Conclusion

Based on John Clark's argument about relativization being the fundamental paradigm through which modernity can be assessed, this research project relativizes Ceylonese artistic modernity by studying it as a process that operates and is produced through inter-dependent crosscurrents of westernization and indigenization, amateurization and professionalization of art practice within elitist and popular tastes. The multiple ideological as well as stylistic positions that these interactions produced, form the basis of this thesis. Clark explains that when visual forms cross cultural boundaries—whatever the nexus of meanings and practices might be in their host culture—they can be redeployed for different cultural purposes in another cultural discourse. Further, he points out that the reception is mediated by the available skills of the receiving artists.¹ Hence, relativization of an aesthetic mode is an act of translation. This act of translation involves the assimilation or localization of power discourses that are encoded within the appropriated artistic modes. In this context, relativization could be considered a stylistic adaptation, caught up in ideological accommodation or transformation. Partha Chatterjee, in his Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World, distinguishes between what he terms the 'thematic' (system) and the 'problematic' (possibilities) of any social ideology.² His distinction offers a much clearer framework to understand the nuances of relativization. For Chatterjee, the thematic refers to an epistemological as well as an ethical system which provides a framework of elements and rules for establishing relations between elements: the problematic consists of concrete statements about possibilities justified by reference to the thematic. As I have discussed in my earlier chapters, the phenomenon called modern art in Ceylon resulted from the exchanges between local tradition, Victorian academism, French modernism and Indian artistic revivalism. At the structural level, Ceylonese art shared similarities with the modernity of Europe and India by

drawing upon their characteristics. The project of modernity may therefore be seen as being singular and universal, yet branching out, keeping in mind local exigencies. Within the general ‘structure’ of modernity, were embedded local cultural ‘possibilities’ which took on exogenous influences and grafted them on to endogenous forms.

The research identifies Colombo’s colonial port culture as a seeding ground for artistic modernity in Ceylon. As an island situated in a strategic geographical location of the modern world, close to yet cut off from the subcontinental land mass, Ceylon with its 400 years of European colonization emerged as a major ‘contact zone’ between the East and the West. Indian nationalism and artistic revivalism, on the other hand, operated as a counter-current that balanced Europeanization. Culturally, these changes did not always lead to absolute subordination of one structure by another. They were in constant interaction. The emergence of a bourgeoisie with the booming of local capitalist enterprise, English education and new career opportunities in the colonial administrative machinery, presents a complex social transformation in the wake of colonial modernity. By emulating their colonial masters, the Colombo elites produced a third culture that was neither fully British nor completely local. Without developing an antagonism towards colonial rule, the upper classes sought positions of privilege within the emerging capitalist economic structures and political organizations. The elite therefore had an ambivalent relationship with colonialism and nationalism. This opportunism shaped the character of Ceylonese elitist nationalism and differentiated it from other formations in the Indian subcontinent.

Indian art historians have clearly delineated the role of colonial art schools in changing tastes, meanings and practices of art in British India. With the rise of the nationalist movement, these schools or alternative schools like Santiniketan provided the leadership and institutional space for resistance or revivalist movements. Even on the margins of the academies set up by the British, we see space being appropriated for intellectual challenges. In Ceylon, British intervention in local art practice never occurred along similar lines. Though a few professionals were involved with state art institutions, there was always a gap between pedagogy and practice. The colonial government’s engagement with visual representation in the early decades of colonialism was through the making of documents related to colonial knowing and governing of an alien land and
its people. This included documents of topography, maps, ethnography and natural history. Courses on surveying and drawing were introduced at the Colombo Royal Academy and Colombo Technical College for the same purpose in 1820 and 1896 respectively. Hence, their intention was neither artistic nor industrial, but lay somewhere in between. In contrast, it was the local elite gentlemen artists who rephrased the available pictorial modes and practices and evolved the category of ‘art’ based on the idea of self expression or a popular visualism. In this context, amateurish practitioners and self-taught artists emerged as the first easel painting practitioners. Many of the modernist painters received their art training in Europe or in India. The art department in the Technical College almost functioned as a teachers’ training college. Public school art curriculum encouraged amateurism through its approaches and methods. In the latter part of the nineteenth century, the formation of the Amateur Art Club and its transformation into a colonial art society with state patronage characterized the process of institutionalization of art in the colony. Thus, the art practice was directly fashioned by the elitist leisure culture rather than colonial art institutions. This was sustained by the elitist public sphere and the local capitalist patronage. In the absence of a traditional aristocratic class, the pioneer painters emerged from the anglicized or Euro-Asian local bourgeoisie. The artists’ class background allowed for art training in Europe and social networking for career development. Therefore, most of the important painters operated outside of the art department of the Technical College. The individual gentlemen artists and their collectives had an agency to influence colonial art spaces as well as local art practices. Similarly, the exhibitions of visiting artists had a considerable impact on the art culture of the city.

