VOLUPTUOUS MAIDENS AND CUBIST DEMONS: THE "WAR OF MARA" PANEL OF GEORGE KEYT'S MURALS AT GOTAMI VIHARA, BORELLA, SRI LANKA[1]

Sometime before 1937[2], George Keyt wrote the following lines of verse:

> The desired image continues to subsist on absence,
> Continues to subsist in me,
> And presents a masquerade of itself,
> An assumption of itself,
> Many moods and sources of its face and voice in things not visible,
> The breath of feelings which hasten across my path,
> The contemplation of a shadow.
> But is it no cause for alarm that returning
> That shape will find itself a stranger among the emanations?
> I shall spare the work of absence,
> The hidden images, the twisted longings ecstatic in entanglement,
> Desires fading into foliage,
> The hidden images, the happiness in everlasting retreat from the fear of revelation.[3]

Prior to the 1930s Keyt had long abandoned his Christian up-bringing and enjoyed his own Buddhist revival.[4] During the 1930s he had begun the process of divorce

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[1] This essay is the result of work begun for Professors Jane Daggett Dillenberger and Doug Adams (1947-2007) as part of "The Devil and Soul in Art and Theology" at the Graduate Theological Union, Berkeley, California. The author wishes to acknowledge their support, enthusiasm and pioneering life work in the field of art and religion with deepest admiration and gratitude. The author also thanks Mr. L.S.D. Pieris of the Sapumal Foundation for readily allowing "Still Life with Mangoes" which is part of the holdings of the Foundation to be reproduced in the journal; Mr. Cedric de Silva of the George Keyt Foundation for procedural guidance regarding image rights; and Mr. Michael Sproule, Senior Partner of Messers D.L. and F de Saram, Attorneys-at-Law, Executors to the Estate of the late George Keyt, for permitting Keyt's "Still Life with Mangoes" to be reproduced in this essay. Finally, the friendship and resources of Mr. Mohan Daniel of the Serendib Gallery, Colombo, are profoundly acknowledged, as is the facilitating expertise of Dr. Cynthia Caron when the foundations of this small research began.

[2] *Image in Absence* was privately published in 1937.

[3] Martin Russell, *George Keyt*, (MARG Publications: Bombay) 1950, p. 48. "Revelation" in this case, may likely be the personal domestic crises intimated by friends of Keyt's; taken more philosophically one can hear "revelation" as Keyt's own spiritual-religious decision making.

from his Burgher wife, gone to live with a Sinhalese lover near Kandy and heard the not-too-distant call of epic Hinduism.[5] This segment of poetry from his 1937 book, *Image in Absence*, clearly expresses his own existential and romantic conundrum at the same time as it connects him, in his own mind, with a kind of *puranic* longing.[6] But, more than these self-references, it tacitly apprehends what is to come when he begins work on the murals depicting the life of the Buddha at Gotami Vihara, especially his representation of Mara's assault on Siddhartha's meditative serenity under the Bodhi tree.

The section of George Keyt's Gotami Vihara murals, which I have chosen to call "The War of Mara" (Fig. 1), is a pictorial conflation of two or three episodes (depending on how one reads it) from the Pali Canon.[7] From left to right this section begins with the assault of Mara's demons on the meditating Bodhisattva, followed by the Buddha in *Samadhi* meditation, concluding with a further conflation

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[4] Sunil Goonasekera, *George Keyt: Interpretations*, (Institute for Fundamental Studies: Kandy), 1991, pp. 15, 18, 49. H.A.I. Goonetileke in *George Keyt: A Felicitation Volume*, (Aitken Spence: Colombo), 1977, p. 21. I am particularly thankful to Dr. Goonasekera for his comments and corrections regarding this essay.

[5] H.A.I. Goonetileke, *George Keyt: A Life in Art*, (George Keyt Foundation: Colombo), 1989, pp. 7-8. Goonetileke's decorous summary of Keyt's married lives was confirmed with equal decorum by Sam Elepata when I interviewed him in late 2000.

[6] Goonetileke in "The Felicitation Volume", p. 28, states: "The collection *Image in Absence* is the literary complement to his paintings of the period, and is likely to stand the test of time. His poetry is a poignant palimpsest or avenue to the deeper understanding of his most personal paintings." I seek to take that avenue especially in relation to Gotami Vihara. Though it seems less personal, applying the hermeneutical philosophy of Michael Polanyi as a general framework, I believe one may be able to enrich interpretation of the Mara panel in particular.

[7] The events immediately surrounding the enlightenment are generally accepted as canonical in the order: Śakyamuni gives up his fruitless austerities; he takes a proper meal and receives a sign that he will attain Buddhahood; he begins his meditation under the bo tree; Mara sends his demon hosts to scare Gotama Śakyamuni; Śakyamuni remains unmoved; Mara boasts to Gotama that he has been more generous than the Bodhisattva; the earth witnesses to the Bodhisattva's greater charity in his previous birth as Prince Vessantara; Mara flees; the Bodhisattva meditates through the night attaining omniscience and the insight of dependent co-origination; the Bodhisattva Śakyamuni gains nirvana/nibbana at dawn; now a Buddha Śakyamuni remains in deep meditation for seven weeks; during the fifth week Mara sends his daughters to tempt the Buddha; he does not look at them; in the seventh week two merchants give him alms and become his first lay disciples; overcoming his doubt about teaching by the urging of the god Brahma, he then goes to Benares and preaches his first sermon.

of the first section with Mara's final attempt at dissuading the Bodhisattva from enlightenment by sending "his daughters."

