

# Buddha to Krishna

Life and Times of George Keyt

Yashodhara Dalmia



A Routledge India Original

## BUDDHA TO KRISHNA

This book traces the emergence of modernism in art in South Asia by exploring the work of the iconic artist George Keyt. Closely interwoven with his life, Keyt's art reflects the struggle and triumph of an artist with very little support or infrastructure. He painted as he lived: full of colour, turmoil and intensity. In this compelling account, the author examines the eventful course of Keyt's journey, bringing to light unknown and startling facts: the personal ferment that Keyt went through because of his tumultuous relationships with women; his close involvement with social events in India and Sri Lanka on the threshold of Independence; and his somewhat angular engagement with artists of the '43 Group.

A collector's delight, including colour plates and black and white photographs, reminiscences and intimate correspondences, this book reveals the portrait of an artist among the most charismatic figures of our time.

This book will be of interest to scholars and researchers of art and art history, modern South Asian studies, sociology, cultural studies as well as art aficionados.

**Yashodhara Dalmia** is an art historian and independent curator based in New Delhi, India. She has written several books including *Amrita Sher-Gil: A Life* (2006) that have received widespread international acclaim. She is also the author of *The Making of Modern Indian Art: The Progressives* (2001) and *Journeys: Four Generations of Indian Artists* (2011). She has curated many art shows, with the most recent being the centenary show 'Amrita Sher-Gil: The Passionate Quest' at the National Gallery of Modern Art in New Delhi, Mumbai and Bengaluru in 2014.



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*Yashodhara Dalmia*

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## PREFACE

One of the most enigmatic of artists, George Keyt's paintings intrigue and tantalize. His bold, sensuous forms delineated with definitive strokes both reveal and conceal, are decorative yet edgy, modern but also ancient. A glimpse of these makes one wonder about the man behind these strangely captivating works. Yet to understand his persona is to take a path which criss-crosses other trajectories that are equally complex.

Mapping this uncharted terrain took me to Sri Lanka, the land of his birth, where it became evident that George Keyt was a charismatic figure and that his name aroused more than reverence. Covering a lifespan of 92 years (1901–93) Keyt, a Burgher, of Eurasian descent, is of importance not only because his work was to pioneer modernism in art in the subcontinent but also because he was the first modern Buddhist artist from South Asia and hence aroused interest in the international sphere. Keyt's painting of Buddha's life in the Gotami Vihara in Colombo is a lucid narration of a sensual, open-ended Buddhism that he suggested needs to be inscribed into the creation of an independent country. For this Keyt archived a gamut of artistic practices from the indigenous Sigiriya murals to the Cubist dissection of forms.

The artist's explorations in Hindu mythology and Indian literature led George to have close links with the cultural life of India, where he lived for long and short periods from 1939 right up to the late 1970s. To the Sri Lankan Buddhist sources were added the imagery of Hindu myth and legend as key influences that led to an art of great sensuality and lyricism. In their bold, robust forms and brilliant colours Keyt was to fuse the East and West and, not unlike Amrita Sher-Gil the Indo-Hungarian artist, was to influence successive generations of artists. In his close association with Indian painters like Francis Souza and M.F. Husain he was also to spearhead an emphatic modernism in the subcontinent.

The drama of Keyt's life is heightened by the fact that his ancestor, interestingly enough, was a British officer posted in Hyderabad where his liaison with a courtesan from the Nizam's court led to his expulsion from India and his basing himself in Ceylon. George's own tempestuous life, which infused his art, led him to renounce his wife and live with the maid who looked after his children and move to her village in Sri Lanka. Subsequently he was besotted by an Indian lady from Bombay and was to marry her and spend the last three decades of his life with her. Keyt's life acquires another dimension because of his close friendship with an Englishman, Martin Russell, who went back to London and was to interact with him over a prolific correspondence until the end. Russell (nephew of the famed Bertrand Russell) also popularized his work abroad and placed him firmly in the international arena.

The life and works of George Keyt, apart from their condensed energy that pioneered modernism, also reflect the social history of the period with all its dramatic upheavals. In his delineation of figures and their specific physiognomies and period costumes, in the archiving of mythology to reflect the struggle against colonialism and in the reflection of life lived by ordinary folk in colonial and post-colonial situations we have a telescopic view of events as they spanned the 20th century.

