

# Sri Lankan Commercial Artists of the Pre-Digital Era (1900-1990): A Case Study of the History of Graphic Design in Sri Lanka

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## Abstract

Commercial art was introduced to the field of visual arts in Sri Lanka during the Colonial period, in parallel to European academic art. The artists and their work influenced by European art is well-documented and interpreted as a cohesive body of knowledge in their contribution towards the development of visual arts in Sri Lanka. Yet it is problematic that, many of the commercial artists and their work are neither systematically studied nor documented in a similar manner. Evidently, several well-known painters and sculptors have contributed to the commercial art industry, according to their biographies. However, commercial artists and their collective contribution to the development of commercial arts in Sri Lanka has not been studied as a part of the history of visual arts in Sri Lanka. Therefore, this study attempts to examine and identify the work of artists and designers of the 'pre-digital era' (era before the advent of digital methods) of commercial art in Sri Lanka.

**Keywords:** Graphic Design, Commercial Artists, Sri Lanka, the Pre-digital era, Visual Arts,

## 1. Introduction

In the broader discipline of Fine Arts in Sri Lanka, western rooted disciplines identified by the terms 'Visual Arts' and 'Graphic Design' have only a short period of existence, appearing during the Colonial era. Both these disciplines were introduced to Sri Lanka during the Colonial era. Western rooted visual arts clearly stand out from the traditional Sri Lankan visual arts which has continued for hundreds of years and produced within a Buddhist religious context. Colonialism introduced new mediums and painting techniques such as oil painting on canvas and watercolor on paper as well as new subject matter and new dimensions for the creation of arts as well as for the purpose of creating art. During the period of British rule 'graphic design' forms such as print publications, logo design, typography, and poster design were developed and implemented in the Sri Lankan social context. 'Graphic design' in the subsequent era were the products of a rigorous manual process where artists or designers used manual tools and techniques for creating commercial artwork since any digital method was not introduced in this era. As a matter of fact, the graphic design process had been based on manual methods all over the world, until from the 1980s to the early '90s, advances in digital computer hardware and software radically altered graphic design process (Meggs, 2020). Hence the era before the 1990s can be identified as the 'pre-digital' era of graphic design.

The artists and their work during the Colonial era and the era following independence is well-documented and archived, studied and interpreted as a cohesive body of knowledge for their contribution to the field of Sri Lankan art, as well as in engaging with social and political contexts. Yet it is problematic that many of the activities subsumed under the term 'graphic design' in this pre-digital era are not properly documented, despite the fact that many well-known artists have worked as designers, to create logos, posters, book covers and advertisements. A number of well-known artists have not only worked as commercial artists, but they have also trained many others in this specific discipline. Even though the information about these well-known artists' achievements as commercial artists can be found in their biographies, there is no descriptive record about their work or their design process. Therefore, it is apparent that the 'history of graphic design in Sri Lanka' is identifiable only as individual achievements of a few selected artists, rather than as a cohesive body of knowledge encompassing the complexity of its development.

Apparently, the problem of defining approaches to document the history of graphic design is evident in America and Europe as well. It is suggested by Triggs (2009, 2011) that graphic design history is less established as a discipline when compared to other design disciplines such as fashion & industrial design, although the history of graphic design as well as the theories,

tools and techniques are documented and archived to a considerable extent. There have been many attempts to address this issue since 1983, with "The first symposium on the History of Graphic Design: Coming of Age," held at the Rochester Institute of Technology, New York, USA. It was followed by other conferences focusing on graphic design history. Along with these conferences there are a number of seminal books published on the history of graphic design such as, "History of Graphic Design and Communication: A Source Book (1983) by Clive Ashwin", and "A History of Graphic Design (1998) by Philip B. Meggs" to name a few. It is apparent that the historical development of graphic design, its relation with art & culture, as well as its impact on the society in America and Europe is being constantly interpreted and updated in an academic context to this date.

