

Posters from the past

By Shaveen Jeewandara

View(s):

Walking into the Barefoot Gallery feels like walking through a time portal that transports you to the golden ages of commercial art. A retro wave overwhelms you as posters of young lasses dressed in 70's attire shyly smile down upon you. This then is a collection of posters from the island, before it lost Ceylon as its name. From Air Ceylon boasting its sapphire service, to Hollywood heart-throb of the past, Lex Barker holding a pose in 'The Storm Over Ceylon' – this is a rare exhibition.



Anura Saparamadu has been collecting these posters over the last six years, spending his free time surfing the internet and hunting down antique sellers for the commercial works of art. "This one had me glued on. That was where my passion for posters took life," he says, pointing at a beautiful poster depicting Kandyan dancers, dating back to 1948. "I thought to myself of all the forgotten ones such as this, out there. Us Sri Lankans have been deprived of the opportunity to bask in the beauty of our own art, since little prominence is given to posters."

Mr. Saparamadu went on to write a coffee table book – 'Vintage Posters of Ceylon' in 2010, fusing his succinct verses with the posters. "When I was acquiring them, the price ranged from a few dollars to a few thousand dollars. The highest priced, the hand-drawn silk-screened ones were by Sri Lanka's maestros of yesteryear C. K. L. Samarasingha and G. S. Fernando," Mr. Saparamadu recalled.

Talking of about the difference between the poster art of today and those vintage specimens, Mr. Saparamadu points out the amount of hard work that went into their making. There used to be a time where each poster would be carefully cut from blocks, and meticulously lithographed on to paper. This is an extremely delicate enterprise and requires patient precision, whereas today's posters are complete at the click of a mouse.

"Back then, poster artists had to bring out the best in the movie through their own creativity, while today, a mere screen-shot of the film is taken and superimposed on the poster," he says.

Each one of the posters hung up at Barefoot draws an intricate link to Ceylon. Surprisingly, the interest among the youth seems to be greater than expected, with many of them wanting to trace back the good old days their parents go on and on about. "I sell prints of these posters at Rs.3000 each, and my buyers are not limited to professionals. The youth show a lot of interest," Mr. Saparamadu says.

The oldest poster on show dates back to 1899, and depicts a young sarong-clad lad, holding up a sign for 'Hagenback's Ceylon Tea' while the most recent dates to 1972.

'Vintage Posters of Ceylon' is now on at the Barefoot Gallery, from 10 a.m. – 7 p.m. on weekdays and from 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. on Sundays until November 24.