Introduction

"Modernity is a qualitative, not a chronological category."¹

With modernism manifesting itself in the domain of visual art, the European circuits of art making, reception and production underwent a paradigm shift in the 1880s. In the same decade, the artistic tradition of Ceylon,² the British crown colony in the Indian Ocean, experienced a sea change through the encounter of the European modes of representation. The new representationalism, which was not a direct transcription of European realism, appeared concomitantly in the forms of easel paintings and in popular mural paintings of the Buddhist temples. It was also a consequence of the institutionalization of western mode of art making, changing public tastes and shifting equations of the social production of art, both within the secular elitist sphere of the 'white town' as well as in the popular religious sphere of the 'black town' areas of Colombo.³ These changes were coupled with the growing cosmopolitan character of the port city of Colombo located strategically in the political, economic, travel and communicative network of the British Empire.

The flows of humanity through islands that are strategically located along trade routes and not isolated, leaves them vulnerable to the influences of a global nature that constantly alter the notion of the local. The shift in artistic idiom during this time was not an instantaneous outgrowth of British colonialism, rather it resulted from a much deeper acculturization process implicated in trade, travel and immigration linked with European colonialism that began with the Portuguese (1518–1656), followed by the Dutch (1656–1796) and the English (1796–1948). Advancement in circulation of knowledge through means of mechanical reproduction,

² Since this research focuses on the colonial period, it prefers to use the British name Ceylon akin to most other archival material.
³ Colonial Colombo was a divided city. The fort area served as an exclusive ethnic enclave of British. The descendants of Portuguese and Dutch lived in an area outside the fort, the Pettah. The native city, or the black town, was placed well out side the Pettah.
conjoined with capitalist production as well as the emergence of new forms of
governmentality and a class based society became the common cause for artistic
modernism, both in the metropolitan centres as well as in the faraway colony. These
led to a shared historical, economic, social and artistic experience that characterized
modernity both in the European metropolis and the colony at the turn of the twentieth
century. These undercurrents of parallel and inter-dependent developments have
played an important role in the manner in which modernism was shaped,
contradicting the Euro-American centric art discourse, which has tended to produced
the modernity of its ‘other’ as being reflective, imitative and incomplete.

In the absence of a decisive political struggle for independence, as in the Indian
subcontinent, nineteenth century ‘nationalist’ ideology in Ceylon was an outcome of a
strange admixture of anti-Christian, Buddhist revivalist ideology compounded by the
collaboration and competition of the elite social classes within the existing structure
of British colonial power. It was a position exclusively associated with Sinhala
Buddhist identity and the colonial discourse of power.4 For the locals, the survival
strategy was always about how to enjoy maximum privilege under the colonial ruler.
This indirectly encouraged rivalry for appropriation of the colonial lifestyle and
mannerisms among locals. In this context, nationalist ideology and the sentiments of
Indian artistic revivalism, coupled with French modernist art, redirected the path of
colonial art practice between the 1920s and 1940s in Ceylon. Such influences led to
the formation of modernist artists’ collectives like the Ceylon Art Club and the 43
Group that challenged the monopoly of colonial art institutions like the Ceylon
Society of Art. By engaging with the ideas and visual idiom of French modernism5
and the Bengal School,6 the Ceylonese artists (individualized, bourgeois male and
English speaking) positioned their practice at the crossroads of tradition and

4 Power, as Pollock has revealed, is not a matter of coercive force but a network of relationships, of
inclusions and exclusions, of domination and subordination. Griselda Pollock, Vision and Difference:
5 French modernist movement in painting appeared in Paris, after 1860s, from the experience of
industrialization and urbanization, comprised several art movements and ‘ism’ such as Impressionism,
post impressionism, Expressionism and Cubism.
6 Under the leadership of Abanindranath Tagore, a nephew of the poet Rabindranath Tagore,
the Bengal school, first art revival movement in Indian, emerged as a reaction against the academic art
styles promoted by Indian artists such as Ravi Varma and in British art schools. It was inspired by the
swadeshi art ideology of E.B.Havel, A.K.Coomarswamy, and sister Nivedita.
modernity, colonialism and nationalism, as well as aesthetics and politics. Modernist experimentation delicately mixed the Parisian aesthetic sensibility with national expectations. The local modernists distinguished themselves from the academic painters as well as traditional artisans, besides delineating themselves as being independent from their European counterparts. Their pictorial idiom had agency at local and international level. The Ceylon modernist painter, one could also argue played an important role in establishing some of the key characteristics of modernist art in the Indian subcontinent.

