Chapter 2

Dialectics of Modernity: Issues in Colonial Art Writings

'The principal product of art history has thus been modernity itself.'

2.1 Introduction

Changing socio-aesthetic dimensions of art with the increasing bourgeois patronage replaced the precolonial producer-consumer relationship. Colonial art—with its plethora of cross-cultural visual references and indexicality—challenged the earlier sets of visual vocabulary, and drastically configured the taste and demanded a new way of viewing. This situation, created a need for mediators of art whereby art writing played a crucial role, in the context of the reading public.

Excepting a few writings on Indian art which covered Ceylon, artists' biographies and a handful of writings in English on contemporary art constituted art writing in Ceylon after the 1950s. This chapter focuses on the exchanges and debates of the period derived principally from newspapers, catalogue writings and public speeches as registered in the newspapers. Predominantly, these debates were situated around the local and foreign exhibitions and exhibits of the period between the 1920s and 1950s. The people who participated in these discussions largely belonged to the Euro-Asian or Anglicized Sinhala community, visiting foreign artists and colonial administrators, connected to the major elitist artist groups of the city. The exchanges could be read as an extended space of artist collectives: their ideological positions and aesthetic preferences. On the other hand, these writings produced a rupture by encouraging the centrifugal or horizontal movement of elitist leisure culture against the exclusiveness and verticality of the elites' clubability. The issues—circulated among the educated middle class, debated among the

---

cultural elites and resisted by the cosmopolitans and patriotic standpoints—inevitably determined the undercurrents of art practice, while shaping the nature of the bourgeois public sphere.

Further, these debated opinions not only signalled the nature of the public sphere, as Habermas argues, but also signified the birth of a new artistic sphere in which print capitalism played a crucial role in fashioning the artists' and viewers' sense of subjectivity and opinion about the art world. By connecting art practice with the bourgeois discourse on nation'ness' and nationalism, these writings gradually transformed art practice into a more politically conscious act. In addition, connecting art with nation through a discourse was implicated with situating art from the past and the present within the national consciousness which was exclusively Sinhala Buddhist in nature. As Eric Hobsbawm observes, colonialist and nationalist art writing attempts to construct a linear, authentic stable (invented) history through the act of selection and omission, determined by demands of immediate socio-political conditions. By encompassing a dual process that validated the past through the present and authenticated the present through the past, these writings invented a new bourgeois notion of art. The emergence of this two-way process and their intersection constitutes and characterizes the art discourse of this period. Thus, these writings represent different stages of this double appropriation in a period of constant flux. This nationalist appropriation was, however, firmly challenged by the cosmopolitan mentality of Ceylonese modernity which argued that art has no national boundaries.

While compiling these debates from the newspapers I frequently encountered words such as nation, race, purity, imitation, mimicry, originality, tradition and realism. Since these words and their connections with each other involve larger ideological implications and aesthetic preferences in the colonial context, I have treated these terms as crucial entry points to probe the ideological framework and dialectics of artistic modernity in Colombo. Through this reading, I shall try and unravel the larger internal correlation among these significations in the body of colonial art discourse.

---

2.2 A Category Called ‘Art’

Through the cultural encounters of the nineteenth century, a society called ‘modern’ was realized through a process of displacement, reorientation, exclusion and inclusion of values, norms and forms. The notions of ‘art’ and ‘fine art’ themselves were a product of this transformation, points out John Clark. This notion of art was institutionalized through museums, art education and art writing. Bernard Cohn and Tapati Guha-Thakurta have detailed the colonial project of transferring ‘objects and monuments’ into works of art and into ‘histories’ in colonial India. Concurrent with these developments, the setting up of the Ceylon Branch of Royal Asiatic Society in 1845 based on the existing models in London and Calcutta and a museum in Colombo to display the archaeological findings of the colony, played a decisive role. The establishment of museums and commencement of archaeological excavations brought archaeological objects into a new administrative institutional space and gave official custodianship to the colonial government. Anderson observes that antiquity became an effort to create alternative legitimacies of the colonial regime. The old sacred sites were to be ‘museumized’ and secularized into the map of the colony, and their ancient prestige ‘draped around the mappers’. In the mechanics of producing new heirs to the local past, meanings of the ancient objects were actively altered and politicized. It is important here to underline the fact that the nationalist project which emerged to resist colonization adopted similar tactics wherein the nationalists donned the mantle of the authentic custodians of the nation’s heritage.

These new sites of art were made possible through an acute change in the viewership that transformed traditional participants into modernist spectators. This transformation demanded a new way of seeing to recontextualize the object in the domains of history and aesthetics. The opening up of museum spaces and exhibition venues and the circulation of art writings through the print media were closely connected with the process of reshaping the ways of seeing and its institutionalization in various

---

forms. Earlier writings played an influential role in modernizing the way of seeing and bringing precolonial material culture into the discursive domain through narrativization and secular rituals around these ‘invented’ art objects. Even though Ananda K. Coomaraswamy was read by his critics as anti-modernist, his lifetime engagement with photo documentation, museum displays and cataloguing of visual objects museumized the invented ‘Eastern tradition’. This objectification encompassed a modern way of seeing connected to gallery-based visual art practices of the twentieth century. His art museum practices, on the other hand, were one of the early developments that contributed to the emergence of new art institutional spaces in Ceylon and South Asia.

Museum practices employed a method of formal description of the object in the form of written text and introduced new sets of categories to identify anonymous objects. The categories thus devised—art, craft, fine arts and functional art and their applications—concomitantly reimposed other Italian Renaissance categories such as ‘artist’, ‘craftsmen’ and ‘genius’ in the colonial artistic space. It marks and constitutes a break from the premodern. Coomaraswamy's *Medieval Sinhalese Art* (1904), *Arts and Crafts of India and Ceylon* (1913), *History of Indian and Indonesian Art* (1927), Vincent A. Smith's *History of Fine Art in India and Ceylon* (1911), Benjamin Rowland’s *The Pelican History of Art: The Art and Architecture of India. Buddhist, Hindu, and Jain* (1953) are groundbreaking historical investigations of Ceylonese ancient and medieval art. These prime texts which established a category called art in the context of Ceylon had considerable impact on later writing. The titles of these books clearly show the writers’ preoccupation with the art/craft binary of the late nineteenth century England. Materials, traditions and objects, specific to Ceylonese or Indian culture and alien to established western art history, were left out by these historians. Architecture and sculpture were, for colonial historians, the only reliable sources on which to build a ‘scientific history of the colony, a land where there were no written annals, which could be trusted.’

John Davy, for example, argues that ‘the Sinhalese...possess no accurate records of events, are

---


8 Ibid. Here, I am indebted to Bernard Cohn for his insight in the context of India.
ignorant of genuine history, and are not sufficiently advanced to relish it. Thus, archaeological ruins in Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa were considered specimens of ‘authentic’ pieces of art because of their textual references in ancient Pali chronicles such as Mahāvaṃsa and Cūlawaṃsa. The colonialist and nationalist discourse’s contemporary validation of these ancient sites, on the other hand, made them legitimate samples and yardsticks of art in Ceylon. Through validation and authentication, an invented past was put forward as tradition.

Partha Chatterjee points out that spiritualism was put forward by nationalists as the character of the inner self of the nation and its traditions against the materialism of the west. Coomaraswamy’s early writings which idealized Indian art as ‘spiritual’ and ‘transcendental’ emphatically challenged the colonial historians’ claims that sculpture and painting never existed as ‘fine arts’ in India. This idealization essentialized Indian art’s complex history and multiple practices around the ‘common essence.’ Thus, ‘it is possible to characterize “neo traditional” art fairly richly by mapping its products on the axes of essentialism-epochalism and modernity,’ says John Clark. In this process, orientalist/nationalist writings were transformed from their earlier antiquarian and archaeological expertise to stake claim to aesthetic and spiritual empathy. This reconceptualization was heavily invested in the nation building project. As has been pointed out by Tapati Guha-Thakurta, the aestheticized object of Indian art emerged as the main field for the representation of the nation. ‘While archaeology served increasingly as the index of prehistoric antiquity of the land, art history continued to be the bearer of the nation’s unique artistic self.’ This was done through the careful selection and omission of western ideologies, expertise, Sanskrit/Pali sources and local

---

14 Ibid., xx.
materials from the past. Based on the Eurocentric writings of the colonial period, nationalist/orientalist writing fashioned a new conception of art by reorienting precolonial material culture. These attempts at writing art history—on par with the western methods and assumptions such as racial theory, dynastic styles and permanency of the material—in a way transports the archaeological material findings from their historical context into the new material consciousness of colonialism.

With the influence of modernist intervention in the latter part of the nineteenth century in Europe, the concept of art in Ceylon underwent a dramatic shift. Transcendental aesthetics and symbolic approaches propagated by the nationalists and orientatlisters became a ground for relativization of the modernist ideas like spirituality in art, distortion, symbolism and anti-realism. In this context, the observation of the Colombo Mayor, H. E. Newham at the exhibition of Otto Scheinhammer in 1928 makes for interesting reading.

I am not one of those who believe that the function of art is to teach us lessons; we have others to do that for us, for instance the press. Nor is it the duty of art to interpret nature, we can leave nature to interpret herself. To my view the function of art is closely related to the creator of things and possibly it is that divine spark which inspires him in the work of creation.¹⁵

The mayor's idea of art echoes the aesthetic principles of the medievalists/modernists by completely de-linking art from nature and connecting it with the divine. By rejecting academic and socialist realism, he emphasizes the personal spiritual experience of the artist in the process of art making. Although the modernist idea of individualism was contested by the orientalists, the modernist equating of the spiritual with aesthetic experience gained currency amongst the orientalists and nationalists. In his lecture under the auspices of the CSA titled 'What is Art', well known Indian art critic, O. C. Gangoly held that art was not necessarily a faithful imitation or representation of life. 'It was by no means a substitute for life. Art was not illusion, for it had a reality of its own...'¹⁶ Here, Gangoly's opinion sounds like the modernist notion that art in itself was a reality, not an imitation of another reality.

