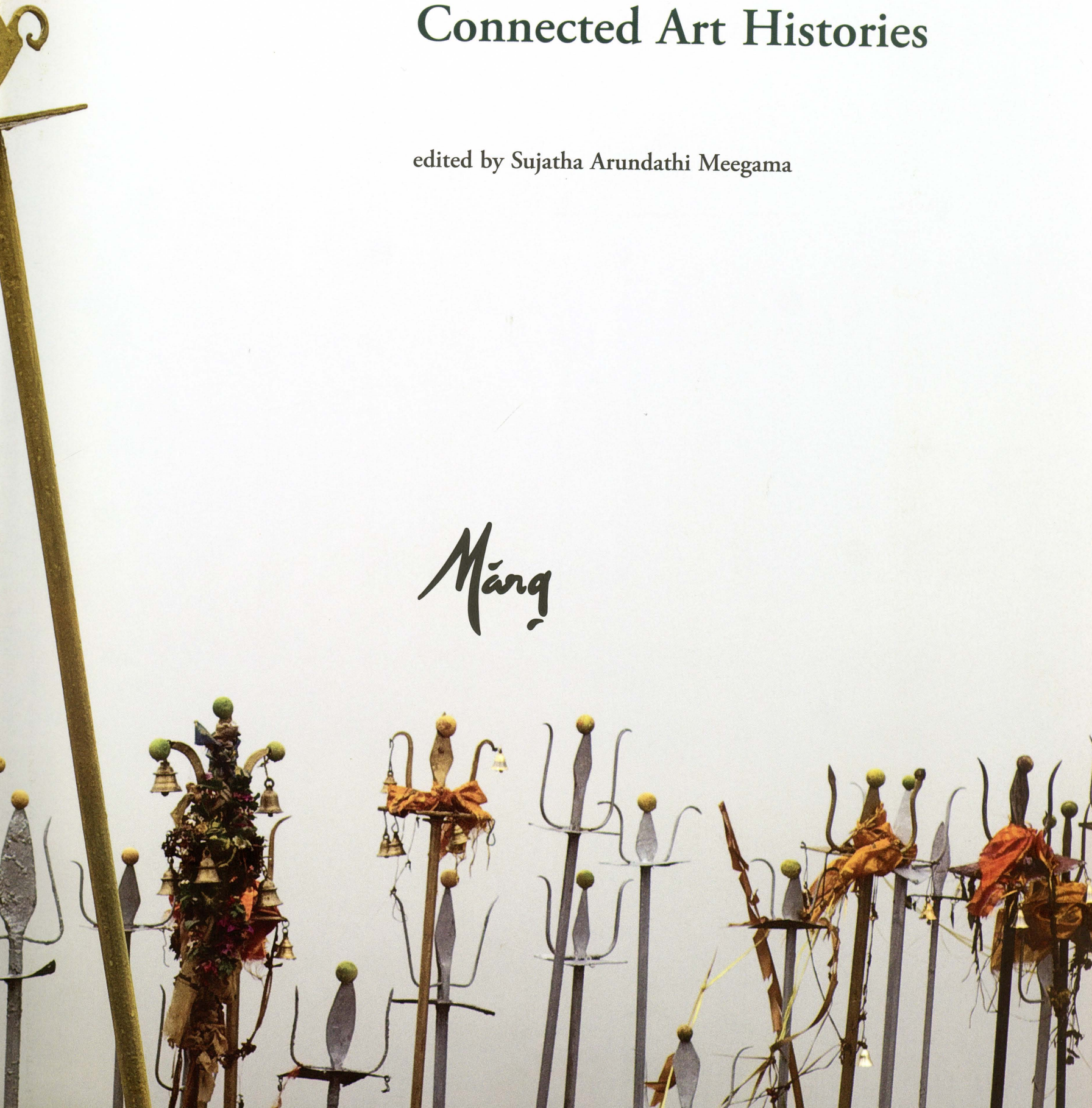


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# Visualizing the Sinhala Buddhist Nation: The Temple Murals of Sarlis Master

T. Sanathanan



**W**ith exposure to Western culture through trade, Christianity and colonization, the Buddhist mural tradition in Sri Lanka underwent a drastic change after 1850 in the southern maritime districts, close to the ports of Colombo and Galle. These areas produced an Anglo-Ceylonese style by assimilating European realism and the colonial lifestyle into the earlier narrative register that was dominated by line and the flat application of a limited number of colours. The Anglo-Ceylonese style developed in two phases: the first phase saw the introduction of colonial styles of dress, furniture, architectural settings, vehicles and other accessories into the existing narrative structure (figure 2).<sup>1</sup> The second phase showed a major breakthrough in the traditional two-dimensional forms of depictions through a naive attempt at illusionism (figure 3).<sup>2</sup> An eccentric combination of illusionism, contemporary life and mythological content led to an ambivalence in physical and temporal experience.

By the early 20th century, this hybrid style transformed into a full-blown popular realism in the murals of the master artist Maligawage Sarlis.<sup>3</sup> Sarlis was commissioned to paint many temples located in the vicinity of Colombo.<sup>4</sup> Through the production of mural paintings, book illustrations, and popular lithographic prints, portraits, cinema set designs and Vesak pandal hoardings,<sup>5</sup> he initiated a dialogue among the fields of painting, theatre and the emergent nationalism informed by Buddhism. His style became synonymous with the popular idea of painting and he was popularly known as “Sarlis Master”. His enterprise also marked the birth of the popular professional or “star artist”. Hence I argue that his art epitomized the new collaboration that combined the capitalist economy, modern technology of image production and nationalism with the newly emerging charismatic persona of the artist individual. Sarlis’ paintings became a symbol of Sinhalese bourgeois modernity.

