Postcolonial Identities and Visual Art Education – A Case Study of Sri Lanka

Priyantha Udagedara
Department of History and Theory of Arts, Faculty of Visual Arts, University of the Visual and Performing Arts
priyantha.u@vpa.ac.lk

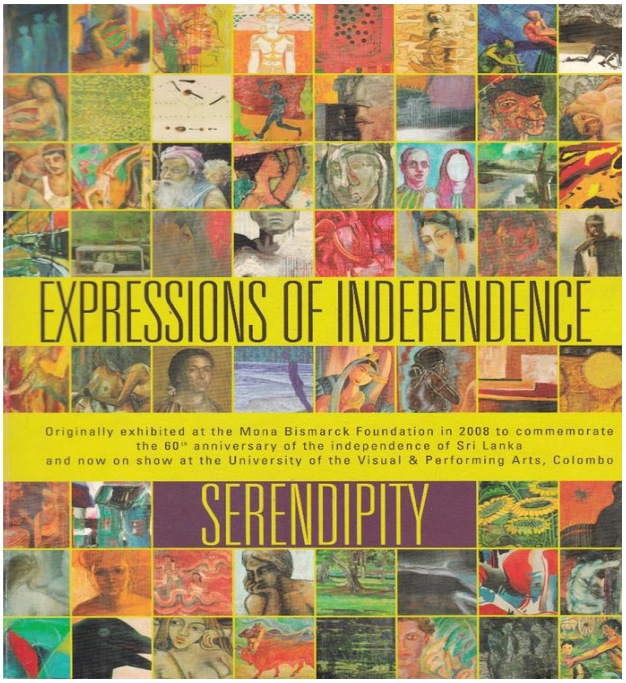
Abstract **-** Visual art education in Sri Lanka has historically, theoretically, and comparatively been investigated in a postcolonial context. Through examination of historical situations, this study focuses on how visual art education has been and continues to be marginalized, ignored, and only utilized to achieve a dominant national ideology or to propagate the political agendas of various forces and actors. The study also raises questions about the bureaucratic national cultural superiority observed in culturally embodied pedagogies adopted in art education and examine the ways in which such pedagogies sideline innovativeness, ethnic diversity, and the socio-cultural contexts in which art education happens. This research challenges the institutional and national recognition accorded to visual art as a social unifier or cleanser. Focusing on this issue, the study attempts to reframe the history of visual art teaching seeking to identify impediments and shortcomings in the past and present with a broader context. The study proposes recommendations based on innovativeness that would be necessary for drafting a national visual art education policy which would gravitate towards a national creative economy. This, in turn, would provide an opportunity to examine the legacy and current position of Sri Lankan visual art education from multiple positions and perspectives.

Keywords **-** *Visual art education, Postcolonial identities, Institutional structure, Pedagogy, Creative wulture*

Introduction

The exhibition entitled 'Expressions of Independence and Serendipity' was organized by the Mona Bismarck Foundation and the University of the Visual and Performing Arts, Colombo in 2008 to celebrate the sixtieth anniversary of the Independence of Sri Lanka (Figure 01). The works of sixty artists were included in this exhibition. The artists selected for this exhibition were alumni of the University of the Visual and Performing Arts. Overall, the works included in this exhibition can be recognised as outmoded, orthodox, and discriminatory because the selection committee excluded the work of active and well-known

contemporary artists. Additionally, the organisers excluded representations of the Jaffna peninsula entirely in this international representation of the nation. Although many contemporary artists in Sri Lanka address conflict, human rights issues, displacement, war, and socio-political crises in their works as stated by Perera (2010), their representations of the island were marginalised or smoke-screened by the organisers.



Source: Expressions of Independence and Serendipity Image Available at: Didouan, K, ed. (2008) *Expressions of Independence and Serendipity*: The Mona Bismarck Foundation France and University of the Visual and Performing Arts, Colombo.

FIGURE 01. COVER PAGE OF EXHIBITION CATALOGUE

As the pioneering and oldest national visual art education provider, the University of the Visual and Performing Arts' position with regard to this international representation of the nation was called into question because of the exclusions observed at the exhibition. As the main body involved in engaging with artwork, University of the Visual and Performing Arts' stand and vision of the national visual art collection is problematic and biased. Further, one can argue that its understanding of the modern and contemporary Sri Lankan art scene is narrow, and in this exhibition, nothing controversial was included. As this exhibition was organized to exhibit the island's postcolonial artistic legacy in Europe, the organizers might not have wished to display anything controversial

or questionable, because the exhibition took place at the peak of the civil war in 2008, the year before its end.

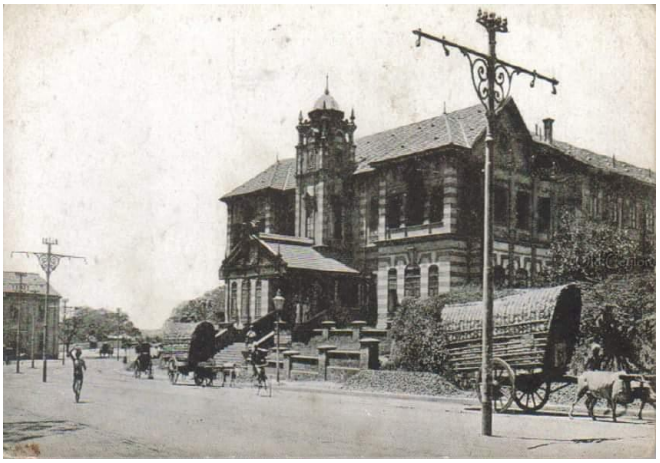
In contrast, current visual arts education has started to move away from emphasizing an outmoded fine arts discipline towards broader subject areas associated with visual culture. This visual culture questions nationality, authenticity, and identity which means that concepts such as nationalism, tradition, and ethnicity are rejected, and the discipline is open to radical changes and new media (Turner, 2007). Because contemporary visual culture largely shapes our daily life (Howells, 2004), the image of Sri Lankan visual culture portrayed at the exhibition could be deceptive as it does not characterise the real picture, or the diversity that characterizes postcolonial visual culture in Sri Lanka.

