

Words:
Shiromi Pinto

SHIROMI PINTO introduces MINNETTE DE SILVA, the Sri Lankan modernist who inspired her novel.

Minnette de Silva has been enjoying a bit of a resurgence. Sri Lanka's first modernist architect and the first Asian woman to be made an Associate of the Royal Institute of British Architects, de Silva has had conferences dedicated to her in rarefied academic institutions and retrospectives in magazines. This year, she featured in an exhibition on post-independence architecture at New York's Museum of Modern Art.

This would have been unthinkable even two decades ago. Back then, she was an anomaly one could scarcely believe had existed at all. I heard of her only by chance, through an old friend—a London architect who briefly worked with her in the 1980s. Over the course of long and spirited conversations, he'd tell me about this extraordinary woman who knew Picasso, Henri Cartier-Bresson and the father of modern architecture, Le Corbusier. *And* she was Sri Lankan.

I was intrigued. Through my mom, I secured a copy of de Silva's *The Life & Work of an Asian Woman Architect*. The book is a rich personal archive and contains her theories on modern regionalism—an architectural approach that synthesizes modern aesthetics with the most relevant aspects of traditional regional architecture.

It was de Silva who pioneered the inner courtyard, blurring the line between outside and inside. It was also she who integrated

traditional arts and crafts into her buildings' interior design. Today, Sri Lanka's Geoffrey Bawa is credited with these innovations, but de Silva got there 10 years before him.

It was this injustice that drove me to write my novel *Plastic Emotions*. I began that journey, fascinated by the fact that this woman from a tropical island was friends—and perhaps more—with Le Corbusier.¹ I ended it, certain that she had been done a deep disservice, particularly in her home country of Sri Lanka—a country she reluctantly returned to post-independence but which she later refused to leave, always hoping she would get her due in the end.

I'm humbled that my fictionalized account of her life seems to have spawned an interest in and respect for de Silva in Sri Lanka and beyond. I hope that it leads to practical efforts to preserve the few of her buildings that still stand. Perhaps she will finally get the recognition she deserves.

(1) *The Guardian* describes Pinto's novel as one of "romantic speculation." Pinto's inspiration was drawn from a photograph of de Silva and Le Corbusier standing in conversation, and from the letters they exchanged. As *The Guardian*'s review summarizes it: "She gives them trysts, meaningful exchanges, a separation and then painful longing, ending only with Le Corbusier's death in 1965."

Photo: Brian Brake. Courtesy of Museum of New Zealand.

Photo: Jerry Schatzberg/Getty Images

Words:
Katie Calautti



The dazzling history of sunglasses.

The first people to wear sunglasses could have hardly imagined that, centuries later, they would be a glamour accessory whose function often bore no relation to the presence of harsh sunlight.

To cut the relentless glare of light on white in the arctic region of North America, the Inuit people carved slits in pieces of wood or bone to create snow goggles. To more opulent effect, legend has it that while watching gladiatorial events, Roman Emperor Nero shaded his eyes from the sun through an emerald. In 15th-century China, lenses were made from flat pieces of smoky quartz. Emerald-tinted Goldoni glasses were worn by gondoliers on the sunny canals of 18th-century Venice and, around the same time, blue and green glass eye-preservers were popularized in Britain to correct light sensitivity and vision impairment.

By the 1920s, Hollywood starlets started wearing shades on set to protect their pupils from the harsh lighting—then left them on to mingle unnoticed among the hoi polloi. The driving goggles of the 1930s—worn by women behind the wheels of cars without windows—signified rebelliousness and

independence and tipped the scales in fashion's favor.

Such glamorous associations kept stacking up. Bausch & Lomb made the classic Ray-Ban aviator frame to shade the eyes of World War II pilots flying at high altitudes, and they kept an air of adventurous cool through the 1940s. Those early prototypes proved that sunglasses both protected and quickly transformed a face—and so the pragmatic morphed into an aesthetic must-have. In 1956, Bausch & Lomb made what would become their signature Ray-Ban Wayfarer, and musicians fueled their mystique by wearing the style on nightclub stages.

Ensuing decades boasted their own iconic styles—the oversized lenses of the 1960s popularized by Jackie O, the round rims of the 1970s synonymous with John Lennon, the neon frames of the 1980s worn by glam-rockers, and the mini shades of the 1990s often associated with *Friends*-era Jennifer Aniston. Modern iterations run the gamut, adhering less to a single style and more to a reflection of the wearer's personality. Sunglasses, it seems, have done a 180—what once hid now firmly highlights.