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AN INTERVIEW WITH DONALD RAMANAYEKA ON ASPECTS OF CULTURE IN SRI LANKA

Le Roy Robinson

Donald Ramanayeka, a member of the Advisory Panel for Art and Sculpture of the Arts Council of Sri Lanka, is a landscape painter in oils, water colors, pastels and black and white.

He was born November 18, 1920, on a coconut estate, where his father was a planter, in Pannipitiya, ten miles from Colombo. He attended the Kandy Convent School, Trinity College, Kandy, and Cathedral College, Colombo.

Donald Ramanayeka has held over 35 one-man shows. Since 1938 he has been a regular exhibitor in the Ceylon Society of Arts in whose competitions he has won many awards. He has also shown his paintings at international exhibitions in Bangladesh, Bulgaria, Brazil, China, England, India, Japan, Nepal, the Soviet Union and South Korea.

In 1981 he represented Sri Lanka at the Asian Artists Conference in Dacca, Bangladesh.

Twice president of the Ceylon Society of Arts, he was conferred an Honorary Fellowship by the Society for services rendered to art.

Appointed by the Ministry of Cultural Affairs, he was for two years Curator of the Sri Lanka National Gallery of Art.

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ROBINSON: Let’s begin by dealing with your personal history as an artist. How did you get started as a painter?

RAMANAYEKA: I had a passion for art and wanted to be a painter from my childhood. I was born a twin, by the way; the other child, also a boy, died at the age of five. I used to draw on the walls with charcoal and colored chalks. I began painting when I was nine years old. My parents were proud of my talent and encouraged me a great deal. I participated in children’s art competitions conducted by newspapers and won awards. I received my first training in art at Trinity College from J. A. Hardy, our English art teacher. I also learned a lot by watching David Paynter doing the murals at the Trinity College Chapel. I began exhibiting my work in 1938, when I was eighteen, in the Ceylon Society of Arts. Having sold my work on that occasion, I became a
ROBINSON: Please say a little more, then, about David Paynter.
RAMANAYEKA: David Paynter was one of Sri Lanka's foremost painters. He won international distinction both in portraiture and landscape. He died in 1975 at the age of seventy-five. He was born in Almora. In the foothills of the Himalayas. He studied in England and Italy. He exhibited at the Royal Academy in the 1920s. He returned to Sri Lanka in the 1930s. In the Trinity College Chapel he painted four murals with Ceylonese models and Ceylonese landscapes. The Christ in the crucifixion scene was a beardless young Sinhalese. In the Good Samaritan scene, trees found in Ceylon were in the background. In the other sections the men and women depicted are typical Ceylonese. David Paynter was a gentle person. Full of humanity. He was politeness personified. Humility is a rare trait among our artists, you should know. I have great reverence for David Paynter and his art.

ROBINSON: Did you have any other important local teachers of art?
RAMANAYEKA: Just before World War II, I studied at the Atelier School with Gate Mudliyar A. C. G. S. Amarasekera. An uncle of mine introduced me to him. That was around 1935. I worked under him for five years. He taught the fundamentals of art. He was a conservative painter. Traditionalism is still strong in Sri Lanka art. Amarasekera was one of Sri Lanka's greatest artists. He excelled in all the media — oils, watercolors, pastels, black and white, etchings. He exhibited his work in international exhibitions and won acclaim. He died at the age of 100. In 1983. He was also an excellent magician, and he was called "The Gay Deceiver." Sometimes, though, he was arrogant.

ROBINSON: Have you taught art yourself?
RAMANAYEKA: I've instructed nearly a hundred pupils. I always encourage anyone in the pursuit of art. I've organized many art exhibitions for the upliftment of art in Sri Lanka.

