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Introducing a God and His Ideal Form: A.K. Coomaraswamy's "Dance of Śiva", 1912/1918

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In July 1912, the first version of the famous essay "The Dance of Śiva"¹⁾ by Ananda Kentish COOMARASWAMY (22 August 1877 – 9 September 1947) appeared in the less-known journal *Siddhānta Dīpikā*, published in Madras. A number of recent authors have overlooked this original date,²⁾ since the article had become much more popular as the title essay of a volume that was published for the first time in New York in 1918. On only thirteen pages (in 1918: ten and a half pages) COOMARASWAMY (hereafter AKC) promulgated his view and vision of Śiva's aspect of Naṭarāja, a sculptural type that for him involved a glimpse of the true, mystic form of this Hindu deity. Although AKC has been criticised for certain short-

comings in the recent years,³⁾ the outcome of his article is undoubtedly a shift in the international perception of an artwork and the ensuing acceptance of an image originating from a context that previously had been largely despised by Western art critics. In finally receiving a positive critique, Śiva Naṭarāja developed into an exceptional case of a multi-armed deity. AKC's achievement was to have chosen the congenial subject, which he framed with a multi-layered interpretation, drawing from the indigenous tradition as well as Western sources that he regarded as facilitating a translation of its essence. By giving it less an iconographical treatment than an iconological evaluation, he successfully evoked the God's greatness as well as invoked the coalescence of form and content. In this way he managed, as it were, a breakthrough in the bulwark of Western scepticism towards Indian art. The time in which he wrote his essay has considerably contributed to the meteoric ascension in the popularity of Śiva Naṭarāja. A recent study by TURNER (2010) characterizes the pre-World War I period in Britain as that of the rise of

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- 1) The special character 'Ś' was used for 'Ś' in the version of 1912. The author's name was given as "Dr. A. K. Coomarasvāmi".
 - 2) The lack of information is particularly felt in a recent contribution by KERSENBOOM (2011: 30) because she tries to embed his writing of the essay in the biographical context. The original place of publication was not revealed by A.K. COOMARASWAMY in the volume of 1918, where he listed several names of periodicals where "certain of these essays now rewritten" were published previously (COOMARASWAMY 1918: [140]). The *Siddhānta Dīpikā*, discontinued by 1914, is not included. Only in 1923 (II: 92), did AKC refer to the original place of publication, but he gave the year as "1913" instead of "1912". LIPSEY (1977) remained unaware of the essay's earlier publication. However, both the bibliographies by DURAI RAJA SINGAM (1981: 233-239) and by AKC's son Rama P. COOMARASWAMY (1988: 12-13) refer to the original article. Before its modification and re-publication in the volume of 1918, the essay was reprinted in GOPINATHA RAO's *Elements of Hindu Iconography* (1916: 231-252). GOPINATHA RAO (1916: 231) explained that he had shared with AKC the textual sources gathered by him, before the latter wrote "independently a very beautiful article". A reprint of the first version in another publication occurred in 1963 (SOMASUNDARAM PILLAI 1963, App. II: 153-162, without the Tamil quotations).

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- 3) To the best of my knowledge, the earliest critical discussion is by Partha MITTER, whose general conclusion reads: "However persuasive Coomaraswamy's interpretation may have been it did not really bring us any closer to the understanding of Indian art" (MITTER 1977: 285). He was already moving in the direction of criticism for "Orientalism", i.e. the inappropriate application of Western normative concepts in approaching cultures of the East, the theoretical foundation of which was laid by Edward SAID only one year later. KERSENBOOM (2011) has recently sought to identify such an approach in AKC's "The Dance of Śiva". I would like to call for a deeper analysis of the attitude of a writer who "considered himself a Hindu; moreover, he is recognized within this tradition as an orthodox exponent of Hindu doctrine." (MOORE & COOMARASWAMY 1988: xxiv). AKC's leaning towards Traditionalism, particularly with reference to his later writings, is clearly attested by SEDGWICK (2004: 34-36).



Fig. 1 Natarāja, Tamil Nadu, ca. 11th century, bronze, 92.7 x 74.3 x 39.4 cm, Portland Art Museum, Portland, OR, Museum Purchase: Helen Thurston Ayer Fund, acc.no. 56.12 (acquired 1956). Photo courtesy of the Portland Art Museum.

This bronze originally had a more ornate flaming arch, whose outer portion must have been removed because it was regarded as unaesthetic in its damaged state (GROUSSET 1930: figs. 95, 96). The decoration was in fact similar to that of the image in Fig. 5. The Portland image has the rare feature that Śiva's left leg extends to the front at an unusual angle.

modernism in art and an increased serious interest in things Indian and she also situates AKC within this setting.⁴⁾ The same period also happened to witness a proliferation of the topic of dance and movement in art.⁵⁾

The present contribution does not intend to completely reexamine the facts, but rather combines a commemoration of the centenary of the article with a short analysis. It starts with a few comments on Naṭarāja from a contemporary perspective and continues with a biographic sketch of the time when AKC wrote his essay. The essay's contents – including some of the modifications introduced for the edition of 1918 – and subsequent criticism are briefly discussed and followed by a note on 'Coomaraswamy's Naṭarāja images'.

