

Modern Art in The Buddhist Image House. Gotami Viharaya

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When George Keyt completed his murals at the Gothami Viharaya Borella, in the mid-20th century it created a sensation, almost a scandal.

Sri Lankans, who were accustomed to see the characters from the Buddha Charita as painted by the school of Maligawe Sarlis and Solias Mendis, were not accustomed to see such voluptuous figures and amorous poses. Furthermore, they were not familiar with the modern visual language of Keyt, which had taken inspiration from Modern Art seen among the French artists such as Braque and Picasso. This double cultural shock may have been one of the root causes to reject the newly painted murals.

This research on one hand locates Keyt's painting in the realm of 'Spiritual Art' of India with a heavy use of symbolism, taking examples from S. P. Sakalasooriya, Ananda Samarakoon, Motagedara Wanigaratne, Jayasiri Semage, Somabandu Vidyapati, Danny Wimalasiri on one hand, and on the other hand as seen in a selection of artists of the '43 Group'.

The general rejection of the '43 Group' because they did not follow rules of perspective, single point perspective, picturesque compositions of landscape, neo-classical poses, shadings implying a three dimensional and Keyt's heavy dependence of line may have been other reasons for the attack on Western Modernism entering the Buddhist Image House via George Keyt.

The research question would be focusing on the taste of the Sinhala Buddhist elite, who were intolerant to the erotic sentiment "Sringara" which is amply displayed in the stone reliefs of Bharut, Sanghol, Nagarjuna Konda, Karle and murals of Ajanta, where human form is shown in all its beauty. The presentation at the conference will focus on Buddhist Art as seen in contemporary Sri Lankan artists and Keyt's Gotami Vihara murals.

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