Art writings and exchanges in English newspapers played a crucial role as opinion makers and mediators between the elitist public sphere and the artistic sphere in the early decades of the twentieth century. The important artists and cultural activists of that period debated their ideas regarding realism, nationalism, revivalism and modernism through newspapers. The artists’ direct participation in the debates and articulation of their political and aesthetic standpoints in textual terms signified the birth of the new artist’s personality which was implicated in his social status. In addition, information on art events and the inaugural address of colonial officers and local cultural elites at the
openings of city exhibitions were covered by the English dailies. This significantly fashioned the tastes of the reading class. Art writings were solely responsible for the production of a new notion of art among the reading public. These writings, while closely knitting artistic identity with national identity, produced an innate tension between the artist's individuality and nation's collectivity.

If modernity is constituted by a rupture with the customary, then the reconstitution of this customary as tradition is a fallout of the project of modernity. Colonial art writings operated within this dual process. While tradition was invented from the experience of colonial modernity, modernist art was framed within the invented notion of tradition. In Ceylon, the project of invention of tradition and the notion of artistic identity based on the past were entangled with the discourse of purity and authenticity based on the colonial race theory. This led to the perverted invention of a pure Aryan Sinhalese Buddhist past. As in the case of other spheres of culture and in disciplines such as history and archaeology, racialization of art discourse was one of the central characteristics of Ceylonese modernity. This racial discourse reversed the colonial project and challenged the cosmopolitan nature of the elitist public sphere. But the pre-1955 artistic sphere remained cosmopolitan by resisting the hard-edged nationalist and patriotic voices.

Although existing art writings construct the Ceylon Society of Art as an official colonial institution that patronized Victorian academic realistic paintings, my reading establishes it as an amateurish organization with an orientalist ideology. Hence, the Ceylonese Art Club and the 43 Group's stance against CSA was complicated and mostly dictated by attitudes towards professionalism and choice of styles. In the absence of manifestos, individual preferences came to the forefront; artists negotiated with their situations cultural location individually. Therefore, artists' collectives were formed through a coming together of diverse individual positions which cannot be essentialized. Interestingly, these artist collectives were not against westernization. While the CSA preferred academic realism, the CAC and 43 Group displayed an affinity for Parisian modernism. Amarasekara and Winzer, while differing in their aesthetic preferences, shared their reservations towards revivalism for different reasons. Similarly, Amarasekara and the 43 Group were both critical of the idea of nationalist art.
Amarasekara openly criticized the Bengal school and Santinikatan for their self-contradictory, patriotic views on a 'national art.' This clearly indicates that their outlook was open-minded and was not strictly in keeping with nationalist ideology or subservient to colonialism.