ROBINSON: What is it like to be an art teacher in Sri Lanka?
RAMANAYEKA: The pupils whom I instructed were in groups. Some I instructed individually, of course. Most of them were talented. But some hadn't the imagination of a fly. But they persisted in having classes. I had a trying time. Some of them were ungrateful and later did not even mention the name of their tutor. They labelled themselves as "self-taught artists." I always im-
parted all I know in art to the pupils and aided them a great deal to complete their paintings. There were many foreign ladies who were residents here and who sought my tutelage in landscape painting. On many occasions we went painting outdoors and enjoyed painting Mother Nature.

ROBINSON: Would you mind saying something about some of these students?

RAMANAYEKA: In the 1950s I had to go weekly to Queen's House to hold classes for Joan Wenn, the hostess there. Queen's House used to be the residence of the then Governor General. Now it is the President's house. Mrs. Wenn was a talented painter and painted commendable pictures. I used to ride my pushbike there.

Then there was Muriel Navon, the wife of the Israel Charge d'Affaires. In the early 1970s. She was a very skilled artist working in oils, water colors, and pastels. In appreciation of my teaching, she sponsored an exhibition of my work in her residence. She invited diplomats, friends, and connoisseurs, and the exhibition was a success. I sold virtually all of my paintings.

In the late 1970s I also aided a High Commissioner of Bangladesh. Mohmada Hoque. She was an extremely talented person. She excelled in flower studies, figures and landscapes. She held an exhibition at her residence, too, before her departure from Sri Lanka.

In the local world, Christine Wilson is easily one of my best pupils. She's a gifted landscapist and flower painter. Yvonne Paulier is also a talented artist. She held a solo exhibit five years ago. Then there's Langanie Fernando, very gifted in figure and landscape painting. She always calls herself a Devoted Pupil.

ROBINSON: Wilson is a writer, isn't she?

RAMANAYEKA: Indeed! She's the most successful woman writer this country has ever known. She's turned out three novels, numerous short stories, a play. She's talked over the B. B. C. Two of her novels have been translated into German and one of them — she writes in English — was recently out in Sinhala, The Bitter Berry. She's also written about her father, Doctor R. L. Spittel, who was, as you know, a well-known anthropologist who wrote a great deal about the aborigines here, the Veddahs. Her book is called Surgeon of the Wilderness.

ROBINSON: Jegatheeswari Nagendran has mentioned that you yourself were a
devoted pupil of a Russian painter by the name of Sofronoff.

RAMANAYEKA: Yes. Alexander Dmitri Sofronoff. I owe eternal gratitude to him. I met him in 1940, when I was twenty, here in Colombo. He was working at the Galle Face Hotel as an interior decorator. I studied with him for eight years. He taught me how to paint with a spatula on canvas. Of course, J. D. A. Perera and David Paynter advised me, but Sofronoff was my mentor, my master.

ROBINSON: In what way?

RAMANAYEKA: He showed me the colors appropriate for landscape painting here. Until then, our painters in Sri Lanka were using sombre colors, the Western palette, colors more appropriate to Western climates. Our local paintings lacked the glory of the tropics. Sofronoff showed us the colors suitable for the tropics are bright. Cobalt blue. Cerulean blue. Olive green. Lemon yellow. Reflecting our bright sunshine.

ROBINSON: What was Sofronoff doing in Sri Lanka?

RAMANAYEKA: He came out to Ceylon in 1938 with a Russian ballet company. Later he was employed at the Galle Face Hotel. He held nearly ten solo exhibitions here. He gave liberally to charities. He painted with the brush and spatula. His technique was Impressionistic. The room he occupied in the hotel was his studio, but he was more an outdoor painter. He unselfishly imparted to me his technique of painting and of using the colors he discovered for Ceylon’s climate. Besides those I’ve already mentioned, yellow ochre, vermilion, mauve. Since I admire his style, I call him my “Guru”.

ROBINSON: Did you continue your relationship with Sofronoff when he returned to his own country?


ROBINSON: Please say more about your wife.