### **Buddhist Revivalism and Sinhala Buddhist Nationalism**

In Sri Lanka, local revival movements at the end of the 19th century, through their tactics of mimicry, appropriation as well as Indianization, significantly reworked the project of colonialism. After an immense struggle for survival under European colonialism and Christianity for more than three centuries, Buddhism began its revival at the turn of the century. The revivalist movement was directed against “Christian” power rather than against British colonialism; moreover, an anti-Christian movement by English-educated monks like Migettuwatte Gunananda and Hikkaduwe Sri

**1**  
Ceiling of Sri Jayatilakaramaya, Colombo, artist unidentified, but attributed to Richard Henricus. Courtesy Department of Archaeology, Sri Lanka.

Sumangala had evolved through different stages as a Buddhist revival movement between 1860 and 1885.<sup>6</sup> Kumari Jayawardena argues that the most radical section of the bourgeoisie expressed their patriotic feelings through religious and cultural movements, especially through the revival of Buddhist and Sinhala identities.<sup>7</sup> Thus, the seed of nationalism was embedded in the projects of religious revivalism.

From the 1860s, new Sinhala Buddhist capitalists and merchants became the dayakas (literally “donors”) of the Buddhist cause and revivalism. The most lavish financial support for the Buddhist movement came from the Karava<sup>8</sup> planters, distillers and renters of Panadura.<sup>9</sup> The money earned in a “non-Buddhist way” by the distillers and arrack renters was spiritually encashed and purified through its investment in the Buddhist cause. On the other hand,

Buddhist revivalism gave new agency to the newly emerging non-Govigama elites to display their identity in the public arena. Patrick Peebles argues that wealth was less valid as an index of social status in the colonies than in the colonizing nations.<sup>10</sup> The social advancement of this new class was endorsed by the transaction of economic profit into cultural capital and this gave a new edge to their “progressive” identity.

In 1897, to mark the Diamond Jubilee of Queen Victoria’s coronation, the colonial government permitted local Buddhist temples to utilize funds for their own development.<sup>11</sup> That decision played a key role in the mushrooming of Buddhist temples and their decoration programmes in the Colombo district.

Furthermore, orientalist reconstructions of the history of the island glorified and romanticized the role of ancient kings in protecting Buddhism, building temples, and decorating them with paintings and sculptures. The archaeological findings of the remains of murals in Sigiriya, Thivanka, Dambulla and Kandy endorsed the orientalist imagination.<sup>12</sup> In this context, Buddhist wall-paintings emerged as an exhibitionary site of the new aspirations of city-based Buddhist bourgeoisie. Based on invented Sinhala Buddhist heroes from ancient chronicles, nationalists set up new notions of ideal masculinity and femininity that included the protection of religion, race and language. A combination of an imagined Sinhala Buddhist golden age, the duties of lay Buddhists, and the economic capital and cultural aspirations of the new middle class instrumentalized artistic productions within the religious domain.

### Theatre and Sinhala Buddhist Nationalism

The colonial-period temple murals evolved with the popular theatre tradition. There was a triangular relationship between temple murals, theatre and Buddhist religious nationalism in the period between 1880 and 1930. Visual realism,



2  
Scene in the bedchamber of Yashodhara, Sri Subodharama Maha Viharaya, Karagampitiya, Dehiwala. Photograph: T. Sanathanan.

3  
Scenes from *Ummagga Jataka* on the outer wall of the ambulatory, Sri Subodharama Maha Viharaya, Karagampitiya, Dehiwala. Courtesy Department of Archaeology, Sri Lanka.

I argue, entered the popular domain mainly through theatre with all its ambiguities. Temple murals and the colonial theatre developed as art genres of the urban middle class by influencing each other. Simultaneously employed in the production of backdrops and screens for the theatre as well as murals for temples, painters easily crossed the borders of the two media while catering to the aspirations and tastes of their middle-class patrons.

In the closing decades of the 19th century, Sinhala modern theatre registered its presence against the existing folk theatre traditions—Parsi<sup>13</sup> companies and English theatre. Although the beginning of modern Sinhala theatre was rooted in the earlier Nadagama form, it was deeply influenced by British colonial theatre, Bengali nationalist theatre and the touring Parsi theatre from Bombay.<sup>14</sup> It marks a significant

transition in Sinhala theatre from traditional to modern as it transformed from being rural, ritualistic, stylized and offertory to being urban, secular, naturalistic and commercial.<sup>15</sup> An amalgamation of Nadagama and Parsi theatre developed as a distinctive theatre style called Nurti.<sup>16</sup> The earliest writer in this tradition was C. Don Bastin (b. 1852), a pupil of revivalist Hikkaduwe Sri Sumangala. His first play was published in 1879.<sup>17</sup> Nurti, as a theatre form with a larger component of prose and dialogue, was divided into acts and scenes like the European plays. It emerged as a new urban form of Sinhala theatre from the 1880s and became a powerful medium of nationalist ideology.<sup>18</sup> John de Silva and Charles Dias, both lawyers by profession, developed the young Nurti tradition into a full-fledged national and nationalist theatre by the early 1920s.<sup>19</sup>



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### **Book Illustration: The Work of Richard Henricus**

In conjunction with the popular religious movement, dharma texts and Jataka stories were printed in the letterpress to make them accessible to a wider reading public. Richard Henricus and J. Wijesinghe are two important names associated with book illustration at the end of the 19th century.<sup>20</sup> Richard Henricus (active between 1890 and 1920) and his elder brother Charles Henricus worked in a wide range of media from book illustrations to theatre backdrops and temple murals, and catered to the needs of Christian and Buddhist institutions. These different modes of material and circulative possibilities of images were linked by an eclectic visual language, characters and legends. New Buddhism benefited from Henricus' Buddhist characters cast in the European Classical visual mode with a Christian outlook.

