

## BOOK REVIEW

### QUEST FOR COOMARASWAMY A Life in the Arts



Pratapaditya Pal



**Quest for Coomaraswamy: A Life in the Arts**, by Pratapaditya Pal, published by Bayeux Arts, Digital-Traditional Publishing, Calgary, 2020. Preface, Acknowledgements, Introduction, 9 Chapters, Appendix, Notes, Select Bibliography, Index, 328 pages, over 120 illustrations, 23.5 × 17 cm. ISBN: 978-1897411872. US\$34.95 (hard cover with dust jacket). Website: [www.bayeux.com](http://www.bayeux.com).

WHO IS Ananda Coomaraswamy? He is a household name among scholars of South Asian art, but on first blush, his very name arouses curiosity. The identity expressed by his name is a key to the complex cultural configuration that he embodies—born of a Lankan Tamil father and an English mother, brought up in colonial Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) and high-empire England, Coomaraswamy himself drew consciously on cultural hybridity in an engagingly human and positive sense of the term. Once

we know a bit about him, we read his books—and the classics enshrined on the shelves of our private intellectual history become iconic. But Pal sets out to unpack the icon; what interests him is the “person behind the persona” and he deftly explores this in nine fascinating chapters. Pal is himself an icon on the shelves of any mental library of art and culture, so perhaps he is leading us into a hall of mirrors.

Pal writes passionately, but *Quest for Coomaraswamy* is not a hagiography. It is an exercise in warm appreciation and considered criticism, far from the harsh and cold critiques of those mid-gets who delight in trampling on the shoulders of the great men and women preceding them. *Quest for Coomaraswamy* is a mirror that reflects the gesture of Coomaraswamy’s life and the dignity of his intellectual trajectory. An affectionate biography, an antidote to the age of frag-

mentation in which information is hastily drawn from the internet without regard for continuity or context, a plunge into the deep history that Coomaraswamy distilled and presented through the dance of life. Pal weaves continuity and context into an elegant tapestry worthy of the extraordinary figure who was Ananda Kentish Coomaraswamy. *Quest for Coomaraswamy* is about Coomaraswamy as an organic whole, a man and his ideas, not a life abstracted or a cold curriculum vitae; Pal’s work is a dance of ideas, a series of dramatic gestures that evokes the flavours and moods of the drama of AKC.<sup>1</sup>

What is biography about? I trust that we all know the difference between geography and biography: geography is about maps and biography is about chaps. But it helps the reader to know a lot about maps, because AKC was an early globetrotter or *Welltenbummler*. Not just the everyday map of today’s world, which is still in constant flux, but the map of history: ancient Indian and Ceylonese dynasties, the far-flung British empire, maps from the age in which itineraries followed the sea routes, and America, raw and rich, was opening up to world culture. As for chaps, the book is about the incredible story of AKC, a chap extraordinaire, with a strong supporting cast of other interesting chaps and ladies besides. Biography helps us to understand and appreciate the intellectual contexts of people we know only through their writings. A sympathetic biography like this gives depth, warmth, light and intellectual stimulation—along with surprises, which are many. The author’s passion and his lapidary, serendipitous style make us eager to read on, to see what fresh insights the next page might offer. The well-chosen pictures contribute to this.

For years I have enjoyed Pratap Pal as a sensitive and elegant writer, and this facet is certainly in evidence in this volume, which makes me realise that he is an equally sensitive and elegant painter: every chapter is a carefully painted and colourful tableau. The nine chapters are successive chronological frames for AKC’s life, but the author blends time and space so artfully that each chapter is a passage through time, space and ideas.

This is, after all, how life seems to work. For AKC, the movement through space was especially important in the formation of his career: from the colonised isle of Ceylon to the metropole of the British Isles. But Britain was not a complete “other” for the young boy and he adapted readily. Then there were visits to Ceylon’s big neighbour, India, and AKC seemed to blend seamlessly into what in retrospect was an especially dynamic period of Indian culture and art, exchanging ideas with the Tagore family and with several of the great British scholars who breached the social boundaries of the colonial mindset to appreciate and contribute to Indian art. AKC breathed a special air of internationalism.