In many ways, Keyt's *magnum opus*, the murals at Gotami Vihara[8], nevertheless, both fail ***and*** succeed in accurately teaching two Buddhist principles: overcoming desire and the fractured nature of perceived reality. Stylistically, Keyt employed his then-developing "epic Hindu" form to represent the daughters of Mara as well as accomplishing the zenith of his cubist technique to depict the demons of Mara; in the former, he fails, while in the latter he succeeds. From a devotional-didactic perspective it is the deployment of cubism to represent the functions of *khandha* that can be interpreted as nothing short of artistic genius.

Stylistic History

Inarguably, George Keyt was the stylistic product of British-colonial art, French modernism and the artistic traditions of South Asia.[9] Images of the War of Mara are plentiful in Sinhalese Buddhist temples. Depictions of Mara and his hordes in the Kandyan style tend to be flat and linear, a distinctive feature of traditional Sri Lankan painting after the 16th century; the characterization of this incident range from rendering very stylized anthropomorphic demons to theriomorphs. Keyt's early paintings from the 1920s are well-accomplished, post-impressionist[10] images of village life, Buddhist monastic life, landscapes and still lives. In some ways, his early works echo his elders and contemporaries, such as David Paynter and Geoffrey Beling, but even these works stand in tacit rebellion against the academic modes of European easel painting that dominated Ceylon's art culture in the early 20th century.

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[8] Dating Keyt's murals is difficult: Martin Russell said 1938 to 1940 in his 1950 book on Keyt; Sunil Goonasekera says 1940 to 1942 in *George Keyt: Interpretations*, 1991, p. 66, though Goonasekera clarified that Keyt's age significantly affected his memory at the time (Email correspondence, 22 Jan 07). Ian Goonetileke agrees with Russell in an essay introducing *Lionel Wendt: A Centennial Tribute* (Lionel Wendt Memorial Fund: Colombo), 2000, p. 49.

[9] Goonasekera adds that Keyt explicitly denied influence from the Buddhist murals at Ajanta; rather, he was specifically influenced by Indian sculpture, especially from the Gupta period (email correspondence, 22 Jan 07). And yet, the truly voluptuous and tacitly erotic nature of female figures in the Ajanta caves must have at least been noticed by Keyt when he traveled there with his sister in the late 1930s; the affinities with his own representations of women appear to me to capture both the sculptural superabundance and limited, ancient mural evidence found in India.

[10] Goonasekera, 1991, p. 19.

According to Ellen Dissanayake,[11] in the early 1930s, Keyt's cousin Dr. Hugh Modder was a surgeon in practice in London; from there he sent Keyt several of the 1932 and 1933 volumes of *Cahiers d'Art* which included images of cubist works by Picasso, Braque and Leger from the late 1920s and early 1930s. Around the same time the writer, photographer and modern art aficionado Lionel Wendt began publishing newspaper articles criticizing the stifling 19th-century atmosphere of Ceylonese art. By 1938 Wendt began gathering a number of friends, including Paris-trained painter Harry Pieris, to discuss the direction of Sri Lankan modern art. From this began the promulgation and promotion of 20th-century European stylistic innovations coupled with historic and contemporary Lankan culture.

The immediate effect of the European artists on Keyt can be seen in a work from 1933 titled *Still Life with Mangoes* (Fig. 2). Coming upon this painting for the first time at the Sapumal Foundation in 1999, I was struck by its early 'cubist' pedigree. In terms of modernist composition and color harmonies it became apparent that Keyt immediately understood Braque and Picasso's principles for the new century's art. In fact, I presently believe that Keyt was immediately convinced by cubism and *almost* immediately incurious about the technique. If the images in *Cahiers d'Art* were among the earliest work by Picasso and others that he saw and studied, then the rapid execution of "Still Life with Mangoes" in 1933 demonstrates the intuitive nature of cubist possibilities to Keyt's own artistic eye. In other words, analytic cubism immediately made sense to him and by 1939 or 1940 he had mastered its implications for his own stylistic use.