Unfortunately, the Ceylonese contribution to modernism has not been adequately acknowledged in Asian or World art discourse; the principal reason for this omission being the lack of local scholarship in the field of art history. The writing of art history in Ceylon has primarily been the domain of archaeologists or nationalist historians. Naturally, their ideological positions, methodological limitations and disciplinary circuits have further distanced and dislocated colonial interventions as well as modernist frameworks from contemporary discourses, thereby constructing the modern as ‘unauthentic’ and ‘impure’ as opposed to its ‘natural’ opposite ‘tradition’. Therefore, a wide range of visual material from the colonial period remains unexplored by art historians and their interpretations of art history. Apart from the available fragmented survey exhibitions, documentations and biographical details of artists, there has been no detailed study which adequately frames colonial/postcolonial Ceylonese art within the historical processes and draws out the complexities of cultural discourse embedded within.

My research has emerged from a response to absences of non-western art traditions in Euro-American narrations of art history; a result of their intellectual biases as well as in reaction to the nationalist, formalist Ceylonese art history. Misconceptions and prejudices embedded in the existing local art history created a constant conflict between local practice and discourse. The lack of proper research based on primary materials as well as interpretations based on contemporary approaches, further limited the scope of art education in the island. Thus, this project has tried to bridge the gap between art practice, discourse and pedagogy by addressing the art more politically as well as aesthetically. The project serves a dual purpose.
Firstly, it traces the history of modernism in Ceylonese art from available primary and secondary sources. The subsequent intention is to understand the cultural politics of art making in colonial Ceylon in the light of contemporary cultural theory.

The complexities that led to the transformation of the port town of Colombo from a colonial military check-post to the national capital during British rule, produced the modern state, the growth of a capitalist economy, the emergence of a middle class, a rapid increase in migration from the rural to urban areas and the formation of a modern social, political and aesthetic consciousness. With this transformation, Colombo, unlike any other place in Ceylon, became the epicentre for contestation and negotiation of all categories of identity in the modern era. Further, with its large leisure class, art institutions, publishing houses and visiting artists, Colombo naturally emerged as a main centre for the western mode of art practice. This research thus focuses primarily on the art world of colonial Colombo. By doing so, the project also acknowledges the co-existence of multiple art worlds in multicultural and multicentred colonial and postcolonial Ceylon. By focusing on the period between the 1920s and 1940s—a crucial period in the colonial/national encounter—this research engages with recent debates that question Euro-American linear readings of modernity and attempts to understand the localized formulation of art practice and its representational politics in the wake of modernity. To understand local artistic modernity in its larger relativization process, this research will also be elastic enough to stretch back and forth between 1815 and 1955 when key characteristics of colonial modernity were gaining ascendancy.7

**Rationale and Intervention**

Modernity has been described as a way of inhabiting the world and a kind of consciousness that springs out of city life and a capitalist economy. According to
Charles Harrison, modernism is regarded both as a condition consequent upon certain broad economic, technological and political tendencies and as a set of attitudes towards those tendencies. It is also an engagement with preoccupations and spectacles specific to the age. Modernity has been characterized by a series of shifts: in modes of production from feudal structures to a capital base, in technology driven by machines, and in institutions that mediate or constitute a civil society or public sphere or a political society. These shifts also mark the configured ideas of nature, time, history, society and the individual. As in the nationalist discourse, the term 'modern' has become highly problematic in discussions about postmodernism and postcolonialism. Since European colonialism is seen as the primary agent of modernization in much of the nineteenth century colonized world, any understanding of colonial modernity is surrounded and informed by the humanist ideals of the enlightenment project. ‘The European colonizer of the nineteenth century both preached this enlightenment humanism at the colonized and at the same time denied it in practice.’ This disparity in pedagogy and practice, can be felt locally in all representations of colonial modernity, and can be reflected upon as language of domination. Consequently when the first group of local artists gained agency through their art, their achievements were greatly aided by the fact that they hailed from a privileged social standing. Naturally these artists followed their colonial masters in using art as a tool of ‘othering’. Thus while art was mobilized as a weapon of resistance against colonialism and a terrain of competition with the colonial master, it also operated as a tool of dominance over subservient social groups. Colonialism’s dual identity gained new momentum and was further institutionalized with the rise of nationalism: a form of resistance as well as domination. The assimilation and appropriation of artistic knowledge by the locals, in relation to medium, subject matter and style cannot therefore be seen as a naive or apolitical act. The local mechanics of modernism have to be understood within the larger cultural politics and representational strategies specific to the period and context.

