Hippolyte Silvaf and his drawings of Sri Lankan fishes

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Introduction
Hippolyte Silvaf was one of Sri Lanka's best-known 19th Century artists. While he is best remembered for his paintings of Sri Lankan costumes of the period, a large collection of his natural history drawings which have not been noticed since 1861 came to light recently. We feel it appropriate that the known information on Silvaf should be presented, together with an appraisal of his natural history drawings.

Biography
Phillip Antoine Hippolyte Silvaf was born to parents he claimed were French in Pondicherry, the chief settlement of French India, on the Coromandel coast about 200 km south of Madras on 8 January 1801. His date of arrival in Sri Lanka (then Ceylon) is not known, but appears to have been in the early 1820s. On 12th September 1832 he married Wilhelmina Gertrude de Haan of Negombo, a coastal fishing town about 30 km north of Colombo. They had a son (Napoleon) and a daughter (name unknown). The Silvafs lived in Pettah, then a fashionable residential area just outside the Fort of Colombo.

Silvaf made a living by giving lessons in painting and music, assisted by his wife and later his children. Between 1830 and 1840 Silvaf worked part time as an illustrator for the Military Museum in the Fort of Colombo. By 1839 he had prepared a folio of some 15 drawings of Sri Lankan costumes which he attempted unsuccessfully to have published. The drawings were dedicated and sent to Sir Wilmot Horton (1784-1841), who was Governor of Ceylon from 1831 to 1837, with a request that he persuade the government of Ceylon to publish them. Horton refused however, on the grounds that he did not wish to interfere in the affairs of the colony;

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Between 1845 and 1850 Silvaf tried his hand as a painter of miniatures and had some success in producing hand-coloured daguerreotype portraits. By 1850 he was sufficiently well recognised to have his portraits and natural history drawings reviewed in Young Ceylon (vol. 1, no. 1), a journal devoted principally to the arts. In the early 1850s he travelled to the then famous pearl fishery in Mannar.

Evidently owing to poor patronage in Colombo, Silvaf moved to Kandy, the former capital of the Ceylonese kings, in 1852 or 1853. Here, the Silvafs set about setting up a second art school on Brownrigg Street. His view of the ancient palace at Kandy (then restored and occupied by the British government agent, E.R. Power) executed in 1857 still survives in a private collection (Fig.1). Silvaf also sketched the first railway locomotive on its way from Colombo to Kandy (published in the Observer newspaper of 9 March 1864) on the newly-constructed railway. A commemorative souvenir issued for the occasion 1867 advertised 15 postcard-size prints of Ceylon costumes executed by Silvaf. Alistair Mackenzie Fergusson (1816-1892) too, included these pictures in his Souvenirs of Ceylon (1868). Several of Silvaf's published drawings are listed by de Silva (1995).

Silvaf seems to have been followed by misfortune in all his endeavours. His school (probably the first of its kind in Sri Lanka) was a failure and had to be closed down. He died in Negombo on 9 April 1879. He was buried in the cemetery of the Roman Catholic church there, but we have not succeeded in locating his grave (it is not included in J. Penry Lewis's Tombstones and monuments in Ceylon, 1913).

Etymology
The spelling of the name Silvaf appears to be unique, and is evidently a corruption of the common Portuguese name Silva (still one of the most frequent surnames in Sri Lanka). We have considered two possibilities for its origin.
The more likely one appears to be that as Silvaf's father was also Hippolyte, he followed his name with the word "fils" (= son of, in French), subsequently abbreviated to just "f." Through usage, this probably resulted in the corrupted spelling "Silvaf." In all his drawings examined by us, the signature is spelt "Silvaf."

A second possibility is that he followed his signature with an "f" as an abbreviation of "facit" (= drawn by, in French). This too, was commonly the case in the period, although in Ceylon the artist's name usually carried the postfix "del." (delineare, Latin, to sketch or outline).

We are not aware of any documents (other than drawings) signed by Silvaf and are therefore unable to resolve this matter with any finality. The shipping registers for the early 1820s too, have been examined, but without success. However, in view of his son Napoleon having consistently spelt his name "Silvaf", we have here decided to follow existing usage by adopting this spelling as correct.

Materials and abbreviations

The fish drawings
T.H. Huxley, in Tennent (1861:364-367), drew attention to a "large series of beautifully coloured drawings of the fishes of Ceylon". Huxley went on to write:

The fishes, it appears, were captured around Colombo, and even had those from other parts of Ceylon been added, the geographical area would not have been very extended. Nevertheless, there are more than 600 drawings... The large extent of the collection alone, then, renders it of great importance: but its value is immeasurably enhanced by the two circumstances, – first, that every drawing was made while the fish retained all that vividness of colouring that becomes lost so soon after its removal from its native element; and secondly, that when the sketch was finished, its subject was carefully labelled, preserved in spirits, and forwarded to England, so that at the present moment the original of every drawing can be subjected to anatomical examination, and compared with already named species.