Therefore, the objectives of this study was to examine and identify the work of artists & designers of the pre-digital era of graphic design in Sri Lanka, in order to understand the importance of their contribution to the discipline of graphic design in Sri Lanka. This study focuses on graphic design work created from 1900 to 1990, which was associated with print media. Therefore, any non-print forms such as signboards, vehicle signs and road signs lie outside the scope of this study.

As it was apparent that there are only a few literary descriptions available regarding the matter in question, the focus was on first-hand evidence such as authentic copies of books, novels, magazines and posters where the information regarding the artist can be gathered in the form of a signature, acknowledgement or attribution. Online Archives, the National Archives of Sri Lanka, the National Library, the Library of the University of Kelaniya, and private collections were used to find and examine such evidence.

There have been many difficulties in identifying the creators of many commercial art work due to a number of reasons. For example, it is impossible to identify the designer of a particular book cover where the reprinted books do not retain the original cover of the first print. Moreover, many of the archived books at libraries are hard bound for preservation and therefore the original cover is lost. There were many cases where the books do not contain any information regarding the cover designer or illustrator. Interestingly it is evident that some publishers have not attributed the works to the creator. In such cases the signature of the artist was used, whenever it was available in the cover. However, there are some works that do not bear a signature or the signature is indecipherable. Poster designers can also be identified by their signature as many of them bear the signature of the creator. Identifying the designer of a particular logo is much more challenging as the nature of that type of design does not allow any indication regarding the creator, and it can only be identified by the acknowledgement of the institution who owns the logo. Identifying the designer of a certain advertisement is also a daunting task as any recorded acknowledgement is the only source that can be used.

## 2. The history of graphic design

Graphic design has become an industry which is inextricable for visual communication with the division of labour as caused by the industrial revolution. It has grown in to a professional industry in parallel to consumerism a specialized area in the broader discipline of the Visual Arts. Visual Arts such as paintings, drawings, or sculpture can be separated from Graphic design only by a debatable blurry margin, in the sense that, graphic design uses visual elements for the sole purpose of communication for specific audiences. Both of these use the fundamental elements and principles selectively and collectively in order to create a visual expression. Even though these two disciplines share the same fundamentals and principles, they have their own distinctive features in relation to their contexts. Visual artists create paintings, sculptures, murals and carvings as a reaction to any socio-political situation or merely as a visual expression of the artist's inner feelings, for the visual experience of a much broader audience. Graphic designers create logo designs, posters, advertisements, book covers, illustrations and type design as visual solutions to certain problems relating to visual communication, targeting a clearly defined audience. Graphic design is often a collaborative discipline, where, writers produce words, photographers & illustrators create images, and a designer combines them to create a complete visual communication. Moreover, the visuals graphic designers create have to be re-created or mass produced in a variety of media for the purpose of visual communication in a commercial context. Therefore, graphic design can be demarcated as a separate discipline from the other more subjective visual art forms.

Comparatively analysing the existence of these two disciplines, graphic design as a discipline has a relatively short history although visual arts can be traced back to prehistoric times as a means to create visual experience. According to Meggs and Purvis (1983) The term 'graphic design' was first coined in 1922 by an American type designer named William Addison Dwiggins (1880-1956), to describe his activities as an individual who brought structural order and visual form to printed communications. Even though many graphic design historians and writers have accepted this claim for decades, Shaw (2014) argues that the term 'graphic design' had been employed before Dwiggins. However, the terminological history of the term 'graphic design' does not reflect the history of the artistic activity that is encompassed within that term. As Shaw suggests, terms such as 'printed art', 'commercial art', and 'graphic art' have been used since the 1880s to the dawn of the 20th century to signify, what we call graphic design today.

