

Tissa Ranasinghe

A rare phenomenon, a man who is a born teacher, combined with a master artisan (equal to any Italian) plus an artist of great vision Sir Eduardo Paolozzi

A rare phenomenon...

In 1968 I had just found a new location for the Alliance française of Ceylan : a vast house on Ward Place, with a pleasant garden. I naturally wished to organize exhibitions of young Sri Lankan artists: this opportunity given to local talents seemed to me to be one of the missions of the cultural centre of a nation which has benefited so much from the creativity of foreign artists, from impressionism to cubism and to the “Ecole de Paris”.

In Colombo, the capital city, I had not spotted any real art gallery, and not met any art critique. Whom then should I approach to select promising talents? I made an appointment with the director of the Government College of Fine Arts of Colombo. His role and function made him, or so I thought, the most likely person to point out the artists I should encourage.

I was in for a pleasant surprise: the man had a vigorous, merry, dynamic personality and a vast culture. We were more or less the same age: the prime of maturity. Strong and tough, with piercing, typically Sinhalese eyes he had an obvious appetite for life. His conversation proved that he was well up with all the directions followed by contemporary aesthetic researches. To tell the truth, I had feared to be confronted with some wise, experienced, totally uncreative civil servant who had obtained this prestigious posting at the end of an honourable career. This director, full of life and passion for the arts, at once conquered my heart. He took me round the institution, showed me the works of his students, gave me their names and addresses: I could freely contact and select them. He even mentioned Narasingam, a young outsider and crazy painter who had nothing to do whatsoever with the College. (He was the first I exhibited). In brief I had met a well informed, friendly, respectful, open minded administrator. I had not for one moment the slightest idea that he could be an artist too.

Barbara Sansoni’s luminous scarves and sarongs were then becoming world famous. Browsing in her first old shop I spotted two small interesting bronze sculptures. I am not a collector and did not think of buying then. One of them was an original, sensitive, inspired representation of Ganesh. I asked if I could meet the artist. His name was Tissa Ranasinghe. “Really, you have never heard of Tissa Ranasinghe ? He is quite famous here. He won a prize at Sao-Paulo Biennale, you can find his works in private collections abroad ...” I felt secretly disappointed: I had naïvely hoped to discover an artist and to reveal him to the world. This already famous creator had no need of the Alliance française patronage. Still I had made an appointment and came back to the shop, three days later, to meet the renowned artist.

DURGA



Surprise, surprise ! The director of the Fine Arts College was waiting for me in the shop! He was the famous Tissa Ranasinghe. We laughed together and went on with our conversation like two old time cronies. Friendship too can spring up at first sight.

At that time I did not dare to ask him for an exhibition at the Alliance. Obviously, in his own country, he deserved something more official and more glorious than the new exhibition room of a freshly opened foreign cultural centre. This will remain one of the secret regrets of my life. I never asked him later whether he would have accepted the invitation: had he said yes, my regret would have turned to remorse.

This double encounter, this happy comedy of errors, has tied a faithful bond between us, across continents and years. Our titles of directors were no encumbrance: we bore them lightly. Parallel to our official missions, we both had our personal work to pursue. We soon discovered that our families too had similarities: playful wives full of generous fantasy, children ready to share games, and common relations among music lovers. Tissa, my long lasting friend!



DANCER & DRUMMER

A man who is...

I know nothing of his childhood nor of his first education. We were too busy exploring the present in joyful complicity to linger in a past where we had been apart. I had a new world to discover, feel and taste, Tissa opened its doors for me. As to him, he had always been a son of our common planet, taking it in his stride, one foot Asia, the other one in Europe. He was what I wanted to become. My long desired mirror twin...

We shared the same appetite and curiosity for all types of food. As a student in Europe and later as the husband of an English woman, Tissa had had to cope with culinary relativity. An explorer at heart, he had learnt to enjoy the infinite diversity of tastes and flavours. He would often invite me to accompany him in the slums of Colombo where we used to patronize popular canteens I would never have dared to enter alone. There we would order violent curries, greasy pancakes, subtle Madrassi combinations, and typical kebabs of the Muslim Tamils. The joy of food sharing was our constant companion. Tissa had a tendency to put on weight : he chose to reduce his consumption of rice, which, he said, was as much responsible as beer for his growing paunch. A good choice, which enabled him, years later, in Isleworth, Middlesex, where he had finally fixed his abode, to initiate me to the rites of the English pub.

So, here is a man who enjoys life and its pleasures without barriers, beyond frontiers. What I then considered as a “bon vivant”’s penchant now seems to illuminate the artist’s original inspiration. For instance, Tissa never remained closed in the categories of traditional Buddhist imagery. He will model a Ganesh idol, or other Hindu divinities, alien to his parish, with the same deep fervour. He loves all the gods for their common humanity. He excels in the execution of realistic, official or private, portraits, as well as in more abstract images to which prayers will be addressed. He is at home in the kitchen as well as in the temple. Aware of the mystical quality of food and of the sensuality of religious rites he practises a form of humanism with which I find myself in harmony.

Another facet of his character is his attachment to the land.

He was born in 1925, at a time when Ceylon was still a Crown colony, and his 21st birthday coincided with the accession of the island to independence. He comes from family of coconut planters.... When Tissa took me to the farm which was then managed by his younger brother, when I saw him stride along the paddy fields, size up the coconut plantation, pat a cow on the neck, discuss with the labourers under the shade of the palms, I understood a fundamental trait of his personality which is reflected in his artistic production : he is a son of the soil.

His sculptures are a witness to it. In sculpture and architecture, which are the arts of space, one tends to oppose two styles or temperaments: heavy or light, full or empty, squat or slender, soil or spirit, romanesque or gothic, in brief, earth and air, the alternative between the peasant and the dancer. As a sculptor, Ranasinghe is obviously a peasant, the opposite of Lynn Chadwick, who invariably presents us with gigantic insects on stilts. Ranasinghe’s human or sacred figures are always animated by a sort of chthonian impulse: even when he moulds a bird in flight, a dancer in space, he always ostensibly weighs him with a starting block (*Garuda*) or an exaggerated leg (*The Dance*) or an earthly pedestal (*Penance*). This is a deeply Sinhalese trait: thus, in traditional Kandyan choreography, the dance draws its energy from the soil, struck by the whole extent of the sole of the foot



GARUDA I

This earthy bond, this noble peasant origin is not only expressed by the sculptural forms, it inspires the themes, revealed through the chosen subjects. When Ranasinghe started on his career as a sculptor, abstraction was the craze all over the world. The artists would exhibit mobiles or geometric structures, or combinations of discarded elements which would later proliferate as “installations”. This inescapable trend, this terrorist fashion could not be ignored by young Ranasinghe, in the intellectual ebullition of the London of his apprentice years. But those conceptual debates, those aesthetic gimmicks did not concern him. They belonged to another galaxy.

