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EDITOR'S PREFACE

Ananda Kentish Coomaraswamy 1877-1947

"Blessed is the man on whose tomb can be written *Hic jacet nemo*" [Here lies no one].
(A. K. Coomaraswamy, *Hinduism and Buddhism*, p.30)

In response to a request for autobiographical information, Ananda K. Coomaraswamy replied: "I must explain that I am not at all interested in biographical matter relating to myself and that I consider the *modern* practice of publishing details about the lives and personalities of well-known men is nothing but a vulgar catering to illegitimate curiosity… this is not a matter of 'modesty' but one of principle." The principle involved here, often enunciated by Coomaraswamy, was to value the truths expressed by the man above the man himself, who was merely a vehicle for their expression. Now nearly sixty years after his death, he would perhaps forgive us this venture into biography, especially since the wisdom he so eloquently unfolded remains of such precious value in this world of uncertainty and flux in which we live in the twenty-first century.

The breadth of Coomaraswamy's knowledge, the many fields of which he had full grasp, seems astonishing in today's world of narrow scholarly specialization. While primarily known among scholars as an art historian, he shed light upon many other diverse subjects, for he did not limit the study of art to descriptive or historical inquiry. He drew the broadest implications for the meaning and always-present value of the works of art under consideration, delving into aesthetics, literature and language, folklore, religion, metaphysics and many other fields. His heritage and early years uniquely prepared him for this life's work. Ananda Kentish Coomaraswamy was born in 1877 in Colombo, Ceylon. His father was the distinguished Sri Lankan barrister Sir Mutu Coomaraswamy and his mother Elizabeth Clay Beebe, from a wealthy English family. Sir Mutu died in 1879 when Ananda Coomaraswamy was two years old. His mother had already brought the young Ananda back to England, and after his father's death, they lived in a cottage in Kent. Ananda attended Wycliffe College in Gloucestershire from 1889 to 1897. He received the B. Sc. in geology and botany from University College, London in 1900 and in 1906 his doctorate in Geology from London University. At least as early as 1896 he began to make annual

visits to Ceylon, the homeland of his father, where he undertook geological surveys and studies and was soon appointed the first director of the newly-established Mineralogical Survey of Ceylon.

In 1902 he traveled by ox cart throughout Ceylon in fulfillment of his geological research. He quickly became aware of the traditional Buddhist and Hindu culture and the arts and crafts which still flourished in the remoter regions of Ceylon, more-or-less untouched by modern European civilization. At the same time, with his English upbringing he was painfully aware of the neglect of this traditional culture by the Western-educated Sinhalese under the pressure of colonialism. His interest in the protection and revival of Sri Lankan culture led him to the founding in 1905 of the Ceylon Social Reform Society. The purposes of the Society expressed Coomaraswamy's full comprehension of the value of the traditional society of Ceylon and his awareness of what was at stake if these traditions were irreparably lost. In his travels throughout the country he had discovered the hieratic sacred Buddhist temple sculpture, the vibrant folk and utilitarian arts, the traditional dress, the marvelous literature and language where "ploughmen spoke as elegantly as courtiers," and the customs and ceremonial life which still ordered daily existence. During his time in Ceylon, living in a cottage outside the city of Kandy, his interests gradually changed from geology to traditional Indian and Sinhalese arts and culture. In 1906 he resigned his position as director of the Mineralogical Survey, publishing little in a scientific vein thereafter, and in 1907 during travels in India, he formally became a Hindu in Lahore, prior to returning to England. Although he gave up his geological work, his scientific training was later to serve him well in his careful studies of iconography and his precise and penetrating expositions of linguistics and metaphysics.

Coomaraswamy's early efforts in Ceylon led to an eloquent series of articles, books, and exhibitions, in which he portrayed the deadening effects of colonialism on the traditional cultures of India and Ceylon and the need to nurture and revitalize all the traditional arts, including handcraft traditions. In the emerging *svadeshi* movement of the day, some Indian nationalists had advocated local craft production as a bulwark against economic and political control of Indian life by the British, but Coomaraswamy differed with them in stressing the need for spiritual and cultural preservation and revival. Only by preserving core values which recognized the beauty and spiritual meaning in traditional forms could a true nationalist movement be founded, a movement that could free itself not only from Western economic and political domination but of greater importance, from cultural domination. Following the lead of

John Ruskin and William Morris, Coomaraswamy decried the mediocrity and uniformity of machine-made products as well as the sapping effects of factory work upon laborers and the meaninglessness of an industrial culture no longer based upon spiritual traditions.