RAMANAYEKA: She’s a batik artist and cloth weaver. She paints also — in oils and water colors. Figure compositions. Leela gives me all the encouragement to pursue my art. She is truly a kind and understanding soul. Ours was a love
marriage, and we are supremely happy, even after twenty years.

ROBINSON: You said you were advised by J. D. A. Perera. Who was he?

RAMANAYEKA: Perera was one of the greatest portrait painters of Sri Lanka. He died in 1967 at the age of sixty-nine. He painted celebrated people — Sita de Saram and Sir John Howard, for example — and ordinary people. The National Art Gallery has about ten of his works.

ROBINSON: Do you have any idea why you decided to concentrate on painting landscapes?

RAMANAYEKA: Nature. I love nature. The beauty of trees is unspeakable. Once I saw a cluster of fine bamboo trees at the Udawattekelle Sanctuary in Kandy. I could not help but embrace them and kiss them! It's a forest on a high elevation. It teems with monkeys. There are huge trees of all varieties. It's a place for nature lovers. Sometimes painters go there for inspiration.

ROBINSON: You've been exhibiting since 1938, but when did you have your first one-man show?

RAMANAYEKA: That was in 1954. In Trincomalee. At the Nicholson Lodge. It was sponsored by the British Royal Navy. The Commander then was Charles Rowe. 1954 was a good year for me. It brought me a rare distinction. I submitted a landscape — a rural scene in Sri Lanka — to the Summer Salon, the Royal Institute Galleries in London, and it was accepted for exhibition. Some B. B. C. TV reporters attended the exhibition and they selected this painting for showing on TV. Millions of British people saw it. This was the first time that a Sri Lanka painter had been honored in this way. The painting itself is in a private collection in England now. Coincidentally, Queen Elizabeth II paid her first visit to Sri Lanka in 1954, and thanks to Mrs. E. H. L. Wenn — as I said, a student of mine who was the hostess at Queen's House then — I was able to hang two canvases for the Queen, one of mine and one of Sofronoff's. When she made her last visit here, I had the honor of personally presenting one of my pictures to her.

ROBINSON: Can you describe that 1954 landscape?

RAMANAYEKA: The oil painting — impressionist — was of a typical Sri Lanka village scene. It depicted a sunlit roadway amidst paddy fields. In the foreground there was a village hut — and a flamboyant tree. In the distance there was an ox cart. I think it conveyed the true atmosphere of Sri Lanka, the landscape.
ROBINSON: You said the painting is in a private collection in England.

RAMANAYEKA: Yes, it's now in London. In the possession of Mr. and Mrs. Basil Baldwin. He was an Engineer in the Royal Navy. He was stationed in Trincomalee in the 1940s. Most of my patrons have been Britishers. I owe a debt of gratitude to British people for the great encouragement they have given me. Works of art by local painters are bought mostly by foreigners, you know, mostly tourists, and by a few in our moneyed class.

ROBINSON: As for important years, I understand that 1971 was also an important one for you.

RAMANAYEKA: Yes, it was. As you know, I was awarded a scholarship to the United States. Under the International Visitor Program sponsored by the State Department. I was nominated by the Sri Lanka government. I was able to visit ten states and met and had discussions with several artists. But before I went to the States I made what you could call an artistic pilgrimage around Europe — Rome, Berlin, Paris, London. I visited all the important galleries, met many other painters. In Rome I was the guest of our then ambassador to Italy, Mrs. Loranee Senaratne. She's the President of the Sri Lanka Association of Writers and Poets. She's a writer, a poetess, an exceedingly kind person. I met a lady painter who had been painting miniatures on ivory in the Vatican for over twenty years. Maria Casanelli. I met Professor Elsa Zuzzanelli. Sebastian Nello. Others. They were very charming. They were simple and humble artists who were always willing to impart their knowledge. I myself was humbled on that trip. I saw Michaelangelo's paintings in the Sistine Chapel. I felt I was not even a student of art, I was so humbled before the gigantic awe-inspiring sculpture-esque paintings that Michaelangelo's immortal genius conceived. I admired the Pieta, too, of course.