'Dominance of "Europe" as a subject of all histories is part of a much more profound theoretical condition under which historical knowledge is produced in the third world' says Chakrabarthy. In the discourse of art, as in many other disciplines, the term modern has been conceptualized, historicized, disseminated and discussed from a Euro-American centric perspective, through the agency of western art history. Western art historical writings construct the 'modern' in art primarily as an achievement of a white, heterosexual, masculine, Christian position. In this context, art of the colonies is seen as an incomplete and crude multiplication or imitation of the western modern, along with the art of other subaltern positions. While claiming the agenda of modernism as universal, ironically, these writings end up distorting the modern along geographical, gender, race and class divisions. The hierarchical discourse and predicament in conceptualizing and historicizing the modern, have not only reduced the scope of art history in the non Euro-American world but also created an enduring anxiety among other societies that 'the modern' never belonged to them. These ill-defined territories of modernism further problematize one's understanding of the premodern and postmodern in local terms. Adding to this is the knotty problem of nationalist historiography; commonplace in formerly colonized countries, which have attempted to reconstruct a civilizational past by excavating 'historical evidence' from the ruins of a presumed 'ancient glory'. They have preferred not to deal with the recent colonial past of their societies, seeing it as a blot or an aberration. Further, the nationalist's penchant for metaphysical or transcendental aesthetics, while essentializing precolonial cultures, has also programmed modernist developments. This in a way, Chatterjee has argued, was able to turn the modernizing discourse against the civilizing right of a colonial power, by constructing a modernity situated in tradition that was not open to colonization. Through this filter, an alternative indexing

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11 Ibid.
12 Since the preoccupation of twentieth century western art history is to construct the modern in the Euro-American context and legitimize it as the 'modern art' of the world, it leaves no room for the art practices of and exchanges from the non Euro-American world. Jansen's History of Art treats Euro-American art history as world art history. Gardner's History of World Art, in the limited pages allotted for non Euro-American art, mentions only about the pre-modern periods of these cultures. Similarly, Amason's History of Modern Art constructs the western modern as the only modern in the world.
and defining of categories of modern and tradition allowed for the production of a
'contra modernity'.

Since the project of modernity in the western world is read against the notion of
Enlightenment, 'many western intellectuals have thought of modernity as the rule of
institutions that delivered us from the thrall of all that was unreasonable and irrational.
Those that did not fit into its ambit could be described as pre modern.' On the other
hand, the Euro-American modernist standpoint, John Clark argues, 'has not seen its
higher cultural forms and historical discourses as translatable or selectable by other
cultures, nor has it recognized the self-constituting power of those other art discourses
to effect such translation and selection.' As Ranajit Guha points out, the global
history of capitalism need not reproduce everywhere, the same history of power. In
societies like those of colonial south Asia, divided into differences of region, religion,
caste, class and linguistic groups, the process of modernization cannot have had a
uniform action and counter-action. Therefore, it is always 'incomplete' and 'hybrid'.
Fractured social and geographical territories yield possibilities for the coexistence of
multiple modernities. These uneven realities and their imagined counterparts are
formed as variations of imagined communities.

Gananath Obeyesekere, in Cannibal Talks, argued that cannibalism as a
colonial construct involved prejudices, dialectical misunderstandings and the fantasy
of the colonizer as well as the colonized. His argument compels us to think about the
very construct of visual representation in the colonial era because it was complicated
through preconceived ideas, visual cultural histories and misreadings, imaginations
and fantasy. The themes, modes of expression and selection and circulation were
governed by the existing cultural structures and aesthetic modes. Words or text from

13 Partha Chatterjee, Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse? In The
Partha Chatterjee Omnibus (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999). Partha Chatterjee, The Nation and
its Fragments: Colonial and Post Colonial Histories in The Partha Chatterjee Omnibus (Delhi: Oxford
University Press, 1999).
14 Dipesh Chakrabarthy, Habitations of Modernity: Essays in the Wake of Subaltern Studies (Delhi: Permanent
Black, 2002), xix.
16 Ranajit Guha quoted in Dipesh Chakrabarthy, Habitations of Modernity: Essays in the Wake of
Subaltern Studies (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2002), 13.
17 Gananath Obeyesekere, Cannibal Talk: The Man-Eating Myth and the Human Sacrifice in the South
the alien cultures were translated rather than transcripted into the local context on the basis of their lexical equivalence and their use in different sets of contextual conventions by the political actors and their audiences. Among these shifting paradigms, modern art in south Asia can be read as a representation of a variety of types of selective, inter-discourse translations. How then does one locate this form of modernity that deviates from all canonical understandings of the term?

