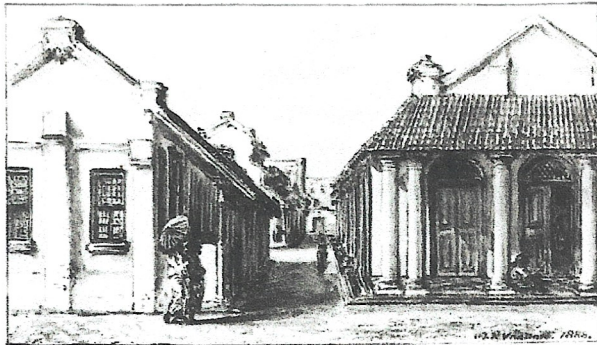


THE NATIONAL TRUST – SRI LANKA LECTURE ON THURSDAY 25th SEPTEMBER 2014

Two urban topographers, illustrators and artists in mid nineteenth century Ceylon - Hippolyte Silvaf and J.L.K.Van Dort by Archt Ismeth Raheem

The 66th Session of the Monthly Lecture Series of the **National Trust - Sri Lanka** will be held at the HNB Auditorium, 22nd Floor, HNB Towers, 479 T.B. Jayah Mawatha, Colombo 10 at 6.30 p.m.



OLD DUTCH STREET
within the Fort of Colombo



Topography is a term whose definition as described by art historians has been disputed for centuries. It came into prominence around the eighteenth century by artists and draughts men primarily to provide a visual record of a particular area rather than as a form of self-expression.

The technique of delineating strategically important landmarks was deployed by military draughts men to sketch views, plans and surveys of the areas where troops were occupying or aiming to conquer enemy territory. Topographic views are often seen as secondary to 'fine art' or 'landscape' views as a result of their being just mere visual records and nothing more. Often professional artists and military personnel who were specially trained at an art school or academy in topographical drawing executed these tasks.

But in contrast to their British counterparts the two Sri Lankan artists under review – Hippolyte Silvaf [1801-1879], and John Kalenberg Van Dort [1831-1896] were self taught, and had little or no training at a school of art, or visited Europe to hone their skills.

Unlike their associates the nineteenth century British artists [both resident and visitors] who were pre-occupied in the search of the "picturesque" in the natural

landscape, for their thematic compositions, these two Sri Lankan artists who resided in the crowded suburb of Pettah, Colombo, often turned to the street and urban surroundings for inspiration.

The by-lanes and streets of this densely populated suburb was settled by peoples of varying religions and communities and often provided these artists with interesting subject matter for their canvases which ranged from pageants, processions, *peraheras*, social gatherings, religious festivals, and street scenes-. Often the street participants varied - acrobats, astrologers, magicians, minstrels, musicians and vendors were as common place as passersby.

In effect the most vibrant social activities and events within the communities often took place in the street with public participation-such as weddings and funerals – which are now more private events. Although both Silva and Van Dort also documented architecture buildings this was of secondary interest to them, and often used as backdrops in their paintings.

Lacking the necessary specialized equipment and instruments used by the British professional topographers such as *camera obscura*, and other optical devices to copy images of landscapes and to cast perspectives; both Silva and Van Dort in contrast, relied on their self generated skills to achieve the same ends in their travel sketches.

This lecture reviews the range of their output during their individual careers that spanned the nineteenth century and the unique style both these artists developed over their lifetime and demonstrating the versatility and adaptability of the various mediums they employed in their work. Also the lecture will scrutinize the influences on their work by contemporary artists and painters of Europe.

One such intriguing painting of Van Dort's titled the "*Vacant Chair*" [1870]- was similar in approach to the motif such as those painted by Luke Fields, [1843-1927] Vincent van Gogh [1853-1890] and Paul Gauguin [1848-1903] and titled the "*Empty Chair*". Was the Sri Lankan painter aware of the works of such famed contemporary artists in Europe? -- *Ismeth Raheem*.

The National Trust – Sri Lanka conducts monthly lectures on the last Thursday of each month. The lectures are open to the members and the public at a nominal fee. The HNB Sustainability Foundation is the principal sponsor of the events of the National Trust – Sri Lanka.

Further information can be obtained from the Trust Office Tel 2682730 at the Post Graduate Institute of Archaeology, 407, Bauddhaloka Mawatha, Colombo 7.