

GEORGE KEYT: PAINTER, LOVER OF WOMEN

Jane Russell

“Those whose lives he affected comprise a roster of the most distinguished artists, writers and personalities of his time. He survived them all.”

Obituary of Ezra Loomis Pound

When any nonagenarian dies there is a bit of a fuss. When the nonagenarian is a painter of international repute, the ferment is considerable. Thus George Keyt — as renowned for his longevity in this part of the poor world as Picasso and Dali were in the rich — finally becomes a chunk of art history.

And what a chunk! George Keyt died at 92, a tall man with shoulder length grey hair and a huge reputation in his native land. There were some (men only?) who knew George Keyt well and were treated by him as equals. But for the main part, the hoi-polloi was easily divided by the Great Man into three categories — buyers, competitors and the rest.

Like Picasso and Dali, Keyt was a complete egotist. In Collette's celebrated cartoon of the 43ists, Keyt is the bespectacled, long-haired, kurta clad figure on the extreme right with his back to the others (and the viewer), his nose in the air, staring into space. It could well be sub-titled “The Artist as Supreme Individualist”. There is no doubt that Keyt enjoyed fame and money. Breton's famous acronym of Dali's name, “Avidas Dollars” (“Greed for Dollars”), emphasised the commercialist trend that Dali and Picasso had encouraged and which has since ensnared modern art, painting especially, in a sleazy partnership between artists, critics, agents and investors — a partnership in which the genuine art-lover has no place.

Keyt's quick appreciation of his commercial value brought him to the forefront of the 43ists. The twelve erotic line-drawings executed for the 1947 edition of his translation of the *Gita Govinda* (published in London through the good offices of Martin Russell) made him famous. With fame came buyers.

I remember coming across a postcard from Keyt, circa 1950, addressed to a chic Kandy architect, brusquely rebuking her for not bringing Lord and Lady X to his Amunugama studio to buy at least one of his works!

But with fame and money came artistic stultification. In Pound's *Cantos* appear these telling lines:

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No Picture is made to endure nor to live with But it is made to sell and sell quickly:

With usury, sin against nature,
Is thy bread ever more of stale rags,
Is thy bread ever dryer than paper.

The freshness of vision and intellectual vitality that had successfully combined the Afro-Cubist perspectives of Picasso and Braque with the poetic sensuality of Tantric temple sculpture — a vision that earned Keyt a place alongside Picasso in the 1954 “Contemporary Art” show held in London, and high praise from Herbert Read and Roland Penrose, the foremost British art critics of the time, — became within a decade a rigid stylisation in which Keyt found himself entrapped. It is ironical that the dozens... maybe hundreds... of post-50s Keyts' that are found in the homes of the rich and fashionable, and were later to appear in banks, hotels and other prestigious commercial institutions, will be precisely those Keyts' that will barely rise — and may even fall dramatically — in value now that Keyt is dead. I don't know how much the Colombo Renaissance Hotel paid for the Keyt Mural in their lobby, but they should prepare to write it off as an ill advised investment. Sloppy workmanship, harsh — even crude — lines and gruesome colours bear witness to the dire effects of repetitive and derivative work on the accomplished and versatile artist that Keyt truly was.

But was a crass preoccupation with money the only reason for Keyt's obsession with the sensual ladies of the Radha-Krishna mythology? Was it mere ‘sexploitation’ masquerading as modern oriental art?

Martin Russell thought Keyt never sought popularity, but then Russell looked on Keyt as an ‘Englishman abroad’ rather than a Sri Lankan, and from a strictly British or European viewpoint, Russell was right. Keyt was never really bothered about fashions in European or American painting. Certainly not once he had received some kind of recognition in those circles — but he was deeply concerned with the opinion of his fellow Sri Lankans. The British art critics' labelling of Keyt as the ‘Gauguin of Ceylon’, though not wholly specious was dreadfully simplistic.



A poet and rebel by nature, Keyt discharged himself from Fraser's Trinity College as a fourteen year old in protest against the treatment meted out to Sinhala-Buddhists by panic-stricken British authorities in the aftermath of the 1915 riots. Keyt was fortunate to have been born into a family with wealth and common-sense enough to let young George go his own way. But Keyt had been exposed to Trinity's philosophy long enough for the school motto "*Respice Finem*" ("Look to the End") to have sunk in. Converting himself to Buddhism and wearing the sarong in public was just the beginning of his patriotic response. The poetry and articles he published in newspapers on Buddhist and Hindu themes were further steps on the way to the magnificent flowering — not unlike that of the talipot palm — in the wonderful canvases of the late twenties and thirties, most which have been wrongfully dismissed as academic.

