

*The text below was delivered as a lecture at the concluding ceremony of the yearlong Silver Jubilee celebration of the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts (New Delhi), 19 November 2013. Published with permission.*

## **A.K. Coomaraswamy: A New Encounter with an Old Master**

**Roger Lipsey**

What a privilege to be here and to have this opportunity to speak with you. My theme is “a new encounter with an old master”—with Ananda Coomaraswamy. This we can say, and perhaps more than a few of us can say it: one’s first contact with Coomaraswamy’s writings is not merely intellectual—not merely a calm assent to thoughts of some interest. It is an encounter. It shakes one’s view of art and history and of oneself. He means to slay something in us and to give life, hope, and direction to something else. In this large task he is effective.

My own first encounter with his ideas may not have been wholly unlike your own, though the circumstances were undoubtedly different. I must momentarily break a rule set by the older Coomaraswamy: not to speak of oneself, to eschew the personal and attend exclusively to the impersonal, the greater Self. But as I’ve lived, I’ve come to feel that God does not write our lives inattentively—that within each life lived a little faithfully, and graced if only a little by good fortune, not all is trivial. We are the falling sparrows mentioned by Christian scripture: noticed and cared for as much as greater things.

In the 1960s I had been very nearly adopted by a French family—I certainly adopted them—who took a great interest in Romanesque art and architecture, the art of the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries richly surviving in city and countryside from the north to the Mediterranean. We often traveled by car from Paris to the south and detoured to visit monuments ranging from great churches and abbeys of that period to chapels scarcely on the map. I didn’t fully recognize it at the time—I was quite young—but we were explorers for meaning, decipherers of ancient codes, pilgrims in time. We were returning to an era when religious concepts and sensibility guided the arts, when an immense repertory of symbols and images from the European heritage and from contacts with the East was a shared possession. We would enter a 12<sup>th</sup>-century church as if entering the 12<sup>th</sup> century. My adoptive father chose our monuments, and it was evident that he practiced some private discipline of attention in his approach to sacred art. We didn’t visit monuments to talk about them, though of course we did talk with one another; we visited to be possessed, to learn secrets, to widen our view of human nature—and therefore of our own identities.

At the family home in the south of France, we gathered one summer to read a text aloud: our life on holiday was covertly pedagogic, this kind of thing happened quite often. For the occasion we climbed to the stone roof of the 11<sup>th</sup>-century riverside tower which was part of the property. The text I was to read was unfamiliar. As it was in English, I was expected to translate at sight into French so that all family members would understand it. And as there were no chairs or benches, we sat cross-legged and my adoptive father offered his back to mine as a support—he had some notion that mind is posture, I couldn’t quarrel with that. Back to back, occupying the middle of the family circle, we must have looked like a fantastic two-headed figure on a Romanesque capital. I set to work. The text was from Coomaraswamy’s most widely read book,

*Christian and Oriental Philosophy of Art*. And so it was revealed: the sensitive, inquiring, deeply respectful approach to medieval art, which had captivated me, was due in large part to this still unknown author, Dr. Coomaraswamy. I could draw lines in my mind from what I read to our experience, and our way of experiencing masterworks of the Romanesque.

I took the lesson home to the United States and read further in Coomaraswamy. His vision soon propelled me to seek a graduate education in the history of art. I would become a mature decipherer of ancient symbols—so I wished. I would become deeply acquainted with the treasures of religious art of many cultures. I would learn to think not only in words but in images. Words were tiresome, there were too many in the mind. Images were silent but compact with life and meaning. Coomaraswamy had written that the natural language of metaphysics is images, and in some way still obscure to me this already made perfect sense.

In light of these grand aspirations, my entry interview with a renowned medievalist at the graduate school I eventually attended was ominous. I explained to him my passion for Romanesque art, my admiration for works ranging from the austere beauty of Cistercian monastic architecture to intriguing sculpture in remote chapels. The professor looked at me from a chill distance. “Don’t say to me,” he responded, “that because sculpture is primitive it’s better!” Reaching past the immediate conversation, there was some categorical refusal in his words and attitude. I felt as if I had received a physical blow.

