

GEORGE CLAESSEN



PARADISE ROAD

**GALLERIES**

WINDOW ON ANOTHER DIMENSION

*George Claessen*

GEORGE CLAESSEN  
1909 – 1999

17 DECEMBER 2021 - 12 JANUARY 2022

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## Claiming Space: George Claessen and his diasporic abstraction

An anxious, bordering on despairing, group of artists chatter and cogitate in Aubrey Collette's tight knit oil painting *The '43 Group*. Known for his satirical swipes, the cluster of agitated figures with furrowed brows are likely churning over an aesthetic conundrum. You can almost see Lionel Wendt, the central figure and something of a patriarch of the group, turning his thoughts inside out. George Claessen is the figure standing to his right, distantly contemplative. His pose, in retrospect, captures the sense of dislocation he said he always felt<sup>1</sup>, although it obscures somewhat the fact that he was integral to the '43 Group that was, in part, a panacea for Sri Lanka's anglicised art world and the academic vision it dispensed. Participating in the Group's annual Ceylon exhibitions held at Darley Road, Claessen often showed figurative drawings that would remain the backbone of his practice. With his professional training and occupation as a draughtsman at the Colombo Port Commission, drawing was a habitual activity and, when not in a work setting, a seemingly fervent visual download of his day. His was a consistent style, with works such as *Male Figure, 1981*, bearing striking resemblance to the soft touch he expressed in pieces like *Mother and Child* shown at the first '43 Group exhibition in 1943. Pared back but abundant, Claessen's line was, as the critic L. P. Goonetilleke described, 'striking for its effects achieved with remarkable economy.'<sup>2</sup>

If his drawing can be considered an unwavering expression, painting was a site for his experimentation. As Claessen moved away from Ceylon and relocated to Australia, his style shifted. And as if needing to loosen

himself from the intensity of one island's life, his painting refreshed itself when it reached another. It has been suggested that in this transition Claessen was seeking critical recognition that had been slow coming in Ceylon, but perhaps it was the relative anonymity in Melbourne that was alluring and endowed him with self-assurance. In his new abstract style confident strikes of paint began to emerge and cluster on his canvases. With a liberal use of colour, Claessen conjured bright hazes.

London was the city where Claessen's abstraction reinforced itself. But what did it mean to be one of the first Sri Lankan artists, and one of the 'last colonials',<sup>3</sup> to come from a colony into the imperial centre? Finding his footing in London in 1949, as the British Empire lost its own, Claessen was part of what Stuart Hall has described as a 'first wave' of artists that included, among others, his fellow '43 Group member Ivan Peries, and Anwar Shemza, Frank Bowling, David Medalla, F.N. Souza, Aubrey Williams, and Donald Locke, who arrived in Britain to embrace the purportedly modern space. And while there was promise and optimism for a new strain of international modernism that proffered a level playing field for all artists—and a movement that these diaspora artists felt 'they naturally belonged to...and, in a way, it belonged to them'<sup>4</sup>—it was girded by complexity and contradiction.

The post-war, post-colonial identity crafted by the city relied upon democratic idealism. A self-conscious drive towards decolonisation that led to literary celebration of such authors as V.S Naipaul, and gave rise to the Festival of Britain and the Arts Council, also consolidated the Imperial Institute.<sup>5</sup> The extent to which Claessen fell into this milieu comfortably and engaged with modernism, on what was perceived to be its own ground, is complex. For as Lotte Hoek and Sanjukta Sunderason explain, 'the art world of 1950s Britain was...marked by a viscosity, both participating in and resisting modernism's universalising ambitions'.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>1</sup> As described in an interview with Esmee Claessen, November 2021

<sup>2</sup> As quoted by Neville Weeraratne, *43 Group: A Chronicle of Fifty Years in the Art of Sri Lanka*