As an artist, he situated himself in his Lankan heritage, in the strong tradition of that sculpture of mainly sacred inspiration and usage which harks back to the creators of Anuradapura, and later of Polonaruwa and which appears under various guises in the village temples, the hermits' caves, the Buddhas 'colossal figures emerging from high rocky surfaces

which the jungle is always ready to reclaim, all useful practical images, created for the believers' devotional rites, receptacles for prayers and redistributors of their energy. He was tempted too by those crossroad statues erected to honour some historical figure, and to give life to the nation's memory in the mind of passers-by who were now citizens. An art rooted in the actual world, deliberately significant, rejecting any merely decorative or aesthetic preoccupation.

Another important element of his personality is willpower. Ranasinghe has chosen to become what he is.

He was the eldest son, indeed gifted but the family did not consider him to be as academically bright as his two younger brothers. So he entered the School of Tropical Agriculture. After graduation Ranasinghe was recruited as a civil servant into the Ministry of Agriculture. He was put in charge of the implantation of the new methods of rice culture. His mission consisted in explaining them out and popularising them in the rural world. He told me how he would ride through the country on a bicycle and try to lecture the peasants. They would listen quietly and then invite him to share a meal of the old rice they had tended and harvested since time immemorial. What could he teach them? What was he doing with his own life? He resigned and registered at the School of Fine Arts in Colombo.

There drawing was taught, as well as western painting, traditional decoration and clay modelling. This last technique attracted him. He was 25 and a promising painter. He stood at the crossroads life, chance and his calling had prepared for him and chose his destiny: he would be a sculptor.

Did he then realize that he had chosen the most complicated, costly and difficult craft? Sculpture needs much more space than painting: a workshop of vast dimensions, room to store heavy, cumbersome, often expensive as well as rare, material. It also needs more time: while a painter can swiftly trace a first sketch with a few brush strokes, and erase it, if he is not satisfied, with a few drops of turpentine, it is another matter for the sculptor who has to chisel a block of marble or of ebony and is allowed no *pentimento*. Clay might appear at first sight as a more docile medium and I have seen Ranasinghe mould it with rapid virtuosity, but then come the ordeal of fire, the hazards of the kiln, the adventure of casting...

Then, beyond mere production, the contact with the public is not easy to establish. A minimal exhibition implies heavy transport. Few galleries are fitted for it, and still fewer amateurs are on the lookout for this form of art. Even those who will find space in their houses for a large canvas on a wall will have difficulty in lodging a sculpture, which will also appear as more austere, less decorative, more difficult to decipher.

Young Ranasinghe was not blind to those obstacles but they did not deter him. He was determined to tackle them and lucidly felt that the first steps for him would be to acquire the technique, the tricks and ropes of the trade, the Craft ! For a Ceylonese of the time the necessary training could only be accomplished in England. Listen how he detail his own itinerary :

"In 1954, I applied for the very first Ceylon Government scholarship to be awarded to a Ceylonese art student to study sculpture at the Chelsea School of Art in London. However, I was not successful.

Determined to prove to myself that I could be a good sculptor, with financial backing from my mother and two brothers, I proceeded to London and joined the Chelsea School of Sculpture, learning alongside the chosen Government Scholar. Both my tutors (two very well-known sculptors in Britain), Willi Soukop and Bernard Meadows both tried

unsuccessfully to obtain grants for me from both the Ceylon Government and the British Council.

However, on the basis of my work at the School, I was awarded the first UNESCO Fellowship earmarked for Ceylon under the Creative Artists Scheme in 1958. This helped me to complete my studies and to travel in Europe visiting museums and galleries.



23. Peacock and Rider

I returned to Ceylon in 1958. There was a great demand for bronze sculptures but there were no foundries to cast such work. I decided, therefore, to join a commercial fine art foundry either in India or London. Not one of the foundries that I approached was prepared to take me on for training.

Events took a happier turn in 1961. My former guru at the Chelsea School of Art was now Professor of Sculpture at the Royal College of Art in London. He had just started a bronze foundry at the sculpture school operated by two famous Italians 'Grande Bronzistas' – The Angeloni Brothers.

At the Textile School of the Royal College of Art, was an ex-student of the Chelsea School of Art, my dear friend, Natalie Behr. Knowing that I was seeking to come to London to learn bronze casting, she had asked Professor Meadows whether he would take me on.

He agreed at once and asked me to come to London by 29th September. As I had no financial means to fly to London and support myself for a year, on 25th September, I approached the Asia Foundation for help. The Director, Lou Lazaroff, who liked my sculpture, immediately gave me a grant.

In London, as a foundry apprentice, for four months I was the tea-maker, tool cleaner, sweeper, washer and cleaner of cast bronzes etc. After the Angeloni brothers realised that I was truly dedicated, they freely imparted their knowledge and expertise to me.

In 1962, having stayed for an extra six months, I returned to Ceylon (after a brief appearance at the Kensington Register Office where I married Sally Cooper in the presence of two dear friends (witnesses and the only guests apart from Sally's mother).

From 1963 to 1971, I operated a foundry with basic machinery and tools at my youngest brother's coconut estate at Yogyana (a village of which few had heard). During this period, while teaching sculpture part-time at the Government College of Fine Art in Colombo, I cast nearly 500 bronzes of my own sculptures.

In 1968, I was made Director of the Government College of Fine Art. In 1970, I resigned as I could not carry out the programmes I had designed and in sheer frustration at my lack of progress.

In 1972, with the escalating prices of raw materials needed for bronze casting and gradual drying up of sculpture commissions, my wife and I decided to try our luck back again in London. I started work at the Morris Singer Foundry (at that time the largest foundry in England) as a mould maker.