Moving from the problematic positions observed in visual art education in Sri Lanka stated above, the evolution of visual arts education in Sri Lanka and the problematic contemporary situations observed in this field will be explained below with an art historical perspective. Following Ceylon's independence, governments that came to power have focused on nation-building with a nationalist perspective. Problematic, exclusionary political propaganda emerged during this process to further strengthen the supremacy of Sinhala nationalism within the sociopolitical system. This propaganda stemmed in part from precolonial narratives about the superiority of Sinhala Buddhist culture. As Chandasiri Olaganwatte (2008) points out, it is evident that the traditional Pirivwna education model was further developed with this perspective parallel to the expansion of the Victorian school system. Buddhist schools that were established pre-independence followed the structure of the Christian school system to further strengthen and reestablish Buddhist education and Buddhist cultural heritage. Other areas such as traditional local dance also received similar attention. They were introduced into the Kalayathana institute format/ secondary school education system and later adopted by the academia. These developments were in the direction of securing what was known as traditional values in local art forms.

Sri Lanka's pre-colonial visual arts education was based on the Gurukula tradition but the intervention of imperial, colonial powers led to its gradual eradication (Olaganwatte, 2008). Traditional visual arts education was belligerently replaced by British visual arts education when visual arts education was absorbed into the formal system in 1896. The British administration introduced courses in drawing and painting at The Ceylon Technical College (Figure 02) which became an established center and permeated the national

education system in post-colonial Sri Lanka (Dharmasiri, 2010). The introduction of Western-molded visual arts education to colonial Ceylon can be explained beyond the imperialist propagation of the cultural superiority of the British. This phenomenon can be used to illustrate the post-colonial nation-building project in Sri Lanka because the former and the latter are inherently linked.

To study this cultural formation of visual arts education in Sri Lanka, this paper is divided into two sections. The first section narrates the development of visual arts education under strong colonial influence using contemporary examples. Secondly, this paper will discuss visual arts history in relation to postcolonial situations, while paying particular attention to the notions of nation-building, nationalism, and Sinhala Buddhist cultural superiority to provide conceptual and historical depth. This paper also examines questions of visual arts education in postcolonial Sri Lanka, and finally elaborates on the nationalistic formation of visual arts education in a postcolonial context which closed off space for the development of a dynamic national visual and cultural identity.



Source: Image available at: https://www.facebook.com/SLCOT/photos/maradana-college-of-technology-1907/804353202942896/

FIGURE 02. MARADANA TECHNICAL COLLEGE IN 1907

Evolution of Visual Art Education in Colonial Ceylon

Historians often discuss how Victorian education introduced by the British colonial administration throughout its colonies tried to propagate the so-called superior cultural elements of the British within the aforementioned colonies. Eventually, these new cultural elements became extensively popular among the locals, and they adopted and created rich cultural motifs that mark

colonial influence as pointed out by Bill Ashcroft (2002). In particular, a Sri Lankan English-speaking elite that received colonial education and accepted British ways of life bloomed in the late 19th century. This elite had the patronage of their colonial masters who were chiefly responsible for marginalizing local education and local ways of life. In Ashcroft's words (2002, p. 12), colonial structures were often simply taken over by indigenous elites. This transformation was commonplace in many colonial societies. Similarly, Goonetilleke argues that even after Independence, the ruling and social élites in Sri Lanka consisted of 'brown sahibs', (1990, p. 40). This community accepted and valued English education and cultural systems while closely following its artistic traditions. Furthermore, by accepting Western art traditions, literature, and music, this community might have tried to acquire the worldliness and cultural authority wielded by their colonial masters. On the other hand, this was an attempt by the local elite to attain imperial cultural excellence for themselves. They needed this excellence to become culturally superior like their colonial rulers. As Goonetilleke further elaborates "the English educated became more aware of themselves and the social, cultural, and literary context in which they lived" (1990, p. 40).

The above-mentioned sociocultural shift was visible in Sri Lanka due to the permeation of English medium education (Goonetilleke, 1990). As Senaka Bandaranayake and Albert Dharmasiri stated, the distinct Sri Lankan bourgeois families accrued individual family portraits, landscapes of rural and urban scenes, flora and fauna drawings as well as photographs, although very few have survived (Bandaranayake & Dharmasiri, 2009) between 1830 and 1870. The painting titled E.R Gunathilake and Family (Figure 03), painted in watercolour on silk by an unknown artist in 1890 (Bandaranayake & Dharmasiri, 2009) depicts the well-dressed Gunathilake family. Mr. and Mrs. Gunathilake are dressed in a costume already popular among southern Ceylonese elite families during that time. Strong cultural influences from the Portuguese and Dutch made these styles widely popular. In contrast, the rest of the family is dressed in English clothing popular at the time, thus indicating their social and cultural affiliations.