<sup>3</sup> Stuart Hall, "Black Diaspora Artists in Britain: Three 'Moments' in Post-War History", *History Workshop Journal* 61, no. 1 (Spring 2006), 4

<sup>4</sup> Stuart Hall, "Black Diaspora Artists in Britain: Three 'Moments' in Post-War History", *History Workshop Journal* 61, no. 1 (Spring 2006), 5

<sup>5</sup> It later became the Commonwealth Institute in 1958

<sup>6</sup> Lotte Hoek and Sanjukta Sunderason, "Journeying through Modernism: Travels and Transits of East Pakistani Artists in Post-Imperial London", *British Art Studies*, Issue 13, <https://dx.doi.org/10.17658/issn.2058-5462/issue-13/hoek-sunderason>

At this time, for Claessen and the '43 Group, London gave access to the messy edges of modernism where national differences and exoticism prevailed. An exhibition of the '43 Group, who by now had mostly disbanded from the country, was held at the Imperial Institute in 1952. By then, 59 years after its establishment as a tool of empire, it was an outcast—an aged institution with sad hessian walls and staggeringly dim lighting that bespoke the underlying value of this exhibition in London's wider aesthetic hierarchy. The works themselves were heralded by the critic John Berger as showing 'a new, truly democratic tradition of art' untainted by 'the cultural corrosion of urban capitalism'.<sup>7</sup> While for Maurice Collis, writing in *Art News*, the show made him 'optimistic about painting in that part of the world'<sup>8</sup>. Spin off exhibitions appeared with variations of artists—from the '43 Group shown at the Petit Palais, Paris; Heffer Gallery, Cambridge; the ICA, London—and led to the formation of the Ceylon pavilion at the 28<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale in 1956.

This is all to say that London set and imposed artistic limits. Not only did the city's cultural agenda contain Claessen's work within a nation-state framework, but his potential to fulfil artistic ambitions were compromised by his socio-economic circumstances. He juggled his day job with halloed evening and early mornings in his living room studio. Clearly, London's art institutions struggled to reconcile the 'non-Western' with their regular programming. Elsewhere in the UK, there was marginally more assimilation. Claessen was offered a solo show in Leicester, although it was impossible to fulfil. Modernism's illusion of internationalism was really only challenged and ruptured by individuals like Denis Bowen (1921-2006) and curator Guy Brett (1942-2021) who were tireless and consistent in their advocacy and supporters of radical, international work.<sup>9</sup>

It was Denis Bowen, an artist who founded the New Vision Centre Gallery, who invited Claessen for his first UK solo show. 'They were very, very good and saw the potential in my work', Claessen remarked. In the Marble Arch gallery, Claessen's convictions about abstraction, fired by ambition, were given their own space and were accompanied by analysis that did away with canonical equivalents. As G.M Butcher wrote in the catalogue, 'They are not figurative; but neither are they abstract (in the ways we usually understand this term). They are precise renditions, with the utmost reality, of that state of Being which is beyond Appearance'.<sup>10</sup>

It was a similar staking of space that Bowen created when he seeded the first Commonwealth Biennale of Abstract Art in 1963. Claessen's work hung with a selection of abstract painters from all corners of the world

including John Latham, Ahmed Parvez and Victor Pasmore. This was, as Eddie Chambers suggests, a notable counterpoint to the healthy swathe of exhibitions that pushed diaspora artists to the peripheries and beyond. For a brief moment, this exhibition expanded the dialogue about abstraction. A *Cosmic Law*, 1963, one of six works that was on display, was a mesmerising ripple of colour and shape that shares in its frivolity with later works such as *Tailpiece*, 1997.

