



**BOOK REVIEW**

## **Quest for Coomaraswamy: A Life in the Arts**

**By Pratapaditya Pal. 328 pp. Calgary, Bayeux Arts, 2020.**

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Ananda Kentish Coomaraswamy (1877–1947) is remembered as a major founding figure of Indian art history and as a polymath who bridged Eastern and Western cultures in his prolific writings. His career can be said to have had three acts: the young scientist; the art historian and museum curator (as well as socio-political essayist and Indian nationalist); and the ageing metaphysician, in tireless intellectual search of ancient truths. There were, at the same time, evident continuities throughout, both in his writings, with their occasionally polemical flavour, and in his enigmatic and driven personality.

Born in Colombo of Anglo-Ceylonese parentage, Coomaraswamy grew up in England, following the death of his father Sir Mutu Coomaraswamy, a distinguished Tamil lawyer and legislator. After taking a degree in Geology and Botany at University College London, Coomaraswamy undertook field work in Ceylon and was appointed director of its Mineralogical Survey. He was accompanied there by his first wife, Ethel (later Ethel Mairet, the influential handloom weaver), whom he first met while fossil-hunting on the Devon Jurassic coast. In Ceylon they worked together on a survey of the island's traditional arts and crafts, already under threat from Western influences and industrialism, a theme that Coomaraswamy would expound, in full William Morris vein, in his resulting work *Mediaeval Sinhalese Art* (1908). He had by then come into a large inheritance, and this pioneering book was hand-printed on Morris's former printing press at the Coomaraswamys' new home at Broad Campden, in an Arts and Crafts Movement enclave of the Cotswolds. It inaugurated his career as an art historian and his new role as an eloquent interpreter of Indian sculpture and painting to a hitherto oblivious Western audience.

Coomaraswamy now had the means to travel often and extensively within India. There he befriended the Tagore family and their circle, among other leading cultural figures. He also developed a keen acquisitive eye for the hitherto almost unknown Rajput court paintings from Rajasthan and the Punjab Hills, especially illustrations of Krishna subjects and related themes imbued with the erotic *rasa*. His collection of these works would form the basis for his next important book, *Rajput Painting* (1916), another ground-breaking study, notable for its moving flights of poetical prose as much as its scholarship.

Eros or *kāma* was at this stage central to Coomaraswamy's life and philosophy of art. By 1910 his first marriage had ended when he took up with the young Alice Richardson, a gifted singer who also became proficient in the Indian classical tradition, performing under the name Ratan Devi. In 1916 Coomaraswamy arranged an American tour for her, but in New York her ill-starred affair with the noxious occultist Aleister Crowley brought this second marriage to an end. In the following year, Coomaraswamy left

England finally, after troubles with the wartime British authorities. He took up a curatorial post at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts and would remain there until his death 30 years later.

During his early Boston years, Coomaraswamy did much to build up the museum's Indian collections to their present excellence, with generous help from the benefactor and connoisseur Denman Waldo Ross, who also facilitated the museum's acquisition of Coomaraswamy's own collection. During the 1920s he published several masterly catalogues of the museum's Indian sculpture and paintings collections. Other major contributions were his classic *History of Indian and Indonesian Art* (1927), a model of scholarly synthesis, and his two-part work *Yakṣas* (1928–1931), which remains a fundamental study of early Indian sculptural symbolism.

Coomaraswamy's life now revolved between his disciplined Boston routine, ordered around his research and writing, and his regular forays to New York and its bohemian avant-garde arts scene. There he met and married Stella Bloch, 20 years his junior, a Polish-born dancer who had studied with Isadora Duncan. Although they spent much time apart in their different cities, she became his muse for a decade or more and he often drew or photographed her, with much artistic skill. His recent friendship with Alfred Stieglitz had persuaded him of the importance of photography as an art form, and his own studies of female nudes or a smoky Boston railway yard were notably Stieglitzian.

