

Ananda K. Coomaraswamy: The Perennial Philosophy of Art

By Fabian Gudas

Ananda K. Coomaraswamy was born in Ceylon in 1877, the son of a distinguished Singhalese father and British mother. Two years later his father died, and his mother, who had brought her child to England the previous year, never returned to Ceylon. Thus Coomaraswamy was reared in England, and his education culminated in his receiving a Doctor of Science degree from the University of London. Gradually his interests shifted from botany and geology to Oriental culture; and for the last thirty years of his life he was a member of the staff of the Boston Museum of Fine Arts in charge of its Oriental collection.

Despite these Western associations, Coomaraswamy never identified himself with the Western way of life. During his extraordinarily prolific writing career, which lasted almost half a century,¹ one of his chief aims was to interpret to the West the culture of the Orient, particularly the art and philosophy of India. Another aim was to reverse the judgment of Kipling that East is East and West is West and never the twain shall meet. In his earlier

Editor's Note: This essay was first published in *Studies in Comparative Literature*, Louisiana State University Press, Baton Rouge, 1962, pp. 1-28 (edited by Waldo F. McNeir)

¹ A bibliography of the "more important" publications of Coomaraswamy was compiled by Helen E. Ladd of the University of Michigan and published in *Ars Islamica*, IX (1942), 125-42. This bibliography of 494 books, articles, and reviews covers the period from 1900-1942. A selected bibliography of Coomaraswamy's writings up to 1945 appeared in *Psychiatry*, VIII (1945), 373-77; this bibliography was reprinted in a Coomaraswamy Festschrift volume edited by K. Bharatha Iyer, *Art and Thought* (London, 1947), 255-59. Ray F. Livingston, *Ananda K. Coomaraswamy's Theory of Literature* (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Minnesota, 1956), 266, refers to a mimeographed list of Coomaraswamy's writings prepared by S. Durai Raja Singam; Raja Singam has also collected a large number of tributes to Coomaraswamy written by prominent Eastern and Western scholars and men of letters. He has published these tributes in two volumes: *Homage to Ananda K. Coomaraswamy* (Malaya. I. 1948, and II. 1952). Livingston has revised his dissertation and published it as *The Traditional Theory of Literature* (Minneapolis, 1962).

essays he was constantly pointing out correspondences between Oriental and Western thought: Nietzsche's Superman is similar to the Chinese and Indian Superior Man; Shakespeare's plays reflect the canons of Indian dramatic theory; Indian aesthetics anticipates the views of Goethe, Croce, and Clive Bell.² As Coomaraswamy's knowledge of Sanskrit, Chinese, Greek, Islamic, and medieval philosophy deepened, he began to see more fundamental correspondences in the doctrines of the great thinkers of the East and West. From the early thirties to his death in 1947, he was a vigorous advocate of what he called the "traditional" or "perennial" philosophy, a metaphysics once universally accepted but now in great danger of being wholly forgotten as impatient modern man rushes to construct his utopias. Coomaraswamy set himself adamantly against the dominant intellectual currents of modern times (except science), and pleaded for a transvaluation of the West's most cherished values.

Many of his later publications were intended to document his claim that the great thinkers of the East and West taught the same doctrines. By a laborious comparison of philosophical texts, he tried to show that these teachers not only shared a common metaphysics but also made the same applications of metaphysical principles to the solution of problems in ethics, politics, and the arts. Coomaraswamy also extended his comparative studies to the practices and dogmas of the world's great religions and to the arts, myths, and other folklore of all races. Here, too, among seeming diversity he found a remarkable similarity in essence. He raised the question, "How is it that so many and different kinds of men have thought alike?"³ The answer seemed to him to be obvious: universal consent can be explained only by the hypothesis of an original revelation which receives a continuous verification in the lives of those who choose to live by it.

The present essay confines itself to an analysis of the theory of art as taught by the perennial philosophy, with special emphasis on what it has to say on myth and symbol, on folklore, and on the aims and methodology of comparative literature. These are subjects to which Coomaraswamy devoted a great deal of attention in the last fifteen years of his life. The

² Some of Coomaraswamy's earliest essays on Indian culture are collected in *The Dance of Shiva*, first published in 1918. The edition of *The Dance of Shiva* used for this paper is the Noonday Paperback (New York, 1959).

³ *The Bugbear of Literacy* (London, 1949), 96. Other editions of this collection of essays on various topics have the title *Am I My Brother's Keeper?*

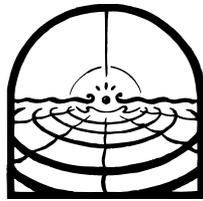
development of his views on the theory of art is beyond the scope of this essay, although it is a very interesting subject. For example, in his earlier writings on art, he seemed content to work within the categories established by contemporary aesthetics; later, after he had formulated the perennial philosophy of art, he recommended the abandonment of aesthetics as an autonomous discipline, and he called "disinterested aesthetic contemplation" a contradiction in terms and pure nonsense⁴.

I

Modern Western man regards himself as the heir of all the ages, the happy culmination of a long line of cultural evolution. He prides himself on his clearheadedness, the expansion of his encyclopedias, and his freedom from the confusions and errors of the early stages of human thought. He believes that he is living a life vastly better than that of any of his ancestors and that his standard of living is destined to rise further to inconceivable heights. He looks upon the other peoples of the world

⁴ In spite of his contempt for aesthetics; Coomaraswamy has received some remarkable tributes from contemporary aestheticians. Katherine Gilbert, in a review of two of his books in the *Art Bulletin*, XXX (1948), 157, has told us that "no one else living among us was able so to interweave the languages and cultural perspectives of Sanskrit, Greek, mediaeval Scholastic, American Indian, and modern western European" into such a powerful restatement of traditional views. Thomas Munro, in his *Toward Science in Aesthetics* (New York, 1956), 112, says that "on the whole, his work is among the most valuable of American contributions to the subject he denounced." Munro also reviewed Coomaraswamy's *The Transformation of Nature in Art* very generously in the *Art Bulletin*, XIV (1934), 397-98. These tributes are remarkable in that they come from two of our most knowledgeable aestheticians, both of whom disagree violently with Coomaraswamy's appraisal of modern artistic theory and practice. However, not all aestheticians have been so kind. For example: Helmut Kuhn, in a review of Coomaraswamy's *Why Exhibit Works of Art?* in the *Journal of Philosophy*, XLI (1944), 106-107, expresses the opinion that "Coomaraswamy, outside the field of Indian archaeology, is an amateur," and that his book is a "paradoxical *jeu d'esprit*." Finally, no list of summary estimates of the work of Coomaraswamy can omit the lyrical praise of Eric Gill, which brightens a page of his *Autobiography* (London, 1940), 174: "Others have written the truth about life and religion and man's work. Others have written good clear English. Others have had the gift of witty exposition. Others have understood the metaphysics of Christianity and others have understood the metaphysics of Hinduism and Buddhism. Others have understood the true significance of erotic drawings and sculptures. Others have seen the relationships of the true and the good and the beautiful. Others have had apparently unlimited learning. Others have loved; others have been kind and generous. But I know of no one else in whom all these gifts and all these powers have been combined. I dare not confess myself his disciple; that would only embarrass him. I can only say that I believe that no other living writer has written the truth in matters of art and life and religion and piety with such wisdom and understanding."

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