The Biennale, unlike Venice and Sao Paolo that had included Claessen's work, gave a glimpse of borderless aesthetic value. This 'welcome', however, quickly ran its course. It can be argued, to borrow Kobena Mercer's description, that Claessen fell foul of 'cracks in such "colour-blind" internationalism'<sup>11</sup> that began to emerge in the late 1960s. With an exhibitionary hiatus that lasted until the mid 80s, when he was again shown in the context of the '43 Group, Claessen as Claessen was seemingly incompatible with Britain's conceptualisation of international modernism. This is not to say he was deferred. Claessen was prolific and contributed to artist group shows in his North London locality with the Islington Art Circle and Hampstead Artists' Council, as well as associating himself with the London Free Painters and Sculptors.

Where Claessen's oeuvre has been siloed, this essay for the first time demonstrates him as an artist with a diasporic abstraction that deservedly requires a place in a truly international history of art. Rather than a plug-in to a canon that has operated with exclusionary callousness, Claessen needs to be seen as a part of multiple contexts, his journeys opened up to reinterpretation through institutional exhibitions, scholarly work and, one hopes, meaningful collection acquisitions.

Dr Cleo Roberts-Komireddi

<sup>7</sup> John Berger, Review, *New Statesman and Nation*, 13 December 1952

<sup>8</sup> Maurice Collis, Review, *Art News*, 29 November 1952

<sup>9</sup> Unsurprisingly, remain relatively obscure today.

<sup>10</sup> New Vision Gallery; Paintings Drawings Collages

<sup>11</sup> Kobena Mercer, "Aubrey Williams: Abstraction in Diaspora", *British Art Studies*, Issue 8, <https://doi.org/10.17658/issn.2058-5462/issue-08/kmercer>

The genius of Claessen really came to the fore in his abstract work. The paintings can be described as similar to French tachisme or the American abstract expressionist tendency. In these works, Claessen clearly reached the pinnacle of his artistic expression. His abstract work spans a period of over 50 years. It was stated earlier that a tendency towards abstraction was clearly seen in some of his early work, for example the 1943 painting 'Mother & Child'. The real departure into abstraction took place some years later, in 1948 in Australia, following what Claessen described as a "revelatory experience". (...) This quasi-religious revelation had a profound influence on Claessen's subsequent work.

Abstract Paintings  
Excerpt from the publication, 'George Claessen'  
by Dr. Shamil Wanigaratne, 2000