### 3. The history of graphic design in Sri Lanka

In the context of Sri Lanka too, the terms 'commercial arts' and 'graphic arts' have been used to collectively identify the artistic activities related with print media. According to Nyrop et al. (1971, p. 187) the Government College of Fine Arts reconstituted in 1965, included Fine and Commercial arts, administered by the ministry which was responsible for education and cultural affairs by that time. The glossary of Technical Terms for Aesthetic Education II, published in 1983 by the Education Publications Department, includes the terms 'Commercial Arts', 'Commercial Artist' and 'Graphic Arts' in this context. Therefore, it can be assumed that the terms 'Commercial Arts' and 'Graphic Arts' have been used until the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, to identify the activities associated with graphic design. It is uncertain when and by whom the term 'graphic design' was first employed to describe this distinctive art form within the Sri Lankan context.

However, the matter of the history of the terminology is far less important than the history of the discipline itself. Just as in America and Europe, in the centuries long history of Visual Arts in Sri Lanka, Graphic Design has only a short period of existence since the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The ancestral activities related to the modern day graphic design can be identified within the early printing industry. However, it is not appropriate to use the term 'graphic design' for the activities relating to the early printing process, as it was a highly technical process where the printers were more likely operators of the press. Nevertheless, as the printing techniques evolved over time, it paved the way to new artistic activities which can be identified as graphic design. Along with the advancement of printing, the types of outputs have also evolved with Sinhala newspapers, magazines, and books becoming a popular medium of communication for both commercial and educational entities as well as for religious and political propaganda. Designers were required to create new Sinhala type designs, as well as illustrations were required for the books and magazines to appeal to the readers in enhancing their experience. Moreover, it can be assumed that logo designs were needed for the identity of printers and publishing companies. It can also be observed that advertisements were utilized by the publishers, as a source of funding to cover the expenditure of the newspaper, magazine, and book printing. Therefore, more skillful and specialized artists were in need for the industry.

Along with the social and economic changes brought about by Colonialism, new methods of visual communication were introduced. The development of internal & international trade as well as industrial development gave birth to many trading companies and related institutions, whose active operations required identity design such as logos & trademarks as well as advertising that suits the evolving social context. Moreover, newly established Government and educational institutions were also in need of identity design and advertising.

The introduction of novel entertainment methods such as the theatre, musicals & cinema also required such visual communication methods for marketing. It is evident that the necessity for graphic design forms such as type design, logo design, poster, advertisement, book cover, and illustrations grew rapidly during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

#### 4. Graphic design for publications

The oldest form of printing on paper in Sri Lanka can be traced back to the 18<sup>th</sup> century, as a result of Colonialism, when the Dutch introduced the printing press to Sri Lanka (Hemapala, 1987, p. 9). The ability of the printing press to mass produce information was advantageous for the dissemination of information in a visual form. The printing process and output have evolved during the Colonial period in three phases, during 1708-1796, 1796-1812, and 1812-1948 (Hapuarachchi, 2003, p. 76). It is apparent that, in the beginning, the Colonial rulers as well the priests who were propagating Christianity used this to their advantage. The advent of a first Sinhala press was a result of the ambition of two Dutch priests to promote Christianity in the local language (Hemapala, 1987, p. 9). During 1812 and 1860 these Christian presses published many propaganda materials in the Sinhala medium. Subsequently, with the establishment of the first Buddhist Press in 1862, Sinhala Buddhist movements countered the propaganda of Christianity with their own publications, instigating Buddhism and Nationalism (Wendabona, 1997, pp. 11-12). During this development of the early printing industry in Sri Lanka many artistic activities began to emerge associated with it. For instance Sinhala type design developed as it was essential for Sinhala publications. The Chithra type foundry and the N. J. Cooray type foundry are two of the notable institutions in Colombo that contributed to the publication industry at the time (Hapuarachchi, 2003, pp. 106-107).