The Sri Lankan landscape embedded with a palimpsest of cultures provided the rich matrix for George's paintings. It was to lead him to India where the country was reverberating with all the energy of a newly found independence and George was to draw from it for many of his works. His international fame followed where Keyt's name resounded modernity in the subcontinent in a manner that was distinctive and specific. It was no wonder that the poet Pablo Neruda, writing of his works, mentions that 'These figures take on a strange expressive grandeur, and radiate an aura of intensely profound feeling.'

In tracking Keyt's journey I made my way to Melbourne and to a memorable visit to the oldest surviving member of the '43 Group, Richard Gabriel, in November 2011. He was in his late eighties, but his mind was vividly alive with narratives of the Group and his engagement with it. Richard took me around his studio in the outskirts of Melbourne, which was like a gallery of paintings, each one a Pandora's box of events. A sumptuous Sri Lankan meal followed, making it into a morning which one could not forget easily. I was fortunate to have met him just then for he passed away five years later, leaving behind everlasting memories.

In my visits to London and to Dorset to the home of his closest friend, Martin Russell, I was to find another rich source of correspondence and

memorabilia. The paintings and drawings of Keyt lined the Dorset cottage, making his home a virtual museum of George Keyt. It was equally memorable to meet Martin's wife Anne who was on a wheelchair and in considerable ill health but was a gracious hostess and took pains to furnish us with essential details of the friendship. Her passing away in 2013 left very few people, barring his own family, who were close to George and remembered his days with such clarity.

In turning it over I think what drew me to work on this biography was to archive the embedded layers that brought about modern art in the sub-continent. The pioneering works of Keyt left behind a legacy that others were to follow. In unravelling some of the processes that went behind this journey I hope to also have uncovered his isolation, desolation and struggle to survive at a time of considerable personal ferment, some of it of his own making, which led him to the edge of an abyss. This was also a period when there was little infrastructure and almost no market for art and for his work. At that time, he had little money and until the end would be in need of it for ordinary day-to-day things. The contrast with his market today almost surpasses comparison. Yet he had to struggle without much support or recognition and with very little means to leave behind works that have considerable depth and grandeur.

It seems appropriate to end with a few lines from the poem on Keyt written by the poet Keki N. Daruwalla entitled *The World of George Keyt*:

*For everything palpitates here.  
The sandal coloured limbs pulse with ichor.  
The green is brighter than a parrot's plumage  
and takes off. The yellows are a quest for light.  
The palette vibrates with the warmth of flesh tones  
and overwhelms the senses  
like the bursting of a musk-pod.*

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This work has been made possible with the help and support of the Martin Russell family and my heartfelt thanks to all of them. If Martin Russell was George Keyt's closest friend and supporter, it is his family whose open-hearted cooperation enabled me to write this biography on him. In particular, I would like to thank his son Julian Russell who opened his father's archives in London and allowed me to spend hours sifting through the papers and also generously took time off from his busy schedule to speak about the complex phenomena of this iconic artist. Julian also facilitated a visit to his mother, the late Anne Russell, in her picturesque cottage in Dorset. In a state of considerable ill health, she managed to sit up and speak to us for she pointed out that George was Martin's closest friend. The visit to the cottage where Martin had spent his last years also proved to be very helpful in the material it yielded for the book. I would also like to thank Julian's sisters, Laura and Emily, for their support.

George Keyt's own family has dispersed, but it was very useful to interact with his daughters Diana and Flavia for their many insights into George and their vivid memories of their growing-up years. Lionel Peiris and Damayanti Peiris, George's nephew and niece, are to be thanked for the many hours spent in divulging information about the family. I would also like to thank the solicitor Michael Sproule, George's nephew, for the useful information provided by him. I am grateful to Cedric de Silva, Chairman, George Keyt Foundation, and his wife Sita de Silva for their support. Heartfelt thanks to Deborah Philip for her meticulous research for this project. I am grateful to L.S.D. Peiris, Secretary of the Sapumal Foundation, for his help in introducing me to the Sri Lankan art scene and in particular the *'43 Group*.