01, *Window on Another Dimension*, 1997, Watercolour on paper, 17cm x 12cm



02, *Chromatic Abstract*, 1997, Watercolour on paper, 17cm x 12cm





03, *Abstract Grid*, 1998, Watercolour on paper, 18cm x 14cm



04, *Tailpiece*, 1996, Egg Tempera on paper, 22cm x 18cm



05, *Equation*, 1998, Watercolour on paper, 18cm x 14cm



06, *Equation*, 1997, Watercolour on paper, 18cm x 14cm



07, *Abstract*, 1997, Watercolour on paper, 17cm x 12cm



08, *Blue Mosaic*, 1997, Watercolour on paper, 18cm x 14cm



09, *Abstract*, 1997, Watercolour on paper, 17cm x 13cm



10, *Abstract*, 1997, Watercolour on paper, 18cm x 14cm





*Abstract*

*George Claessen (1994)*

11, *Abstract*, 1994, Watercolour on paper, 19cm x 14cm



12, *In Search of an Equation*, 1997, Watercolour on paper, 18cm x 14cm



13, *Abstract*, 1998, Watercolour on paper, 18cm x 13cm



14, Voices, 1998, Gouache on paper, 22cm x 15cm



15, *Equation*, 1998, Watercolour on paper, 18cm x 14cm



16, *Equation*, 1997, Watercolour on paper, 18cm x 14cm



17, *Abstract Panel*, 1997, Watercolour on paper, 19cm x 14cm



18, *Talisman*, 1997, Watercolour on paper, 17cm x 12cm





19, Abstract page, 1997, Watercolour on paper, 19cm x 14cm



20, *Abstract*, 1998, Watercolour on paper, 17cm x 14cm



21. *Of Another Dimension*, 1997, Pastel on paper, 22cm x 16cm



Abstract

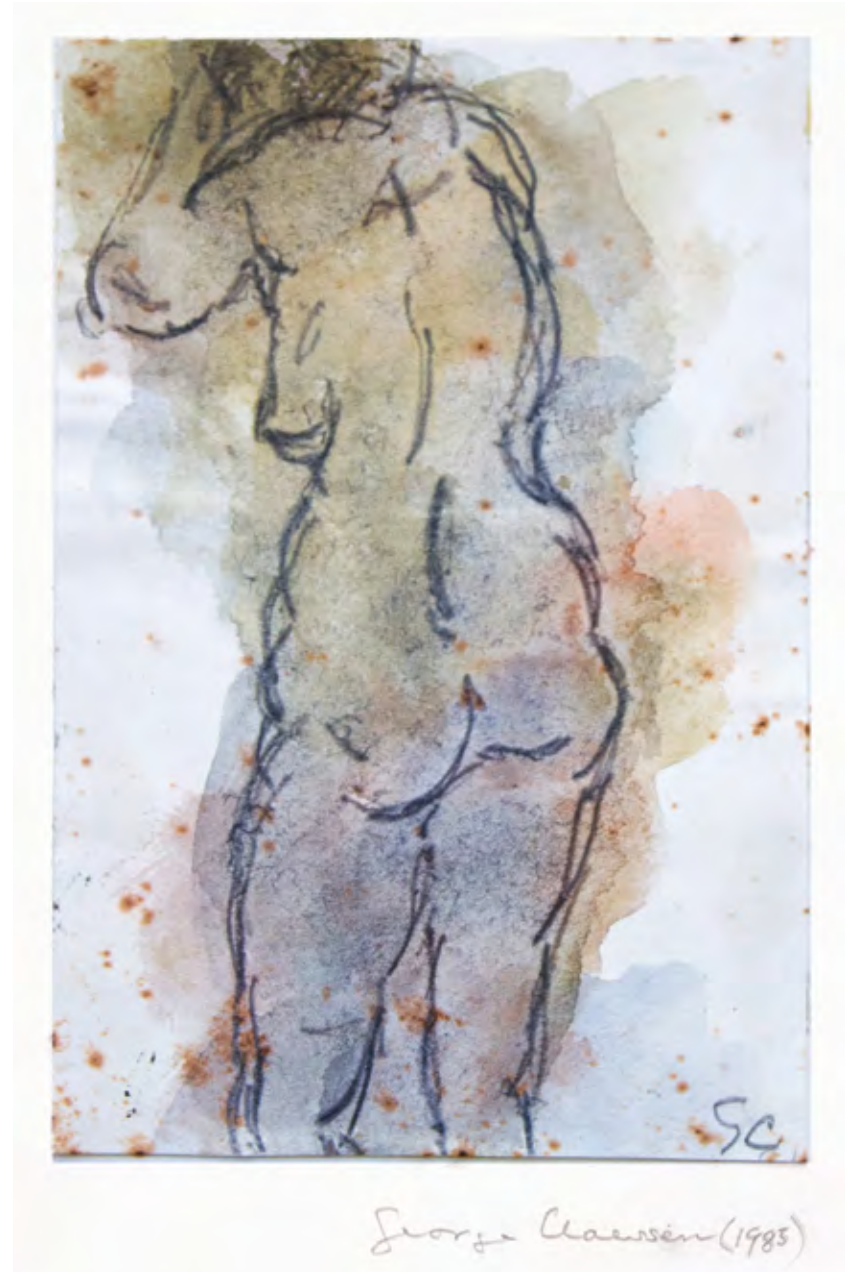
George Lacombe 1996

22, Abstract, 1996, Watercolour and Crayon on paper, 21cm x 18cm

Claessen's figurative work spans his entire lifetime as an artist, in parallel with his abstract work, which was his hallmark. This is perhaps unusual in an artist. In these works he demonstrated that he was primarily a superior draftsman. Claessen worked with a number of mediums, including watercolours, oils, acrylic, egg-tempera, pastels, gouache, crayons, ink, chalk, charcoal and dry point. There are many different types of work, ranging from portraits to still life, but there is a distinct style that is uniquely Claessen. (...) The range of these is such that comparisons with other artists, even if it was possible, would be a futile exercise, as would a description of the different types of work. To focus instead on what he is trying to express may be more useful to the reader. The work shows naturalistic, impressionist and expressionist tendencies and in some examples he has veered towards abstraction.