Euro-American and Marxist theoretical frameworks interpret the modernity of the third world as 'incomplete', 'yet to be' and 'mistaken'. Most recent scholarship, while accepting that many of the institutions and ideas associated with modernity, also question the notion of modernity as ideal-typical and prefer to fix it with alternative or plural modernities, or prefer to call it 'modernity at large'. This approach, by considering various global, local and regional forces that constitute the history of capitalist modernity and its different contextual, and multiple manifestations, provides a less Euro-centric reading of modernity. Nevertheless, these readings have to be understood cautiously without essentializing or reversing the tenets of modernity. As Timothy Mitchell puts it, 'On the one hand, the language of alternative modernities can imply an almost infinite play of possibilities, with no rigorous sense of what, if anything, gives imperial modernity its phenomenal power of replication and expansion. On the other hand, the vocabulary of alternate can still imply an underlying and fundamental singular modernity, modified by local circumstances into a multiplicity of “cultural” forms.' As an alternative to the Euro-centric singular modernity and the pluralism of alternative modernity, Mitchell

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18 Here, I use Appadurai’s argument where he elaborates this nature of transformation as semantic and pragmatic in the context of elites and their followers. This, I believe, can be extended to interpret the cultural exchanges between similar social categories. Arjun Appadurai, Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997), 36.
reminds us to acknowledge the singularity and universalism of the project of modernity. 22

Mitchell, however sees modernity as not an exclusively western or European project, rather he sees it as being constituted in and by the colonial encounter. It as an interaction between the west and the non-west, not staged in the west and then imitated in the non-west. He further observes, 'staging the modern has always required the non modern, the space of colonial difference.'23 'Its authority and presence can only be produced across the space of geographical distance. It is this very displacement of the west that enables modernity to be staged as “the West”. 24

Similarly, Ashis Nandy argues that colonialism is a psychological state rooted in earlier forms of social consciousness in both the colonizer and the colonized. It represents a certain cultural continuity and cultural baggage. 25 These arguments suggest the relativity of the west in the understanding of its other, the non-west.

In this context, the last two decades have registered a paradigm shift in theorizing local modernism in Asia. Usage of terminologies such as ‘Asian modernism’ (John Clark), ‘Asian Avant Garde’ (Geeta Kapur), ‘contextual modernism’ (Sivakumar) and ‘regional modernism’ (Shivaji K. Panniker) indicate the changes in discursive practices. 26 These texts register a shift away from the earlier anti-colonial, and tradition vs. modern arguments to approaching the modern in multiple ways related to local histories.

Clark, in Modern Asian Art, argues that 'modernity invents itself everywhere, it is required for new relativization of the past of any given culture or group of cultures. The principal condition is that these cultures need to, and are capable of,
carrying out relativization.' He further argues that 'modernity belongs to Asian cultures because of their own demand.' Geeta Kapur, on the other hand, criticizes the position taken by Peter Burger, arguing that the Avant Garde is a historically conditioned phenomenon. Even though these authors have contributed significantly in repositioning modernism in local art practices, paradoxically, their imagination and abstraction of Asia/India as a single socio-cultural category turns the argument into a generalization that does not account for the multiple nature of the modern in its socio-historical context.

Partha Mitter has argued for westernization as modernization, emphasizing the indigenous abortion of a western style that shaped the nature of Indian modern art. While his argument fails to distinguish between modernity and coloniality, it attempts to build up a narrative of colonial modernism out of a selected reading of fossilized styles. Therefore, it fails to portray the complex existence of modernity. Mitter's linear historical approach, in a way, hegemonizes Bengal modernism and positions it as the only Indian modernism. Tapati Guha-Thakurta, while discovering the roots of the nationalist project of making a 'New Indian art', argues that the birth of 'new art' in Bengal was a result of an overlapping impact of colonialism and nationalism. She extends her argument by saying that 'change in pictorial styles and mode of representation assume their real significance only as part of a wider process of change in tastes, expectations and ideologies.' She further argues that the changing styles and techniques can be situated within a broader spectrum of encounter with new dominant forms of knowledge and the constitution of new social aspirations and identities. Along with artistic form, taste emerges as an important site of struggle between different groups who produce paintings and for whom paintings were produced. Her arguments extend the horizons of art history towards understanding the

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27 Peter Burger (1984) interpreted Avant Garde in the light of historicism as a project that evolved to destroy the false autonomy of bourgeois art and it belonged solely to the prewar period. He sees postwar Avant Garde as merely a repetition of the earlier without its anti-establishment vigour. Kapur disagrees by arguing that Avant Garde emerges only in a moment of real political disjuncture. It will appear in various forms in different parts of the world at different times. Geeta Kapur, When was Modernism: Essays on Contemporary Cultural Practices in India (Delhi: Tulika Books, 2000), 374.
complexities of modernity. Tapati Guha-Thakurta, in *Monuments, Objects, and Histories*, 30 traces the institutional and disciplinary formation of art history in colonial India, through which she maps the problematic of modernity in relation to the national art agenda, endorsed by the state.