Studying Śiva Naṭarāja

The number of studies devoted to Naṭarāja (Figs. 1-5) that have appeared in the past nearly hundred years is considerable and they would deserve a bibliography of their own. AKC's "The Dance of Śiva" undoubtedly instigated this proliferation. While some authors, like C. SIVARAMAMURTI, have chosen to broaden the type definition beyond Śiva's dance posture with his nearly horizontally lifted left leg and a transversely held front left arm,⁶⁾ in recent years authors have again agreed on adhering to a narrow type definition. The actual outlines or demarcations of this type, however, have rarely been discussed and they are still not settled. Achieving a more exact definition of the type would be an intriguing question because certain subtypes and intermediary forms exist. In a separate study I refer to the relevant art-historical literature which cannot be detailed here for lack of space.⁷⁾ Apart from recent criticism of AKC's "The Dance of Śiva" (see below), emphasis of some current contributions has been laid on the topographical and ritual context of the image in the Naṭarāja temple at

Chidambaram itself⁸⁾ and the development of this type of image into a "Universal Icon".⁹⁾ Exhibitions over the last decade have made it a point to demonstrate the cultic-ritual aspect of Naṭarāja and related bronze processional images.¹⁰⁾

Naṭarāja (Tam. *Āṭavallān*) is certainly one of the most common types of South Indian processional deities. Between festival times the image is kept in a subshrine of its particular Śiva temple, clad in precious robes (Fig. 2). In Chidambaram itself, the religious and topographical reference point of Naṭarāja, elaborate rituals are carried out daily for the deity enshrined in a large South-facing hall at the centre of the Naṭarāja temple, the golden-roofed Citsabhā ("Hall of Consciousness").

Regarding further studies of the topic, the origin and early development of the type still remain little known.¹¹⁾ Also, it has not been attempted to date to compile an inventory of bronze images from South Indian temples, which would probably be impeded by the limitations in studying temple possessions.¹²⁾ Studying the images in their contexts would have definite advantages because most of the objects in museums outside India lack a record of their place of origin. Other topics calling for further study would be investigations of the later development of the type, i.e. after the Cōḷa period representing its zenith, and also to ascertain the iconographic relationship between bronze and stone images.¹³⁾

The outstanding aesthetic attraction of the Naṭarāja type clearly lies in the figure's balanced stance that holds the potential for both stillness and movement. Particularly artful are the graceful lifting of the front left arm and the left leg in roughly parallel positions and the body's torsion towards the proper right side. In comparison with other – both earlier and coeval – dancing images of Śiva, this type represents a certain simplification because it is

4) I wish to thank Romita Ray for drawing my attention to this article.

5) E.g., 1912 was the year of the creation of both Georg Kolbe's famous dancer in the Alte Nationalgalerie zu Berlin and Marcel Duchamp's painting "Nude Descending a Staircase (No. 2)".

6) SIVARAMAMURTI 1974. The expansion of the topic is hinted at in the preface: "[...] as I worked I realised that the theme is inexhaustible. Naṭarāja was no longer just in the golden hall at Chidambaram. His dance halls appeared all over our vast country".

7) WESSELS-MEVISSSEN 2012. The most important and numerous contributions, over several decades, have been made by R. NAGASWAMY (e.g. 2006).

8) NANDA & MICHELL 2004. For a more comprehensive – but far from complete – bibliography see WESSELS-MEVISSSEN 2012.

9) BELTZ 2011; cf. also PAL 2004 and SRIVATHSAN 2012.

10) E.g. DEHEJIA 2002; BELTZ 2008.

11) I have made a fresh attempt to explore the early meaning of the icon before it was interpreted according to the *pañcakṛtya* concept of the Śaiva Siddhānta school (WESSELS-MEVISSSEN 2012).

12) This is understandable to some extent, because art thefts have occurred, which any exposure might abet.

13) After KAIMAL (1999: 409) has drawn attention to a frequent type of niche reliefs showing Naṭarāja, BENNINK *et al.* (2012) have recently collected evidence of enshrined free-standing stone images of Naṭarāja.

only four-armed. At the same time, it has numerous charming details which many generations of artists have outrivalled each other in executing in the most perfect way, in the intricate *cire perdue* technique and subsequent finishing.¹⁴⁾ The fact that this type from Tamil Nadu does not belong to the ithyphallic variants of Śiva's dance has facilitated its acceptance to wider audiences outside India.

Between Britain and India – the writing of the essay

AKC's biography is well known only in parts, since he, being reluctant to focus attention on his own person, did not write it down himself.¹⁵⁾ Certain blanks, therefore, remain. Regarding the period under discussion, it belonged to the time when AKC had spent months or years altogether in India, while being based in England between 1907 and 1917. To ascertain where the essay originated a crucial question is how long before the publication from Madras (today's Chennai)¹⁶⁾ in July 1912 "The Dance of Śiva" had been written. If it had already been written in 1911 or early 1912, this could have been during a visit to Madras. However, not even the year of such a visit has been recorded.¹⁷⁾ This Southern metropolis must have attracted him, not only because his Ceylonese father (who had died only two years after his birth) was an ethnic Tamil with Indian ancestry. Closer to the date of publication, AKC was back in England. The only indication that he had returned by spring 1912 is the report of his acquiring a small sculpture, actually a piece of erotica, from his sculptor-friend Eric Gill in April.¹⁸⁾ If the article was prepared relatively close to its date of publication – which is probable because the *Siddhānta Dīpikā*, discontinued in 1914, was a monthly journal – he would have written or at least revised it in England. In this con-

nection, it is worth noting that as early as 1909 and 1910, AKC had published two short articles on "Natarāja" and "Śiva's Dance",¹⁹⁾ which indicates that his attention was already drawn to this particular topic.

