Ananda K Coomaraswamy's Aesthetics :

The Rasa Theory and the Hindu Religious Tradition In Art — A Critique

By T. Wignesan

> « Ceylon, from the standpoint of ethnology and culture, is an integral part of India. [...] It should be noted that the distinctively Sinhalese (Buddhist) art is the Kandyan art of the interior : the art of Jaffna belongs to that of Southern India, while that of the low country during the last three centuries has been one-third European ».
>
> [COOMARASWAMY 1913 : v, 39]

AKC — the acronym by which Ananda Kentish Coomaraswamy is universally known — was born to a Ceylonese Hindu Tamil father and an English Catholic mother in Colombo on 22nd August 1877. His mother left with him for England when he was only two, and his father, Sir Mutu Coomaraswamy, a barrister and legislative council member, unexpectedly passed away on the eve of joining his son in England on 4 May 1879. AKC lived in symbiosis with his mother, aunt and grandmother, the only remaining members of a wealthy aristocratic English family in Kent, until he graduated from University College, London, with first class honours in minerology and botany in 1900, and then he left for Ceylon. By 1903, he was fellow of University College, and his research into minerology earned him an enduring place in the colony, in the same year, as the first director of the Minerological Survey of Ceylon. In 1906, the University of London conferred on AKC the degree of D.Sc. for his official reports on Ceylonese minerology and other scientific papers, an honour never previously bestowed on a Ceylonese : AKC had also incidentally discovered a new mineral — *thorianite*, an oxide of thorium and uranium. While in Ceylon, he had also founded *The Ceylon Social Reform Society*, 1905-1907, « in order to encourage and initiate reform in social customs amongst the Ceylonese, and to discourage the thoughtless imitation of unsuitable European habits and customs » [LIPSEY III 1977 : 22]. In 1907, he left his birthplace for good, having been frustrated in his efforts to instill a sense of appreciative preservation for time-honoured indigenous arts and crafts in the island. In 1908, he had brought out on his own Essex House Press [using William Morris's famous handpress, *The Kelmscott Press,* while taking fifteen months to print 425 copies] in Broad Campden, near Stratford-upon-Avon, his first considerable work as an art historian : *Mediaeval Sinhalese Art*, which dealt with the later traditional arts of Ceylon, not those of Anuradhapura or Polannaruva before the twelfth/thirteenth centuries.

From that date on, AKC veered almost completely away from Ceylonese minerology and arts, and devoted the remaining forty years of his life almost entirely to « discovering » and interpreting Indian arts, philosophy and religion. Roger Lipsey, AKC's meticulous biographer, comments :

> **Coomaraswamy's writings in the Ceylon period show that he was touched by the formal religious art and architecture of the island and learned much from seeing that a religious conception of life suffused the life and artifacts of the common people of Ceylon, but he seems to have had little significant contact with the monastic community. […] ... he included Ceylon as an integral part of his earliest general history of Indian art [...] but in fact his departure had something final in it. Ceylon had not been ready to respond to his ideas, not ready to create and support a « Mistral ». [Frédéric Mistral, a French poet, attempted to revive the « literature and customs of the *pays de la langue d'oc* » in France in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, an effort which « represented for Coomaraswamy the unachieved ideal he had dreamed for Ceylon »]**
>
> [LIPSEY III 1977 : 32-40]

Elsewhere in the biography Lipsey himself draws revealing attention to the fact that AKC's *ideas* were not really his own : he had been dourly and profoundly influenced during his English boyhood days by John Ruskin and William Morris's anti-industrialist, back-to-nature writings and activities. So, in a way, it would seem that AKC's failure to inculcate Morris's ideals in Ceylon drove him to tag the island to the Indian sub-continent, and when he was finally harassed by the British authorities during the First World War for his open support of the Indian independence movement (*swadeshi* or the boycotting of British imports and the development of village handicrafts) and his refusal to take up arms, refusing even conscription as a conscientious objector in a special detachment, his British passport (and some of his inherited fortune) was officially confiscated (2), and one might say, in the same breath, that his ties with Ceylon had almost come loose, though not in the hearts of Ceylonese whose elite gathered in large numbers in Colombo to celebrate his seventieth birthday *festschrift* party held in Boston where he was since 1917 the curator (and later fellow) of Indian and Muhammedan art at the Museum of Fine Arts. It is curious that he did not feel the same way about India. His attempts to find a place in the sun at that moment in India, too, were thwarted : he was refused a teaching post at Benares and, elsewhere, as a founding « curator ». Irony of ironies, AKC was made the Chairman of the National Committee for India's Freedom — *in absentia* — in 1938.

In spite of — or rather because of — these life-shakingly traumatic events, AKC clung closely to his origins, and, in 1907 at Lahore, formally became a staunchly-informed Hindu, even, later, going to the extent of wanting to embrace *sanyasi*-hood : he had decided to settle for good in India after his retirement from the Boston Museum with his fourth wife of Jewish origin from Argentina. His encyclopaedic knowledge of things cultural from India (and Ceylon, of course), his penetrating insights into European and Oriental art, thought, aesthetics and religion, meticulously analysed and interpreted in hundreds of articles and essays, catalogues and reviews, his indefatigable defence and/or discovery of the Indian sub-continent's cultural past, such as, Rajput painting, and Indian cultural influence and spread in

Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia — make him the quintessential son of South Asia, a role that devolves on him to greater effect than with most of the Indian and Ceylonese intellectuals of the first half of this century.

It is precisely for these reasons that we may think of him as a Ceylonese, not just because he had been born in Colombo, the son of an eminent Tamil leader, nor because his cousins [this is not certain], Sir Ponnambalam Arunachalam and Ponnambalam Ramanathan, and his nephew [AKC's son, Dr.Rama P., made it known to the writer, in 1995, that Tambimuttu was in no way related to AKC] Meary James Thurairajah Tambimuttu, had each attained fame as native-born Ceylonese.

Coomaraswamy's Espousal of the Hindu Philosophy of Art

Let us next consider if there is a form of aesthetics unique to AKC, or even if there were an attitude to art or a critical vision of things that might be construed as a particular « aesthetic » way of looking at the things of beauty or *objets d'art* that AKC wrote about so extensively. In other words, what — if any — is his philosophy of art ? But before we do so, we may as well quote what he had to say generally about his life's work and the underlying truth about things, practically at the end of his life, that is, at his seventieth birthday party.

> [...] I should like to emphasize that I have never built up a philosophy of my own or wished to establish a new school of thought. Perhaps the greatest thing I have learned is never to think for myself ; I fully agree with André Gide that « toutes choses sont dites déjà »[sic], and what I have sought is to understand what has been said, while taking no account of the « inferior philosophers ». Holding with Heracleitus that the Word is common to all, and that Wisdom is to know the Will whereby all things are steered, I am convinced with Jeremias that the human cultures in all their apparent diversity are but the dialects of one and the same langage of the spirit, that there is a « common universe of discourse » transcending the differences of tongues.
>
> [LIPSEY II 1977 : 434]

Even if we grant that AKC may be allowed some excesses of style and language at the end of a long and arduous day, there is in this quotation one sentence that is pertinent to the consideration of « his » aesthetics, and which is « ...what I have sought is to understand what has been said... ». We need not occupy ourselves with his other declarations in the above final avowal. As far as his « aesthetics » are concerned, this statement is quite crucial. In fact, any reader of his copious works on art on the lookout for a personal, special theory or attitude towards art is bound to be either disappointed or confused. This might just be the conclusive point. He was so involved with the traditional way of looking at things that, one might say, he simply forgot to work out for himself his own philosophy of art, until… until one takes note of his stray comments in letters, catalogue write-ups and « asides », especially on modern art. There is one direct avowal, however, that we should take into consideration, but in view of the rest of the « ambiguous » statements vis-à-vis what he espouses in traditional Hindu or

Buddhist theories, we might be well-advised to view it with some (legitimate) circumspection. Before he discourses on the « true » Scholastic philosophy of art which he postulates as representing equally that of the Orient, he declares, as late as 1939 :

It will not be out of place to say that I believe what I have to expound ; for the study of any subject can live only to the extent that the student himself stands or falls by the life of the subject studied ; the interdependence of faith and understanding applying as much to the theory of art as to any other doctrine. [So much so that we can do no better than to quote AKC resuming the traditional philosophy of art.] We have emphasized that art is for the man, and not the man for the art : that whatever is made only to give pleasure is a luxury and that the love of art under these conditions becomes a mortal sin ; that in traditional art function and meaning are inseparable goods ; that it holds in both respects that there can be no good use without art ; and that all good uses involve the corresponding pleasures.