Source: Image Available at: Bandaranayake, S and Dharmasiri, A (2009) *Sri Lanka Paintings in the 20th Century*. Colombo: The National Trust Sri Lanka.

FIGURE 03. *E.R GUNATHILAKE AND FAMILY*, WATERCOLOUR ON SILK, 1890.

Therefore, the introduction of English medium education and subsequently art education to the colonial social system was not just a stylistic or technical fostering of introducing a new subject. It can be argued that this is a pivotal moment which broke the existing conventional artistic traditions and education in colonial Sri Lanka. Later, this marked the beginning of the establishment of a Western art tradition among Sri Lankans in both schools and higher educational institutes.

Historical evidence suggests that local artists have followed, trained under, or have been strongly influenced by colonial artists and traditions. These local artists, who were actively involved in image-making, displayed skills in watercolour and oil painting (Dharmasiri, 1990). They created work on similar themes and obeyed institutional rules derived from colonial visual art teachings. In 1846, the Colombo Academy started teaching landscape, scientific drawing, and design under the supervision of *Andrew Nicholl* (Millar, 1995). Born in 1804 in Belfast, self-taught artist Nicholl arrived in colonial Ceylon in 1846. He was a landscape painter and illustrator who was appointed by the British Government to teach the above mentioned subjects. He spent four years serving as an artist and art teacher at the Colombo Academy (Silva, 1998). The colonial administration expected him to train skilled individuals who could occupy the Survey Department and other government offices as draftsmen or cartographers (Silva, 1998).

Source: Image Available at: National Museum collection Colombo.

FIGURE 04. ANDREW NICHOLL, *BANYAN TREE MT. LAVINIA* (1804-86)
WATERCOLOUR ON PAPER.

J. L. K. van Dort, a pioneer Sri Lankan artist and draftsman, or as Dharmasiri (1990) calls him, the first Sri Lankan artist who followed the Western style of art making clearly shows Nicholl's influence on Sri Lankan art because his paintings are similar to Nicholl's work. Moreover, Van Dort is believed to be a student of Andrew Nicholl. He created topographical landscape works which exemplify Western artistic influences and representational methods. He has created a series of landscapes and other pieces applying perspective and three-dimensional qualities, a recognizable character of the place and is skilled in handling watercolour mediums. Van Dort borrowed motifs and technical elements from Nicholl. For instance, as in Nicholl's work, Van Dort too included a half-naked man opposite the buildings he painted to create a sense of scale. This is evident in his paintings entitled 'Dutch Reformed Church (Wolvendaal), Colombo' and 'Dutch Reformed Church, Galle' (Figure 05).

Source: Image Available at: https://www.vandort.org/showmedia.php?mediaID=95&albumlinkID=77.

FIGURE 05. J. L. K. VAN DORT, *THE DUTCH REFORMED CHURCH, GALLE* (1888)
WATERCOLOUR ON PAPER, 28.7X39.9 CM.

Source: Image Available at: Weeraratne, N (1993) *43 Group - A Chronicle of Fifty Years in the Art of Sri Lanka*, Lantana Publication.

FIGURE 06. UNKNOWN ARTIST, *THE FIRST AMATEUR ART EXHIBITION, COLOMBO DRAWING CLUB* (1887).

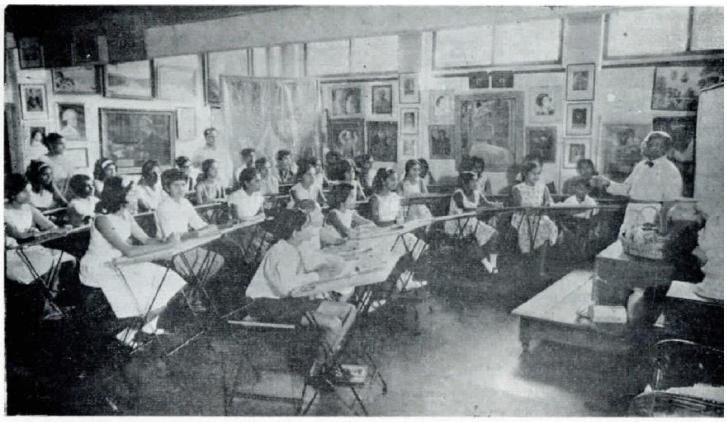
As Dharmasiri (1990) narrates, the Colombo Drawing Club, more popularly known as the Portfolio Sketch Club, was an informal gathering of amateur artists and art lovers which began in the early 1880s (Figure 06). Membership comprised of family members of the British colonial administrators. The group met in each other's homes approximately once a month. During their meetings, amateur artists shared their portfolios, then discussed works and nominated the best work of the month. They also peer-reviewed their works to create and present something better at the next meeting. Their very first exhibition was held to mark the diamond jubilee of Queen Victoria. A temporary exhibition space was set up by members on Prince Street on the top floor of a coffee shop popularly known among artists as the Coffee Tavern. The exhibition, which began on 16 August 1887, lasted four days during a holiday known as Race Week. The exhibition took the appearance of a salon or academy-style art exhibition (Dharmasiri, 1990). It is theorised that the organisers might have wanted to create something similar to exhibitions held in their motherland. The establishment of The Colombo Drawing Club led to the formation of the Ceylon Society of Arts in 1891.

As visualized in image 06, a considerable number of works were displayed on the walls during this exhibition. The illustration makes it evident that locals were present at the exhibition along with their colonial masters. The keen interest shown by the locals in the art on display suggests that even during these early stages, local chiefs had an understanding or interest in Western art and aesthetics. As discussed above, this emphasises the strong cultural influences received via colonial education.