This was followed by a table authored by J.E. Gray which indicates that the fish drawings represented 12 shark species, 19 rays and 558 bony fishes in 49 families.

No mention was made of the artist or the provenance of the drawings. Sir James Emmerson Tennent (1804-1869) was Colonial Secretary of Ceylon from 1845 to 1850. He was a keen naturalist and a fellow of the Linnean Society of London. He took back to England with him a significant collection of zoological specimens and was a visitor to the British Museum for the purpose of obtaining advice and assistance from natural historians such as J.E. Gray (1800-1875) and Albert Günther (1813-1914) (Gunther, 1975: 282).

In 1859, Tennent published his Ceylon, in which he acknowledged several drawings as having been executed by "M. H. Silvaf" (Fig. 2). The style of these drawings, which conforms to other natural history drawings in the same book, suggests that they were specially commissioned by Tennent. It would appear that Silvaf therefore had some contact with Tennent, however indirectly.
The collection of fish drawings, which had been offered to the British Museum in 1986 (A.C. Wheeler, in litt.), were not noticed by us until 1992, when they came up for sale in Amsterdam. The collection was eventually procured from Wheldon & Wesley Limited of the United Kingdom by the WHT for the NMSL.

There are altogether 587 more or less detailed watercolour studies painted on 225 leaves, bound in two albums of approximate size 26x19 cm. Most of the drawings are signed by Silvaf. The local and sometimes the scientific name of each species is noted in pencil on many of the drawings, 17 of which depict Crustacea and four of which are of Medusa. The balance 566 drawings are of fishes (including sharks and rays). Six leaves containing 15 figures are noted as being lost, although if the 21 Crustacea and Medusae are added to Gray’s list of 589 fishes, there must originally have been 610 figures. This corroborates Tennent’s (1861: 323) statement that there were “upwards of six hundred species and varieties” depicted.

The fate of the specimens themselves is a mystery. Tennent (1861: xiii) referred to “the large collection of examples of fishes sent home by officers of the medical staff, and which remain unopened, in the Fort Pitt Museum at Chatham; but I am not without hope that these may shortly undergo comparison with the drawings which exist of each...” Huxley too, evidently did not see the specimens, for he wrote (op. cit.) “It would be very hazardous to express an opinion on the novelty or otherwise of the species and genera figured without the study of the specimens themselves...” Tennent evidently did not hand these over to the BMNH.

Figure 2. Drawing of a slender loris by Silvaf, from Tennent (1859, 1: 134).
The only other collection Tennent (1861:336-337, 339) refers to are the “nineteen drawings [of freshwater fishes] sent home by Major Skinner in 1852”, now evidently lost.

Günther (1861: v) stated that the British Museum had received “a collection of duplicates of fishes in the Museum at Fort Pitt, presented by the Medical Officers of the establishment.” However, A.C. Wheeler (in. litt.) states:

According to this I would have expected this collection to have been registered between June 1860 and July 1861, but I made a page by page examination of the Registers from January 1860 to December 1861 without finding any reference to Fort Pitt. I also checked on the indexes of the registers for 1854-1863 and 1864-1870 without finding any [relevant] entries.

I am at a loss to understand why Günther listed these “duplicates” but did not have them registered. I also looked for material from Tennent (Ceylon) in the Registers with the following results:

1857.12.19.1, Callia in spirit.
1864. 3.18.1, Saccobranchus microcephalus
1866. 1.24.1-28, (1-6, reptiles; 7-28, fishes)

There is little doubt that Günther himself examined the drawings, but in the absence of specimens, he probably had little use for them (the Board of Trade envelope in which they were forwarded to Günther on 19 December 1860, addressed to him in Tennent’s own hand, is in the collection of the WHT (Fig. 3).

We have been unable to find any reference to the Fort Pitt Museum or the fate of its collections and presume Silvaf’s specimens to be lost. It is as difficult today to attempt identification of all the fishes from the drawings alone, but it is clear that several species have been depicted many times over. As studies, the quality of the drawings is very variable, only a handful (see Figs. 4-6 for representative drawings) being close to that achieved by J.W. Bennett (1828-30), the only other comparable Ceylonese fish artist of the period.

**Conclusion**

There appears to be little doubt that the specimens from which the fishes were drawn have perished. The drawings themselves are of little value scientifically because they were never named and published. Regardless of this, Hippolyte Silvaf will continue to be remembered as one of Sri Lanka’s most outstanding artists of the 19th Century.

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**Literature cited**


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Figure 3. The address on the envelope containing the collection of drawings addressed to Günther in Tennet’s hand.

Figure 4. Penaeid shrimp and climbing perch (*Anabas testudineus*), by Hippolyte Silvaë.
Figure 5. Unidentified fish, by Hippolyte Silvaf.

Figure 6. Butterflyfish (*Heniochus acuminatus*), by Hippolyte Silvaf.