I became an altogether diligent graduate student. That was what there was to do, and I appreciated the opportunity. Focusing for the most part on Western medieval art, I learned the catalogue of works in several other cultures, befriended (or very nearly) the outstanding scholar of Islamic art, Richard Ettinghausen, who had a sense of grateful debt to Coomaraswamy; took courses from Stella Kramrisch, who had not only known Coomaraswamy but prolonged his spirit and perspective for many decades. My dissertation topic remained undecided. Perhaps it should be a monograph on a Romanesque church with complex sculptural decoration; I had a quite perfect one in mind. But the somewhat narrow project didn’t sit well with me. I was a seeker of symbols, of ancient knowledge—among glass slides. It was a rather pathetic situation. I had to admit to myself that my education in the history of Western art had largely been what the later Coomaraswamy abhorred: an education in objects and their provenances, in the history of styles and masters, in technical issues of connoisseurship: superb as far as it went, and hard-earned by the generation of predominantly German scholars and their American students who were our professors—but something was grievously absent. I could see now, but what was I seeing? Weren’t religious objects signs of spirit? Wasn’t the task to interpret that spirit, to discover and articulate what Coomaraswamy termed “the polar balance of physical and metaphysical” in works of art?

His world of ideas, the paradoxical rigor and intimacy of his approach to religious art, was still calling to me. He was the inescapable, welcome teacher. Without him, the history of art had become, as he once coldly put it, boring. With him, it was a journey of discovery not only of the language of art but of entire cultural fabrics, of the best and deepest we humans have so far made and spoken. Daringly, I proposed to our distinguished faculty a dissertation on Ananda Coomaraswamy’s life and thought. The faculty promptly broke into two: some—Ettinghausen, Kramrisch, and others—understood how much new work there was to be done and its intrinsic value; others were typified by yet another renowned professor who described Coomaraswamy as “a second-rate mind.” The angels prevailed, I was free to begin.

Nine years later it was my privilege to publish the three-volume edition some of you may have in your libraries—two volumes of Coomaraswamy’s later writings on art, symbolism, and

metaphysics, a third on his life and thought as it developed from the early years in Sri Lanka, through his rich experience in India and England, and on to America. I cannot recall the years when I was preparing those volumes without bringing to mind the late Rama Coomaraswamy, Ananda's son, who with his large and lively family offered me a sanctuary of warmth, respect, and conversation of an altogether unique kind. His home in Connecticut displayed exquisite Indian miniatures, works of craft, and much else collected soon after the turn of the century by Ananda; his files had a wealth of his father's correspondence and unpublished writings; he had some of AKC's books, thoroughly marked up in the master's hand.<sup>1</sup> The legendary teacher and scholar, who had left this world in 1947, was grounded in that home by artifacts, by the atmosphere, by the continuity of generations. Thank you, Rama and Bernadette.

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What was so moving? What remains so moving despite the passage of years? I would say that Coomaraswamy in his later years conferred dignity on those who instinctively approach religious art as an epiphany, a transforming experience that teaches and touches both mind and heart. So doing, he was not arguing for an abandonment of scholarship, on the contrary. He was enlarging and refining a dimension that had been marginalized, forgotten, even scorned in the legitimate effort to construct an art history and modes of art historiography on a solid foundation. It was a dimension that had no voice—none that was thorough and persuasive—until he spoke. That dignity was his own, communicated through his writings as if they were a secondary but nonetheless powerful *darshan*. I would say that this gift of dignity—which was both a deep consolation and a rigorous challenge to those who could respond—makes itself known on two levels. The first level is that of aphorisms and of expositions so compact that they retain the flavor of aphorism: Coomaraswamy was able to condense and shine a thought until its expression needed few words, often enough unforgettable words with the force and fecundity of seed syllables. Full of implication, they retain the atmosphere of his thought and promise that more still can be discovered by looking in the directions toward which they point.