ROBINSON: As a landscape painter, you're lucky you don't have to be on a scaffold looking up at a ceiling.

RAMANAYEKA: As a matter of fact, one of my most interesting and exciting jobs was as an assistant to N. S. Godamanna. He is mainly a portrait painter. He was commissioned to paint the cupola of St. Mary's Church in Negombo. In 1946. Of course, the paintings were not originals, just reproductions of works of old masters. Anyway, to answer your question, I remember how I had to lie on my back on a scaffolding for well nigh three years! Once I went up I
never came down the whole day. Food was sent up. And I had to attend to 
other business too while I was perched 72 feet high.

ROBINSON: Well! Back to Europe, then. After Rome?
RAMANAYEKA: Yes. Then I went to West Germany. I was the guest of the West Ger-
man government. Dietrich Loewe, who was in the West German Embassy
here then, arranged that. In Munich I had the great pleasure of meeting Ot-
to Scheinhammer, a painter who had been in Ceylon in the late 1920s and 
early 1930s. He donated his entire collection of Ceylon paintings, nearly six-
ty landscapes, figure compositions, and portraits, to the Augsburg Town 
Hall. They’re on permanent display there. Our Ceylon Society of Arts has 
two of his paintings. He gave me a monograph of his own work. Magnifi-
cent reproductions. Including several of his Ceylon paintings. Scheinham-
mer was born in Munich in 1897. He worked some time as a “free lance” ar-
tist. Later he made several trips to Italy, Dalmatia and the Netherlands. He 
came out to Ceylon in 1927 and painted his impressions of the country and 
the people with enthusiasm. He was the first to paint nudes in Ceylon, by 
the way. When he returned to Germany, back in 1931, he had a successful 
exhibition. But a fire broke out and destroyed thirty seven of his works. He 
made a second trip here in 1932 and painted here until 1935. He died in 1981. 
He was eighty-four.

ROBINSON: What are the names at least of other foreign painters who have 
painted in Sri Lanka?
RAMANAYEKA: Well, Sofronoff, of course. Alfred Coffey and Donald Friend, both 
from Australia. Salvatore de Pasquale, an Italian artist. And others. Too 
to many to mention. Coffey painted landscapes here and held an exhibition at 
the Art Gallery in 1935. Donald Friend was here for some time and worked 
in all the media and held an exhibition in 1969. Sometimes he exhibited with 
the 43 Group — at their invitation. Salvatore de Pasquale came out in the 
1940s and had a solo exhibition of his work done in Italy and a few Ceylon 
landscapes and figure studies. An Englishman Donald Floyd also came out 
in the 1940s and painted landscapes and had a show at the Art Gallery.

ROBINSON: Then after West Germany, you went to Paris, right, in 1971?
RAMANAYEKA: That’s correct. I was in Paris only briefly, but I spent every minute I 
could in the Louvre Museum and especially in the Museum of Impres-
sonism. People in the art world — artists, curators — had classified my
work as "impressionistic". I admired the work of Monet and Manet and Sisley, Renoir, and Pissarro. I visited Montmartre, where Utrillo, Van Gogh and Picasso had once lived. The painters I met there were very friendly, very cordial. One artist — an American — even offered me a canvas board and paints to paint a picture. That was the unity found among painters. Outside Sri Lanka. Even now most of the artists here are envious of each other. I met many fellow artists in London, too. I visited the Tate Gallery specially to see Turner's work. His idyllic dream-like landscapes, often of Venice. The force of wind and water conveyed by his open rigorous brushwork. The sense of the all-embracing flood of light that envelops a scene. It impressed me tremendously. In New York at the Guggenheim Museum I saw Picasso's "Night Cafe Scene" of 1900. In the Museum of Modern Art I saw Monet's "Water Lilies". But the majority of the pictures I saw in the States were very modern American paintings — futurism, vorticism, rayonism, expressionism, optical, kinetic, pop art. Yes, 1971 was a significant year in my education as an artist.

