

**THE AESTHETICS OF
ANANDA COOMARASWAMY**

By
Dr V RAGHAVAN

Transaction No 56

**INDIAN INSTITUTE OF WORLD CULTURE
Bangalore 560 004**

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DR V RAGHAVAN, litterateur and scholar of Sanskrit, former professor of Sanskrit at the University of Madras, was requested by this Institute to deliver a talk under Dr L S Doraiswamy Family Memorial Endowment series. This he did in 1978 and he chose as his subject The Aesthetics of Ananda K Coomaraswamy, whose birth centenary was being then observed throughout the world.

Dr Raghavan wanted to edit and expand this paper but his demise prevented it. Since the paper is valuable it is now being offered as a Transaction so that admirers of both Dr Coomaraswamy and Dr Raghavan can have access to it.

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Printed by W. Q. Judge Press, 97 Residency Road, Bangalore 560 025 and published by the Indian Institute of World Culture, 6 Shri B P Wadia Road, Basavangudi, Bangalore 560 004, India

The Aesthetics of Ananda Coomaraswamy

DR. V. RAGHAVAN

At the time when the invitation to deliver an address came to me from The Indian Institute of World Culture, Bangalore, several cultural institutions in the country were celebrating the birth- centenary of Ananda Coomaraswamy to whom, more than to anybody else, the west and modern India no less owe their understanding of Indian art. I, therefore, thought that I might speak on some important aspect of Coomaraswamy's contribution and thereby pay my tribute to one with whom I had some contacts in the early thirties when my papers on 'Sanskrit Texts on Painting' and 'Natyadharmi and Lokadharmi' (Idealism and Conventions and Realism of the Ancient Indian Stage) had attracted his attention.

In the several articles and publications on Coomaraswamy that appeared at the time of the centenary, his contribution to the study of Indian and South East Asian art and archeology and his interpretation of the ideals of Indian art deceived the attention of writers. I chose for the subject of my present lecture 'The Aesthetics of Coomaraswamy,' intending to deal with it in some depth and critically. From a historian of Indian art, Coomaraswamy, in his study of the nature and meaning of art as such was led to explore the writings on art by the medieval Christian mystics and found a remarkable similarity to the traditional Indian conception. He had always been a follower of writers like Morris and Ruskin in their view of art as vocation and culture and beauty as part and parcel of work and not something of a luxury, cultivated in leisure and separately. 'Industry without art is brutality' is a statement which he quotes often. It was also a sacred conception of art. This involved not merely a theory of art but also a philosophy of life itself. He found that this fitted very well with the philosophy of art and beauty which he found in the exposition of the Christian saints. There was, as he found, a common conception of art in medieval (pre-industrial) Europe- and traditional (pre-colonial) East, particularly India. This theory of art is part of the perennial philosophy of which Coomaraswamy became, in the final stage, an eloquent exponent. He drew much from Meister Eckhart, whose writings he termed 'an Upanishad of Europe' and accepted his thesis that 'Art is religion, religion art, not related, but the same.'

In his exposition this theory of art, Coomaraswamy broke away from all the accepted writers of repute on modern aesthetics like Croce. In fact, he found himself at variance with all the notions that are known generally as the leading ideas holding sway in current art-criticism. In fact, according to him, the very word Aesthetics is, as we shall see, a misnomer. One of the methods adopted frequently by Coomaraswamy in his interpretations is to resort to the radical or pristine meaning of a word. The Greek original of this word 'aisthesis' means 'sensation' and 'reaction to external stimuli' whereas 'art is an intellectual virtue.' He equates the aesthetic, as used today, with the materialistic and all that the critic today speaks of as aesthetic refers just to that which Coomaraswamy calls 'the aesthetic surface' and not the substance or the truth. On the other hand, 'Beauty has to do with cognition,' 'art is regarded rather as a body of knowledge and as a skill to be acquired.' Again 'it is not by sensibilities but by his intellect that man can be called an artist.' Quoting Plato he says that the name of art cannot be given to anything irrational.