Examples are to be found nearly everywhere in his later writings, but we might well turn to a notable essay of 1938, "The Nature of Buddhist Art," which falls midway between a classic work of historical scholarship, his *History of Indian and Indonesian Art* of 1927, and his farewell speech of 1947, which made clear that he had few scholarly tasks remaining and looked forward to a life of spiritual practice in India. What was the sound of that gift of dignity? "In order to understand the nature of the Buddha image," he wrote in the first lines of that essay,

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. . . . 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.<sup>2</sup>

Nearly the whole of his teaching about sacred art and our possible reception of it is implicit in these few words. He was interested in shocks, in the abrupt change of internal orientation that can come over one in contact with truly great works of art, and there is a shock here. The first sentence starts with such calm; one feels oneself under the guidance of a genial, cultured, uncontroversial mind. And it ends with a shock: if we are to understand the Buddha image, we must “remodel our own personality.” What does that mean? Can’t we just come and go from works of art? Aren’t interest and pleasure enough? No, the encounter is much more intimate, and more formal, than that. We are to receive what we see “as an image of what we are ourselves potentially.” We are to recognize that, no matter what our frame of mind some moments earlier, now we are “pilgrims come from some great distance to see God; that what we see will depend upon ourselves.” At this point he calls, characteristically, for indifference to the aesthetic qualities of the work of art. “Beauty is the attractive power of perfection,” he wrote elsewhere; it is that perfection we are to perceive. “No splendor but the *splendor veritatis*,” he writes later in this essay—no splendor but the splendor of truth. If we are to focus, as he puts it, on the transcendental archetype rather than the likeness made by human hands, there is nonetheless a promise of another order of contentment or joy: “we are to take part in a communion.” Such an inner event cannot be coldly intellectual. Often enough in the later years Coomaraswamy was stridently intellectual, taking a word of scripture, a motif or symbol through cross-cultural changes in a way that can bewilder his reader; but that is not so here. We are to participate in a communion.

At this point he introduces the fundamental Buddhist idea of awakening, not as an abstract object but as an existential challenge: “The image is of one Awakened: and for our awakening, who are still asleep.” Within the possible communion, the Buddha image has the power to stir us, to awaken us if only for a moment. That moment will leave its trace and lead on. Clearly we are no longer in an art-historical context: this text is not about history, it is about oneself and one’s possible transformation. If art history is comfortable and a little distant, this is not. In the closing lines of the paragraph, Coomaraswamy makes that explicit: “The objective methods of ‘science’ will not suffice; there can be no understanding without assimilation: to understand is to have been born again.”

This is late Coomaraswamy, and this is an example of the permission he gave to approach serious works of art, rooted in long religious tradition, with the attitude of a seeker, a pilgrim. It was not a permission to return to the essayist, amateur style of an earlier art historiography—the one that he grew up with in England. On the contrary, more thorough scholarship in a larger number of disciplines was needed. Certainly his own complex scholarship in the later years bears witness to that demand.

I’ve spoken of permission; one could as well say encouragement. There is a further, deceptively simple formulation which we should acknowledge before moving on. “Works of art are reminders,” Coomaraswamy often wrote. And he would continue: “in other words, supports of contemplation.”<sup>3</sup> If there is anything axiomatic in his writings, it is this pair of thoughts. The first carries far. “Memory is for those who have forgotten,” he liked to quote from Plotinus. From that perspective, works of traditional religious art are the unchanging locus of concepts and felt wisdom which we wavering ones forget, and with their help can remember. On occasion he would divide the word “remind” into its parts—re-mind—to take the point still further: serious works of art re-endow us with mind, have the potential to bring about a metanoia.<sup>4</sup> The second formulation, concerning the work of art as a support of contemplation, is yet another invitation to the pilgrim to stop and see and assimilate—to allow the work of art to teach. We are encouraged

to linger, and more than linger. “If . . . we have so followed up the history of a work of art,” Coomaraswamy wrote in 1938, “that it is as if it had been made both by and for ourselves, our knowledge of it is no longer merely an accidental knowledge about it, but an essential knowledge. We have acquired a ‘lively sense’ of it. We have performed what is no mere empathy or ‘in-feeling’ (*Einfühlung*), but an act of the intellect, in-wit, ‘in-knowing.’ The work has become a part of our life forever.”<sup>5</sup> Coomaraswamy’s passionate intellectuality is memorable. It presses against one, implicitly asks where one stands, what one cares for without compromise. It asks what, in our experience and intent, is the central cultural act. And among his many replies is this one: “It is not to enlarge our collection of bric-à-brac that we ought to study ancient or foreign arts, but to enlarge our own consciousness of being.”<sup>6</sup>

