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## FULL CIRCLE

FROM THE ART HUBS OF ROME, STREETS OF MILAN TO NEW YORK'S FIFTH AVENUE —  
TILAK SAMARAWICKREMA'S COLOUR PALETTE IS NO LESS GLOBAL THAN LOCAL.  
THE SRI LANKAN ARTIST ADMITS THAT TRAVELING HAS TAUGHT HIM MORE THAN ANY  
CLASSROOM COULD HAVE EVER HAD. HE SPEAKS TO **TIRNA RAY**

Ganesh Chandra

A well-known architect by profession, Tilak Samarawickrema finds time for art, textile design, animation works and even digital art.

Today, the world may be a canvas for him, but Samarawickrema started off as an architecture student, not because he wanted to, but because his father saw potential in him. "I didn't even know whether I could draw," he says.

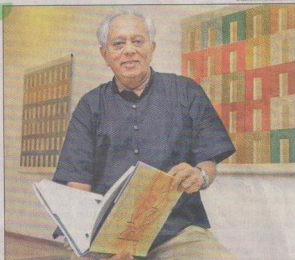
Starting on a tabula rasa, in 1968, the first year student was assigned a collage project. With limited avenues to modern art, he worked through the night to put together a piece that was much appreciated by the evaluators the next day.

"I spent most of my time in the library, where I read about great artists like Van Gogh and Picasso. Also, this is when I started working at Geoffrey Bawa's studio, the renowned Sri Lankan architect and pioneer of the vernacular design idiom," says Samarawickrema.

Soon after, he went to Milan on a scholarship. While pursuing his studies, he soaked himself in an exciting and bohemian world of art, design and politics. "After one and a half years of my studies, I moved to Rome. Soon after, I started living on my own. Living in close proximity to the Roman forum and Colosseum, I was doodling, something that I had started in Bawa's studio. It was now evolving into an art form, incorporating the forms and curves of the Sinhala alphabet."

Samarawickrema — who was recently in the Capital to exhibit his works on contemporary woven art — worked hard and earned a living through his drawings and animation movies. It was the beginning of a journey that would see him exhibiting his line drawings all over the world — from Rome and Milan to New York and Sao Paulo.

It was in Rome that the artist, only 27-year-old, bumped into Pierre Restany, the father of neo-realism, who liked his works. In 1963, Samarawickrema returned to Sri Lanka to



Tilak Samarawickrema

complete his architecture degree. By that time, he had not only assimilated the European art instincts, but the radical design movement too was fresh in his mind. Explaining why he was drawn to architecture, he says that it opened up a new world for him and taught him the precision of proportion.

Apart from reviving indigenous crafts of the island, Samarawickrema has designed cotton tapestries hand woven by traditional weavers of Talagune Uda Dumbura, the oldest weaving village in Sri Lanka. More recently he traveled to Afghanistan to set up a design centre for carpet weaving in Kabul.