> We have shown that the traditional artist [« normally anonymous »] is not expressing himself, but a thesis : [...] We have shown that art is essentially symbolic, and only accidentally illustrative or historical ; and finally that art, even the highest, is only the means to an end...
>
> [COOMARASWAMY 1943/1956 : 23]

In several erudite articles, especially in the second-half of his life, such as, « The Part of Art in Indian Life », « A Figure of Speech or a Figure of Thought », « The Intellectual Operation in Indian Art », « *Samvega* : Aesthetic Shock », not to mention the relevant essays in *The Dance of Siva : Essays on Indian Art and Culture*, *Christian and Oriental Philosophy of Art* and *The Transformation of Nature in Art*, AKC took great pains to analyse and explain both the European and Oriental traditional philosophy of art, a task, it would seem, which had in the process convinced him of the perennial value of the traditional point of view since the works of art as in the case of the Indian sub-continent and its environs appeared to him to endure and increase in value down through the ages. This approach in itself would be sufficient to characterise AKC's espousal of the traditional methods of fashioning and appreciating art, but there is yet another aspect of his makeup which needs to be circumscribed and which is also evident in the above quotation : he was a devout believer ! His unprotesting acceptance of Hinduism as a creed did not in any way detract from his early Catholic upbringing. It must be noted here that his researches into the arts went hand in glove with his reading and exposition of religion and metaphysics. In the last phase of his life, from 1932 to 1947, religion as a source of the fundamental nature of art informed his own personal view of life, and the more he attempted the exegeses of individual pieces of art, the more he saw the unity of all art informed by the « Eternal or Universal Spirit » and the « oneness » of man.

> L'artiste oriental qui prendre dans la nature les éléments de sa composition, le Chinois qui peint les montagnes et les brouillards, l'Hindou qui représente les bouviers et les

> vachères, dessinent les symboles d'idées générales, les formes extérieures d'une vie intérieure universelle. (3)
>
> [COOMARASWAMY 1977 : 80]

Even as early as 1918 when he fell in love with the seventeen year-old dancer, Stella Bloch, whom he later married, he strove to share with her the platonic love of *sahaja* — he continued to live in Boston while she remained in New York, meeting occasionally and in the summer in Maine — according to the dictates of the « soul-lifting » Brahmanical version of carnal love.

> In India we could not escape the conviction that sexual love has a deep and spiritual significance. There is nothing with which we can better compare the 'mystic union' of the finite with its infinite ambient — that one experience which proves itself and is the only ground of faith — than the self-oblivion of earthly lovers locked in each other's arms, where 'each is both'. [...] The least intrusion of the ego, however, involves a return to the illusion of duality. [...] In sahaja, the adoration of young and beautiful girls was made the path of spiritual evolution and ultimate emancipation.
>
> [COOMARASWAMY 1924/1985 : 103-104]

The fact that the couple later divorced and both parties went on to remarry and have children and prosper has little to do with our assessment of AKC's aesthetics, and, this, despite the « grave doubts » shed on his probity by his disciple and close friend, Eric Schroeder.

> [...] And indeed I began to notice inconsistencies in him as a character which for a while interrupted the growth of trust, though it never affected liking. [...] His marital career was inappropriate to a man who wrote of marriage as a sacrament and some of his financial dealings seemed no less incongruous with the views of right livelihood which he expounded. And yet he had spent practically all his substance for what I could see to be a consecrated end, the publication of his work. And he had had, by worldly standards, great possessions. I was puzzled. [...] My betters [Eric Gill] thought better of my friend than I did. It began to appear that I had been wrong in paying attention to my instructor's inconsistencies...
>
> [LIPSEY III 1977 : 286-287]

There was, it appears, a constant battle going on in AKC's psyche. Like all men of rigour and purpose, he sometimes faltered in the aims he set himself, but the directions his line of thinking and experiencing took did not vary much — judging by the information from Roger Lipsey's biography — from that of a single-minded Western-trained scientist attempting to come to terms with himself and his sense of « Indian-hood ». The back-to-nature, anti-materialist advocacy of Jean-Jacques Rousseau (the noble savage), William Blake (freedom and creativity and the primacy of the Imagination), John Ruskin (« industry without art is brutality »), William Morris (anti-industrialist social idealism and the popular peasant culture of craft production), the reaffirming of oriental spiritual values by Jacques Maritain and René Guénon, [*y compris* Émile Mâle's Christian iconographic interpretations] and Christian

mediaeval thought as articulated by St. Augustine were the roads he readily took to arrive at the source of traditional Hindu/Indian heritage, and once he sensed the general direction of his course, he spared no efforts to get the most out of it. He never really belonged to the academic world ; the reason for this perhaps may be found in his not obtaining even a single diploma in art, aesthetics or metaphysics. Yet he was sought after eagerly by academics, and he lectured in academe from time to time without being a tenured professor. From the available evidence, it does appear that he taught himself everything — from languages like Sanskrit and Pali [he steadfastly improved on the Greek and Latin he must have learned at Wycliffe College from the age of twelve to twenty] to the corpora of art, philosophy and religion in these languages, the study of theology taking precedence over everything else and informing his perceptions into the arts as the years gained on him.

AKC had thus come to the conclusion that « art in India » meant something different from the sense we entertain of it either in our days or probably elsewhere in the world. Art is an expression of the consummate racial expression ; no novelty in expression is wilfully sought by the artist who acquires his skill in « pupillary succession ». Art arises in India in response to a demand, and the « virtue or defect of a work [are those] of the race in that age. [...] all are equally expressive : [...] there are no distinctions of fine and applied or decorative art and no unsurmountable barrier dividing the arts of the folk from the canonical arts » [COOMARASWAMY 1923 : v-viii]. He believed that great art was produced by a people who loved life, not through a dedication of art for art's sake, a safety valve which preserved Indian art from the corrosion of archaism. It must be remembered, therefore, that, here, we are confronted by an aesthetician who had definitely turned his face away from all forms of modernism and adopted for his philosophy of art that which he conceived as being traditionally Indian or Hindu.

> Originality and novelty [in Indian art] are never intentional. Changes in form, distinguishing the art of one age from that of another, reflect the necessities of current theology, and not the invention of genius : changes in quality reflect the varying, but not deliberately varied, changes in, racial psychology, vitality, and taste. What is new arises constantly in Indian tradition without purpose or calculation on the part of the craftsman, simply because life has remained over long extended periods an immediate experience.
>
> [COOMARASWAMY 1923 : vi-vii]

He believed that an artist expressing only his own ideals and aspirations was not working originally ; that only by conforming to given ideas of the Spirit and by making it his own can the artist attain to the status of the Greek daimon : the individual, modern « genius » in relation to the immanent Spirit of traditional philosophy « is relatively nil » [COOMARASWAMY 1943/1956 : 38]. AKC's study and exposition of Indian art led him gradually to an enunciation of a philosophy of art which might be construed as his « own » adaptation of the Vedanta viewpoint.

