

Indian Nationalism and the Making of 'Modern' in Sri Lankan Art

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The written art history of Sri Lanka maps modernist art practices in Sri Lanka as a consequence of westernization. But the material evidence, newspaper accounts and exhibition histories reveal how through ideological and aesthetic choices, India and its freedom movement became a counter current to the westernizing threads in Sri Lankan culture in general and art practices in particular. Hence, the mechanics of churning out a 'new art' from British colonial culture after 1920, was largely governed by the influence of Indian intellectualism. Apart from the visits by the Indian National congress leaders, exhibitions of works by artists of the Bengal school and Santiniketan had electrified the city-based local art practices and opened up debates on 'new eastern art' or 'national art'. In this context, Rabindranath Tagore's visits to Sri Lanka in 1922 and 1934 were crucial. One of the direct impacts of this current was the formation of the Ceylon Art Club (1921) and Sri Palee College (1934) in Colombo, and Kala Nilayam (1934) in Jaffna. Later, many of the Ceylon Art Club artists joined photographer Lionel Wendt in the formation of the country's most charismatic modernist art collective known as '43 group.' These developments formed an alternative to existing urban art derived from the ideals of Victorian academicism. Meanwhile, unlike the Bengal school, artist groups in Sri Lanka in this period displayed less insular and more cosmopolitan attitudes. This paper attempts to unpack the creative tension that was produced by the Indian Nationalist movement in the making of 'modern' in Sri Lanka art.