George Keyt: Breaking with Tradition

by Ellen Dissanayake

By the time an artist becomes well known, particularly if he has already reached his seventies, much of the thought about his work has become established. The critical observations accumulated throughout the years become a legend with a life of their own that later writers cannot help but be influenced by. Thus it was disconcerting when George Keyt of Sri Lanka recently upset some 25 years of Keyt criticism that found an intimate connection, even a dependence, between the painter's art and his having lived more than three decades in a Kandyan village. A few years ago Keyt remarried and moved to Colombo, the capital city, and away from his village "roots." Yet Keyt continues to paint as effortlessly and as characteristically as before. The writer on Keyt now finds it necessary to say something new.

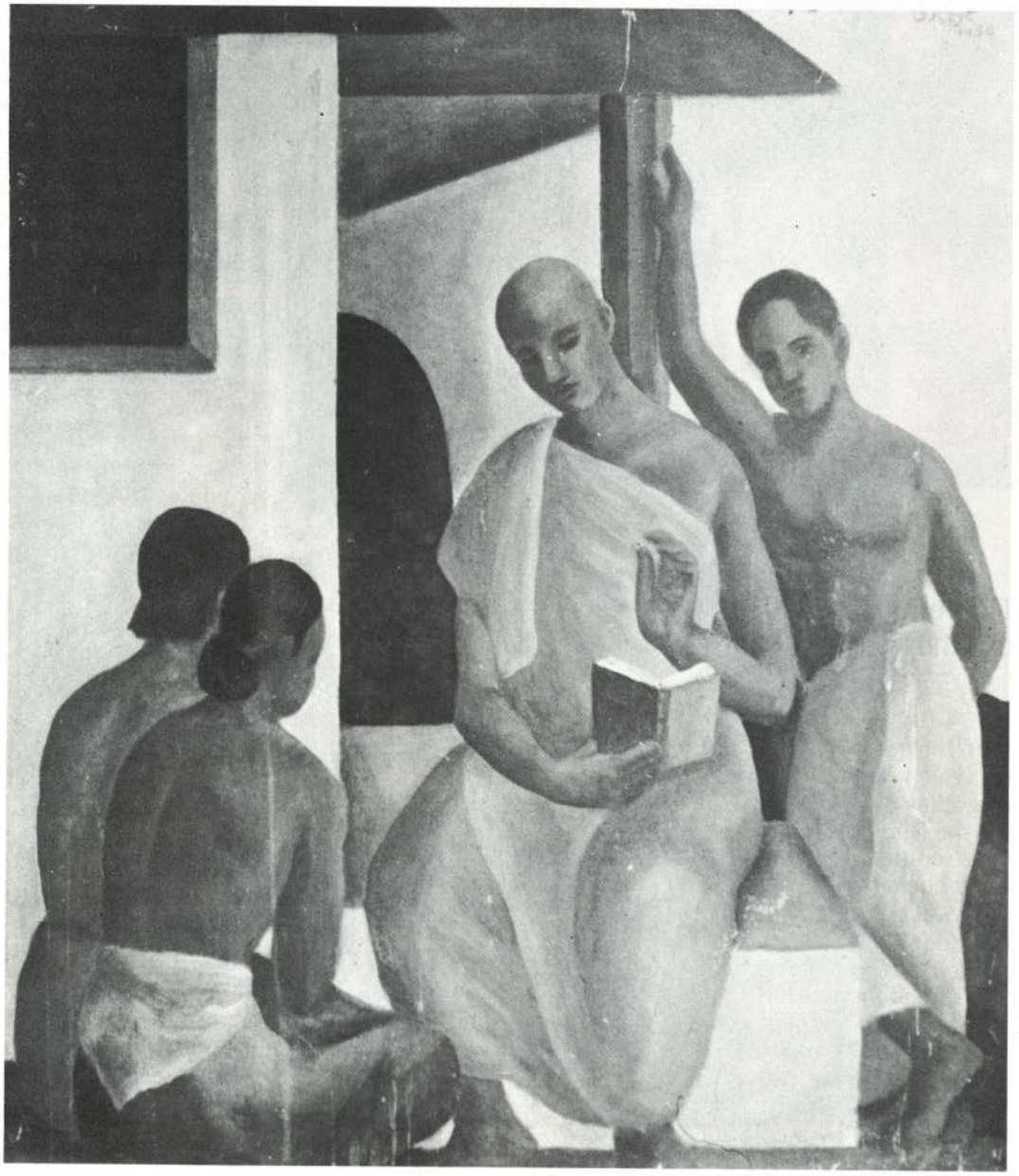
Yet it will always be necessary to consider the importance and fruitfulness of Keyt's village "period" (if 30 years, more than the entire career

