reaching success professionally." His artistic journey is one of fulfillment.

And the whimsical and tireless brushstrokes continue to strike the canvas.

gkolambage@yahoo.com