AKC's residence was on England's countryside, in Broad Campden, close to the then centre of the Arts and Crafts Movement, in which he participated. He lived in a deconsecrated Norman Chapel that provided ample space for his library. He also produced his own books there, *The Aims of Indian Art* of 1908 being among the first ones. Among his close friends were the early modern sculptors Eric Gill and Jacob Epstein, who were both inspired in their work by South Asian sculpture. His longest sojourn in India must have been in 1910-11, when AKC gathered a large art collection and curated an exhibition.²⁰⁾ By that time he had planned to settle in India for a period of ten years,²¹⁾ after spending one year in Europe, but the first World War and his deteriorating relations with the British Government finally led to his emigration to the USA in 1917.

Provided that he had been, as I assume, in Madras some time during the year 1911, AKC could have met the Russian-born scholar Victor Goloubew. Goloubew had travelled there for his research and taken photographs of bronze sculptures of Natarāja in the Government Museum Madras. AKC used Goloubew's photograph of the image from Tiruvalangadu (cf. **Fig. 4**) in a publication of 1914²²⁾ and as the frontispiece of his book of 1918,²³⁾ but the

14) The process is nicely demonstrated on <http://www.asia.si.edu/exhibitions/online/chola/chola.htm> as part of the exhibition by DEHEJIA (2002).

15) In May 1946, AKC wrote to S. Durai Raja Singam: "I must explain that I am not at all interested in biographical matter relating to myself and that I consider the *modern* practice of publishing details about lives and personalities of well known men is nothing but a vulgar catering to illegitimate curiosity [*sic*]" (MOORE & COOMARASWAMY 1988: 25).

16) Two monographs of his also appeared from Madras, *Essays in National Idealism* (1910) and *Art and Swadeshi* (1912).

17) LIPSEY 1977 did not mention a visit to Madras around this time. AKC's son, Rama P. Coomaraswamy, acknowledged one or more visits to Madras but did not indicate any date.

18) COLLINS 1998: 73; cf. TURNER 2010: 260.

19) DURAI RAJA SINGAM (1981: 233) refers to the articles that seem to have been restricted to one page each: "Śiva as Nataraja", *Central Hindu College Magazine*, Benares, Vol. IX, No. 7, 1909, p. 174 (cf. CROUCH 2002: 183, who adds "N.S."), and "Śiva's Dance", in the same journal, Vol. X, No. 11, 1910, p. 281. However, CROUCH (2002: 190) lists the second article as published in *[The] Theosophist*, Madras, XXXI, 12, 1910, [1620-]1621. I was not successful in tracing these articles.

20) He headed the Arts Section of the All-India Exhibition, Allahabad, 1 December 1910 – 28 February 1911.

21) Letter to William Rothenstein of 15 September 1910 (MOORE & COOMARASWAMY 1988: 370-371). Very few letters from the time before the 1930s are preserved at all, and any statements of place seem to have been omitted.

22) COOMARASWAMY 1914: pl. XXX. TURNER (2010: 259, fig. 10) has cited a wrong plate number.

23) This becomes obvious by comparing it with the reproduction of the photo series in 1921, specifically pl. VII, in the preface of which Goloubew described them as his photographs (RODIN *et al.* 1921: 7). Almost a decade later, René GROSSET (1930: 155, fig. 97) still used Goloubew's photograph.



Fig. 2 Naṭarāja and Goddess Pārvaī (with attendants), enshrined in the Gomukteśvara-Māsilāmaṇiśvara temple, Tiruvavaduturai, near Mayiladuturai, Tamil Nadu, bronze, ca. 11th century. The bronze images in the picture are not necessarily coeval. Photo by Gerd Mevissen, 2001

frontispiece of the 1912 version of his essay still showed one of AKC's own pictures of the Naṭarāja from Velankanni (see below).

Naṭarāja's "Cosmic Dance"

Both versions of AKC's essay start with a quotation from the Śaiva *bhakti* poet Māṇikkavācakar's *Tiruvācakam* of the 9th century, "The Lord of Tillai's Court a mystic dance performs: what's that, my dear?" (12.14). While the following quotation starting with "When the Actor

beateth the drum [...]" is of uncertain origin, the third citation is taken from a text on dance by Lucianus Samosatensis, *De saltatione* 7. Thus, the initial, extremely short citation leads the reader right into the centre of the Naṭarāja cult that is Chidambaram. Māṇikkavācakar was so closely associated with Śiva's image under worship in this important temple that according to tradition he had merged with it at the end of his life. The quote from Lucianus, on the other hand, on the primeval origin of the dance in general, seems to indicate that AKC makes an

