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INTRODUCTION

Some years ago the historian Jonathan Spence treated us all to his book, *The Memory Palace of Matteo Ricci*, the vivid study of a Jesuit missionary in sixteenth-century China who introduced Chinese scholars and administrators to the Jesuits' expert art of remembering. The gist of the method was to construct a memory palace, an imaginary structure as vast and detailed as required to house, room by room, the memories one wished to retain and recall at will. *Figures of Speech or Figures of Thought?* introduces us to the memory palace of Ananda K. Coomaraswamy. He would object at once that it is not his own memory palace, not even remotely a personal possession, but rather the common inheritance of humankind diligently assembled. The point would be well taken. Yet as he often cited from St. Thomas Aquinas, "everything is known in the mode of the knower." The memory palace in this book and throughout Coomaraswamy's later work carries the signature of a very great mind.

Everyone knows that Coomaraswamy's writings are often difficult. His footnotes can be book-length; many essays are two in one, a primary text purposefully guided across an ocean of secondary references and reflections. A shift in metaphor may be helpful: there is a cartographer's intent and passion at work here. Mapmakers do not skip a promontory or summarize a river; their task is to be rigorously exact. But even while recalling the complexity of certain of Coomaraswamy's writings and the long challenge they pose, one has to remember two quite different elements. There are essays of wonderful simplicity and directness (here, for example, "Shaker Furniture" and "Literary Symbolism"), and even in difficult writings passages shine with the poet's gift for the perfect word or image, as if everything that came before, no matter how complex, prepares such luminous moments.

This is the least indulgent of writers. His *daimon* drove him to the farthest reaches of complexity in search of complete truth that could withstand every test. He was among the first global thinkers, a scholar of comparative wisdom—in this book, wisdom about art—who could not rest content with the ideas, icons, and teaching narratives (sacred history, myth, and tale) of one culture only. He shows us Christian ideas, icons, and narratives alongside Hindu and Buddhist ideas, icons, and narratives, and these in turn alongside Platonic and Muslim elements of culture—and more still. He sought and saw their underlying

unity. He said memorably of the Delaware Indians that their religion possessed everything necessary to become a world religion, but for one thing only: they had too few guns and ships to impose themselves on others. The comment reflects both the breadth of his ecumenical vision and his awareness as an early participant in India's struggle for independence of the undercurrent of violence in imperialism.

Coomaraswamy uncovers and puts before us the truths of a primordial tradition, reflected in the world's existing traditions and expressed by them as if in differing dialects. He asks us to join him in the effort to *decipher* the religiously rich arts and crafts, literatures and folklore of the world's traditions. Linking all of his writings, the act or gesture of decipherment recognizes that traditions are richly encoded and reveal themselves only superficially in the absence of key ideas and perspectives. Those ideas and perspectives are present at the center of each tradition, but they must be seen and stated with clarity if they are to provide a reliable orientation.

The vast learning marshaled by Coomaraswamy in this book and others provides a basis for deciphering traditional works of art and the cultural conditions that needed those works and gave life to them. Coomaraswamy does not invite us to stroll past pictures at an exhibition for pleasure's sake but rather to engage in a quest for understanding. A pair of essays in this book, "The Nature of Buddhist Art" and "*Saṃvega*: Aesthetic Shock," speaks to this intensified quality of encounter with works of art. In the first of the two essays, the opening paragraph states with spare nobility the entire premise of Coomaraswamy's approach to traditional religious art:

> In order to understand the nature of the Buddha image and its meaning for a Buddhist we must, to begin with, reconstruct its environment, trace its ancestry, and remodel our own personality. We must forget that we are looking at "art" in a museum, and see the image in its place in a Buddhist church or as part of a sculptured rock wall; and having seen it, receive it as an image of what we are ourselves potentially. Remember that we are pilgrims come from some great distance to see God; that what we see will depend upon ourselves. We are to see, not the likeness made by hands, but its transcendental archetype; we are to take part in a communion. We have heard the spoken Word, and remember that "He who sees the Word, sees Me"; we are to see this Word, not now in an audible but in a visible and tangible form.... The image is of one Awakened: and for our

> awakening, who are still asleep. The objective methods of "science" will not suffice; there can be no understanding without assimilation; to understand is to have been born again. (p. 145)

For all of us who encounter works of traditional religious art and yearn to receive the messages placed in them long ago as if in safekeeping, Coomaraswamy continues to be the teacher without peer. To know art with his guidance is to be in quest. To know with his guidance is the fullest of acts, not only mental, not only aesthetic, not only affective, but a movement of the whole person toward another order of knowledge. Coomaraswamy wrote of this, again in "The Nature of Buddhist Art," in words that exemplify his unique poetry. A seemingly dry exposition concludes with an image of ecstatic beauty:

> If the use of [a] symbol is to function mediately as a bridge between the world of local position and a "world" that cannot be traversed or described in terms of size, it is sufficiently evident that the hither end of such a bridge must be somewhere, and in fact wherever our edification begins: procedure is from the known to the unknown; it is the other end of the bridge that has no position. (p. 156)

Coomaraswamy was a great academic. His catalogues of Asian art in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, are models of their kind, and there are nearly innumerable articles and books dedicated to clarifying points of knowledge within the honorable boundaries of the academic disciplines he practiced, primarily art history and Sanskrit/Pali study. But in his last 16 years or so, from about 1932 until his passing in the fall of 1947, he tended to use his comprehensive knowledge of the history of art, of languages ancient and modern, Indic and Western, and of Western and Asian scripture and commentary and philosophy, to purposes that often transcended and occasionally defied typical academic aims. He was gathering ancient and traditional knowledge before it was too late. In opposition to the secular culture of our time, which he considered empty and profoundly misleading as to the proper goals of human life, he assembled a palace of memory in which ideas, images, and narratives rooted in pre-modern tradition were recognized, cleansed of misunderstandings, placed in logical order, linked with kindred materials, and restored as teachings for our time. This memory palace was not a museum; it was and still is for habitation, for use. He worked with a kind of desperation, not only because he was approaching his older years but because he experienced the society around him as amnesiac, willfully and grossly forgetful of the "traditional or 'normal' view" of

life and art. He had long been a scholar. Now he was a teacher and prophet.

The study of art history and the critical reception of contemporary art have moved in fruitful directions since Coomaraswamy's time. We are certainly better at the social history of art than we were then. We have noticed the actuality of women as individual artists and as the owners of the fingers that produced magnificent works. Archaeology has advanced, and with it many times and places of artistic accomplishment are far better understood. In terms of critical theory, we have ideas so compelling that they can easily overshadow the patient study of the work of art itself. The art of the twentieth century, which with few exceptions Coomaraswamy held in contempt, was richer in spirituality than he acknowledged. On the other hand, many of Coomaraswamy's concerns and practices—his attention to iconography, his exploration of literary sources and parallels, his interest in the artist's values and procedures—are more firmly part of the fabric of art-historical and art-critical study than they were in his day. Though readers will notice in Coomaraswamy's writings attitudes and interpretations that seem dated, the core of his work is surely classic, fresh in each generation.

In "*Saṃvega*: Aesthetic Shock," a complex work with unexpected passages of unforgettable force, Coomaraswamy writes of "the shock or wonder that may be felt when the perception of a work of art becomes a serious experience."

> In the deepest experience that can be induced by a work of art (or other reminder) our very being is shaken … to its roots.... It involves … a self-naughting … and it is for this reason that it can be described as "dreadful," even though we could not wish to avoid it.... I have myself been completely dissolved and broken up by … reading aloud Plato's *Phaedo*. That cannot have been an "aesthetic" emotion, such as could have been felt in the presence of some insignificant work of art, but represents the shock of conviction that only an intellectual art can deliver, the body-blow that is delivered by any perfect and therefore convincing statement of truth. (p. 181)

Orientation is a strange thing. It takes only a little light, shining in the right direction, to show the way. Coomaraswamy's writings are filled with light, but even a short passage such as this shows the way. It reflects a hierarchy of values, a quality of engagement with works of art that does not leave one cold or unchanged, continuity between spiritual experience and the experience of art. Every passage from his writings cited in this brief introduction speaks to the seeker in each of us, to

the one who perceives in arts long past—the peacefulness and intensity of an early Byzantine icon, the glowing turquoise glaze of an Iranian ceramic, the limitless joy of Shiva dancing—not just material treasures luckily preserved but signs intimately addressed to us.

How clumsy one feels in the effort to say, in all simplicity, that Coomaraswamy is an irreplaceable teacher. Surely one must go on from his writings; they are not a pen or tether. Just as surely, they must be remembered. The ideal curriculum would be a full year of study of his writings; this book represents a superb point of entry. Thereafter, as St. Augustine wrote in a homily on the first Letter of John, "Love and do what you will." We need to move freely in society and culture as they are today, and to contribute as and where we can. This too is self-naughting: not to stand apart. Yet one remembers.

Roger Lipsey

"Introduction" to *Figures of Speech or Figures of Thought?*

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