In the context of Ceylon, there is no single art writing that conceptually engages with the question of modernity. The word 'modern' has been repeatedly equated with style rather than with conceptual frameworks or social history. Albert Dharmasiri’s *Modern Art in Sri Lanka*, 31 and Senake Bandaranayake and Albert Dharmasiri’s jointly authored *Sri Lankan Painting in the Twentieth Century*, 32 are compendiums that introduce Ceylonese modern art through tracing the individual artist’s styles. They comfortably narrate the history of post-traditional painting in Colombo as the history of the island with a conscious silence on the contribution of Bengal revivalism or Santiniketan, the rural pedagogical institution set up by Rabindranath Tagore. Similarly, Neville Weereratne and Sunil Goonasekera 33 exclusively map the stylistic development of modernist art in Ceylon. The underlying agenda of these critical appraisals is to establish that the 43 Group was the most ‘important’ artists’ group and through that validate their artistic style as the most ‘original’, ‘significant’ achievement of Ceylonese modernism. Their approaches have concluded that the 43 Group was modernist, and deemed it to be the natural opposite of the academic realists from the Ceylon Society of Art. These writings have tried to decolonize the Ceylonese modern by indexing it to the invented ‘Sinhalese past’. Consequently, they have misrepresented modernity by working against the cosmopolitan eclecticism of the colonial art world. Jagath Weerasinghe’s *Twentieth Century Sri Lanka Art* could be seen as the first attempt to compile a history of

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twentieth century art with its prehistory. But the main purpose of Weerasinghe’s historical narration is to establish and differentiate the ‘90s art trend’ from the preceding art movements. His essay on contemporary art in Sri Lanka identifies three main trends in the development of colonial/postcolonial art practices based on the prevailing socio-economic and political conditions of the particular period. These trends include: the emergence of the nation state and formation of the 43 Group; nationalist art influenced by Bengal School and Santiniketan and abstract art of H. A. Karunaratna in the 1960s, influenced by the ideas of New York school and spiritualism. However, developments prior to the 43 Group which constitute the premodern and early modern are not defined and historized, which sets the question of modernism’s relativity as a hazy affair.

Ismeth Raheem’s writing on colonial photography and colonial prints, and R. K. de Silva’s valuable compilation of Dutch prints—early prints and newspaper engravings—map the early phase of westernization with the reproductions of the works of the colonial traveller-painters, military men engaged in surveillance and topographical artists and photographers. Though R. K. de Silva’s project was not art historically driven, Raheem, through his excavation of historical information and thematic readings of colonial photography and early prints, is able to flesh out the early history of visual modernity in Ceylon. Together, these texts establish the role of visual representation in colonial governing.

Quadri Ismail’s recent writings on individual artists attempts to read paintings from the poststructuralist perspective and mainly in relation to the country’s racially embedded postcolonial political history. His readings establish one-to-one connection between the visual and its meaning. For Ismail, image is a text that can be read: He

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ascribes no value to the idea of image as something open and suggestive.\(^3^8\)

Additionally, the work of anthropologists like Elizabeth Nissan, Pradeep Jeganathan, Malathi de Alwis, Valentine Daniel, and historian Jonathan Walters' writing about ancient cities, monuments and pilgrimages, register a sharp critique of established nationalist art history.\(^3^9\) Fundamentally, they reveal how the idea of 'ancient' or an authentic 'Sinhalese past' was constructed around monuments and artefacts to support colonialist and nationalist discourse.

It is also important to point out that most art historical projects on south Asian modernism omit consideration of the intellectual contributions of the social scientists on the subject of modernity. These accounts also differ significantly from the poststructuralist intervention in reading an image. Thus, art historical interpretations run the risk of ending up as an elitist, formalistic venture with a lack of clarity in defining modernity. Artist and artwork-based writings fail to situate their argument within the larger setting around art production in an age of constant flux. More precisely, without defining the 'modern', critical writings on art engage in projects of 'periodization' and 'relativization' of modernism. While these projects miss the nuances of the cultural politics of visual practices and their circulation in the modernist context, they try to justify their formalistic position by reading the stylistic evolution with the support of a selective, and therefore, incomplete understanding of social history.

