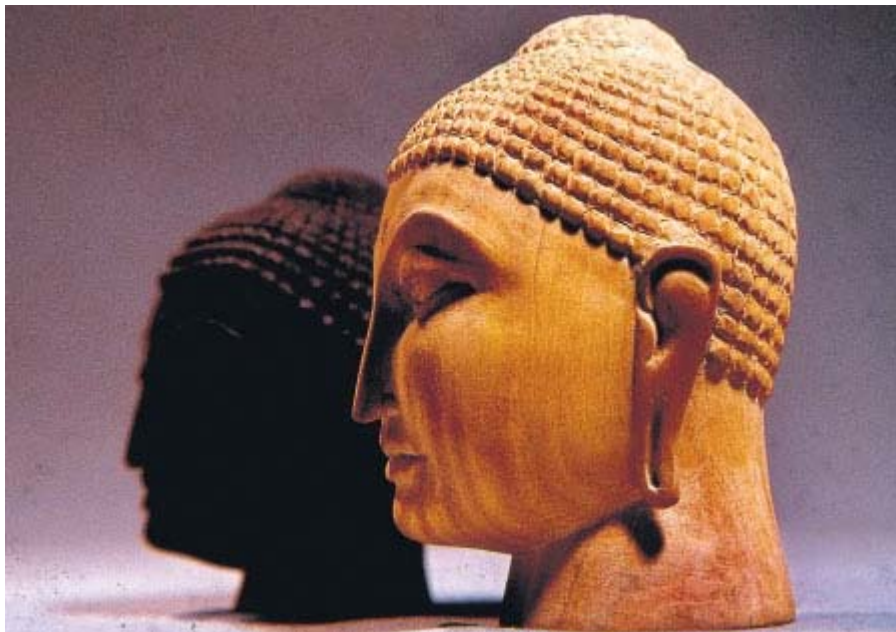


The Nation



Tilak Samarawickrema can talk about art. He can talk about design. He can talk about handicraft or with a broader brush fill the mind's canvass with opinion on culture, heritage, history and politics, both of the mundane diurnal and of the more abiding ideological. He can also talk of exploration, the search for and encounter with all manner of things, with different shapes, lines, colors and meaning.

'A Voyage in Sri Lanka Design,' an elegant volume put out by Vijitha Yapa Publications is a life story. It is an account of exploration along many pathways with astute acknowledgment of intersection and commonality, and sensitivity to connectivity across time and space of multiple spheres. The text and illustrations are neatly organized in a by-subject manner, but within these chapters the signature of a man with multiple interests and one who has resolved to keep mind open to both the fresh and abiding is apparent.

Tradition and the traditional are things he has clearly encountered and occupied himself with, in both gaze as well as creative work. His, however, is not a hard-grip encounter but a caressing. This is what probably allows him to see unevenness in what his gaze encounters. It allows him, moreover, to slip under sheen and observe the delicate and violent mix of ideology, philosophy and political economy.

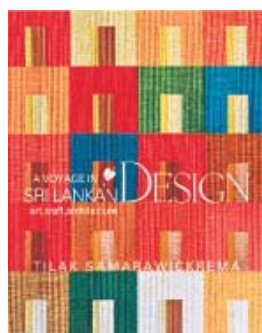
Tilak is not a transcriber of things past and things on their way out. He obtains inspiration from the traditional and adds social and economic shelf life by using idea, motif and material in what he produces for modern day consumption. That's not a surprise, given unabashed veneration of Ananda Coomaraswamy and in particular of his definitive (for many) work, 'Mediaeval Sinhala Art', which he says has framed this book and indeed, one could argue, his life. Coomaraswamy saw art not as ornament but as something alive and which obtained value mostly from utility. Tilak's excursions have gifted him ample examples of live art and his urban encounters probably made him see enough of 'art as ornament and nothing else'. His own work appears to take direction from the Coomaraswamy definition. His 'journey', therefore is vibrant, his work speaks, they engage and perhaps even transform.