Keyt was never academic: on the contrary, he was proudly self-educated and he bears closest comparison with Gauguin. If his semi-realist, semi fauvist style resembles that of Beling and others who had been taught in the art academies of Britain and Europe, that is only because Keyt had no other 'maters' available to him. While other members of the English educated elite were travelling widely outside Ceylon, Keyt was only concerned in burrowing deeper and deeper into the hinterland of Sinhala-Buddhist culture, reaching as far as possible down to its roots in the village.

The paintings of this period are the most perfect and pure expression of Keyt's genuinely romantic association with the Buddhist culture of the Kandyan Sinhalese. Sensualist and materialist as he was however, it was not with the aridities of Buddhist philosophy but with the outward trappings of Sinhala Buddhism that Keyt had fallen in love. The file of marigold-robed monks climbing a densely foliated village path on their way to a *dana*: the profusion of lemon-white temple flowers being offered by the gorgeously bedecked women of a pious Kandyan Buddhist household — their warm succulently bronzed flesh contrasting with the delicate grey-pink cottons and voiles of jacket, sari and cloth, cleavages temptingly voluminous, hair gleamingly oiled: in colour, texture and mood, these early Keyts' celebrate the poetic sensuality of Woman yet in an almost touchingly innocent way. However more famous his later "Woman with Mirror", "Woman with Bird" etc. etc., they never recaptured that beautiful ingenue quality.

But what was most clearly defined in these early works was Keyt's commitment to his end goal — to become Sri Lanka's most famous and beloved painter. To that purpose Keyt dedicated himself to his technique: the relentless eye for situation and the mastery of colour and line are already apparent. But in 1939 this romantic interlude came to a close and Keyt retired to Amunugama

with his second wife Pilawela Menike to live out the pastoral lifestyle that he had captured so winningly in his paintings. His emergence from this rustic seclusion in August 1943 at the exhibition organised by Lionel Wendt and Harry Pieris in Colombo created, as Russell recalled something of a sensation.

Keyt had arrived with a new style: erotic, flowing and devoted almost wholly to the female form. Keyt had discovered Tantric art about the time that many westernised intellectuals were discovering Freudian theories of sexuality. The revolutionary impact of Keyt's tantric "liberation" on Colombo society cannot be overestimated.

But what was it exactly that Keyt had discovered in the tantric fantasy of middle India, of India of the Middle-ages, of the India of the Middle Kingdom? What was this fantasy that had spawned an entire mythology around Krishna and the Gopi girls, that had found literary expression in Vatsyayana's *Kama Sutra* and Jayadeva's *Gita Govinda* and plastic expression in the sculptures adorning the great temples of Bhubaneswar, Konarak and Khajuraho and the smaller but even more exquisitely carved temples of Belur and Halebid? The erotic miniatures of the Mughal period, the acme of Indian painting, are perfectly explicit in their portrayal of the sexual act — far more so than the coy Keyt whose characters seem doomed to eternal foreplay. "The faithful, the Tantrikas," writes Bernard Soulié, "regarded sexual intercourse as the essential rite of initiation enabling them to accede to Knowledge". The ultimate of Tantra was to reach supreme enlightenment through an ascetic sexuality.

But this was not what had inspired Keyt. "What stirred me" wrote Keyt of Tantric sculptures, "was their voluptuous density and the idea, where women were concerned, of voluptuous fertility."

A revealing statement. What Keyt thought he saw in Tantric art, through his essentially western eyes, was something much more akin to the Greek fertility cult of Dionysus. Although Dionysian rites resemble Tantric rites (in the central role of the sexual orgy for example), the members of the Greek Cult were so saturated with wine — owing to their devotion to Bacchus, god of inebriation — as to be wholly out of control by the time they started copulating. This was never the case with followers of Tantra. "A judiciously controlled sexual delirium" requiring "arduous physiological training" was the only vehicle for advancement to the Tantric "Supreme Serenity" (Soulié). The very fact that the male Tantrika had to concentrate solely on retaining his seed during intercourse, precluded the female Tantrika (his sex-goddess) from fulfilling any function pertaining to motherhood. In tantra, the idea of sexual intercourse was to attain enlightenment, not to make babies.



The dionysian on the other hand, elevated Woman to "Earth-Mother", "Life-Giver". "Goddess of Fertility", "Baby-Maker Incarnate,"... and so apparently did Keyt.

"I don't believe" said Keyt in 1963, "in breaking up my life into profane and sacred love. Both must be there." The 'both' are physical **and** family love. This is not Tantra. This is classic male chauvinism.