> The Hindus have never believed in art for art's sake ; their art, like that of mediaeval Europe, was an art for love's sake. They made no distinctions of sacred and profane. [...] For great art results from the impulse to express certain clear intuitions of life and death, rather than from the conscious wish to make beautiful pictures or songs. [...] There are tests more universal than those of particular canons or personal likes and dislikes. A great art expresses a clear and impassioned vision of life : each unessential statement detracts from its power. [...] In Indian philosophy : « Whether or not the work reveals the Self (*atman*) within the form (*rupa*)...[the] presence of this spirit is Beauty ». [...] To cultivate some-sightedness, to recognise one reality behind the pleasant and unpleasant Names and Forms, the familiar and unfamiliar formulas, it is needful to go behind the merely representative element to the purely emotional content of art, its dealings with love and death, for these are exactly the same to all in all nations and times all over the earth. [...] It is this content, the movement of the spirit, that is the universal subject-matter of art.
>
> [COOMARASWAMY 1913 : vii, 56, 58]

At the root of these assumptions on the part of AKC lies perhaps a notion that we can, with certainty, at the end of several millenia prove what went on in the minds of artists and craftsmen in times gone by. In this respect even intuitive feeling and/or available literary, historical or archaeological evidence must take second place to the usefulness of a rigorous *poïetical* examination and verification. It is nonetheless strange that certain Indianists seem to think that the *Natya Sastra* or the *Silpa Sastra* or even the *Tolkappiam*, 3rd C. BC to 2nd C. AD (?) — the Tamil classical treatise on poetics and linguistics, dictating the *Cangam* poetical conventions — simply came into being with a wave of the authors's styluses. This is particularly surprising when we see that AKC himself was well aware of this fact.

> In the same way the law books, particularly Manu, and the technical literature, such as the *Bharataya Natya Sastra*, imply development long preceding the final recensions. And in just the same way the appearance of Hindu sculpture and architecture in the Kusan and early Gupta period, even in the absence of all other evidence, would prove a lengthy previous development.
>
> [COOMARASWAMY 1923 : 30]

These authoritative works prescribe highly coded, complex prescriptive techniques for the arts, whether in dance, drama, music or poetry, and these treatises, it is evident, could not have been formulated with such precision and authority without centuries of experimentation, and acceptation by common consensus, by all sorts of creators and patrons of the arts prior to the very act of committing to memory or of recording these almost inflexible creative rules on palm leaf manuscripts. The Indian arts could not have therefore assumed its complex, refined and sophisticated forms and techniques without the freedom of expression and experimentation lasting for entire periods/generations of creative activity. To

think that tradition informs and orders its own fixed constitution without the willful inventive intervention of « genius », as AKC does, is an « affirmation » that must be called into question.

Indian aesthetics which has its origins in the theory of *rasa* as expounded by Bharata in his *Natya Sastra* of the first century A.D. is grounded in the long arduous road of the Brahmanical spiritual quest for *moksa*, the liberation of the egotistical self through union with the *atman*, the Godhead. So, it comes down to us in its highly coded structure through the ages with slight modifications, and/or additional breath, to its original spiritual conception. Thus, art to an Indian is not a separate or separable artistic activity, except for the adherents of the Sankya school who subscribed to the belief in art for art's sake.

> Oriental art cannot be isolated from life and studied *in vacuo* ; [...] ... the forms of Oriental art will always seem to us arbitrary or at the least exotic or curious, and this will be the measure of our misunderstanding, for it was none of these things in the eyes of those for whom it was made and who knew how to use it.
>
> [COOMARASWAMY I 1977 : 146]

It is undertaken by the devout in celebration of his/her utter submission to the « Universal Spirit » while the receptor is likewise expected to be *sa-hrdaya*, that is, of a similar heart. Some exceptions apart, like the village practical arts of weaving, handicrafts or *orfèvrerie*, almost all the traditional fine arts and public architecture of Hindu and Buddhist India have been religion-oriented. And yet the entire masses are expected to partake of the results of individual or collective artistic activity. Not just the mind and body are involved in making art what it is to the senses, but without the « Eternal Spirit » informing it, art is deprived of its purpose : it is just a shell, a casing without being. Art that imitates nature is a lesser art. Conversely, Nature being not always perfect, in other words, not always and everywhere « beautiful », there is need for art but of an « angelic » prototypical kind.

> Man's works of art [...] are properly deduced [sic] only when they are made in imitation (*anukrti*) of the angelic arts (*devasilpani*). It follows, indeed, directly from the principle « As above, so below » (*amusya lokasyayam loko 'nurupah*) that works of art (*silpa karmani*) can only be regarded as conceived in accordance with the law of heaven (*rtaprajatani*) and as well and truely made (*sukrtani*, as the works of the Rbhus [Ribhus, artisan elves, sons of Indra and Saranyu] are said to be, and as before defined, « beautiful ») when they are made after (*anu*) the angelic prototypes, which are intellectually begotten in the revolution (*pravartana*) of the Year (*samvatsava, Prajapati*).
>
> [COOMARASWAMY I 1977 : 81-82]

In fairness to AKC, despite the seeming identification of his own views with traditional Indian aesthetic theories and hence the religious bias in evaluating and judging works of art, he expresses some possible doubt or misgiving about the contents of the essay, « The Part of Art in Indian Life » when he says in the same breath in a footnote :

> In expounding the theories of art and beauty we have refrained from the expression of any opinions (*dristi*) or hypotheses (*kalpana*) of our own ; relying only upon authority (*sruti* and *smrti*, Veda and Upaveda), we speak of our exposition as authoritative (*prameya*)
>
> [LIPSEY I 1977 : 94 & footnote 85]

But then this footnote statement may only be another way of saying that he felt that his own comments or opinions alongside the exposition of classical Brahmanical theory might be superfluous, what with it being religiously ordained *prameya*. In a short essay, however, it would be begging the task to want to lay out in full the enormous armature of Indian classical theories of aesthetics, a task which has nonetheless taken hundreds of pages even for AKC to exploit and expose. We will therefore content ourselves with a shorter statement of the theory of *rasa* and its adjuncts, before coming to grips with the way AKC tackled his self-allotted industry of interpreting Indian arts. One question however interposes itself : Did he interpret Indian aesthetic theory as a separate branch of study for his or the reader's information while he left the interpretation of the corresponding arts to his own sense of innate aesthetic « justness » ? We will see as we go on that this is not entirely an easy problem to unravel, since AKC has been inordinately prolific in both the theoretically analytical and interpretative fields. In such a situation, we are obliged to take some specific examples of both and verify if they coincide or remain separate, that is, that he may or may not have espoused the theory to explicate the very works of art that were born of the theory in India.

The Rasa Theory in Coomaraswamy's Art Historical Interpretation

To begin with, then, what is *rasa* ? Apart from its denotations, according to B.N. Goswamy, *first*, the sense of the material essence or juice of vegetables ; *second*, its non-material essence, the finest part of it like the indescribable perfume that arises from it ; *third*, *rasa* suggests the taste, the odour which results from its utilisation or reception of either its material object or its non-material properties which afford pleasure, and then its *final* sense in an artistic and aesthetic context :

> — le *rasa* en arrive à désigner un état de bonheur accentué, au sens de l'*ananda*, le genre de béatitude que l'on ne peut connaître que par l'esprit. Pour des écrivains, comme Vishwanatha, auteur d'un célèbre traité de poésie du XIVe siècle, le *Sahitya Darpana*, le *rasa* est un état voisin de la béatitude provoquée par la connaissance de la Réalité Ultime, « frère jumeau de la saveur de Brahma ». Pour Vishwanatha, la définition même de la poésie implique l'idée du mot *rasa*. Comme on le dit si souvent : « la poésie est une phrase dont l'âme est le *rasa* ». (4)
>
> [GOSWAMY 1986 : 20]

Other concomitant aspects of *rasa* are better explained by T.P. Ramachandran.

