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Prosser

[5.0 out of 5 stars](#) Coomaraswamy - Conflicted Genius and Man of the World

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My connection to the arts of India developed at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art with the collection built by Dr. Pal. I eventually became the chair of the Southern Asian Art Council and held the position for four years. During that time, I had the privilege of meeting Dr. Pal, eventually working up the courage to seek his wisdom and scholarship related to pieces in our personal collection. The fact that we are friends has not influenced (much) my opinion of his most recent work which I am proud to add to my already extensive accumulation of the author's books.

Though familiar with Ananda Kentish Coomaraswamy the scholar, I knew nothing about Coomaraswamy the man. I worried that I would find the book to be dry and academic and would struggle to tell Dr. Pal what I thought of it without endangering that friendship.

You can imagine my relief when I found the book to be accessible, informative and above all, delightful to read. One of the first things that drew me in was learning about AKC's middle name, which I never knew. It is in honor of his mother, an Englishwoman from Kent who boldly married into a Sri Lankan Tamil Hindu family. As a child of mixed marriage myself (Christian and Jewish), I instantly wanted to know more about the man the marriage produced. Dr. Pal humanized him, and I found a connection right from the start.

Readers looking for academic appreciation of the eminent and enigmatic scholar of the arts of India and Indian-influenced Asia should consult the much-cited 1977 Roger Lipsey biography. In what Dr. Pal refers to as this "limited biography", the reader will find that they learn more about the fascinating coterie of collectors, creators and characters that filled Coomaraswamy's life. Dr. Pal's often very personal comments and observations demonstrate his love and respect for a man he clearly considers a teacher, contributing to and inspiring his own intellectual pursuits, but never met in life. By linking east and west, AKC (as he is referred to in the book) had a profound effect on contemporary art and culture in his adopted home in the USA and around the world.

In the end, what comes through most is a profound sense of inner conflict – a very modern concept - that Coomaraswamy embodied wholeheartedly. Was he an Indian who viewed the world through a European lens or a European seduced by the exotic East? Did his academic veneer crack on issues related to the Hindu/Muslim divide in Indian history and art? He fell in love and married European women, so why did he attempt to train them to be dutiful, Indian wives? These are not questions Dr. Pal attempts to answer but, by highlighting these dichotomies, he asks us to view AKC's life through a new lens. I found it particularly interesting as we in the USA are about to inaugurate as Vice President a strong woman born of a marriage between an Indian Tamil Brahmin mother and a Jamaican Christian father

At times, the names and locations can be daunting to follow, but I found myself swept up in the whirlwind of travel, discovery and romance. The reader follows his intellectual and amorous adventures across three continents, four formidable wives and thousands of years of history and metaphysics. I was impressed to learn that AKC supervised the printing of many of his early works on the same press on which William Morris, produced the famed Kelmscott editions while his first wife and frequent collaborator, Ethel Mary Partridge, won renown for reviving traditional dyeing and weaving techniques. Tantalizing details like that abound.

His early relationship with the leading figures of the British and American Arts & Crafts and modernist movements, including Rabindranath Tagore, Alfred Stieglitz, Edward Steichen, Eric Gill and John Caged was a revelation. As a photographer myself, I was particularly interested in his close relationship with modernist photographers. Both he and his first wife were accomplished photographers, and he went on to make exquisite portraits of his second wife, acclaimed singer and musician, Ratan Devi née Alice Richardson and the third wife, pioneering modern dancer, Stella Bloch, an American of continental European Jewish origin. The fourth wife, Doña Luisa Runstein, an Argentine socialite from a Jewish family and renowned Bostonian photographer known as Lotte Lamas. After AKC's death in 1947 Doña Luisa devoted herself to editing and organizing AKC's archive until her passing in 1970. It takes a strong, confident man to win the hand(s) and devotion of such and amazing quartet of women.

Rather than burying his unmistakable nose in dusty tomes, devoting every waking hour to scholarship and collecting, AKC led an exciting and scandalous life. His friends included fantastically rich collectors, leading artists, writers and scholars in the US, Europe and Asia, as well as beautiful, intelligent women to whom he was, if we are to believe Dr. Pal's account, irresistible. The book devotes an entire chapter to AKC's four wives, each of whom won fame on her own merits. The passages about his relationship with Japanese art scholar and modernist, Okakura Kakuzo, furthered my understanding of the transmission of modernist ideas and trends around the world in the days prior to World War II. He was indeed a universal figure.

Just when you start to wonder about the academic AKC as opposed to the worldly AKC, in the last few chapters, Dr. Pal makes it clear that, above all, Coomaraswamy was the consummate scholar. You are suddenly swept up in an intellectual monsoon, with complex ideas rushing at you with a speed that this poor scholar wasn't prepared for. I needed to reread passages several times to understand the enormous ideas generated by AKC's astounding intellect.

In the end, Dr. Pal shows us an Ananda Kentish Coomaraswamy who is human and conflicted but relatable without dimming one bit his scholarly reputation and glorious contributions to art and metaphysics which have been widely explored by his previous biographer, Roger Lipsey, whom Dr. Pal references humbly and graciously. I think the highest praise I can give this book is that Dr. Pal introduced me to someone I would have dearly liked to have known.