---

¹⁵ The Ceylon Observer, December 11, 1928.
¹⁶ The Ceylon Observer, October 22, 1935.
2.3 Invention of 'Ceylonese Art'

Ceylon, as a state, came into existence through unification achieved by the British imperial power, followed by the development in transportation and communication. Prior to this, many local and south Indian kings, chieftains, the Portuguese and the Dutch ruled different regions of the island and constantly engaged in the production of material culture. The subjugation of the Kandyan kingdom in 1815 brought about the political, administrative and geographical unity of the island. After British rule united the entire island, various facets of historical findings were neatly piled to build up a linear history of the ‘glorious’ past of the crown colony. This inventing and ordering/reordering of local history within the colonial methods, was closely knit with the larger project of ordering/reordering of the colony’s landscape. Later, the whole project was appropriated into the nationalist discourse to formulate a systematic, linear history of the golden age of the nation based on the Sinhalese race, Buddhist religion and unified territory.

In the early twentieth century, some Ceylonese intellectuals perceived India as the motherland and not as a threatening power. The Ceylon National Review that Coomaraswamy edited emphasized the mental and spiritual kinship existing between India and Ceylon. Coomaraswamy’s books—mentioned earlier as well as those by Vincent Smith and Benjamin Rowland—contain important sections on Ceylon. In general, they posit Ceylonese precolonial art history under the umbrella term of 'Indian art' or 'Buddhist art'. Thus, they saw Ceylonese art as a provincial variation or an extension of Indian art. Coomaraswamy believed that:

There is scarcely any part of Sinhalese life or religion, or art which is quite comprehensible without reference to India; the Sinhalese themselves are Indian; the greatness of their civilization dates from the wave of Indian influences that reached Ceylon through Ashoka’s missionaries. … The most remarkable reawakening in national self-consciousness which has taken place in modern times is recognition by the people of India of their fundamental unity. Of this unity Ceylon is economically, mentally, and spiritually a part; and with its culture and life, must on her own survive or perish.18

The coining of the term 'Ceylonese art' was an attempt to define art according to modern geographical boundaries of a state. This category was applied to precolonial art thus ironically collapsing the precolonial cultural boundaries into the present state or national boundaries. This ironic transformation and the tension it created within the very meaning of the term was perpetuated in all future art historical discourse in various forms.

Apparently, in the process of homogenization, intercultural and multicultural expressive forms of the precolonial island became singularized and exclusive. The identities that were outside the dominant category were erased, appropriated or confronted. As a further development, the growing consciousness of Ceylonese identity displaced India from its earlier motherly position. For example, Amarasekara distinguished Ceylonese art from Indian art by claiming that Ceylonese art was far removed from the influences of Indian art.

At the very outset, it must be accepted that the Sinhalese have had an Art practice of their own. Ananda Coomaraswamy says in his *Medieval Sinhalese Art*: 'the civilization and Art of Sinhalese are distinctly Aryan and distinguished from, though closely resembling that of South India'; and again he says Sinhalese decorative art is in a sense both freer and wider than that of north India in later times and gentler, less grotesque, more akin to Medieval European Art than to the Dravidian Art of South India. Professor V. Goloubeff, the eminent French archaeologist of worldwide repute, who recently gave a lecture at Royal Asiatic Society, further confirmed this opinion. He expressed the opinion that at one time Ceylon had an Art of its own, independent of and uninfluenced by Indian Art.¹⁹

What is interesting is, although Amarasekara, like Coomaraswamy, accepts the stylistic similarities between the art of Ceylon and south India, he believes that the Sinhalese were Aryans who came from north India. He argues that Ceylonese artefacts, in their refined quality, are akin to medieval European rather than north Indian art. As a response to European imperialism, early nationalists emphasized a pan-Indian identity. But the above statement discloses how local nationalist consciousness strategically and gradually erased the Indian identity with an anxiety to establish an independent Ceylonese identity. Moreover, this identification placed Ceylonese art closer to the 'progressive' western world.

2.4 Racializing Art

Racial consciousnesses marked postcolonial polity that emerged from the conditions of modernity in Ceylon. This shows overlaps with the manner in which the trope of race was mobilized in the Indian context. Romila Thapar has argued that the 'theory of the Aryan race not only structured knowledge about the past, but perhaps more directly gave legitimacy to the conflicts of the present. The theory has a genesis in colonial attempts to “discover” the Indian past, a discovery which is rooted in the colonial present.'20 While the theory was first introduced by the culture of colonialism as a theory of language, at its zenith, it transformed into a racial theory, a product of the culture of imperialism. Romila Thapar elaborates:

The variant interpretations of the Aryan theory illustrate its role in the political agendas of various social groups and the nature of the contestation between these groups. It reflects therefore what has been called the organizing capacity of intellectual rationalizations in the form of theories of fictive ethnicity. Appeal to a seemingly scientific explanation of biological heredity made it to coincide with racial categories. It provides nationalist myths of selective linear history in which the genetic descent of a ‘nation’ is sought to be traced and authority comes naturally to those of upper castes or of the dominant religion...21

Aryan theory, from its genesis, is a thesis about linguistic origins and argues that Sinhalese is an Indo-Aryan language.22 However, Sinhalese became an indicator of a lineage that descended from the Aryan ‘race’ whereby a linguistic theory metamorphosed into a racial theory.23 This was based on the belief that all speakers of Indo-European languages were related to each other by biological decent. Marisa Angell argues that archaeology, the Aryan theory and political legitimization to rule, secured the structure of empire for the British. Therefore, the Aryan theory was used as a tool to increase British political power in Ceylon. This allowed the rulers to project a hereditary link with the

21 Ibid., 76.
22 B. C. Clough, in the 1820s and 1830s, was first asserting that the Sinhalese language was derived from Sanskrit. Rudolph Virchow in 1885–86 used the expression ‘the Sinhalese race’.
majority of their subjects, which would then allow them to claim the legitimacy to rule.²⁴ R. A. L. H. Gunawardene has noted that the Aryan theory in colonial Ceylon was embraced not only by British orientalists, but also by large swathes of the Sinhalese community. The theory, located a section of the south Asian community in a privileged position: it elevated them to the rank of the kinsmen of their rulers, even though the relationship was a distant and tenuous one.²⁵

In the census conducted in Sri Lanka in 1871 and 1881, ‘race’ appeared as an important category for the first time.²⁶ The history of Ceylon has always been conceived as the history of the Sinhalese people, argues Michael Roberts. ‘It has bequeathed to us, in a powerful fashion, two interrelated concepts: Dhammadipa (Lanka as a home of the Buddhist doctrine in all its pristine purity and glory) and Sihadipa (Lanka as the home of the Sinhalese).’²⁷ Sinhalese nationalism, by appropriating the imagination of the Ceylonese nation, displaced all minorities from the nation space and constructed the Tamils as a perpetual threat to the nation. ‘From the 1880s onwards, the preoccupation of the early nationalists with “Aryanness” meant demonizing the “lower races” of other ethnic and religious origins and the valorizing of Sinhalese Buddhism.’²⁸ As Roberts says, ‘invidious yet powerful influence of historical traditions, natural physiographic unity attached to an island and newly arrived democratic theories and democratic sanction of a demographic majority made possible this transformation.’²⁹ The word ‘Jathiya’ in Sinhala has been used to signify both race and nation. This linguistic fix, in a way, erased the line between these categories in popular usage. Therefore, for the Sinhalese, ‘there could be no nation that was distinct from a race.’³⁰

²⁴ Ibid., 54. If one looks at the articles that touch upon the Aryan theory in the Journal of the RASCB and concurrent political goings-on in the 1880s, there is a marked confluence of identities—the orientalist scholarship, between Sinhalese Aryans and British Aryans: and in politics, between the Sinhalese Kandyan elite and the British. Ibid., 58.
²⁹ Ibid., 443–444.
³⁰ Ibid., 444.
As Thapar argues in the Indian context, one of the primary concerns of this theory is to establish the rightful inheritors of the land. With growing sentiments of nationalism, the question of origins and affirmation of common descent became crucial and needed legitimation from history.\(^{31}\) In the beginning of the twentieth century, the image of India as ‘motherland’ faded with the emergence of racial consciousness. Nira Wickramasinghe mentions that in the following decades fewer references were made to India as the mother culture. ‘It was no longer India but a specific geographical region of India, the province of Bengal that came to be identified as the land of the Aryans, which was looked upon as the motherland of Aryan Sinhalese.’\(^{32}\) Cunningham’s interpretation of Buddhism as a religion of the Aryans gave a religious flavour to the race theory. He also argued that Buddhism spread wherever Aryans conquered and populated the land.\(^{33}\) This made the dominant Sinhalese to consciously distance themselves from south India which was identified as Dravidian Hindu. The south Indian culture, with its social and artistic imprint, was beyond the pale of Sinhalese culture. The ‘Lion Race and the Sinhalese nation,’ for instance, represented the Sinhala Buddhist revivalist, Anagarika Dharmapala’s thinking. This perspective originated in the mythologizing history and romanticism commonplace in nationalistic thinking since the late nineteenth century. Dharmapala argues:

> The descendents of the Aryan Colonist were called Sinhala after their city, Sinhapura, which was founded by Sinha Bahu the lion-armed king. The Lion armed descendents are the present Sinhalese, whose ancestors had never been conquered, and in whose veins no savage blood is found. Ethnologically Sinhalese are a unique race…\(^{34}\)

Here it is pertinent to mention Perziosi’s argument which helps us situate the racial theory in the domain of art discourse.