Three months later, Professor Meadows once again came to my rescue! He offered me the post of Assistant to Mr. Angeloni at the College foundry where I had first been a student in 1962 and where graduate sculpture students were now being trained in all aspects of bronze casting.

On Mr. Angeloni's retirement, I took over the overall running of the foundry and the training of the students.

My greatest accomplishment, I feel, is that some these men and women now operate their own successful foundries both here and in Great Britain and Ireland."

PENANCE I



A man of two trades...

Tissa is naturally modest: he does not want to bore his relations with the list of prizes, medals and other rewards attributed to his works. He leaves it to the media to spread the information : it is their job, not his. His years of apprenticeship in London are also detailed in the article LP Goonetilleke devoted in July 1966 to the young sculptor in the pages of his publication on *“Architecture and Art in Ceylon”* (1).

TOO CLOSE TO THE SUN



A master artisan

For most people the alchemy of casting remains a mystery. We have all visited a potter's workshop, or sometimes a glass blower's, never a founder's. Is it too dangerous? We imagine it as a secret inferno where metals are brought to boiling point and poured out in fearful streams... If you look up the word *foundry* in any encyclopedia you will come upon a long article with a detailed catalogue of techniques differing according to metals, alloys or moulds (transient or permanent, of sand, plaster, or lost foam); the ancient and noble technique of lost wax being now reserved for unique works of art. The layman feels lost.

I once saw Tissa cast and bring to light a bronze bust: a birth from fire. My ignorance made me blind to the development of the ceremony: one sees only what one already knows. The scene was taking place on the family farm where Tissa had established an open air foundry under a palm shelter, no small installation indeed, since the idea was to cast bronze, a fabulous process akin to magic. It is not a one handed job. The agricultural workers were there, helping the master with passion, supervising the fire and poking it up, on the look out for the melting point, bringing crucibles on a berth of branches, in a ritual with which they had become familiar. Obviously they felt in charge of a noble achievement. There were very few words, but intense grace and pride in this activity.

I knew well the human size bust that was being cast on that particular day: I had seen it moulded in clay by Tissa in his sculptor's workshop on Galle Road, in Bambalapitiya district. Actually, I was the model. He had asked me to pose for him as a favour, saying he needed to practise, to exercise his hands and eyes so as not to lose the knack; a sly pretext and delicate detour to offer me my portrait. I never dreamt that the gift would be a bronze. I saw a head emerge from a block of earth and did not recognize my face. After careful drying, the clay was covered with a plaster mould made of detachable quarters, and later, molten wax replaced the clay. The liquid bronze would chase the wax away and cool down inside the mould, hardening as the final portrait. The making of such a mould is extremely complex, with several layers of covering, and a number of filling tubes and exhaust pipes in strategic places. The result is a sort of thick plaster placenta, a shapeless egg, in which the work to be lies hidden. This egg will be transported to the centre of the foundry to receive the stream of molten metal cast by the founder with the sure swift gesture which distinguishes the true professional.

So, I had seen a master founder at work. Tissa, my friend, for a little while, stood on another plane, far removed from my world.

Then after the casting and the quick cooling comes the miracle. The broken mould gives birth to the native statue, which, like a newborn babe, has to be toileted. After being cleaned, chiselled and polished, it is given, with a blow torch, the final touch of fire that will awaken the bronze reflections of the noble metal.

But Tissa's professional learning goes beyond the techniques studied and taught in Europe.

One afternoon he took me to the workshop of an old bronze founder somewhere in the suburbs of Colombo. This Brahmin – therefore a priest by caste – had specialised in the fabrication of small statues of Hindu deities. He worked sitting on the ground, in ancestral conditions, in a strange poverty of means: a few bamboo scrapers, a three stone hearth, a coconut fire. I felt transported in some nomadic camping place of the cave age. The man was lean and slow, marked by old age, he was clad in a white dhoti, a long cotton cloth that the Hindu priests tie round their loins; his forehead had been whitened with *vibhuti* ash and bore the signs of Shiva traced in red *tumeric*, the thread of the twice born was tied across his bony chest. Obviously we had come at a moment when he was performing a sacred function. We waited and he showed us the idol of the god Subrâmanya that he had just finished casting.



BULL & CONDOR

Only small statues could come out of his exiguous primitive workshop. He worked only on order and copied intangible models which were to become cult objects. As in most sacred rites, the production of each of these objects obeyed marvellously complicated precise rules which had been codified for centuries. First of all the combination of metals has to differ according to the divinity: some prefer lead or tin, other zinc or copper, for reasons which, it seems, are given and commented upon in sacred sanskrit books. Then the realisation of the statuette is accompanied with different prayers, and gestures variously oriented according to the stars, the seasons and the hours, a cosmic liturgy, very similar to the one which presides over ragas, those Indian fundaments of all artistic creation.

Where I had, up to then, only seen the art of the sculptor or the craft of the founder, Tissa had suddenly revealed to me a sacerdotal activity: a function which conjures up the gods, cast them into material shape, and establishes them lastingly, in their bronze resemblances, among the faithful. Of course I do not believe for a minute that Tissa sees himself as a priest or feels invested with any kind of religious apostolate. But he does not neglect this perspective, he knows and values it, he has experienced it through his intimate contact with the Brahmin praying under the coconut trees. Does not this, to a certain extent, illuminate his own sculpture? One can consider that a large part of Ranasinghe's work is close to what our conventions call "sacred art" and when I stand in front of one of his

interpretations of the image of the Buddha, I know that this has nothing to do with a workshop exercise, I can feel a sincere original fervent exploration, a desire for transcendence which has not been rigidified by rituals.

As most of Ranasinghe's work is in bronze, the question of whether his trade as a founder has influenced his style as a sculptor is often raised. It was frankly posed by A.J. Gunawardena and received an equally frank answer: "I think all the time of the casting problems and this lead to the kind of simplification which is good for art." And A.J. wisely adds: "the saving of cost is not to be sneezed at either." Would not our Brahmin agree to this? Besides the only other material which Ranasinghe has ever used in a significant manner, particularly in murals, is terra cotta, which also has had to pass through the ordeal of fire. He has very rarely resorted to wood, and never to stone or marble, those matters of remorseless confrontation.

A born teacher

Of course I am not entitled to judge of Professor Ranasinghe's talent as a teacher. I could only copy the unanimous praise of his students, colleagues, employees, or record the distinctions he received.