Although trained under his elder brother George Henricus who was sent to Italy by the Christian missionaries to learn painting, Richard's pictorialism drew heavily from the paintings in Poorvarama Vihara, Keselwatta.<sup>21</sup> He also evolved the theatre backdrops for the Tower Hall Theatre established in 1911.<sup>22</sup> Gamini Jeyantha Mendis identifies decorative motifs in the ceiling of the Jayatilakaramaya Temple (1909) in Grand Pass (figure 1) as the sole surviving wall-painting by Henricus.<sup>23</sup> The only other surviving works by Henricus are the black-and-white book illustrations printed in the half-tone technique in Colombo (figure 4). The cover pages and the illustrations of books based on *Jinarajavansaya*, *Kusa Jatakaya* and *Kusa Jataka Kavyaya* made Henricus popular among the Sinhala Buddhist readers.<sup>24</sup> The wide circulation of the illustrations, in a way, determined the popularity of the image among the newly emerged reading public. His visual style shows a direct influence of Christian imagery, European romanticism or

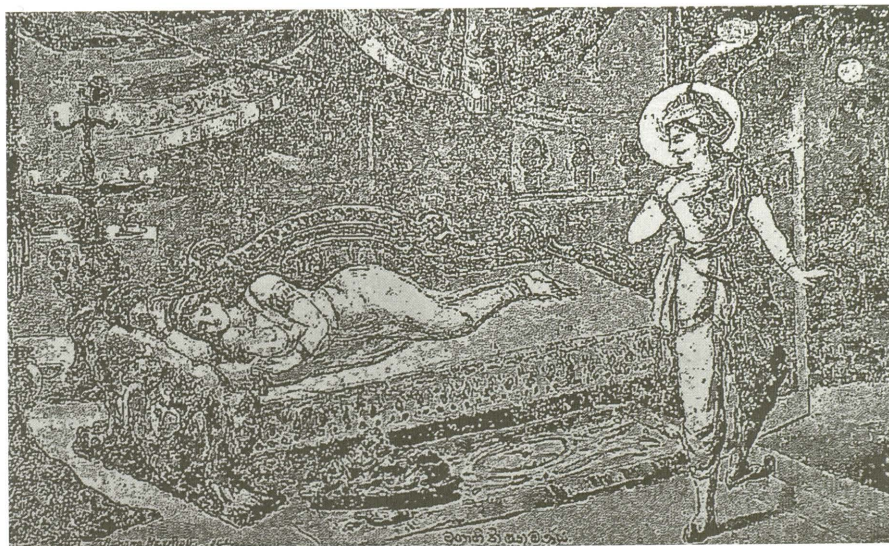
neoclassicism and Parsi theatre tradition. By introducing Doric columns, rococo furniture and heavy royal drapery curtains into the premodern Buddhist context, he evolved a popular style that appealed to the bourgeois taste of that period. It is important to remember here that one of the Buddhist revivalists Hikkaduwe Sri Sumangala issued a certificate to Henricus, acknowledging his service to revivalism.<sup>25</sup>

### **The Visual Style of Maligawage Sarlis**

Maligawage Sarlis<sup>26</sup> began his career as an apprentice to Richard Henricus in 1909. By engaging in multiple possibilities available through the production and circulation of visual images using modern means, the versatile Sarlis consolidated and popularized the hybrid style of Henricus. In the 1920s, his art transformed the temple space into an exhibition space for the Sinhalese imagination of nation, religion, language, race and history. I suggest that his clever blend of European illusionistic technique and traditional content, on the other hand, produced a "desired realism"<sup>27</sup> of the bourgeoisie that concomitantly represented modernity and tradition. The visual grandeur created by the extravagant combination of stucco-polychrome sculptures, painted bodies in dramatized actions (figure 5), frozen scenes of Tower Hall Theatre,<sup>28</sup> and decorative ceilings, reminiscent of popular Parsi set designs, became characteristic of his style. His art transformed the entire physicality of the interior as the other world situated in morals, beliefs, myths and invented history of modern Buddhism. Here, Buddhism's history, Sri Lanka's history and the Buddhist myths gelled together to produce a "painted" world, akin to "Indian magical realism", a phrase proposed by Christopher Pinney to describe Indian popular visual culture.<sup>29</sup> Sarlis' paintings went hand-in-hand with the developments in theatre by John de Silva and Charles Dias, both visually and thematically. In his pictorial space,

4

Richard Henricus, "Parting from Yashodhara and Prince Rahula", printed and published by K.D. Perera, Vidyadarsa Press, Colombo. Photograph: T. Sanathanan.



mythic palaces were modelled in the fashion of Victorian mansions or courts with Mughal arches and domes. Similarly, the human figures were dressed in the Victorian-Mughal costume of the Parsi theatre. These icons, with melodramatic bodily postures, appeared in front of scenic mansions, streets and parks.<sup>30</sup> While literally following the visual illusion of Victorian theatre by transforming the background as backdrop, these paintings missed the illusionist possibility of painting and divided the space into foreground and background without a middle ground.

Sarlis' paintings entered the popular realm through lithographic prints. With the help of a Buddhist entrepreneur, selected works were printed in Germany and circulated in Ceylon and Burma.<sup>31</sup> In fact, in his endeavours, Sarlis was similar to the Indian painter Raja Ravi Varma who too was influenced by the Parsi theatre and re-cast the Hindu mythical characters in an illusionistic style to suit the tastes of the emerging middle class and the sentiments of nationalism. In 1894 he established Ravi Varma Fine Arts Lithographic Press in Bombay, that allowed the popular spread of his imagery throughout the subcontinent and neighbouring regions.<sup>32</sup>

Many of Sarlis' temple projects encompass the Buddha's life story. These depictions literally

follow Henricus' style in the selection of plot and compositional articulation. For example the theme of Prince Siddhartha parting from his wife Yashodhara and his son Rahula painted by Sarlis in the Maligakanda Pirivena shrine (1911–20) (figure 6) and Isipathanaramaya image house (1920) (figure 7), both in Colombo, represent the stages of evolution of Sarlis' style based on the direct reference to Henricus' black-and-white book illustration (figure 4). Their colour scheme and the illusionist rendering also share similarities with Raja Ravi Varma's oil paintings of scenes from Hindu mythology and epics which, in the form of cheap oleograph prints, reached every corner of the subcontinent including Sri Lanka in the last decade of the 19th century. But Sarlis didn't stop at painterly illusionism. As in the case of rococo interiors, he sculpted the mass of the main characters, and brought actual volume into play. His sculpted images created in a glossy, polychromatic palate are placed against the painted background. This combination of painting and sculpture reflects the relationship between the actor and the backdrop in the picture frame of the Victorian theatre tradition.