Figurative Work and Landscapes  
Excerpt from the publication, 'George Claessen'  
by Dr. Shamil Wanigaratne, 2000

23, *Back of Nude*, 1985, Watercolour on paper, 23cm x 15cm





24, *Nude Upright*, 1981, Oil Crayon on paper, 35cm x 15cm



George Claessen (1980)

25, *Nude*, 1980, Etching, 23cm x 12cm





26, *Study from the Male*, 1974, Pencil and Gouache on paper, 52cm x 37cm



27, Horseman, 1987, Pen and wash on paper, 15cm x 17cm



28, Bottle, 1977, Watercolour on paper, 29cm x 19cm

Head.



George Claussen (1985)

29, Head, 1985, Oil Crayon on paper, 33cm x 23cm



30, *Horse and Cart*, 1998, Crayon on paper, 16cm x 21cm

Cherub.



Janja Claassen (1997)

31, *Cherub*, 1997, Pencil and Crayon on paper, 17cm x 12cm



32, *Male figure*, 1981, Oil, Pastel and Watercolour on paper, 51cm x 35cm

George Claessen died in London 1999 at the age of 90. His life spanned the 20th century. Almost unknown internationally, Claessen was recognized by a very small constituency knowledgeable about contemporary Sri Lankan art as one of the founders of the '43 Group. Even in Sri Lanka, despite his reputation, there were very few who could say that they knew his work well. With the publication of Shamil Wanigaratne's book on Claessen, it became possible to study the entire range of the artist's work through a period of more than sixty years.

One of the most remarkable things about Claessen is that he was at one and the same time an abstractionist and a representational painter. Throughout the greater part of his artistic life he was equally at home with a portrait, a figure or animal drawing, a still life or a purely abstract composition. Thus, while there is a categorical separation between the figurative work and the abstract, there is also constant interpenetration between the two modes, sometimes in one and the same painting.

This constant shifting between figuration and abstraction was neither an affectation nor an experiment. Profoundly philosophical, the consistency and authenticity of this switching between figurative representation and abstraction were clearly the product of the intensity and honesty of his artistic concerns. It was a direct expression of the way he approached what he found interesting in the world around him. The test of his integrity lies in the consistency that exists throughout the entire 60-year range of Claessen's work. His ways of seeing and of expressing himself are distinctly identifiable through decades of painterly activity as the product of a single artistic sensibility.

Claessen spent more than a half of his life separated from the land of his birth. His 'exile', first in Australia, then India, and finally England, was similar to that of other major '43 group painters, who abandoned their Colombo beginnings, some to go abroad, others to rural retreats; Ivan Peries to London and Southend; Justin Daraniyagala to his family manor in rural Pasyala; Geoffrey Beling to the abandonment of art for religious activism; George Keyt wandering between one rural Kandyan retreat and another; Gabriel to Australia in his retirement.

But Claessen's separation was also more intense, introverted, further removed from his Sri Lankan homeland than that of any of his fellow artists, just as his art was itself unrelated to any particular cultural landscape. In that sense, Claessen was the most intellectual of the original '43 group, the most concerned in his art with idea and perception. As his fellow painter Daraniyagala described it in an early review, written just a few years after the first '43 Group show: "detail does not interest him; he sees broadly with an innate profundity which characterises all his work; and above all is possessed of the ability to transmit effectively the reactions of an extremely sensitive mind to the objects and scenes of everyday life."