By the time of the Second World War there was a surge in Sinhala magazines in a variety of subjects and interests (Hemapala, 1987, p. 29) aiming at various demographics as well (Hapuarachchi, 2003, p. 134). Ven. Kalukondayawe Pagnnashekara thero (1965, p. vi) mentions of having discovered and listed more than a thousand Sinhala magazines that have been published. During the Colombo era, Sinhala periodical magazines have evolved specially due to the innovative and revolutionary ideas of W.A. Silva and Hemapala Munidasa (Hemapala, 1987, p. 29). Other than the Sinhala newspapers and magazines, various Sinhala books such as novels, short stories, poetry books, and Children's books also became popular during the Colombo era. According to Dolage (1993, p. 187) during the 1900-1990 period 2126 children's books have been published. Apparently, children's magazines also became popular during this time. The first Sinhala Children's Magazine, named 'Lamainge Sangarawa' published in 1913, was followed by various Children's magazines culminating in the publication of 'Udaya Lama Sangarawa' in 1957 (Dolage, 1993, p. 12). There were many Printing

presses in the Colombo area and one in Kegalle as well (Hapuarachchi, 2003, p. 115) that supported the surge of the publication of Sinhala books. It is evident that by this time, apart from the printers, skillful artists were involved in the creation of these publications, as a variety of type design, illustrations, and drawings were needed for cover and articles of the magazines.

As the printing technology advances with the ability to print colorful images by using lithography, it can be assumed that more and more artists were needed to create illustrations for book cover designs and illustrations as well as to develop various Sinhala typefaces to be used in the covers of these publications. It is apparent, by examining the surviving and archived original publications that the artists who have worked in this context have created genuinely creative designs for book title typefaces and covers alike. The well-known painter M. Sarlis, being a first grade commercial artist as well, is said to have supplied drawings and illustrations to Buddhist books, educational books, newspapers and magazines during this time. He was also the chief artist of the newspaper 'Swadesha Mithraya' (Mendis, 1991). M. Sarlis's son Susil Premarathne was also involved in creative arts in the publishing industry, even though he was famous for his singing career. Other well-known artists such as G.S. Fernando, Sumana Dissanayake, S.H. Sarath, Karunasiri Wijesinghe, Jayasiri Semage, Vinnie Hettigoda, Colvin Settinayake and Tissa Hewavitharana have created many original artworks for books and other publications. The well-known contemporary artist Kingsley Gunatilake has also created award winning illustrated Children's Books. Evidently Siri Gunasinghe, Mahagama Sekara, Bhadradi Mahinda Jayathilaka and Gamini Jayantha Mendis, have also created book covers even though they are mainly recognized for their achievements in other specialized disciplines outside the visual arts. Other well recognized persons such as G.L. Gauthamadasa, Motagedara Wanigarathne, Thalagama jayasinghe, Piyaratne Hewabattage, Bandula Harishchandra, Hingulwala Dissanayake, A.D. Ranjith Kumara, Somasiri Herath, Sunil Jayaweera, Jayarathne Samarasekara, Sybil Wettasinghe and L.S.E. Amararathne can be identified as professional designers who were engaged in type design, cover design and illustrations. Among these Sunil Jayaweera, Jayarathne Samarasekara, Sybil Wettasinghe and L.S.E. Amararathne have authored children's literature with their own illustrations (Dolage, 1993, p. 43). Sunil Jayaweera can be identified as an author/illustrator who hasn't received the proper recognition he deserved, as he developed a uniquely Sri Lankan illustration style for children's books. He has won many international and national awards for his contribution to children's literature. In 1981 he won a prestigious BIB (Biennial of Illustration Bratislava) Honourable Mention award from the Czechoslovak government (Ranaweera, 2018). Apart from Sunil Jayaweera only two other illustrators in Sri Lanka have won a BIB Honourable mention award, namely: Kingsley Gunathilake in 1987 and Sybil Wettasinghe in 1989 (Knižnica - Bibiana, 2010). Somasiri Herath was the

illustrator of many of the government school text books published by the Educational Publications Department (Ranaweera, 2021).