Yet when I saw him, in his rural foundry, direct the gestures of agricultural workers whom he magically turned into assistant alchemists, I understood that the man possessed a rare pedagogical virtue. His know how was as infectious as his good humour. Attentive to the fire, managing the course of hot lava, those villagers held their place in an elemental ballet, and I had the impression of witnessing a ceremony organized according to the Nâtarâja, which I was then discovering. I felt lucky.

Remembering this, I understand why the directors of the Royal College should require the services of such an inspiring teacher.

But is not Ranasinghe particularly Sinhalese in his pedagogical attitude? Beyond the mere transmission of a discipline, does not he accept the eastern function of the Guru, artist in action as well as spiritual father? A maker and a soul, the bread mould and the yeast in the dough, he is surrounded, more than by pupils, by disciples, by "*shishyas*".

But it took me years to understand this. On a visit to London I had accepted the hospitality offered by Tissa and his charming wife, Sally. They had organized a small party, partly to honour me, partly for the pleasure of it. And who had been invited for the occasion? Of course a few old friends, familiar of Sri Lanka, but most of the crowd was formed by the students and former students of the foundry of the Royal college of Arts. All those young people were very much at ease and at home, they were treated as the children of the house. And suddenly hearing the tone of tender respect with which they addressed Tissa, I recognized the same familiar admiration I had felt in the voice of *shishyas* addressing their gurus among the sitar players in India.

Let us listen to A.J. Gunawardena :

"It was a warm and humid summer afternoon. Clad in protective gear, Tissa was supervising the casting of a piece by a small group of graduate students. In point of fact, he was as active as the students themselves, if not more so. He not only directed the students, but also contributed to the labour himself. Clearly, he was well accustome to the sweat and discomfort of metal-crafting.

Afterwards, the traditional bottle of wine was opened – more than one bottle as I remember. And we talked late into the evening. I then understood why Tissa was held in such high esteem and affection by his students: he belonged with them and shared their personal concerns and dreams. And it so happened that, two years later I was present at the same venue – during the farewell party given to Tissa by his colleagues and former students who had arrived for the occasion from different parts of the country. "Guru bhakti", respect and love for the teacher, was plentifully evident that night at the College..."(2)



Penance II

An artist of great vision...

Can one visit the secret workshop of an artist, enter the hidden corridors of invention? When A.J. Gunawardena asks Tissa about his inspiration, the gestation of his work, whether the initial spark is provided by sketches, observation, readings, encounters, or any other impulsion, the answer is invariably: "I make". Mmm. Art as fabrication. Well, of course this is what the word art means. Is Tissa trying to evade the question? I think this means that he never conceives his work in a purely intellectual manner, his creations do not emerge from thought, like Plato's prototypes, to be materialised in clay. To be sure, this is the way most architects work: they draw plans, they design the building before realising it concretely. Not so Ranasinghe, a craftsman in an existentialist period: his work is the result of touch and go gestures, groping approaches, decisive action, a personal process which transports the vigour and implication of the artist into his work. Thus the traces of his fingers will keep the bronze face alive.

PENANCE IV



Or is it a false discussion? When Ranasinghe models a head, well, he is inspired by the living person under his eyes, resemblance is the first criterion. Of course he adds his style, his manner, his signature, through which we shall still recognize the model just as the postman recognizes my address in the thousand and one diverse handwritings of my friends.

This leads us to distinguish two main avenues in Ranasinghe's work: on the one hand the statues realised after a precise model, and on the other hand the more conceptual and more abstract sculptures which, for the most part represent idols and belong to the field of religious iconography.

In other terms: lay art and sacred art.

We have all come across Ranasinghe's lay statues, in Sri Lanka : standing portraits of former Prime Ministers stepping out unwearyingly in front of official buildings in the capital city, or of Colonel Olcott exhibiting his theosophist beard at a crossroads in Galle, or again the bust of Munandiram Samaraweera in front of Weligama, a dream born from the sea. All those statues have one thing in common: the crowd must be able to recognize characters whom the press through photographs and even caricatures, the cinema through newsreels and documentaries, have made familiar to all. The obligation of resemblance makes realism a must, but, as those persons are historical figures, honoured by a newborn democracy which elevates them on a pedestal, (which is not the far off glorious throne of half deified kings), as respected incarnations of the nation's recent independence, reverence also is a must.

This balance (necessary in a democracy) between realism and ostentation could be illustrated by a well known anecdote: the story of the challenge that made young Tissa famous. One government had decided to erect a statue in the memory of D.S. Senanayake, first Prime Minister of independent Ceylon. A renowned English sculptor was approached, a specialist, I must say, of heavy allegories influenced by the bombastic style of totalitarian regimes. The result was a scandal which shook up the whole island's intelligentsia. Ludicrous ! grotesque ! Then Ranasinghe, still a student in London, proposed to realise a new statue and offer it to the nation. The daily newspaper "the Observer" launched a subscription to cover the 14 000 rupee foundry costs, with almost immediate success.

Between realistic resemblance and official exaltation what is left of the creator's originality? I find it in the folds of the strict costumes of these notabilities, creased by an invisible hand which instils the shudder of life into bronze immobility: This is Ranasinghe's handwriting, restrained, though, and hardly perceptible so as not to break the solemnity of the homage.

Fortunately, in the busts and portraits this handwriting is given free play. They belong to what I have defined as lay art, but they are of a private order, and therefore more authentic. My sincere Tissa! I look at the bronze head of actor Romlas de Silva or of actress Annie Boteju, both made in 1970. They look muddy, bumpy, burnt and battered and cauldron-boiled, they look alive! They have been made with blows, cuts, swellings, wounds and although those scars were absent from their faces when I met them, a long time ago, still here they are, Romlas and Annie, genuinely present, alive with all those lives they have had, as actors, to incarnate.



This personal style, this way of casting life into bronze, came early into Ranasinghe artistic career. He was still a student, in 1957, when he exhibited a portrait of Nathalie Behr, a girl with a graceful smile. Yes, of course, seen from the front, a smile irradiates her face, but when you look at her profile the bronze betrays an attentive, acute, anxious seriousness. The artist goes from one to the other of these antagonistic expressions through a rhythmical play of scratches that the eye of the spectator will interpret as the movement of life. Tissa's handwriting!