ROBINSON: On the subject of museums, would you say something about your own experience as Curator of the National Art Gallery of Sri Lanka?

RAMANAYEKA: I was the very first Curator of the Gallery. I was appointed by the Ministry of Cultural Affairs. I should say that the Ministry is very active in promoting art. I was sure I could do a good job. I wanted to set a good example. During my 1971 tour I'd learned some of the fine points of the restoration of paintings. I wanted to restore as many of the old paintings in the National Gallery as possible. I was well acquainted with these old paintings because I'd been emotionally attached to the Gallery from my youth. The paintings were in a sorry state of neglect. As you yourself pointed out! I did what I could. I also wanted to improve the way paintings were hung in the Gallery. It was all haphazard. Certain paintings should be hung in a certain way. A particular way. I wanted to focus on different themes for exhibitions. By temporarily removing irrelevant pictures. I wanted to have special sections for local painters — to name only three, J. D. A. Perera. David Paynter. Saradias Lankatilleke, mainly a portrait painter. The framing of a picture is also an important factor. Many painters were content to frame their works haphazardly. In Sri Lanka we didn't have the opportunity then to get mouldings that befit a work. In the States one could choose from an
array of nearly 100 different mouldings for framing. Lighting, too, is important. And background. In 1971 I had the privilege of seeing works of art being hung where even the walls or panels were painted particular colors to enhance the exhibit. Paintings should be displayed in correct lighting, artificial or natural, and they should be displayed in appropriate backgrounds.

ROBINSON: Then how about discussing the art scene in Sri Lanka in general. I think you know Rahju Michael Pereira.

RAMANAYEKA: Yes. Michael’s indeed a talented young artist. But painting in imitation of Salvador Dali is unhealthy, in my opinion.

ROBINSON: Pereira has made a lot of negative remarks to me about the situation of art and artists in Sri Lanka. I’d like to ask you similar questions and see if your overall impressions agree. For example, he seems to think that the appreciation of art is at a low level in Sri Lanka.

RAMANAYEKA: Let me say that the general appreciation of fine art in Sri Lanka is poor, yes, but it’s getting better. There has been a lack of adequate education in art in the public schools, but the situation is improving. Until recently, art was not considered a subject worthy of being taught in our schools. Pride of place was given to European literature and European history. And music. Sports are encouraged — cricket, tennis, soccer. Anyone who distinguishes himself in any kind of sport is almost always sure of a job anywhere here.

ROBINSON: Malika Jayasinghe has said that artists here do not often receive a fair return for their work.

RAMANAYEKA: There are many talented young people in this country, but they have to struggle hard to keep body and soul together. Most artists here live in conditions of extreme poverty. The cost of renting a studio is beyond their means. They work at home. They do not get grants. They do not receive subsidies. They cannot count on income from sales of paintings or sculpture. They cannot count on commissions from either public or private sources. As artists, they do not qualify for sickness benefits or unemployment insurance or retirement pensions. In short, most artists here do not earn a living through art alone. Of course, a few come from wealthy families or have other sources of income or employment. Or they are commercial artists. The status of artists here is very poor.

ROBINSON: How much does it cost to rent a studio?
It costs over two thousand rupees, a year.

How much do paintings sell for?

Sometimes paintings fetch very high prices, even a lakh of rupees.

Who is getting such high prices?

At the moment, Senaka Senanayake's works fetch the highest prices in Sri Lanka. He's a famous artist. Senaka Senanayake is Sri Lanka's most famous artist. He's a millionaire. People come here from foreign countries in quest of his work. He studied art in the United States. He's held over 95 one-man shows world wide — Rome, Paris, Berlin, Prague, San Francisco, London, Tokyo. His work is represented in various permanent collections. He's the Director of the Oberoi Hotel Art Gallery.