Post 16th century, certain themes were recurring ones in temple murals. These ranged from life events of the Buddha, former lives of

#### 5 (following pages)

Works by M. Sarlis in the interior of Ashokaramaya Temple, Colombo, 1920. Courtesy Department of Archaeology, Sri Lanka.



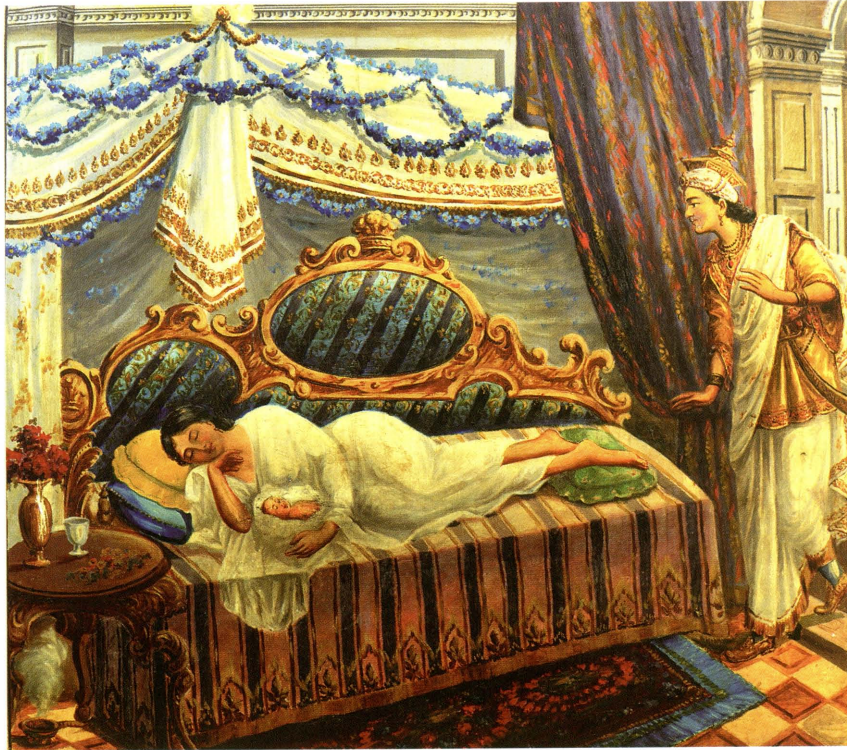




the Buddha (Jatakas), history of Buddhism in Sri Lanka, *suvisi-vivarana* (the 24 declarations given to Gautama by former Buddhas), *atamasthana* (eight sacred Buddhist sites in Sri Lanka) or *solosmasthana* (16 sacred Buddhist sites in Sri Lanka), *Arahants* (standing figures carrying sprigs of flowers), the Buddhist pantheon of gods and celestial world/heavenly scenes,<sup>33</sup> to various folk and Hindu deities now part of the Buddhist pantheon, and portraits of patrons. The local cultural politics of a period, class interests of the patrons, the period vision of the artist and his creative calibre collectively influenced the selection of a Jataka, or a scene, episode or character. Since the making of Sarlis' murals was interwoven with revivalist politics, ethnic and religious riots,<sup>34</sup> and the emergence of an exclusively Sinhala Buddhist nation-state in the colonial/postcolonial period, the murals go beyond the merely religious or aesthetic. For example, Sarlis' sculptures at Sri Sudarshanaramaya in Kiribathgoda narrate the story of a king who, under the influence of liquor, ordered the death of his infant son, a Bodhisatva, by beheading him with a sword (figure 8). This could be read as a direct comment on alcoholism resulting from the colonial culture. Another moralistic message is conveyed through *Telapatta Jataka* which describes the evil of sensual pleasures.

The Sinhala Buddhist ideologue Anagarika Dharmapala in fact blamed Christian England for the evils in society through the exercise of "filthy lucre using the demon of alcohol and opium".<sup>35</sup> In addition, the temperance movement of the early 20th century considered alcoholism as non-Buddhist. This viewpoint gained significance in the struggle against the colonial lifestyle and values. John de Silva's plays such as *Sinhala Prabhava Natakaya* (1902) and *Sura Sondaya* (1917) handled this theme effectively. Neloufer de Mel argues that John de Silva repeatedly emphasized the consumption of





alcohol as a betrayal of Buddhist, and therefore, national values.<sup>36</sup> But, what is interesting to note here is that these murals were partly patronized by the capital earned from arrack renting and distilling!

Buddhism thus provided an ideological basis for the political unity of the Sinhalese community in the colonial period. The concepts of Dharmadipa (Island of Dharma) and Sinhaladipa (Island of Sinhalese) from ancient chronicles, were galvanized together to make larger claims on the island as well as foment resistance against foreign invasions. Preserving the purity of Buddhism and the Sinhala Aryan race became the twin important, interrelated duties and masculine virtues of Sinhala Buddhist men. The idealized qualities of Sinhalese nationalist ideology were iconized in the form of warrior heroes and great Buddhist patrons. The iconographic programme of Sarlis exhibited these heroes in a prominent way,

as part of the larger nationalist discourse. At the main entrance of the image house of Sri Sudarshanaramaya, Sarlis placed the iconic images of Dutagamunu (or Duttagamani), the ancient king who was celebrated in the nationalist historical narratives for his victory over a Tamil king, and the nobleman Anepidu, who built viharas for monks during the Buddha's time (figure 11). By placing historic and mythic heroes alongside each other in an idealized form of realism, in the costumes of the popular theatre, the artist undertook the twin tasks of the contemporary Buddhist: safeguarding the Sinhala Buddhist nation and patronizing the religion.