At Gotami Vihara, we can see direct borrowings from what Keyt saw in those volumes of *Cahiers d'Art*. Volume 7 (Jan-Feb 1932) contained articles about the development of cubism featuring Braque and Picasso. Perhaps the beady-eyed image on page 19 (Fig. 3) or the chaotic scene, "Theogonie," on page 21 may have informed the chaos of Mara's legions, but demonic chaos and bug-eyed devils can be found throughout Lankan paintings of the War of Mara. Volume 7 (Mar-May 1932) may have held greater importance for Keyt because here may have been the first reproduction he saw of *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* (Fig. 4). I see no direct borrowing from Picasso's *Les Demoiselles* to Keyt's Gotami cycle, except perhaps some of the flattening of facial features on some of the demons; they bear some relationship to the masked women in *Les Demoiselles*. Nevertheless, Picasso's deformations, and the blurring of anthropoids into theriomorphs cannot but have impressed Keyt, or at least caused him to take notice. Fantastical morphing between the appearances of life forms within the representational world of Buddhism and Hinduism are commonplace. Surely Keyt was aware of this? Rather, the overall

[11] Ellen Dissanayake, "George Keyt: Breaking with Tradition." *Orientations*, Vol. 7, No. 7, July 1976, 32-43.

impact of Picasso's own innovative, visual world – even in reproduced, black and white magazine images – probably communicated powerfully to as fertile a mind as Keyt's. Direct borrowing, however, has been indubitably taken from page 113; the bisected "X" for a brow is undeniable (Fig. 5). And perhaps the image on page 167 (Fig. 6) – which has been often cited as an influence on Keyt (most significantly, Sunil Goonasekera, 1991) – can be seen as resulting in the bodily conflation of the two demons furthest to the viewer's right in the War of Mara panel.

Keyt was enamoured of line, for which Braque and Picasso – and later Matisse – provided formal liberation, but he was more deeply concerned with what could be done with South Asian content in modernism. Keyt's artistic concerns were cultural in terms of vision, subject matter and religion. For Keyt taking on European styles were not so much an acquiescence nor a self-effacing accommodation, rather he sought *to adopt into* Sri Lankan culture what the West, in the recent past, had provided for ***his*** use. That is to say, I believe, his inherent and deepening personal and cultural self-confidence turned the tables on what was generally accepted as the cultural inferiority of South Asia in the face of European advances at the start of the 20th century. Keyt saw South Asian cultures as artistically superior to the West by virtue of South Asia's ancient creative history and by recovered ancient spiritual traditions. What Europe provided was but a tool, a method; his hermeneutic remained South Asian without a doubt in his mind. Accorded elite status by birth into the Dutch-Sinhalese Burgher class and by the penchant for class hierarchy brought by the British, George Keyt fashioned a 20th century modernist art that became, as M. F. Husain said to me, "the only art coming out of Ceylon that we were interested in."[12] In other words, Keyt's employment of the stylistic idioms of Braque and Picasso reappropriated and reinvigorated the ancient styles of South Asian painting found at Ajanta and Sigiriya and the murals in the Tivanka image house at Polonnaruwa, not merely for didactic, political purposes, but for the purpose of commitment to a personal knowledge of his own artistic worldview that now embraced and altered a world creatively larger than he and Sri Lanka had known before.

Comparative Analysis

Within South Asian modernism the work of George Keyt in general and his murals at Gotami Vihara in particular stand in comparable cultural relationship to European modernism as exemplified by Picasso's *Les Demoiselle d'Avignon*. While not as

[12] Meeting M.F. Husain briefly in Mumbai in Nov 2000, I asked him about Keyt and his opinion of Keyt's work. He was ebullient in his recollections of Keyt and frankly singled him out in terms of his importance as an influence on himself and his Bengali School colleagues.

iconic[13] as *Les Demoiselles*, nor as stylistically innovative as Picasso's work, Keyt's Gotami murals are regarded in Sri Lankan art history and in South Asia, as sea-changing. Gotami Vihara is clearly Keyt's *magnum opus*. When one considers that – as a religious public work of art – these murals were the first exposure for many to modernist art its considerable impact can be appreciated. How do these two works compare, by way of preliminary speculation?

The scholarly history of *Les Demoiselles* is broad and contentious. Early assessments focused on the stylistic development of cubism as Picasso's answer to the problem of two-dimensionality (Khanweiler, 1920; Barr, 1938). In 1958, John Golding extended the developmental consideration of the painting to include, not only, El Greco, Cézanne and African Traditional art, but also the importance of primal Iberian sculpture.[14]

By this point in the painting's scholarly history, lines had been drawn between those who saw the work as early 'cubism' or the 'birth of cubism' and those who did not. What is of more significance for comparison with Gotami Vihara is the development of an analysis dependent upon the spectator. In general, the debate over reception theory vis-à-vis *Les Demoiselles* is moot when European art stands in comparison to South Asian art; in India and Sri Lanka, art is all about the reception of the viewer be it traditional religious art or art intended for socio-political consumption.

From Leo Steinberg's 1972 article[15] in *Art News* to Jean Clair (1988)[16], Carol Duncan (1989), David Lomas (1993)[17], and Anna Chave (1994), most have dealt with the position of the viewer, even when that viewer is the artist him/herself, to wit: the modern penchant for distortion; men creating "ambiguous self-displaying women;"[18] rendering deformity out of 19th century physical anthropology; and "the critical lens of gender and race."[19]

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[13] Or maybe not yet as globally iconic. It remains possible that as greater knowledge of 20th century Sri Lankan art disperses, broader audiences will come to see how important and radical these murals are as a public work in their place and time.