The world and in particular Sri Lanka has not picked up on Coomaraswamy, though. 'Tradition' hangs from walls wherever we go, from hotels to the living rooms of the affluent and even the art loving Bobos (Bourgeois Bohemians), but utility value has for the most part been reduced to eye-candy and showcasing. Tilak's tapestries speak of a past as well as an abiding sense of 'way of life'. They have market value, yes. They also speak. They teach. They preserve and nurture something more than a color-line mix that pleases eye.

Art connoisseurs would probably speak of Tilak's aesthete and his contributions to create 'a new aesthetic order'. What the uninitiated realizes is how Tilak's reinvention of the tradition has spilled over to real, lived, experienced life, for example in the world of fashion. The book contains the words and appreciations of experts. Those essays illuminate. They also help us understand where Tilak stands in the global art firmament. Bruno Munari's piece on his drawings is a case in point. He speaks of the amazing economy of Tilak's hand. He expresses so much with so little, which of course implies the 'lot' that is constituted of study, experimentation, reflection and imagination. He must possess the most delicate fingers, that much can be concluded.

Those line drawings manifested themselves in the now celebrated and oft-wowed Munchee TV commercial aired during the recently concluded T-20 World Cup. It demonstrated that 'tradition' to Tilak is not cast in stone and not buried in the past either. It is up to those present to do what they will. Tilak is firmly rooted in the moment, which is a high vantage point to those who sees it as such from which gaze can be cast on that which came before and that which is yet to unravel. This is why there is a certain futurism in his work that is (interestingly) familiar as well. He takes line and he makes it dance. He gives a third dimension even in a two-dimensional activation. That must take a lot of skill.



He says his architecture 'has a universal and cosmopolitan approach'. Perhaps it is something intrinsic to 'buildings' but his designs are a stark contrast to his drawings. Curve is replaced with straight line. There is less 'dance' and more 'standing' if you will. Neat. Elegant. This book can be a flip-through and that would please much, let there be no doubt. That, however, would be a disservice to the man, the work, the pathways he has travelled, the treasures he has picked up and the painstaking but seemingly effortless polishing and crafting he's engaged in all his professional and artistic life. Most importantly, one would miss the significance of the 'social' in all his undertakings. Even as his craft carries his distinctive signature, Tilak's work has always been contextualized by a deep appreciation of the collective, a strong respect for those who came before, appreciation and acknowledgment of the wells he has sipped inspiration from and an abiding sense of social responsibility. It all adds up to many things, including a kind of patriotism that flag-waving and anthem-singing 'nationalists' have no clue about.

It is a journey in itself, this reading. It is a quick-read book that needs to be read slowly and many times over, one feels. It puts reader in touch with something that is hard to describe but perhaps speaks to him in a familiar voice of things he or she is made of but probably unaware of. A treasure, simply.

A nutshell introduction

An autobiographical visual narrative of Tilak Samarawickrema's life's work. A voyage in Sri Lankan Design captures his prolific body of work in architecture, art, crafts development, and design over the past 40 years. The book begins with Samarawickrema's major contribution to the arts and crafts of Sri Lanka in the 1080's through his consultancy at the National Design Centre, which culminated in the exhibition Silpa.

It then moves to document his creation of a unique design aesthetic in his hand-woven tapestries produced through a 20-year collaboration with the traditional weavers of Talagune, Uda Dumbara. The book also provides a window into his art with its original drawing style composed of sensuously curving lines that resonate with the Sinhala calligraphy. Further, it illustrates how Samarawickrema has expanded the scope of his line drawings, adapting them to work in multiple mediums including wire sculpture and cinematic animation.

Finally, A Voyage in Sri Lankan Design documents his architecture, which ranges from residential housing to factories, banks and office interiors, all designed in a modernist and contemporary idiom. While Samarawickrema's art, crafts, and tapestries retain links to vernacular aesthetics, his architecture expresses a cosmopolitan and universal approach to design. The book encapsulates the creative output of this versatile individual who has transcended vocational and geographical boundaries to produce a rare body of work in multifaceted design. Through photographic material, illustrations, reviews and articles in international catalogs and magazines, this exquisitely crafted book records Samarawickrema's exceptional contribution to Sri Lankan design.



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