It has been well observed that the true artist is a biographer not only in his portraits but also in all his other paintings - where he depicts a scene in action, a landscape or an abstract idea. Every true picture, therefore, is a biographical poem. It illumines the mystery of life for our better understanding. It portrays not only an object, but its character. It transforms old images into new beauty. It reproduces not only the manner but the meaning of a sitter or a scene.

The great artist interprets whatever he represents. He adds to the painting the rhythm and colour of his own personality. Such an artist was Maligawage Sarlis.

As a lad he didn't go through a course in academic art. He didn't have the opportunity to learn the technique of formal design. But Sarlis started drawing and painting with his father's brother Vidane, who was famous for drawing religious pictures to be hung in every rural home.

M. Sarlis first had his education under the scholar monk Ven. Valitara Gnanatilaka and later at Vidyodaya Pirivena at Maligakanda in Colombo under the eminent scholar Ven. Hikkaduwe Sri Sumangala where he learnt Sinhala, Pali, Sanskrit and writing of poetry.

It was at Maligakanda that he met Richard Henricus, one of the best known Sri Lankan artists exponent of murals and portraits of the early decades of 20th century. Richard Henricus was well-known in drawing murals in both Buddhist and Christian contests and in curtain paintings for the Tower Hall theatre in Maradana in 1911. Sarlis is known to have worked as an assistant to Richard Henricus at the Jayatilakarama temple in Grandpass in 1909.

M. Sarlis’ first professional creation is said to be at Jayatilakaramaya shrine room the 'Seated Buddha.' Sarlis was also influenced by the late Gate Mudliyar A. C. G. S. Amarasekera the doyen of academic realist painting in Sri Lanka. The Maligakanda Temple is the first temple to be painted and sculpted by Sarlis between 1911 - 1920. A series of paintings from the 'Suvisi Vivarane' and the offering of milk rice by Princess Sujatha is still remains in their original form at the temple.

During 20th century there were no equivalent pictures to adorn the walls of Buddhist houses other than framed prints imported from Europe with pictures of the royal family, romantic landscapes in Christian homes had
pictures related to their religious beliefs. M. Sarlis immediately started to fill the vacuum. With the help of a Buddhist entrepreneur named William Pedris got his Buddhist pictures litho printed in Germany and marketed islandwide. These pictures included the incidents from the Jataka stories and the portrait of the Venerable Sivali Maha-thera was the most popular picture. This picture became so popular.

In 1925 Bastion and Company and H. W. Cave published Sarlis’ work in litho prints and distributed them islandwide. These pictures included Vijayavatara, (arrival of prince Vijaya to Sri Lanka), the death of Madduma Bandara, the heroic Kandyan child aristocrat ready to be executed for the national cause.

The reputation he gained by his work in the shrine room at Maligakanda and the popularity of the litho prints paved the way to obtain a number of temples all over the island. One of his finest works can be regarded in the series of paintings depicting the Maha Mangala Sutta on the ceiling of the shrine room still remains in its original form at Maligakanda temple.

Sarlis was not only known as a temple artist and illustrator, but also as a graphic and commercial artist. He can be considered as one of the pioneers of modern advertising art. He was the chief artist of the very popular Sinhala language newspaper 'Swadesha Mithraya' and he also designed its Vesak journal. He also designed book covers and also a book for small children called 'Aksara Hodiya' a children's alphabet for use in Kindergartens. He also had a reputation for life size portraits painted, statues of famous personalities sculptured like Anagarika Dharmapala, Colonel Henry Steel Olcott and Musereus Higgins to name a few. His contribution to Buddhist art and design were the Vesak pandals and Vesak lanterns. Vesak pandals with pictures depicting the life of the Buddha were a concept of Sarlis master.

In order to spread his knowledge and skill, he started an art school called the Ceylon Art College. These training programmes were for commercial art, and also a correspondence course in art through the Lanka Art Correspondence Institute in 1923. M. Sarlis was also well-known as a writer and a poet who contributed articles to various newspapers on traditional art. I was so fortunate to become his next door neighbour when I was able to pick up the rudiments of art under the tutelage of his son Susil Premaratne and his star pupil the famous water-colour artist G. S. Fernando.

His father Maligawage Nandiris was a well-known astrologer of Andadola Ambalangoda.

M. Sarlis was born in 1880 and died in 1955. His enormous out put at the easel, his brilliant work as a sculptor, and as a muralist made few generations of his countrymen immortal.