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Picasso and Keyt

by

Prof. Tim Scott

Good Evening Ladies and Gentleman,

Dr. Roland Silva has asked me to talk about Picasso and Keyt. If any member of the audience is an expert on the art of Georg Keyt, I must apologize for any errors of fact or observation that I may make. I am not a connoisseur of his art, merely, like many others, an admirer of the position he helped create, in 20th century Sri Lanka, of a powerful and inspired modern movement in painting. One which was of the time, but indisputably also directly descended from South Asian tradition and, above all, belong to his native land.

When I was a student in London in the mid fifties, I had never heard of George Keyt. Nor, I suspect, had my fellow student and new found friend Roland Silva; later to become, for his sins, Archeological Commissioner of Sri Lanka.

The only Sri Lankans of whom I had any awareness at that time, apart, from Roland himself, were another student in our year; Lala Aditya, an ex student Valentine Gunasekara, and a strange and shadowy figure in the exalted fifth year, (we were first year minnows), called an ex student Geoffrey Bawa was of course, to hear much more of him later on, having designed and built a house in Kandy.

The only other well known Sri Lankan celebrity of the time, was a certain Sir John Kotelawala, famous for riding to hunt and crying “tally ho”!

Getting acquainted with these Sri Lankans was a byproduct of my architectural studentship. However, I was also to encounter, as a fellow student, in the sculpture class of the now 'Sir' Anthony Caro at St. Martins School of Art, a young lady called Susila Fernando. I believe she is here present tonight. Susila had been, before arriving in England, the youngest member of the 43 group. It was thus, that I came to hear that there had been, and still was, an active modernist movement of artists in 'Ceylon'.

Incidentally, I was much put out when, on one occasion, during Mr. Caro's experimental drawing class, he told me that Susila's drawing was much better than mine! A galling medicine for an arrogant young student to have to swallow.

Later having married a beautiful Sri Lankan lady I found on the Thames going to Oxford, my sojourns in Sri Lanka began. It also enabled me to fully appreciate Keyt's subject matter. I got to know much more about the 43 group and their achievements, through actual contact with their work and through reading. As an ambitious modernist sculptor from Britain, it was a thrill to find confirmation of one's thinking here in Sri Lanka.

I had also become aware, crucially, of the parallel movements in India (through the magazine Marg). My discovery of the joys of Indian classical music that had arrived in London around the mid fifties had already enriched my experience of Eastern Art.

At this point, I suppose I should raise, one again, the hoary old subject of 'Eastern' and 'Western' art. Their characteristics and differences, and whether the 'twain' should ever 'meet', that has taxed art historians since the 19th century.

1 do not believe, as has often been stated, that the decline of ancient tradition, in art, in the east, was entirely the byproduct of the colonial imposition of European thinking and ideas.

Of course this played a part, in many cases an entirely negative and destructive one. In the case of Sri Lanka, I think one can state, without too much scholarly controversy, that classical art, the art of the great periods of Anuradhapura and Polannaruwa, had already declined by the late 'medieval' period into a 'populist' form; 'decorative' – yes, but 'profound-no' of mannerism.

Buddhism no longer had the inspirational force to produce great art, and it retreated into its philosophical and literary shell. In any case Buddhism, in my view, in Sri Lanka, was always better served by architectural achievement than by artistic. Historical evidence can be disputed endlessly. This is not the place for it. The ancient force was spent. Any ambitious artist, albeit subject to colonialism, was bound to acknowledge this position.

Any 'eastern' artist, then, had not only to cope with the imposed restrictions of a colonial vision of the world - but with a lack of any solid historical foundation on which to build an authentic edifice emanating from his own culture and past. This had been broken, buried, or forgotten, reduce to a populist fragment. Devoid of any real depth and officially denigrated. Adequate knowledge of pre-colonial artistic heritage became available only gradually, often through jaundiced and prejudiced sources since most of them were European. An aspiring artist had to start from scratch and create his own history.