It is reasonable to assume that there are many other artists/designers who have worked in the publication industry, as it is evident that there were many books, newspapers and magazines published during this time. Interestingly, the information gathered in the form of a signature, acknowledgement or attribution reveals that many other designers have created artwork for publications at a professional level. It is also apparent that some of these artists were authors of books as well. Listed below are some of the designers/illustrators revealed in this manner.

Jinadasa Gunasekara	Sauris Silva
K. Wijayakeerthi	Nandasiri Baddegama
M.R.M. Swarnasinghe	P. Wickramanayake
Haripriya Gunasekara	Samarakoon Pathiraja
Susil Premadasa	Ananda Abhayasiri
K.P. Abeysinghe	Sunil Dayananda
S.L.B. Herath	W.M. Fernando
P.A. Wijayarathne	A.M. Rathnapala de Silva
Hemapala Ranaweera	Wijayasiri Amarathunga
A. D. Karunarathne	

This list is by no means exclusive nor complete as there are many signatures which cannot be deciphered as to identify the name of the creator, while some books bear only the initials of the creator such as 'T.S.E.W', or as part of the name such as 'Piyasena', in the form of a signature. Another important point regarding this list is the fact that, apart from a few acknowledgements in secondary sources, it is compiled only by examining books & other publications which were available in their original condition. Another interesting observation is that many books do not contain any signature, acknowledgment or attribution regarding the creator of the cover. It should also be considered that there might be a vast number of books & publications which are not within reach at this point, due to many practical reasons.

## 5. Graphic design for publicity

Apart from the publications such as books, newspapers & magazines there were other forms of graphic design, such as logo design, posters and advertisements used by both government and commercial companies. Posters and advertisements were used as a medium for the dissemination of information, or for the purpose of persuading the masses in order to influence their opinion.



Logo designs were required by these institutions to be identified by the masses.

Posters have been an indispensable form of visual communication since the Colonial period. The history of the poster art form can be traced back to the 15th century in Europe, and they were used as an effective medium to disseminate news and information to the populace originally for the purpose of the King or the Church (Saparamadu, 2011, p. 7). During 1840-1850 with the perfected colour lithography, posters were mass produced in Europe. A French artist named Jules Chéret is considered the father of the modern poster (Jules Cheret - The Complete Works - Jules-Cheret.Org, 2017), as he was the first artist to mass produce posters with strikingly vibrant color and expression using his own lithographic techniques, during 1859-66. The end of the 19th century saw an outburst of posters in the streets of Europe, and the first 'Ceylon' posters were also printed in Europe during this period. During the mid-20th century many Sri Lankan artists have designed posters, most famous being the veteran watercolor artist of the era G.S. Fernando and C.K.L. Samarasinghe. 'Vintage Posters of Ceylon'; a coffee table book compiled by Anura Saparamadu (2011) is an important material that encompasses evidence of authentic posters made during the 20th century. This book is divided into seven categories; namely tea, travel, war, cinema, government, consumer goods and miscellany featuring posters created by artists such as G.S. Fernando, CKL Samarasinghe, & Reggie Kandappa and many others. According to Saparamadu, during the Second World War there was an explosion in propaganda material created by many commercial artists, such as G.S. Fernando and Reggie Kandappa as they were recruited to design propaganda posters for the war effort. During the first half of the twentieth century Poster competitions were very popular in Ceylon as every government institute and many companies used competitions to find designers to design their propaganda material (Saparamadu, 2011, p. 69). C.K.L. Samarasinghe was a prominent designer who has participated in almost every competition and won many.