Drawing parallels between the Euro-American modernist artistic styles and the local artistic forms or viewing local artists and their works within a western


methodological framework ends up placing local modernism in a subordinate position. As Rozsika Parker argues in a different context, what is needed is a change in the rules of the game which demands scrutiny.40 'This can evolve only from a critique of art history.'41 While focusing more on modern art practice as a whole, my aim is to discuss modern art through its historical process that is modernity. Although my research focuses on elitist and popular art practices, it attempts to connect its arguments and observations with the larger cultural discourses of the period and other kinds of material representations circulating at that time. 'Since history cannot be reduced to a manageable block of information, it has to be grasped as a complex process of relationships.'42 This project reads art history in disjoints by dismissing linear narrations. It tries to capture the essence of the modern in discontinuities and specificities of historical locations, approaches and themes. Janet Wolff has argued that 'culture is not just a reflection of economic and social structure. It is mediated at a variety of levels. It is mediated by the complex and contradictory nature of the social groups in which it originates: it is mediated by the particular situation of its producers and it is mediated by the nature of operation of aesthetic codes and conventions through which the ideology is transformed and in which it is expressed.'43 By interrogating visual codes, ideologies, institutions of mediation, class interest, and the racial, sexual and gender divisions operating behind visual representation, I try to map them together in more precise and heterogeneous configurations.

Social historical literature produced by social scientists on Ceylonese society provides ground for a cultural historical framework to understand and discuss modernity in terms of the local. Formation of colonial elites and its cultural implications are well delineated in the works of Michael Roberts and Kumari Jayawardena.44 They reveal how merchant capitalism or the trades including the

41 Ibid.
42 Ibid., 42.
arrack and precious stones industry, plantation capitalism, along with educational acquirements, contributed to upward social mobility of the subordinate social categories during British rule. They also elucidate how families and individuals who were ascending the socio-economic ladder, employed marriages and dowries with considerable dexterity in order to buttress or assist their social and economic advancement. Jayawardena, by addressing the cultural politics of both the heterogeneity and the class homogeneity of the national elites, gives details about the rise of the new-rich 'nobodies' across caste, ethnicity and religion into the ranks of 'somebodies'. She uncovers the link between capital accumulation, religious revivalism, ethnic identity and political movements. Jayawardena, Malalgoda, Gombrich and Obeyesekere discuss Buddhist revivalism in the matrix of colonial Ceylon which led to the birth of 'Protestant Buddhism'. Their writings connected aspects such as reinventing practices, formulating new rituals and the challenge posed by subordinate castes to the upper caste monopoly in monkhood. Readings on the formation of the city of Colombo, its class and ethnic distribution and the demographic changes delineated by Nihal Perera and R. L. Brohier are significant in understanding the changing urban spatial terminology and its aesthetics. These writings also reveal the notion of the public emerging in the colonial city.

Indigenizing Colombo, as Nihal Perera argues, was a two-way process encompassing westernization of subjects and localization of structures. This produces liminality, hybridity, ambivalence and irony as characteristics of the city space. Perera interprets this process as an act of contestation and resistance to colonialism. It took place through an appropriation of the white town by local elites, Buddhist revivalism and

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migrations from the suburbs and rural areas into colonial Colombo. Based on Homi Bhabha's concept of mimicry, Perera shows how elites produced hybridity in response to colonialism.\(^{47}\) Jani de Silva, on the other hand, explains how the Victorian lifestyle and English public school curriculum contributed to the making of local elite gentlemen and how this in turn masculinized the so-called 'effeminate' Ceylonese according to the standards of Victorian masculinity and 'manliness'. Her observations contribute to understanding the shifting notions of power and their ways of embodiment and exhibitionism which reveal how appropriation itself empowers the powerless. Nira Wickramasinghe's reading of clothing in colonial Ceylon criticizes the subaltern studies historians for not treating material culture as a source of history. Her research places the very act of clothing in the colonial contestation of imagined authenticities which, she argues, is the main character of Ceylonese modernity.\(^{48}\)

While trying to distinguish between modernity and aesthetic modernism, this research also attempts to distinguish between aesthetic modernism and modernist art practices by reading the aesthetics of the modern and politics of aesthetic modernism. Since both gallery-based art practices and popular visual representations are manifestations of colonial modernity and they influenced each other, the notions of kitsch and popular become crucial to such readings. Therefore, understanding the tension between the 'popular' and 'elitist' practices is vital in the process of defining modernism. While considering Greenberg's contention that the attitudes and intentions are different in modernist art and the popular domain, the project tries to offset high art practices vis-à-vis the 'popular' to understand the self critical, radical, intentional claims of the elitist or the 'Avant Garde'.\(^{49}\)

A major concern of this research is to understand multiple pathways of modernism and its multifaceted representational politics in colonial Colombo by posing the following questions. What was the nature of colonial modernity in Ceylon and how did it relate to the art world? How does one read the relativization processes

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\(^{49}\) Clement Greenberg, "Avant Garde and Kitsch" (1939), http://www.sharecom.ca/greenberg/kitsch.html
which situate modern art in the historical process? How do we periodize modernisms in Ceylonese art? How did ‘elitist’ artists rebel against or differentiate themselves from the popular taste and reposition art within a site of criticality? How did colonialism and nationalism spatialize, gender(ize), racialize and historicize modernity through artistic representations? How did local cultures redirect modernity’s universalizing project?