Is there any one person particularly well known in commercial art in Sri Lanka?

G. S. Fernando. He has the outward appearance of a genial Ayurvedic physician. As a matter of fact, he studied Ayurvedic Medicine for a while in his youth, but his leanings toward art changed the course of his career. He went to Ananda College in Colombo. He did some work at the then National Theater, the Tower Hall. He worked on stage sets for the Sinhalese dramas of those days. He also attended the Atelier School of Art of Gate Mudliyar A. C. G. S. Amarasekera. He was about twenty years before me. He took a correspondence course in commercial art and got a job — a secure one — in the commercial art section of the Times of Ceylon. That was in 1934. He continued as a commercial artist and cartoonist. His forte in commercial art is posters. He's repeatedly won first prizes for posters in competitions on such diverse subjects as tourism, food production, national security, railway information, and Sri Lanka. He's won several awards at the Ceylon Society of Arts. He's shown his work in international exhibitions in China, India and the Soviet Union. He invests his work with the charm of Ceylon. His work has a depth of feeling seldom achieved by his contemporaries in this field. Fernando is not only a commercial artist either. As a water color painter, he's in a class by himself.

Please describe G. S. Fernando's work in water colors.

He's made water color a powerful medium. Impressionistic. Lyrical. Memorable. His water color landscapes convey the beauty of Sri Lanka with extraordinary tenderness. Yet he retains the vitality so essential to the
medium. He achieves this with a complete command of his palette with speedy strokes, and his liquid flowing brush is remarkable for its economy, strength and infinite subtlety of color.

ROBINSON: Isn't it too facile?

RAMANAYEKA: No, not at all. G. S. Fernando's art goes far beyond a facile enchantment of the eye. It fulfills a more essential purpose: the identification of feeling and the education of the spirit. Water color can easily become so cold, and, when wrongly handled, it can be deceitful, insipid and unexciting. Over and over in Fernando's work one feels an immediacy, the immediacy of a moment. He doesn't make studies for later alteration in the studio — usually with a consequential loss of vitality. He doesn't recollect his inspiration in tranquility, to paraphrase Wordsworth. He finishes a painting on the spot. He doesn't concern himself as many do with carefully observed and meticulously painted studies of clouds, say, however much he reacts to clouds. His argument seems to be that if a sketch has intense feeling it has everything needed. Why touch it? His painting displays a deep-seated reverence for Nature and love for his country.

ROBINSON: Who are some other important painters in Sri Lanka?

RAMANAYEKA: There's Stanley Abeysinghe. He was born in 1914. He's been mainly self-taught except for a short period at the Ceylon Technical College under J. D. A. Perera. He's talented. Versatile. Even in his student days he carried away many notable awards of the Ceylon Society of Art. Later on many occasions his work was judged as among the best paintings of the year. He had a successful one-man show in 1945. His work is widely experimental in form and color. He's jettisoned technique for its own sake in an uncompromising effort to project an idea. He's travelled extensively. He's had an exhibition in Bombay, India. He won the C. S. A. scholarship to Europe. His work was included in an exhibition of Asian Art. He was Principal of the Ceylon College of Fine Arts. He's easily one of Sri Lanka's best portrait painters. He's painted many leading personalities of Sri Lanka.

ROBINSON: To go back, you've already said a little about J. D. A. Perera, but his name keeps coming up. Would you mind giving a rundown on his career?

RAMANAYEKA: Perera was born in 1897 at Gampaha.

ROBINSON: A. V. Suraweera and Henry Jayasena were born there too.

