

# The Lady of the Six Yards

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Chandramani Thenuwara's enduring attire of ease and comfort – Sari on safari.

The span of Sri Lanka's six yards of handloom in cotton threads unfolds a beautiful story of dedication and the creative genius of native pioneers who pushed design boundaries and pursued new frontiers. The six yards of handloom heritage has come of age from routine designs, shifting and blending colors to create distinctive shades and dazzling effects along its length and breadth. Such a remarkable journey doesn't happen in a vacuum. It is down to dedication and hard work of designers like Chandramani Thenuwara, who dared to recast the traditional attire in a new light.

**Words** Jennifer Paldano Goonewardane.

At 89, Chandramani Thenuwara exudes an effortless sense of style, authenticity and sensibility. Her love for the sari has endured, a comfortable and easy garment she wore with pride wherever she travelled, in cosmopolitan London and even on an African safari. The six yards of cloth define her dedication to changing Sri Lanka's handloom textile industry. She stirred up the color palette and drove extensive design deviations and palatable forays that elevated the sari into realms of audacious flamboyance. Nature's simplest of visions inspired her color journey, the Sinharaja forest's muddy ground to strewn autumn-colored leaves. One thing that she refused to do was to allow her designs to be produced in silk, a moral position that has held all her life to not let 2,500 silkworms in their cocoons be boiled alive to make a silk sari. She was the disruptor extraordinaire who stamped her design footprint silently but robustly.

## Thriving in an unconventional career choice

Chandramani was born with a creative DNA, evident since childhood, demonstrating a talent for sketching. Her father was convinced that his daughter would be well-known someday, as declared by an astrologer, for her paintings and not for saris. The transition from a potential painter to a designer was an unplanned outcome,

declares Chandramani. Chance meetings with strangers produced new beginnings. The incessant wanderer spurred by a love for travel, Chandramani's journey to becoming Sri Lanka's first female Chartered Textile Technologist and a Fellow of the Textile Institute of the

United Kingdom was an outcome of circumstances rather than a planned pursuit. It was as if some force had pre-written her destiny, moving from one phase to another, from one opportunity to the next, that would lead to her final sojourn in Manchester, the precursor to a dynamic career in textile designing in Sri Lanka. Her unintended career, she says, was most satisfying. Chandramani still wonders how pieces fell into place, ideally linking to make a complete picture. Her secret to success is dedication and perseverance, honoring every opportunity by putting her heart, mind, and soul to grow through them, find purpose and give it her best shot. After all, in those halcyon days when young people would shy away from choosing a career in art, fashion, and design, Chandramani broke the mold. Looking back, she says that whatever the task, big or small, she applied the best of herself, patiently developing new designs and color combinations, sharing her knowledge with thousands of local artisans and university students who have grown the industry to global fame.

Her work has been recognized and honored by the Textile Institute of the UK with the Design Medal, a first for Sri Lanka, in 2019. In 2018, the Department of Integrated Design of the University of Moratuwa gave her the Lifetime Felicitation Award, recognizing her lifelong contribution to the design field during Sri Lanka Design Week. The Department of Textile Industry in 2017 felicitated her creative contribution to the local textile industry. In retirement, Chandramani has donated her personal collection of fabrics designed by her to the Colombo National Museum, curated and preserved meticulously and open to study and research, a repository of wealth preserved for posterity. Hers unfolds like a tailor-made life story, spun perfectly, blending harmoniously and flowing gracefully.

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## **Her destiny unfolds**

Even a loss had been an opportunity for Chandramani, like when she had to leave Ladies College Colombo with immense sadness at the beginning of the Second World War when the school's buildings were taken to house foreign soldiers. However, her new school, Good Shepherd Convent Kotahena, would be the stepping stone to her future and shape her creative ethos under the school's art teacher, Cora Abraham. This avant-garde recast art education to release the genius in children over the confines of conservatism. Under Cora Abraham's tutelage, Chandramani honed her artistic prowess, abandoning convention and looking at art through a progressive and contemporary lens. An abrupt disruption became the antecedent to her future in art and design. Returning to Ladies College to complete her education was another dream come true for Chandramani, who successfully entered the University of Ceylon to read for a science degree, which only a few women did then.