> Unlike a *vibhava,* which is the cause of an emotion and an *anubhava*, which is the effect of an emotion, the *viyabhicaribhava* is an emotion itself. Bharata mentions eight *sthayibhavas* [permanent moods] : conjugal love (*rati*), mirth (*hasa*), sorrow (*soka*), anger (*krodha*), fortitude (*utsaha*), fear (*bhaya*), disgust (*jugupsa*), and wonder (*vismaya*).
>
> [RAMACHANDRAN II 1980 : 48]

In his essay, « Hindu View of Art II : Theory of Beauty », Coomaraswamy gives in some succinct detail the anatomy of *rasa*. He equates the term with the feeling of beauty or aesthetic emotion, and the work of art that embodies it is deemed to be invested with one of the nine permanent moods (*sthayibhava*) which « form a master-motif to which all other expressions of emotion are subordinate » [COOMARASWAMY 1924/1985 : 31] the nine as opposed to the thirty-three transient moods (*vyabhichari bhava)*. According to B.N.Goswamy [1986 : 328-329] (since Coomaraswamy lists nine but gives only eight *rasa* ; Bharata himself only gave eight), the *rasa* constitute major sentiments as follows : the erotic (*shringara*), the comic (*hasya*), the pathetic (*karuna*), the furious (*raudra*), the heroic (*vira*), the fearful or terrible (*bhayanaka*), the odious (*bibhatsa*), the wondrous (*adbhuta*) and the peaceful (*shanta*), whose *bhava* or *état d'esprit* are, respectively : *rati*, *hasa*, *shoka*, *krodha*, *utsaha*, *bhaya*, *jugupsa*, *vismaya* and *shama*. Despite AKC's habitual academic rigour, here in an important philosophic distinction of Indian aesthetics, he lapses by not giving or making the distinction between *rasa* (sentiment or flavour) and *bhava* (emotion, *état d'esprit* or moods) though he makes up for it all by adjusting and recapitulating the theory amply — a favourite practice of his in successive essays since they very often treat of the same subject matter — in his « The theory of Art in Asia ». In the former essay, however, he later compensates by the subtle distinctions he proposes on the nature of *rasa*, though the nuances seem, to me, a product of interpretative accretions.

> The 'nine rasas' are no more than the various colourings of one experience, and are arbitrary terms of rhetoric used only for convenience in classification : [...] Rasa is tasted — beauty is felt — only by empathy, 'einfülung' (*sadharana*) ; that is to say by entering into, feeling, the permanent motif ; but it is not the same as the permanent motif itself… [...] [I am here transposing the statements for the sake of coherence.] If, on the contrary, a transient emotion is made the motif of the whole work, this « extended development of a transient emotion tends to the absence of rasa » [from Dhanamjaya's *Dasarupa*, iv, 45] or as we should now say, the work becomes sentimental. Pretty art which emphasizes passing feelings and personal emotion is neither beautiful nor true : [...] The tasting of rasa — the vision of beauty — is enjoyed, says Visvanatha [in *Sahitya Darpana*, circa 1450 A.D.] « only by those who are competent thereto » : [and he quotes Dharmadatta to the effect that] « those devoid of imagination, in the theatre, are but as the wood-work, the walls, and the stones ». [...]
>
> [COOMARASWAMY 1924/1985 : 32-33]

In other words, the Indian aesthetic embodies also a socio-anthropologically distinctive ethical tinge to it : if you are not *sa-hrdaya*, that is, if you are not cast in the same mould as the creator of the object of art, you are not worthy of being an appreciator of the created piece. You belong in another — and I imagine — *lower* caste of beings forever blocked out of the realm of artistic appreciation. If the creator and the receptor must be of the same *trempe* in order to be able to get a glimpse of the « Ultimate Reality » which constitutes the essence and the ultimate aim for the production of Hindu art, then where is the necessity to provide for people of similar vision and makeup works of art ? The *sa-hrdaya* receptor may just as well turn on his inner eye by virtue of his own potentially similar artistic imagination (*pratibha*) to envision the « Ultimate Reality ». The contrary being the case, the advantages of birthright make the essential Hindu philosophic position of man *vis-à-vis* the « Four Ends of Life », the *purusharthas*, that is, just action (*dharma*), pleasure (*kama*), wealth (*artha*) and spiritual liberation (*moksha*), quite untenable, for it *a priori* arbitrarily closes one door, the door of the realisation of *moksa* through art by the uplifting experience of *rasa* for those who are not endowed, by birth, with this special faculty. This Hindu attitude to art becomes a dictum in the words of a mediaeval authority.

> Viswanatha comments very pertinently on this fact [Is AKC endorsing this fact ?] when he says that « even some of the most eager students of poetry are seen not to have a right perception of rasa ». The capacity and genius necessary for appreciation are partly native (‘ancient’) and partly cultivated (‘contemporary’) : but cultivation alone is useless, and if the poet is born, so too is the rasika [in AKC’s words « one who enjoys *rasa*, a *connaisseur* or lover »], and criticism is akin to genius.
>
> [COOMARASWAMY 1924/1985 : 33]

Bharata’s dictum, v*akyam rasatmakam kavyam* (« Art is expression informed by Ideal Beauty », according to AKC) constitutes, in essence, the basic Indian aesthetic formula, and the tasting of this « Ideal Beauty » or *rasa* becomes the subject of commentaries and discussions, elaborated by such mediaeval and modern aestheticians as Viswanatha, Danamjaya, Coomaraswamy and Goswamy. AKC compares and relates the tasting of *rasa,* which to the Hindu-Indian affords a vision of the Ultimate Reality, « twin brother to the tasting of Brahma » and as such a way out of rebirth in the transmigration of souls, to Christian Scholastic aesthetics and to such isolated post-mediaeval visionary cases like the mystical Blake’s in order to affirm the universality of its underlying nature to be experienced in all forms of art everywhere, decrying at the same time the ephemeral nature of modern European philosophy of art which, according to AKC, attaches greater value to sensations and the surface physicality of expression in art. Other aesthetic theories such as *dhvani* do not concern us here though the Alankarika of the *navina* school recognized *bhava* (emotion) as the best theme for poetry or what made for superior poetry [RAMACHANDRAN 1980 : 57ff]. Right now, without entering into any great detail on the theory of *rasa* which is beyond the scope of this paper, it will be useful to take a couple of examples of AKC’s art interpretations to see if the

rasa theory — since it is supposed to underwrite the traditional Hindu conception of art — subsumes his artistic outlook and aesthetic criterion. Let us first consider his approach at the beginning of his role as an art critic and historian, at the time when he had already published *Mediaeval Sinhalese Art* (1908), *Indian Sculpture and Painting* (1908), *The Indian Craftsman* (1909) and the two volumes of *Indian Drawings* (1910-12). The work we shall draw from is the *Selected Examples of Indian Art* (1910) that AKC printed on his own Essex House Press at Broad Campden.

His overall approach in interpreting these plates is based on a description technique which, as I see it, falls under four separate headings.

1) Synopsis of the « legendary » background : Take for instance Plate I [no pagination for plates] entitled : « Siva Ratri or Siva Puja ». Of this he says, « Siva's Night is a fast day falling on the fourteenth day of Maga (February). For twenty-four hours the Saivite should abstain from food, drink and sleep. Puja (offerings of flowers, fruit and water) is offered to Siva every three hours of the day and night ».