Coomaraswamy's ideas helped set the stage for the full-scale incorporation of the local production of handcrafts into the Indian nationalist movement led by Mohandas Gandhi. Throughout his life Coomaraswamy maintained an active interest in the progress of Indian independence from British rule. He first met Gandhi at a meeting in London in 1914 and always commended his work which he saw inspired at the highest level. Shortly before India achieved independence in 1947, in answer to a question about Gandhi, Coomaraswamy responded that the former's advocacy of non-violence (*satyāgraha*) made him a teacher not only for India but a *jagat-guru* (a teacher whose role is of universal significance), for "non-violence, as he knows, is not merely a matter of refraining from visibly violent actions; it is a matter of making peace with our selves, one of learning to obey our Inner Man; for none but the outer man or ego is aggressive." Here Coomaraswamy placed the most essential spiritual commandment, to know and master thyself, as the necessary basis of all human and hence political and social action.

Returning to England in 1907 Coomaraswamy took part in the Arts and Crafts Movement, applying more broadly the ideas concerning traditional arts he had formulated in Ceylon and India. He soon became closely associated with C. R. Ashbee, a disciple of William Morris and even acquired Morris's printing press upon which he printed his first major publication, *Mediaeval Sinhalese Art* in 1908. At this time he began the serious study of Indian art, contributing articles on Hindu and Buddhist bronze statuary to scholarly publications. He worked quickly to correct the Eurocentric view of English and other historians who saw India as an inferior civilization and its sacred art either without value or totally dependent upon Greece and Roman sources. In a paper given before the Oriental Congress in Copenhagen in 1908, Coomaraswamy stated that the Greek influence upon Indian sculpture was "magnified out of all proportion" by European scholars and was "ultimately neither very profound nor very important." At the same time he began to publish his studies of Mughal and Rajput and other Indian painting. Rajput painting in particular was virtually unknown in the West and underappreciated in India until Coomaraswamy began collecting examples of it, upon which he first lectured in Calcutta in 1910 and which he first published in 1912 in his *Indian Drawings: Second Series, Chiefly Rajput.* In 1916 he published his magisterial *Rajput Painting*, a pioneering work

which in two large volumes dealt with and illustrated this remarkable school of Hindu painting flourishing in Rajasthan and the Punjabi regions of northern India from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries. Of central importance in the Rajput school are the paintings illustrating the life of Rādhā and Krishna, providing a profound allegory for the path of the soul through love towards God. Coomaraswamy recognized that Rajput painting was a deeply symbolic art unconcerned with naturalism, yet vitally concerned with human ends. He wrote in *Rajput Painting*: "Rarely has any other art combined so little fear with so much tenderness, so much delight with such complete renunciation."

With the outbreak of the First World War, as an Indian nationalist—in a sense he was the spiritual conscience of the *svadeshi* movement—Coomaraswamy was against Indian involvement in the military effort: "We have no imperial call to offer military service to either combatant, or to rejoice intemperately at the success of this or that industrial empire.... neutrality of thought may be efficacious for the tempering of strife ... because ... all things are intertwined and indivisible." For this principled anti-colonialist and anti-industrialist stand ("what we call our civilization is but a murderous machine," Coomaraswamy would later quote Prof. George La Piana of Harvard), he was threatened with legal proceedings in England and had some of his property confiscated by the government, but was able in 1917 to emigrate to America with some financial assets and of most importance, with his invaluable collection of Indian art. Through the support of Dr. Denman Ross, a professor of art and design at Harvard and patron of the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, Coomaraswamy was hired in April 1917 as the first Keeper (Curator) of the newly-established Section of Indian Art in the Museum's Asiatic Department. Ross also purchased for the Museum most of Coomaraswamy's Indian painting collection which formed the basis of the new Indian section.

Prior to assuming his duties, Coomaraswamy quickly acquainted himself with his new homeland. He traveled across the United States, spending time in New Mexico where he helped to inspire the revival of Indian and Hispanic arts and also visiting the Navajo and Hopi Indian reservations before going on to the west coast. Returning to Boston, over the next decade he produced for the Museum a series of catalogues of the collection, monographs, and articles which were models of art historical scholarship and essentially established the basis for the modern study of Indian art. These works set the stage for his major work, *History of Indian and Indonesian Art,* published in 1927. It became the standard reference work on the subject and is still in print today.

Having established himself as a pre-eminent scholar in the field, Coomaraswamy gradually returned to interests of his earlier life: a renewed concern with metaphysics and religion and their application to contemporary life. In the late 1920s he began in-depth studies of the Vedas and other classics of Hindu and Buddhist spiritual thought and in 1933 published the first fruits of his labors as *A New Approach to the Vedas*. It was impossible, he said, to truly understand the sacred art of India without simultaneously knowing the full spiritual context in which it was created, for which these scriptures were important keys. And this was not merely an academic task: "It is evident that for an understanding of the Vedas, a knowledge of Sanskrit, *however profound*, is insufficient. Indians themselves ... insist upon the absolute necessity of study at the feet of a *guru*."

