

# Sri Lanka: Rediscovering a hidden treasure

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## The socialist era art collection at People's Bank in Slave Island

Nestled amidst the bustling streets of Slave Island (Kompannavidiya) lies an obscure art gallery that remains largely unknown to the public. The building, a stark relic of Sri Lanka's socialist era in the 1970s, is frequented by hundreds of locals conducting routine banking tasks, unaware of its historical significance and the treasure trove of art it houses.

The People's Bank Building, located at Sir Chittampalam Gardiner Mawatha, was completed in 1976 during Sirima Bandaranaike's (Mrs. B) second term as Prime Minister. Constructed in an era of stringent import restrictions, the building was a testament to the utilisation of local materials and decorations.

The collaborative efforts of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) and the Communist Party under Mrs. B's coalition Government led to its commission, with the State Engineering Corporation overseeing the construction while the interior design was coordinated by Suren Wickremasinghe and his Russian-born wife, Tanya. Although completed during Felix Dias Bandaranaike's tenure as Finance Minister, it is likely that the project was initiated before 1975 when Dr. N.M. Perera of the Communist Party held that role.

The building's cold concrete and cement façade serve as a poignant reminder of an era dominated by socialist ideologies, which influenced governmental reforms and policies. Though recent refurbishments have transformed the entrance lobbies, the stairwells retain their original austere appearance, reminiscent of that grim period.

However, hidden within this sombre edifice are 12 large artworks in various media, adorning the lobby wall of each floor. These creations were crafted by acclaimed artists of the time, including George Keyt and Richard Gabriel from the renowned '43 Group. Young talents like Senaka Senanayaka, Jayantha Premachandra, Nadine David, and others contributed murals using locally-available materials such as terracotta, wood, and clay.

One of the prominent pieces is architect Ismeth Raheem's mural, illustrating the history of currency in Sri Lanka, featuring aluminium and gold leaf work he learned from Donald Friend, who experimented with these materials during his time in Ceylon. According to Raheem, it was Pieter Keuneman, a leading member of the Communist Party, the then Minister of Housing and Construction, who invited him to contribute a work of art for which he received a fair sum.

Throughout the collection, the symbols of the farming and working class – the hammer and sickle – make recurring appearances in paintings by George Keyt, Senaka Senanayake, and Richard Gabriel. Notably, during that era, many architects resorted to clay and terracotta due to their local availability, making it no surprise that these materials were extensively incorporated into the building's design.

Slave Island, one of Colombo's oldest areas, is rapidly losing its multi-ethnic, secular identity as

historic colonial buildings fall prey to the Urban Development Authority's demolition plan. The burgeoning office and apartment projects replacing these structures are engulfing neighbourhoods, erasing their historical charm and significance.

In 2021, then Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa ceremoniously announced the construction of the new People's Bank Building when the foundation stone was laid for a towering 23-storey structure. As for the current location, its fate remains uncertain, with speculation that it might be demolished and sold, along with other State-owned land in Slave Island and Fort. Any plan to relocate these valuable works of art must be approached with utmost care and consideration due to their delicate nature. The clay and terracotta murals are particularly fragile, as they are firmly fixed to the wall.

This rare collection of socialist era art at the People's Bank Building serves as a silent witness to a pivotal period in Sri Lanka's history, preserving artistic expressions and ideologies that played a vital role in shaping the nation. Uncovering and appreciating this hidden treasure can offer visitors a unique glimpse into the past while fostering a deeper connection to the country's rich cultural heritage.

Ismeth Raheem's 1976 aluminium gold leaf panel portraying the history of currency in Sri Lanka's pre-colonial, Portuguese, Dutch, and post-independence eras



Wood carving by B. Wimalaratne of the Kandy Perahera (1979)



Wood carving by Yasantha Buwange of workers, animals, and working class tools



Nadine David's oil on canvas showing working class people from different ethnicities in harmony and devotion (1976)



Wimal de Silva Boralessa's terracotta mural intricately portrays the dynamic energy between hard-working masses, animals, and tools



Wimal de Silva Boralessa's terracotta mural of hard-working masses, animals, and tools in action



Senaka Senanayaka's oil on canvas of people hard at work ploughing a field with tractors, bulls, and manual tools (1975)



Wood carving by Pushpananda Weerasinghe (1976) of traditional men and women engaged in productive tasks spanning agriculture, industry, and music, captured in fluid motion



George Keyt's (1976) oil on canvas of workers and field animals with the symbolic sickle sowing and harvesting. The painting has red and black abstract centrefold, iconic of the Soviet style



Richard Gabriel's oil on canvas of two bountiful trees flanking a tableau of various village scenes, fishing, construction, agriculture, harvesting, and domestic bliss



Jayantha Premachandra's oil on cement mural of industrialisation and collective harmonious economic bounty



Wood carving by Upasiri (1977) of various forms of manual labour

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### **P.S.**

This rare collection of socialist era art at the People's Bank Building serves as a silent witness to a pivotal period in Sri Lanka's history, preserving artistic expressions and ideologies that played a vital role in shaping the nation. Angeline Ondaatjie is to be appreciated for revealing this unknown (to many of us) collection; and for sharing these wonderful images. On a few minor points, we would add:

\*# NM Perera was a leader of the LSSP not the CP.

\*# The reference to architects Suren and Tanya Wickramasinghe, should have been completed by mention that Suren was the USSR trained son of CP Chairman S. A. Wickramasinghe.

\*# The Peoples Bank Chairman between 1970 and 1975 was Hector Abhayavardhana of the LSSP, who may have had a role in the curation of the art collection.

\*# The Peoples Bank itself was established in 1961 by ex-LSSPer and then left-SLFPer TB Ilangaratne. It was supposed to complement and strengthen rural cooperative banking and to provide affordable credit to farmers.

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