It was very moving to meet the well-known film-maker Lester James Peries and his wife Sumitra at their ambient home in Colombo. Though he was over 90, his vivid recall of the formation of the '43 Group, where he was present, and its subsequent development as well as his memories of George proved immensely useful. The scholar Neloufer de Mel is to be thanked for her writings and for her generous help. I am also grateful to Kumari Jayawardena, the cultural theorist and writer, for her insights and her writings. Arjun Daraniyagala, Justin Daraniyagala's nephew, is to be thanked for his help in understanding his illustrious uncle.

The oldest surviving member of the '43 Group, the late Richard Gabriel, met us in his studio at Melbourne and is to be thanked posthumously for the immense trouble he took, despite his age and illness, to provide information and knowledge about the Group. I am grateful to Richard's daughter and her husband, Mr and Mrs Hiran Leidan, for facilitating this valuable meeting. Heartfelt thanks to the art historian and artist Neville Weeraratne, the author of the authoritative book, *'43 Group*, and his charming wife Sybil Keyt for the time spent at their home in Melbourne and for the information provided by them. I would also like to thank Esmeralda Claessen and her husband for the hours spent at their home, also George Claessen's studio in London, for their help. I owe a debt of gratitude to Nathan Sivasambu, the founder and the initiator of the *Ceylon Bloomsbury Group* and the *'43 Group Colombo London*, for his knowledgeable support and information provided on the Group.

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This work is dedicated to my mother Saraswati Dalmia for her profound cultural and literary influence on me and the family. A writer and scholar herself, she sowed the first seed and lovingly nurtured its growth. My sister Vasudha Dalmia is to be thanked for her scholarly inputs and her warm encouragement for this project.



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## A FINE START

His life stretched across the entire 20th century and was witness to its triumphs and upheavals. Added to that was the drama of his own journey which was as intense as his creations in paint and poetry. George Keyt, the painter known for his voluptuous, sensual, spiritual and modern works, was born on April 1901 in Kandy, the Sri Lankan hill station, with its resplendent scenery and long tradition of history and culture. Kandy is Sri Lanka's second city after Colombo and was preferred by colonials because of its cooler climate and scenic beauty with its lakeland setting and hilly surroundings. Its many old colonial buildings and the tea plantations in its vicinity testify to their emphatic presence in the last century. Kandy's biggest draw, however, is the Temple of the Sacred Tooth, where a tooth relic of Lord Buddha is kept in a golden casket and a sumptuous annual festival takes place to celebrate this. Ironically enough it was the only town that did not have colonial rulers until it finally succumbed to the British in 1815.

The colonial encounter with Sri Lanka spanned four centuries, with the first ship of the Portuguese arriving around 1505 and the domination of the Western powers lasting till 1948. The Portuguese rule (1505/6–1658) was followed by the Dutch occupation (1658–1796) until the British (1796–1948) finally overpowered them and ruled till Independence in 1948. There have been few Asian countries that have had such a lengthy imperial rule under colonial powers as Sri Lanka, and it had a profound impact on its development and culture. But even when the British had occupied most of the country, the proud Kandyan chiefs did not succumb and it was only in 1815 and partly due to internal intrigue that the city gave in. The kingdom's remote location came to an end as roads were built from all cardinal directions into the city and plantations inhabited the surrounding landscape as the government set up its alternative headquarters here. The long and rich tradition of music, dance, drama and

ritual however took its own course, as did the famous Buddhist temple that housed the Buddha's tooth relic. For most in Sri Lanka, traditional Kandyan culture is seen as representative of the country's indigenous wealth. The first king of Kandy, Vimaladharmasuriya, who came to power in the early days or in the 'year two thousand, one hundred and thirty-five from the nirvana of the Master' and had Buddha's tooth relic fetched from the province of Sagaragamu and had a relic temple erected in the neighbourhood of the royal palace, may not have been pleased with the turn of history but would have been satisfied with the continuation of its culture.<sup>1</sup>

In many ways Kandy had not changed much since the days when the British writer Leonard Woolf had been posted there in 1907. In his time it had a population of 30,000 and was full of 'white men'. As he mentioned in his autobiographical account *Growing* about the time he spent in Sri Lanka,

I'm glad that I spent a year of my life at twenty-seven in Kandy, for life there was unlike any that I had ever known elsewhere, but I did not like it in the way that I liked Jaffna or Hambantota, and it did a good deal to complete my education as an anti-imperialist.