Concerning aphorism and compact exposition in Coomaraswamy’s later writings, permit me to call attention to one further feature, vividly demonstrated by the essay we have been exploring. The topic is his formidable imaginative power, frequently disguised in such stately academic gowns that at first one scarcely notices. Turning briefly to the traditional symbol of the bridge, he begins a thought sequence steadily enough with material easily visualized—and goes on to a realm that he himself might not have anticipated: a majestic and rather uncanny re-envisioning of the symbol. Authors even at Coomaraswamy’s level of deliberation don’t always know how their sentences will end, and need not know; they trust. The context is a discussion of the physical location of a religious symbol. He begins with a safely anodyne observation: “[Symbols] can even be carried about from place to place.” And he continues:

Not that the Spirit is therefore in one place more than another or can be carried about, but that we and our supports of contemplation . . . are necessarily in some one place or another. If the use of the 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.<sup>7</sup>

There has never been such a bridge, nor I suppose will there ever be: there is just this one. The voice of the passage is dry and learned, as if something quite evident and matter of fact were under discussion, but in this guise Coomaraswamy introduces a remarkable improvisation on the symbolism of the bridge, capable of opening one’s imagination to possibilities not of novel bridge design but of the design and farther reaches of human identity.

I mentioned earlier that, to my mind, Coomaraswamy’s gift of dignity to the seeker and pilgrim is encountered at two levels. Those of you who have looked into his biography will recall that his doctorate from the University of London was in geology and that with the wife of his youth, Ethel Partridge, he traveled widely in Sri Lanka in the early years of the twentieth century as director of a mineralogical survey. Ethel was already a craftswoman, a weaver and dyer; she was later to become famous in English craft circles as Ethel Mairet. Minerals and hand-woven cloth—these were dominant motifs in their young lives. I think that Coomaraswamy retained something of the geologist’s mind in later life: he had a crystalline sense of order. His complex cross-cultural writings of the 1930s and ‘40s, in which he would often pursue a single term, concept, or symbol in utterly exhaustive detail, have a puzzling structure that sometimes defeats ease of reading—until one realizes that he was, in effect, building crystals of knowledge, each unit cell carefully set in the lattice, each related by lawful bonds to other unit cells, the entire structure rigid but sturdy and lasting. The alternative metaphor pays homage to Ethel Partridge:

he was a maker of tightly woven fabrics of cross-cultural terms, concepts, symbols, and this to the end of his days.

These crystals of knowledge, this tightly pulled weave of ideas, had one purpose only: to restore our understanding of what he called traditional cultures, to demonstrate the depth and dignity and inevitability of their perspective, to show the underlying unity of such cultures despite their differing languages—and to invite us to return to them not literally but intellectually and spiritually. This mass of knowledge was his second gift. It was both unsettling and reassuring—unsettling because he was permanently ahead of the great majority of his readers, had studied far more and far more widely than one could hope to replicate; reassuring because his later writings consistently support an integrated scholarly and spiritual perspective. He was both learned and wise. This was *his* gift, his vocation, and he obeyed it without sparing himself. Was his theme key words in the Pali lexicon? There is a beautiful, lengthy article on the topic. Was the theme the traditional Indian theory of government? He wrote a superbly intricate monograph on the relations between spiritual authority and temporal power. Was the theme the Indian temple, restated in its essential features in a most inspiring yet austere way? There is such an article. Was the theme a seemingly simple one, “why exhibit works of art?” He knew how to descend from the heights of scholarship where he had few peers to address a broad public in simple, telling words.

I suppose this was genius at work. He wouldn’t have welcomed the term. He viewed himself as a wayfarer, still on the way. But he had such clarity as he made his way. What sort of clarity? Among other things he could recognize and give substance to the links between high symbols and teachings and the rest of us at lower altitudes of life. Once in the later years he wrote as follows to an unnamed correspondent:

The highest level of reference we can grasp from below seems to us like the goal; but it is only a temporary goal; the ladder is very long and has many rungs . . . . Yet the Way is not *infinitely* long; it is only incalculably long; and at the same time so short that it can be crossed in a second, if all is ripe for that. . . .”<sup>8</sup>