This personal and reflective, rather than cultural or social, focus would at least in part explain the fact that he was the only painter of the original '43 Group to become an abstractionist. Although his abstract work originates in the late 1950s just at the time when the first post-Second World War abstractionists were beginning to attract gallery attraction in America and Europe, his entry into this mode was entirely self motivated. Such a development was implicit in the inherent nature and concerns of his work from the very beginning. Wanigaratne's book describes and explains very well how this took place, the 'revelatory' experience with which it began and Claessen's poetry and reflective writing in which he describes his interest and intentions: "I felt that if I had any real contribution to make it was through being an abstract painter... (an) enormous and mystical subject". Although his work is on a miniaturist scale when compared with that of (say) the New York School, there is no doubt that Claessen will one day have to be considered a major 20th century abstractionist, in the intensity, purity and perfection of his work, if not scale or quantity.

Claessen's achievement clearly demonstrates the significance of 20th century Sri Lankan painting and the position the '43 Group occupies in the history of modern art in Asia.

Prof. Senake Bandaranayake

Essay from the publication 'Sri Lanka Painting in the 20th Century' published by The National Trust Sri Lanka, 2009



# GEORGE CLAESSEN

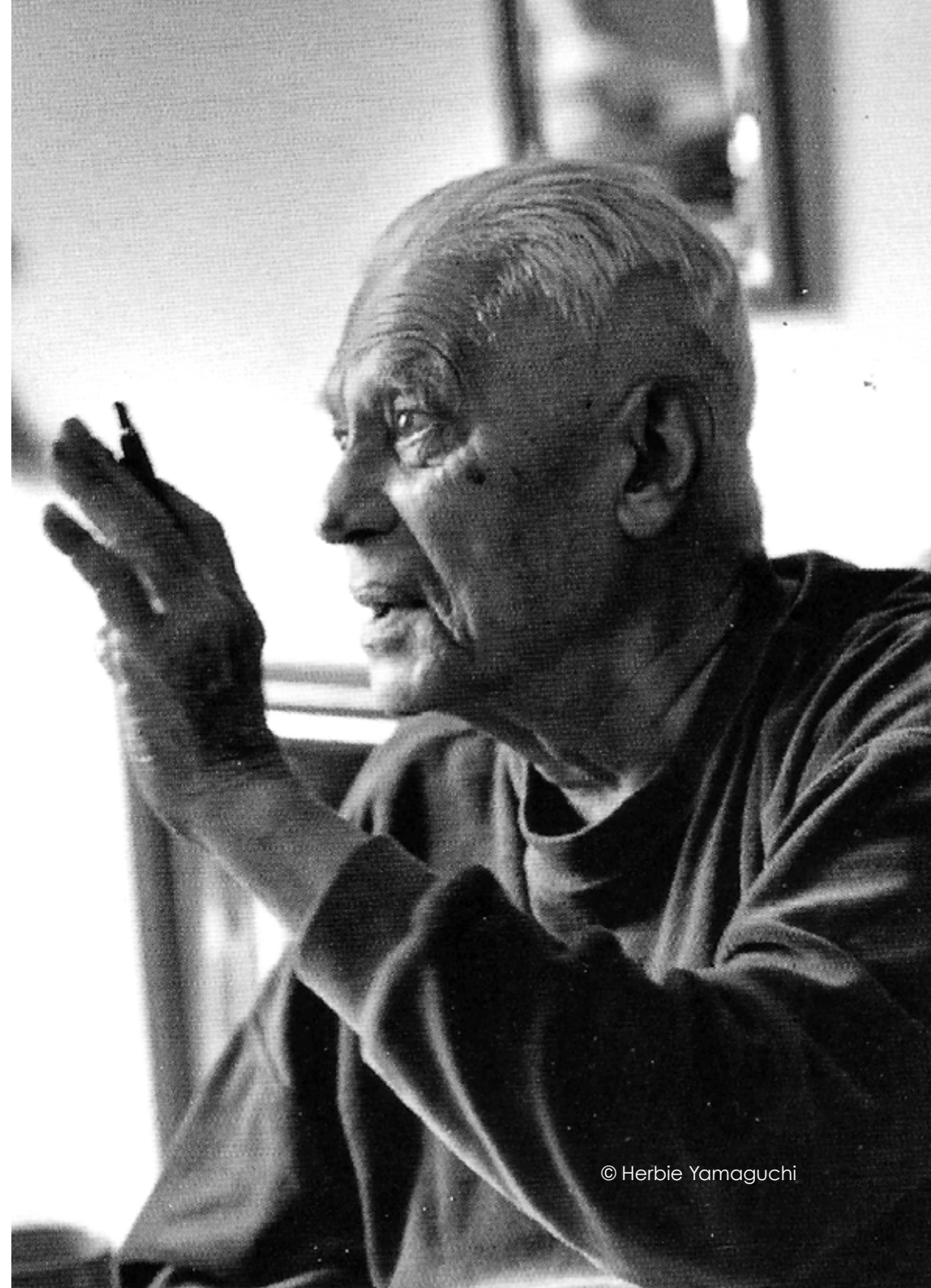
1909 - 1999

## Education

St Joseph's College, Colombo, Sri Lanka

## Exhibitions

- 1941 *Competitive Exhibition*, Ceylon Society of Arts, Colombo, Sri Lanka
- 1941 *A Study of an Old Man*, Ceylon Society of Arts, Colombo, Sri Lanka
- 1943 *Opening Exhibition, '43 Group*, Colombo, Sri Lanka
- 1944 *Ceylon's War Effort Pictures Exhibition*, London, UK