The Introduction stands alone as an independent essay on AKC and his intellectual context and legacy. Chapter 1 draws a vivid portrait of AKC’s distinguished father, Sir Mutu Coomaraswamy: AKC was doubly an aristocrat—in Ceylon through his father’s side and in the UK through his intellectual merits and connections. At the same time, he was close to the earth and the landscape with its undulations—the hills of England and the fossils tucked by time in the river beds of southern England and the hills of Kandy. From the start Swami Vivekananda and the Tagore family enter the picture, auguring the young boy’s spiritual promise, and Ananda grows up in Kent with his English mother. Chapter 1 introduces one of the amazing features of AKC’s life story: he started out with an interest in—a passion for—*Geology*.

This is developed in Chapter 2, which details how at the age of twenty, AKC joined University College, London, to study Geology and Botany and how he excelled to the extent that by the age of twenty-six, he was appointed director of the newly established Mineral Survey of Ceylon. His interest in geology led him to explore the landscape, and through this interest he met his first wife, Ethel Mary Partridge, on the North Devon Coast while both were hunting for fossils. Ethel was anything but a fossil and it was she who introduced him to the world of handicrafts. His passion for fossils led AKC to explore the Gloucestershire hills, which prepared him for strenuous years



as a mineralogist in the hills of Kandy in Ceylon. And, incredibly, this “young man whose principal training had been Geology and Botany ... with seemingly effortless ease transformed himself into a brilliant cultural historian” (p. 49). His *Mediaeval Sinhalese Art* was published in 1908 when he was thirty-one years old, heralding a lifetime of meticulous and well-crafted publications. We learn further about AKC’s involvement in the Arts and Crafts Movement and “craft-idealism” and the development of his politico-cultural ideas and notions of social reform.

Chapter 3, “Discovering India”, follows AKC to India and details his encounter with, and participation in, the Bengal School of Art, mixing with the Tagore brothers and the luminaries of the age, including Ernest Binfield Havell and Nandalal Bose. Here we learn about AKC’s development as a connoisseur and collector of art. Chapter 4, “A Crusader for the Cause of Indian ‘Fine Art’”, takes us into the realm of polemic, stirred by a statement made by Sir George Birdwood in 1910, who says of a Borobudur Buddha: “A boiled suet pudding would serve equally well as a symbol of passionless purity and serenity of soul”, combined with some indiscreet statements by the painter—and principal of the School of Art in Bombay (Mumbai)—Cecil Burns. This brings a discussion of English reactions to Indian aesthetics, and issues in William Rothenstein, a close associate of AKC and a key figure in the formation of the India Society in London and the Indian art world of the early 1900s. We learn about AKC’s “eagerness for translating texts”, and the story of the production of *Myths of the Hindus and Buddhists* with the Irish Sister Nivedita (1913), a book beautifully illustrated with colour plates by members of the Bengal School.

Chapter 5, “Joining the Boston Brahmins”, follows AKC to Boston, where he settled at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts from 1917 for the remainder of his life (1947) (and where Pal was “Keeper of the Indian Collections” from May 1967 to December 1969). Chapter 6, “The Scholar-Curator”, deals with his curatorial work and his museology *avant-la-lettre* (since AKC himself grew up with and

contributed to museum practices and studies, as did Pal as well, for later phases of the field). Chapter 7, “In the Company of Women”, is about the women in his life—the succession of four wives, each very different, their intellectual interaction, and their contributions to AKC’s artistic development.

Chapter 8, “A Man for All Seasons”, details more of the ideas and activities of this “multisplendoured genius”, especially his creative nature, his poetic soul and his mastery of the English language. Chapter 9, “The Summation: Man or Superman?”, brings together the assessments of intellectuals of the period with Pal’s own evaluations. The Appendix, containing “Correspondence between Tagore and Coomaraswamy”, opens with an imposingly pensive 1930 photograph of AKC in conversation with Rabindranath Tagore in Boston. The volume closes with a Select Bibliography and Index.