Tissa works fast. He does not demand long posing periods from his model. His fingers move swiftly as if disconnected from the eyes, a little like the fingers of a pianist who does not need to look at the keyboard to interpret the music. When he modelled my head, he never asked me to remain rigidly motionless, and I do not think that he even tried to measure the proportions of the forehead or the nose by holding a stick at arm's length, as some other artists do. He probably knew me too well already, he had me in his eye.. Two sessions were enough, the first one to adumbrate the structure, the second one to finish off the details. I

never had the impression I was posing, I was almost disappointed. He was active but we were continuing our usual conversation. No effort. I expected a little more ceremony...

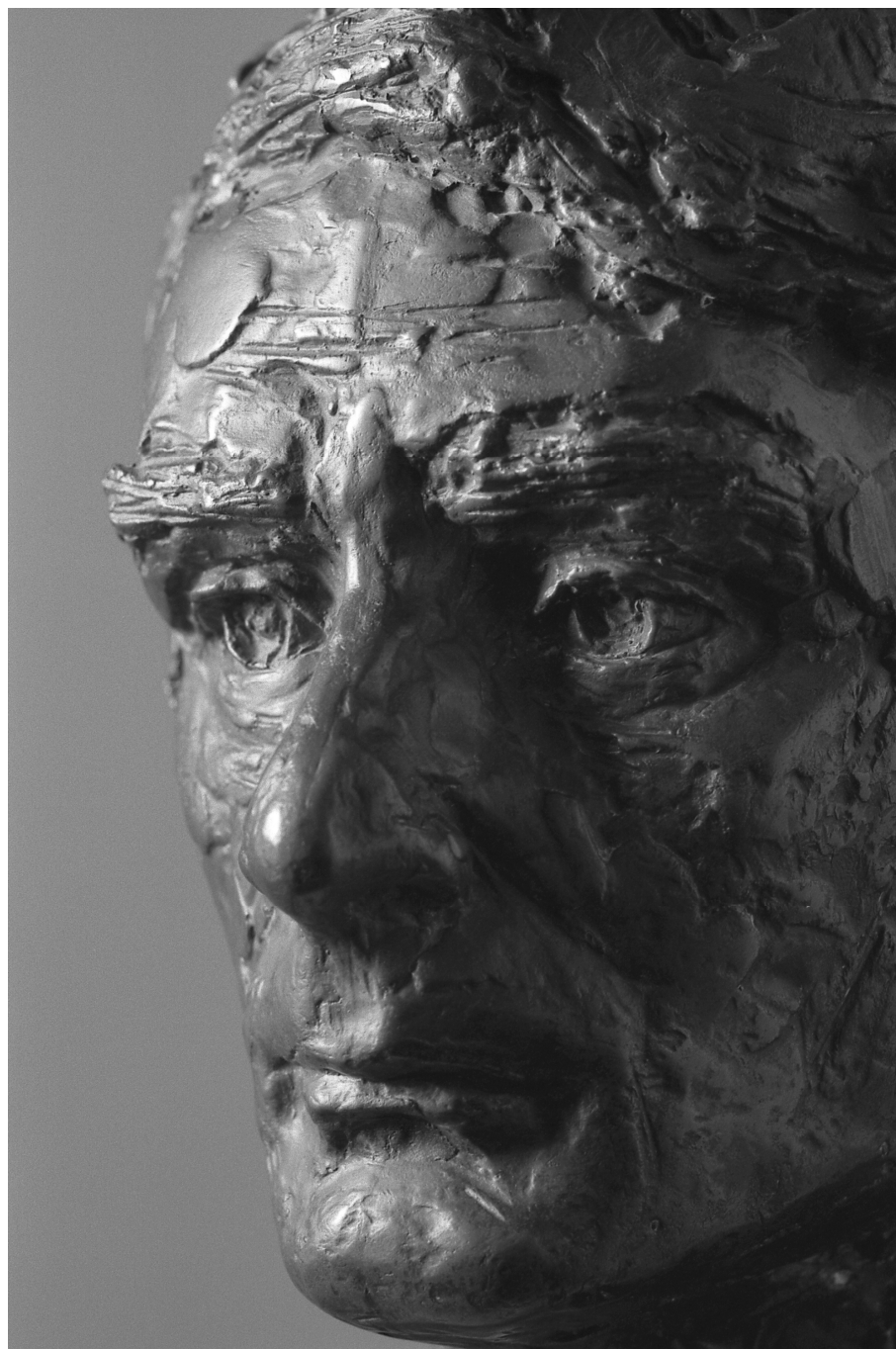


Of course, I did not recognize myself when he presented me with the finished head. Not so my entourage: my children, for instance, immediately identified me: Papa! Strangely enough I found that face rather resembled my own father's. Then I was told that I was the last person to be able to judge of that resemblance, since I had never seen my face in three dimensions. Photographs are two-dimensional.

Still, I had problems in accepting that face which was supposed to be mine but where neither cheeks, brow, temples nor chin, nay, no skin space at all called for tender stroking, scarred as it was by tool marks and fabrication gestures. I wanted to be smoother, darling, not flattened by the spatula here, split there by the knife, swollen above the eyebrow by a pellet of clay crushed under the sculptor's thumb. I could not get used to myself. Fortunately, frequent travels and changes of abode took me away from that portrait, and when, years later, I unearthed it and brought it to light again, ah, such sudden life!

It was the resurrection of a quivering being. Under the scars of the execution which had wounded my vanity, I discovered a face in the making. Marble or metal what is more static than the sculptor's material? But the accumulation, touch by touch, of the signs of fabrication,

all those small bumps and scratches, gave new life to that now disappeared face. Suddenly I could name Ranasinghe's style: lyrical realism.



Realism, because his themes proceed from reality and reflect it. The face is recognizable. But the artist does not efface himself to leave room for reality through identical reproduction. He stamps it with his mark, with the imprint of his gestures, the traces of his tools, the personal expression of the artist at work.

Of course he has had thousands of predecessors. Franz Hals was probably the first to make his personal touch a form of signature. Many followed suit. The expressionists systematized and blew the gimmick up. Ranasinghe does not care. He says "I make, I am a maker". This must be taken literally. His private portraits and busts, where he most freely reveals himself, bear the spontaneous scars of his tools, the agile traces of his fingers, so that

in the bronze head the spectator will discover a face in the making, achieved and yet unfinished, definite and yet still in evolution, a continuous birth...