2) Physical or surface description of the plate : « The picture represents a Princess with two attendants making offerings at a mountain shrine at night. The *linga*, Siva's symbol, is seen on the right at the mouth of a little cave within which a light is burning. On to the *linga* falls a splashing stream of water from the rock, to form a rivulet that finally passes across the front of the picture, where its bank is lined with flowers and nodding sedges. This stream is the Ganges, that falls from heaven on to Siva's head, and thence to earth ». [It is curious, AKC does not elaborate on this prodigious myth that had once been wrongly construed as forming « Arjuna's Penance » in the Pallava Shore Temple at Mamallapuram, early 8th C.]

3) Interpretation (accompanied by further physical details) : « Perhaps there is a further meaning in the picture. Just as the yogi in some Indian pictures stands for Siva himself, so here, the Princess adoring Siva may be Uma. There is a conscious air about the mountain and the forest. Uma is daughter of the mountain, she is Parvati. Suddenly another key detail of the picture emerges. The half-hidden moon, even though full, suggests the crescent moon on Siva's brow ; perhaps this reveals to us more than any other detail the picture's mysterious charm — the whole landscape is the living garment of Siva himself. The *linga* is only a symbol, but He is everywhere ».

4) Art-historical background : « The date of the work is probably late seventeenth century. Its subject is purely Hindu, and I have therefore classed it as Rajput : it belongs really to that fully developed Indian style which owes much to both Rajput and Mughal sources ».

AKC has not in fact described the entire picture — not that this is necessary in art criticism or in *rasa* treatment. Besides, he has not paid any attention to the colours, though his rather pregnant statement about the Princess being the daughter, Uma, of the « conscious air » mountain must necessarily emanate from the sombre, earthy colours of both the mountain and the forest. He has not even slightly touched on the figures and the aspects of the three

humans in the picture : there are three women and yet he « presumes » — rightly I should think — that one is a Princess who is seated upright. The other two are therefore attendants ; they are less accoutred, less finery on their seated squat bodies which are covered all over, excepting the face and hands. AKC does not describe the postures of the three, which, seems to me, to be very important — together with the jewellery and clothing — in detecting the social position of the figures. The attendants, holding vials or vessels in both hands adopt a humble and almost disinterested expression and lackadaisical posture. The Princess, by contrast, sits up boldly on her hind legs and has her hands joined in prayer in front of her. She is also abundantly covered in jewellery while her clothes are finer — a gossamer touch to them in contradistinction to the coarseness and drabness of the green and mauve of the attendants's clothing ; the Princess's sparse clothing is in purple, golden and pink, with a studded black satin headgear. Her face and head are full and resplendant while her almost exposed torso is turgidly vibrant and rosy in colour — *la belle fille en fleur* ! Not so the attendants : one is between being dark and dusky, the other is of a clearer but pale tincture. AKC also leaves out the description of the rocks, sedge and plants surrounding the seated supplicatory figures, nor the trees on to the left background and the starry yet cloudy sky between the mountain and the woods. The tray with containers in front of the Princess and the sacrificial fare are also left out. The frame of three-tiered filigree in gold over green and blue does not attract his attention, either.

Here, we would do well to pause and listen to what AKC, himself, has to say about the method of explaining works of art.

> No explanation of a work of art can be called complete which does not account for its composition or constitution, which we may call its 'constant' as distinguished from its 'variable'. In other words, no 'art history' can be considered complete which merely regards the decorative usage and values as a motif, and ignores the *raison d'être* of its component parts, and the logic of their relationship in the composition. It is begging the question to attribute the precise and minute particulars of a traditional iconography merely to the operation of an 'aesthetic instinct' ; we have still to explain why the formal cause has been imagined as it was, and for this we cannot supply the answer until we have understood the final cause in response to which the formal image arose in a given mentality.
>
> [COOMARASWAMY, JCP 1990/1991 : 24]

AKC's explanation of Plate I does, indeed, accomplish some of the stages in the methodology he proposes (which is ironically structuralist in approach), but certainly falls far short of the revelation of the « final cause ». We can also see that there is a great deal he has left out. He is not obliged to describe the entire picture, but since he does begin to do so, I wonder then why he left out some rather important details, in particular the colour scheme. The question that I am moved to ask in all AKC's description and interpretation — the major part of it has to do with extra-artistic or pictural concerns — is to what extent the theory of *rasa* has entered into

his interpretation or « criticism » ? You might think that this is after all only one picture, and, therefore, such a question is invalid if we take his entire art-historical work into consideration. Unfortunately, this is not the case. As we have seen, this picture is part of the Rajput collection AKC discovered and presented to the world from probable oblivion. It also appears in a selected collection. Besides, the technique I have recorded is what he has adopted for almost all the remaining plates in the collection. The question is also : under what *rasa / sthayibhava* may we class the picture ? What then are the considerations and criterion which informed AKC's selection of this picture ? If I am to answer this question myself, I'd say something like this : the theme of the picture is religious fervour as portrayed in sacrifice, in other words, joy in pain (let none cry « masochism » !), selected for the fineness of three presences in other-worldly wilderness, if need be, an air of mystic entrancement conveyed mainly by the gloomy colours of the surrounding ruggedness of Nature threatening to overwhelm the three innocent, lonely and helpless, feminine presences ; so what is its *rasa* ? Blind faith ? *Bhakti* ? *Santi* ? Quite frankly, I don't see how Indian aesthetic theory comes into play in AKC's interpretation of this picture. Let us also admit it, the background details AKC has supplied is not something the « uninitiated » receptor can find for himself, but this comes from research and scholarship, not from an aesthetic response to the object of art before one. For instance, for the background information on Rajput painting, AKC had to rely on Keshava Dasa's *Rasikapriya*.

Let us now look at a « modern » painting AKC has selected for this collection. This is Plate XIII, entitled : « The Banished Yaksha » by Abanindronath Tagore, the Nobel Prize winner's nephew, and leader of the national school of modern painting in India before the Second World War. This is what AKC has to say about it.

The Yaksha for some offence was banished for a year from Aloka, the city of Kuvera, and seeing one day a drifting cloud, he addressed to it a message for his far-off wife. This has been made by Kalidasa the occasion for a long and beautiful poem, « The Cloud Messenger », describing the journey of the cloud all over India, until it reaches Aloka. Seated on a slope of the Himalayas, the Yaksha, clearly of royal blood, with a vina by his side, is addressing the drifting mists, and casting flowers towards them in token of prayer. The actual effect of these drifting mists, half hiding trees and flowers, lending a peculiar mystery to the whole landscape, is rendered with great sympathy and skill. The reproduction loses much, however, without colour. The colouring of the original picture is extra-ordinarily beautiful.

My comments on Plate I apply equally to Plate XIII ; he admits the importance of seeing the colour in the latter which he describes quite flatly as « extraordinarily beautiful ». Apart from the extra-artistic background details or « pre-dramatic event » of the painting, AKC has really nothing very much to say about it. So, what are we to conclude again ? Is *rasa* a theory that « cannot » be applied to certain works of art, even if they are Indian and traditional ? Or is it that these plates AKC selected from a whole range of Indian paintings simply do not qualify as being worthy of a *rasa* response ? In other words, according to traditional Indian classical

theory, these plates do not come up to mark as works of art. It would do no good to assume that so fine and learned a person as AKC was not « *sa-hrdaya* » as the creators of the paintings.