At the main entrance of Ashokaramaya temple in Colombo, facing the main Buddha statue, Sarlis painted images of Emperor Ashoka, famous for spreading Buddhism to Sri Lanka, Prince Vijaya, the mythical ancestor of the Sinhalese race, King Dutagamunu and King

6

M. Sarlis, *Parting from Yashodhara and Prince Rahula*, Vidyodaya Pirivena, Maligakanda Pirivena shrine, Colombo, 1911–20. Courtesy Department of Archaeology, Sri Lanka.

7

M. Sarlis, *Parting from Yashodhara and Prince Rahula*, image house of Isipathanaramaya Maha Vihara, Colombo, 1920. Courtesy Department of Archaeology, Sri Lanka.



Parakramabahu, Sinhalese rulers celebrated for their victory over the Tamils and their building activities (figure 12).<sup>37</sup> In a similar location in Isipathanaramaya temple, he painted the portraits of contemporary patrons of the temple (figure 10). Painted in the style of academic realism, the patrons appear in European suits. This combination, while equating the charity of contemporary middle-class patrons with the service of ancient kings, actualize myth as history and past as present. The artist's selection of heroes juxtaposed myth with the history of Buddhism and the history of Sri Lanka, cutting across temporal and spatial divides.

Similarly, Sinhala-Buddhist womanhood became a key concern of Buddhist revivalism. To counteract the undesirable influence of Christianity, missionary education and Western values, Buddhist revivalism restricted the women within the values and customs of reinvented tradition. Dharmapala's laity rules focused largely on the behaviour and clothing of Sinhalese Buddhist women. Out of his 200 rules, 30 were devised for women.<sup>38</sup> Concomitantly,



the movements for women's education and women's franchise during the 1920s and '30s posed a challenge to the orthodoxy of Buddhist revivalism. Nationalists like Piyadasa Sirisena<sup>39</sup> were highly critical about these developments and warned that it would lead to the "decline of the race".<sup>40</sup> Hence, only through "conforming to the prevalent patriarchal attitudes in bourgeois society"<sup>41</sup> and accepting roles such as loyal wives, good mothers and virtuous partners, women were allowed to enter the public domain.

Queens and aristocratic ladies drawn from historical legends and Buddhist stories represented the idealized respectable Aryan Sinhalese women. These heroines were long-suffering, dutiful wives like Sujatha or martyred mothers like Viharamaha Devi (figure 13), whose son Dutagamunu was believed to have safeguarded the self-respect of the Sinhalese race. Another type of role model was Sanghamitta, a nun who renounced worldly life to disseminate the message of dharma.<sup>42</sup> These women are celebrated because of their connection to great men who served the race and the religion

8  
M. Sarlis, scenes from *Chulla Dhammapala Jataka*, Sri Sudarshanaramaya Purana Viharaya, Kiribathgoda. Photograph: T. Sanathanan.

9  
*Mara's Daughters*, oleograph print based on a painting by M. Sarlis. Photograph: T. Sanathanan.

or were instrumental in the great masculine project of nation-building. Hence they become an “embodiment of the community”.<sup>43</sup> These images set up the ideals for lay women and showed how they could transform themselves into respectable women.

The aristocratic blushing ladies displayed fair-skinned faces, bodies fully covered in silk saris, with heavy ornaments and downcast eyes as if avoiding the eye of the outsider. Many of Sarlis’ women are draped in the newly invented nationalist Kandyan or osariya sari style or in the North Indian style with their heads covered. The postures of the female body also echo the characters of Parsi theatre. John de Silva’s theatre idealized aristocratic women such as Sita in the Ramayana, the queen in *Daskon Natakaya* (1888), Sirisangabo’s queen in *Sirisangabo Charitaya* (1903) and Ehelepola Kumarihamy in *Sri Vickrama Rajasingha* (1906).<sup>44</sup> Before the advent of cinema, theatre was a powerful medium that constructed the popular idea about “Indian Aryans”. Since most of the characters in the Jatakas or the historical characters are believed to be Aryan women from North India, the artist naturally drew upon Parsi theatre for an authentic portrayal of the aristocratic Aryan woman.

Another popular theme in these decorations is “Mara’s daughters” who attempt to seduce the Buddha through their dance and music; they have been shown in Western attire with musical instruments like the violin. In the painting by Sarlis, though wearing saris, their bodily presence clearly demarcates them as the “other” of the respectable woman, the “shameless Euro-Asian woman” or “immoral white woman” (figure 9). They were attacked as being “ugly” and described as having “brown hair and light eyes (popularly referred to as cat’s eyes) and reddish fair skin which was linked to lobsters”.<sup>45</sup> Their Westernized social habits, dress and behaviour were considered to be a

bad influence, hence demonized in public and private discourses. They were often identified as shameless in terms of their sexuality. Kumari Jayawardena observes that Buddhist ideologues categorized female “devils” into three distinct groups—the European, the Euro-Asian and the local Christian—who became the permanent “others”, subverting and undermining Sinhala Buddhist society and culture.<sup>46</sup>

The final important theme in Sarlis’ depictions is the atamasthana or solosmasthana, places of pilgrimage. The earlier pictorial convention was a symbolic representation of eight or 16 identical images of stupas. This evolved into a photo-realistic painting of the actual sites. Interestingly, Sarlis rendered them in the realistic mode in monochrome against the polychrome decorative background of the temple. The artist may have used photographs



10  
M. Sarlis, portrait of a male patron, Isipathanaramaya Maha Vihara, Colombo. Courtesy Department of Archaeology, Sri Lanka.