In 1908, renowned Sri Lankan Artist A. C. G. S Amerasekara started the first school of art, The Atelier. At the time, there was a huge demand for art lessons from Colombo-based elite families (Goonethilleke (ed), 1966). The students studied basic art lessons which were academically based and some of these students later became renowned Sri Lankan artists. It was evident that Amarasekara had a clear objective for his art school and states that:

> Our policy and practice in conducting our school is to cherish the Greek ideals: the good, the true and the beautiful, and identify the art with the beautiful. At the very outset, we try to teach our students to observe what is beautiful in nature around us and its pictorial realization. (Goonethilleke, 1966, p. 13).

Amarasekara was a self-taught artist who strongly followed Victorian academic principles. The above statement makes it evident that he believed in the classical fundamentals of aesthetics originating from Greek art and philosophy. He also trained his students to paint realistic pictures with a great understanding of nature and realism. Amerasekara held exhibitions in Europe, and this might have allowed him to closely study and examine Western academic traditions. He could therefore draw and teach Western art to his students with great confidence. Figure (07) depicts a moment at his academy where young students are seen participating in object drawing as a foundation skills development method in conventional visual art pedagogy. The atmosphere in the picture suggests that it was a well-organised academy equipped with all the facilities required for visual art education.



Source: Image Available at: Goonethilleke, L, P (ed) (1966) *The Doyen of Painters Sri Lanka.* Colombo: Felicitation Volume.

FIGURE 07. *TEENAGERS AT A LESSON IN STILL LIFE*, ATELIER.

The Institutionalisation of Visual Art Education

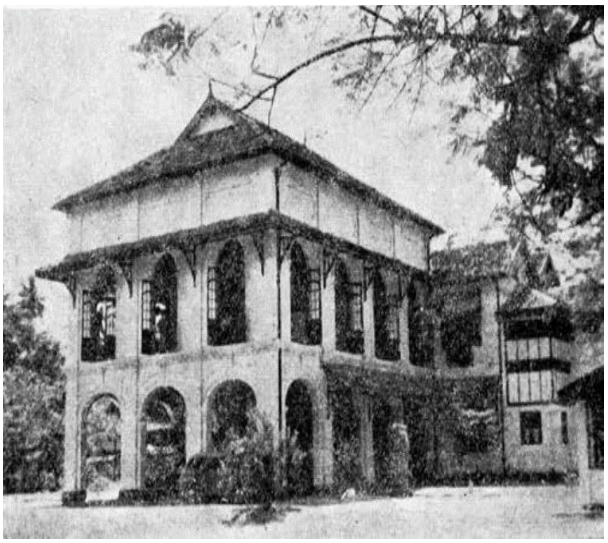
J. D. A Perera (Figure 09) is considered to be one of the leading figures in the history of Sri Lankan visual art teaching. He trained under A. E Bartlem and later became an assistant to art master D.J Perera at The Ceylon Technical College (Dharmasiri, 2010). He subsequently received a government scholarship to study at the Royal Academy of Art in the United Kingdom and was extensively exposed to formal British art education. As Dharmasiri noted when the British Council held a reception for the first art scholar J. D. A Perera from Ceylon, J. D. A got an opportunity to meet Dame Ethel Walker, whose working methods as a painter fascinated him very much (Dharmasiri, 2010).

Dharmasiri further elaborated that he was invited to collaborate with Walker's studio. This collaboration provided him with an opportunity to meet renowned British artists such as the pioneering British portrait painter Augustus John. Upon returning to Ceylon, he promptly applied the knowledge and experience he gained in England to his teaching practice at The Ceylon Technical College. It can be argued that his training at one of the foremost art institutions in England and his association with pioneering British artists and educators honed his skills, allowing him the ability to restructure and contribute to the thriving Sri Lankan art education scene, steering it in new directions, a legacy which is still evident in the curriculum at the Faculty of the Visual Arts at the University of the Visual and Performing Arts. This marked a key point of departure in visual arts education from the standard Western education model into a pervasive new

direction, thereby creating a considerable number of practicing artists from the institute.

As previously demonstrated, in the beginning there were limited objectives associated with visual arts education in Sri Lanka. However, since 1947, it is evident that there has been a considerable rise in demand for the study of arts and crafts, as particularly illustrated by the rapid growth in student numbers in the crafts sector. As Dharmasiri states, in addition to providing drawing, painting, photography, and sculpture classes, education is coordinated with the industries department in order that instructions may be given in various crafts (Dharmasiri, 2010).

This may have been fueled by the Indian Swadeshi Movement which influenced the socio-political background of newly independent Ceylon. In line with these developments, in 1953, the Art Department attached to The Ceylon Technical College was established as a separate institution in Horton Place Colombo 7 and was named the Government College of Fine Arts (Figure 08). J. D. A. Perera was appointed as its first principal (Figure 09). Perera started several reformations during its expansion to cater to the new demand in the field. He attracted Royal Academicians such as David Shillingford Paynter, who had a clear vision of art education, to expand the academic structure of the institution.