We cannot leave our examination of AKC's aesthetic responses to Indian art without comparing the above interpretative technique with that of another period in history studied at a time in his life when he had acquired greater skill and expertise. In 1927, AKC published his *History of Indian and Indonesian Art*, a book which had finally established his reputation as one of the foremost art-historians on South and Southeast Asia — together with J. Burgess, Vincent Smith, E.B. Havell, A. Foucher, A. Grünwedel, W. Simpson, J.Ph. Vogel, J.H. Marshall, Roger Fry, O.C. Gangoly, R.P. Chanda and a few others — if not the foremost art-historian of the times. Even as late as 1976, Roy C. Craven writes : « Though the book is now somewhat outdated, anyone involved with the art of India owes a fundamental debt to Coomaraswamy and must ultimately come to regard him as their scholarly patriarch » [1976 : 7]. Let us also select a period in Indian art which stands out by its overwhelming and distinctive productiveness — the Gupta period, 320-600 A.D. AKC himself says that the

> **outstanding characteristic of the art of India at this time is its classical quality. [...] With a new beauty of definition it establishes the classical phase of Indian art, at once serene and energetic, spiritual and voluptuous. The formulae of Indian taste are now definitely crystallised and universally accepted ; iconographic types, and compositions, still variable in the Kusana period, are now standardised in forms whose influence extended far beyond the Ganges valley, and of which the influence was felt, not only throughout India and Ceylon, but far beyond the confines of India proper, surviving to the present day.**
>
> [COOMARASWAMY 1927/1965 : 71-72]

In considering the relevance of *rasa* theory to Indian art that AKC discusses in this book, this period should be particularly interesting for its classicism and therefore for its *rasa*-oriented art. A revision of his comments on this period reveal once again his enormous scholarship and comparative technique in the arts in general, his acute sense of history and his ability to collate all the variegated elements into a plausible synthetic whole. But once again, we are left in the lurch about figuring out how the theory of *rasa* entered into an appreciation of the outstanding artistic qualities of the period. The book contains the now famous *tour de force* of 400 selected plates of Indian art, crafts and architecture, with a description of the plates given separately. The description unfortunately remains what it is, a sparse and basic description of bare essentials : mainly place, period, material used, or where found. In the 213 pages of text, we are regaled to a highly documented history of art in South and Southeast Asia, but if we look for the way classical Hindu theory shaped this phenomenal art, we are refered to some authority of the past on the subject, as for instance :

> The *Visnudharmottaram* distinguishes the kinds of painting appropriate to temples, palaces and private houses ; and applies the theory of *rasa* to painting. Paintings are there classified as *satya*, *vainika*, *nagara* and *misra*, which I am inclined to render as true, lyrical, secular and mixed, mainly with reference to their themes. [In a footnote he says : *Satya* seems to mean here « true to life, realistic », perhaps with reference to portraiture. *Vainika* suggests pictures of musical modes. *Nagara* perhaps = erotic ; *nagarika* might be translated as « man about town ».]
>
> [COOMARASWAMY 1927/1965 : 87]

Discoursing on Gupta art, AKC compares and contrasts the Kusana period, the Ghandara and Mathura schools, analyses with great precision the place of painting, sculpture, religious public architecture, such as, *stupas* [funeral mounds], *caitya*-halls [halls of group worship or memorial monuments], *viharas* [monasteries], *sikhara* shrines [the tower over the principal sanctuary of the hindu temple, known as *vimana* in the South], and other domestic and palace architecture, and arts and crafts, etc., defines their styles and influences, enters into, for instance, the polemic over the influences of Hellenistic art on Ghandara art with gusto, quoting as he often does, his contemporaries before taking a definitive stance.

> Thus the famous theory of the Greek origin of the Buddha image, propounded by Foucher, and since adopted by many scholars, proves [*sic*] to lack all solid foundation, and falls to the ground, and with it the implied Greek inspiration of other Indian images, Brahmanical and Jaina. The fact that a Hellenistic element, plastic and iconographic, of some kind, enters into and is absorbed by Indian art, remains. Opinions may differ as to its extent and significance ; its importance is slight, and perhaps rather historical than aesthetic.
>
> [COOMARASWAMY 1927/1954 : 75]

To establish the « Indian-ness » of the Buddha figure in the early Gupta period, he has recourse to very deft descriptive touches : « ...characterised by its refinement, by a clear delineation and definition of features, by curly hair, absence of *urna* [the « Third Eye »], greater variety of mudras, elaborately decorated nimbus, the robe covering one or both shoulders and extremely diaphanous... » [1927/1965 : 74], but then his critical approach is still descriptive. It is when he deals with architecture that he moves away from the apparently descriptive approach to stylistic and structural nuances, waxing philosophic at the same time.

> The change from horizontal and domed to vertical and pointed forms is the most conspicuous tendency represented in Indian architecture, and must reflect an emotional qualification taking place in religious psychology not unlike that which distinguishes Gothic from Romanesque. A parallel tendency in India in narrative art has been traced by Foucher, contrasting the reserve of the earlier *Jataka* scenes with the emotional emphasis already so marked at Ajanta. The same development can be

> followed in the literature, and no doubt, if we knew enough about it, could be recognized in music and dancing.
>
> [COOMARASWAMY 1927/1965 : 83]

AKC concludes the Gupta period by his consideration of paintings mainly from the Ajanta *viharas*, and he quotes Lady Herringham and Dey to underline its simplicity and religious fervour, not in any sense as

> primitive or naive ; a more conscious, or, indeed, more sophisticated art could scarcely be imagined. [...] The specifically religious element is no longer insistent, no longer antisocial ; it is manifested in life, and in an art that reveals life not in a mode opposition to spirituality, but as intricate ritual fitted to the consummation of every perfect experience. [...] The sorrow of transience no longer poisons life itself ; life has become an art, in which mortality inheres only as *karuna-rasa* [pure compassion] in a poem whose *sthayi-bhava* is *srngara*. The ultimate meaning of life is not forgotten,...but a culmination and a perfection have been attained in which the inner and outer life are indivisible ; it is this psycho-physical identity that determines the universal quality of Gupta painting.
>
> [COOMARASWAMY 1927/1965 : 90-91]

It is undeniable that AKC here is treating of an entire period, and as such we may not be able to validly work out his technique in consonance with our earlier analyses of the selected plates of 1910, but then, judging by the quotations of authorities he gives and his own methodology of relying heavily on descriptive and historical phenomena, we are again at a loss to understand how Indian classical theory, apart from, say, the canonical rules formulated by Cukracarya in his *Silpa Sastras* — the canonical texts that painters and sculptors strictly follow in their creations — feeds his appreciation of art in general, excepting of course, for AKC, the religious substratum on which art erects itself. « L'émotion esthétique naît de l'accord de l'âme avec le mode permanent, donc par *empathie* (*sadharana*) et re-création de l'imagination. Elle est essentiellement le produit de l'activité spirituelle du spectateur lui-même... » (5) [COOMARASWAMY 1977 : 83]. This is specially the case when we come across his numerous essays explicating the relevance of *rasa*.

> Une œuvre d'art est une affirmation à laquelle le *rasa* a donné sa forme ; sa valeur se mesure en dernier ressort aux délices de l'émotion esthétique et non à l'information qu'on en peut retirer. Le *rasa* se savoure par une expérience unifiée et mystique, béate et consciente, mais elle n'est pas occasionnée par un plaisir spécifique, par une qualité particulière de l'œuvre d'art ou par un agrégat de qualités délectables : elle se manifeste spontanément, et elle est tout à fait indépendante des autres activités mentales, telles que l'association ou la curiosité. (6)
>
> [COOMARASWAMY 1977 : 85]

From this passage we can glean that, for AKC, « l'émotion esthétique » is some sort of a consciously beatific, unifying mystic experience, having no relevance to other qualities of the material of the work of art, and yet he affirms that the *rasa* is that which gives form to it. In a way, then, this passage may excuse his descriptive technique in interpretation : « non à l'information qu'on en peut retirer ». Even if we accept this version of *rasa* theory, when it comes to AKC's critical response, we are time and again confronted by the host of extra-artistic details which constitute « l'information qu'on en peut retirer » through a study of the work of art's non-artistic background, such as, « pre-dramatic events », legendary or religious allusions, and historical associations. And since he says the *rasa* « se manifeste spontanément », it would have been by far a greater contribution to art, if AKC had deemed it worthy of recording his own spontaneous emotional responses to the works of art that he had gazed upon for the better part of his life.