His main observation about Kandy was that Europeanizing of the non-Europeans was a mistake. Leonard wrote to Lytton Strachey, his close friend from his Trinity College days in Cambridge:

The Kandyan grovels on the ground and touches your boots, but has retained his independence and his manners . . . I certainly, all through my life in Ceylon enjoyed my position and the flattery of being the great man and the father of the people. That was why, as time went on, I became more and more ambivalent, politically schizophrenic, an anti-imperialist who enjoyed the flesh pots of imperialism, loved the subject peoples and their way of life, and knew from the inside how evil the system was beneath the surface for ordinary men and women.<sup>2</sup>

Leonard Woolf had joined the Civil Service and had been posted in Sri Lanka, or Ceylon as it was then known, in 1904. He moved in different parts of the country from Colombo to Jaffna and Kandy and it grew on him to his very bones. He returned to England in May 1911 and soon after married Virginia Stephen who was along with her husband a central figure in the Bloomsbury Group. He also wrote the famed novel *The Village*

in the *Jungle* only two months after his return and it was published in 1913. It not only made record sales in the United Kingdom but was translated into Sinhalese and became an essential part of the literary culture of Sri Lanka. Leonard wrote in *Growing*:

One of the charms of the island is its infinite variety. In the north, east and south-east you get the flat, dry, hot low country with a very small rainfall which comes mainly in a month or so of the north-east monsoon. It is a land of silent, sinister scrub jungle, or of great stretches of sand broken occasionally by clumps of low blackish shrubs, the vast dry lagoons in which, as you cross them under the blazing sun, you continually see in the thickening distance the mirage of water, a great non-existent lake sometimes surrounded by non-existent coconut or palmyra palms. This is a country of sand and sun, an enormous blue sky stretching away unbroken to an immensely distant horizon. Many people dislike the arid sterility of this kind of Asiatic low country. But I lived in it for many years . . . and it grows into my heart and my bones.<sup>3</sup>

Christopher Ondaatje mentions that after spending long hours at work Woolf while in Kandy would play tennis, squash and hockey. His day would end at the Kandy Club for a drink, bridge, billiards and dinner, and it was here that he experienced the centre of British imperialism with all its amplifications.<sup>4</sup>

### George Keyt country

If Kandy was the last post of the white man where he was free to make much of his position and power and it is described graphically in Woolf's various writings, it was also George Keyt country and the landscape of his artistic world. George's origins themselves here were as colourful as his life. According to his biographer and close friend, the Englishman Martin Russell, his ancestor was John Thomas Keyt of the 51st Regiment of Foot, Yorkshire Regiment. While serving in the British army in India he eloped with a Begum's daughter in Hyderabad and escaped to Sri Lanka as her people were out to kill him. His son Henry Keyt (1802–67) served in the Ceylon civil service as assistant colonial secretary and married Louisa Elizabeth van der Smagt in the Dutch Reformed Church on 4 November 1839. Their son, Fredrick Theobald Keyt (1842–1904), was an MD

from Aberdeen and served as a colonial surgeon in the Ceylon Medical Department and married Mary Elgin Dickman. But it was his second wife Elizabeth Henrietta Krickenbeeck, daughter of Frederick Justinus Krickenbeeck and Elizabeth Adrienne Toussaint, who was George's grandmother. The son born to them Henry Keyt (1867–1927), George's father, married Constance Evelyn Sproule, daughter of James Hugh Sproule, Proctor, and Gertrude Arabella Pieréz. Their son, George Percival Sproule Keyt, was born on 17 April 1901.<sup>5</sup>

The family account, however, states that their first ancestor was working for the Dutch East India Company in India and fell in love with a courtesan from the court of the Nizam of Hyderabad. As a result his embarrassed employers asked him to leave the service. He then joined the British and was posted in Ceylon where he worked as a civil servant. He went with the English to fight the battle of Waterloo where he was killed. In recognition of his services, his wife and children were supported by the British. His Irish relatives, for he originally came from Drogheda in Ireland, came to Ceylon to ask for his children, but the dancing girl refused to give up the boy. The girl went with her father's family to Ireland and is lost to the family history.