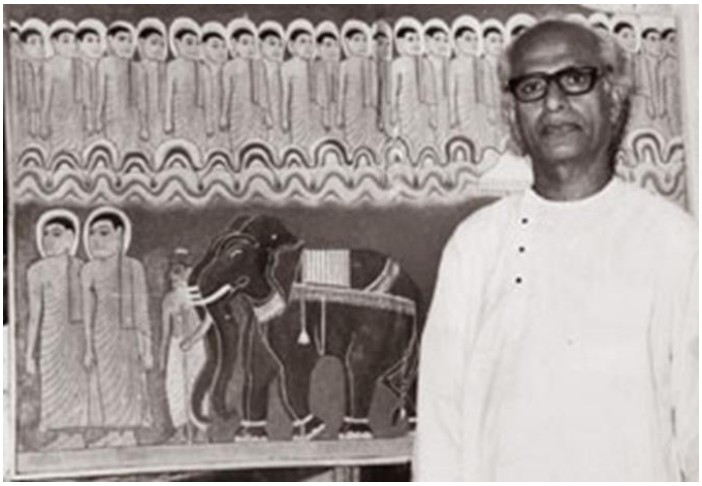
Source: Image Available at: UVPA 10th Anniversary Show: Visual Art Exhibition (2015) (Catalogue) University of Visual and Performing Arts.

FIGURE 08. *GOVERNMENT COLLEGE OF FINE ARTS*, HAYWOOD BUILDING (ND) COLOMBO 07.

Since its beginning, the medium of instruction for visual arts subjects at the Government College of Fine Arts was English. In 1952, Perera introduced *Sinhala* medium classes and recruited local craftsmen as instructors. For instance, S. P. Charles (Figure 10), who showed skill in copying traditional mural paintings, was appointed as an instructor. Traditionally, the academic members of the College comprised of either British gentlemen or locals who studied in Western institutions, especially in the United Kingdom. Even the local academic members were dressed like the English. They adopted the attitude of English gentlemen who followed Western artistic conventions. This is why the recruitment of local craftsmen and the introduction of Sinhala was a pivotal moment which significantly changed visual arts education in postcolonial Sri Lanka. Perera created a platform for local artists and artisans within an academic structure, thereby allowing them to become massively influential in Sri Lankan postcolonial art education.

Source: – Image Available at: http://archives.dailynews.lk/2010/03/23/fea20.asp

FIGURE 09. *J.D.A. PERERA DOING A PORTRAIT OF PREMIER S.W.R.D. BANDARANAIKE*



Source: Image Available at: Saundarya Vishwaviddyala Wansha Kathawa 1893-2010. University of the Visual and Performing Arts.

FIGURE 10. *S. P. CHARLES*

Since its establishment, the Government College of Fine Arts is the only independent institute dedicated to teaching visual arts at an academic level. Adopting many drastic educational reforms throughout its history, today it stands as an independent university with four faculties. Since its establishment in 2005, it has become the pioneering university for teaching visual arts with a committed faculty.

In addition, a few departments were established within the Sri Lankan academic system to teach visual arts. They include namely the Ramanathan Academy of Fine Arts – University of Jaffna (1975), Swami Vipulananda Institute of Aesthetic Studies in Batticaloa (1997 - formally attached to The Eastern University), Sri Palee Campus – University of Colombo (1996), Visual Arts and Design and Performing Arts Unit – University of Kelaniya (1975) and Department of Fine Arts - University of Peradeniya. These Departments function amidst many difficulties in developing their own identities, visual art practicing and diverse pedagogical methods. The autonomy in visual arts teaching education held by the University of the Visual and Performing Arts since its inception is now changing.

Towards Challenges and Opportunities

Addressing the current crisis in creative art education, Farzana Haniffa discusses the broader purpose of modern creative art education. Responding to the recently published report by *the* National Audit Office (2020) and its attempt to connect unemployment among graduates in Sri Lanka with the study of the

Humanities, Haniffa argues that the job market is not the sole focus of creative arts education. She argues that in order to achieve a society that is culturally and socially strong and one that ensures the well-being of humans, arts education is vital. A similar argument is advanced by Saumya Liyanage (2020) in his discussion of the importance of aesthetic education to sustainable development. Equal development of the cultural, sociopolitical, and economic sectors is essential for human progress. Similarly, modern-day analysts have identified that equal growth of the physical, mental, and economic sectors is vital for sustainable growth.

Haniffa further stresses on the marginalization of arts education in Sri Lanka. As discussed, authorities are keen to develop the science, engineering, and industrial sectors even at the expense of undermining the humanities subjects. Liyanage also underlines the active contribution of cultural industries to growing economies. Creative Economy Outlook 2022 published in parallel to the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development underscores the following:

> The creative economy is one of the world's fastest-growing sectors. Creative industries create employment and income, promote innovation and contribute to societies' well-being (Grynspan, 2022).

As discussed here, creativity is linked to any industry, and it contributes to economies on a considerable scale. Creative industries largely support not only the economies of developed countries but also the economies of developing countries. For instance, the size of creative goods and services exported from India has grown from USD 7.5 bn in 2005 to USD 20 bn in 2015 and is expected to grow to USD 35 bn by 2020. This will make India one of the largest players in the trade of creative industries (Pearl Academy), and thus solidifying the importance of creative arts education. However, it appears that policymakers largely do not consider the vital role this area of education plays. A recent policy decision made by the Ministry of Higher Education increased the number of students in visual arts departments throughout local universities, but this decision was largely influenced by the current political climate rather than a broadly discussed sustainable policy decision. These decisions create further issues within the visual arts teaching departments such as an increased lack of infrastructure facilities, funding, and human resources.