A shaded color fabric being woven.



Chandramani in Nepal in 1990 during a three-month UNDP Design Consultancy.



Chandramani with her mentor, Cora Abraham, who taught her to look at art from a different lens.

Art would run in her veins even as she read for a degree, deeply enmeshed in Cora Abraham's art school, which advocated a design philosophy of free expression and experimentation with color and line. She is a founding member of the Young Artists Group, started by Abraham for her former students and other young artists in the 1950s. This group consisted of many greats, including artists Laki Senanayake, Ione Peries, Jean Solomons, Sybil Keyt, Mavis Webster and Marie Perera, and architects Turner Wickremesinghe, Suren Wickremasinghe and Christopher de Saram, who met every Sunday to discuss their work and paint. Artists are crazy happy people, as Chandramani describes, enjoying the hedonism of a free-spirited lifestyle open to

ideas and exploration. She did so with all the like-minded souls of the Young Artists Group and enjoyed the privilege of exhibiting her paintings on invitation with the artists of the '43 Group. However, the young aesthete could not complete her degree as she was busy painting and organizing exhibitions for the Young Artists Group. In her twenties and enjoying every bit of her life, Chandramani was content being single. But on the sidelines, others were planning her destiny. The first salvos came from extended family members, aunts and uncles, eventually spreading to her family. Her marital status had become everyone's concern, the perennial dilemma of every young Sri Lankan woman.

### **Pursuing her love for travel**

Chandramani knew she wasn't marriage material. Hence, she was focused on planning her future. Besides her love for art, young she was obsessed with travel, which she claims was her sole ambition. As a child, she would collect pictures of travel destinations that came with Nestlé's chocolate, pasting them in a scrapbook, determined to see them someday. As if to escape her badgering relations, in 1960, Chandramani joined a study tour of England and Europe organized by the Sri Lanka Teachers Travel Club as a young math and physics teacher at Ananda Balika Vidyalyaya while awaiting final year results from the university.

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Leaving on her first overseas tour with two sterling pounds in hand amid tight controls on carrying foreign currency, a chance sitting with their tour guide would shape life's next chapter. Passing Trafalgar Square, he had pointed to the National Art Gallery. He regretted that it was not on the itinerary, eliciting an instant reaction from his art-loving visitor, who bemoaned the exclusion. In an ensuing conversation, Chandramani told the Englishman of her love of art. Unbeknown to the visitors, the following day's schedule included a visit to the Camberwell School of Arts and Crafts South London, a complete detour from the plan. During this tour, Chandramani

shared her portfolio with the school's administration, conveying her desire to study art there. But she also told them she could not afford to pay for three years in London. From there, the group continued its journey to Scotland, France, Germany, and Italy. Upon her return, she received an offer letter from Camberwell for a one-year art course.



Harold Peiris Gallery exhibit of Chandramani's work.



Chandramani's students modeling two of her creations.



Chandramani assigned her students to observe and weave the myriad of colors of the Sri Lanka Almond tree also known as the Kottamba tree – the result was spectacularly varied.



Inspired by nature – a woven tapestry of buttress roots.



Promoting Ceylon Tea among the English – Chandramani proudly wore the sari as her country's Tea ambassador.

### **New opportunities from chance encounters**

Time went by fast. She had seen the seasons, but the prospect of returning to Sri Lanka and facing relations harassing her into marrying was unthinkable. Running out of money, Chandramani's first job in England was at a surgical support

equipment manufacturing facility. Her weekends were spent visiting the National Art Gallery and relaxing at the nearby Ceylon Tea Center. She was also looking for a new job opening. That too soon came her way following a chance meeting with a Sri Lankan lady at the tea center.