On Coomaraswamy's Assessment of Rajput and Mughal Painting

In fact, there is little use now in belabouring the case of AKC's rather ambiguously tortuous espousal of Indian classical theory in his own interpretations of Hindu art. By checking on his pronouncements on all sorts of works of art, one can see that this is quite evident. This does not mean, however, that AKC was inept as an interpretor of Indian art ; on the contrary, we have discussed his predilection for religious or spiritual justifications in his aesthetic explanations of Indian art. It might appear that these are part and parcel of one and the same thing ; it is and yet it is not : paradoxically it depends on how you look at it. Bharata's *rasa* theory, Sukracarya's canonical rules of artistic creation, and the additions and modifications of later aestheticians, like Vishwanatha in his *Sahitya Darpana*, to the corpus of the Hindu canon of art — are not independant of the Hindu religious outlook or Brahmanical *weltanschauung*. AKC perhaps also pushed his conception of Indian art a bit beyond defence. Although several other art historians, in particular, Vincent Smith and E.B. Havell, had championed Indian art against attacks from John Ruskin and Lord Birdwood, AKC made himself particularly known for his pioneering efforts in discovering Rajput painting, and also for the attention he gave Mughal art, but he was sadly proven wrong later for his assumptions based on their nature and value.

AKC felt that Mughal art was secular, « worldly, topical, occupied with the life and times of the court and with natural appearances » [LIPSEY III 1977 : 99], only an inconsequential « interlude » in Indian art, lasting through Akbar and Shah Jahan's reigns, whereas, he postulated, Rajput painting followed ancient Hindu traditions, related to the Ajanta frescoes of the 7th and 8th centuries.

> Unlike Mughal painting, it [Rajput art] was little concerned with the precise imitation of natural appearances, either of persons or of landscapes, plants, and animals ; all of these elements appear in Rajput art, but transformed by the mind's eye into a harmonious imagined world that does not compete with nature. [...] Mughal art is now

> understood to have been the all-important catalyst that transformed the tradition-bound schools of Hindu painting that existed just prior to the period of Akbar...
>
> [LIPSEY III 1977 : 100]

Lipsey's comments further show that both Hermann Goetz and Eric Schroeder attacked AKC's findings on Rajput and Mughal art, and later scholarship showed that the Ajanta frescoes had no connection to Rajput painting. Schroeder also demonstrated that Mughal art was religiously inspired. Goetz, on the other hand, attacked AKC's view of Rajput civilization as being « simple, aristocratic, generous and self-sufficient », for in fact the common people had no access to their art.

The Buddhist aesthetic doctrine : *samvega*

In the essay, « *Samvega* : aesthetic shock », it would seem by the comments AKC makes, he comes close to identifying his own conceptions of artistic *appreciation* with those of classical Indian theory, in this case a Buddhist doctrine, but then again it is rather difficult to separate the explanations he gives of the theory and his own views. This sounds like a paradox, and it might very well be true : in the clarifications he supplies of the concept of *samvega*, one is almost tempted to construe an « over-reading » of the principle he might appear to espouse, but this is as far as one may go, unless one has proof of a practice in AKC's interpretations which remains consistent with the response in relation to this theory ; besides, one cannot simply enter into AKC's head and sort out, on the one hand, the theory he is explaining and commenting on and, on the other, the specific AKC response. In the final analysis, we have to fall back on his own avowal that « ...what I have sought is to understand what has been said... » [LIPSEY II 1977 : 434]. The aesthetic concept of the Pali word *samvega*, according to AKC, circumscribes

> a state of shock, agitation, fear, awe, wonder, or delight induced by some physically or mentally poignant experience. [...] The shock is a consequence of the aesthetic surfaces of phenomena that may be liked or disliked as such. The complete experience transcends this condition of 'irritability'. [...] … more than a merely physical shock is involved ; the blow has a *meaning* for us, and the realization of that meaning, in which nothing of the physical sensation survives, is still a part of the shock. These two phases of the shock are, indeed, normally felt together as parts of an instant experience ; but they can be logically distinguished. [...] In the first phase, there is really a disturbance, in the second there is the experience of a peace that cannot be described as an emotion in the sense that fear and love or hate are emotions.
>
> [LIPSEY I 1977 : 182-184]

It is for the above reason as well that AKC is averse to considering *santi* (peace) as a *rasa* : Bharata himself did not list *santi* among the eight he prescribed. As an example of *samvega*, AKC cites the anecdote of Brother Vakkali who spent his days gazing at the « beauty » of the Buddha's person. Vakkali overcomes being snared by the « idolatrous experience » in that he

does not become « attached » to the visual image : thus he makes the transition from shock to delight, and from delight to understanding. AKC stresses that « the aesthetic support of contemplation is not an end in itself » [LIPSEY I 1977 : 181]. Here again, we may note the religious motive in aesthetics that, time and again, occupies AKC's interests. The principle of art for art's sake must, indeed, appear to him to be quite pointless. This very same attitude can be observed in his commentary of a well-known modern painting.

> We also feel the horror ; but do *we* see the barb when we consider Picasso's *Guernica*, or have we 'desired peace, but not the things that make for peace' ? For the most part, our 'aesthetic' approach stands between us and the content of the work of art, of which only the surface interests us'.
>
> [LIPSEY I 1977 : 179]

Conclusion

What are we then to make of AKC's aesthetics, if he does not rely totally on Indian-Hindu tradition in his interpretations of art ? The truth is most — if not all — art historians of the region's art do not demonstrate a thorough or more scientific approach. As we pointed out earlier on, it is more or less in his asides — not in his major essays and books — that we may note a more personal view. In 1919, AKC wrote the following notes for John Mowbray-Clarke's exhibition catalogue in New York.

> The two things that matter least about a work of art are its charm and its technique. What does matter is its necessity, and the quality springing from necessity which we appreciate in works of art that are truly original — that of immediacy. The only title to ideas is our ability to entertain them. Works that are original possess a life of their own aside from any question of « difference » : and many a work that is traditional, influenced or plagiarized, is more original than another that is conspicuously novel. It is romantic to believe the first kiss to be better than the last, or to discover spiritual value in a merely technical virginity. It is only love and not the sequence of gestures that constitutes the truth of experience.
>
> [LIPSEY III 1977 : 150]

We would not be far wrong in assuming here that AKC was attacking all that was *avant-garde* and went under the name of « modern » which he, quite obviously, saw as a vain attempt to be original through experimentation in technique. In its place, he wanted the perpetuation of the old norm, even the imitation of traditional masters, and what he preferred most was spontaneity, in other words, « innocence », freshness, arising from the purity of the spirit within, within all. In this he was being faithful to his version of the Hindu spiritual tradition. He saw abstract art « as an ascetic, idealistic reaction to the 'art of luxury' whose purity was « not true to the earth » [LIPSEY III 1977 : 150]. So much so that it is curious to see him taking a stance on the « art of photography » and propounding « other » aesthetic norms. He championed the

work of Alfred Stieglitz, even finding for it a place in the Boston Museum, for he felt that the German-trained photographer

> had thought through to a way of linking photography with the philosophical basis of all the arts that he called traditional. [...] The peculiar virtue of photography [...] is its power of revealing all textures and revealing all details. The art of photography is to be sought precisely at this point : it lies in using this technical perfection in such a way that every element shall hold its place and every detail contribute to the expression of the theme. Just as in other arts there is no room here for the non-essential. [...] … the problem is so to render every element that it becomes essential.
>
> [LIPSEY III 1977 : 158]

Here, in this statement, we might note an element of *rasa* theory creeping into his critical makeup : the *essential* as opposed to the *non-essential*, the permanency of *sthayibhava* as opposed to the transient mood of *vyabhicaribhava*, but then the latter also has its place in the Indian aesthetical operation of the communication of art. So much so that it is quite surprising to see AKC as adamant as he was about modern art as late as 1928 in a conversation with Dorothy Norman over Stieglitz.