Pirith at the Malwatta Vihare, oil on canvas, 1931

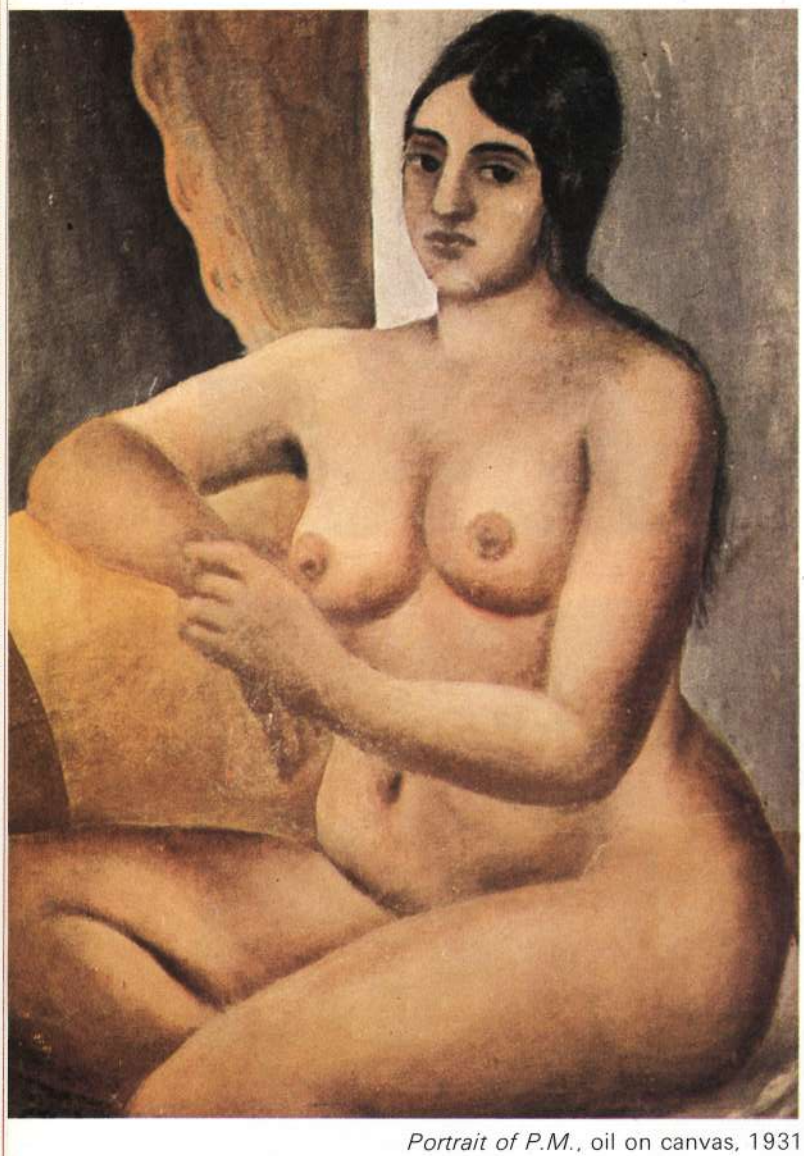
of many artists, can be termed a "period"). For Keyt, his former isolation, although self-chosen, was no affectation, no "exile." In the Kandyan village, unlike in the city, Buddhism permeates people's lives in numerous ways, large and small. Traditional guidelines circumscribe and shape daily life amid the gentle contours of the tropical countryside. This is the psychological and physical landscape in which both Keyt and his art took root and drew nourishment.