Between the high official statues and the small private portraits, most of the other bronzes belong to what I have called sacred art. The inspiration is Buddhist and Hindu, and there the wise seekers of light and the gods in their various avatars are given human shapes. Most of those works are about 60 centimetres high.

Other works can be added to that group, although their inspiration is not directly religious. First of all those recurrent interpretations titled “Mithuna” (couple) whose embraces in various forms celebrate love- but is this so far from the celebration of a divinity? Then those enraged testimonies – *Explosion*, *Innocent Ones*- realised under the emotional shock caused by terrorist bombings in Colombo. Then there are a few decorative murals. But those are marginal pieces.

Specialists will agree that tradition had for a long time rigidified Indian or Sinhalese sculpture. No inspired impulse. It is difficult to innovate when the gestures and attitudes of the revered figures have been codified by habit, or worse by dogmas and rites. When priests or theologians imprison the images of gods in rigid interpretations what liberty is left for the artist’s inspiration?

In other terms: what did Tissa Ranasinghe bring to Sri Lankan sacred art in the XXth century?

An erudite and a connoisseur, Martin Wickramasinghe has noticed that the “Buddha in Samadhi mood” is seated in the lotus position “*padmasâna*”. This position, he says, is never used in the ancient statues of the Buddha in Ceylon. Tradition always shows him sitting in the hero position “*palanka*”.(3)

Viranga records an interesting remark in his commentary on the mural titled “*Enlightened*”: “On the radiant face of the Buddha, the sculptor has, perhaps unwillingly, created a suggestion of pride. When this was commented upon, Tissa Ranasinghe said : “Why not ? at that moment he must have felt a touch of pride!”(4)

This two anecdotes throw some light on Tissa Ranasinghe’s inspiration, and illustrate what he has wanted to bring to the Buddhist sculpture of his time. He does not feel tied by tradition, by official creeds, or by traditional representations. He creates his own image of the Buddha, freely, in his own way, according to his sensibility. He lends to the Enlightened One the human weakness of transient complacency, he sits him in the position which suits him best, (and who will claim that the Buddha, thus positioned, is less significant?) He animates him with his own feelings, his intimate vision and, above all, he tries to communicate the fervour he experiences. This is lyricism, and it is precisely this new element which he introduces in the sacred art of Ceylon which theologians had frozen in didactic rigidity. Ranasinghe simply says that God’s place is in our hearts.

It is the same lyrical approach which I had already discerned in the portraits, but here, where faith is concerned, he is not so much a “maker” as a son of the soil. Why has Ranasinghe, who, as a sculptor, did not seem to be interested in the animal world, devote at least two sculptures to the representation of the fight between a crane and a crab? This perplexed me until a Sinhalese friend told me the theme reminded him of a lullaby his grandmother used to sing, and another one indicated that the story figured among the Jâtaka fables which are still very popular in Sri Lanka. In brief, Ranasinghe’s faith has nothing to do with the articles of the official creed, in this field he is a peasant, with a peasant’s taste for old tales and for naïve beliefs. Martin Wickramasinghe’s comment rings true to me : “I believe

that the quality of Ranasinghe's sculpture that stirs the heart of the people is the inspiration he derived from the folk elements of Buddhist art and from Sinhalese folk poetry".

Enlightenment 2002 (relief) 44cm x 30 cm



NANDI



Beyond the Buddhist inspiration, this remark can be applied to Ranasinghe's important Hindu iconography. Think for instance of the beautiful sculpture titled "*Mahishasura*" : a stylised human figure, clad in a sarong and armed with a spear is killing a bull. The bull has fallen on its back, the man is perched on its round belly as on the rotundity of a planet. It could be a village scene: the sacrifice of the bull. Actually it is immediately recognized as part of the popular imagery in Dravidian tradition; Skanda (an avatar of the above mentioned Subrâmanya) is killing the devil-bull Mahishasura. This mystic *corrida* is usually represented in the most baroque grandiloquent way: Skanda waves sixteen arms, rides a tiger or a lion, in a violent cacophony of colours. In Ranasinghe's interpretation, the economy of means is striking: an unbalanced oval, the stylised shaking legs, raised towards heaven, of the bull in its last throes, and the straight vertical thrust of the weapon felling it. No fable, no frills to express the victory of organised spirit over brute matter, in pure plastic terms. David and Goliath!

Actually, the same economy is manifest in all of Ranasinghe's representations of Hindu divinities. He has done away with all the fabulous attributes which are supposed to express their powers and virtues: no multiplicity of arms, no distinctive tools, weapons and jewels, no vehicle. He uses abstraction to express not the myths but the principles and concepts incarnated by those divinities. Let us try to decipher Ranasinghe's plastic code.

Modelling, for instance...

We have seen that private portraits sport the exalted scars of their fabrication. Those traces are not so present in icons, or with a totally different significance. "*Ardhanarishwara*" represents that form of Shiva in which he is unified with his wife (*shakti*) Parvati into one figure which symbolizes the ambivalence of the divinity. This image is often present in temples, and in order to help the believers to identify it, the artists add feminine trinkets on the left side of the statue, and masculine accesories on the right. Instead of this anecdotic facility, Ranasinghe chooses a plastic solution worthy of an authentic sculptor. The feminine part is column-shaped and sways elegantly at hip height, its smooth soft surface calls for caresses and catches light in long bright strokes, there are no details except the discreet swelling of a breast. The masculine half is constituted of the superposed pointed angles of the leg and of the arm, in aggressive broken lines, and its rough uneven improbable surface seems to have been brutally wrenched from the soil, the light hardly manages to shimmer on its contours.

Thus, through a different modelling of antithetic forms, that is through purely sculptural means, Ranasinghe brings to light the opposition of the sexes.

Or polishing which is another form of modelling ...

The bas relief entitled "*Enlightenment*" shows the supreme moment of the Buddha's awakening. Curiously this apotheosis is rarely present in Buddhist iconography. Traditional art seems to have shunned the difficulty of representing this spiritual experience. Ranasinghe lifts up, in calm ascension, the bust of the Buddha above the whirling wave of the world, a concentric, threatening and disorderly samsara, the engulfing movement of many waters. In the depth a mask is floating, it could be the face before the awakening. The visible arm of the Buddha is still half caught in the eddying stream, but his face and bust are already steeped in serenity: the emergence into a higher form of consciousness is a slow process.