Any discussion on colonial modernity in art would not be complete without assessing the problematic of 'realism' in local art practice and discourse. In most cases, the exposure to European art was through printed reproductions and colonial art forms generally produced by amateurs for non-artistic purposes; except for the work produced by local artists who underwent art training in Europe or were able to visit European art museums. It is important to note here that the local responses were not directly influenced by forms of European high art tradition. Responses varied at elitist and popular levels, depending upon the taste, content and social position of both the artist and the consumer. Since oil painting gained popularity among the local upper classes in the 1920s, photography became a magical tool that constructed the idea of realism in Ceylon. The ubiquity of photography, its popularity resulting from its capacity to capture 'data ratios' (a phrase used by Christopher Pinney to analyze colonial photography which he draws from Friedrich Kittler), the reproducibility of the medium and easy accessibility, contributed to a drastic conceptual and stylistic change in elitist as well as popular artistic spheres. Therefore, in the context of Ceylon, oil painting gained acceptance among the local elites by utilizing the space opened up by photography. The realistic mode's 'data ratio' and its association with the officialdom of colonial power, on the other hand, encouraged the local elites to master the genre. The newspaper exchanges on representationalism suggest how realism was conceived as a technical possibility as well as a way of seeing in Ceylonese society. Thus, realism was received within the local colonial-national conflict rather than with its European historicity. In addition, realism as a mode of objectification carried a notion of dominance that operated through the gazes of anthropology and the picturesque. Hence, the idea of local artists mastering the style was intertwined with the relativity of its power structure with local cultural politics.

Imbibing colonial representationalism worked through appropriation of genres like topographical views and ethnographical representations in the form of landscape, portrait and figure compositions of the local body. While in general, these thematic
engagements could be seen as simulation of western practices, in particular, the works
were embedded in the local upper class responses to their physical and social
environment. In landscape paintings of the colonialists, the place accessible in
picturesque views, archaeological sites and colonial building environments represented
their subjectivity and their attempt to furnish justification for owning a colony. The
hegemonic discourse that operated through images encouraged responses from the upper
class. The search for regional features became a major preoccupation of colonialist
topographical representations. They constructed Ceylon as a tropical, hilly land of
picturesque views. Later, these views were exoticized in the Orientalist narrations. The
colonial 'regional' was transformed by overlapping it with the 'rural' in the nationalist
discourse and this construct was valorized as a symbol of the 'uncolonized', authentic site
of the emergent nation. Hence, the rural in the Ceylonese painter's picturesque and
modernist views was a colonial construct, implicated within the experience of urbanity
and nationness. Modernist empathetic approaches personalized local landscape, which
reversed the colonial objectification. As a result of a new subjectivity as well as the
impact of French modernism, local artists employed close up views at the expense of
colonial picturesque and panoramic views. On the other hand, a sense of loss of place
produced by the urbanization, colonization and homogenized production of a 'national
character' along the lines of majoritarian ethnic and religious identity, appeared to
generate a feeling of nostalgia or melancholia.

The local bourgeoisie employed a dual approach to represent their own body
in the form of portraiture and the subaltern body in the form of figure compositions.
Portraits helped them exhibit their newly acquired social status, self confidence and
individuality of the 'somebodies'. Portraits also represented the gentleman painter's new
partnership with the patron of his own social stratum. These paintings reveal through the
bodily performances of the subjects, the manner in which the local elitists—who had now
entered into colonial bureaucracy, professions and state councils—were implicated within
these webs of power and control. In contrast, subaltern bodies were orientalized,
stereotyped and frozen in time and space, by employing the anthropological gaze that
operated in colonial photography and caste and costume drawings. The gaze of the
'other', embedded in the colonial visuals, was multiplied and extended to other social
categories in the form of figure compositions. As in European modernist art, the female body became one of the major stylistic and thematic preoccupations of the local modernist. The female nude in Ceylonese modernist paintings operated through three different discourses: anthropological/racial, allegorical/national and gender/sexuality. This shows how local patriarchy and nationalism, by using the aesthetic frames of colonialism and modernism, re-disciplined the female body and reestablished new notions of respectability. It also suggested the interplay between male sexuality and creativity in the wake of individualization of art practice. Similarly, the homoerotic gaze and the class and racial difference between the artist and his model, stereotyped the local male body as 'effeminate'.