While visual arts departments do suffer from unsatisfactory policy decisions made by higher education authorities, these departments are highly

criticized for being unable to produce capable artists, arts educators, historians, curators, and designers as most graduates show interest in working only in the government sectors such as teaching in schools or holding administrative positions in a government department. This criticism cannot entirely be rejected because most of the graduates choose to work as teachers in government schools. For instance, majority of the students graduating from the Faculty of the Visual Arts work as government teachers. But the curriculum of the Faculty is not geared towards producing teachers for the education sector. Instead, the entire curriculum focuses on producing professional art practitioners who are expected to work in creative industries as professional artists or designers. As the Faculty page of the Faculty of Visual Art states:

> The Faculty produces graduates with competencies to be employed in professional, practical and academic careers in the field of visual arts. Painters, Sculptors, Printers, Designers, and Interior Decorators are some of the professions available to our graduates (Faculty of Visual Arts, 2021).

Lack of opportunities also contributes to the phenomenon of graduates trained as painters, sculptors, printmakers, ceramic designers, visual communication designers, or multimedia artists ending up in schools, classrooms, or government offices. For example, The Sri Palee Campus, University of Colombo offers a Bachelor of Arts (Special) degree in Performing Arts. The main focus of their curriculum is to train graduates to fill the gap in the performing arts industry. Upon graduation, the graduates are expected to work in the performing arts industry as professional artists or service providers. But apart from a few exceptional cases, they become school teachers or administrative assistants. The current economic downturn in the country has further exacerbated this situation. Upon inquiry, several students who recently graduated from the art departments at the Colombo, Peradeniya, and Jaffna universities stated that due to lack of opportunities, instability in the industry, insufficient income, and concerns related to job security, they prefer to take up permanent jobs offered by the government, an argument which cannot entirely be rejected or ignored.

The pedagogical system and curricula of most of these entities have not been updated. Apart from a few innovative teachers who have national and international reputation along with active academic participation, most of the faculty at these institutions practice and believe in traditional methods of teaching and learning. To further analyze this issue, it must be noted that these higher education bodies were originally established embracing a traditional European

academic structure or the traditional kalayathanaya format. In most cases, both teaching philosophies are teacher-centric and close off space for innovative practices. As previously discussed, these institutions eventually became or were formally re-established under the local university structure in 1975. Upon closer inspection, it's evident that this transformation created many issues for their institutional identity. It appears that even after the move to absorb these institutions into the national university system, their pedagogical methods remain unchanged. Most of these institutions developed new curricula simply to attain university status and fulfil requirements stipulated by higher education authorities during the transition period. Although these changes took place, it is evident that these departments still do not adhere entirely to the structure of the university system.

The above mentioned situation may sometimes change according to the individual culture of the faculty. This is made evident by the exhibitions entitled Made in IAS (2000), a visual art exhibition by 16 artists from the Institute of Aesthetic Studies, University of Kelaniya, currently known as the University of the Visual and Performing Arts, curated by Jagath Weerasinghe; the 2008 Degree Show of the University of Kelaniya curated by Kingsley Gunathilake; the Seven Conversations (2015) curated by Sharmini Pereira and T. Shanaathanan; Being And Becoming curated by T. Shanaathanan; and *Monadology* (2015) curated by Priyantha Udagedara with students of Sri Palee Campus, the University of Colombo. These were recognized as innovative professional achievements. They were widely discussed among academic and art circles. Despite these achievements, efforts taken to give a radical character to art education remain unsustainable and not continuous due to problems related to institutional mismanagement and issues relating to lack of policy.

Source: Image from Author's Collection, Faculty of Visual Arts, University of the Visual and Performing Arts, Colombo.

FIGURE 11. *JDA PERERA GALLERY*

Poor learning environments and administrative structures, and lack of opportunities and professional platforms such as exhibition spaces and funding facilities also contribute to the absence of institutional growth. Majority of these institutes are housed in buildings with extremely poor conditions and inadequate infrastructure facilities. This is visible at the Sri Palee Campus which conducts its visual art lectures in a compact, dark space with insufficient facilities not conducive to learning. A similar situation prevails at Swami Vipulananda Institute of Aesthetic Studies in Batticaloa (Figure 12). Its students learn in hut-like structures with little to no facilities. The Faculty of Visual Arts at the University of the Visual and Performing Arts has managed to develop its facilities to a satisfactory level with studio facilities including ceramic studio facilities and printmaking facilities during the past years and hosts a three-storey gallery with a large exhibition space (Figure 11). A proper mechanism to share these facilities with other national institutes in a fair manner with the intention of knowledge dissemination and cultural exchange does not currently exist. There is a lack of drive in creating a plan to share technical facilities or gallery space with less equipped art departments or units in other parts of the country. Thus resources are not shared with centers that are in dire need of facilities.

Source: Image from Author's Collection.

FIGURE 12. STUDENTS WORK IN THEIR STUDIOS AT THE *SWAMI VIPULANANDA INSTITUTE OF AESTHETIC STUDIES,* BATTICALOA.

Reforms, though limited, have been made in pedagogy, research, and innovations within visual arts education. Despite these reforms, institutions have failed to recognise practice-based/led research in visual art practice as one of the main areas of knowledge production (this is also common in music, dance, and drama) and as one of the major areas that requires reforms within visual art

departments in Sri Lanka. A majority of the institutes, some of them long recognized as traditional in many countries, now agree to recognize visual arts education as another area of knowledge production. In this regard, the foremost institutes throughout the world have introduced practice-based or practice-led research studies in visual and performing arts and have allowed this approach to permeate within academia. Most visual art departments in Sri Lanka offer four-year degree programs which require students to complete a comprehensive studio project and a dissertation as part of their capstone learning experience. Most visual art teaching departments (outside Sri Lanka) encourage their students to write an extended text critically examining a project related to visual art. For instance, an exegesis, critical commentary, thesis or critical research component (La Trobe 2016: 02) should be submitted parallel to a studio project. This written piece is deemed equivalent to the traditional thesis or dissertation. In Sri Lanka, a trend of visual art students completing dissertations that are disjointed from their studio projects is observed. An instance of this striking disconnect is while a visual art student's studio project highlighted post-war trauma prevalent in the 2010s, their dissertation discussed costume and fashion in 18th-century Kandyan mural paintings.