The face, the shoulder and the bust of the Awakened One are polished to coppery brightness, their state has been changed, they are no longer weighted by matter, they rise in blonde shining reflections through the very heart of the worldly wave, which still rolls its

rough wild billows. Here again the sculptor uses a purely plastic technique to express the Buddha's metamorphosis.

The polishing of a significant detail is often used by Ranasinghe to emphasize the structure of his religious statues. In "Triple trident" the three successive tridents, seen from the front, form a scale of light which rises from the animal to the god. And the trunk of "Ganesha", god of studies, is brightly tattooed with the Sinhalese alphabet. Polished too is the strange abstract head he has given to his shivaite idols.

What about abstraction ?

Ranasinghe always represents the Buddha with a face, if not realistic, at least identifiable, which seems natural: was not the heir of the Shâkyamuni race a human being and a historical character? But most of his Hindu divinities, entities which belong to the conceptual or mythological order or imaginary beings, have been given, instead of a head, a strange abstract appendix, a sort of oblong pyramid with sometimes a forked relief imprinted where the face should be. Is this recurring form significant?

Let us examine the sculptures and try, through comparison, to form a receivable hypothesis. The various representations of Shiva, exhibited at Bangkok National Gallery in 2002 might give us a lead.

The head, "Descent of the Ganges" represents the double face of Shiva-Parvati, in two assembled halves. It is a rather realistic portrait. One recognizes on the god's forehead one half of the ritual crescent. This double face is crowned by the monumental Mount Kailash where the Ganges has its source. This sacred mountain has been stylized to become the model of the "gopuram" towers erected at the entrance of temples. Here we have the two fundamental elements: a dual face, and the pyramid shape of the gopuram.

In the "Ardhanarishwara" with its contrasting modelling, so characteristic of the double nature of the divinity, the two halves of the face are hewn apart, separated by a glossy groove which emphasizes their difference. This central split will reappear when, on other idols, the two stylised, simplified abstract halves of the head will be reduced to two parallel bars springing, gopuram-like, from the shoulders of "The Dance", of the bull rider in "Triple Trident", of the "Rider" on its peacock, and of various avatars of Shiva.

At this point Tissa finally decided he would answer my query about the genesis or significance of such a head shape (although an artist does not have any obligation to explain his work, of course!). Here is the answer:

"I first started using this form for the head of Shiva, making the trident the head itself. I was also interested in the old stone heads of our ancient cities – no details on the worn faces and large ears with decoration; also the head ornaments of Kandyan dancers – they hide the face.

Also, I think I was too lazy to do detailed faces and just simplified the face to a blank, highly polished form – it gives a certain mystery and anonymity."

This piece of confidence, (in which one must recognize a good dose of self-deprecating humour, about the so-called laziness of an artist who has proved capable of leading several lives in one), throws an interesting light on the sculptor's inspiration. Using the mystic sign of the trident rather than the realistic representation of a face? Is not this the same type of iconographic revolution which in Christian countries gave birth to a sacred art which rejected anecdotic images and concentrated on symbols? Ranasinghe is a man of his time, he has felt the stirrings of this universal desire to rid religions of their mythologies, preferring sacred signs to idolatrous scenes.

We should also notice that Ranasinghe recognizes a double inspiration: first of all, the ancient statues of which, century after century, the monsoons have erased the features without depriving them of their mystic attraction, rather endowing them with the mysterious force of the ineffable. This is the heritage he claims, assumes and will perpetuate.

Then the costume of Kandyan dancers as it is seen in religious processions. A temple art practised by villagers who give it the rural dimension which is a constant reference of the Sri Lankan sculptor.

The genesis of a sign.

When Ranasinghe expresses the unknown face of gods through that abstract, original shape of a stylised trident, his invention does not spring from an act of aesthetic provocation nor from a gratuitous whim : it has its roots in tradition.

What is more, the mission of this fork-shaped face is to express the double nature of the divinity, unified in one and the same impulse. This duality corresponds to the image of the couple, the “*mithuna*”, present in Ranasinghe’s work under multiple guises. Outside the representations of the Buddha, solitary figures are rare in his work. Embraces are frequent. Even apparently self contained figures like “*Ardhanarishwra*” soon reveal their double nature, but the dichotomy combines in unison, rarely in conflict. A philosophy of love pervades Tissa’s work.

GANGA II



I make

Tissa Ranasinghe's work might puzzle the western critique, accustomed as we are to schools, categories, and all the paraphernalia of classification. How shall we characterize an artist who offers, in one and the same generous movement, realistic portraits of Prime Ministers and compositions tending to abstraction, supposed to represent gods and couples? Any attempt to catalogue him is doomed to failure, he slips out of all categories and none of

our cherished “isms” can apply to the whole range of production of that singular artist. Yet his work has a stylistic unity: his manner is immediately recognisable.

Let’s come back to the practice which structures his artistic quest: “I make”, he modestly says, meaning that he does not want to be encumbered with theories, that he is essentially a craftsman. No gratuitously aesthetic or purely abstract or ornamental object will come out of his hands. He will have a subject. At the same time we have seen that he never resorts to anecdotic solutions, to decorative small talk. To signify the feminine or the masculine essence he only resorts to plastic, essentially sculptural means: the grain of the material, hand wrought, modelled or polished, the organisation of lines, the composition of volumes. This austere technical language makes him sometimes difficult to approach. Well, a sculpture has to be seen as a sculpture, not as a piece of pastry!

Ranasinghe has had the luck to be born into an epoch where the public had become familiarized with abstraction: the idols and couples he represents would not have been acceptable or even visible for his grand-parents: the tension and density would have totally escaped them, they would have perceived a game bordering on sacrilege. Today it is possible for him to express himself in a common artistic language through which art is getting rid of the anecdote to reach authenticity.

Before Ranasinghe other Easterl creators had mixed their voices in the global concert, but I think Tissa was the first to introduce modernity in Asian sacred art. Was he conscious of his daring? His personal history as a small Ceylonese planter who became a sculptor in London led him naturally to express his Buddhist culture through a universal plastic language which he assimilated and made totally his.

I said to express, not to translate. There is no calculation here, no so called adaptation. Ranasinghe does not translate the traditional Ceylonese Buddha into contemporary style.