[14] John Golding, "The *Demoiselles d'Avignon*." *The Burlington Magazine*, Vol. 100, No. 662, May 1958, pp. 155-63.

[15] Steinberg, Leo. "The Philosophical Brothel." *Art News*, Vol. 71, NOs. 5&6, Sept & Oct 1972, pp. 22-9 & 38-47.

[16] Jean Clair, "The Eye of Disorder and Desire." *Art International*, No. 3, Summer 1988, pp. 17-19.

[17] David Lomas,. "A Canon of Deformity: *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* and physical anthropology." *Art History*, Vol. 16, No. 3, September 1993, pp. 424-46.

[18] Carol Duncan, "The MoMA's Hot Mamas." *Art Journal*, Vol.48, Summer 1989, p. 175.

[19] Anna C. Chave, "New Encounters with *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*: Gender, Race, and the Origins of Cubism." *Art Bulletin*, Vol 76, No. 4, December 1994, p. 598.

Jean Clair sets up an intriguing tension between a Proustian worldview and a Freudian worldview – as two 'humanist pessimisms' – and the mechanistic optimism of the Futurists. While the Futurists embraced "speed and the cult of energy,"[20] Freud and Proust differentially "held that love was what doomed man to repeat the gestures of his own depravity."[21] As answers to the emerging problem of modernism, (f)or Freud, it was through analysis that man could return to his prelapsarian beginnings; for Proust, through the incessant recollection of his own life. In either case, the old *ars moriendi* gave way to an *ars nascendi*, and this was to become the basis of modern aesthetics.

In any event, this is a possible interpretation of the period, torn between two extremes: the blind euphoria of Futurism and its religion of progress (in its socialist and fascist variants) and the pessimistic but redemptive vision of a few individuals who persisted in struggling against "mass and power."[22]

Clair raises Proust's question of "why doesn't the movement of our body through space and time bring about a change in the perception of identity?"[23] Clair cites Kandinsky's epiphanic experience of not recognizing one of his own paintings standing on its side such that it changed the development of his art; he cites Mondrian's symbology of verticals and horizontals, Duchamp's urinal, Dan Flavin's neons, Joseph Beuys' 'piece of fat.' All of this indicating, for Clair, that modernism is meaningless without being seen in particularized contexts, angles, or light.[24] For Picasso, in relation to *Les Demoiselles*, Clair says, so to speak, the eyes have it. He accepts Picasso at his word (albeit through Malraux) that Picasso felt like primitive man, defenseless in the face of a hostile universe,[25] or a young child lost in the dark, too scared to listen to reason. Painting was not a matter of formal or aesthetic problems but rather a riposte to a personal threat. ... Picasso turned to conjuring and

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[20] Clair, 1988, p. 7.

[21] Ibid. Indeed, if we re-interpret "love" as a function of *tanha* (desire) in the Buddhist sense, then "repeating gestures" of "depravity" are, unbeknownst to the Western authors perhaps, confirmation of the first two Noble Truths.

[22] Ibid.

[23] Ibid.

[24] Ibid, 9. And as such, my argument regarding Keyt on page 5.

[25] The simple misunderstanding of Picasso, Malraux, and ultimately Clair himself by not critiquing this statement itself, needs addressing though not at length in this essay. Suffice it to say that the fully developed religious cosmologies of "primitive man" are precisely what gave them power to engage the world, not as an enemy, but as cohabitators. An essentializing primitivism = childishness prevails in Clair's reasoning even though he generally recognizes Picasso, albeit somewhat pathologically, gaining power from contact with the primal; Picasso was very clearly a modern man defenseless in the face of a changing human world.

"exorcism" as part of a ritual in which primitive fetishes were used to confront a mortal danger which neither traditional art nor religion nor even art conceived as religion could ward off.[26]

These sorts of problems are absent from Keyt's Gotami Vihara. Keyt's resolution of his 'modern(ist) conundrum' was much less exhibitionist than it appears 1907 was for Picasso.[27] This is not to belittle the sheer will of Picasso to successfully resolve his personal, social and creative problem, but for Keyt in the 1930s his regional cultures – his South Asian context – provided the answers to the problem of identity Europeans had brought to South Asia four and a half centuries before. Keyt was born into an alien religion (English Christianity) and traversed a spiritually-searching pathway many Americans would find unremarkable. The difference for Keyt was that he did not need to seek another imported tradition through which to resolve his emotional or artistic crisis. Once he had rejected Christianity in his late teens, Buddhism provided an alternative in situ that ultimately led to his discovery of what best suited his conscience: mythoi-poetic Hinduism, especially the Krishna tradition.[28]

Picasso, Braque, even Leger and later Matisse, are clearly owed a stylistic debt by Keyt, but the fact of Gotami Vihara incurs no philosophical or religious debt to any tradition beyond those born in South Asia. Additionally, the psychic tearing apart of one's social culture had been a long-standing experience of colonized peoples, therefore the revival of Buddhism in late 19th-early 20th century Ceylon provided a balm comparably unavailable to Picasso and his contemporaries in their modern "colonizer" contexts. For Keyt, I suspect, there was a natural healing of what tore at him between his colonial-Christian upbringing and his anti-colonial embrace of Buddhism through a developing type-of Krishna "bhakti," at least until his crisis of the 1930s, after which his spiritual-artistic desires were philosophically resolved.