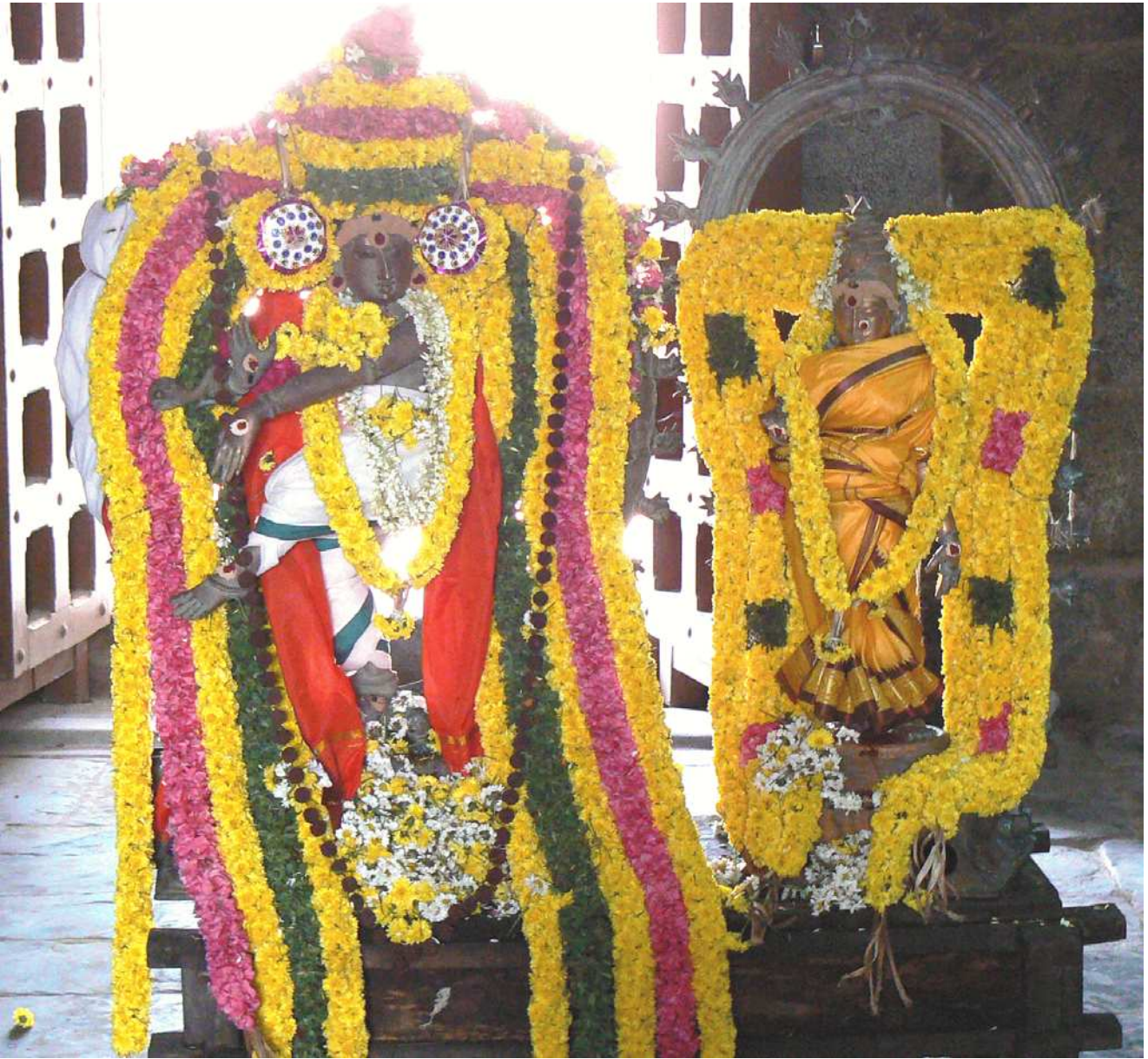


Fig. 3 Naṭarāja and Goddess Pārvaṭī decorated for the procession on Ārudra-darśanam, Airāvateśvara temple, Darasuram, Tamil Nadu, ca. latter half of the 12th century. It is curious to note that the image of the goddess has been decorated in a way that makes it appear smaller than that of her divine husband. Photo by the author, 2007

attempt at relating the god's essence to Western categories of thinking.²⁴) After that, in anticipation of his conclusion, follows the famous statement: "Whatever the origins of Śiva's dance, it became in time the noblest [1918a: clearest] image of [1918a inserted: the] activity

24) His attempts, including comparisons from science, may be interpreted as moving in the direction that ASSMANN (1996: 36) suggests "[...] a transcultural medium that will not amount to westernization or Americanization could provide visibility and transparency in a world of preserved traditions and cultural otherness."

of God which any art or religion can boast of." (COOMARASWAMY 1912: 2; 1918a: 56; italics in the original).

While taking a scrutinizing look at the main section of the article, it may be said that the style is dense and the wording well thought-out. AKC introduces a structure by restricting himself to three kinds of dance, which I would regard as basically chosen from a rhetorical point of view. There is nothing that is completely misleading, but the presentation of the subject matter reveals the somewhat narrowed scope of a pamphlet-like, assertive style.



