

**ANANDA COOMARASWAMY AND
APPROACHES TO THE STUDY OF
TRADITIONAL SRI LANKAN
ART AND SOCIETY***

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Ananda Coomaraswamy's studies of Sri Lankan art are of crucial importance in the history of his development as an interpreter of the art and thought of Asia. As far as we know, these studies represent his first serious encounter with Asian art and with the society which produced that art. They constitute his formative experience and training as a scholar, a writer and a contemporary thinker. His methods and approaches to Indian art may be found here in a seminal form. This applies especially to two basic strands in his researches and writings which have deeply influenced contemporary approaches to Asian art and society: his descriptive, scientific method and his concern with making the lessons of the art of the past serve the needs of the present—that is to say, his vision and interpretation of our traditional culture and society as offering some kind of perspective or "solution" to the cultural, social and political predicament of our time. We may call this his combination of science and politics—or, of art-history and philosophy.

These two major strands in Coomaraswamy's thinking go back to his European childhood and youth. Born in Colombo, from the age of two onwards he grew up in Europe. At school he showed a precocious interest in palaeontology and at university he trained as a geologist, which gave him a firm basis in scientific method. We know next to nothing about the early influence of Hinduism or the effect of his Sri Lankan family background, except that he seems to have been a vegetarian at school.¹ Through his mother's interests and connections he had an early association with Fabian socialism, while his thinking was directly and

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1. "Sir (Mutu) Coomaraswamy is the foremost man among the Hindus; his wife is an English lady; and his son is barefooted and wears the holy ashes on his forehead...": Swami Vivekananda, quoted in S. Durai Raja Singham, *Ananda Coomaraswamy: Remembering and*

profoundly influenced by the ideas of William Morris and John Ruskin. Morris's, anti-industrialism, his utopian-socialist view of the "regeneration of modern man by handicraft" and his late Romantic (Pre-Raphaelite) interpretation of mediaeval society,² are all highly relevant to Coomaraswamy's ideas about the relationship between art and society and his views on the crisis of modern civilization. Coomaraswamy's encounter with Sri Lanka provided him with an actual experience of a "mediaeval" society disintegrating under the impact of colonialism and capitalism, just as his intensive study of the arts and crafts of that society gave him a concrete instance of the functions of traditional art and a contemporary process of cultural and social change.

Coomaraswamy's research on Sri Lanka covers a period of roughly a decade, i.e. the first ten years of his scholarly life. He first returned to the country of his birth in 1896 at the age of nineteen. After several annual visits while he was still a student, Coomaraswamy lived in Sri Lanka from 1903 to 1906, working as a geologist and studying the country's traditional art.³ From the very outset, his writings of this period display those two basic elements or approaches referred to above. Although these are often integrated or intertwined, it is useful and convenient to consider them separately.

Some of the outstanding characteristics of his Sri Lankan writings may be listed as follows: (a) his powers of observation and skills in the systematic accumulation of data; (b) his descriptive and analytical abilities, including the fineness and precision of writing, evocative and stylistic brilliance and skill in enumeration, analysis, interpretation and argument; (c) his powers of synthesis. We may consider all this as part of his scientific methodology. No Sri Lankan or foreign scholar in this field before Coomaraswamy, had displayed or developed these abilities and applied them systematically to the study of Sri Lankan art and culture. He carried these studies to a higher level than had been achieved previously and set standards of scholarship which remain a model even to this day. It is precisely this achievement that we have in mind when we call Coomaraswamy the first modern Sri Lankan art-historian.

Coomaraswamy's absorptive and descriptive powers as a researcher are clear from the very beginning. His genius lay in his capacity for working with precision at high speed, in a detailed grasp of large amounts of data and in an immense productivity. While still a geological student, in the course of his annual visits to Sri Lanka he had already completed geological maps of Kandy, Hakgala and the Galle Fort areas. During a period of about three-and-a half years as Principal Mineral Surveyor, he had trekked across large areas of the

Remembering Again and Again, Kuala Lumpur, 1974, p. xxi. Regarding Coomaraswamy's opposition to the slaughtering of animals for food, see S. Durai Raja Singham, *Homage to Ananda Coomaraswamy: A Garland of Tributes*, (Kuantan, Malaysia?), 1952, p. 152; see also, *The Ceylon National Review*, 1, pp. 106-107; 2(5), pp. 125-131.

2. See p. 83 and Note 42.

3. Coomaraswamy was appointed Director of the Mineral Survey of Ceylon in 1903. He arrived in Sri Lanka in April of that year and lived here for a continuous period till the end of 1906. Then, after a tour of India, he went back to Europe and later took up permanent residence in the United States. He maintained his close contact with Sri Lanka at least until about 1911, especially through the medium of *The Ceylon National Review*, of which he was one of the founding editors. This journal was the organ of the Ceylon Social Reform Society, a largely culturally oriented nationalist organization. Coomaraswamy was its first president. He is thought to have visited Sri Lanka on two or three occasions after 1906. The bulk of his writings from 1900 to 1909 relate to Sri Lanka, the most fertile period of such writings being from 1904 to 1906.