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Well, then, is he beyond criticism? There *is* a very great purity in Coomaraswamy’s approach to art, to myth and symbol, to Hindu, Buddhist, and Christian scripture and tradition, to classical Greek sources—but is the weave in places airlessly tight, the crystal of knowledge too rigid? About his purity of vision there can be no doubt. It is evident in an aphoristic statement such as this: “The signs, constituting the language of a significant art, are full of meanings; in the first place, injunctive, moving us to do this or that, and in the second place, speculative, that is, referent of the activity to its principle.”<sup>9</sup> One can receive this brilliant statement even with awe: it covers much ground. But it disregards the physicality of works of art: are we really not to concern ourselves with appearances? In recent years Coomaraswamy’s austerity has been challenged, for example by Professor Rekha Janji in her book of 1989, *The Sensuous in Art*. “When I first started my study of Indian aesthetics,” she writes there, “I was deeply impressed by Ananda Coomaraswamy’s exposition. . . .” However, she continues, at a later stage of study she recognized that “the joy associated with the creation and appreciation of art works essentially thrives on extolling the sensuous experience. . . . While creating the work, all [the artist] is

interested in is the transfiguration of his imagination into a coherent structure. It is only the beholders who violate the autonomy of an art work by imposing moral and spiritual norms on it . . . .”<sup>10</sup> And she goes on to develop her argument well, in Coomaraswamy’s manner, from ancient texts and interviews with traditional craftsmen.

She is not alone in her questioning. Professor Partha Mitter, than whom few have greater respect for Coomaraswamy, wrote some years before her: “Whilst acknowledging [Coomaraswamy’s] importance in establishing the claims of Indian art as a great tradition, I feel that his particular metaphysical approach has stood in the way of appreciating the intensely human art of ancient India. . . .”<sup>11</sup> In a summary article of 1990, Dr. Donald Stadtner similarly remarked with reference to both Coomaraswamy and Kramrisch that “a . . . religious orientation has restricted to a great degree the basic questions posed by the previous generation of historians of Indian art. The study of Indian art has thus proved especially resistant to newer approaches developed in other areas of art history.”<sup>12</sup> Prof. V. K. Chari noted in 2002 that “while . . . icons evidently served a ritual/devotional purpose, we have to ask whether the commonly accepted aesthetic values, both expressive and decorative, . . . were not [also] an important part of the Indian conception of art,” and on this basis he criticizes Coomaraswamy’s preference for “[setting aside] the aesthetic aspects of Indian art, thus presenting an account wholly in terms of scriptural ideas.”<sup>13</sup> Indian art historiography has decisively moved on; the bibliography of Prof. Mitter’s 2001 Oxford history of Indian art refers almost without exception to scholarly writings of the past 30 years.

But critique and uneasiness is not all we have heard in recent years. For example, in his book of 1996, *The Advaita of Art*, H.V. Dehejia adopts and extends Coomaraswamy’s perspective with superb learning: “Aesthetic experience,” he writes, “is essentially a knowledge episode.”<sup>14</sup> In recent years there have been, as well, rigorously learned reinvestigations of two classic Coomaraswamy themes—the iconography of Shiva Nataraja and the origin of the Buddha image—which revise some of Coomaraswamy’s central findings with respect, nearly affection, for his groundbreaking work.<sup>15</sup>

This is the literature, but it is surely time to share something of my own view. It is evident that Coomaraswamy made little effort to understand the art of his own era. Through his friendship in the 1920s with the American photographer and champion of new art, Alfred Stieglitz, he was briefly interested in photography as a fine art and moved in an avant-garde circle, but he had no lasting interest in even the most intellectual arts of our time—in Kandinsky, Klee, and Mondrian, to mention only three.<sup>16</sup> My own critique of this gap in sympathy and knowledge is embodied in my book of 1988, *An Art of Our Own: The Spiritual in Twentieth-Century Art*, which applies—so I have always hoped—his methods to art and artists to which he was quite blind. I also would say that his later writings skew the balance he advocated between the physical and metaphysical aspects of art in favor of religious and symbolic content. No matter! All of our work bears a signature; this was his signature. Coomaraswamy’s dedication to the recognition and collation of what he called traditional ideas about art, symbol and myth, the lexicon of scripture and much else left to others—to later generations—the task of revisiting his accomplishment, revising where needed, adding our understandings to his. He remains unavoidable, providentially so. He initiated careful study or brought new sophistication, learning, and interpretive skill to many, many realms, particularly of Indian culture. So doing, he also furnished seekers and pilgrims with maps of exquisite accuracy and detail. The long trace of his influence endures. “Our life is a combustion,” he once wrote.<sup>17</sup> *His* life was a combustion. By its fire we can all see more.