Fig. 4 Naṭarāja, Tiruvalangadu, Tiruttani Taluk, Tiruvallur Dt./Tamil Nadu, bronze, ca. 11th century, 114.5 x 90 cm, Government Museum Chennai (formerly: Madras), acc.no. 236. Photos by Christian Luczanits, 2006. The broken parts of the tresses of the god can be observed on the figure's proper right (a), and, even more clearly, from the rear side (b), which contains a unique ornament.

The main section of the essay interprets Naṭarāja on the basis of the Siddhānta school of (South Indian) Śaivism, namely the concept of Śiva's five-fold action *pañcakṛtya* (Skt.): *sṛṣṭi* – creation/emission, *sthiti* – preservation, *saṃhāra* – destruction/reabsorption, *tirobhāva* – veiling, and *anugraha* – grace. Here it is a matter of further research whether such an interpretation has persisted from the very inception of the Naṭarāja type which is nowadays accepted to have occurred some time in the 9th/10th century. However, as the *pañcakṛtya* concept has been the dominant reading of the image for the past several centuries, this treatment was and would still be acceptable for a general introduction to the topic. Moreover, the journal where the article was first published, *Siddhānta Dīpikā*, was the organ of the Śaiva Siddhānta Mahāsamāja and part of its title, *Light of Truth*, is a translation of *Uṇmai Viḷakkam*, the title of a text from which AKC derived some central quotations.²⁵⁾ Thus, a close entangle-

25) It is the more peculiar that an omission occurred in his quoting *Uṇmai Viḷakkam* 36 pertaining to the central statement about Naṭarāja's dance (cf. note 31).

ment of the contents of his article with the organ of publication can be observed.

Coming to AKC's most important innovation, this is undoubtedly contained in the concept of the "Cosmic Dance" that has since become a topos of its own.²⁶⁾ Quite significantly, this term is not contained in the text, but it only appears in the caption of the frontispiece of 1918. Taking this fact into consideration, it is quite amazing how great its impact has been. Another important fact is that the 1912 version is the only article in which he cited Tamil sources.²⁷⁾ In this connection it should be noted that in his own publication, T.A. GOPINATHA RAO, whom Padma

26) It is more a popular topos than a term used in academic studies. E.g. SIVARAMAMURTI (1974: 23-24), although he seems to have agreed with AKC's interpretation, did not repeat it in his lengthy study. SRINIVASAN (2007) titled an essay of hers "Cosmic Dance". The term is further used in *Dancing with Śiva: Hinduism's Contemporary Catechism*, where homage is also paid to AKC (SUBRAMUNIYASWAMI 2003: xxxix-xl).

27) The main sources of his quotations are Tirumūlar's *Tirumantiram*, the date of which remains disputed (suggested dates range between the 5th and 11th/12th centuries) and the *Uṇmai Viḷakkam* of ca. 13th century.

KAIMAL has erroneously regarded as AKC's research assistant,²⁸⁾ only included Sanskrit (Āgama) texts and not any Tamil literature.²⁹⁾ Thus, hardly any overlap can be recognized in the studies of AKC and GOPINATHA RAO.

The peculiarity of the version of 1912 is the use of a few Sanskrit terms without English explanations and a number of quotes in Tamil given in the footnotes. AKC has painstakingly removed these features subsequently, in order to make the text accessible to a Western (specifically, US-American) readership. A small detail also reflects this: In the final sentence, the Indian version uses the honorific "Śrī Naṭarāja", which is more familiar to the believer. In the American version of 1918, "Śrī" has been omitted and the sentence slightly reformulated, then running: "familiar with all scepticisms, expert in tracing all beliefs to primitive superstitions, explorers of the infinitely great and infinitely small, we are worshippers of Naṭarāja still".³⁰⁾ This inclusive statement containing a subtle manipulation is, in my view, one of the "secrets" of AKC's essay. It may be explained as originally expressing his own fraternisation with the South Indian readers of the *Siddhānta Dīpikā*. An underlying inclusion of an US-American readership would have been awkward for someone who had just immigrated, as he had, about a year ago. However, AKC may have been fond of such an indirect, inclusive address with its appeal to develop religio-spiritual sentiments towards Naṭarāja.

I would like to point out that AKC's essay should not be regarded as an iconographic study in the narrow sense, since the description of the dancing god remains subordinate and is not discussed any further.³¹⁾ The author

seems to have consciously chosen this restriction, as he writes: "In these notes I expressly refrain from all aesthetic criticism and have endeavoured only to translate the central thought of the conception of Śiva's dance from plastic to verbal expression, without reference to the beauty or imperfection of individual works." (COOMARASWAMY 1912: 12; 1918a: 65: "So far I have refrained [...]").

A major impact on the public had, no doubt, been achieved by the essay collection of 1918. LIPSEY (1977: 150) has observed: "The essays in this book [...] represent the culmination of his career to that date as an art historian and critic of culture. [...] This book [...] has managed to survive in America as an introduction to Indian culture." It is interesting to note that the publisher, *The Sunwise Turn Inc. – A Modern Book Shop*, founded in 1916 as an avant-garde bookshop in Manhattan, was also frequented by well-known writers like Ernest Hemingway and Eugene O'Neill (*ibid.*: 147-151). A new edition of *The Dance of Śiva* appeared in 1924, with an introduction by the French Nobel Prize laureate Romain Rolland. It is reported that on 9 September 1947, the day AKC died in the garden of his home at Needham, Massachusetts, he was just about to finish a revision of this volume for a new edition (*ibid.*: 254).