While the elitist modern was more secular and cosmopolitan in nature and confined to gallery based practice, the popular modern was religious and patriotic in character and housed in the Buddhist temples in the form of mural paintings. It is important to note here that historical paintings as a genre rarely existed in the elitist sphere and occupied the wall spaces of Buddhist temples that were a consequence of Buddhist revivalism and Sinhala Buddhist nationalism. Even those modernists or neo-orientalists who painted the mythical themes, chose the temple space for their artistic endeavours. This is something peculiar to Ceylonese modernism and later continued in the church decorations of David Paynter and Richard Gabriel.

Positioned between the colonialist state and local elitist public sphere, the murals in newly built colonial temples with capitalist economy and Buddhist revivalist ideology created an alternative national sphere. The creation of 'art museum like temples' challenged elitist art as well as the colonialist museum by melting the rim between myth and reality, the secular and the spiritual, and politics and aesthetics. By combining the language of colonialist and elitist visual practices based on landscape, portraits, ethnography with the theatricality of Indian Bazaar art and Parsi theatre, these murals produced a visual construction of the splendour of the Sinhalese Buddhist nation. Further, the nation is constantly evolving from the visual interplay between myth and history.

A popular illusionism (or 'Indian magical realism') that evolved through a combination of Victorian realism and theatricality was utilized in synchronizing temporal and spatial differences of myth and history. The nation space in the compositional structure was
further compositionally placed between the seven heavens and the tortuous terrain of hell in Buddhist belief. The ethical codes of the imagined nation were performed through idealized stereotypical bodies of aristocratic Aryan male and female characters from mythology and history. This idealization is inseparably connected with the othering of minorities. They were demonized and treated as a threat to the nation. The Orientalist/nationalist glorification of traditional mural paintings as authentic expression of the past helped validate these new Buddhist murals and their ethno-religious nationalist politics. Even in the case of Jataka narrations, their selection and visual articulation were influenced by Victorian and Protestant ideals. Visual representations of the myth of the Buddha’s visits to the island and the symbolic and realistic portrayal of sacred Buddhist pilgrim sites dotted throughout the island transformed the island into a holy Buddhist land. Pilgrim sites demarcated and safeguarded the borders of the modern nation from the colonizing forces. The prime thematic engagements of Buddhist murals display how the land and local body gained primacy in the nationalist discourse as in the case of the colonialists.

Indian revivalists and the 43 Group may have shared a consensus at the thematic level on the question of a national art, but they differed at the problematic level on the issue of reproducing the past. Similarly, Amarasekara employed the western illusionist technique and anthropological gaze as a sign of ‘progression’, but by positing his realism as ‘realism idealized’ he sharply differed from the historicity and objectivity of European realism. Although the handling of female nude in the paintings of Keyt had its precedent in western modernism, by transforming them as mythical heroines, he intertwined it with the nationalist discourse on tradition at the problematic level. The research demonstrated how the colonial picturesque landscapes and ethnographical documents became an archetype for later national representations. As Pratt shows us, these autoethnographic expressions connote both imperial subjection as well as resistance. In the course of this reading of colonial art practice, paradoxically the nation emerged as a subtext, at the problematic level. Through the articulation of invented traditions in art discourse—evocation of rural geography in landscape paintings, portraits of the local elites and

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stereotyped bodies of mythical characters and subalterns—the nation attained its visual form.

Richard Bauman and Charles Briggs reveal how the conception of modernity operated and was produced through the binaries such as western vs. non-Western, tradition vs. modernity, secular vs. religious, content vs. form, rational vs. irrational, mind vs. body, public vs. private, material vs. spiritual and representational vs. symbolic. This study placed modernity between these binaries or the constant interplay and tension between these binaries. Hence it identifies modernity as a condition of ambivalence, irony and duality—a clash between the universal imagination and local realization or structures and possibilities. The colonial visual representations reveal that the predicament produced by the co-presence of circular and linear time and fixed and fluid categories of space were the conditions of Ceylonese modernity as well as the Ceylonese nation.

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