> From the beginning, the principal concern of historians and critics of visual arts was linkage of objects to patterns of causality assumed to exist between objects and makers.

---


\(^{33}\) Alexander Cunningham, *Bhilsa Topes or, Buddhist Monuments of Central India, Comprising a Brief Historical Sketch of Rise, Progress and Decline of Buddhism with an Account of Opening Examination of the Various Groups of Topes around Bhilsa* (Varansi: Indological Book House, 1966), 2-3.

objects and objects, and between all of them and their various contemporary contexts. Underlying this was a family of organic metaphors linked to certain common theories of race in the early modern period: in particular, the presumption of certain demonstratable kinship, sameness, or homogeneity among objects produced or appearing at a given time and in a particular place.  

This approach of art history was further complicated by the colonial-national confrontations. The characteristics of 'pure' race became characteristics of art in these readings.

The pioneer organization which propagated the Aryan theory in the nineteenth century is the Ceylon branch of the Royal Asiatic Society, active since 1845. RASCB was involved with several research activities besides publishing a journal that was both an initiator as well as a reflection of opinions in the nineteenth century. It provided an archaeology exploration fund (started in 1884), which evolved into the Department of Archaeology in 1890 and helped set up a museum in 1877. An article dealing with language, culture and race in Ceylon, published in the RASCB journal in 1885–86, pointed out that the Sinhalese are both linguistically and racially Aryan; that Tamil are Dravidian; and that the Sinhalese/Aryan race is superior both racially and (therefore) culturally.

'Aryan India was emerging as the key theme of historical and artistic attention, with its underpinnings of national pride.' Prejudices were extended to Ceylon through its origination myth wherein the Aryan invasion from north India transformed the island into a Sinhalese Buddhist nation. The Aryan content made the Sinhalese upgrade this myth to 'history,' while being oblivious to the story of colonization embedded in the myth. Thus, Ceylonese art writing in general, and art history in particular, largely manifested from the homogenising project of racial ideology. Therefore, their terminologies, methodologies and expected outcomes were based on the prejudices of

---

37 Ibid.
racial theory. Most influential writers including Coomarswamy implicitly and explicitly framed their arguments within the Aryan theory.

I began to see behind these obvious survivals and analogies of still earlier days—survival from a remoter period, habits of thought and tricks of craftsmanship that must have been handed down from early Aryan time and can be traced back to early work in North India, where history tell us the 'Lion race' of Ceylon actually came, and patterns whose history is even more ancient. 39

However, K. M. de Silva argues that there is no archaeological evidence for the early Indo-Aryan settlers that could be traced back to north India. 40

Interestingly, Rabindranath Tagore, in his civilizational mission to the island, used the Aryan theory to prove hereditary links with the Sinhalese based on the Vijaya myth. 41 The poet says:

Sinhala was once colonized geographically by the Bengalees. Let it be colonized again spiritually. Let the vital and organic connection between Sinhalese and Vanga be re-established through the cultivation of mother tongue. Let the Sinhalese realize the utter futility of pursuing the path of imitation. Let them not barter their soul in exchange of the castaway clothes of European materialism. Let the dead weight of convention be displaced by the eternal potency of life. 42

Interestingly, Tagore interpreted the nationalist binary of western materialism vs. eastern spiritualism in which Bengal, the seat of Aryans (according to the Ceylonese chronicles), became the seat of eternal potency. Likewise, in many discussions about Ceylon, ‘the past that was invoked therefore, was the Sinhalese past. “Ceylon” and “Sinhalese” were constantly juxtaposed and viewed as synonymous terms. 43

Even though art history focused on the ancient cities of Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa, the conclusions were generalized and applied to the whole island as the

---

41 The great Buddhist chronicle narrates the story of Vijaya who landed in Ceylon with his followers from Bengal on the very day the Buddha died (circa 6th century BCE). He initially married a demoness named Kuveni; later he rejected her and married a Tamil princess from South India while his followers married the Tamil women who came with her. From this legitimate union sprang the Sinhalas.
achievement of the Sinhalese ‘race’ and the Sinhalese ‘nation’. What is important to note at this juncture is that the nation, as a consciousness, never existed in this particular historical period. It is highly questionable to essentialize the achievements of these two cities as applicable to the whole island, an island whose cultural legacy was far more complex, resulting from cultural contacts with the art of Amaravathi, as well as Pallavas, Cholas and Nayakas of south India. Further, the Vijaya myth that was used to legitimize the Sinhalese blood relationship with north India, also mentions the ‘craftsmen and thousand families of eighteen guilds’ that were sent across the sea from the Pandya region of south India (Madurai) with hundreds of Pandya Tamil women as proper spouses for Vijaya and his male followers. However, this information of early artist migration was muted in the nationalist discourse of art. While accepting the fact that Tamil artisans were employed in the decoration of Polonnaruwa, and some of the present day Sinhalese masons are of Tamil descent, Coomaraswamy, in his *Medieval Sinhalese Art*, used the word ‘Sinhalese’ to valorize the artistic achievements of these ancient cities. In Coomaraswamy’s writings, we sense a developed, finely honed, chronological structure based on dynastic and regional variations. On account of this, dynastic appellations such as Kushana and Sunga, Chalukya and Rashtra, Pallava and Chola became the normative lexicon of Indian art history. Paradoxically, in Ceylon, he erases his own framing device to collapse the diversity of the island’s cultural heritage into a singular frame, defining it as the ‘achievement of Sinhalese.’

In *Medieval Sinhalese Art*, Coomaraswamy documents the social and artistic tradition of the Kandyan kingdom of the south Indian Nayakars through minutely tracing major stylistic connections with the art of south India and the south Indian origin of the artisans. His basic argument is that these south Indian elements were fully localized into a ‘uniquely Kandyan’ idiom in the local cultural milieu of Kandy. Yet, instead of using

---

46 He believed that while Sinhalese craftsmen were employed in producing articles of necessity for simple agricultural folk, artists, the Kammalars from the crafts guilds of South India were engaged in catering to the requirements of the city and court. Based on Dr. Pulney Ady’s paper in *Journal of Industry* (no.50), he argued that the Kammalars are descendants of the Aryans who entered India across Punjab long before Vyasa began the collection and arrangement of Vedas. Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, *Medieval Sinhalese Art*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1956 [1908]), 62.
the word 'Kandyan', Coomaraswamy employs the word 'Sinhalese'. As pointed out earlier, what is problematic here is the manner in which the term Sinhalese, introduced as a linguistic category and later transformed into a racial category by the early European historians, now emerges as an artistic style in the writings of Coomaraswamy and his followers. In a different context, Coomaraswamy argues for art as an expression of racial experience. He further states that 'traditional forms depended on the fact that they represent race conception rather than the ideas of one artist or a single period. They are a vital expression of the race mind.'

In order to criticize the individuality insisted upon by European modernism, he emphasized racial identity, which itself was a colonial conception and applied that to conceive the nature of precolonial art. In fact, his bewilderment is the real nature of colonial ambivalence.

In an open letter to the Kandyan Chiefs, Coomaraswamy argues that the Kandyan style in architecture has many obvious Hindu features but yet has a character of its own. Though one can agree with his argument, his intention is not so clear in the usage of the word 'Hindu'. Because orientalist art history classified 'Hindu architecture' into four major styles based on region and race. In the context of medieval Sinhalese art, one would presume that the word Hindu connotes Dravidian style. Further, to demarcate the Kandyan style of architecture, Coomaraswamy uses the word 'Hindu-Sinhalese', establishing a hyphenated connection with the mainland of India. What is important here is his use of the term 'Hindu-Sinhalese' style, rather than Buddhist-Hindu or Sinhalese-Tamil style. By interweaving religious and racial identities, yet avoiding any mention of south Indian, Dravidian or Tamil, this new artistic identity that he suggested was ambiguous. Premised on an idea of purity, this detour around a geographical region was an attempt to formulate an authentic Sinhalese identity. This is visible in the way he urged the Kandyan chiefs, who were Buddhist Sinhalese, to safeguard the art and architecture of the Kandyan region.

In the process of Sinhalization of art history, the south Indian or Tamil contribution was grossly underplayed and even interpreted as a negative influence on the other. For example, Benjamin Rowland reports:

---

With the final conquest of Polonnaruwa by the Tamils in the 15th century, Sinhalese art fell on evil days; scarcely a monument worthy of serious consideration survives from the various capitals including the final stronghold at Kandy.\textsuperscript{49} The author is silent about the Tamil contribution to the so-called Sinhalese art in all the historical periods and is also mute about the Portuguese colonial rule which was deeply prejudiced against art practice. The Portuguese attempted to put a stop to local art practices by imposing religious conversion and banning the public performance of rituals of native religions. While most of these early writings are silent about the role of European colonialism, at some point, they perceive south Indian influence as a contamination that destroys their Aryan purity. This is also visible in the rather vituperative comment made by Anagarika Dharmapala, who staked a majoritarian claim on the nation by suggesting that minorities were a damaging force. For him, the struggle against European colonialism was also a struggle against the Tamils and south India. He writes:

This bright, beautiful island was made into a Paradise by the Aryan Sinhalese before its destruction was brought about by the barbaric vandals.\textsuperscript{50}

The religious antagonism of the Chola period which destroyed Buddhist, Jain, and in some cases, Vaishnava sites in south India as well as the Buddhist sites in Ceylon got a racial dimension with the influence of the racial theory and ethno-nationalism in Ceylon.