Regarding the reception by Indian readers, it is apparent that AKC had expressed himself in a way that is accepted by the *living* Śaiva tradition. As far as I can see, no criticism has yet come from the South Asian side. DURAI RAJA SINGAM (1981: 233) cites A. Ranganathan with a far-reaching comment: "This is a piece of creative writing. He was probably the last of that great Saivaite Tradition of which Tirumoolar [author of the *Tirumantiram*] is the first."³²⁾

C. SIVARAMAMURTI, both a scholar and devotee of Śiva, in his comprehensive work on Naṭarāja refers several times to AKC's views in the chapter on the significance of Śiva's dance (1974: 23-24). Two contemporary scholars, R. CHAMPAKALAKSHMI and Archana VERMA, are still supportive of the "integrative symbolic concept" that sets Naṭarāja apart from other dancing aspects of Śiva, an opinion that obviously reflects AKC's interpretation.³³⁾

which only makes Śiva's Five Activities complete. It remains almost inexplicable why this omission was never detected.

28) This is corroborated by the treatment of AKC in SUBRAMUNIYASWAMI 2003, already mentioned in note 26.

29) "Though the concept of Naṭarāja may have arisen out of the dancing Śiva imageries, it is iconologically different from all other dancing images of Śiva; more than being an image, it is

28) KAIMAL 2011: 471. This is highly unlikely because GOPINATHA RAO served as the Superintendent of Archaeology, Travancore State.

29) GOPINATHA RAO 1916: 223-270 and App. B: 115-133, on Nṛttamūrtis. As stated in note 2, he reproduced AKC's article of 1912 in his own publication.

30) COOMARASWAMY 1918a: 66. With the wording being largely identical in the Indian version of 1912, it becomes clear that he must have addressed urban intellectuals rather than rural traditionalists.

31) COOMARASWAMY 1912: 4; 1918a: 58. Among the flaws of his description are "tightly fitting breeches" for Śiva's lower garment, the description of the front left arm that is clearly held in *gajahasta* as pointing down to the dwarf underfoot (1918a: 58) or to the lifted foot (1918a: 60), while *gajahasta* generally does not involve pointing, and the omission of the portion "*Tirobhāva* (obscuration) [arises] from the foot which presses down" in *Uṇmai Viḷakkam* 36 (also counted as no. 35, cf. *Uṇmai Viḷakkam*, pp. 52-54; COOMARASWAMY 1918a: 59),



Fig. 5 *Naṭarāja*, South India, Vijayanagara Period, bronze, ca. 14th-15th century, 117.5 x 95.3 x 35.6 cm, Museum of Art, Rhode Island School of Design, Providence, Museum Appropriation Fund 33.026. This image has a few charming details, including the asymmetrical arrangement of the god's flying tresses. Photo courtesy of Museum of Art, Rhode Island School of Design

Recent critical assessments

The US-American scholar Padma KAIMAL has somewhat mercilessly criticised AKC's interpretation of *Naṭarāja* as ahistoric and one-sided in her article (1999: 391). She, however, put it more moderately in her recent revisit of the *Naṭarāja* topic, where she acknowledges his achievements as well: "Coomaraswamy's interpretation surely continues to help contemporary audiences admire South Asian art. I suspect, however, that Coomaraswamy's interpretation was neither the only nor the first meaning that Nataraja sculptures carried. The meaning of objects, and especially objects communities value, tends to vary from one viewer to the next, and one age to the next." In the following, she reassesses the earliest perceptions about *Naṭarāja* which had, in her opinion, "associations with gruesome rampage and imperial power." (2011: 483). It remains a crucial research question whether the

violent connotations of Śiva's dance were perpetuated in the *Naṭarāja* icon or whether an overwhelmingly benevolent character of the deity had been implied from the time of its inception. The early rise of a devotional (*bhakti*) cult in Tamil Nadu from ca. 6th century onwards seems to render the latter case slightly more probable.

KERSENBOOM (2011) lately expressed a trenchant criticism of AKC's essay that resembles a slating review. The tenor of her article invokes his failing to take into account, or seriously evaluate, local myths and narratives. This is expressed by his dismissal of Chidambaram's local legend about a group of heretic sages attacking Śiva as having "no very close connection with the real meaning of the dance" (1918a: 57), while the earlier version read "no very direct connection with the meaning of the dance" (1912: 3). It seems to me that a certain uneasiness on his part is reflected in the reformulation. His aim to bring home the transcendental meaning of Śiva's Dance must have led to the decision not to concentrate on the local narrative tradition. KERSENBOOM's ridicule of AKC as having performed his own *tāṇḍava* dance (while alluding

an integrative concept." (CHAMPAKALAKSHMI 2011: 481). "Though the concept of *Naṭarāja* may have arisen from all other dancing images of Śiva, since more than being just an image it is an integrative symbolic concept." (VERMA 2012: 188).

to his first name Ananda, in order to complete the term *ānanda-tāṇḍava* – “blissful-vigorous dance”) definitely overshoots the mark. Apart from failing to situate the writing of the essay properly in his biography, what she unfolds is a rather labyrinthine picture the verification of which the reader can only hope to find in her forthcoming book. Her accusation of “Orientalism” is strongest when she criticizes the citation of Alexander Scriabin’s “Poem of Ecstasy” in the version of 1918 (1918a: 62-63). Here KERSENBOOM is really leaning on a weak point, because Scriabin’s effort to empathize with the Indian mind on its path to liberation is not convincing. AKC may have been too enthusiastic about it, as he allotted almost a whole page to this insertion. At large, KERSENBOOM tries to emphasize the local element in the cultic tradition of Naṭarāja that, after all, reflects present developments in research to return from the “universal” and “cosmic” implications of AKC’s time back to the local patterns, practices and multi-layered narratives.

