

LATITUDE

Vintage posters of Ceylon



By Shabna Cader

His collection of posters totals to about 335. It seems to be quite a large number for someone who started collecting just a mere six years ago. Anura Saparamadu is in a world of his own and harbours a passion unlike no other in Sri Lanka. He is a collector of vintage posters of Ceylon.

His first vintage poster was purchased back in 2005. It was a poster by the then Ceylon Tourism Authority (known today as the Tourism Board of Sri Lanka). The poster is quite simple really and highlights one of the famous aspects of the country – Kandyan dancers. The caption at the bottom of the poster reads 'Land of song and dance'. Quite apt and straightforward.

Starting a collection

"I happened to be doing research online and came across the poster quite by accident. I was amazed at the work of art and began to research on the subject of vintage posters," said Saparamadu. "The results intrigued me even further as I found 100 more vintage posters. Since then, I believe I simply got carried away with the idea of collecting them."

Saparamadu collects vintage posters dating the pre-1972 era and goes as far back as the 1880's. All of his posters are in relation to the island, then known as the Pearl of the Indian Ocean – Ceylon.

"The most I've been able to collect have been from within the country. But I've also purchased over 150 from England. Then the highest number of posters from France, and then a couple from Italy and Argentina as well. It's very surprising to receive emails from people around the world who have a poster and are willing to part with it. I've come to notice that many of the locals do not see the value of it. Some of the street shops have old posters that have hung on the walls for decades and when I ask them if I can have it, they seem to think I'm crazy!"

Saparamadu has paid as low as US\$ 2 for a poster but also US\$ 1,000 on one occasion. "For the most part in Sri Lanka, I spend next to nothing because people are willing to part with them with no question."

A favourite

Saparamadu's much-loved vintage poster of Ceylon is the most simple of all in his collection. It is a small one at that, of a Tamil/Hindu woman; a tea-plucker in a central upcountry tea plantation. The sky is cloudless and a beautiful blue, the plantation is a healthy green spread. The woman is garbed in a pink saree complete with a thick yellow border. The caption at the bottom of the poster reads 'Picking Empire grown tea'. It is a 1929 vintage poster.

Ceylon, vintage edition

His collection varies from posters on tea, cinema, consumer goods, travel, government, and war to miscellaneous. On the subject of tea, posters at the time were a powerful and highly effective medium of advertising. Many of the brands depicted in the posters were well-known in Great Britain as well as in other parts of Europe and North America. The first film to put Ceylon on the global cinema map was The Bridge on the River Kwai. It was filmed on the island and was a great commercial success but unfortunately did not encourage the artistic creativity of its poster.

Manufactured goods during the Ceylonese days were highlighted in plenty of posters. Many of them were created during the 1930's and no longer exist. As a tropical island, posters created for the sake of attracting tourists were made to reflect the simple beauty, lush greenery, sandy beaches and cultural sites. The government posters were created with the idea of educating the public and also creating awareness on various subjects like drugs and alcohol, disease and new developments. Interestingly, a handful of the first posters of Ceylon were printed in Europe. The earliest known poster in the hands of Saparamadu was created in the year 1883; it is a cinema poster promoting Carl Hagenbeck's Singhalesen Truppe, a Sinhalese dance troupe.

Every vintage poster in his collection is the work of a local artist. Although British artists were sourced for the initial stages of poster production, gradually, this passed onto the many talented and fine Ceylonese creators who had an artistic mind of their own. The use of font, colour and subject creates a very simple yet effective impact on the viewer. Unmistakably, a look at each poster evinces a mastery of language as well as design aesthetic that natives possessed at the time.

Incalculable artistic value

"I've been asked as to why I collect them and all I can say is that I am passionate about it. These are beautiful works of art and wonderful examples of Ceylonese creativity. Although my collection is by no means comprehensive, it is a way in which I am able to showcase what creativity used to be 40-50 years ago," he said. He describes there is a huge difference between the artistic styles of the posters created during the 1920's – 1930's and those in the 1950's – 1960's. "I would say that the best posters were created prior to the 1950's. Posters were screen printed and it was quite a long and tedious process but gradually, the people became lazy."

Saparamadu's grand collection prompted the publication of a book; Vintage Posters of Ceylon. This was launched two years ago alongside an exhibition that was held at the Galle Fort during the Galle Literary Festival.

Sadly, like most posters, many did not have a long life-span. They were put up for a certain period of time and then removed and discarded. This is how many are lost and cannot be found today. Over 90% do not exist. However, the few that remain are evidence to a period of time that highlights a medium of creativity unlike no other and unseen at present.

"My first exhibition was actually quite small and since then, I've been probed to have a larger second one." Vintage posters of Ceylon will be on exhibit at the Barefoot Gallery until 24 November.

Other Images

