

# BARBARA SANSONI QUEEN OF VIBRANT COLOURS

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**S**ri Lankan women have risen to great heights in diverse fields, bringing honour to their Motherland. These prudent and inspiring women had the long term vision, supplemented by relentless determination to make a lasting difference. Success can be defined and appreciated in many ways. In my personal view you can claim to be successful only when you have made others manifest their success, through your pragmatic influence. That is the distinguished hallmark of a resolute leader.

This week Sri Lanka mourns the loss of one of her daughters Babara Sansoni. She was a gifted woman of many talents. By her simple life and hard work she reached out to other women and empowered them. Her flagship store Barefoot was synonymous with colours and became a reputed brand, garnering international fame in the realm of fashion. After all, fashion is a reflection of a nation's creative soul.

Let us delve into the life of this grand lady who impacted the way we dress and taught us to appreciate local handlooms. The philosopher Marcus Cicero once opined "The life of the dead is placed in the memory of the living". The legacy of Babara Sansoni will continue.

Kala Suri Barbara Sansoni (April 22, 1928 – April 23, 2022) was a Sri Lankan designer, artist, entrepreneur and writer. She was duly recognized for her outstanding contribution in architecture, textile designs, and hand woven panels. She founded the Barefoot textile company, a company that is highly acclaimed for its handloom fabrics. Sansoni served as the Chairperson and Chief Designer of Barefoot Pvt. Ltd. for many decades, transforming the local fashion industry with her



**Barbara Sansoni**

magnificent manifestation of colours.

This dynamic designer redefined the concept of colour in Sri Lanka. Prior to Barefoot we Sri Lankans were quite fascinated and proud of our home grown batik clothing. Batik was the take away gift of all visiting tourists to this resplendent island. However Babara Sansoni gave this nation a new fabric, oozing with contrasting colours. The radiant Barefoot brand rapidly grew to offer clothes for any occasion, still retaining its local design essence. This was Sansoni's unique selling point in terms of her brand. Her creations were alluring and unique. She drew her inspiration from the sunrise and sunsets of this island.

## Sri Lankan culture

Barefoot soon became a desired destination for all tourists in Colombo. It later blossomed as a venue for arts and exposition of Sri Lankan culture. This strong but amiable business-