These issues prevail not only among undergraduates but are also evident even among faculty members. Most university lecturers in the visual art discipline (with a few exceptions) complete their postgraduate qualifications in completely different disciplines. This phenomenon can be found among most lecturers in the fields of visual communication, painting, or print-making who conduct their postgraduate studies in History, Archaeology, or media related disciplines solely to obtain a postgraduate qualification (these studies cannot be considered interdisciplinary). It can be observed that this situation developed in academia due to most young lecturers undertaking postgraduate qualifications to obtain tenure as opposed to producing new knowledge in their area of specialisation. Although adequate levels of funding and scholarship facilities exist for postgraduate education within the university system, only limited candidates are willing to go overseas and explore opportunities and developments in the area of visual art.

To have a balanced teaching and learning environment, ensuring cultural diversity is necessary. In a country like Sri Lanka, ethnic diversity is vital and significant. Sri Lanka continues to suffer from an ethnic conflict. As Graeme Chalmers argues in *Celebrating Pluralism: Art, Education, and Cultural*

Diversity, art provides an interim space. This interim space can be a shared cultural space. Graeme further argues:

> Art provides a sense of meaning or significance or intensity to human life that cannot be gained in any other way. Finally, art is a means through which we can reach out to others for mutuality; it is a means of communion as well as communication (Graeme 1996: 34).

Little or no cultural diversity is evident in most visual art departments in Sri Lanka. Within the Faculty of Visual Arts (University of the Visual and Performing Arts Colombo), classrooms are filled with Sinhala Buddhist students. A similar situation is evident in Jaffna and Batticaloa where Tamil and Muslim students occupy the classroom exclusively. Student groups comprising students from multiple ethno-religious backgrounds are hardly visible at these institutions. This situation creates a considerable cultural gap between the North and South of the country. This lack of ethnic and cultural diversity is evident not only in student admissions but also in the demographic make-up of the teaching faculty. For example, there are no Tamil or Muslim faculty members in the Visual Arts Department of the University of Visual and Performing Arts and many other departments within the campus. Most Visual Arts Departments consist of either Sinhala-speaking or Tamil-speaking faculty members exclusively. Without creating wider opportunities for students and teachers from diverse ethno-religious and cultural backgrounds to interact with one another within the university system, our policymakers introduce programs such as national harmony in the curricula to improve understanding and harmony among ethnic groups in the wider community. This is a highly questionable approach because there are no practical efforts within these academic spaces to create opportunities for inter-ethnic or inter-cultural exchanges.

The medium of delivering lectures in visual art departments is still limited to only Sinhala or Tamil. This shows that a language barrier that prevents interactions across the linguistic divide mars the activities of these departments. Under these circumstances, candidates who studied their Advanced Level curriculum in the visual arts stream in the South prioritize applying for universities in Colombo and Kandy, while Tamil-speaking candidates naturally move to the North, thus creating sharp ethnic boundaries in visual art education. This divide leads to an unfavourable situation for students, faculty, and the field of visual arts education as a whole. This should be properly addressed. There

should be bridges that can facilitate conversations and activities across the linguistic and ethnic divide in Sri Lanka.

There are many projects underway in the Humanities faculties with the special objective of equipping the students with skills necessary for them to secure employment the 21st century. These programs are focused on developing the English language competency, information technology skills and management skills of the undergraduates. Students are asked to engage in business startup programmes and made to identify the career pathways available to them. Unfortunately, these programs do not go beyond a few workshops or lecture sessions. The success of these programmes is assessed based on the number of activities conducted. There are hardly any follow-up processes to evaluate the sustainability and effectiveness of these programs. There have not been any studies conducted with the view to gathering details about the graduates who work as professional artists or how many of them start their careers in the creative industry, or whether they have started their own businesses. Comprehensive studies of national requirements or case studies are generally absent in Sri Lanka. There has been little effort to learn from the success stories of similar departments at universities in other countries. Likewise, only a few academics are interested in contemporary conversations in the field of visual arts education or the emerging trends and trajectories within this field.

Liyanage (2020) emphasizes that empathy be given a central place in art education. It is a concept which is either largely ignored or limited to policy papers at the national and institutional levels. Sri Lanka's education sector including the visual arts education sector focuses narrowly on pass rates in examinations, employability and income. These are considered the indicators of success. Bouton Bobette (2016) discusses the importance of empathy in education wherein education should focus on the development of diverse skills, moral development, service learning, and cognitive, affective, and behavioural development. Eminent theorists such as Eisner (1993) and Gardner (1988) have argued that aesthetic subjects are vital to create a balanced and sensitive society because art education stimulates sensory, creative, and unique ways of understanding the world. Today, there is a need to re-imagine visual art education with a broader social vision which can contribute to the creation of a polity that is resistant to exclusion and discrimination at the levels of class, caste, ethnicity and gender among others, and upholds ethical and moral values that are considered inclusive and egalitarian.

