

SRI LANKA'S MAN OF MANY TALENTS

Multi-faceted architect, artist, designer and rural handicraft revivalist, **TILAK SAMARAWICKREMA** talks to **SHANA MARIA VERGHIS** about his energetic and prolific life and times at a show of tapestries he designed that is showing now at Lado Sarai in the Capital

Several years ago, Tilak Samarawickrema had the pleasure of seeing a design he created with Sri Lankan weaves copied, motif for motif, at a high-profile fashion show by Karl Lagerfeld for Fendi. He was never credited for it although he later saw the piece at a Fendi boutique in New York. "I'm happy it got recognised. I was fine with that," said Tilak, who has no patent on his designs. But this multifaceted man is showcasing some expensive tapestries, made in collaboration with a family of Talangune weavers, at a show of contemporary woven art. The project, funded entirely by him, has been on view at Gallery Art Motif in Lado Sarai from April 1-7.

Tilak, who heads his own design studio, is also a leading architect in Sri Lanka. But it has only been during the last few decades that he has focussed more on architecture although his training is in that field. He has created houses, factories and also won several awards at design competitions, including one for a bank prototype, using traditional Sri Lankan design. But the look of most of his architectural work is international with a penchant for clean lines, which were honed during his student years when he went to Italy.

Lately, his life is turning full circle as he is drawing again, like he did years before. He started his professional life as an artist in Italy. Tilak was based there from the 70s, doing beautiful ink drawings. Inspired by Sri Lankan calligraphy, he also animated some his work.

One of his animated films, which he showed us, was based on a Lankan fable about a court jester named Andere. "It was a bohemian life in Italy then. I had many relationships. Milan had a major influence on my aesthetics. It was once a major hub for high-tech industrial design. And so was Memphis's radical design movement. The Bauhaus sensibility also impacted my work although I dropped it as I went along. Being an artist doesn't pay you well. Once I married, (a fellow Sri Lankan, I started to use my degree in architecture."

When he returned to Sri Lanka during the 80s, he did his Masters for three years, then put his hand at reviving dying, rural handicrafts. After that he set up a crafts gallery with the International Labour Organisation (ILO). Some of his designs were applied to industrially knitted fabrics in Germany. The gallery only lasted two years, because it was unsustainable. Tilak told us heavily that the rural handicrafts sector in his country today is still in very good shape. After that got over, he tripped to Guatemala, where he was inspired by Mayan weaves, and when he returned, he visited the village of Talangune, which has apparently got, "the oldest weaving tradition in Sri Lanka." There he cultivated the acquaintance of a weaver family, who have since been commissioned to use their looms to create tapestries with the graphics visualised by Tilak. He also said that the weaves have no name. He doesn't use natural dyes as they aren't cost-effective and each piece takes about 20 days to make. Since he began to work with them, the fortunes of the family, who live in a region called the



Durbana Valley, have changed for the better.

Clients for the tapestries made between architectural assignments are usually tourists looking out for something special to take back. The aesthetics of the weaves have been transferred to other media, like sculptural toys. His architectural sensibility and tapestry design are different ball games howev-

er. Running us over images from his laptop, we saw an IT faculty and corporate establishments he had built. He said that although one may not get an opportunity to use one's architectural skills everyday, he enjoys building, just as much as he enjoyed his carefree artist years. "Even as an artist, I got a lot of exposure because I had exhibited at the Biennales."

After his daughter's prodding, Tilak recently returned to his drawings once again and is now part of a *Contemporary Artists of Sri Lanka* exhibition in London this month. "I hadn't drawn for many years. So it was not very easy to return to the medium. I'm very good at changing and doing different things. I had visited India years back when I was passing through from Italy. More recently, I came to get a visa to set up a carpet weaving project in Afghanistan," he shared. He added his early calligraphic works have inspired other artists. And now it is far more common to see the Sinhala alphabets he worked with, transformed into designs for tee shirts, brass boxes and such like. He asserted without any arrogance in his declaration, that, "I was the one who started them."

Since he was in Sri Lanka when the war began in 1983, we wondered if it affected his work. "It was difficult, yes. Mothers didn't know if their sons would return home alive each day. But Sri Lankans got used to it. Was it good to get used to war? No. But if you did not, you would become neurotic. So we simply had to get over it." Each of the tapestries costs about \$350-400. It's a self-sustaining project now and they have exhibited at two museum shows. His latest adventure, apart from the drawings, is creating moving images from tapestry motifs, which he said could have their uses in advertising. "And India has one of the largest ad markets, right?"

(The exchange happened before the Indo-Sri Lanka final ended, and as a result, was a very civilised one between both parties!)