This intellectual view of art requires much explanation. The things to be known of a composition are the right reason or logic of the composition; clear expression of the theme of the work; the subject-matter or what has been intended to be communicated; meaning not

being external but integral; the unity of form or expression and the matter to be expressed which constitute the perfection of the work; emphasis on perfection which is the real beauty; appeal to our understanding rather than fine feelings, an education, not in sensibility but in philosophy; the criteria ‘ Is it true ? What good use does it serve ?’. ‘ The intuition—expression of an imitable form—is an intellectual conception born of the artist’s wisdom,’ the product of not some ‘ aimless (so-called) inspiration’ but of ‘ purposeful and vital operation ’ of something ‘ conceived in intellect.’ The ‘ intuition’ meant is, in the words of Augustine, ‘ an intellection’, ‘ extending beyond the range of dialectic,’ and expression, not the likeness produced by the artist’s observation of things as seen in the world, but of archetypes called forth in recollection or contemplation, the types being heavenly forms, iconographic images and standardized types of character or personality, myths rather than history, the architecture of the universe and the unstruck music (*anahatanada*) of the spheres. The language of this art is symbols, not vague or imaginary, but precise like mathematics and well-understood, and hence a body of knowledge handed down in tradition, tradition being, as Coomaraswamy puts it aptly, the mother-tongue of this art.

This symbol is a universal language and supplies the only key to the different expressions in different ages and cultures, for example, the recent explanation by John Irwin by relating the Christian Cross to the primordial universal pillar, the *skambha* of the Atharva Veda.

Art is, therefore, something in which man functions in a higher level of his being, in his spirit, in his universal self or consciousness. This is not ‘reduction of art to the theology’ but the *summum bonum* of art. Art is thus a means, if indeed we can say so, to the end of seeing and being one with the ultimate reality, ‘the final end of beatitude equated with the vision of God whose essence is the cause of beauty in all things,’ in Plato’s words, ‘ to attune our own distorted modes of thought to cosmic harmonies’, ‘by an assimilation of the knower to the ‘to-be-known.’ The Rgveda poet compared his poetic hymn to a chariot (*Ratha*), which transported him to his God; art is the fiery chariot of contemplative thought, according to Blake, whom Coomaraswamy quote, riding which the artist could “meet the Lord in the air.”

The conception of art set forth above renders meaningless, according to Coomaraswamy’s, many of the principles, which are held as axiomatic in current art-criticism. Firstly in traditional art, things necessary in all activities of man are useful and beautiful at the same time. When a thing has to be made, ‘it is by art that it can be properly made; there can be no good use without art.’ The artefacts, now collected and exhibited in the museum, had their original place in the house, temple or church. The vocation of a man IS a function which was an indispensable means to his spiritual development. “The man devoted to his own vocation finds perfection... That man whose prayer and praise of God are in the doing of his own work perfects himself”, ‘Svakarmana tam abhyaseya,’ as the Gita says.

From this it follows that the artist is not a special kind of man but that every man is necessarily a special kind of artist. We can even say that any one who is not so is an idler or a parasite. So also the patron is not a peculiar affluent person; the patron is just the consumer; the householder or worker buys or uses things which are at the same time things of art.

Now what about the reference to some artists as genius? Coomaraswamy, who debunks the notion of genius, considers genius not as a peculiarly developed personality but as simply the immanent spirit; a particular individual is not a genius but every person has a genius.

Equally fallacious are the ideas of originality, individuality, self-expression, freedom and some work being called a masterpiece. Where do these questions arise when the patent

character of all traditional art, Christian, Oriental or Folk, is its anonymity? It is not the expression of some particular personality or of some individual idiosyncrasy; but it is man, as the external and universal self, that is expressed. It is the supra-individual level from which the artist derives his vitality. What he produces is not the result of his observation of man and things in the world but what he sees in his mind as the archetypes, iconographic images and portraiture of standardized types of human being, As Ruskin clarified, the ‘virtue of originality is not newness,’ ‘it is only genuineness’. Barring some regional and temporal stylistic features—which helps us to identify the place and period of an image or a painting,—there is no question of innovation or originality; “In South Asian sculpture, the images of Hari-Hara and Siva-Parvati (*Ardhanari*) are represented in ways different from that obtaining in India; but the basic symbolism of Hari-Hara and Siva-Sakti is intact. We have the analogy of music in which the pre-defined *Raga* yet admits of improvisations. Coomaraswamy says this on originality; “the last desire of the traditional artist or thinker is to be original; he only endeavours to be true.” “The traditional craftsman who repeats the same designs..... is; working continuously on a higher level of reference than the man whose images are all of immediate and private invention. The traditional artist is more than one man deep.” There is also no question of repetition or plagiarism. Whatever the perfect master, that the traditional artist is, produces is a masterpiece. So are indeed all the Natarajas. Novelty and freshness is an inherent quality of beauty. itself as poet Magha says: क्षणे क्षणे यत्त्रवतावुपैति तदेव रूपं रमणी यतायाः।