A visit to Keyt in former days carried with it an aura of excitement apart from the anticipation of meeting a celebrated artist. You traveled some seven miles from Kandy on winding country roads, viewing en route Sinhalese village life that goes on today much as it has for centuries. From the window of the taxi or car, you saw verdant fields of paddy alternating with dark-green hillslopes thickly planted with the fruit and spice trees for which Ceylon is famous. On the way you could

George Keyt: at home away from home



Priest with Pupils, oil on canvas, 1930



Portrait of P.M., oil on canvas, 1931

The romance of the countryside is gone, but the vitality of the artist remains

visit the rock temple of Degaldoruwa, the walls of which are covered with some of the finest examples of extant Kandyan wall painting, depicting the Buddhist Jataka or Birth stories with details from contemporaneous eighteenth-century Kandyan social life (see *Orientations*, June 1975).

Keyt would greet visitors—heralded by barking dogs—from the doorway to his studio, which formed one wing of the simple house. About him was the fragrance of an aromatic oil made from amala fruit and applied to the head for its medicinal benefit. You could also note the *sooraya,* or amulet, on a fine golden chain around his neck. Wearing a long *kurta* over a *dhoti,* more often than not garnished by a colorful cerise shawl, and with hair that was shoulder-length decades before fashion bestowed its approval, George Keyt's physical appearance confirmed the impression of vigor and originality one assumed after hearing about his astonishingly creative productivity.

In a country whose people are not outwardly emotional, Keyt's freedom from restraint was immediately noticeable. He talked very fast, intelligently if not always intelligibly. The tactile propensity of his paintings was characteristic of the man himself; he took your hand or arm, or came close when he talked.

The walls of his large studio were covered with his most recent paintings. Around the sides of the room were various tables, bent (literally, in one instance) with their covering of correspondence and papers, an old slant-top desk filled with drawings and sketches, a divan and several chairs. On a mat on the floor were half a dozen Indian musical instruments, including the *sitar, tabla* and *esraj.* These belonged to Keyt's sons, young and accomplished performers of Hindustani classical music. On the easel, centrally placed at the far wall, was invariably a nearly completed painting, and near it a table on which were some color-drenched coconut shells used for mixing paint.

Among the accumulation of clotted coconut shells, barking dogs, exotic instruments and works of art, Keyt nevertheless assumed an ordinary village life. The surrounding garden, abounding with the local flora, supplied much of the needs of the kitchen (coffee, jak, spices, a dozen or so different fruits); some of its exotic flowering plants could be recognized in the paintings. A Ceylonese child, not realizing there were visitors, might rush into the studio and withdraw again—brown eyes wide—to the kitchen, from where the smell of woodsmoke and spicy ground condiments emanated along with the agreeable voices of women and children. Many of the people to be seen or heard did not belong strictly to the house, but would drift in and out casually from the village as is the Kandyan way.

Friends like myself who have visited Keyt and enjoyed his company in these picturesque surroundings find it difficult to imagine him anywhere else but in the rural setting. For the visitor both the romance and clutter are gone in Colombo. Keyt is less voluble, less flamboyant a personality. His house is tidier, his life more regulated. He looks the same—the broad planes of his face are still strong and handsome, the nose straight, nearly growing out of the line of his forehead like one of his profile drawings. The vitality remains evident, and the warmth. Presumably, in the felicity and affirmation of a new marriage, it is to be expected that Keyt's attention should turn inward and find repose and replenishment from internal, emotional sources that have little to do with the immediate environment. And it is gratifying to see that his recent paintings continue to be beautiful and accomplished, and that he is, if anything, more prolific than before. One must after all grant that a man should live to satisfy himself, not the romantic

preconceptions, practical wishes or theoretical imperatives of others.