This narrative which was provided by the eldest daughter of George, Diana Keyt, goes on to mention that their ancestry consisted of the Dutch Burghers of Ceylon who were descendants of French Huguenots, Portuguese settler families and citizens of the low countries. She states:

As a child, I remember our government archivist, Jan Paulusz, showing us the huge leather bound books (Thombus) which held our family records. He showed me a name – Johanna van der Witt – and said 'She was your ancestor. She came here when she was 14 years old with her family', and then he showed me the family names I knew, the Krickenbeecks, the van der Smagts and so on. Through my mother and my father I am descended from two governors of Ceylon. When my sister was a student in Germany she became interested in our family tree and did some research from the church records in Europe. We had always been told by older family members that my father's curly black hair and pale blue eyes were 'his Jewish blood coming through'. Since the ancestor they claimed was a Jew was named 'Toussaint', we were skeptical. But my sister found that he had indeed once been Jew originally named Ari Goldenstein who had worked for Frederick the Great in Potsdam helping finance his battles. Somehow he

decided not to be a Jew any longer and went to the low countries where he became a Christian and took the name of Harry (Henry) Toussaint.<sup>6</sup>

It seems that Constance, George's mother, belonged to an Irish Burgher family where there was a Portuguese connection as well. Flavia Keyt speaks of it and so does Diana when she states that:

Many years ago there were still in Kandy, decaying mansions of the Portuguese gentry. On one of our afternoon calling days, Nana and I went to an area of dark little narrow streets and entered a large gloomy house. We went in to visit two ancient ladies, resplendent in outdated European clothes, who spoke with my grandmother in Portuguese. . . . These were maiden sisters of her mother, who had been a Pirez. . . . They were very slim and had grave aquiline faces with pale, olive skins . . .<sup>7</sup>

Little more is known of the daring ancestor who seems to have broken the iron curtain to elope with a Muslim girl, which was nothing short of courageous. The family account names him as Henry Keyt and that he was born in 1802, but in that case he could hardly have fought the battle of Waterloo in 1815. If we go by the fact that it was John Thomas Keyt who eloped with the Begum's daughter when serving in the British army in India he could then well have fought in the battle of Waterloo when he would be in his late twenties or early thirties. This would also tally with other narratives of similar incidents around the turn of the 18th century. In William Dalrymple's narrative in *The White Mughals* we have James Achilles Kirkpatrick, the British Resident at the court of Hyderabad between 1797 and 1805. He had apparently adopted Hyderabadi ways of living and clothes and shortly after arriving had fallen in love with the great niece of the diwan (Prime Minister) of Hyderabad. He married Khair un-Nissa, or 'Most Excellent Among Women', in 1800 according to Muslim law for he had converted to Islam to marry his bride. After a great deal of digging Dalrymple also stumbled on an account of a meeting between the young couple at the India Office Library which recounted in Kirkpatrick's own writing the fact that she was irrevocably in love with him and prepared to go through any fiery ordeal. The book recounts the tragic story of their relationship where in the end the daughter is taken away at the age of four to England and baptised and then completely cut off from her maternal relations. Absorbed into the upper crust of Victorian society as

Kitty Kirkpatrick she had fascinated her cousin's tutor, Thomas Carlyle, who in his novel *Sartor Resartus* had based his heroine Blumine on her, 'the fairest of Oriental light-bringers'. When Kitty finally is in contact with her grandmother the letters exchanged over continents revealed to her the narrative of her parents meeting and falling in love and the tragic fate of Khair un-Nissa.