In 1933, Dr. Andreas Nell delivered a lecture on the art and craft traditions of Ceylon. Although he presumably attempted to trace the socio-economic condition of Ceylonese traditional art production, he actually tried to establish an Aryan legacy for the Sinhalese artistic heritage.\textsuperscript{51} In 1934, at the ‘National Art Festival’ organized by the National Art Society in Colombo, Dr. R. Saravanamuttu explained that the aim of the society was to reawaken and rekindle those ideas and ideals that lay dormant in the people of this country, and to awaken the racial soul and give it a chance to express itself.\textsuperscript{52} But this idea of racially identifying the nation led to the polarization of artistic identity during the formation of the National Art Society in 1933 under the leadership of

\textsuperscript{51} \textit{The Ceylon Observer}, June 24, 1933.
\textsuperscript{52} \textit{The Ceylon Observer}, August 16, 1934.
C. W. W. Kannangara, Minister of Education. The objective of the society, the 'furtherance of Sinhalese Art,' was vigorously debated. Members were divided in their opinion and insisted upon the inclusion of Dravidian and Muslim art. Eventually, it was agreed to replace the word 'Sinhalese' with 'Oriental.' This exemplifies how race, as a category of artistic identity, multiplied and reproduced in the colonial and postcolonial art discourse and transformed the artistic space of contestation and competition.

'Art History has laboured to legitimize its truths as original, preexistent, and only recoverable from the past.' The patriotic inspiration derived from the past, therefore carried sectionalist undertones which moulded nationalist thinking and fashioned the character of the modern Ceylonese nation state and its written art history. Hence, as John Clark observes, 'the use of the word 'traditional' to characterize artworks often involves the ideological self-definition of works by, or on behalf of, a social group who are instrumentally bound to legitimize their own stereotyping of the past. Such groups systematically exclude the actual historical variation in the past through their present reconstruction of it.'

2.5 Ideas of 'Pure' and 'Impure'

'Notions of authenticity were central to the growth of anti-colonial ideas in the early twentieth century.' The search for an authentic present led to the search for an authentic past. Authenticities are produced by the past, invented from the present. 'The race theory, like nationalism, is highly concerned about the internal borders where the concept of pure and impure played a crucial role.' Jayawardena argues that 'the impure are defined as inferior or untermensch (sub-human) and a threat to the majority.' Also, Thapar points out that 'racism presupposes a fear of bastardization and underlines separateness. It is at

53 The Ceylon Observer, November 25, 1933.
54 Donald Preziosi, Brain of the Earth's Body: Art, Museums and the Phantasms of Modernity (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 32.
the same time intelligible to large numbers and touches on commonly felt insecurities.\textsuperscript{59} This notion of pure, ingrained in the race theory and the idea of nationalism, extended to the artistic sphere through nationalist or orientalist artistic paradigms as part of colonial resistance. As mixed races became a threat to the colonial state or the nation, hybrid artistic styles and lifestyles were criticized by both colonialists and nationalists. Influences were seen as contaminations that must be purged.\textsuperscript{60}

Coomaraswamy writes, 'the taste of "educated" Sinhalese has degenerated beyond recovery, and some modern Buddhist constructions are not surpassed for incongruity and ugliness by any buildings in the world.'\textsuperscript{61} He complains that the modern Sinhalese was not willing to understand the implications of a century of foreign government and education in which the 'national culture' was completely ignored resulting in a period of subservient and obsequious imitation of foreign manners.\textsuperscript{62} Because of the colonial influences, Coomaraswamy continues, the older spirit has departed and though the unspoiled villager is still a man worth knowing well, the 'educated' classes are sadly degenerated and de-nationalized, the old life and culture are despised, and all interest in the country and its past is dead.\textsuperscript{63} Here, he identifies the village as the site of existence of the old spirit, unspoiled by the imitations of the educated class. The entries and descriptions in Coomaraswamy's \textit{Medieval Sinhalese Art} emphasize the role of reorganized handicraft traditions in the revival of a national culture. The book romanticized the medieval past of the 'Sinhalese' as the ideal pre-industrial village civilization, supported by royal and religious patronage of the arts.\textsuperscript{64} Bandaranayake points out that 'Coomaraswamy's appraisal of traditional Ceylonese and later of Indian art first arose in the context of a fierce critique of the impact of colonialism on traditional "Aryan" society and a fundamental rejection of the industrial

\textsuperscript{59} Romila Thapar, \textit{The Aryan: Recasting Constructs} (Delhi: Three Essays Collective, 2008), 77.
\textsuperscript{60} Early discussions on 'influence' are from the Eurocentric viewpoint situated in the Greco-Roman ideals and the artistic style of Gandhar became exemplified as a product of unskillful imitation of Greco-roman influence. But Orientalists, particularly Coomaraswamy and Havell, contested this notion.
\textsuperscript{61} Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, \textit{Medieval Sinhalese Art}, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1956 [1908]).
\textsuperscript{62} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{63} Ibid., 14–15.
\textsuperscript{64} This has been discussed at length by Tapati Guha-Thakurta in \textit{The Making of a New "Indian" Art} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 161.
capitalist society of the west in which lay the origins of colonialism. The flip side of Coomarasamy’s criticism of urbanization was the romanticization of rural society and its craft traditions. The unspoiled nature of the rural authenticates its craft productions as national expression. As John Clark argues, the major intellectual and artistic centre for Indian neo-traditionalism is rural rather than urban. It had a major effect on its development and formal stylistics.

At this juncture, Coomarasamy’s project of writing a book about late medieval Kandyan art took on a decisive political edge. What is important to note here was the historical need to project Kandy as an ideal pre-industrial self sufficient society. Kandy came under the direct influence of British colonialism much later in 1815 after a long history of resistance to European colonialism. Therefore, it was seen by nationalists as the locus of purity, originality and authenticity in ‘Sinhalese culture’. It symbolized the nationalist idealized imagination of uninterrupted continuation of medieval Ceylonese social and artistic life. It also authenticated Kandyan crafts as an expression of the ‘unspoiled’ rural against the colonial culture of Colombo city. Consequently, in nationalist discourse, Kandyan crafts seemed more appropriate for the construction of the national self rather than the contaminated ‘fine art’ of colonial Colombo. It is relevant to note here that the first craft society was established in Kandy in 1880.

The Ceylon Social Reform Society was formed under the leadership of Coomaraswamy in 1906, in order to encourage and initiate reform in social customs and to discourage the thoughtless imitation of unsuitable European habits and customs. Its manifesto stated that it was anxious to encourage the revival of native art and science. The Society desired to assist in protection of ancient buildings and works of art which go on under the name of redecoration and repair. The Society advocated the establishment of schools for native art and science. In this context, the whole idea of revivalism could be read as a project against colonial imitation, governed by the colonial idea of purity and

---

67 Ismath Raheem in a personal conversation with the author.
originality. Since art and nation went hand in glove, hybridity or imitation in artistic expression was seen as a challenge to the basic existence of the nation.

Governor Hugh Clifford's dispatch of 20 November, 1926 described the local Ceylonese population thus:

An essentially imitative people, they have adopted from their childhood the manner of living, the speech and as many of the social usages of the English as their means can make accessible to them. They are proud of having imbibed such an exclusive British quality as the public school spirit. ... Many of them experience difficulty in addressing an audience in Sinhalese; many of them have visited Great Britain and in ordinary conversation allude to England as home.69

Sir James Peiris, a distinguished member of the State Council, expressed a similar opinion about the art scene of Colombo. At the opening of the School Art exhibition in 1928, he stated that it was common in Ceylon to imitate or copy a few master hands and call it art. Ceylon, even in other fields, had become a very imitative country which was deplorable. They should attempt something original, and Ceylon itself provided ample opportunities for individuality and originality.70

French artist Edouard Barat, who visited the island in 1936, was quite critical about the imitative quality visible in the works of the younger generation:

Many young Sinhalese artists (among them are many young girls) have taken to painting more as a pastime than for pure pleasure in life...imitating a phase of western art of crude taste.

They have painted still life, compositions with European fruits, which perhaps they have never seen with their own eyes; or vegetables and other green stuff which only grow in Scotland, or have drawn figures, which appear to be but poor imitations copied from imported English calendars.71

Barat's remarks, while revealing the general situation, also connected the vocational practice of art, particularly of the women, with imitation.

Imitation and westernization became central issues in the speech of Tagore delivered at various places in Ceylon. For him, doing away with imitation is the actual

70 The *Ceylon Observer*, March 28, 1928.
71 The *Ceylon Observer*, June 23, 1936.
meaning of revivalism and the alternative to westernization. In a public address to a
gathering of 5,000 people at the Jaffna Central College grounds in 1934, Tagore said:

What saddens my heart is to find that though you are born to a beautiful land; there has
risen no poet in your midst, inspired by her magical charm, no lover to sing her serenade.
Your life seems to be floating on the surface of your history, which almost solely consists
of politics of a colourless kind. You have not yet fully strung her and tuned her; you
would have surely felt the necessity of it. If your soul were fully awake and if it
responded to the ceaseless message of beauty that come to you from your horizon and
blessings that meet you from the bosom of your earth.

You indulge in vanity of mastering a language which is not of your heart and your birth­
right which does not belong to your past, not to your future, and owning that obsession in
her children. Your country is waiting in vain for her wealth of literature, which only can
help her to discover her own soul and to bring out the treasure lying hidden in the
lightless corner of her mind.

I hope that my coming to your country will not end in ephemeral sensationalism, that
even when I leave your shore the memory of it will speak to you about the greatest of
your problems, which is that of finding our own true voice—not that of your master—in
our own language? In order to justify your existence, you must make your self heard to
your own self and to others. Do not waste your time and intellect in carefully imitating
other people, however great they may be, imitating their gestures, their manners, their
idioms, and be utterly lost in a vagueness of futile inanity.