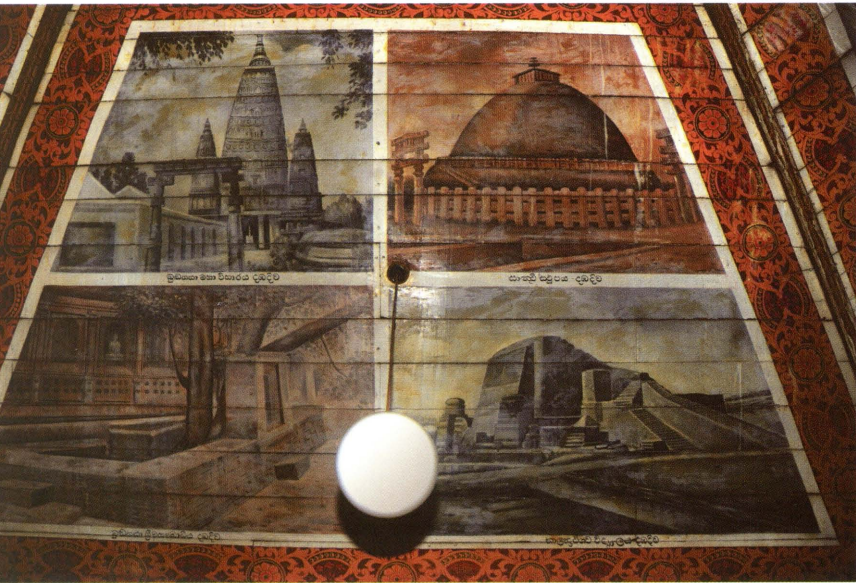
**11**  
M. Sarlis, images of Dutagamunu and Anepidu, Sri Sudarshanaramaya Purana Viharaya, Kiribathgoda. Courtesy Department of Archaeology, Sri Lanka.

**12**  
M. Sarlis, portraits of kings at the entrance of Ashokaramaya temple, Colombo. Courtesy Department of Archaeology, Sri Lanka.

**13**  
M. Sarlis, images of Sujatha and Viharamaha Devi, Sri Sudarshanaramaya Purana Viharaya, Kiribathgoda. Courtesy Department of Archaeology, Sri Lanka.







as references to paint these sites; thus through the genre of black-and-white photography, Sarlis' images became a "real document" of a mythical site. Juxtaposition of photographic images of the holy sites with mythical stories and historical characters, on the other hand, help validate the mythic as real, and the present as being as authentic as the past. These paintings gained dimension with time in the murals of Iriyawetiya Sudarshanaramaya and Mathugama Panthiya Sri Maha Mangala shrine as proper landscape paintings, but the colour scheme remained monochromatic (figure 14). In the Sri Sudarshanaramaya Purana Viharaya, the murals include 16 Buddhist sites from around the world. The realistic transformation of these mythical sites into geographical locations implies the emergence of historical places in the nationalist imagination. Hence the mental, virtual pilgrimage was now given an actual, physical significance and was mapped out over the island. Interestingly, the colony was now transforming into a holy land.

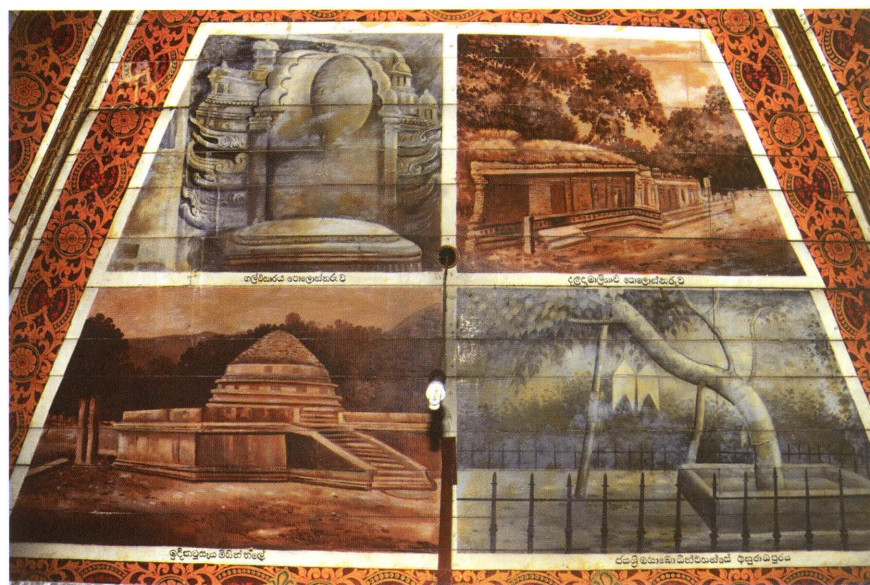
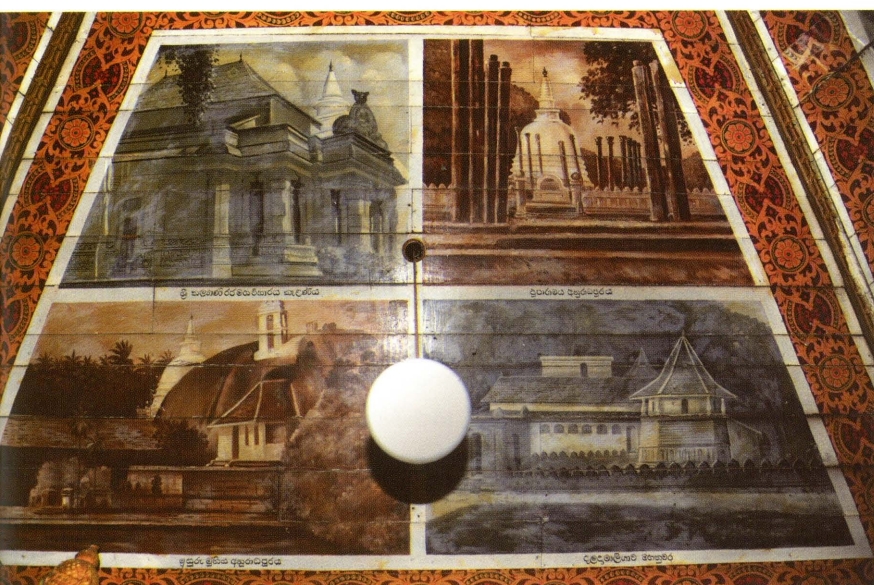
### Conclusion