“**I** make”. He expresses his own Buddha in his personal language. He expresses himself.

“**I** make” : in this statement which could be the motto of a creator who sees himself as a craftsman, the emphasized personal pronoun, I, (yes, yes it should be underlined) indicates first of all that Tissa’s ruling principle, as a sculptor, is the personal implication and sincerity which, in art, is called lyricism.



DEBRIS

Notes

(1) (...) Ranasinghe was launched at the Chelsea School in the midst of the Pop art movement and the Anti-ugly Society - yet he was in the safe hands of Willi Soukop and Bernard Meadows (1954-57) and moved forward calmly to present us with a well-defined artistic personality of a startling new order(...). In the interim, Ranasinghe won the first prize for Sculpture at the Chelsea Art School (1954) and was awarded the Chelsea Diploma two years later : soon a UNESCO Fellowship under the Creative Artists Scheme enabled him to complete his studies further at Chelsea and travel in Holland, Germany, France and Italy.

(...)Ranasinghe returned to Ceylon in 1958 and the following year held an Exhibition of sculpture in Colombo (...) He was appointed (for a short while) as Visiting Lecturer at his old school-Government College of Fine Arts and the influence he had on the art students of his Division becomes cogently clear now. In 1961, he returned to Britain (...). This time he worked at the Bronze Foundry of the Royal College of Art and was for a period employed on the staff of the Foundry (...); during this period Ranasinghe exhibited with the Young Commonwealth artists..." L.P. Goonetilleke : *Some thoughts on sculpture in Ceylon, Architecture and Arts in Ceylon*, july-sept 1966, Colombo.

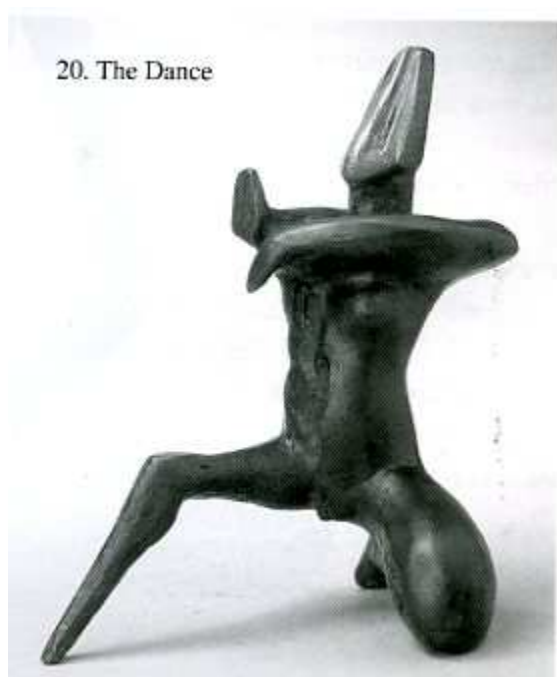
(2) A.J. Gunawardena : *Tissa Ranasinghe : a master of fire*, The Island, 20/03/1994.

(3) Martin Wickramasinghe : *Buddhism and Culture*, Tisara Poth Prakasakayo (date ?)

(4) Viranga : *Sophisticated, professional artist*, Ceylon Daily news, 7/10/71.

(5) Tissa Ranasinghe : *Visions of the Buddha, visions of the Gods*, bronzes contemporains du Sri Lanka, National Gallery, Bangkok, february 2002. Voir :

The Dance, a sculpture by Tissa Ranasinghe



20. The Dance

The title indicates that the sculptor is not representing one dancer in particular, but dance in general. This allegory has tempted a lot of artists: the celebrated works of Carpeaux or Matisse, which bear the same title, are milestones in the history of art.

Ranasinghe's sculpture presents a half kneeling stylised figure, apparently disproportionate and disparate. The left knee rests on the ground, egg-shaped and swollen, attached to a rounded thigh. The right leg, on which the foot is not even adumbrated, has been reduced to a meagre oblique stick, with a slight swelling indicating the calf, and to a very thin thigh, in total contrast with the left leg. The two dissymmetric atrophied arms spring horizontally from the shoulder and their

extremities suggest hand movements.

The same dichotomy is found in the torso, the left side is smooth and rounded, with an obvious breast: a woman's body. The right side with its rough grain, its pointed, nervous, muscular shapes suggests virility. This figure unites the two sexes in the act of dancing. This contradictory union of the feminine and the masculine elements, Ranasinghe had already explored it in its *Ardhanarishwara*, in which Shiva and Parvatishare share the same and one figure, thus expressing the ambivalence of the divinity. In general, to make the two sexes evidente, idol makers accumulate explicit accessories : clothes, jewels or other trinkets and gimmicks. Ranasinghe refuses this anecdotic facility and finds strictly plastic sculptural expressions : feminine smoothness as opposed to masculine roughness, a rounded shape as opposed to a lean silhouette, curves as opposed to straight broken lines. In *The Dance*, Ranasinghe has used the same codification.

He also uses the same forked, gopuram shaped appendix which usually figures the head of his Shivaite divinities. I must conclude that this sculpture is a representation of Shiva.

Which Shiva ? Well, *Nataraja* : Shiva dancing to create the world, the best known representation, the Mona Lisa of universal sculpture! The most codified representation too,

where the least element has significance, the number of arms, the movements, the gestures, the crushed demon, the Ganges, the circle of flames...

Ranasinghe sweeps that fabulous bazaar away, bares Shiva of his accessories. His will is to express his own vision of the *Nataraja*, the dance from which the world was born. Here is his artistic challenge.

Nataraja...from now on I will view the sculpture in a different way. Here is an androgynous humanoid rising from no other pedestal but himself, his movement supporting and raising the world through the attraction force of his horizontal arms. The strength is evident. He is measuring space, inventing its breadth and length, shaping the horizon : the unfinished arms are limitless, the legs are inventing the first vertical thrust towards the zenith, the body is straight and victorious, you suddenly



notice its harmony. An amateur of western dancing could discard this sculpture as a disproportionate abstraction, but a Sinhalese villager will immediately recognize in the position of the arms the gesture through which the traditional dancers open the vastness of the world for the Buddha at the Perahera.

Do not all dancers invent space ? Ranasinghe, without didacticism and without any mythological paraphernalia expresses that universal cosmic truth.

Traduction : Marie-Hélène Estève