I shall consider myself as having failed in my message, if I have not sufficiently
impressed you with the truism that you can not belong to your self. If you do not produce
your own literature as a truest document of the mastery of your mind, and also if I have
not persuaded you to believe that you must have a continental background of your
culture, which is the Indian background, that will vitalize your thoughts and enrich
your imagination.72

Here, Tagore mobilizes the trope of nature as a female who is waiting to be represented by the
(male) artist. While criticizing westernization as imitation, he insisted that Indianization was the
only way ahead to get rid of imitation.

In 1934, responding to dance and music performances in Colombo by the students
of Tagore’s Santiniketan, a correspondent wrote a letter in The Ceylon Observer stating

72 Ceylon Observer Weekly, June 19, 1934.
that it was a feeble imitation of highland dancing. In a quick rejoinder, Tagore retorted that 'everything we sing and dance is our Indian art and national creation. It is not right to say that everything in the East is an imitation of the West.' In his reaction, Tagore placed imitation as an antithesis of national creation. This reflects the Coomaraswamy's idea of imitation. Further, it also shows that how the earlier colonial notions of imitation were inverted and deployed in the nationalist discourse.

2.6 Imitation and Realism

Realism occupied centrestage in all written exchanges of the period. It may be interesting to look at some of the arguments to understand the position behind this mode of representation and how it was interpreted differently by different individuals and interest groups. Further, it was also closely knit with the debates on purity and imitation. These debates ranged along with the rapid spread of the realistic mode through photography, representational emphasis in colonial art education, and the elites' struggle to master the powerful artistic mode of that time. This institutionalization, at all levels, circumvallates realism with the discourse of dominance. In the colonial power dynamics, the appropriation or mastering of this mode of representation meant gaining agency or displaying progress. Both colonialism and nationalism used realism as a powerful tool to affirm their identities. Further, the association of realism with materialism and imitation confronted an epistemological rupture in south Asia. Hence, contradiction and tension between the ontological and epistemological meaning of realism in the colony, on the other hand, fashioned the distinct approach to that mode in local art practices.

Parul Dave Mukherjee, while tracing the genesis of naturalism in the Indian nationalist discourse, shows us how John Ruskin's problematic division of 'barbaric art of the Hindoos' and the noble art of civilized Europeans was centrally based on the idea of 'naturalism'. She further strengthens her argument with George Birdwood's statement that monstrous shapes of the puranic deities were unsuitable for the higher forms of artistic representation that is naturalism; and this is probably why sculpture and painting were unknown as fine arts in India. Therefore, as she points out, the association between naturalism and fine arts added a new dimension to the task of resurrection for the

---

73 The Ceylon Observer, June 03, 1934.
nationalists. As a response to the colonialist idea, the nationalists/orientalists reinforced the sharp East-West dichotomy in aesthetics, thus creating a new polarity between 'realism' and 'idealism'. Thus, 'naturalism became a fulcrum upon which rested the project of rescuing the notion of fine arts in India.'

Poul Pieris, the historian, in his address to Ceylon Art Club in 1929, criticized the Victorian and Edwardian levels of naturalism as futile imitation of the unessential characteristics of the cheapest style of representation in western art. Transcendental aesthetics of early orientalist writings saw realism as a threat to the local 'spiritual' culture. As Amarasekara pointed out, the early technique of the work of Eastern countries reveals a spirituality which is denied to more realistic representation of the modern methods of art expression. Nationalist spiritual/material binary simultaneously resisted and accommodated realism. By accepting the material and technical development of the west in the outer spheres of culture, nationalists claimed that the real eastern identity relied on the inner sphere which was spiritual. While accepting the formal qualities of realism, the nationalists searched for spiritual content that reoriented the historical realism of the West, creating an inherent predicament.

In 1936, Amarasekara produced an oil painting titled the 'Devil Dancer's Daughter.' This is considered to be one of the most significant paintings produced in the realist mode in Ceylon. Apart from its size and theme, its critical coverage by the print media added to its importance. The painting gave rise to several debates around Amarasekara's personality, CSA's ideology and modernist aesthetics. One could argue that the popular perception of 'Devil Dancer's Daughter' is partly a construct of the print media. An art critic wrote in The Ceylon Observer that the picture itself is meaningless. 'In this country the Devil dancer dances, his son also dances, but I have never heard of

---

77 My observation is based on the argument of Partha Chatterjee on spiritual/material in Partha Chatterjee, Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse? in The Partha Chatterjee Omnibus (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999).
the "Daughter of devil dancer" dancing. What a far-fetched idea! A similar sentiment was expressed in a letter to the editor that appeared two days after this comment which said that Amarasekara’s ‘Devil Dancer’s Daughter’ was good as a poster design but as a picture it was ‘to my mind a travesty of facts.’ The same letter also mentioned his landscape paintings at the London Academy Exhibition that year. The letter quotes Mr. Brook Elliot, who saw them in London and who at the same time was quite familiar with the Ceylonese landscape, as having observed that these pictures lacked the warmth and the atmosphere of the sunny clime of Ceylon. The contradiction between the painted reality and the actual social reality became an issue for these disagreements. It is also significant to observe here the degree of actuality that the public expected in the form of content that was translated into visual appearance. Most of these comments could be read in the light of nineteenth-century notions of ‘Realism’ that were based on the idea of ‘seeable fact’.

This discussion would be broadened by looking at some critical appraisals of portraits painted by Amarasekara around the same time. The views revolve around issues of technical competence and the expressive quality of realism. One view defines Amarasekara as a master craftsman and not an artist because of a lack of expression. It further argues that the mechanical finish in his paintings was a result of exceeding the limits of the medium. Another sharply written piece says:

Mudaliar’s work looks very realistic, it lacks expression. His portrait paintings look sculpturesque. This is a point which might perplex even the judges of Royal Academy Exhibition where, it is said, the Mudaliar’s work has a place. His Devil Dancer’s Daughter will appeal to the aesthetic taste of the tourist.

In short, the views presented above suggest that achieving realism through technical virtuosity leads to expressionless representations which are similar to the popular realistic genre available in the souvenir market. They argue that realism in paintings is not about photo finish; it should be sincere to the emotional reality or the character of the model. But Amarasekara, in his response to these criticisms, defined realism only in technical terms. He argues that eminent artists paint in an academic manner, with precision and

80 Ibid.
attention to the minutest detail, thereby obtaining a pleasing realism and this is not possible with any other style. 82 In one of a series of controversial exchanges with Amaresekara registered in six issues of *The Ceylon Observer* on technical virtuosity and representation, an art critic wrote:

What I wanted to point out is that it is the photographic draughtsmanship that has wrought unhappy results in interpreting the soul of Mudaliar Amarasekara’s sitter. ACGS seems to have entertained the notion that ‘imitation’ is the sense of interpretation, and that, in portraiture, the artist should paint in scrupulous and minutest detail, with photographic precision, and the beauty of his sitter as is visible to the naked eye. The beauty contemplated in art, I daresay, is not the superficial beauty—the beauty of flesh and blood. It is the beauty of the romantic, mystic, spontaneous, and emotional matter in which the artist brings the soul of his sitter into his work. Art, in true sense is not a physical problem: it is essentially a ‘spiritual problem’. Nature, I maintain, is not a model merely to imitate. On the contrary, I enunciate that Nature is an instrument of interpretation and inspiration. Hence my suggestion that Mudaliar Amarasekara is wrong in basing his work on the principle of ‘imitation’. 83

Interestingly, this argument defined realism as a problem of interpretation and inspiration, therefore, as a challenge in representing the spirit rather than the physical appearance. To put it differently, it argues that realism is not about the reality of material but spiritual content. But Amarasekara stated in his foreword to an exhibition catalogue of the Atelier School:

Our pictures will show you that we are Realist, as different from other schools of thought and expression and we try to represent things as they are really seen because we feel that, that is the best way of conveying to you the delight we ourselves have felt in them. But our realism is not merely an ‘imitation’ of nature but interpretation. First it is realism idealized: we compose and select from before us only what is essential to the beauty of the scene, omitting sometimes deliberately more often instinctively and unconsciously, all that detracts and obtrudes, we emphasize effect by contrast of light and colours. 84

By framing his realism as interpretation and positing his experiential reality instead of visual reality, Amarasekara brought his subjective position into realism. Further, he found a middle way for assimilation by cleverly combining the nationalist binary of ideal/real

into his new category called ‘realism idealized.’ His representations were not strictly from the third person’s position that objectifies, but a position in-between first and third persons. It is therefore difficult to identify Amarasekara’s realism in the expected terminologies of western realism. John Clark’s argument on assimilation may help us to place in context some of the above arguments. He argues that ‘reception is above all governed by the receiving art culture’s demand for the transfer of specific art style at a given epoch. At its very first stage, transfer must involve assimilation.’ He further says that assimilation is frequently tentative but skillful accommodation.

Another passage from Amarasekara’s catalogue essay further clarifies his idea of realism.

We find Fa Hian has said of the paintings of Sinhalese that they had a ‘very life like appearance.’ Parakrama Bahu-II ‘longed to have a perfect likeness of the master as he was in his life time’ and skilled painters were employed to ‘paint a surpassing likeness of Buddha’ and we also read that the artist King Jetta Tissa ‘sculptured a beautiful image of Bodhisattva so perfect’ that the image of Buddha was so realistic that ‘they rejoiced as if they heard the doctrine preached by the living Buddha himself.’

What is more important here is that Amarasekara went to the extent of talking about realism in the images of Buddha and Bodhisattva belonging to ancient Ceylon. This comment reminds one of earlier colonialist criticism that Indian puranic images were unsuitable for the higher expressions of naturalism and the Orientalist scholar’s counter argument that naturalism in art existed in India even in precolonial times.