The violence of *Les Demoiselles* is hardly comparable to the violence of *The War of Mara* panel. It is true that Picasso's women visually do violence as well as have violence done to them, not only stylistically, but perhaps by the viewer's own

[26] By comparison see Clair, 1988, 12.

[27] This is difficult to categorize, because I believe Keyt was enduring a very personal transition during the period he painted the Gotami murals (see mention by Goonasekera, 1991, p. 64); unlike Picasso's "exhibitionism", Keyt's crisis resolution had to be sublimated with propriety even as he sought to breakdown social conventions through his artistic representations. In both cases, the power of their representations, naturally enough for two creative geniuses, embody those resolutions of life-changing realities.

[28] Goonetileke, *George Keyt: A Life in Art*, pp. 2-3.; Goonasekera, 1991, pp. 50-54. Goonasekera's explanation of *rasa* and Keyt also makes this point (1991, pp. 44-48).

gaze; be it objectifying or politically correct, 'typically' male or 'righteously' female, both at least play right into Picasso's searching hand. The Daughters of Mara in Keyt's mural are in fact ***supposed*** to be objectified, leered at, and lusted after. They are illusion; manifestations of carnal pleasure intended to lure the sage to destruction.[29] Were the Bodhisattva a female it can be reasonably and consistently concluded that Mara would have manifested sons rather than daughters.[30] The point is that Keyt's rendering of the violence of the Mara panel is rendered out of artistic tradition in order to be compliant with religious tradition, rather than, in Picasso's example, borrowing from African tradition in order to resolve his own inner violence. If Keyt is working out some inner violence of his own in this mural it is indeed *worked out*, and no longer holds power over him.

Philosophical Analysis

Turning to a more philosophical analysis of the War of Mara panel, it occurred to me, some time ago, that George Keyt was on to something fascinating in this portion of the Gotami murals. As I am not a linguist, I am relying on the Pali Text Society's digital Pali-English dictionary to help my theorizing about Keyt's murals in terms of Buddhist philosophy.

Keyt learned Pali from the monks at Malwatte Vihara in Kandy in the late-1910s and 1920s and is alleged to also have known Sanskrit; I have heard much contradictory information about the latter from numerous people who knew him. Nevertheless, he was learned about Buddhist philosophy, not merely story and legend, so I believe he had an insight – whether tacit or focal – about this particular moment in the story of Siddhartha Gotama in terms of the nature of perceived reality as well as an insight into how cubism could enhance depicting this Buddhist worldview.

If the term *khandha* is understood in layers, if Keyt understood these layers, as I believe he did, then we can apply its meanings to Keyt's art-making in the Mara panel. The demons are represented as having bulk, a massiveness of gross substance.[31] In popular American parlance, we would say they are "pumped-up;"

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[29] Numerous Sri Lankan temple paintings depict jataka tales wherein hapless men are devoured by "she-demons" who took on the guise of alluring young women only to later reveal their true, monstrous form. According to Goonasekera, Sarlis Master produced a series of very popular lithographs, including one about Mara's daughters, that were widely circulated around the island (correspondence, 22 Jan 2007).

[30] Assuming a heterosexual frame of reference, of course.

[31] http://dsal.uchicago.edu/cgi-bin/philologic/getobject.pl?c.1:1:1103.pali, p. 233. Hereafter, PTS, and page number.

they are muscular, with broad shoulders, narrow waists and substantial thighs. The Buddha himself is also broad, but owing to his iconic, frontal form, he does not appear "gross," in either American English sense of the word, rather, he is light and refined.

If we look at the dark-coloured demon nearest the Buddha's own left shoulder we see that Keyt has rendered his back facing us as he glares at the Buddha. Both arms are raised, one wielding a scimitar. Keyt has painted this demon's back muscles pronounced, yet distorted; one sense of *khandha* applied to an elephant is not entirely applicable, but a related sense of "to whom has grown bulk = a large back"[32] may apply. Only one other demon is showing his back, to the far left of the panel, but the back-facing demon nearer the Buddha has a peculiar representation in distortion that is reminiscent of Leger's tubular and angular limbs in many of his paintings; Keyt's rendering is "well endowed with bulk"[33] that feels like the crude meanings of *khandha*. As we look at the demons, shoulders abound, heavy with the weight of rage and hatred, which will not be lifted from them; they are like another meaning, tree trunks, but with no sweetness at their cores.[34]

Can we also see them as "denoting bulk" in terms of a "great mass of fire" or more so, a "mass of water," an ocean, which is how Mara's army – for example even in Bertolucci's film "Little Buddha" – is sometimes portrayed? This army of Mara's demons sent to assault the meditating Bodhisattva rolls toward him like waves, like a torrential flood. Keyt's representation does provide a torrential sensation coming from both sides like an enveloping wave.