By 1930 Coomaraswamy had married again, having met his fourth wife Doña Luisa Runstein, a society photographer from Argentina, at a communist rally. This proved a lasting and stable union, and their move to Needham, outside Boston, facilitated the strict work regime of his later years. Summer vacations were spent in Maine, where Coomaraswamy gained local fame for his fly-fishing expertise.

Now in his fifties, Coomaraswamy had turned away from the humdrum chores of museum work and even from the study of individual works of art per se. Focusing on questions of symbology, iconology, and aesthetics, he immersed himself in Vedic studies and the later Indian traditions, as well as the mystical or scholastic literatures of other world religions. In the last 15 years of his life, he directed his mature intellectual powers to metaphysics and the insights of the ancient wisdom literatures. His essays of this period, with their closely argued philological insights and fecundity of cross-cultural reference, show a density of exposition and annotation that can deter the less hardy reader. They retain a following among students of Guénonian Traditionalism and the *Philosophia Perennis*.

On the occasion of Coomaraswamy's seventieth birthday and following his death soon after, many tributes to the scholar-sage were published by his admirers K. Bharata Iyer and later Durai Raja Singh, a Tamil schoolteacher in Malaysia and number one Coomaraswamy fan, who also amassed much valuable documentation of the great man's life. Coomaraswamy himself had deplored the practice of biography as 'a vulgar catering to illegitimate curiosity', and in his voluminous correspondence he was usually cagey about personal matters. But he surely realised that a life as various and exceptional as his would be written about. Of all the tributes that appeared, the most revealing was a shrewdly perceptive memoir by his younger museum colleague Eric Schroeder. It captures the older scholar vividly, with affectionate anecdotes of his idiosyncratic, English gentleman persona and other foibles, while also pointing to a deeper tension between his idealism as a thinker and writer and his sometimes wayward marital or financial conduct.

Roger Lipsey, in his *Coomaraswamy: His life and work* (1977), the only previous full biography, also acknowledges his subject's human shortcomings, while treating them with a certain decorous reticence. Lipsey's book, which appeared as the third volume in a Bollingen Foundation edition of some of Coomaraswamy's later symbolical and

metaphysical essays, is above all a well-rounded intellectual biography that remains of enduring value.

After Lipsey, no writer has felt emboldened to embark on a further quest for Coomaraswamy until this welcome new biography by the distinguished art historian and museum curator Pratapaditya Pal. Having long reflected on Coomaraswamy and his works, Pal sets out to reach a fuller understanding of 'the quotidian and intellectual life of the man' and to know more 'of the person behind the persona'. His viewpoint differs somewhat from Lipsey's, in that he writes primarily as an art historian, Calcutta- and Cambridge-trained, whose first museum job in the United States was as a successor to Coomaraswamy at the Boston Museum in 1967. He accordingly strikes a personal note at times, weaving into the narrative his own experiences as an Indian making his career in the United States, among other such asides.

He discusses with insight the historical cultural milieu of Boston, its early coterie of 'Orientalist' collectors of Far Eastern art, and the old-fashioned, male-dominated ethos that formerly prevailed within the museum. He is also able to provide much new detail about Coomaraswamy's experiences and contacts in India, partly drawn from Bengali sources. Particularly good is his extensive chapter concerning Coomaraswamy's relations with women, above all his four wives, the last of whom Pal knew personally. All four were, in differing ways, clever and artistically gifted women, with whom Coomaraswamy actively collaborated in exploring their shared fields of interest. Pal is surely right in saying he 'would not have been the man or scholar that he was without them'.

There are a few minor errors in the text (for example, Ernest Mackay has become 'Ernst', and some lines from a French love poem by Coomaraswamy are incorrectly transcribed and translated). The author also follows—as have other writers—John Irwin's assumption in an article of 1965 that the well-known bronze Hanuman in the Victoria and Albert Museum had been donated by William Morris of Arts and Crafts fame (the museum now believes this sculpture was presented by a Ceylon civil servant of the same name). This is no crucial matter, however. Pal's lively and absorbing account of Coomaraswamy's life and work is altogether an illuminating one and a major contribution to its subject.