Although her new job had no connection with her education and training, it was an excellent opportunity to satiate her travel desire. As a tea demonstrator at the Ceylon Tea Center, she would travel weekly to different parts of England draped in a sari to showcase and sell Ceylon Tea. The quiet beauty of England kept Chandramani immersed in her role while she managed to save enough money to travel to Europe every year. She was also making new friends. Two encounters henceforth set the path to her journey to becoming a textile designer. In Spain, she met a couple from Manchester who would encourage her to pursue studies instead of working as a tea demonstrator. But Chandramani was living the best life she could have only dreamt of, travelling and staying in hotels, carefree and intrepid. Meanwhile, Chandramani met an officer from the Tea Propaganda Board who visited the store on an inspection tour. From there, he was leaving to meet a young man from Sri Lanka travelling to Manchester to study textile technology at Salford. Curious, Chandramani tapped her Manchester friends for information, and soon, the artist and tea demonstrator was off to Salford College of Technology to study textile technology, an area of study that she had not dreamt of ever following. From a nine-month study course in art, Chandramani spent nine years in England, qualifying as a Chartered Textile Technologist after three years of training, made possible through a study grant from the British Adult Education Scheme, at the end of which she won the governor's prize for best results at Salford.

### **The Sri Lankan foray**

Her return journey in 1969 was adventurous too. She travelled by bus for most of the trip, camping in various countries up to Turkey for three months, and returned to Sri Lanka from India. Chandramani intended to own a weaving business in Sri Lanka. But instead, in 1970, she joined her former classmate at Salford, Ajith Dias, in a new textile business. In 1973 Chandramani became the first qualified designer at the Department of Small Industries, which had, in practice, been filled by individuals who progressed from weavers to designers without formal training. This was the start of her long stint in public service, working under several ministers and directors whom she admires for their genuine commitment to reviving the local handloom textile industry by supporting local weavers with manufacturing resources and giving her ample design freedom.

As a designer at the Department of Small Industries she designed the weaves for the fabrics. Her first jacquard curtain still hangs at her residence, if not in perfect condition, at least in one piece after almost 50 years. Her distinction was her out-of-the-box approach to combining colors that were different from the routine ones, a skill that she attributes to her Cora Abraham Arts School background and foreign training. She continued pushing for new designs, from moving from excessively woven floral arrangements to adding abstract patterns with the jacquard loom. Thinking anew, breaking away, and questioning routine practices were challenging. There were many setbacks when her designs would not see the light of day or be blocked from reaching the weaving mills. But patience was her virtue, and skill was her strength. Her commitment was rewarded when bosses who noticed her talent and immense potential realized she was under-employed.

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A design center was set up in Kadawatha to augment and provide the space for innovation for this creative genius who was brimming with ideas and ready to reshape tradition without obliterating the past. With boundless design freedom and training to try out new trends in weaving, at the request of her director, Chandramani tested the merging of colors in weaving curtain material, a departure from the mundane distinct stripes, a satisfying outcome that she tried on the sari. From extending the potential of the double cloth from pillowcases and quilts to brazenly pushing artisans to see the universe of opportunities in this weaving technique to make spectacular design combinations in textiles with multiple utilitarian values, Chandramani played with exciting color palettes. The boundary breaker and trendsetter in her field, she redefined the look of the handloom sari by drawing on the influence of Johannes Itten's color theory through endless combinations of individual colors, creating startling contrasts, juxtaposing warm and complementary colors to develop saris with spectrum colors, which soon became a fad among urban elite women. Eventually, her influence spread to the multiple weaving centers in the country whose weavers fused her inventive designs into

their fabrics. She also tried to sustain a wool weaving project initiated under the guidance of an English consultant for carpets and wall hangings from wool received from the Department of Livestock Development.