The scope of freedom within the framework of the given pattern has been indicated above. The very fact that the artist is not indulging in the presentation of any personal feeling or idea, makes freedom as such out of place. The freedom is to conform to the ideal form that he sees in his supra-individual being. There is an illuminating passage in the Sanskrit drama of Visakhadatta, the *Mudrarakshasa*, where there, is a precious definition of freedom or *syatantrya*. According to the design and order of the teacher Chanakya, King Chandragupta, his protege, is to play a feigned quarrel between themselves, in which the King is obliged to assert his independence as King. Feeling uncomfortable about this, the King says, here: What> this freedom I am asked to assume? In so far as I am always being guided and chastened is mind by my teacher. I am indeed ‘free.’ (III.5/6). The greater freedom that art should endow one with is of course the freedom from his ego, for which the traditional anonymity is the sure means.

The train of ideas mentioned above—originality, individuality, etc., which are the stock-in-trade of current criticism, Coomaraswamy condemns as Renaissance conceit. Without understanding the true meaning and purpose of art, the new humanistic or biographical or psychological criticism, which sees in art an autobiography of the artist, Coomaraswamy dubs as “a pathetic fallacy.”

Then there is the idea of ‘style’, which has been made much of. The scope of stylistic variation was indicated above when speaking of freedom. Style, Coomaraswamy brings under the accidents of art and it is by transcending it that art becomes universal. Style is contingent, not intrinsic. Rama was beautiful, despite the style of his hair which was according to his times.

There are some more dicta reigning in the world of art-criticism which Coomaraswamy deals with and which we may consider now. First, the distinction of Fine Art and Useful Art and Craft. In the philosophy of art so far propounded, the dichotomy of arts into ‘fine’ and ‘useful’ and the designation of the latter as craft does not exist. All things are made both useful and artistic. The beauty of the product depends on the perfection of its making. There

is no such thing as useless art; also an art which only pleases and has no more significance is not real art.

Nor does Coomaraswamy accept the theory of 'art for art's sake'. He compares it to the - saying 'virtue is its own. Reward' and points out that virtue too is not an end in itself but a means of man's last end of happiness. Art is similarly a means to the ultimate end of all human effort; it has a spiritual meaning and purpose. There is no question of any motivation like money and fame. An artist earns so that he may continue to work and produce his works. Fame does not come in as the art is all anonymous. As for art itself being its end, it is self-contradictory, unless we equate the end with the last and lasting happiness. Use and value coincide in it. According to Aristotle, quoted by Coomaraswamy, "the general end of art is the good of man." As he says in another place, the general end of art is not "Art" but "Man Art is indispensable as a means of spiritual development. Dante said that the purpose of his *Paradise* is "to remove those who are living in this life from a state of wretchedness to the state of blessedness This automatically flows out of the conception of the artist, that he is not a special kind of man, a genius, but every man in his station in life and making big things perfectly, is an artist; and also out of the view of art that it is not a museum or exhibition or a drawing room piece, "...art was not an end, but a means to present ends of use and enjoyment and to the final end of beatitude equated with the vision of God whose essence is the cause of beauty in all things."

This higher usefulness of art actually makes art didactic. St. Bonaventura enunciates three functions of art: 'to express, instruct and persuade.' Only, as Sanskrit criticism would clarify,, the instruction is not palpable but subtle and automatic, this seductive specialty lying in its quality of beauty. It is not "the aesthetic emotion the first and final end of art" ; it is " far more the meaning that illumined the forms ", rather than the forms themselves. " The perfection, brilliancy, or beauty of the expression invites and seduces us to take possession of its content To regard the work of art as an end in itself, to permit it to take the place of its use or content, to say it is its - own meaning " is, in the words of Coomaraswamy ' idolatry or fetishism.'

What is a discussion on aesthetics without a consideration of the concept of Beauty? On this, there is the well-known saying 'Truth is Beauty and Beauty, Truth,' as also the triad of values, Beauty, Goodness and Truth. What is Coomaraswamy's thinking on this? To begin with he exalts Truth and without equating Beauty with it, he calls Beauty the attractive quality of Truth, its inevitable accident, not its *raison d'être*. "The function of Beauty is to attract us, not to itself, but to *that which* is beautiful Beauty is that aspect of the truth which attracts us to the truth. The idea of goodness brings in the question of art and morality. If perfection is beauty, there is no question of degrees of perfection; considerations of a work of art from an ethical point of view are legitimate for the good of humanity. Although it is not a judgment of art as such, it is clear that, in the words of Confucius, that while a dance is perfect beauty and perfect goodness, a war dance is perfect beauty but not perfect goodness. The bomb is a perfectly made thing but cannot be called good.