2.7 Revivalism and ‘National Art’

Donald Preziosi argues that ‘modernity is thus the paradoxical status quo of nationalism, existing as virtual site constituting the edge between the material residues and relics of the past and the adjacent empty space that feature is imagined to be, demanding to be filled.’ If the first phase of art writings engaged with inventing a premodern history of

---

86 Ibid., 24.
88 Donald Preziosi, Brain of the Earth’s Body: Art, Museums and the Phantasms of Modernity (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 40.
the colonial state or emerging nation within the compulsions and expectations of newer identities, then the second phase of writings situated colonial and postcolonial art practices within the invented past. As is evident from the earlier discussion, 'revivalism was enmeshed within the search for self-confidence and the search for an identity. Inevitably, it tended to focus [on] age old identities—one’s specific "cultural family" or "ethnicity"." Coomaraswamy identified the revival of Indian art with the discovery of India's political efficiency. Therefore, the art historical project of this period attempted to gain political viability by asserting certain identities from the past. As many art historians have argued, this tendency to anchor modernity in the past instead of breaking from it, differentiates Euro-American modernism from south Asian modernism.

This period also registered the spreading of the Indian nationalist thought into the Ceylonese public sphere. Indian nationalist thought amplified the pressure created by cosmopolitan and patriotic sentiments. Differences in colonial history contributed to variations in the process of relativization and interpretation of Indian influence and gave a distinct disposition to Ceylonese writings. From the newspaper exchanges, one may conclude that the Bengal school and Santinikatan initially ignited the idea of 'national art' in colonial art practice. Cultural heredity and racial continuity were strategically employed by the local elites to accommodate selective ideas from India. The identification/differentiation with India, on the other hand, gave a new bargaining position to local elites. This realignment also strengthened emerging social networks among the cultural elites of the region. A Ceylon Daily News editorial registered this transformation through the statements of C. R. Das on nationalism.

A process through which a nation expresses itself and finds itself, not in isolation from other nations but as part of a greater scheme by which in seeking its own expression and therefore its own identity is materially assisted by the self expression and self realization of other nations as well.

---

By expressing these sentiments at an early stage in the nationalist movement, C. R. Das suggested the inexorableness of India in the self realization of Ceylon and its expression. The colonial governor, Sir Hebert Stanly, responded to this transition by arguing that national consciousness was the basis for national art.

Art played a very important part in the development of the national life. ... As a country progressed towards a full realization of its national consciousness and towards a more advanced position of national activity art generally prospered with many advances.92 However, the idea of national art was contested and resisted staunchly by some members of the highly anglicized local elites. When a journalist commented that ‘the promotion of national art is bound to meet with favour in these days of national awakening,’ Amarasekara contested in no uncertain terms the idea of a national art, by arguing that art is a universal language. ‘If we keep ourselves in artificial isolation from any outer influence, we can only produce an indigenously grown national art.’ Further, he commented: the foreigners expected to see something a little barbaric in Ceylonese contemporary art, but in my work I have not only shown the natural beauty of our country I have also expressed the state of civilization we are in today. To think art in national terms is to put that ideal of “brotherhood through art” very far distant indeed.93 Interestingly, Amarasekara’s claim sounds like the modernist utopian imagination of international art. As a studio practitioner displaying local natural beauty in the realistic mode in oil painting or water colour, he equated this with showing the state of civilization. Here realism indicates the degree of civilization. On yet another occasion, he argues:

The art today is a cosmopolitan affair. Facilities of communication and the inter-change of international ideas by literature and colour reproductions of the world masterpieces, have broken down the old frontiers of thought, so that while painters of various styles may be found in all countries, the mode of expression throughout the world are becoming very much alike.94

---

92 The Ceylon Observer, August 14, 1928.
93 The Ceylon Daily News, February 13, 1925.
Academic realism naturally came under attack from revivalists whose imaginations were shaped by the neo-traditionalist way of thinking. Whether academic realism in its true sense existed in Colombo is still a question. More or less, the term indicated the amateurism of the CSA with the ‘artistic standard of picture post cards and plagiarisms of Royal Academy catalogues.’ 95 This becomes clear from Lionel Wendt’s views about revivalism.

It is unfortunate that the Society (CSA) as a body looks askance at the ancient art of Ceylon. Some prominent members...are said to be distinctly hostile to a revival of indigenous art. The society exclusively follows the English water colour painters. It does not even attempt to profit by study of art of the modern European Schools. In this respect the Society exactly represents the servile mentality of the modern Ceylonese...lack of originality among our people is clearly attributable to indifference of the so-called educated Ceylonese in national culture.96

It is important to note here his helplessness in persuading the CSA to look at ancient art and modern European Schools. Hence, the criticism levelled against the CSA is not because of western influence but the amateur practices based on academism, a style of painting that was already passé in Europe. Similar sentiments were expressed in his newspaper exchanges with Amarasekara in 1930 that continued for quite some time with responses from others, after the exhibition of paintings of the British Royal Society artists and Otto Scheinhammer’s farewell exhibition, both at the CSA.

In his outright condemnation of the Town Hall exhibitions, Lionel Wendt expressed his disappointment about the quality of works. He wrote: 'They may be realistic portrayals of pretty sitters, they may remind sentimental spectators of charming holidays and happy country scenes, but pictures in proper sense....they are not. There is not one picture among the one hundred and ninety exhibits.'97 In his reply, Amarasekara attacked modernist art that was popularized by the CAC. He commented: 'Some of the products of the post-impressionist school to which the public have been treated within recent years and told to admire because it is the correct thing to do, coupled with an Art jargon which in many cases is as absurd as it is insincere.' He continued: 'The average

96 Ibid.
97 The Ceylon Daily News, March 03, 1930.
laymen still await with empty patience some explanation of the frightfulness displayed in
the works of some of our local painters who have been successful in achieving ugliness in
their work that were recently exhibited. In these rebuttals, Amarasekara held that art
must depict only the beautiful. Citing Keats—'beauty is truth, truth beauty'—he
contended that art, therefore, must stage its objects, whether natural or human,
‘truthfully’ in order to produce beauty. In other words, art had to be ‘realistic.
Amarasekara viewed the post-impressionist and cubist approach in contemporary art
as ‘frightful’ and ‘achieving ugliness’ as opposed to realism, which he argued, catered
to the laymen’s sensibilities. He further explained the aesthetic merits of the exhibits
as follows:

The landscapes here, for instance can be enjoyed by anybody who loves nature, without
knowing anything about art…. They are true to the nature and nobody cares whether they
are pictures of Venice or ‘somebody’s back garden’, only if the latter was as beautiful a
subject for artists to paint and a connoisseur to live with. These pictures have another
great appeal, especially to the students—that is their beautiful surface quality of the
pigment itself.

George De Niese, who participated in the controversy to support Amarasekara, argued
that Wendt’s comment arose due to his disappointment and dismay to find modern idols
like Cezanne and Gauguin missing from the exhibition. ‘Mr Wendt as he grows older will
perhaps begin to understand that just as there are more types of beauty than one so there
are more schools of art than one, and that no level headed critic will expect, and be much
less disappointed on missing the pet gods of a particular individual or clique in the sole
and exclusive occupation of the entire art pantheon.’ Similarly, Arthur Anthonisz
argued that Wendt evaluated the exhibition, perhaps, with the sole idea that no picture
painted in a style other than what he is pleased to consider the modern style can be of any
value. Amarasekara’s supporters read Wendt’s criticism as an expression of his
personal inclination towards modernism.

Wendt commented: ‘Painting, if it is to be art, should not be photographic…must
possess qualities of form and colour that are demanded of art.’ He argued that the skillful

---

100 The Ceylon Daily News, March 06, 1930.
handling of realism had become outdated with the commencement of modernism. His reaction to the realism nurtured by the CSA shows a larger concern with 'quality'. He emphasized: 'many of the paintings are simple bits of pretty colour, expression of sweet sentimentality, records of natural beauty. ... There are, as it is, a sufficiency of recordings of natural beauty in Ceylon proceeding relentlessly from year to year. The need is for a realization that such records are not art, however praiseworthy be the craftsmanship. An exhibition of a set of modern colour reproductions of old masters would have been a great service to art in Ceylon.' While his statement distinguished sentimentality and craftsmanship from creativity, it explicitly stated that the problem was not westernization or realism but mediocrity of expression. His views reflect those of Winzer, as regards the quality of art practice in Ceylon in the name of academic realism. Winzer described these works in the Catalogue of the first modernist exhibition in the 1930s as the 'artistic standard of picture postcards, plagiarism from Royal Academy catalogues.' Van Geyzel went further and questioned Amarasekara about the merits and spiritual significance of these pictures.

It is important to note here that European aesthetics became the reference point for aesthetic standards. In that sense, these arguments are not really anti-west. The only difference is the identification with a different artistic mode. In a few instances, India too became a yardstick to measure Ceylonese aesthetic standards as S. A. Wickramasinghe argues.

The tragedy of art suicide in Ceylon could be well realized by the study of the birth of the glorious national art in modern India after a century of darkness. Exotic influences have reached us as far as costume and gesture, the roots of life they could not touch. Go to a public dinner or a society wedding and watch how we perform with superstitious exactitudes the rituals of European manners. A veritable mimicry which is surpassed only by an enslaved Negro! To one who had seen the great masterpieces of ancient India, the mother of Eastern culture and shared in the feeling of devotion, spiritual calmness and the grandeur of modern Indian artist, statesman, philosopher or poet, the atmosphere of the

102 The Ceylon Daily News, March 10, 1930.
103 Winzer, in the foreword to the exhibition catalogue of Keyt and Beling, quoted in Manel Fonseka, "Rediscovering Lionel Wendt," in Lionel Wendt: A Centennial Tribute (Colombo: The Lionel Wendt Memorial Foundation, 2000), 21
The exhibition of paintings of George Keyt and Beling, organized by Winzer in 1930, is considered to be the first modernist exhibition in the city. Winzer notes in his Foreword to the exhibition catalogue that ‘any young artist who turned for advice and inspiration to the works of modern masters was proclaimed as being “morbid” or “not original”, an “imitator”, a “cubist”, a “modernist”—for to belong to our own time, to try and discover new modes of expression or execution is considered a departure from good taste.’ In response to the first modernist painting exhibition, Dr. Andreas Nell, an eminent ophthalmologist and historian member of the Asiatic Society, in his letter to the editor, *Ceylon Daily News*, sharply contested the very idea of artistic revivalism by asking whether revivalism substitutes a new formula for the old.