Coomaraswamy’s Naṭarāja images

As referred to above, AKC has at least twice illustrated the Naṭarāja image from Tiruvalangadu (also: Tiruvalankatu, Thiruvelangadu; **Fig. 4**), which serves as the frontispiece of the volume of 1918, with a picture taken by Victor Goloubew in 1911 (see above). The image on the frontispiece of the article in *Siddhānta Dīpikā* showed the Naṭarāja from Velankanni, also in the collection of the Government Museum Madras.³⁴⁾ Both bronze sculptures appeared together in the book of 1921 that contained the famous appraisal of Naṭarāja by Auguste RODIN³⁵⁾ and they are still exhibited in the bronze gallery of the museum. While the *prabhāmaṇḍala* or flaming arch of the Velankanni image is completely preserved, the one from Tiruvalangadu has lost this feature, except for small portions remaining on the pedestal. However, this magnificent example with several unique details³⁶⁾ more than

34) This image had already been published as the frontispiece of his book of 1908. The bronze appears blotchy and thus, not very attractive.

35) RODIN 1921a: pls. I-VI (Velankanni); pls. VII-XII (Tiruvalangadu). The appreciative text that RODIN wrote in the autumn of 1913, on the basis of photographs given to him by Goloubew, was published posthumously in French. In the same year, a less lavishly illustrated English translation appeared in India (RODIN 1921b).

36) Particularly the rear side of the head lacking the protruding wheel, *śiraścakra*, but showing a sash-like decoration (**Fig. 3b**) is absolutely unusual as is the large size of the flame held in the



Fig. 6 David Pohl, *Nataraja*, site specific wall drawing, Allegheny College, Meadville, PA, 2003, spirograph drawing, ink, water, lotus leaves, incense and found objects. Photo courtesy and copyright by David Pohl

deserves to be treated as an outstanding artwork. With an extremely natural rendering of the physical features and an unusually large, but well-proportioned headgear adorned by a huge, wafer-thin moon crest, it is certainly one of the best examples ever executed. SRIVATHSAN recently has traced the role of this particular image in popularizing Naṭarāja both in Europe and in the USA.³⁷⁾ It is remarkable that a fragmented image like this one, which has lost not only the flaming arch but also the flying strands of hair, the flying sashes on the proper left and the upper part of the drum (*ḍamaru*)³⁸⁾ as well as the little finger of the hand holding it has been favoured so much by scholars and wider audiences alike.

After AKC’s departure to the USA in 1917 he remained confined to the collections he oversaw in the

rear left hand. Likewise, the considerable size of the crescent moon is highly unusual.

37) SRIVATHSAN 2012. He has also pointed out that in 1911 (pl. VII opp. p. 78 and pl. VIII opp. p. 80) HAVELL had already published front and rear views of the image from Tiruvalangadu.

38) GOPINATHA RAO (1916: 252) has already noted this.

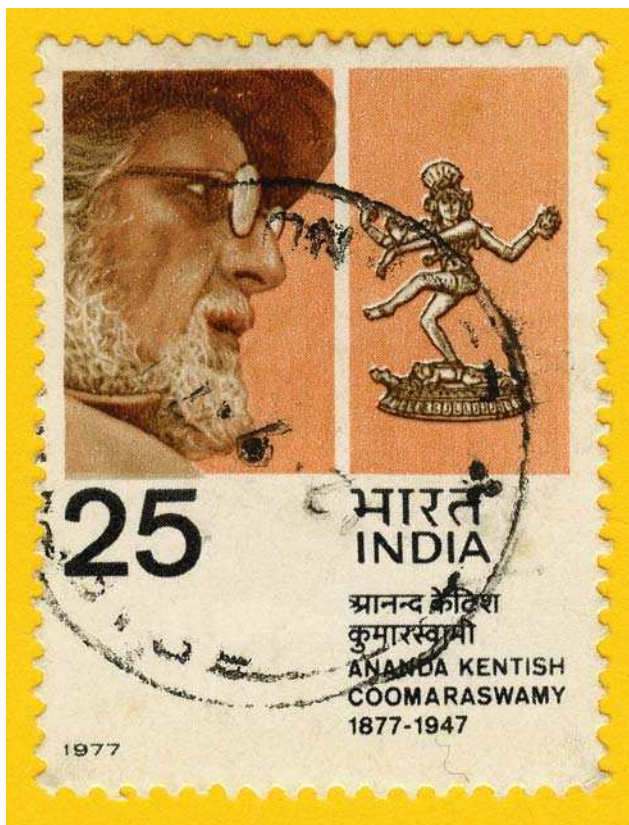


Fig. 7 Indian stamp of 1977, issued on the occasion of the centenary of A.K. Coomaraswamy's birth, after a photographic portrait of 1937 by AKC's wife; Naṭarāja image of Tiruvalangadu (Fig. 4). Photo courtesy of Peter Mika