Yet, I believe Keyt was thinking more deeply in terms of *khandha*. The Pali Text Society's dictionary goes on to explain applied meanings in relation to *dukkha*, as factors of existence, relation to attachment and craving, physical elements and elements of sense perception – all ways in which I believe Keyt succeeded in his representation. In terms of the annihilation of *khandha* and perhaps their origin, here he may have wavered given his own changing perceptions of religion at the time he worked on Gotami Vihara.

Khandha as "all that is comprised under (it)"[35] forms suffering, or "all that is comprised as *dukkha*, all that goes to make up or forms the substance, the idea of ill."[36] When we look at the faces of the demons, we can see "the three ingredients or integrations of greed, suffering and bewilderment."[37] Rounded, bug-eyes project a

[32] Ibid.
[33] Ibid.
[34] PTS, p. 234.
[35] Ibid.
[36] PTS, p. 234.
[37] Ibid.

rage that is indeed greedy while, perhaps, at the same time these eyes are bewildered by the steady tranquility of the meditating Bodhisattva/Buddha. One demon on the far right, holding a bow and reaching for an arrow, has eyes that are flat on the bottom dividing the eye balls in half as though sizing up his intended target. A bearded demon directly behind him has one shoulder hunched up and a hand touching the archer demon, perhaps even pushing the archer out of the way so he can get at the Buddha first. This pushy demon has eyelids unlike most. He, the demon with the viper emanating from his mouth below the Buddha and the demon in profile furthest to the viewer's right, have eyelids and almond-shaped eyes; the demon to the viewer's left holding a boulder to throw at the Buddha also has almond-shaped eyes. This eye shape, coupled with furrowed brows, lends itself to seeing something more akin to suffering than rage per se; especially the final demon in profile to the viewer's far right does indeed look pained. This demonic integration of greed, suffering and bewilderment, as the PTS dictionary puts it, literally becomes "the big bulk or mass of greed,"[38] greed and envy, perhaps, for the soon-to-be Buddha's triumph over them.

In an absolute sense, the entire Mara panel presents a lesson on the "elements or substrata of sensory existence, sensorial aggregates, which condition the appearance of life in any form."[39] These cubist demons and voluptuous maidens are "evanescent, fraught with ills and leading to rebirth."[40] This is where Keyt may have had his greatest insights, both focally and tacitly, as a Buddhist lesson and a personal predilection.

The demons reflect the compositional insight cubism provided him: the disintegration of demonic faces into distorted, flattened features, morphing one into another being, as well as disintegration of features into purely abstract lines and curves. Indeed, as a student noted in class one semester, the demons become progressively more cubist as the panel is read from left to right.[41] Cubism, I believe, provided Keyt what was to him, an obvious didactic tool: *khandha* as aggregation is not only illusion, *mara*, insubstantiality, it is fractured reality. What better way to visually represent a Buddhist truth than to progressively fracture reality via artistic representation. The possibilities for seeing this representation as truly modern not only in terms of other early 20th century philosophies, but even in terms of physical science are equally fascinating and bear more research into Keyt's biography. Reception of the Gotami murals was excited and controversial when first unveiled, not merely because they bucked every artistic convention in Sri Lanka at the time,

[38] Ibid.
[39] Ibid.
[40] Ibid.
[41] Thanks to Josh Giro, Elmira College, Elmira, New York, Fall 2005.

but because they were also packed with modernism, especially the War of Mara panel. They tacitly pointed a way to a new Buddhist iconography.[42]

Nevertheless, I intuit a problem in the overall devotional-didactic success of Keyt's style. Turning again to the meanings of *khandha*, Mara's daughters, in themselves, succeed, but in juxtaposition to the Buddha, they conflate attachment and craving with the annihilation of the same.

By the late-1930s George Keyt had thoroughly immersed himself in Hindu epic poetry, especially the erotic tales of Krishna. The psychology of Keyt's religious worldview may help explain this conflation of spiritual achievement with sexual allure. Indeed, I asked one of Keyt's good friends and confidants in 2000 if Keyt thought of himself as Krishna in some sense; his friend quietly affirmed that notion. Like Picasso; like, for example, the theologian Paul Tillich; women found Keyt's personality very compelling and his presence very attractive, or so this same friend intimated. Later in life Keyt saw himself as a 'Krishna-lover-artist,' a "spiritual voluptuary"[43] as Neville Weeraratne puts it. This began as he started orienting his work in the late 1930s onward toward Hindu epic- and erotic-poetry as sources and *raison d'être.*

As for the rendering of the daughters of Mara themselves, they are indeed voluptuous and languorous. They float on diaphanous clouds; their long black hair is adorned with gold tiaras while heavy golden earrings make their earlobes pendulous. Between their rounded, full and inviting bare breasts hang golden necklaces while gold arm braces and bangles indicate the luxury of the material, hedonistic life Śakyamuni gave up and to which they seek to entice him to return. As in the traditions of the female form in South Asian art history, their exposed bellies are not flat and muscular, rather they are gently protruding signaling the well-fed life of the upper classes. The daughter of Mara furthest from the Buddha also leans her head on a hand propped up by her elbow on a raised knee. This posture and Keyt's rendering of the loose, low-hanging loin skirt directs the viewer's eyes between her legs suggesting the most basic weapon of Mara to thwart the Bodhisattva from his spiritual goal. It is a suggestive device with which Keyt was well-accustomed and accomplished.