That this was a period not widely acknowledged when the British mingled easily with the 'natives' and adopted their manners could make these cross-cultural marriages more common than is known. Dalrymple states in the Introduction of the book:

The Kirkpatricks inhabited a world that was far more hybrid, and with far less clearly defined ethnic, national and religious borders, than we have been conditioned to expect, either by the conventional Imperial history books written by the British before 1947, or by the nationalist historiography of post-Independence India, . . . or for that matter by the post-colonial work coming from new generations of scholars, many of whom tend to follow the path opened up by Edward Said in 1978 with his pioneering *Orientalism*.<sup>8</sup>

If John Thomas Keyt did indeed fall in love with a dancing girl we must note that the courtesans of the period were a repository of knowledge and culture. Mekhala Sengupta states:

The devdasi in ancient Hindu India who later morphed into the kothewali in Muslim India came to epitomise an independent woman artiste and connoisseur with a lifestyle encompassing both the erotic and artistry in not just the performing arts, but politics and persuasion as well.<sup>9</sup>

The case of the courtesan Umrao Jan immortalized in 1905 by Mirza Muhammad Hadi Ruswa in his novel is the narrative of a five-year-old girl who is kidnapped and sold to a tawaif in Lucknow. Ruswa describes the beautiful courtesan's mastery of Urdu poetry and her ability to write poetry and to her performances in dance and music as well as her wit and wisdom. Even more, according to Veena Talwar Oldenburg, the courtesan subverted male dominance and offered resistance to patriarchy where norms of traditional marriage reflected subjugation, denigration and exploitation.<sup>10</sup>

To revert to the genealogy of the Keyts, George turned all this on its head and stated that he descended from the Rajputs of North India and that their original name was 'Kirti'. The veracity of this fanciful belief need not be tested as it showed more than anything else his great desire to ally himself with India, a country whose cultural riches inspired him. But it also showed his disdain for the upper class and the stiff-upper lip Burgher culture which held itself above the rest.

### Somebody to nobody

George belonged to precisely this culture. The Burghers before Sri Lanka became independent were by and large a privileged class and to belong to it would mean access to a comfortable life. The country's long history of colonial occupation meant there were more than one form of racial mix and the heterogeneity would invariably lead to differences: the 'Dutch Burghers' were the Dutch descendants the Burghers were the Dutch or the Portuguese where the latter were in some way considered inferior and the Eurasians were of British descent. To be a Euro-Asian was to be privileged and hence in politics many of them took a cautious, conservative stance on issues. Yet there were others who emerged as catalysts for modernization and democratization and would on occasion be on the vanguard of the early anti-colonial challenge. The most radical among them were inspired by the Enlightenment, the French Revolution, as well as with dissident intellectualism. As the scholar Kumari Jayawardena points out:

Rather than being 'marginal' to society they were utopian-like visionaries and agitators, active on important political and social issues long before the time was ripe for major reforms or social change. Their support was for nascent nationalism, feminism, pluralism, secularism, and the rights of workers and peasants. They also opposed those South Asian hierarchical formations based on caste, ethnicity, patriarchy and semi-feudal class structures.<sup>11</sup>

All the more ironic then that in the later years the cultural resources of the Euro-Asians were not appreciated and a form of demonization took place which turned them into virtual outcasts. Jayawardena observes, 'In Sri Lanka, from the 1880's onwards, the preoccupation of the early nationalists with "Aryanness" meant a demonizing of the "lower races" of other ethnic and religious origins, the valorizing of Sinhala Buddhism, and a demeaning of the "impure" Christian Euro-Asian.'<sup>12</sup> Yet all that





*Figure 1.1* George Keyt.

*Courtesy: Martin Russell Archives.*

hybridity with its rich cultural and political overtones brought with it was the impossibility of essentialism.

Various accounts point to the colourful aura surrounding George's great-grandfather and the fact that he is mentioned as someone who eloped with a Begum's daughter and therefore had to flee India and seek refuge in Ceylon lend it some veracity if not historical accuracy. The first recorded introduction to his ancestors is his great-grandfather Henry Keyt who served in the Ceylon Civil Service and is mentioned by George himself in a letter to a close friend. He writes,

my great grandfather was brought out by the British for the Civil Service here and was a 'native' and became Colonial Secretary and was knighted too. . . . He married into the aristocratic Dutch family – one of them opting to stay back when Ceylon was ceded to England in 1796 – the Van Krickenebecks, who were counts. So the