### **A fulfilling career**

The public sector is often seen as limiting and needing more innovation. However, Chandramani enjoyed her time in government, and the freedom to design and create was the biggest bonus for her to remain. Her directors allowed her to teach at several universities and help write course material. They also obliged her requests for new dyes and yarns to draw her potential onto the loom. Because she could try recent trends, an entire generation of weavers nationwide was influenced to see their potential and opportunities to breach new markets by adding value to the traditional weave. Unlike the private sector, the purpose of the State-sponsored handloom textile industry was preservation and development. Hence, she didn't have marketing sleuths pushing her to increase sales volumes. Chandramani watched closely their acceptance and popularity. Her haute couture weaves were always in fashion.

Retiring from public service in 1990, Chandramani continued to teach at the Department of Textile and Clothing Technology, University of Moratuwa, and also at the Integrated Design Degree course of the Faculty of Architecture of the University of Moratuwa in the fashion and textile design degree course up to the pandemic. Incidentally, when the Department of Integrated Design of the University of Moratuwa felicitated her in 2018, her friend, the late Minister Mangala Samaraweera, handed her the award. It was a double celebration for Chandramani, who had connected with Mangala over their love for art and design, whom she had met in the 1980s as a young design graduate from the exclusive Central Saint Martins in the UK. She describes the young Mangala she first met at Barefoot as a "boy with a sunshine smile" who was putting together an exhibition of his designs. He taught students at the Institute of Aesthetics, University of Kelaniya, at her request. He was one of the most talented designers the students loved immensely and could have contributed significantly to Sri Lanka's textile industry, laments Chandramani. She remembers that in 1985, Mangala organized the first graduation fashion show titled TEX-STYLES '85, presenting the work of the graduating class, which has become a standard event of every fashion design degree course today.

Chandramani also served on the National Crafts Council and the panel of judges to choose the best handloom sari in Sri Lanka that draws the collective talent of



weavers from around the island. Chandramani remains the Honorary Chairperson of the Cora Abraham Art Classes Board of Trustees.

### **Preserving her contribution**

She is celebrated for contributing to the textile industry, but Chandramani's journey in the creative field began as an artist. She was a prolific painter in her young days as a member of the Young Artists Group. That part of her lesser-known past endures at the Sapumal Foundation Gallery, where six of her paintings make up its collection. Of her next phase as a textile technologist, Chandramani is glad that she had the expertise to change the handloom design landscape of Sri Lanka for the better with a free hand that dabbled in bold inventions in those days. Today's vibrant handloom industry, practised by veterans and amateurs alike where quality and design drive competition, is an ode to her efforts.

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The best tribute to her contribution to the handloom industry, especially in reweaving the six yards with rich vivacity, would be to sustain this heritage craft and its designs for posterity before it's too late. Dr Chamila Subasinghe, a former University of Moratuwa colleague in the 1990s who serves as Head of Design at Curtin University in Perth, Australia, while on a lecture assignment at the University of Manchester, had tried organizing an exhibition of Chandramani's designs in Manchester in collaboration with the National Museum in Colombo. However, regulations had barred the textiles from being moved outside. Refusing to give up, the endeavor was unveiled in June 2023 at the National Museum in Sri Lanka as "6 Yards on Her Own Terms".

Following her father's advice, Chandramani did what she loved on her terms. At the end of every new adventure, she didn't stop or step back but sought new opportunities and met strangers who would be springboards and gurus, preparing her for a formidable future role. Looking back, there was a fluidity to every new episode, an unfolding of a pre-written vocation. She added her enthusiasm, seizing every opportunity to learn and mature. She passed on her dynamism to her work, transforming the design ethos of the handloom and, more so, the six yards,

educating and skilling thousands of weavers and designers in the country who are embracing the avant-gardism that Chandramani inventively introduced through decades of public service and as a teacher.



Walking back after receiving the lifetime contribution award from the Department of Integrated Design of the University of Moratuwa in 2018, from her friend, the late Minister Mangala Samaraweera and Officials of the University of Moratuwa.



The award of recognition given by the Department of Textile Industry in 2017.



Chandramani showcasing one of her beautiful designs.