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In the legend of Ananda Coomaraswamy, the 70<sup>th</sup> birthday address commands a notable place. On that date, August 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1947, he spoke to a congenial gathering of friends and colleagues at the Harvard Club in Boston. We know that fewer than three weeks later, quite suddenly, he passed away. For this reason alone his talk would have great weight, but he meant it to have weight in any case. It was a farewell, not only to city and friends and colleagues but to the scholarly life. He revealed that within a year he and his wife Doña Luisa intended to retire to India, “now a free country,” as he put it. And he went on with the grace of which he was capable to say much more. “I have not remained untouched,” he said,

by the religious philosophies I have studied and to which I was led by way of the history of art. *Intellige ut credas!* [“Understand, that you may believe”—he was recalling St. Augustine’s classic formulation] In my case, at least, understanding has involved belief; and for me the time has come to exchange the active for a more contemplative way of life in which it would be my hope to experience more immediately, more fully, at least a part of the truth of which my understanding has been so far predominantly logical.<sup>18</sup>

Ananda and his wife might well have found their way to Tiruvannamalai; very late correspondence makes clear that he regarded Ramana Maharshi as “probably the greatest living Indian teacher.”<sup>19</sup> For years he had been thinking about the limits of scholarship, the limits of the discursive intellect on which he so relied as a scholar and author. He layered into certain writings both what ancient sources taught in this domain and what he himself had grasped. “There are those who ask for a sort of universal compulsory education in the mysteries,” he wrote in the essay we began with, “The Nature of Buddhist Art,”

supposing that a mystery is nothing but a communicable, although hitherto uncommunicated, secret, and nothing different in kind from the themes of profane instruction. So far from this, it is of the essence of a mystery, and above all of the *Mysterium Magnum*, that it cannot be communicated, but only realized: all that can be communicated are its external supports or symbolic expressions; the Great Work must be done by everyone for himself.<sup>20</sup>

It was this Great Work he now felt ready, and surely impelled, to approach, and he would do so under sound guidance in India. Several years after publishing “The Nature of Buddhist Art” he returned to this theme in a magnificently complex essay entitled simply “Manas” (Intellect), in which he charted, in effect, the passage from scholarship to silence. His theme was “de-mentation,” as he boldly translated Sanskrit *amanībhāva*. “Thither neither sight nor speech nor intellect can go,” he wrote, citing *Kena Upanishad*.

we neither ‘know’ it nor can we analyze it, so as to be able to communicate it by instruction”. . . . The realization of the . . . state in which the Intellect does not intelligize, which is called . . . “the Eternal Mystery” and . . . “the Supreme Goal” and which “cannot be taught,” is the ultimate “secret” of initiation. It must not be supposed that any mere description of the “secret,” such as can be found in Scripture . . . or exegesis, suffices to communicate the secret of “de-mentation” . . . ; nor that the secret has ever been or could be communicated *to* an initiate or betrayed to anyone, or discovered by



however much learning. It can only be realized by each one for himself; all that can be effected by initiation is the communication of an impulse and an awakening of latent potentialities; the work must be done by the initiate himself. . . . We make these remarks only to emphasize that whatever can be said *of* it, the secret remains inviolable, guarded by its own essential incommunicability. . . . It is thus by definition inaccessible to “scholarship” in the modern and philological sense of the word. . . .<sup>21</sup>

Listening to these words, to both their meaning and their veiled intensity, we can grasp something essential about Coomaraswamy’s last maturity—and his courage. He had built an incomparable life of the mind; we still benefit from it, as will generations to come. But now he was ready to abandon it, to see what comes next. The fruition of his great scholarly work was to be the Great Work of experiential initiation in realms of spirit he had mapped but not fully traveled. Earlier I spoke of two gifts he made, aphoristic brilliance and the dense network of good knowledge. This is the third and final gift: of himself, not to us—of course not—but in keeping with the salutation that closes the 70<sup>th</sup> birthday address. He said then to his listeners, “‘*Svagā*—may you come into your own,’ that is, may I know and become what I am, no longer this man So-and-so, but the Self that is also the Being of all beings, my Self and your Self.”<sup>22</sup>

Several years after he published that grand essay, “*Manas*,” Coomaraswamy summarized in an essay on literary symbolism an intricate skein of sources he had under study. “From one point of view,” he wrote, “embodiment is a humiliation, and from another a royal procession.”<sup>23</sup> The late years, culminating in his wish for a life of spiritual work and discovery in India, were a royal procession.