These are really distinctions without difference. For Coomaraswamy hastens to point out: "But if beauty is not synonymous with truth, neither can it be isolated from truth." " Beauty, goodness and truth are aspects of a single principle ; as aspects they are separately discussed, but whoever supposes that they can be separately possessed will find himself wanting in ail." Elsewhere. Coomaraswamy, quoting Dionysius, says that the supersubstantial good is God; he also says that God; the first cause, is the source of all beauty, all beauty here being only the likeness of His beauty. यद् यद् बिभूति मन्त्रं ! etc. as the *Gita* Says. Elsewhere

he accepts Beauty as a name of God. These are but three aspects of the one Godhead, *Sat* (Goodness), *Chit* (Truth) and *Ananda* (Beauty).

Progress in art is another modern notion. Primitive art is supposed to belong to a stage when there was no knowledge of anatomy nor sense of perspective. That all this is meaningless can be realized when we remember that the language of art is symbolism. On the correct attitude towards folk lore and popular art, Coomaraswamy quotes Rene Guenon: "The very conception of 'folklore', as commonly understood, rests on a fundamentally false hypothesis..... The folk has thus preserved, without understanding, the remains of old traditions that go back some times to an indeterminably distant past..." And adds: Folk art is not crude or decorative but are really esoteric doctrines and symbols of anything but popular invention.

There are a few more ideas of art-criticism on which we should consider Coomaraswamy's interpretation. For example the important concepts of Imitation and *Sadrasya*, which requires a separate examination and can be taken up only on another occasion.

One of the criticisms of Coomaraswamy's ideas is that they are atavistic, put the clock back, a call to return to an earlier feudal order, a dead order of things. Coomaraswamy answers the criticism. The call to get back to first principles is not one to return to the middle ages; but is only to enable us to understand these aspects better. Truth or Beauty is at all times true and beautiful. Manufacture *by art* is always superior to industry or commercial production *without art*. Manufacture for *use-is* better than manufacture for *profit*. The idea of vocation and its perfection is a philosophy transcending time and place.

There is, of course, no such thing as secularization of art. Truth, Beauty, and Goodness are not materialistic or practical. The spiritual basis of art or its enjoyment is inevitable.

In interpreting and advocating the traditional conceptions of art, Coomaraswamy presents a mutual opposition in the case of some ideas. His over-emphasis on one idea seems to land him in some self-contradiction. But he hastens to modify his drastic statements, for example on Truth and Beauty. Similarly his finding fault with the name aesthetics as a misnomer, and posing or opposing pleasure and knowledge. The root-meaning of a word, which unfolds its semantic history, takes one to an extreme stand, but is not always a contribution to the solution of the problem. Really, these pairs of opposites posed by him are not irreconcilable. It is from feeling, the original meaning of aesthetics, that the *Rasa* theory of Indian criticism has developed, a theory which Coomaraswamy accepts. In his earlier writings, he freely used the word aesthetic. So also the pair usefulness and enjoy ability or didacticism and pleasure. In Indian criticism, these two figure as *Vyutpatti* and *Ananda*. There is no real or ultimate contradiction of the two, as the delectation (*Rasa-asvada*) itself constitutes the higher purpose of sublimating man and of giving him a taste of the bliss of the divine essence (*Brahma-asvada-sodara*).

As for Coomaraswamy's observation on 'genius' and 'masterpiece', it no doubt represents the condition obtaining in the world of traditional art whose character is conformity to given patterns. This still leaves out the difficulty of explaining how, among those true to pre-ordained patterns, one artist or work is greater than another, how Kalidasa, for example, is greater than Bharavi or Magha. A greater manifestation of the divine light, *Pratibha*, genius, in one, seems to be the answer.

Lastly we may note this: All the defects which Coomaraswamy criticizes or notions which he rejects are all corollaries of the industrial revolution. Artistic creative activity persists. When bulk commercial machine production comes to stay, the artistic gifts fulfill

themselves by forging new modes of expression. Fine art, work of leisure, exhibition, art for art's sake, all these come in a train. Articles of daily use or of particular functional nature are no longer the sole medium of expression. If beauty is the perfection of a work, the question arises as to why a nut-cracker or a type of domestic or ritual vessel should be fashioned as a lady or in the image of something else. Independent enjoyment of a piece of artistic work inevitably follows the divorce of the functional and useful aspect of a thing from its aspect of beauty.