The artist, who rejects time-honoured formula, should not set up a new formula to cramp his style and hinder his natural development to maturity and mastery…. This is apparently the danger towards which is drifting our young and sincere artists: replacement of ancient formula by a new formula as false and fallacious as any made hitherto.…. No subservience to theory, formula, or coterie will compensate for refusal to perceive Nature’s lines and forms or a determination to exclude them from the painting in ill-found dread that the representation of Nature could be a bar to interpretation.

Wendt responded to this criticism almost immediately.

It might perhaps be permissible, in connection with the Doctor’s dictum that modern art substitutes a ‘new formula’ for ‘the old’, to point out that the ideals that actuate modern masters of painting are identical with those that actuated the old masters. The truth of this was established a great many years ago.

Ceylon is fortunate in Mr. Winzer who possesses the artistic intelligence necessary for comprehension and application of this principle. Might one also reverently point out that progress is demanded not of the artist alone, but also of the spectator and critic.

---

105 Ibid.
In this analysis, one wonders why after attempting to establish a commonality of ideals between old and new masters, Wendt still insists on change.

But Winzer’s answer to this question is not narrowed down by a formalistic preoccupation. In his speech to the members of the Art Club, he points out the ambiguity in the revivalist discourse of tradition and modernity.

Although economically times are bad, and we have no great hope of financial success...art rises above economic considerations and depression, and proceeds along the path of development and discovery.

Our materials are different, our conditions are different, the demands of the public are different, and the public must be trained and enlightened by us sufficiently, not only to appreciate our work, but also that of past; which is appreciated actually as relics, as signs of past greatness, but not out of time as works of art. But in spite of all differences of time, of conditions, the eternal qualities of art as shown at Anuradapura and Polonnaruwa should be studied, adapted to our life and continuity with them achieved. I may add that this continuity is closer to the decorative conception of modern art than the realistic, true-to-life, prettiness and cheap harmonies of academic achievement.109

As we have seen in the last chapter, Winzer had a liberal approach to education that was more concerned with art rather than with particular artistic forms or styles. But when it comes to practice, his arguments are based on the art of the past and the art of the European modernists, and connected to a design based artistic approach followed by Art Nouveau or the Bauhaus movement. Similar sentiments on modernism and non-European traditional art were expressed by Poul Pieris in a lecture at the CAC in 1929. They reconceptualized the past through a modernist formalist framework of art. Here, Winzer did not advocate reinvention of the past or meaningless adaptation of the modernist European Schools. Even though he insisted on the importance of appreciating traditional or ancient art for its approach to design and external qualities of form, he differed drastically from the orientalist ideology of Coomaraswamy or the Bengal school. He emphasized the study of both nature and forms of past as a way to overcome colonial stagnation. His emphasis on the past was in order to maintain certain continuity with it, rather than a replication. In his lecture at the Young Men’s Buddhist Association on the

subject of Sinhalese Art, Winzer's ideas about the past and its relativization in the present reveal his stand clearly.

Art of the nation was the expression of that nation's life subject to political, economic, and social factors. It had its periods of splendour and of weakness but it could not die. The term 'reviving art' was mistaken. Reviving a form of art which had out lived its days was an impossible and futile task. They saw it well illustrated in the effort to revive Kandyan art. The designs used no longer possessed a meaning. The spirit was flown and it was like galvanizing a dead frog. They could not produce vital art by these methods.

They should go deeper. They should afford chances to the younger generation to develop fresh ideas in the realm of art and they could do that only by reverting to a study of nature and by giving them the means of developing their creative instinct on that basis. The study of the past supplied that culture in thought without which art could not be expressive of national and racial characteristics. Under the double influence of study of nature and of the past those asserted themselves automatically and forged the link with the art of the past.\textsuperscript{110}

An editorial of \textit{The Times of Ceylon} registers the discussion on national art which was influenced by the activities and Swadeshi ideology of the Bengal School as also against westernization in art. It refers us to the point about revitalizing the past through harmonizing it with the present. 'Bengal School of Art which was inaugurated over two decades ago in India would be a step decidedly in the right direction.'\textsuperscript{111}

Tagore's speeches, art exhibitions, and performances of the cultural troupe from Santinikatan revitalized the cultural scene and deepened the search for a national self. This led to a vibrant discussion on national art, evident from the large number of opinions that were circulated in the print media. An editorial in the \textit{Ceylon Observer Weekly} questioned the attitude of local artists who felt an acute lack of 'standards' in their art and were therefore compelled to borrow from European sources. It further commented:

But sedulous copying of the Ajantha or Sigriya frescoes cannot give the Art of India and Ceylon the vitality that spring from genius. Dr. Tagore was perfectly plain on this point.

\textsuperscript{110} \textit{The Ceylon Observer}, February 06, 1932.

\textsuperscript{111} "Editorial," \textit{The Times of Ceylon}, October 23, 1933.
The Bengal artists have eyes for life around them as well as for the mural pictures that belong to their country’s past. He urged artists to come into closer touch with modern life. Ceylon suffers doubly from India’s disability in its lack of what Dr. Tagore called ‘a background of experience which deals with varied and many forms of Art and with its development through the centuries. Our artistic evolution is also hampered for want of creative impulse emanating from a group of real artists striving earnestly for a common ideal. … We hope the exhibition of pictures from Santiniketan and the poet’s message will have a stimulating effect on all interested in the future of Art in Ceylon.\footnote{112}

Dr R. Saravanamuttu, Mayor of Colombo in 1937, identifies lack of national consciousness in art as a problem in colonial education. While he defined art as the ideal unity of spiritual, intellectual and emotional impulses, ironically he saw this ideal as ‘national’.

For centuries under alien control and alien influence, we had received a soulless education, cut off from all our ancient roots of culture and tradition, but today the soul of the people is awakening and we are witnessing the birth pangs of a Ceylon nation. … The teachers in the schools should always remember that a picture was not a photograph, that art was not science, that creation was not mere imitation. Art was always charged with spiritual intensity, with intellectual and emotional revelation.

The great artist would therefore become great only when he became the mouthpiece of that unity of ideal, that national impulse.\footnote{113}

Amarasekara contested the idea of a national spirit. Further, he defended the realist mode which was criticized by modernists as a continuation of colonial legacies. As a realist, while questioning the idea of a national art that reinvented the past, his solution lay in focusing on the contemporariness.

We use all the modern technical knowledge at our command whether gathered from East or West because we believe that Art knows no nationality. …

We believe that there can never be Nationalism in Art or in Science or in Philosophy. We feel that just as science is the universal search for truth, philosophy the search for reality, so art is the universal and not a national attempt to express the beautiful. But you will find in our record the life of our country and our age.\footnote{114}

He emphasized that nationalism can only find expression through subject, but language and technique are universal.\textsuperscript{115} He strongly believed that adaptation of traditional techniques to express nationalist sentiments was against progression. He openly criticized the Indian nationalists in a statement reproduced here.

Quite recently a visitor to the Island lecturing on ‘National Art’ exhorted our local artists and students not to adopt ‘western technique’ as expressed in oil painting, because, according to him all ‘Eastern Art’ has been executed in water colour. We can not endorse that kind of Nationalism. It would be suicidal to reject on any grounds a powerful and pliable medium like oil painting with which we have already achieved much and will achieve ever greater things in the future.\textsuperscript{116}

Interestingly, in order to reject the allegation against oil painting as being non-traditional, he went back to the same sources which nationalists used to affirm authenticities and argued that oil as a medium was used by the ancient Sinhalese as well.

But if tradition alone should be the ground for adopting the medium of oil paint, I might point out that in the first mention of painting in the \textit{Mahāvamsa} it refers to oil as a vehicle for painting by Sinhalese in the second century. ... Sir Cecil Clementi, at one time Governor of Hong Kong and great Chinese scholar said on the occasion of the thirtieth annual exhibition of Ceylon Society of Arts, of which he was the President that in Chinese historical records of the second century BC, Ceylon is credited with having been the first to have used oils as a vehicle of painting though the tradition has been lost to us now.\textsuperscript{117}

Terming the entire argument of revivalism as ‘exalting the past at the expense of present,’ Amarasekara condemned that ‘these misinformed critics wish us of the twentieth century AD to express ourselves in the manner of second century BC.'\textsuperscript{118} He argued: ‘If Ceylon art should be painted in the Sigiriya manner, it would be mere imitation of the past while art should be a living and not a dead language.'

\textsuperscript{115} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{116} Ibid.
He also questioned the need for an archaeologist's approach among artists.

Art is not national but universal. As regards archaeology then, avoid it altogether—archaeology is merely the science of making excuses for bad art: it is the abyss from which no artist, old or young, ever returns, or if he does return, he is so covered with the dust of ages and mildew of time that he is quite unrecognizable as artist, and has to conceal himself for the rest of his days under the cap of a professor or a mere demonstrator of ancient history.\(^\text{119}\)

By insisting on the mastery of technical advancements and progress, he spoke in the language of modernity. On the other hand, he rejected all primitive tendencies of modern art as limitations.