If the writer on Keyt can no longer claim that the painter draws inspiration from the Kandyan village, he must take pains to emphasize that Keyt's art is nonetheless firmly grounded in an "Indian world view." The viewer who is unfamiliar with Keyt's work (and more acquainted with Western art than with the art of India) may at first be struck by its apparent affinities with European art, by the Western influence it shows. Such a reaction obscures or oversimplifies the matter. Though East and West mingle in his work, it is possible to show how Keyt's art—especially among the recognized Ceylonese painters—has grown out of the Indian tradition. Indeed, Keyt feels himself to be essentially "Indian" and expresses a characteristically Indian sensuous view of the world in a twentieth-century idiom. His accomplishment is that in his work easy distinctions between "East" and "West" break down.

Other Ceylonese artists of high stature have in large measure adapted and adjusted their vision to a Western way of expression and thus are considered to be more westernized than Keyt. (One thinks of his highly regarded contemporary, the late Justin Deraniyagala, who involved himself to the utmost in his own paintings, struggling, alone

Nayika, oil on canvas, 1943

Woman with Lover and Attendant, (Rága Hindol), brush drawing with red India ink, 1973

Keyt uses Western elements which seem to have grown from an Indian tradition

and unsatisfied, for perfection of expression like a character in Greek tragedy struggling with his destiny.) Keyt, on the contrary, has always been most strongly influenced by the sculpture and painting of India, and when he has turned to the art of the West has made use of elements which—when displayed anew in his work—seem to have been created expressly for rejuvenating traditional Indian art. It is as if Keyt had detected in certain stylistic elements developed by artists in the School of Paris specifically Indian features that had already been anticipated long ago in such paintings as the Kangra Valley miniatures or the cave frescoes of Ajanta and sculptures of Rajasthan, and unconsciously recognized in these idioms his own affinities with these Oriental elements. That is to say, he rediscovered for Indian art and for himself those particular devices in early twentieth-century Western art that could be incorporated and transformed into the already existing body of Indian art, thus extending it into the contemporary world without destroying its uniquely Indian integrity.

Keyt's own origins are not unusual for the children of the urbanized elite of that time. His paternal grandfather had been called from India by the British government for employment in the civil service of Ceylon. He was highly successful, obtaining the post of Colonial Secretary and eventually being knighted. He became a Christian, marrying into an aristocratic Dutch family and seeing that his son, Keyt's father, married into the same family. When Keyt was born, in 1901, social behavior and goals were largely modeled after Victorian norms, reinforced by the existing local traditions in which family, wealth and social position counted for a great deal. While the urban colonial upper classes in Colombo, like Keyt's family, followed British manners and taste, other rural aristocratic and wealthy Sinhalese landowners remained in their villages, relatively untouched by Western ways. Only a few young men had university education, later entering the preferred occupations of doctor, lawyer or civil servant. These formed an "intelligentsia" which was essentially Western, although among them were few intellectuals in the urban European sense of the word. Scholarship was confined to monks studying Buddhist texts and a few individuals in the universities who emulated British academic tradition. Painting in Ceylon (and India) at the time consisted largely of sentimental studio pictures in the style of the nineteenth-century European salons.

What was unusual was that Keyt, with a few other isolated individuals of roughly similar backgrounds, began to show in the 1930s a restlessness and an intellectual curiosity about the rest of the world. They looked both within and outside their own culture for artistic and political forms with which to express themselves. Naturally they turned toward the West and the Sinhalese village, and—in Keyt's case—toward India as well. Having absorbed colonial values from infancy, these young Ceylonese often looked with strange eyes at their own native landscape and lives, reacting in a sense like the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Europeans who discovered the South Seas or African sculpture. At the same time they were rediscovering their native land, first-rate reproductions of European Impressionist and Post-Impressionist art began to make a belated appearance. In Keyt's case, his cousin—a surgeon in London—first sent reproductions of "modern art" to him and his friend, Lionel Wendt.

Keyt's early work, following the pattern outlined above, was largely drawn from the life of the Kandyan people and the Kandyan landscape that surrounded him. Although Keyt claims now to be sympathetic to a Hindu world view, the influence of Buddhist philosophy and culture are not to be dismissed, particularly in his formative years. In the 1920s he was closely associated with the Buddhist monks at Malwatte Vihare in Kandy, learning from them and observing their life.