Finally, a comparison of the face of the Buddha and the faces of Mara's daughters is in order. (Fig. 7) *Samadhi pilima* usually render the mouth of the

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[42] Goonasekera noted that the influence of what Gananath Obeysekere and Kitsiri Malalgoda have described as "Protestant Buddhism" was gaining ground at this same time among those in the western-educated, Sinhalese Buddhist intelligentsia. (correspondence, 22 Jan 2007).

[43] Neville Weeraratne, *'43 Group: A Chronicle of Fifty Years in the Art of Sri Lanka.* (Melbourne: Lanatana Publishing), 1993, 101. On page 106, Weeraratne writes that the term was a self-appellation of Keyt's, as recalled by Geoffrey Beling in a TV documentary.

Buddha slightly more elongated horizontally, lips touching, sometimes with a hint of a beatific 'smile.' Richard Gombrich explains the form and context of this type of Buddha image thus:

> The actual moment when Gotama became the Buddha is not represented as an episode in his life, though it could be said to constitute the *sat satiya* [the events of the seven weeks after the Buddha's enlightenment]. On the other hand this moment furnishes the paradigm for the *samadhi pilimaya* ('meditation image'), in which the Buddha is shown in a symmetrical pose, legs crossed, hands folded in lap, eyes closed or half-closed. Successful *samadhi pilima* convey great tranquility. This seated *samadhi* posture is the commonest one for a Buddha statue [in Sri Lankan art], the one opposite the entrance to the shrine, which contains or is supposed to contain the relic. The Buddha was perhaps first shown seated, and the famous stone seated Buddha on the Outer Circular Road in Anuradhapura, which may be the most ancient Buddha image to survive, is in the *samadhi* position. A *samadhi pilimaya* is not normally thought of as representing the Buddha at a particular moment in his life, but it seems to me possible that it originated as a representation of the Enlightenment. . . .
>
> A statue rather than a painting usually represents the enlightened Buddha. This reminds us both that it is his Enlightenment which made the Buddha worshipful (in contrast to Jesus, who is sacred from birth), and that the Buddha image, at least as an object of devotion, originated as a relic container, a function which a two dimensional painting cannot fulfill.[44]

Keyt's flatly-rendered Buddha sits on an iconographically traditional lotus throne in the posture of *samadhi* meditation, but his Buddha here seems somewhat less tranquil by employing the same stylistic device as used for the tempting, illusory daughters of Mara; rather than distinguishing the karmic freedom of the Buddha in a state of enlightenment, this Buddha image can appear nearly as entrammelled as the voluptuous maidens sent to tempt him away from attaining *nibbana*. In other words, the face of the Enlightened One and the faces of the daughters of Illusion are the same. But, I suspect, for Keyt himself his representation of the daughters of Mara and their similarity with the face of the Bodhisattva/Buddha is another aspect of *khandha*, perhaps a very personal one, "in

[44] Richard Gombrich, *Precept and Practice: Traditional Buddhism in the Rural Highlands of Ceylon,* (Oxford University Press: London), 1971, pp. 94-5. [Brackets mine.] We can add, for more comparison, the samadhi Buddha at Polonnaruva.

short, the five *khandhan* are associated with pain,"[45] the kind of pain reflected in the poem at the beginning of this essay.

Keyt sees that the desired image of sexual allure ultimately subsists on absence, emptiness, but he is not satisfied now with the no-self, no-god of Buddhist philosophy; now, after his first trip to India in 1939 to see Ajanta, Ellora and the voluptuous rapture of Hindu representation; after divorce and the commencement of Krishna-esque romance; after the break-through of cubism and the affirmation of artistic tradition; George Keyt finds that the desired image "continues to subsist in me." The hero of this devotional epic – indeed all the human images and heroes on the walls of the image house – is himself.[46] From this point on the hero will become the artist-Krishna, incarnate and sexual, but at Gotami Vihara, the zenith of one style and the embarkation onto another, he presents a masquerade, an assumption of himself, moods, sources, faces, voices all not visible, all ultimately empty. Gotami Vihara, I believe, is the sublimated, visual record of not only the resolution of his personal crisis during the 1930s, but also his declaration of where and how he will go as an artist henceforth, despite the necessity of Buddhist restraint inherent in the murals' subject matter. He will proceed with neither post-impressionism nor even Picasso's cubism per se, but his own synthesis of religio-erotic identity. He can even teach visually in an image house and do so supremely well-rendered and philosophically well-informed, but he has chosen everlasting happiness in retreat from the fear of revelation; he has chosen, for himself, *atman*, instead of *anatman*.