Unlike Henricus, Sarlis infused the emerging nationalist rhetoric into popular visual culture. His temple ornamentations through the

articulation of selected archives of race, religion, language and land attempt to actualize the imagined nation. But ironing out the difference of myth and history, seen and unseen, in a realistic mode brought an inherent contradiction within the representation. However, the introduction of theatrical elements, on the other hand, helped bring out the anti-realistic nature of the supernatural world. Further, the iconicity produced by the frontality and tupelo formations of the Tower Hall Theatre harnessed conventions of realism to convey the unreal. Therefore the play between spatial and temporal, actual and virtual, in these murals became feasible through the combination of representational approaches and theatricality.<sup>47</sup> The temples, through their painted walls and polychrome sculptures, organize and exhibit the emerging nation and its perception of the world in familiar terms. The social significance and political connotation of the murals cannot be separated from the temples' larger pedagogic mission. The modernized pedagogic roles of these temples, reflected in their mural projects, also interfered and conflicted with the roles of the modern museum, involved with multiple viewerships comprising the collective body of a believer, worshipper, patriot, citizen and aesthete.

14

M. Sarlis, *Solosmasthana*, Sri Sudarshanaramaya Purana Viharaya, Kiribathgoda. Courtesy Department of Archaeology, Sri Lanka.



## Notes

This article is a shorter version of a chapter in T. Sanathanan, “Modernity, Class Identity and Visual Art in Colonial Colombo, 1815–1955”, unpublished PhD dissertation, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, 2010.

- 1 A rudimentary stage of Westernization through the inclusion of day-to-day objects and European dress can also be seen in the older paintings of the Kelaniya Rajamaha Vihara (1850–51).
- 2 Also visible in the image-houses of Rankoth Vihara, Panadura (1888), Poorvarama Vihara, Panadura, Keselwatta (1888) and paintings on the inside wall of the Dharmasalava (1880–90) and on the outer wall of the ambulatory in Subodharamaya, Karagampitiya (1897).
- 3 My biographical information on M. Sarlis and Richard Henricus is based on the pioneering work of Gamini Jayantha Mendis on these painters. His writings and my personal interaction with him became the prime source of inspiration and information for my research. I am grateful to him for sharing valuable information.
- 4 These temples include Maligakanda Pirivena; Ashokaramaya,

- Isipathanaramaya, and Vajiraramaya in Bambalapitiya; Veluvernaramaya and Pujaramaya in Pothupitiya; Kiribathgoda Iriyawetiya Sudarshanaramaya; Tissamaharamaya; Mathugama Panthiya Sri Mangala Viharaya; Warakagoda Viharaya; Bomiriya Ganewatte Viharaya; and Thammita Induruwa Yalegama Viharaya.
- 5 Sarlis’ Buddhist spectacles in the form of pandals for the festival of Vesak grew out of the temples and entered the main junctions of the city on the full-moon day in the month of May that marks the birth, enlightenment and passing away of the Buddha. These were religious paintings in an impermanent structure with colossal cut-outs, kinetic sculptures and colourful illuminations. Before Sarlis’ intervention, the pandal was made of tender green coconut leaves and did not contain paintings.
- 6 Jayawardena argues that “even if this was a tactic to avoid charges of sedition, it had the effect of arousing Buddhists to a ‘holy war’ instead of an anti-colonial struggle”. Kumari Jayawardena, *Ethnic and Class Conflict in Sri Lanka: The Emergence of*

*Sinhala Buddhist Consciousness, 1883–1983*, Colombo: Sanjiva Books, 1985, p. 7.

- 7 Kumari Jayawardena, *Nobodies to Somebodies: The Rise of the Colonial Bourgeoisie in Sri Lanka*, Delhi: Leftword, 2001, p. 272.
- 8 The Sinhalese fishing caste, who migrated from South India between the 13th and 15th centuries. Govigama (farmers) is the dominant caste in the Sinhala Buddhist caste hierarchy. Karava, Durava and Salegama are the other important castes among a total of 18.
- 9 Jayawardena, *Nobodies to Somebodies*, p. 266. Arrack renting was running a tavern that sold arrack—“renting” refers to the licensing fee paid to the government.
- 10 Patrick Peebles, *Social Change in Nineteenth Century Ceylon*, Colombo: Lake House Book Shop, 1995, p. 15.
- 11 I am grateful to Jagath Weerasinghe for sharing this important information with me in a private discussion.
- 12 The establishment of the Colombo Museum (1877), the Department of Archaeology (1890), and the founding of the Ceylon Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society (1845) and the Oriental Studies