Using for subject matter the world about him and presenting it with authenticity and recognizability, Keyt sought to solve in the 1920s and early 1930s a major artistic problem: how to

Drawing, pencil, 1969

organize the elements of a picture into a coherent, satisfying pattern. Already in the early work he showed a gift and propensity for formal structure and an attraction to large, defined shapes, which were presented with an interest in their balance, weight and arrangement but with little attention paid to creating an illusion of depth. However, it was in the exposure to reproductions of the artists of the School of Paris that he discovered the stylistic vehicle that would—along with a deepening acquaintance with Indian art—help him find the way to his own mature style.

It is fashionable when discussing Keyt to stress the resemblances between his art and that of Picasso, as well as other early twentieth-century painters. He admits the influence of Picasso (whom, he says, he "fell for" because the first picture of Picasso that he saw—from the Rose Period—resembled the "Bengali Renaissance" pictures he loved by Abhanindranath Tagore). He also acknowledges the influence of Braque and Derain, as well as Cézanne whom he first learned about from reading Clive Bell. The influence of these latter three painters can be seen in the formalistic preoccupation of his early landscapes and still lifes.

A look at Keyt's personal library will help to assert a balance, however, and to stress the rightful place of Asian influence in his works. There are numerous picture books containing reproductions of such Indian masterpieces as the cave frescoes of Ajanta and Bagh, or the sculptures of Khajuraho and Konarak. If one looks at these with new eyes after seeing Keyt's work, the common heritage is obvious. Keyt says his earliest Indian influences were from these frescoes and from Hindu sculpture, from Southern temples and the Deccan.

In addition to the books of pictures (and among many volumes of Western literature with which Keyt is also familiar) there are dozens of Asian texts including the great Hindu epics (the *Ramayana*, the *Mahabharata*, *Bhagavad Gita*, *Kalakacharya Katha*), Sanskrit poetic drama, the medieval Bhakti poets, assorted minor poets and prose writers including the great erotic treatises, Sinhalese poetry and prose, the Buddhist Jataka stories, and even English translations of Chinese and Japanese literature. Keyt knows Sanskrit and once published a widely distributed translation (which he also illustrated) of the *Gita Govinda*, the twelfth-century dramatic lyric about Radha and Krishna, one of the world's great love epics. His translation of Sinhalese folk and classical poetry was published in the thirties, and a collection of Sinhalese folk tales, also illustrated by Keyt, appeared a few years ago.

A scrapbook contains newspaper and magazine clippings that show reproductions of Asian painting, architecture and sculpture, as well as photographs of actual persons and events: people