Some misinformed or uninformed critics guided entirely by a mistaken 'national' idea seem to think that we should all paint in the manner of Sigiriya and Polonnaruwa frescoes. They seem to believe that errors in drawing and perspective and shortcomings in techniques, and limitations due to insufficient materials, and limited palette of the time were intentional, and had a purpose, and think that by working within those limitations, and intentionally drawing incorrectly they should capture the spirit of the past, the soul of Sinhalese Art.\(^\text{120}\)

Quite recently, an Indian Lecturer on Art advised the Ceylon students to give up oils and devote themselves exclusively to water colour because he said all European painting was executed in that medium. He might as well have asked us not to use paper but to confine ourselves to painting on ground prepared with coconut fibre and paddy husks because our traditional art in Sigiriya is said to be painted on such a surface. What we have achieved in this, the most powerful and pliable medium will show you how much joy and accomplishment would have been lost to the artist and how much art to the country if such foolish advice were followed. If, in other branches of higher education, we study the science and literature of other countries, why should we deny ourselves similar sources of study to enrich our knowledge and our pleasure in this?\(^\text{121}\)

He pointed out the difference between an appreciation of the past and imitation of the past, a view similar to that of his opponent, C. F. Winzer.

---


\(^{120}\) Ibid.

\(^{121}\) A. C. G. S. Amarasekara, "Fifty Years of Art in Ceylon," Broadcast talk Reported in \textit{The Ceylon Observer}, February 19, 1938.
Frescos of Sigiriya and Ajantha are held in such great admiration not because they are superior in achievement or technique to what has been produced since, but because they are remarkable achievements of the time. ... I maintain that we have very little to learn today from Sigiriya and Polonnaruwa Art because they belong to a period before the arts of portrait and landscape painting were established, long before the art of etching and lithography were invented, long before the laws of perspective and chiaroscuro, the science of colour and light and atmosphere were perfected and given to the world of art.  

The difference between appreciation and appropriation is stated clearly in the following statement. This also ideologically marks out all the CSA activities. Even though Amarasekara, as an active office bearer of the CSA, contested the idea of revivalism, CSA displayed works of the Indian revivalist movement and also set up a special section for oriental art. What is clear from the following statement is that Amarasekara saw them as activities of appreciation.

The CSA has recently started a study circle to study oriental art, especially ancient Ceylonese art of which circle I am also a member; that does not mean that we want to take a retrograde step and start painting in the twentieth century, in the primitive manner of the fifth century, but we have among us some whose temperaments and idiosyncrasies incline them to confine their works to what may be called an oriental manner, or that we have among our members some who are interested in ethnology and archaeology. I do not see why there should be an archaeologist among the artists whose idiosyncrasies will perhaps lead them to add another phase of art to our National Art expression, which now includes all branches of modern art, recognized the world over as fine art.

In 1934, G. Venkatachalam, the Indian art critic, delivered a series of lectures on Indian art which spanned across the ancient and modern periods. He ruffled many a feather with his suggestion that Ceylon had nothing except dead art to show the world. Geoffrey Beling retorted sharply in an exhibition review he wrote of Justin Pieris and George Keyt's work:

A few days ago it was reported that there were no original artists in Ceylon—that Art in Ceylon was dead. The exhibition of the works of Mr. Justin Pieris and Mr. George Keyt

---

123 Ibid.
124 The Ceylon Observer, August 16, 1934.
at the Art gallery disproves this statement. Here we have not only originality, but art. And this is a point that is frequently overlooked, where too much emphasis is laid on originality and self-conscious nationalism in art as ends in themselves. Quite obviously we can now serve no artistic end by returning to a mere imitation of the art forms of Sigiriya, Anuradhapura, and Polonnaruwa, however ‘national’ the result may be. The art of Sigiriya, Anuradhapura, and Polonnaruwa was true to its age: reflected the thought, culture, and ideals of those times; and was created by men who transmitted their nationality to their art unselfconsciously. Their art was a genuine expression of themselves. There will always be national art wherever the individual expresses himself sincerely. But we need not expect it to be a mere repetition of the past. Those who do not expect art to be mere photographic imitations of nature, those who are open-minded enough to approach picture without pre-conceived notions of what they ought and ought not to be, and those who are alive to the significance of rhythm and design and colour in art, will find this exhibition interesting. 125

In a way, Winzer’s strong ally and an active member of the modernist groups, Beling’s comment captured the whole argument of revivalism and national art in a nutshell. For him, the national character was something which emerges from a sincere and unself-conscious sense of being located in his/her period and his/her cultural environment, and hence it could not replicate the past. Therefore, it is against the programmed art of nationalism/orientalism. He also emphasized ‘originality’ and an approach based on design principles in art, the very qualities valorized by the Parisian modernists of the twentieth century. These observations express a clarity rooted in individuality and self confidence.

An interesting turn of debate on national art in the colonial art world, is registered in the catalogue essay of the tenth exhibition of the 43 Group in 1955, a few months before the passing of the Sinhala Only Act which hegemonized the Sinhalese identity over Ceylonese identity. The essay expresses acute concern over the threats to modern art practices, namely from the old academy and state patronage of safe and unimaginative art. It also identified as other adversaries belonging to the present time those ‘twin

monsters [of] politics and nationalism.' These are deemed to be threats to free art practices. It continues:

A new danger to art in this country comes from vociferous and ignorant nationalism. The art of Lanka is presented as something that came to maturity independently of all external influence, and exists uniquely in a sort of sanctified vacuum. That the art of this country's past displayed at various times the influence of Amaravathi, of Gupta art, of Pallava and various south Indian schools is conveniently ignored—if it was ever appreciated. The error here arises from a false conception of tradition as some thing static, achieved once for all. It is akin to the academic heresy that there is only a single style of painting. ... The forces of tradition to which the modern painter is exposed have multiplied enormously in the recent past. The discoveries of archaeology and improved techniques of photographic reproduction have placed the art of all ages and countries at his disposal. 

While echoing the earlier convictions of Beling, the essay registers the Group's strong voice of dissent to the notion of tradition framed by the nationalist ideology. It reinterprets tradition as a local achievement gained from all the external influences including those from south India and as a phenomenon in constant flux. The essay bears a cosmopolitan approach to the past and the present.

2.8 Conclusion

The above debates and their issues construct the ideological plane of the colonial art world of Colombo. John Clark has a word of caution regarding art discourse. 'Interpreting art discourse as discourse alone, without questioning what art discourse is and to whom it is addressed, is problematic.' Since the writings I have considered were published in English and written by men mostly from the Euro-Asian or anglicized Sinhalese communities, these discussions were specific to the elite public sphere. Vernacular newspapers, both in Sinhala and Tamil, did not focus on art practices in the city since it was not of particular interest to their readers. The lack of fluency in local languages among the city elites led to English becoming the language of the art world. These writings reflected the dilemmas, anxieties and aspirations of the city bourgeoisie.

The sense of 'we' expressed in these texts, the taste that they propagated, the priorities of issues and the strong belief in public debate reflected the process of production of a new notion of art as well as the artistic sphere in association with the formation of the bourgeois self. The question of identity—in its collective and personal domains—in different phases of modernity became the subtext of these writings.

Major differences that constitute the public opinion of art and its practice were registered through the voices of Coomaraswamy, the Indian revivalists, Amarasekara and the artists of the CAC and the 43 Group. In the absence of serious art writers, artists themselves voiced their ideological standpoints and aesthetic preferences. As Susi Gablik has pointed out, this transformation is one of the general trends of modernity. This signifies the emergence of the new artist individual, high on self confidence and social recognition. The artist elevates himself from the position of skilled worker to a politically conscious creative individual. This political consciousness gave an agency to the artist to connect his own work with the larger cultural discourse of the time. This new mediatary role or double privileged position of the artist, produced a fixation between the modernist notion of the artist’s self identity and national identity. The equilibrium between the two kept changing contextually as in the case of Amarasekara and Lionel Wendt. On the other hand, the artist’s self interest and the nation’s demands were in constant conflict and demanded continuous negotiations.

As Donald Preziosi points out, ‘the rise of a professional discourse on the arts has been deeply complicit with the promotion and validation of the idea of the modern nation-state as a natural entity ideally distinct and homogeneous on ethnic, racial, linguistic, religious, and cultural grounds.’ Notions of purity, originality and authenticity that police the ‘internal’ borders of the nation were reflected upon as aesthetic ideals. Therefore, I would argue that the fix between art and nation operated through, manifested in and was regulated by writings on art. On the other hand, the aesthetic body of the nation became perceivable through art writing rather than real art work among the reading public.

---

129 Donald Preziosi, Brain of the Earth’s Body: Art, Museums and the Phantasms of Modernity (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 32.
The above discussion on art within the timeframe of colonial modernity reveals a subtext of tradition that is maintained as an elastic concept, to draw close or to push away from. It reminds us of John Clark's argument that 'clearly, as the modern is constituted by a distancing from or break with the customary, so the customary is reconstituted by the modern as traditional.'¹³⁰ Hobsbawm argues, inventing tradition is essentially a process of formalization and ritualization, characterized by reference to the past, if only by imposing reputation.¹³¹ This reinvention, even though read as formal references from the past, implies a larger transformation of the concept of image and image-making in colonial Ceylon.

The elitist collaborative strategy and the lack of a hard-edged nationalist movement restricted the influence of patriotism. In comparison with the art writings of the Indian subcontinent, Ceylonese writings of the period were more cosmopolitan in nature. The anti-imperialist standpoints never deterred them from being eclectic. Therefore, differences among these groups were mainly regarding the sources of reference and selection rather than being anti-European. This brings a duality to their approach, because these artist writers in most cases wanted to be international and national at the same time. The cosmopolitan attitude of Amarasekara and the 43 Group, while critically accepting certain tenets of Indian national art with other western influences, clearly rejected parochialism and quasi-obligatory repetition. They reinterpreted Coomaraswamy's essentialism through this approach. This gave a different edge to Ceylonese art practice.