- Society Sri Lanka (1902) contributed to the imagination of a Sinhala Buddhist past.
- 13 Touring companies of Parsi theatre first came to Ceylon in 1882. Parsi theatre, itself a hybrid form of Indian and Victorian theatre, was at its zenith in Bombay between 1850 and 1930. These companies used elaborately painted backdrops, decor, fancy costumes and enchanting tales of magic to provide spectacular theatre fare. Neloufer de Mel, *Women and the Nation's Narrative: Gender and Nationalism in Twentieth Century Sri Lanka*, Colombo: Social Scientist Association, 2001, p. 63; Anuradha Kapur, "The Representation of Gods and Heroes: Parsi Mythological Drama of the Early Twentieth Century", *Journal of Arts and Ideas*, Nos. 23–24, 1993, pp. 85–107.
  - 14 *Ibid.*, p. 57.
  - 15 *Ibid.*
  - 16 E.R. Sarachchandra, *Folk Drama of Ceylon*, Colombo: Department of Cultural Affairs, 1966, p. 131.
  - 17 *Ibid.*
  - 18 de Mel, *Women and the Nation's Narrative*, p. 62.
  - 19 *Ibid.*, p. 133. John de Silva (1857–1922) drew his themes largely from episodes in Sinhalese history and legend, and tried to recreate the splendour of the past and fictional role models. His productions include *Sri Vikrama Rajasimha* (1906), *Devanampiya Tissa* (1914), *Vihara Maha Devi* (1916) and *Dutagamunu*. He also produced plays on Hindu mythology, *Sakunthala* and *Vessantara Jataka*. Charles Dias followed de Silva's style, interspersing the prose dialogue with songs based on Hindustani ragas. His popular plays include *Sri Vikrama Rajasimha*, *Othello*, *Naganand*, *Kusa Jataka*, *Bhuridatta*, *Vidhura*, *Dharmasoka* and *Padmavati* "Chandra". These plays were a mixture of typical Victorian picture-frame stage and local content, with popular music set to Hindustani tunes, European realistic narrative mode and Victorian-Mughal costume. Wilmot P. Wijetunga, "Sinhalese Drama in Modern Times", quoted in Sarachchandra, *Folk Drama of Ceylon*, p. 134.
  - 20 Gamini Jeyantha Mendis, "Citra Silpi M. Sarlis Saha Bauddha Drusya Sannivedanaya (The Painter M. Sarlis and Buddhist Visual Communication)", MPhil dissertation, University of Kelaniya, 2009.
  - 21 *Ibid.*
  - 22 de Mel, *Women and the Nation's Narrative*, p. 62.
  - 23 Gamini Jeyantha Mendis, "Artist M. Sarlis: Contributor to Buddhist Awakening", in *The Popular Art of M. Sarlis*, edited by S. Wijesuriya et al., Kotte: Participatory Development Fund, 1991.
  - 24 These illustrations were also printed and published by K.D. Perera, Vidyadarsa Press, Colombo.
  - 25 Mendis, "Citra Silpi M. Sarlis".
  - 26 Sarlis was born in 1880 in the southern coastal town of Ambalangada. His father was an astrologer. Sarlis learned Sinhala, Pali and Sanskrit. He worked as art director in the first Sinhala feature film *Rajakeeya Wikramaya*, and ran his own art institution Lanka Chithrakarma Vidyalaya.
  - 27 Indian art historian Geeta Kapur employs this term to characterize similar paintings of Raja Ravi Varma depicting Hindu mythology. She argues that this realism is inalienably related to bourgeois ideology and ethics. Geeta Kapur, *When Was Modernism*, New Delhi: Tulika Books, 2000, pp. 145–79.
  - 28 Tower Hall Theatre at the heart of Colombo was ceremonially inaugurated in 1911. At the beginning shows at Tower Hall Theatre were confined to plays written and produced by Charles Dias, but later lawyer John de Silva's plays were also staged. Tower Hall established Nurti as the form of national theatre.
  - 29 Christopher Pinney, "Indian Magical Realism: Notes on Popular Visual Culture", in *Subaltern Studies X*, edited by G. Bhadra, G. Prakash and S. Tharu, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999.
  - 30 Anuradha Kapur mentions that the most popular curtains in Parsi theatre were the street, the jungle or the garden, the camp and the palace. These entailed representing architecture, furniture, plants, trees, paths, birds and animals, which had at least some sort of likeness to the real thing. Kapur, "The Representation of Gods and Heroes", pp. 85–107.
  - 31 Mendis, "Artist M. Sarlis", pp. 21–24.
  - 32 Partha Mitter, *Art and Nationalism in Colonial India: 1850–1922*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994, pp. 179–221.
  - 33 Chandragupta Thenuwara, "The Murals of the Karagampitiya Subodharamaya Temple: An Investigation of Pictorial Language of Murals of the Southern Province of Sri Lanka", MPhil dissertation, University of Kelaniya, 2006.
  - 34 See Jayawardena, *Ethnic and Class Conflict in Sri Lanka*.
  - 35 Quoted in Michael Roberts, "Problems of Collective Identity in a Multi-Ethnic Society: Sectional Nationalism vs Ceylonese Nationalism, 1900–1940", in *Sri Lanka: Collective Identities Revisited, Volume 1*, edited by Michael Roberts, Colombo: Marga Institute, 1997, p. 444.
  - 36 de Mel, *Women and the Nation's Narrative*, p. 67.

- 37 Parakramabahu I was the first of several strong kings in the 12th century who, taking command of Polonnaruva, the former Chola imperial outpost, successfully unified the island, chased the Cholas away and even challenged them on the Tamil mainland.
- 38 Richard Gombrich and Gananath Obeyesekere, *Buddhism Transformed: Religious Change in Sri Lanka*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988, pp. 214–15.
- 39 As did John de Silva's theatre, and Sarlis' paintings, Piyadasa Sirisena's novels by representing Buddhist nationalist ideology in a realistic mode became the symbols of Sinhalese bourgeois modernity in the early 20th century. See Sarath Amunugama, "Ideology and Class Interest in One of Piyadasa Sirisena's Novels: The New Image of the 'Sinhala Buddhist' Nationalist", in *Sri Lanka: Collective Identities Revisited, Volume 1*, edited by Roberts, 1997, pp. 335–54.
- 40 Kumari Jayawardena, *Erasure of the Euro-Asian: Recovering Early Radicalism and Feminism in South Asia*, Colombo: Social Scientist Association, 2007, p. 255.
- 41 Kumari Jayawardena, "Aspects of Religious and Cultural Identity and the Construction of Sinhala Buddhist Womanhood", in *Religion and Politics in South Asia*, edited by Douglas Allen, Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1992.
- 42 Raja Ravi Varma portrays the Hindu Aryan women in a similar fashion. Karline McLain makes similar observations about the depiction of heroines in Amar Chitra Katha, a series of comic books that tell stories from Indian history and mythology. For a detailed discussion, see Karline McLain, *India's Immortal Comic Books: Gods, Kings, and Other Heroes*, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2009.
- 43 de Mel, *Women and the Nation's Narrative*, p. 59.
- 44 Ibid., p. 58.
- 45 Jayawardena, *Erasure of the Euro-Asian*, p. 254.
- 46 Ibid., p. 256.
- 47 Michael Fried employs the word theatricality to describe the human figure or group of figures engrossed in an activity as if in denial of an audience, in French paintings of the late 18th century. He further identifies the role of theatricality in the need of establishing the fiction that the beholder does not exist. Michael Fried, *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting the Beholder in the Age of Diderot*, Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1980.