RAMANAYEKA: Yes. Perera was educated at Ananda and Wesley Colleges. He had his
early training under A. E. Bartlam of the Ceylon Technical College. He also worked with C. F. Winzer for over ten years. Along with Winzer and Lionel Wendt he was one of the pioneers in organizing the Ceylon Art Club. He was Art Director of the Ceylon Technical College for twenty years. He exhibited annually at the shows of the Ceylon Society of Arts. He was also a Vice President of the Society. In 1946 he got the first Art Scholarship awarded by the government of Ceylon and he studied in Europe for a couple of years. He exhibited at the National Society of London, the Royal Scottish Academy, the Paris Salon, and other places.

ROBINSON: Among the important women painters?

RAMANAYEKA: Sarasvathi Rockwood. She ranks among the foremost among the women painters of Sri Lanka. She's a versatile artist too. Paints in oils, water colors, pastels and black and white. Her portraits in pastels are superb. She also does wood carving, sculpture and ceramics. She's been a member of the Ceylon Society of Arts for nearly forty years and has served as Vice President. She's won many awards in competitions and has exhibited in international competitions abroad.

ROBINSON: To go back to the general again, do associations of artists do anything to improve the overall situation for artists in Sri Lanka?

RAMANAYEKA: There are few painters associations here. The Ceylon Society of Arts. The 43 Group. The Jatika Kala Peramuna. As Michael Pereira told you, Sri Lankan artists are disunited. They cannot get together. The basic cause is Jealousy.

ROBINSON: Then what are local critics of art doing to make the situation better?

RAMANAYEKA: There have been only a very few knowledgeable art critics in Sri Lanka. Journalist L. P. Goonatileke, and Sita Parakrama. She was an artist herself. Both are dead.

ROBINSON: As far as criticism is concerned, how have you been treated by local art critics?

RAMANAYEKA: Very well, I think, for the most part.

ROBINSON: Is there any particular critic whose criticism did you justice?

RAMANAYEKA: I referred before to the year 1971 as a good year for me, and I particularly liked a piece about me published in the Ceylon Times in March of 1971. Sita Jayawardena wrote it. I'd had an exhibition at the American Center in Colombo.
ROBINSON: What did Jayawardena say about your work?

RAMANAYEKA: That I painted beautiful landscapes exhibiting a wonderful technique that captured the light and shade of nature. She noticed how I varied textures to emphasize naturalistic forms and the movements of the subjects — flowering trees, a tumbling river, the sunlight on a rock, a palm-fringed coastline. I'll quote here: "He captures not only the simple beauty of rural roads and wayside places but also the solitude of mountains surrounded in mist and lovely jungle places." There was quiet poetry in the paintings, Jayawardena said. Quoting again: "A kind of tranquil enchantment envelopes reality."

ROBINSON: That gives a good idea of your subjects and the way you treated them. Did Jayawardena express any negative response to your painting?

RAMANAYEKA: Do you know of a critic who does not have negative responses? Yes, Jayawardena said my work sometimes appeared too facile and trite but that there were only a few obvious pot-boilers in the exhibition. But the review was really quite positive.

ROBINSON: Did you show only landscapes in that show?

RAMANAYEKA: No, there were a few figure studies. "Seamstress". "Temple Dancer". And portraits. One of an actress and one of a singer.

ROBINSON: What did Jayawardena say about them?

RAMANAYEKA: She liked them. She said that I was an artist of the future.

ROBINSON: Going back to the general situation of art in Sri Lanka again, what are the owners of private art galleries doing to interest the general public in local artists?

RAMANAYEKA: There are not many good private art galleries here as yet. Only a few private organizations try to interest what you call the general public in art. A few museums and temples, Buddhist temples, show works of art of the past. As I've already suggested, in Sri Lanka traditional art is given more importance than new art. The Ministry of Cultural Affairs has councils on art policy, but artists have little or no practical influence in these councils. Artists in Sri Lanka should get together. Should organize themselves into self-help communities. But, as I said before, they are disunited and badly organized.