Keyt as a young, ambitious painter, found himself in just this position. But there was a problem. Keyt was acutely aware, culturally, that his heritage, Indian art in the broadcast sense, was the true background to his sensibility and perception. He was determined to bring into his inspirational world an authentic flavor of his own cultural inheritance and background. In short it was to be 'Sri Lankan'.

Sri Lankan Buddhism was part of his inheritance, but moribund as a model. India had produced some exciting efforts towards a modernized but truly Indian painting in the work of: for example, Amrita Shergil, the Bengal school such as Jamini Roy and others. This indeed, played a major part in Keyts' background. To the point that when residing and working in India he became a celebrated artist in their community.

The other crucial element to his piecing together of an authentic background to his ambition was that of European modernism as represented in the revolutionary work of Picasso, Braque, Matisse and others.

Keyt, I understand, first encounter these revelations in the pages of the French magazine 'Cahiers 'Art'. It is interesting to note that he was not the only 'colonial' artist to be thus inspired in this way and his work transformed as a consequence.

David Smith, the American sculpture, was at about the same time, in the mid thirties, exposed to, and transformed in his thinking, by what he discovered in Cahiers D'Art. In his case Picasso's and Gongalez' sculptures. It would be interesting to know whether either Keyt or Smith had any awareness of this fact. A wonderful subject for a History of Art thesis.

We find Keyt, then, at the early stages of his career. Searching for means to marry what he felt to be the essential ingredients for a new art with what he also considered to be the fundamentals of his own cultural tradition

Picasso, born into the late nineteenth century, but becoming an icon of the twentieth, was, by contrast, the inheritor of an immense tradition of inspired painting stretching back to the Italian Renaissance. Revolution in painting had not only occurred once or twice, but many times. By the time he began to mature as a young artist he already had a platform of revolutionary art to stand on that had added to and enriched that of the 'old masters'. Classicism, Romanticism, Barbizon Plein air, Impressionism, Post Impressionism and Eurism had continuously stirred the pot of painterly vision and perception for more than a hundred years.

When he, along with Braque and Matisse, changed the previous concepts of form, color and space in painting forever. Twentieth Century, or 'modern' vision in art was born. Any aspiring and ambitious artist not only in Europe and the West, but equally elsewhere in the world, could not ignore what had taken place.

Picasso and Braque shattered our traditional perceptions of the visual world as seen through an imaginary window, distanced by perspective that great Italian invention of the fifteenth century. They invented 'Cubism', in which three dimensional reality was brought forward in space to synchronize with the imaginary picture plane at which the observer stood. As a consequence, the aim of high art in painting changed forever. No longer would the faked illusion of three dimensionality on a flat surface be the primary goal of the painter. The artist was now free to display his form at will across the picture plane

Their positioning only guided and ruled by the internal logic of the composition. Light and Shade, Chiaroscuro, Perspective, the traditional means of creating the illusion of volume were subjected to a new ordering derived from the structures of the subject itself replacing their relative position in an imaginary space. By the time Cubism had 'matured', form, line, color, and space were free to play their own music within the confines of the picture territory. And this fact was what, above all, inspired Keyt's first radical moves in paint.

George Keyt absorbed the gist of these lessons in his study of modernist work in earliest Cahiers D'Art, but it is evident in his earliest work, of the late twenties, that he had already absorbed some 'modern' influences, probably including the work of Derain in France and the Bloomsbury Group in England. This type of simplified figure painting always makes me think it has been tinted in brown Windsor Soup'! and was especially prevalent in Britain.



KEYT

Udawattakele – 1929



PICASSO

Landscape

The 1929 'Udawattakele' painting already shows a marked semi cubistic arrangement of trees and undergrowth. By the mid thirties he was already fully absorbing Picasso's linear abstraction and modeling of form.



KEYT

Head – 1934



PICASSO

Seated Women



KEYT

Still Life with Mangos - 1933



PICASSO

Bowl of Fruit



KEYT

Two Women – 1933



PICASSO

Sleeping Peasants



KEYT

Mother and Child – 1934



PICASSO

Mother and Child



KEYT

Sahuja – 1934



PICASSO

Seated Woman

Paintings such as Two Women 1933 ,
Still Life with Mangos 1933 , Head
1934 , Mother and Child 1934 and
Sahuja 1934 all bear a strong debt to
the post synthetic cubist Picasso
coupled with (as with Picasso
himself) a strong Surrealist overlay.