Conclusion

There are historical surveys that offer us an understanding of visual art education in Sri Lanka and its impact. This paper includes brief analyses of key historical moments from colonial and postcolonial perspectives. It also maps how visual art education came into existence within the higher education sector, its transitions and trajectories, and its organizational and institutional structures. The paper further discusses questions and problems in visual arts education in the past and present. Attention is drawn towards studying identities, nationalities, and diversity in visual arts education in postcolonial Sri Lanka. These observations are important to achieve a national cultural identity and a creative economy that can support the practitioners of visual arts. The broad objectives of 21st-century visual arts education and its focus are discussed in this paper with a view to creating an understanding in the country about its contribution to national development. Attention is also drawn to discussing matters related to the institutional structures within which visual arts education happens and lack of opportunities and infrastructure facilities within visual art departments. These discussions will offer a point of departure for further research on new perspectives and opportunities in visual arts education. This is a historical and comparative study that provides some key directions for more in-depth research on visual arts education in Sri Lanka.

Bibliography

Ashcroft, B. (2001) *Post-colonial transformation*. London and New York: Routledge.

Bandaranayake, S. and Dharmasiri, A. (2009) *Sri Lanka paintings in the 20th Century*. Colombo: The National Trust Sri Lanka.

Being and Becoming (2018) [Exhibition]. Saskia Fernando Gallery, Colombo. 04 - 11 May 2018.

Bouton, B. (2016) 'Empathy research and teacher preparation: benefits and obstacles', *SRATE Journal*, 25(2), pp. 16-25.

Dharmasiri, A. (1990) 'Painting modern period (1815-1950)', in Wijesekara, N. (ed.) *Painting – Volume Five*. Colombo: Archaeological Department. pp.127-137.

Dharmasiri, A. (2010) [Exhibition]. *Opening art exhibition: J. D. A. Perera Gallery*. Colombo: JDA Gallery. 21 - 04 February 2010.

Didouan, K. (ed.) (2008) *Expressions of independence and serendipity:* Colombo, University of the Visual and Performing Arts.

Eisner, E. W. (1993) 'Why art in education and why art in education in BCATA, Journal for art teachers', *British Colombia art teachers association*, 33(1), pp. 07-11.

Gardner, H. (1998) 'Toward more effective arts education', *The Journal of Aesthetic Education* 22(1), pp. 157-167.

Goonetilleke, D. C. R. A. (1990) 'Sri Lankan poetry in English: getting beyond the colonial heritage', *ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature*, 21(3), pp. 39-53.

Goonethilleke, L, P. (ed.) (1966) *The doyen of painters Sri Lanka.* Colombo: Felicitation Volume.

Grynspan, R. (2022) *Creative economy outlook 2022: overview - the international year of creative economy for sustainable development: pathway to resilient creative industries*. United Nations.

Graeme C. F. (1996) *Celebrating pluralism: art, education and cultural diversity.* Paul-Getty Trust.

Haniffa. F. (2021) 'Arts education in Sri Lanka: some clarifications*,' The Island*, 27 April. Available at: https://island.lk/arts-education-in-sri-lanka-some-clarifications/ (Accessed: 10 October 2022).

Howells, R. (2003) *Visual culture.* Cambridge: Polity Press.

La Trobe University Graduate Research School (2016) *Guidelines for examinable components of practice-based degrees by research - section A – general requirements*. Available at: BGR16-23-Practice-Based-Guidelines-for-examination.pdf (Accessed: 10 October 2022)

Liyanage, L. (2022) 'Why aesthetic education needs a breakthrough in Sri Lankan universities?', *Colombo Telegraph*, 2 November. Available at: https://www.colombotelegraph.com/index.php/why-aesthetic-education-needs-a-breakthrough-in-sri-lankan-universities/ (Accessed: 10 October 2022).

Made in IAS (2000) [Exhibition]. Gallery 706, Colombo. 11 - 20 July 2000.

Millar, D. (1995) *The Victorian watercolours in the collection of Her Majesty The Queen.* 2 vols, London: Philip Wilson.

Monadology - Unity/Diversity/Freedom (2015) [Exhibition]. University of Colombo, Sri Palee Campus. 22-25 October 2015.

Olaganwatte, C. (2008) *Nineteenth century poetical works and social institutions of Sri Lanka.* Colombo: Vijitha Yapa Publications.

Perera, S. (2010) 'Politics of showing, seeing, and remembering: dynamics of historiography in contemporary Sri Lankan Visual Arts', in Kasprycki, S, S. (ed.), *Artful resistance – contemporary art from Sri Lanka*. Germany: ZKF Publishers, pp. 21-27.

Pearl Academy (nd) *Creative economy - nation building: higher education as the catalyst*. Available at: file:///C:/Users/user/Downloads/Creative-Economy-Report-GNDR%20(1).pdf (Accessed: 10 October 2022).

Seven Conversations (2015) [Exhibition]. Saskia Fernando Gallery, Colombo. 10 - 24 July 2015.

Silva, R, K. (1998) *19th century newspaper engravings*. London: Serendib Publications.

The 2008 Degree Show (2008) [Exhibition]. University of Kelaniya. 24 April - 10 May 2008.

Turner, C. (2007) *Exploring social issues and value systems in contemporary art education.* PhD thesis. Georgia State University.

University of the Visual and Performing Arts (2021) *Faculty of Visual Arts.* Available at: https://vpa.ac.lk/faculty-of-visual-arts/ (Accessed: 10 October 2022).