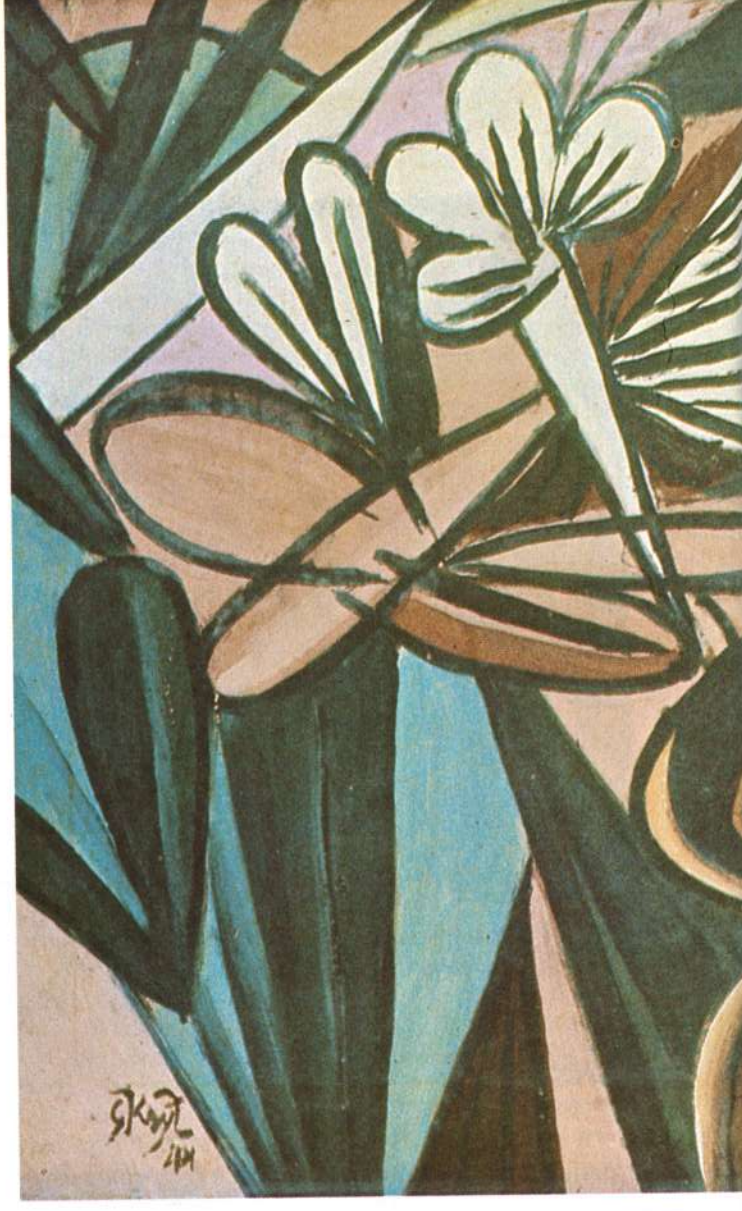
Like those of his Indian predecessors, Keyt's women are unreservedly sensual

worshiping in temples, dancers in their traditional poses and costumes, holy men surrounded by their devotees. Countless clippings and notes that have never found their way into the library or scrapbooks complete this rich collection of pictorial and literary source material, which has for years become part of his unconscious creative equipment and no longer needs to be referred to.