Thank you. Thanks to you all.



Note about the author: Roger Lipsey, PhD, is the author of *Coomaraswamy: Life and Writings*, Princeton (New Jersey): Bollingen Series, Princeton University Press, 1977, and editor of the two-volume *Coomaraswamy: Selected Papers*, published at the same time. His most recent book is *Hammar skjöld: A Life* (Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 2013). See [www.dag-hammar skjöld.com](http://www.dag-hammar skjöld.com) for further information.

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## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> The Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts has acquired in recent years a significant portion of the Coomaraswamy family collection.
- <sup>2</sup> “The Nature of Buddhist Art,” in *Coomaraswamy: Selected Papers*, vol. 1: *Traditional Art and Symbolism*, ed. Roger Lipsey (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1977), 147 (hereafter cited as *SP 1*, with its companion, vol. 2: *Metaphysics*, cited as *SP 2*), Indian edition (New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House, 1978).
- <sup>3</sup> “Why Exhibit Works of Art?” in *Christian and Oriental Philosophy of Art* (New York: Dover, 1956; reprint of *Why Exhibit Works of Art?*, London, 1943), 10.
- <sup>4</sup> “A Figure of Speech or a Figure of Thought?” *SP 1*, 34.
- <sup>5</sup> “The Philosophy of Mediaeval and Oriental Art,” *SP I*, 64–65
- <sup>6</sup> “Understanding the Art of India,” in *Blackfriars* 16.191 (1935), 252.
- <sup>7</sup> “The Nature of Buddhist Art,” *SP 1*, 158–59.
- <sup>8</sup> Alvin Moore, Jr., and Rama Poonambulam Coomaraswamy, ed., *Selected Letters of Ananda Coomaraswamy* (Delhi: Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts / Oxford University Press, 1988), 211.
- <sup>9</sup> “Symptom, Diagnosis, Regimen,” *SP 1*, 319.
- <sup>10</sup> Rekha Jhanji, *The Sensuous in Art: Reflections on Indian Aesthetics* (Shimla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 1989), vii and 13.
- <sup>11</sup> Partha Mitter, “A Man of Our Time: Ananda Coomaraswamy, the West, and Indian Nationalism,” in *Asian Studies Review* (Australia) 7.3 (1984), 49.
- <sup>12</sup> Donald M. Stadtner, “New Approaches to South Asian Art,” in *Art Journal* 49.4 (Winter 1990), 360.
- <sup>13</sup> V.K. Chari, “Representation in India’s Sacred Images: Objective vs. Metaphysical Reference,” in *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 65.01 (February 2002), 54.
- <sup>14</sup> Harsha V. Dehejia, *The Advaita of Indian Art* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1996), 143.
- <sup>15</sup> See Padma Kaimal, “Shiva Nataraja: Shifting Meanings of an Icon,” in *Art Bulletin* 81.3 (September 1999), 390–419; and Juhung Rhi, “Reading Coomaraswamy on the Origin of the Buddha Image,” *Artibus Asiae* 70.1 (2010), 151–72.
- <sup>16</sup> See Nachiket Chanchani, “The Camera Work of Ananda Kentish Coomaraswamy and Alfred Stieglitz,” in *History of Photography* 37.2 (2012), 204–20, documenting what amounts to AKC’s apprenticeship as a photographer with Stieglitz in the 1920s; also Lauren Krois, *Creative Composites: Modernism, Race and the Stieglitz Circle* (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 2012), sv. Coomaraswamy.
- <sup>17</sup> “On the Indian and Traditional Psychology, or Rather Pneumatology,” *SP 2*, 340n.
- <sup>18</sup> “The Seventieth Birthday Address,” *SP 2*, 434–35.
- <sup>19</sup> *Selected Letters of Ananda Coomaraswamy*, 87; see also 232.

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<sup>20</sup> “The Nature of Buddhist Art,” *SP* 1, 156.

<sup>21</sup> “*Manas*,” *SP* 2, 211–14.

<sup>22</sup> “The Seventieth Birthday Address,” *SP* 2, 435.

<sup>23</sup> “Literary Symbolism,” *SP* 1, 326.