

THE INFLUENCE OF EUROPEAN AND INDIAN CULTURE, ART AND AESTHETICS ON THE WORK OF GEORGE KEYT

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Introduction

Among the few gifted artists in the annals of Modern Sri Lankan art in the last century, George Keyt is justly placed in an esteemed position. Keyt, an active and an efficient member of the "43 Group", received acclamation and eminence, both locally and internationally. A poet, translator and exemplary photographer, George Keyt can be rightfully named the pioneer of Modern artists in Sri Lanka. As a professional painter, his lifetime work includes more than 12,000 sketches, oil paintings and acrylic paintings (Anand, 1997). The talent he possessed to amalgamate with modern local art, exquisite concepts of Eastern art and stylistic forms of Western art is a unique feature in the Modern field of Art in Sri Lanka (Arnason, 1998; Candappa, 2001). Beside the works of Western artists such as Pablo Picasso, George Braque, Marc Chagall, Edgar Degas, Paul Cezanne who were working within the frame of Modernism George Keyt too was engaged in a thorough study of the Eastern tradition of art to draw inspiration for his work. He specialized in the Kandyan tradition of Buddhist art as well as the Indian Hindu traditions of carving and the craft of sculpture and craftsmanship of creations in the temples of Khajuraho, Konarak and Bhuwaneshwari representing different traditions (Goonasekera, 1991; Arnason, 1988).

Research Problem

Even though the work of George Keyt has been examined from diverse points of view, these studies seem to be limited to two categories: firstly, the influence of ancient Indian art and secondly, the influence of European Modern art. However the fact that these two categories have been studied separately does not do justice to his work since Keyt juxtaposed his knowledge on ancient Indian art with that of European art forms. These two basic elements in his paintings are so well integrated that they cannot be separated. Furthermore, no attention has been paid to the aesthetic concepts and their influence on the paintings of Keyt, and this too persuaded me to take up the challenge. The main aim of this research is to analyze the external form/appearance of the independent painting style Keyt fashioned through the aesthetic concepts and European art forms that are represented in his paintings.

Objectives

- To identify and critically examine the influence of Sri Lankan and Indian Buddhist paintings on Keyt.
- Recognize the influences and effects of the Tantric philosophy in Medieval Hinduism (for example as found in Khajuraho, Bhuwaneshwari and Konarak temples).
- To examine the pervasive effects of the Indian aesthetic concepts

(especially the *Rasa* concept) on the paintings of Keyt and the manner in which they affected the development of his unique painting style.

- To examine the influence of the work of contemporary Indian artists.
- To study the Influence of the tradition of European Modern art forms and the effects of the works of artists in the same field (Impressionism, Post-Impressionism, Expressionism, Cubism and Surrealism).
- To suggest a consistent and integrated methodology to analyze his paintings

Methodology

The research design used in this study is a qualitative research design including content analysis and phenomenological study. An analysis of paintings, observations, and review of secondary data was the data collection methods of the study and descriptive data analysis and comparative analysis were used for the analysis of the data.

Discussion and Conclusion

Many are the idiosyncratic features in the painting tradition of George Keyt: Use of lines, colors and appropriate forms are exceptional features of this painter. He also concentrated on the symbolic use of color compositions in the paintings summarizing realism in drawings and using it as a powerful mode of expression, drawing on human emotion through the exact depiction of figures via images and positioning of figures on the canvas appropriately angling their gaze. His figures often mirror pent up personal

feelings and experiences and are drawn along one theme in masterly fashion, using different styles to express a range of emotions. The superiority of Keyt's combination of images and their contrasts produce a third implication apart from the quality of *Rasa* or aesthetic emotions inspired in each of his paintings, that is the touch of satire together with a comment on social reality. This maestro creatively and subtly includes morally anti traditional controversial depictions in his paintings. In studying the paintings of George Keyt it is noteworthy that he had adapted various styles of painting, especially those of the 1920's, 1940's, 1960's and the 1980's (Archer, 1977).

Almost all the painting of George Keyt highlight a tasteful combination of fundamentals borrowed from Eastern and Modern Western art. Exemplified in this amalgam are the *Rasa* concepts of Indian aesthetics and Tantric Buddhist concepts. Furthermore, art forms of the paintings were influenced by traces of Western tradition such as Impressionism, Post-Impressionism, Expressionism, Cubism and Surrealism. The exceptional artistic talent of Keyt is evident in his ability to 'invent' a painting style of his own, achieved through the blend of Eastern and Western art concept and forms.

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