Given that it was not possible for most Westerners to study in this traditional manner, Coomaraswamy's method, his "new approach," first involved rigorous translation of the spiritual terms in the texts, translations which, unlike previous academic efforts, embodied the fullness of meaning of each term. In order to understand these terms and the ideas embodied by them, normal word usage in modern English and other European languages was not adequate, so Coomaraswamy began careful etymological and theological studies of medieval Christian texts: thinkers such as St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas, as well as study of the Greek classics: Plato, Aristotle, the neo-Platonists and others. These studies which he continued through the remainder of his life had two purposes: first, to provide a fully adequate understanding of the Vedic and Buddhist scriptures, and second, to demonstrate that such an understanding of metaphysical concepts was an essential and normal part of the Western tradition, but gradually had been forgotten or debased in the West after the Renaissance. Thus a further purpose in Coomaraswamy's later writing was to show how far removed the modern world was from the traditional world of the East and the medieval West. And such a removal was by no means "progress," as commonly thought. Coomaraswamy often quoted the observation of his colleague John Lodge: "From the Stone Age until now, *quelle degringolade* [what a decline]." And he spoke of the "impoverished reality" of the contemporary world to be found in nearly every aspect of life, from the profound disconnection with the spirit to the dehumanizing manufacture and use of every day objects.

Coomaraswamy's work in this period returned to his earlier concerns, but now understood and presented at a deeper level. Commentators have offered different reasons for this radical (in the original

sense of returning to the root) change in his work, but it is perhaps best explained by Coomaraswamy himself in a 1947 letter to his colleague Herman Goetz: "You connect my change of interest from art history to metaphysics with age.... However, I would also like to explain that this was also a natural and necessary development arising from my former work in which the iconographic interest prevails. I was no longer satisfied with a merely descriptive iconography and had to be able to explain the reason of the forms; and for this it was necessary to go back to the Vedas and to metaphysics in general, for there lies the seminal reasons of iconographic development. I could not of course be satisfied with merely 'sociological' explanations since the forms of traditional societies themselves can only be explained metaphysically."

In the early 1930s Coomaraswamy's work was further inspired by his encounter with the writings of the French thinker René Guénon (1886-1951). In a series of books beginning in 1921 Guénon had written authoritatively of Hindu metaphysics and vehemently of the loss of sacred tradition in the modern West. His work was a confirmation of the renewed direction which Coomaraswamy was taking, and the two became collaborators, sharing their work and ideas. Their approaches, however, differed in that Guénon avoided immersion in academia while Coomaraswamy relished it. He was a highly regarded scholar and he thought that his most important work should be directed to the academic community: "I feel that rectification must begin at the reputed 'top', and only so will find its way into schools and text books and encyclopedias."

In the late 1930s and early 1940s he also began writing more popular articles, as well as lectures and radio broadcasts, directed to the educated public. These works generally deal with two major subjects. First they are intended to show that the appreciation of art must involve the whole person, that true art has primarily an intellective—that is an objective spiritual—purpose and can not merely be appreciated for its aesthetic qualities, which finally are superficial and subjective. Secondly they are thoughtful and powerful critiques of the values and direction of modern life. Still a supporter of Gandhi and Indian independence, Coomaraswamy wrote trenchant indictments of the effects of modern industrial civilization on traditional peoples, not only those of India but also more "primitive" peoples whose ways of life and cultures were rapidly being crushed by colonialist exploitation. And he demonstrated that these deleterious effects also and inevitably played a role in the spiritual degeneration of the modern West.

Finally, all of Coomaraswamy's late work is focused on the primacy of the spirit within the human soul, the inborn truth that is inherent in our deepest nature. The immanent spirit, characterized in medieval thought as the synteresis (intellect, conscience) is that "spark of Divine Awareness" which should be the source of all discursive thought and action. While it is sometimes equated simply with conscience in the moral sense, Coomaraswamy notes that it is far more comprehensive than that, for it is the source of self-knowledge and consequently of all doing and all creating. It is the "habit of First Principles," as Coomaraswamy notes, following St. Thomas, habit being understood in the sense of an inborn predilection for truth and understanding. All thought and action, whether intellective, moral, or creative depends upon direct reference to First Principles, to that innate spark of consciousness in every human soul and cannot depend upon the individuality, the little "I" which does as it pleases. Coomaraswamy's message was twofold: first to make clear the objective and subjective reality of the divine presence within us, as it is enunciated in all traditions, and secondly to make us draw the inevitable conclusions that this presence has for all aspects of our life and thought.

Coomaraswamy did not see his method as a spiritual "Way" but rather as the necessary clarifying of thought and intention prior to finding a Way, which could and should be found within the reader's own tradition. He saw himself not as a guru or sage but merely as the explicator of fundamental truths which had been neglected and forgotten by the modern world: "I am neither [a saint nor an intellectual giant], but I do say those whose authority I rely on when I speak, have been both."

William Wroth
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