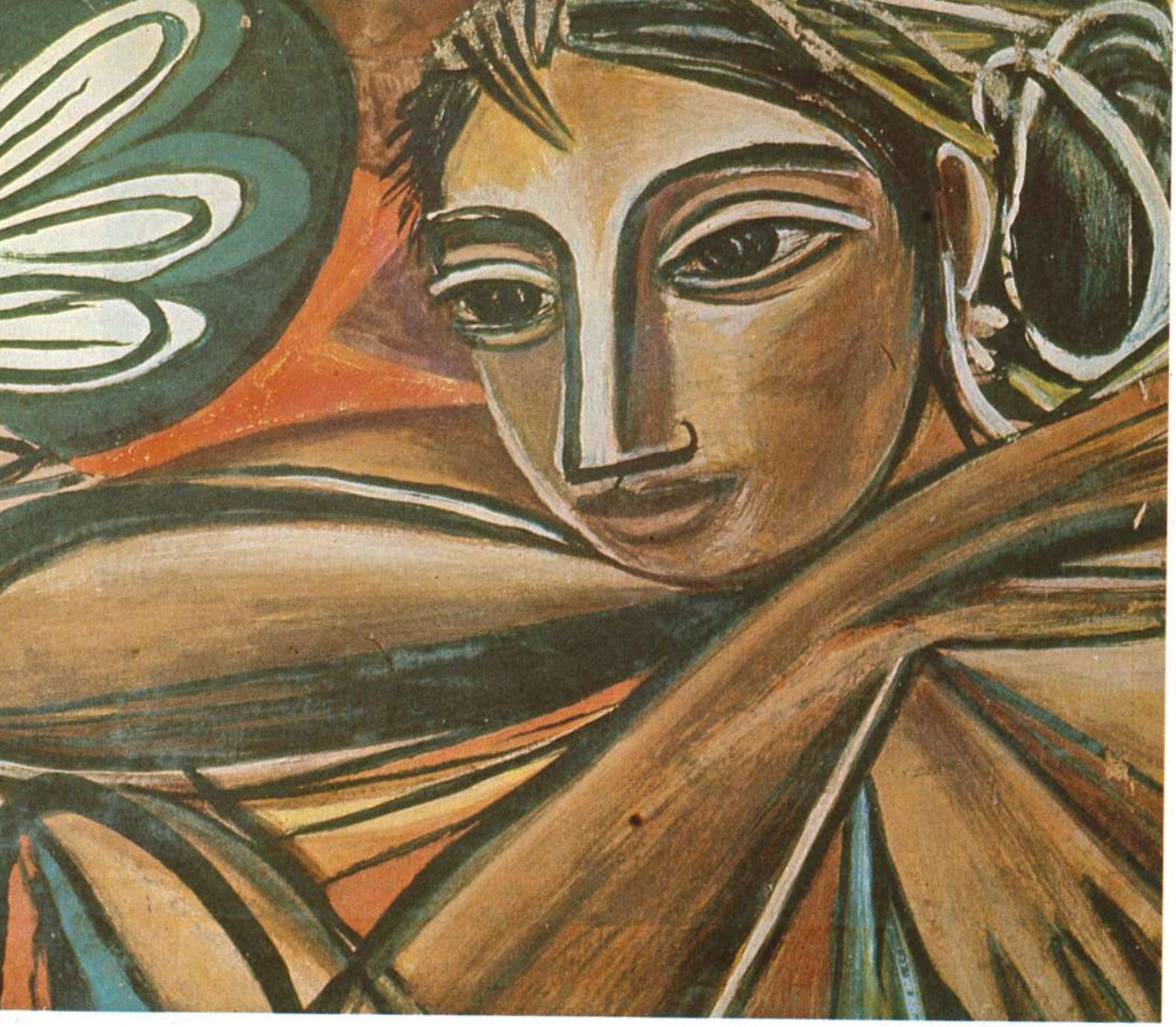
The features in Keyt's art that echo the painting and sculpture of India are both specific and general. One pervasive resemblance that will strike anyone familiar with Indian art is its sensuous immersion in the natural world. As in Indian art, Keyt's expression of the exuberant and voluptuous vitality of nature is inseparable from his use of contour. Although Keyt has a natural gift for drawing and tends to enclose his forms within an outline, his art is not strictly linear, but rather describes volumes—smooth, tactile roundnesses. Curve and countercurve, the fluid rhythmic interplay of swelling, undulating contours, are characteristic of nearly all Keyt's work, and find their most appropriate expression in his portrayals of women. Like those of his Indian artistic predecessors, Keyt's women are unreservedly sensual, whether depicted singly, in groups, or with a lover. The flowers and foliage that accompany them only emphasize their affinity with the world of nature—e.g., fingers and loops of hair are like fronds and leaves. Even the inorganic objects that find their way into his work (clothing, mirrors, pots, musical instruments) have a feminine resonance.

William Archer, in *India and Modern Art* and in the introduction to the catalogue of an exhibition of Keyt's work in London in 1954, has pointed out similarities to be found in Keyt's preoccupation with certain specific pictorial devices characteristic of both certain specific periods of Indian painting and sculpture and of certain phases in the careers of Picasso, Matisse and Léger. (Keyt, however, claims that he was never influenced by Léger.) In any case, it must be stressed that nothing has been taken from the styles of these artists that is not already to be found in embryo within the existing styles of Indian painting.

Archer mentions Keyt's proclivity for showing the intimate conjunction of plants and foliage with the female form. Matisse and other painters throughout the ages have, like classical Indian artists and Keyt, seen the similarity between the bounties of women and of nature and have delighted in portraying beautiful women amid luxuriant vegetation.



Above right: *Reverie*, oil on canvas, 1944
Right: *Girl with Mirror*, oil on hardboard, 1957



Archer notes further devices that Keyt shares with his Indian forebears:

> The conception of nose and forehead as a continuous straight line is prominent not only in Picasso's work but also in Southern Indian bronzes, mediaeval Indian sculpture and in Basholi and Kangra paintings. Profiles with single large emotive eyes are characteristic of Picasso, but equally of paintings in Western India and Rajaputana Boldly rounded forms occur not only in Léger but at Ajanta and Sigiriya, while firmly rhythmical outlines are the essence of Indian village painting.