From 1936 onwards Keyt started to develop his unique synthesis of Indian motifs and subject matter with the modernist devices he had absorbed.

The flatness of the cubist plane became standard, volume and mass denoted by a Leger-like light shading rather like the effect of a tube being lit from one side only. Incidentally, this harps back also to Sigiriya and Ajanta. The compositions are, from this point, held together with bold linear patterns, dividing, and in turn filled, with blocks of colour. They are reminiscent of the later Braque of this period (late thirties and early forties). To my mind this is the period of Keyt's greatest personal development towards a fusion of Indianised subject matter and European style that was his aim. The paintings are wild. Fearless and exude confidence.



KEYT

Shivasloka – 1938



PICASSO

Figure at the Sea Shore



KEYT

Nayika – 1943



PICASSO

Portrait of Mary



KEYT

Wild Flowers – 1943



PICASSO

Still life on a chest of Drawers

These features are embodied in examples as Shivasloka – 1938, the Nayika – 1943 and in the Wild Flowers – 1943 drawn by Keyt during this period.

There is no doubt that Keyt's sojourn in India and his exposure to classical Indian art, in conjunction with that he could find at home in Sri Lanka in the masterpieces of Sigiriya, profoundly guided his painterly ambition. The sensuous feminizing line; the expanding outward thrust of the rounded forms of Indian sculpture – to quote Clement Greenberg, the famous modernist New York art critic, on the subject of the Indian temple itself: "Struggling with the rectilinear on behalf of the rounded..." The idealizing of female features; all became party to his vision.

Like Picasso, the female form became his dominant theme. This is not surprising since the genetic source of both artists was respectively in the two great art traditions of the world, Indian and European, in which the human figure is the dominant basis for creative plastic thinking.

In the next decade, from around 1950 onwards Keyt expanded the motifs he started with the comparatively simple compositions of the earlier years, single figures and still lifes, into much more complex and longer scale figure compositions which constituted, by now, the essence of his personal style. Picasso might still be there as a shadowy ghost, but had been subsumed into something unmistakably Keyt and Sri Lankan.



KEYT

Lalita Ragini - 1951



PICASSO

Nude in the Garden



KEYT

Asanka Jataka – 1963



PICASSO

The Bathers

No doubt, Keyt kept a beady eye on what the old rouge was up to. Picasso was always up to something. Doubtless he reacted in paint many more times to unexpected shocks from the maestro. There was not an advanced artist anywhere in the world who did not. Like all artists of great sensibility, Keyt had built up a stock of formal motifs and devices which were to last him throughout his career and serve him well. He had his ups and downs in quality and like Picasso himself, was responsible for some shallow and decorative work. Not so much (as has often been remarked) plagiarized Picasso; but more plagiarism of himself.

One field in particular showed his weakness for overdoing his admiration for his mentor, that of line drawing. Keyt was perfectly capable of producing an absolutely distinctive style in drawing, as some of those of Kandyan and Indian dancers show. He did not have to; as was unfortunately the case sometimes, imitate too closely that of another artist, Picasso, however tempting.

In the final phase of Keyt's work he expressed himself in subject as Lalita Ragini - 1951 and Asanka Jataka – 1963 .

I am not aware that Picasso had much, in any contact with Indian art, though it would be hard to believe that a man of such sensitivity and wide ranging knowledge of art history was not fully aware of its achievements.

I know of no painting of his that refers in any direct way to oriental art, as had been the case with, for example, Rodin or Van Gogh. It remains surprising, though I suppose explainable by the overwhelming Anglicization of the Indian Subcontinent, that he has not.

I can only say of Keyt's achievements as a painter that had Picasso been intent on producing, in his work, an Indianized and Indian inspired subject and vision, it would have quite probably born are uncanny resemblance to a George Keyt.

And what better compliment could an artist have than that.

Thank you.