ROBINSON: If a young artist wants to study abroad, is it easy for him or her to get a scholarship from local sources?
RAMANAYEKA: In order to study abroad, a student must usually pay his own way — air fare, tuition, fees. And he must be able to speak a foreign language — usually English.

ROBINSON: You said before some local people buy art by local artists. Who are some of the local collectors?

RAMANAYEKA: There's the Anton Wickremasinghe Art Collection. The Ralph Deraniyagala Collection. The collection of Mr. and Mrs. H. W. Jayawardena. Dr. A. C. J. Weerakoon's Collection. The collection of Mr. and Mrs. Winston Serasinghe, the actor Shelagh Goonewardene told you about. There's also the Sapumal Foundation founded by painter Harry Pieris. It's an exception to the rule I've been laying down about the plight of artists in Sri Lanka. Dr. Weerakoon is one of its trustees.

ROBINSON: To identify only one of these collectors — Who is Anton Wickremasinghe?

RAMANAYEKA: He's the Chairman of the Sri Lanka Film Corporation. He's steeped in the arts. His collection includes paintings by Sri Lanka's foremost artists, visiting artists, and even a Picasso.

ROBINSON: And what does Sapumal mean?

RAMANAYEKA: It's the name of a flower, sapu mal, champak. It has a pleasant fragrance.

ROBINSON: Then, what does the Sapumal Foundation do?

RAMANAYEKA: It tries to advance cultural activities. It gives assistance to artists — scholarships, loans, allowances. It helps them to pay for books and equipment. It also tries to help local musicians and writers, theatre people, even scientists. Sapumal has a small art gallery and a library of books and musical scores. Sapumal also assists clubs and organizations involved in the relief of poor and needy and handicapped people in Sri Lanka. Sapumal Foundation has sponsored many artists exhibitions. George Keyt. Sarath Kirinde. Seevali Illangasinghe. Since the passing of Harry Pieris, I believe a committee runs the foundation.

ROBINSON: Would you mind giving us some information about Harry Pieris?

RAMANAYEKA: Harry was born in Colombo early in this century. He was educated at Royal College in Colombo. He also studied under Gate Mudliyar A. C. G. S. Amarasekera — when he was only thirteen years old. Amarasekera fought gallantly to have him go to England. He joined the Royal College of Art,
where he attracted the attention of the late Sir William Rothenstein. In the mid-1920s he won the prize for the best portrait at the Royal College of Art Exhibition. He came back to Ceylon in 1927 and two years or so later he went to Europe — to Paris, where he lived for about six years. He worked under Professor Robert Falk, a Russian exile. He was fortunate to meet and get criticism and advice from Matisse and Luiba Popesco, a Rumanian painter, and he threw off the shackles of English Impressionism. Harry travelled widely in Europe and the best European influences remained deeply imbedded in his work, due chiefly to his study of Rembrandt and Cezanne. But it's to Ajanta — and Ellora and Konarak — and Nature that he really went for his final style, the synthesis, which was peculiarly his own and which makes his work more than superficial.

ROBINSON: Did Pieris spend much time in India?

RAMANAYEKA: He was in India for a few years. In the 1930s. He'd been introduced to Rabindranath Tagore's Ashram at Santiniketan. In Bengal he painted effective landscapes. The chief characteristic of his paintings is of a sonorous and resplendent effect both in portraiture and landscape. As you may know, he was a live wire of the 43 Group, as its Secretary. Later, in 1974, he founded the Sapumal Foundation. Among the members of the 43 Group were Ivan Peries, who was a student of David Paynter, Lionel Wendt, George Keyt, Richard Gabriel, who was a student of Harry's, and several other painters.

ROBINSON: You mentioned the Jatika Kala Peramuna before. How do you translate that?

RAMANAYEKA: It means National Arts Front. It was formed by a painter–sculptor who was also a Buddhist priest, the Reverend Mapalagama Wipulasara Thero. That was in the 1960s. His aim was to resurrect the traditional painting methods of temple art in modern mood.