To these observations we can add that the device (also found in Picasso) of showing a profile view with the "protruding further eye," thus suggesting simultaneously a full-face view, was used in Western Indian Jain manuscript illustrations in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Expanded in significance and expressiveness, this device in Keyt's work may be used also to suggest the union of two lovers as well as the union of the male and female principles.

A large proportion of Keyt's painting is concerned with depicting the inexhaustible poetry of love. This predilection is frequently to be met with in Indian art, and, as in these earlier works, Keyt gives expression to a wide variety of amorous sentiments. The theme of a woman embracing a tree, for example, is a frequent symbol in Indian art and poetry for longing and unappeased desire. Keyt's paintings expressing erotic ardor and abandon often make use of the exaggerated poses, voluptuous curves and rounded forms characteristic of much Indian sculpture (e.g., at Konarak and at Khajuraho). And like the miniaturists he also portrays more tender and sentimental aspects of love such as the delights of lovemaking, the enraptured contemplation of the beloved, or the quiet joy of simply being together. As in Kangra and other Rajput painting the lovers themselves are often treated as one formal (frequently pyramidal) unit, though also—as in this style—segments or shapes within this unit may be defined, and other attendants or musicians may appear in the scene.

For Keyt the theme of lovers, as in Indian art and religion, carries with it a meaning that transcends the admittedly pleasurable sensations of physical love. In an excerpt from the catalogue to an exhibition in June 1971, Keyt writes:

> In my erotic pictures there must be recognition of the underlying idea of the union of the male and female cosmic principles—the *purusha* and the *sakti*. Depiction of the mingling in love means the union of the two separate principles and

If Keyt's paintings are beautiful, it is because nature itself is beautiful

connection Keyt tells the story of a Ceylonese friend, Harry Pieris, who after studying painting in England went to Paris with an introduction to Matisse. Matisse asked where Pieris was from, and when he answered "Ceylon," replied, "Why did you come here? You should have gone to India!"—advice strongly seconded now by Keyt.

Keyt's work has been discussed in print, and he himself has from time to time given some of his thoughts on art a written form. From the earliest emergence of his own individual art he has insisted upon its roots in the Indian tradition. And, as Keyt says, of this tradition:

> . . . for all the representation in old Indian art, there is really no naturalism—look carefully! On the other hand there is *alankarà*, a kind of distortion and rhythm always—exaggeration, etc.—an *emphasis* placed for drawing attention where otherwise there would be a taken-for-granted attitude. This is the meaning of art . . . . In my work, if you look again, even in those pictures which seem to be more free of distortion and exaggeration . . . there is in sense *no* naturalism whatever.

Despite this lack of "naturalism" and Keyt's reliance on *alankara,* one has what seems to be the paradoxical impression that Keyt's paintings are beautiful not because of any self-conscious artistry but because nature itself is so beautiful. His pictures do not pontificate, they speak directly to those who look at them familiarly, to the ordinary Ceylonese who sees Keyt's wall frescoes while worshiping at Gotami Vihare as well as to the educated sophisticate. This is perhaps the secret of Keyt's popularity: he involves himself freely and easily with nature and in mythology, expressing their truths with an Indian flavor but in a way that can be felt by viewers of diverse backgrounds. It is not necessary to know the *Bhagavad Gita* or understand Hindu mythology in order to enjoy his paintings. Keyt has created from local tradition and life an art with an immediacy that can be understood and enjoyed almost anywhere in the world.

Unlike the work of many artists in developing countries where poorly assimilated details uneasily borrowed from alien cultures are grafted on to a formula-copy of a native artistic tradition which no longer possesses its original cultural significance, Keyt's painting successfully displays the Eastern proclivity for embracing so-called incompatible principles. In Keyt's painting, features that are usually considered "Western" or "Eastern," "modern" or "traditional," merge so that the resulting works of art may be called both contemporary (in the idiom of the West) and timeless (in the idiom of the East).

Above left: *Chyabana and Sukanya,* oil on canvas, 1967; Left: *First Meeting,* oil on canvas, 1965; Right: *Radha/Krishna,* oil on hardboard, 1957