R. BYRON BREESE

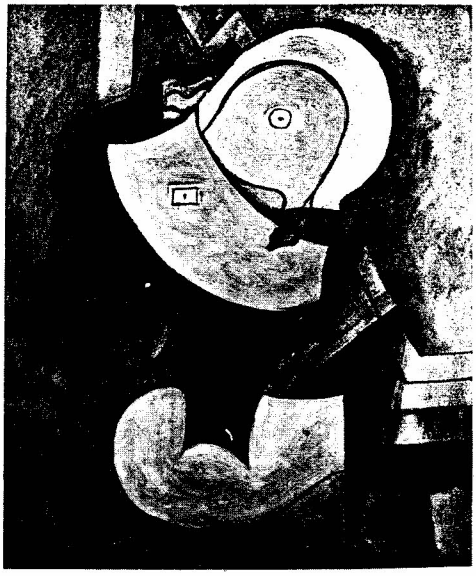
[45] PTS, p. 234.

[46] A clear visual example of Keyt's psycho-spiritual self-perception is well exemplified by a work from the 1970s titled "Divine Union" in which he obviously employs a Krishna-lover theme. The painting can be seen at http://www.shapiroauctioneers.com.au/modhighlights/mh_linkpages/aust_intl_art_link/intl_art/321_018.html. Similar images of the artist as Krishna/artist-lover occur throughout his work from the 1940s on.

IMAGES

Fig. 1: George Keyt (1901-1993), The War of Mara panel, oil on plaster wall, approximately 6 ft. tall by 18 ft. long. Completed circa 1938-1942, Gotami Vihara, Borella, Colombo, Sri Lanka. Composite image by the author.

Fig. 2: George Keyt, Still Life with Mangoes, 1933, o/c, 25 x 15 inches Sapumal Foundation, Colombo. Permission of L.S.D. Peiris



GEORGES BRAQUE, PEINTURE, 1931.

Fig. 3: G. Braque, Untitled, 1931, Cahier d'Art, Vol 7, p. 19

1906-1907. Les Demoiselles d'Avignon, tableau capital de l'œuvre de Picasso.

Cher Monsieur,

Que ces lignes vous remplacent le mot que vous me demandez pour les Cahiers d'Art *à l'occasion de la prochaine exposition Picasso dont vous me parlez.*

Ne me sentant pas assez compétent pour me prononcer sur l'œuvre magnifique de mon grand contemporain, je préfère me borner à vous dire simplement mon immense admiration pour ce très grand peintre.

Si j'admire quelque chose, je veux l'admirer intégralement et c'est bien le cas pour Picasso : je l'admire autant pour le présent et pour le passé que pour le futur. Alors je ne critique pas. Critiquer est le métier des critiques : or on ne sait que trop bien à quoi cela les mène, ce n'est pas un secret : cela les mène à embrouiller les choses, à supplanter l'enthousiasme par l'habitude et à retarder ainsi la compréhension des contemporains. Convenons que c'est un métier de mécháants. Souvenez-vous seulement de ce que Picasso répondit, il y a bien longtemps, au Serpent *de La Fontaine :*

. . . . . .

Pauvre ignorant ! eh ! que prétends-tu faire
Tu te prends à plus dur que toi,
Petit serpent à tête folle :
Plutôt que d'emporter de moi
Seulement le quart d'une obole,
Tu te romprois toutes les dents,
Je ne crains que celles du Temps.

Ceci s'adresse à vous, esprits du dernier or
Qui, n'étant bons à rien, cherchez surtou
moi
Vous vous tourmentez vainement.
Croyez-vous que vos dents impriment l
outr
Sur tant de beaux ouvrages ?
Ils sont pour vous d'airain, d'acier, de diam

Espérant que ces lignes trouveront dans Cahiers *un écho sympathique, car je sais mirution que, comme moi, vous portez à Pic je vous prie de trouver ici, cher Monsieur, pression de mes sentiments les meilleurs.*

IGOR STRAWINSK

Fig. 4: Picasso, Les Demoiselles d'Avignon, in Cahiers d'Art, Vol 7, Mar-May 1933

Figure 5

George Keyt,
Detail from "War of Mara" panel
Gotami Vihara, Borella

Picasso, untitled painting dated 1932 in Cahiers d'Art, Vol 7,
Mar-May 1932, p 114

Figure 6

George Keyt,
Detail from "War of Mara" panel
Gotami Vihara, Borella

1927. COLL. MISS WIBORG. NEW YORK.

« de plus qu'un artiste, il est cette chose étrange, cette chose monstrueuse et rare : un homme. 'homme comme une bombe au milieu de l'art et l'art sauta en l'air en mille morceaux. Ces mille mor-

Picasso, painting identified as "1927, Coll. Miss Wiborg,
New York" in Vol 7, Cahiers d'Art, p. 167

Figure 7

George Keyt,
Details from "War of Mara" panel
Gotami Vihara, Borella