Boston Museum of Fine Arts. During a 1920-21 buying trip to India for the museum, he acquired two images of Naṭarāja.³⁹⁾ The chronologically later piece does not reflect the charm of the earlier period, but exhibits the maturity and grandeur of the type.⁴⁰⁾ The other image that has somewhat rare, slightly awkward features is also known from a drawing by Alice Boner (BELTZ 2011: 216, fig. 6). It is possible that these two bronzes were the only sculptures of Naṭarāja that AKC had ever bought, if only on behalf of his museum. What is true is that these acquisitions were relatively early for museums outside India. In the meantime, a – preferably early – Naṭarāja image has become almost a must for every larger museum with Asian holdings.

39) COOMARASWAMY 1923, II: 87-93 (erroneously spelt “Naṭarāja”), pls. XLV-XVII. LIPSEY (1977: 137) is perhaps too enthusiastic about the artistic quality of these two images.

40) It was included in the show of 2002 (DEHEJIA 2002: 94, 102, cat. no. 4).

Conclusion

The fact that “The Dance of Śiva” has a tendentious or subjective leaning will be obvious to the attentive reader. This likewise holds true for the article that follows it in the volume of 1918 arguing for the acceptance of multi-armed images. What AKC may be blamed for is to have virtually skipped an iconographical and socio-historical treatment and have jumped directly into an iconological evaluation. Although a few shortcomings and minor errors can be detected in his presentation, in my view, his method does not imply a major flaw.

All in all, AKC has provoked a sweeping success of an icon, and he coined the topos of the “Cosmic Dance”. As a matter of fact, however, he has left it to others to pursue a more complete assessment of the Chidambaram-type Naṭarāja – an image, which has not only passed through many South Indian and Sri Lankan towns in procession, but, in the meantime, has also literally and virtually, crossed the whole world. With Modern and Contemporary art rarely taking up the topic of Naṭarāja, it cannot ultimately be said to be firmly integrated in the active global art canon. A rare exception is a temporary installation by David Pohl (Fig. 6), who created an interestingly elusive figure of the god while making use of the circular motion of the drawing tool “spirograph”.

Homage to AKC's study of Naṭarāja has been paid by the issue of a stamp in 1977, the year of the centenary of his birth (Fig. 7). Here, an aged AKC is shown as if beholding the image from Tiruvalangadu. A significant manipulation is that of the rotation of his face that was originally looking down,⁴¹⁾ in order to achieve a horizontal line of sight. The image of Naṭarāja appears rather small as compared to the head of the – in the words of DURAI RAJA SINGAM – “scholar-colossus”.⁴²⁾

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41) Cf. the frontispiece in LIPSEY 1977, photographed in 1937 by Doña Luisa Coomaraswamy.

42) In the subheading of one of his many books on AKC, *Ananda Coomaraswamy, the Bridge Builder: A Study of a Scholar-colossus*, Petaling Jaya 1977.

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Deutsche Zusammenfassung

A.K. COOMARASWAMY'S berühmter Essay "The Dance of Śiva" erschien in seiner ersten Version bereits im Jahre 1912, eine Tatsache, die in mehreren kürzlich verfassten Publikationen übergangen wurde. Die Wiederveröffentlichung einer bearbeiteten Version erfolgte 1918 in einem Sammelband gleichen Namens. COOMARASWAMY ist in den letzten Jahren zu einem umstrittenen Autor geworden. Man zählte ihn zu den sich der Moderne verschließenden Traditionalisten (SEDGWICK 2004: 34-36), warf ihm aber auch eine „orientalistische“ Einstellung vor, die sich durch eine unangemessene Anwendung westlicher Denkkategorien auszeichnet (KERSENBOOM 2011; zuvor MITTER 1977: 277-286). In Bezug auf den Essay über Śiva Naṭarāja wurde in den letzten Jahren Kritik laut, die eine ahistorische, einseitige und idealistische Herangehensweise bemängelt. Der vorliegende Artikel möchte diese Kritik nicht komplett negieren, dagegen aber COOMARASWAMY'S Verdienste in die Waagschale werfen, der sowohl eine höchst interessante Form-Inhalt-Relation eines Kunstwerkes postulierte, als auch den Versuch einer „Übersetzung“ über Religions- und Kulturgrenzen hinweg unternahm. Seine recht knappe, pointierte Studie hat letztlich zu einer weltweiten Akzeptanz dieses Skulpturentypus geführt und sollte daher weiterhin als Bezugspunkt für kunsthistorische und kulturgeschichtliche Betrachtungen zwischen Ost und West bzw. in einer geeinten Welt dienen. Darüberhinaus lässt sich erkennen, dass COOMARASWAMY'S Darlegungen zum Thema „Śiva Naṭarāja“ innerhalb der śivaitischen Richtung des Śaiva Siddhānta als autoritativ angesehen werden.

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Umschlagabbildung: Śiva Naṭarāja, Tamil Nadu, ca. 11th century, Portland Art Museum (see p. 31). Photo: Portland Art Museum
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