- 1946 *Exhibition of Paintings*, Lionel Wendt Art Gallery, Colombo, Sri Lanka
- 1948 *Exhibition of Drawings*, Victorian Society, Melbourne, Australia
- 1950 *Exhibition of Sculpture Paintings and Drawings*, Archer Gallery, London, UK
- 1951 *Exhibition with the Royal Society British Artists*, Pall Mall, London, UK
- 1951 *Salon of Watercolours*, Kensington, London, UK
- 1953 *L'Art de Ceylan, '43 Group*, Petit Palais, Paris, France
- 1954 *Exhibition of Paintings*, Artists International Association Gallery, London, UK
- 1957 *Exhibition of Paintings*, New Vision Gallery, London, UK
- 1958 *Exhibition of Paintings*, Hampstead Artists Council, London, UK
- 1959 *Exhibition of Paintings*, Museum de Arte Moderna, Sao Paulo, Brazil
- 1962 *One Man Exhibition*, New Vision Centre Gallery, London, UK
- 1963 *Commonwealth Biennale of Abstract Art*, Commonwealth Institute, London, UK
- 1975 *One Man Exhibition of Paintings & Graphics*, Stanhope Gallery, London, UK
- 1985 *'43 Group Colombo Exhibition*, Royal Festival Hall, London, UK
- 1987 *'43 Group Colombo Exhibition*, Royal Festival Hall, London, UK
- 1993 *George Claessen a Retrospective*, Gallery 706, Colombo, Sri Lanka
- 2000 *Retrospective Exhibition*, Frank T Sabin Gallery, London, UK
- 2009 *Retrospective Exhibition*, Paradise Road Galleries, Colombo, Sri Lanka



Immortality is something that is passed on by word of mouth or writing.

In doing things with all the integrity you have in your mind – with all the logic you have developed in your brain and all the instinct you have got – you find your point of reference and when you paint that is your signature. That is the only thing that is passed on – you are just a vehicle. You are always unknown – you are not unknown to him who has given you the creative instinct.

George Claessen, 1994



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