The classical male chauvinist is a patriarch, and believes the role of woman to be confined to that of wife, mother and sex-object or bed-mate; that is, roles strictly related to the male as the sovereign authority in political, economic and social relations. Many products of the Sri Lankan boys' school system share Keyt's views; recently a letter appeared in the *Island* from an old boy of Trinity College Kandy under the caption "Women in Business". It began thus: "The woman is a child-bearer and mother primarily. Her biology is so made that fulfillment comes only with these two functions achieved."

Now all becomes clear. Keyt's obsession with the ravishing bucolic ladies of the Radha-Krishna mythology was part of the same patriotic response that caused him to dispense with the 3-piece suit in favour of the kurta and sarong. In assuming a Sinhala-Buddhist (or Tamil-Hindu) persona, Keyt necessarily (and rather happily, one suspects, for who would be the fool to fly in the face of male power and privilege?) took on Sinhala/Tamil male chauvinism in its most affected manifestations.

So, here then is the inspiration for the endless repetitions of the "woman" series of paintings that occupied him for four decades — male chauvinism plus-plus. What a shame that the burgeoning love of brown flesh that had begun so charmingly in his early pictures should have been converted into an extended and ever more deadening power-play!

Of-course, the earlier paintings of this "middle period" had a superficial vibrancy — drawn from the novelty of the technique — that could be very attractive. And certainly the overt expression of the virile, male hero dominating over the lascivious, indolent female helped to sell many of these canvases to the westernised, male elite. (It always struck me as odd that clusters of these Keyts' could be found on the walls of male studies and bachelor bedrooms. But Keyt's fall from grace in his understanding of colour and line — at first so riotously joyful like the expression of Tibetan Buddhism — later hard and flat — hastened apace as his fame and wealth grew.

But having said all that, was Keyt's unashamed appeal to the "middle-brow" Sri Lankan male, such a crime?

The classic male chauvinist is as vital to the classical feminine ego as stylish underwear, perfume, jewellery and cosmetics. He is the devoted flatterer — the eternal worshipper at the shrine of sentimentalised Woman — the woman of "flashing 'bedroom' eyes"/ of swelling breasts and heaving thighs". Like Pound's sexual hero, he sits

in quenched retirement gazing out at "the polyphloesboean sea". And yet, however irritatingly libidinal his source of inspiration, we (men, women, children, idiots) love him for it still! Because is it not so much easier, so much less strenuous to live with a middle-brow Keyt than to 'Wrassle' with the complexities of a Deraniyagala (uncle or nephew) or Fareed Uduman? No thought required — simply relax into a sensual stupor.

And why not? Isn't my irritation only the intellectual pretensions of the outraged blue stocking? Isn't it a fact (and as I write this, I am conscious "that ever and at my back I hear/the howling of the feminist chariot drawing near" that the wholly sensual man can only be understood by the wholly sensual woman? And the wholly sensual woman is much too preoccupied with fulfilling her sensual nature to indulge in such cerebral activity as art criticism.

Beryl de Zoete, the balletomane, poet and author of "Dance and Magic Drama in Ceylon" met George Keyt frequently during her ten-month stay in the island in 1948. She didn't like him very much. At the opening of what she termed the "Keyt School of Dance" in Amunugama, she made this observation: "George Keyt with his long hair, looking very prophetic and rather pompous, poured out a cascade of talk to the Governor-General". She also much preferred Justin Deraniyagala's Paintings — "inspirational pictures which can be judged by no standard but their own. They are more poetic than George Keyt's and beautiful in color". There we have the intellectual woman's judgement.

But Beryl de Zoete was an intellectual snob — she was fluent in classical Greek, among other qualifications — and for such an educated woman, Keyt's philosophy of reducing line and colour to one maxim — "Sensualize!" — was undoubtedly offensive. For the rest of us however, the hoi-poloi that he generally ignored, Keyt's passionate devotion to Woman has scored our imaginations (even of those of us who abhorred his work) in a way that cannot be erased. Keyt's images remain in the mind — like the flash of an iridescent light on the retina — long after the light is extinguished.

Keyt will also be saved I feel by the giant canvases of his last years. These final works have monumental, osmotic massivity that emulates Henry Moore's Gigantic, dinosaurian women. In Keyt's art, the Physical Woman has become as big as the Globe, the Equal of the Planet, the disembodied flesh of Nature Herself.

A Painter-Hero has been laid to rest. He had no qualms about his talent, about his vocation or his vision. A natural soliloquist he created a glamour with his brush that obscured the dearth of philosophical insight in his work.

No matter, no matter: bite into colour, savour flesh, absorb the perfumed splendour — George Keyt is dead.