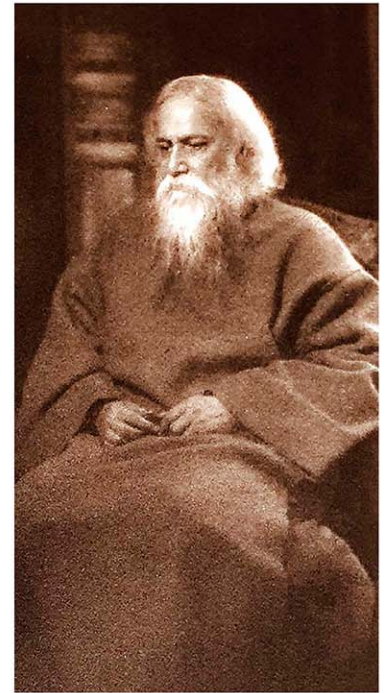
There is much more to the story than I can outline here: the scope of each chapter is so broad, yet so tightly told, that it is impossible to summarise them. The reader is treated throughout to Pal’s own insights. He explains, for example, how Indian art interleaved with European art from (leaving Gandhara aside) at least Rembrandt (17th century) on, through Degas and Gauguin, leading him to muse on the indifference of European critics and art historians to the “intrinsic aesthetic merit of Indian art” (p. 94), a merit that shines throughout the book.

Is Coomaraswamy relevant today? His intellectual relevance goes far beyond art and architecture: his titles include works like *What is Civilisation?*, *Time and Eternity* and *Spiritual Authority and Temporal: Power in the Indian Theory of Government*. AKC was an active progressive; his social sympathies inspired him to engage in humanist activities. In 1906, he founded the Ceylon Social Reform Society, an organisation with a broad socio-cultural agenda “to encourage the revival of native arts and sciences” with economic ramifications foreseen “to re-create a local demand for wares locally made, as being in every respect more fitted to local needs than any mechanical Western-manufactured goods are likely to become”. AKC was co-editor of the *Ceylon National*

*Review*, which was published in Colombo from January 1906 to January 1911. These ideals and movements, and AKC’s role in them, may be forgotten today, but as the world slides backwards and teeters on the brink of barbarism, they are intensely relevant. AKC’s intellectual life lives on: his *History of Indian and Indonesian Art and Yaksas: Essays in the Water Cosmology* are perennial classics;<sup>2</sup> and I myself quote *The Bugbear of Literacy* and “The Parts of a Vīnā” in forthcoming books. AKC is here to stay in the canons of ideas and publications, and they are bound to become increasingly relevant as bewildered humanity tries to make its way through the rapidly changing cultural and spiritual landscapes of this turbulent world. His life exemplifies a cosmopolitanism and a love of learning, a depth of field that is a timely reminder in an age of clashing and increasingly chauvinist and hegemonic perspectives.

What else do we learn about AKC? That he worked and thought hard (look at how much he produced); one of his colleagues reminisces that “No one else I have ever known worked as hard as he did”. AKC was a vegetarian; he was a chain-smoker; he kept a dog, at least in Boston; and he had a subversive sense of humour (Pal relates some amusing anecdotes). Yet, the peace-loving vegetarian was a passionate and expert angler during his summer retreats at a cottage in Maine, to the point that in 1926, the *Boston Herald* published a report titled “Museum Keeper Gets a Big Salmon”, with a photograph of a “triumphant and grinning AKC in English tweeds and Indian turban holding the fishing rod”. On another occasion, fishing with a friend, “after hours of patient effort in the hour of cow-dust Coomaraswamy managed to catch ‘a young and foolish trout too small to keep’”. He “took it off the hook, looked at it with gentle eyes”, and tossed it back into the water to watch as it swam off. Fishing seems to be one of the contradictions of the great man’s life.

*Quest for Coomaraswamy* is a welcome case of a connoisseur writing about a connoisseur; it is a mirror of gestures, of significations that go beyond mere iconographic deliberations to meaningful metaphysics. AKC’s



Rabindranath Tagore  
in Boston, 1930

prodigious output of ideas and writings is astounding, and the prodigious effort and research that Pal has put into this study of his life and ideas astounds as well. Pal unpacks the icon and shows us the person behind the persona; mysteries remain, but these are enigmas natural to the human person, especially to a phenomenal individual like AKC.

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<sup>1</sup>I take the liberty to follow the author and refer to the great man by his initials, “AKC”.

<sup>2</sup>For example, Marcus Bingenheimer quotes the latter in his “A Study and Translation of the *Yakṣa-saṃyukta* in the Shorter Chinese *Samyukta-āgama*”, in *Research on the Samyukta-āgama*, edited by Dhammadinnā, Taipei: Dharma Drum Corporation, 2020, pp. 763–841—one of the most recent publications on the Chinese translations of early Buddhist texts.