

# Principles and Methods of Traditional Art

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## 1.

In the following considerations, we proceed from the fundamental idea that any craft can serve as a support for spiritual realization, owing to its symbolism, which retraces, on the terrestrial plane, a determined universal function; in other words, art—or craft—which traditionally are but one, must correspond symbolically to a divine activity and by this very characteristic it is linked to the angel which is its cosmic agent, this being explicitly formulated in the following passage of the *Atareya-Brahmana*:<sup>1</sup>

It is through imitation of angelic<sup>2</sup> art works that any work of art is accomplished here below, be it an elephant of baked soil, an object of bronze, a garment, a golden object or a mule cart.

Thus, all traditional crafts reflect, in a particular way, the making of the world, and it is precisely thanks to this analogy between the cosmogonic process and the spiritual fulfilment—which is necessarily grafted on a microcosmic “substance”—that the art or craft, as it were, lends itself very naturally to serving as a vehicle to initiatic work.

Here, we must prevent an error coming from a false generalization: if it is true that all terrestrial activity, whatever it may be, has its *raison d’être* in the corresponding universal prototype, as nothing can detach itself

<sup>1</sup> *Editor’s Note:* This essay originally appeared in the original French text in the journal, *Études Traditionnelles*, in 1947, no. 257, pp. 14ff, under the title, *Principes et méthodes de l’art traditionnel*.

*Cf* Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, *The Transformation of Nature in Art*, p. 8.

<sup>2</sup> We note that the “gods” (*devas*) of Hinduism are what the religions properly called so refer to as “angels”.

from its transcendent principle—and under this relationship all human work is inevitably presented as a microcosmic reflection of the making of the world—there is nonetheless a radical difference between a ritual act (i.e. an act which is directly determined by a celestial prototype) and non-ritual activities, like those predominating in modern crafts. This difference is analogous to that which exists between a geometric—and thus regular and fundamental figure, such as the circle, the equilateral triangle or the square—and the infinite multitude of irregular layouts. The regular, “fundamental” or “central” geometrical figures are the most direct representatives of universal prototypes; the difference which separates them from other equally possible spatial forms is *quasi* absolute, which means that it is as big a difference as can be in this domain, precisely because it is of a qualitative order. Yet, it is within a given domain of manifestation that the difference between that which is the principle and that which is derived from the latter can truly “manifest” itself, because apart from this framework, the manifestation must both be effaced before its principle and reduced to it. Since these two points of view are incompatible, it is absurd to have recourse to the argument of relativity of all manifestation to the extent of erasing the differences which the latter implies, such as the difference between ritual and profane acts.

The ritual or “central” character of traditional crafts is therefore inseparable from the fact that they actualize immediate and necessary possibilities of human activity, and this conforms to the primordial origin that traditional civilizations recognize in them.<sup>3</sup>

## 2.

The analogy between the making of the world and the procedure of the traditional artisan reveals itself with a particular obviousness in the construction of temples, because every temple is an image of the entire cosmos, which it reflects in conformity with a determined spiritual language; being an image of the cosmos, it will be *a fortiori* an image of Being and the possibilities which are “exteriorized” or “crystallized” in the cosmic edifice; according to this perspective, the immobility of the temple is like the reflection of the immutability of cosmic laws and

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<sup>3</sup> In the Muslim world, most of the manual crafts are considered as going back to Seth, son of Adam.

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