Methodology

The decision to adopt a cultural-historical approach to trace the trajectories of modern art in Colombo has determined the focus of this project. Sidelining the artist-based biographical model of writing as well as a formalistic reading of artworks, I have undertaken a study of art practice as a whole; stressing primarily on representational politics of colonial modernity in painting and photography. While believing that an aesthetic decision is the prime criterion to enter any kind of art historical discourse, my approach also sees art as a culturally situated phenomenon. Therefore, it believes that a cultural product informed by the aesthetic decisions can also be read through cultural theory. By combining sociological and art historical approaches, it attempts to critique many binaries operating within the framework of broader art historical discourse as well as the conception of modernity.

Modernity is a condition that the work of art both distills from and shares with the encompassing culture.⁵⁰ Here, understanding the nature of modernity which produced the particular kind of figure of thought and speech becomes imperative in defining Ceylonese modern art with its own specific terminology. By employing a thematic approach, this research project moves back and forth across time and space and focuses on the major cultural forces that impacted Ceylonese modern art and shaped its thematic engagements. Chapters 1 and 2 discuss art practice in relation to the changing cultural politics of modernity in the city of Colombo and the emergence of a discursive space for art in the form of art writing. Chapters 3, 4 and 5 deal with representational politics by engaging with major modernist themes such as landscape, body, mythology and history.

⁵⁰ Charles Harrison, Modernism (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).
The primary sources for this research are the prints and water colour paintings of the colonial period in the Dutch Museum, the British Museum and the Colombo Museum (most of these documents/images have already been subjected to study in R. K. de Silva's three books) and the painting collections in the Ceylon Society of Art, Sapumal Foundation and several private collections. The mural paintings of suburban Colombo provide another key area of exploration. Catalogue essays, newspaper articles, letters to editors in newspapers, and books containing biographical information about artists provide considerable secondary sources. Colonial government education department reports and English and vernacular newspapers and magazines of selected years have provided invaluable information regarding the institutionalization of art practices. Interviews with several of the early art collectors and friends and relatives of artists and researchers compliment published sources of information with more personal insights.

Insights from newspaper exchanges and the visual art works, by complimenting each other, became a major source for this study. Since many of the art works discussed in this dissertation have already been reproduced in other publications, I have followed the dating of other authors with caution due to inconsistencies or lack of information.

**Chapters**

Chapter 1 locates the bourgeois art world within the context of colonial port culture. It traces the multiple processes of westernization in local art practice through travelling painters, colonial topographical documents, elitist leisure culture, the formation of amateur artist clubs, colonial state patronage and popular Buddhist temple murals. In tandem, it delineates the impact of Indian artistic revivalism, rise of Sinhala Buddhist nationalism, and the activities of the modernist art collectives such as Ceylon Art Club and the 43 Group. It sees artistic modernity in Colombo as a phenomenon that materialized from the elitist and popular tastes that surround and inform professional and amateur terrains of art making.

Most of the Ceylonese city-based male artists were painters with direct exposure to European art and culture. They belonged to a feudal background or were
sons of English educated professionals. Hence, any inquiry into modern art in Ceylon must be situated within the larger discussion of the homorganic yet heterogenic nature of the Ceylonese elite, their cultural position and their tastes. In this context, it is important to understand the colonial intervention which, instead of democratizing art practice from the traditional caste-based art/craft guilds, created the very opposite by reconstituting it in closed urban class circles. It sees how earnings from the colonial economic enterprise were transformed into cultural capital to mobilize social capital.

Chapter 2 charts the critical reception of art, circulated mainly through print journalism in the period between the 1920s and 1940s. One could argue that debating differences and circulating opinions form one of the aspects of modernity. These critical accounts like art institutions, while shaping a new way of seeing and culturing the taste of new viewers, were also invested in framing the premodern in the modern consciousness. If history is an important form of modern consciousness, then the emergence of historical consciousness speaks of a certain modern and political way of inhabiting the world. It also speaks of a very particular relation with the past. Historical necessity to identify with the past and tradition thus emerged from the struggle for power.

By focusing on art historical writings, articles on art in newspapers and journals, exhibition reviews and catalogue writings, this chapter assesses the mediatory role played by these writings in the context of conflicting ideologies and tastes. This chapter traces the conceptualization of categories such as ‘art’ and ‘Ceylonese art’ and how these categories came to exemplify ideas of racial and national identity as part of colonial and nationalist discourse. It also raises the question about realism and the notion of mimetic, in connection with the making of a ‘national art.’