Poster competitions were used after the war by many government organizations and companies to promote their products and services, just as they were used during the war to design propaganda posters (Saparamadu, 2011, p. 103). The Ceylon Tourist Bureau and the Ceylon Government Railways held many notable poster competitions in which G.S. Fernando and C.K.L. Samrasinghe were the frequent winners. Interestingly, the famous film star named Prem Jayanth was the most sought-after film publicity artist in Sri Lanka in the 1970s (Saparamadu, 2011, p. 131). He has designed many posters for Sinhala, Tamil, and Hindi movies. All his movie posters have his signature in either Sinhala or English. There were many other artists involved in creating posters for theatre,

film and musicals. The poster for the film 'Gamperaliya', directed by Lester James Peries, was designed by the famous artist Motagedara Wanigarathne. Ralex Ranasinghe, recognized for his photographic career, has also designed many colorful posters for film theatre and musical shows (Mahendra, 2016).

Print advertisements can be found in all magazines, newspapers, business directories, souvenir publications, and sometimes in novels, poetry books & children's books. Apart from the government and commercial institutions, advertisements were used by publishers themselves in order to raise money to cover the expenditure of publications. It is evident that many of the artists mentioned above, have also worked as art directors for the advertising industry as well. In fact, some commercial artists such as CKL Samarasinghe, Reggie Kandappa, Shantha Saparamadu had their own advertising companies. It is evident that the Sri Lankan Government also employed advertising for many purposes. In 1956 C.K.L. Samarasinghe was invited to head the Government Cooperative Advertising Department that handled all government advertising and propaganda material. He held that position until he formed his own Advertising agency in 1962 (Saparamadu, 2011, p. 69). Some advertisements contain the name of the advertising company in an abbreviated form while others do not have any information regarding the creators. Therefore, generally, it is difficult to determine the identity of the designers who created them.

Logo designs were indispensable for newly established commercial institutions as well as government organizations, in order to be recognized by the masses. From newly established trading companies to government educational institutes such as schools and universities, we can see a wide range of logo designs created. Apart from the companies itself, identity design was needed for specific consumer products also. It can be observed that every advertisement accompanied the logo of the product or the company. Obviously, identifying the designer of a particular logo is impossible without any authentic source of information acknowledging the creator. There are a few designers that can be identified by such claims. G.S. Fernando is the creator of the famous M.D. Gunasena logo as claimed by the M.D. Gunasena company itself. In 1949 G. S. Fernando created the Gunasena logo as a representation of Gurulugomi the author of Amawatura and Dharmapradipika written in the 12th Century. It was first used in Martin Wickramasinghe's Sahityodaya Katha book published in the same year, 1949 (About Us – M.D. Gunasena, 2020). C.K.L. Samarasinghe was the creator of the famous Ceylon Petroleum Corporation Logo (Saparamadu, 2011, p. 69). Shantha Saparamadu created the Air Lanka Logo in 1979, which was in use until 1998. The famous sculptor Bandula Peiris, in 1982, as the graphics and animation artist at the Sri Lanka Rupavahini Corporation,

created the Rupavahini Logo (Bandula Peiris: Sculpture Reflects Humour and Tenderness, 2013). Apart from these particular cases, identifying the designers of the enormous number of logos designed during the time period in question is almost an impossible task due to lack of authentic sources.

## 6. Conclusion

It is certain that, since the introduction of the printing press to Sri Lanka, there was a gradual development of activities related to modern day graphic design, which were identified by the term 'commercial art' back then. By the time of the Second World War there was a surge in Sinhala publications in a variety of subjects and interests, which paved the way for a professional commercial art industry, where printers, publishers and artists collaborated to create publications for various purposes. Forms of 'graphic design' such as type design, illustration, book and magazine cover design, logo design, advertisement, and poster design have emerged in the Sri Lankan context, with the contribution of many talented artists. Despite the fact that these activities developed into an industry in relation to the economical and societal demands, influencing the art & culture, it has not been recorded as a cohesive body of knowledge so as to identify the complexity and the importance of its development. Only a handful of artists have been identified as commercial artists, where, their individual achievements in the commercial art industry is celebrated where the impact of their contribution to the discipline in a broader sense is neglected. Many other artists who have contributed to the industry are apparently lesser known beyond their names. Therefore, these findings stress the importance of a proper and extended research in to the history of graphic design in Sri Lanka.

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