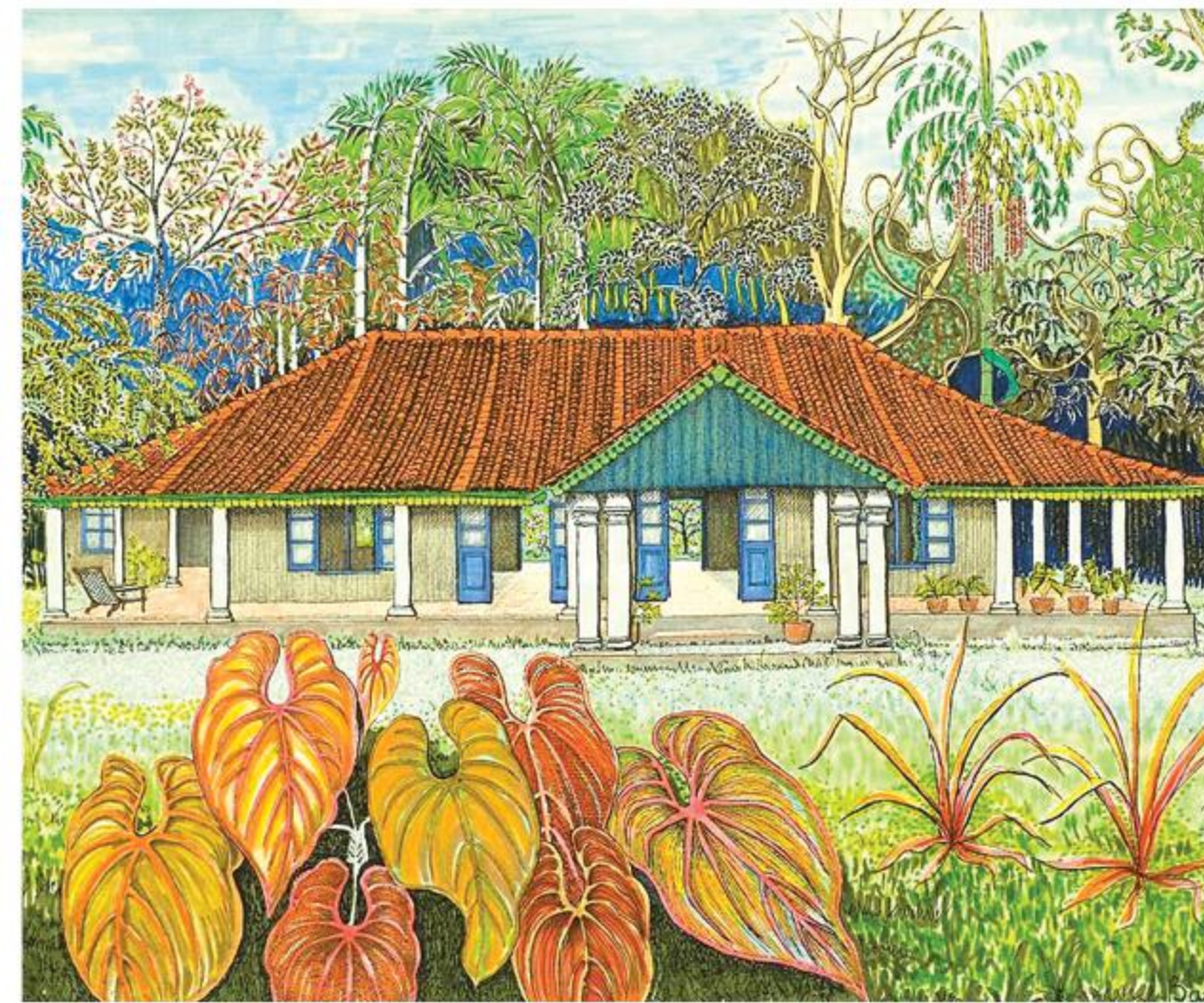


**Barbara Sansoni's Barefoot creations**

woman empowered rural women weavers and transformed the national cottage industry. Sansoni died on 23 April 2022, about an hour after celebrating her 94th birthday.

Sansoni was blessed to have pursued her interest in buildings from childhood after witnessing the highly ceilinged, wide verandahs in her home during her dad's tenure as a Government Agent (GA) in Batticaloa, Matale and Kurunegala. We can now assume that seeing this village life, she was able to absorb what rural Sri Lanka was. This would later help her to understand and relate to rural weavers with whom she worked.

She pursued her primary and secondary education in Ceylon and in Southern India. She studied at a boarding school in Kodaikanal and studied for a year at the St. Bridget's Convent in Colombo for her Higher School Certificate (HSC). She later moved to England and studied for five years at the Regent Street Polytechnic (now known as the University of Westminster).



In that era for a young woman to study overseas was probably a great experience which no doubt enhanced the dormant leadership skills within her, making her stronger and independent. She obtained her degree in Fine Arts from the Chelsea School of Art. This exposure surely inspired her creative thinking process, which years later would blissfully impact all of Sri Lanka.

## Handloom weaving

In the 1950s, Babara Sansoni returned to Sri Lanka from the United Kingdom and she was requested by Mother Good Counsel, Provincial of the Good Shepherd Nuns to promote and enhance handloom weaving by young women under the nuns' care. Sansoni willingly accepted the suggestion of an Irish nun, to become involved in a programme established by the convent in Wattala that taught young and impoverished Sri Lanka women how to weave. Sansoni's initial involve-

ment mainly related to the design aesthetics of the material being produced. Gaining insight into fashion and filled with confidence Sansoni had many exhibitions in Asia, Europe and North America, showcasing her textile designs, drawings, paintings and hand woven panels. She conducted her first one-woman exhibition in London in 1966. In doing so, she put Sri Lanka on the global map.

It is recorded that this multi-faceted woman also worked as a journalist and essayist at the English newspapers Ceylon Daily Mirror and Times of Ceylon during the early 1960s in vintage Ceylon.

Her sketch drawings on the ancient buildings were published in a weekly series titled "Collecting Old Buildings" in 1962 and 1963 in the Ceylon Daily Mirror. During her stint as a part-time journalist, she wrote a series of articles and essays from 1961 to 1963 about traditional local buildings. Success must be recognized and celebrated,

and Babara Sansoni had many accolades to be proud of.

In 1970, she won the J. D. Rockefeller Travel Award for her two years of travel experience across 14 countries during which she studied textiles and architecture. She received the Zonta Woman of Achievement from the Zonta Club of Colombo in 1987. She was duly bestowed with the Woman Entrepreneur of the Year in gold category in 1997 from the Women's Chamber of Industry and Commerce. She was conferred with a Kala Suri from the Government of Sri Lanka in 2005 at the 2005 Sri Lankan national honours in recognition of her special contributions to the development of the arts. Sansoni also received the Geoffrey Bawa Special Lifetime Achievement Award in 2011 for her contributions to art and architecture. In 2016, she was conferred with an Honorary Doctor of Philosophy degree by the University of the Visual and Performing Arts of Sri Lanka.

Creativity is the power to act. The American poet Maya Angelou said "You can't use up creativity. The more you use the more you have". This can be seen in the life of Sansoni. She had a never ending river of creative genius, which flowed to cover many decades. Along its beautiful course this river of talent refreshed and impacted others to grow. Babara Sansoni lived her dreams and fulfilled her goals in classic style. She was a loving mother to her children. She reached the zenith in her chosen fields. May aspiring young women in Sri Lanka follow her path to sustained success. May her sweet soul rest in Eternal Peace.