Chapter 3 explores the notions of landscape painting in connection with the politics of spatial appropriation and gaze in the colonial era, based on a comparative study of the works produced by colonial traveller-painters and Ceylonese artists of early modern and modern phases. By interrogating the intention behind various modes of representation and individual stylistic differences, this chapter foregrounds the different ways of seeing within colonial modernity. The picturesque and panoramic
views in colonial engravings and water colour paintings produce an exotic, measurable category of nature in a newly conquered land. Such works served as a document of the achievements of colonization. Traditional and amateur artists of Buddhist temple murals in the suburbs of Colombo who assimilated, albeit rudimentarily, Italian Renaissance ideals, produced landscapes that were both ambiguous and hybrid in nature. Their works symbolized the changing perception and a new sense of habitation in the early phase of modernity. For the traditional elite painters, landscape painting became both a mode of mimicking the leisure of their colonial masters and a tool for asserting their own domination over the lower strata of society. In contrast, the urbanized modern artist used landscape paintings to represent the nostalgia of a lost rural life or a self imposed exile and a romantic imagining of the nation. While a few artists of the 43 Group attempted to capture fleeting visual sensations in the manner of the Impressionist painters, yet others saw landscape as a point of reference for empathizing with home. It was a playful as also a cerebral site for the dissection and distortion of cubism or montage of place and space which produced the melancholy of an individual, dislocated by colonialism and urbanism. This chapter looks at stylistic differences in landscape paintings as an indicator of multiple possibilities available to the individual and society to inhabit the place or appropriate the space, hence indexical to a new sense of subjectivity rooted in the modern boundaries of a nation state.

Chapter 4 looks at representations of the body as a metaphor for state of being and becoming and the emergence of a modern sense of self that was defined from, and in relation to, demarcated territories of the nation state. This chapter is supported by studies, largely based on colonial ethnographic documents, colonial studio photographs and the painted representation of male and female bodies in the works of artists of the Ceylon Society of Arts, Ceylon Art Club and the 43 Group.

During the colonial period, the idea of the body was associated with virtues of character and the evil of sin, in accordance with the propagation of the British belief in Empire and Protestant Christianity. Bodily types are inevitable in the colonialist and orientalist understanding of the ‘other’ and the canonization of social categories. These stereotypical constructs of body were later invested in the local revivalist and
nationalist discourses as part of their search for an authentic self. In the realm of visual signification, the mannerism of European painting and studio photography played a vital role in nineteenth century Colombo bourgeois society. The European visual binaries between the subject and the object, seer and seen, artist and model, which operated along sexual and racial difference were adopted into the local context as a visual stratagem to represent social hierarchies of the modern period. Hence, the masculinized bourgeois gaze is actively involved in the visual construction of the bodies of the local women as well as rural and working class male bodies. In contrast, subaltern opposition is expressed through a caricature of their colonial and local master’s body through parody and subversion. Similarly, colonial ethnographic discourses were reformulated by urban elites to exoticize and fetishize the ‘other’. At this point, the role of spectatorship associated with heterosexual masculinity assumes importance. This chapter also foregrounds how different types of bodies which inhabit the new reconstructed space of colonial Colombo were invested in the formation of new gender roles in public and private domains and nationalist narrations.

Chapter 5 deals with the theme of history and mythology and attempts to map out how, and through what process, the artistic content of the past as history and mythology was relativized through the act of selection and transformed into a secular realm of seeing by adopting a neo-traditionalist or modernist mode/technique of representation. By considering the social setting, visual idiom and popular themes of these paintings, this chapter tries to raise the following questions. How were Buddhist revivalism and artistic revivalism related to each other in colonial Ceylon? Are these visual narrations connected to the framing of a ‘national allegory’? What was the driving force behind the handling of these themes and selection of the medium? In the context of Buddhist revivalism and nationalism, what kind of agency did these artists have in the temple mural projects? How did the modern mural painters negotiate the relationship between secular and religious, personal and public and aesthetic and social? For whom were these murals produced? How did the nature of viewership change in the context of the murals?

While John Berger (1972) argues that ‘ways of seeing’ imply politics of gaze and sexuality in European oil painting, Said (1978) relates these binaries with the larger Orientalist project.
Unlike their modern counterparts, placed in isolated city-based art spaces, the Buddhist murals are meant for public viewing in religious spaces as a continuation of an age old artistic practice. However, traditional content in these murals was handled in a popular/magical realistic or modernist/neo-traditionalist language. This unusual juxtaposition of physical space and visual style produced a third space which challenged the constructs of traditional art history, along the polar divisions of 'popular' and 'Avant Garde'. The chapter concludes with examining the pedagogic and performative difference of the above binary in the context of colonial modernity in Ceylon where the boundary between the domains of 'popular' and 'high' was in continuous flux.