> I asked Coomaraswamy which modern artists in America he admired. He replied, « Not any. And no Europeans either. The very term *modern art* is an absurdity. The notion that one should attempt to be original in art is sheer nonsense ». « Stieglitz's photographs », said Coomaraswamy, « are in the great tradition. In his work, precisely the right values are stressed. Symbols are used correctly. His photographs are 'absolute' art, in the same sense that Bach's music is 'absolute' music. He is the one artist in America whose work truly matters ».
>
> [LIPSEY III 1977 : 159]

Declarations such as these in aesthetics must indeed appear to be arbitrary and dogmatic, but here we are dealing with a man who had already by that time catalogued, interpreted and written out the history of South and Southeast Asian art. Right at the time when AKC was turning to art and aesthetics, it is interesting to note that Wassily Kandinsky went through his apocalyptic experience as a painter in 1908 : he was

> experimenting with colours and forms to express what he called 'an inner necessity'. [...] … that in order to be expressive of such inner necessity it was not necessary to be representational. [...] He realized that a work of art must always be *expressive* — expressive, that is to say, of some profound emotion or spiritual experience. Could form and colour, free from all representational aim, be articulated into a language of symbolic discourse ?
>
> [READ 1959/1964 : 188-191]

Oddly enough, this sounds very much like what AKC has been saying all along about Hindu art, especially the Kandinsky definition of a work of art in *Der Sturm* in 1913, with the difference that Kandinsky chose to affect both aesthetic and spiritual reaction in the receptor by the process of organizing form and colour : « the form of the work of art is in itself the content, and whatever expressiveness there is in the work of art originates with the form » [READ 1959/1964 : 195].

What can we then make of AKC's aesthetic approach to art ? If an answer were at all necessary at this stage of the discussion, we might simply say that here was a man — not quite intolerant as his words might make him out to be — who believed that art was subservient to the religious purpose in man, that art should manifest and reveal to man the « Eternal Spirit » in all of us, but then, of course, you would have to subscribe to the ultimate reality of this faith in art as well as in the directions the Hindus wished humanity should take to be able to fully appreciate AKC's contribution to the world of (Indian) art. It is difficult to think of a better epitaph to Ananda Kentish Coomaraswamy than the following words by his perspicacious biographer, Roger Lipsey.

> Coomaraswamy [...] was essentially a scholar and a man of letters. His truth came in part from a powerful conscience whose seeds were sown by William Morris, but even more, in his later years, from po[u]ring over the religious writings of the world and recognizing, step by step, that his own nature and hence all men's natures were constituted along the lines that the texts affirmed.
>
> [LIPSEY III 1977 : 159]

And if I might be allowed to add my own last word, I would say, in the sense of the spirit of hexagram 15 of the *Yi Jing*, the greatest quality AKC has demonstrated by his lifelong dedication to the study and exposition of Oriental and European arts and theology is the unequivocal sense of modesty and humility, as witnessed by his most humbling admissions in his « Seventieth Birthday Address » : the image is one of the mountain hidden in the earth !

NB : This paper was published in the *Journal of the Institute of Asian Studies* n°1/1996, Vol. XIV (Chennai, India), September 1996, pp. 15-38. It was first given as a paper at the *5th Sri Lanka Conference* held at the University of New Hampshire in August 13-15, 1995.

List of References

COOMARASWAMY, ANANDA K.

1908. Mediaeval Sinhalese Art. Broad Campden, England : Essex House Press.

1913. The Arts and Crafts of India and Ceylon. London & Edinburgh : T.N.Foulis.

1916. Rajput Paintings, being an account of Rajasthan and the Punjab Himalayas from the XVIth to the XIXth Century, 2 vol., Oxford : Oxford University Press.

1923. Introduction to Indian Art, Madras : Theosophical Publishing House.

1956. Christian & Oriental Philosophy of Art, New York : Dover Publications. [First pub. as Why Exhibit Works of Art ?, London : Luzac & co., 1943]

1956. The Transformation of Nature in Art, New York : Dover Publications.

[First pub., Cambridge, Mass. : Harvard University Press, 1934]

1965. History of Indian and Indonesian Art, New York : Dover Publcs.

[First pub. by Karl W.Hiersemann in 1927]

1977. Pour comprendre l'art hindou, Rennes, France : Le Haut-Blosne.

1985. The Dance of Siva : Essays on Indian Art and Culture, New York : Dover Publications. [First pub. as The Dance of Siva : Fourteen Indian Essays. London : Simpkin, Marshall, Hamilton, Kent & Co., 1924]

1990/1991. « The Interpretation of Symbols » The Journal of Comparative Poïetics, vol. I, n°2&3 (Paris) : 24-27.

The Journal of Comparative Poïetics (JCP). Ed. T. Wignesan.

CRAVEN, ROY C.

1976. A Concise History of Indian Art, London : Thames and Hudson.

RAMACHANDRAN, T.P.

1979. The Indian Philosophy of Beauty. Part One : Perspective, Madras : University of Madras.

1980. The Indian Philosophy of Beauty. Part Two : Special Concepts, Madras : University of Madras.

READ, HERBERT

1964. A Concise History of Modern Painting, London : Thames & Hudson. [First edition, 1959]

LIPSEY, ROGER

1. Coomaraswamy. Selected Papers : Traditional Art and Symbolism.

2. Coomaraswamy. Selected Papers : Metaphysics.

3. Coomaraswamy. His Life and Work.

1977, Princeton, New Jersey : Princeton University Press (Bollingen Series LXXXIX).

Notes

1. I gave this paper at the « 5th Sri Lanka Conference », held at the University of New Hampshire, 10-13 August 1995.

2. According to Dr. Rama P. Coomaraswamy, the only surviving son of Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, whom I met on 15 August 1995, the British authorities, in 1917, had confiscated his father's house at Broad Campden, proscribed AKC from entering the territory of the British Empire and had placed a prize of £3000 on his head. Invited to give a talk in Canada in his last days, he had had to decline on hearing that bounty hunters had dispersed in the area in expectation of his visit. AKC, from the moment Congress had enacted to grant him American citizenship, therefore never laid foot on British sovereign territory after 1917. Dr. Denman W. Ross, patron of the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, purchased AKC's unique Indian art collection and persuaded the Museum trustees to employ AKC to catalogue it as the curator of the Indian section.

3. The oriental artist who takes from Nature the elements of his composition, the Chinese who paints mountains and fogs, the Indian who represents [in his paintings, etc.] cowherds and milkmaids, are [actually] drawing the symbols of general ideas, the exterior forms of an internal universal life.

4. By [the concept of] *rasa* it is possible to describe a state of profound bliss, in the sense of *ananda*, a sort of beatitude that one can only experience through the spirit. For writers like Vishwanatha, author of a celebrated treatise on poetry of the XIVth century, the *Sahitya Darpana*, *rasa* is a condition which is close to the beatitude produced by the knowledge [experience] of Ultimate Reality, « twin brother of the taste of Brahma ». For Vishwanatha, the very definition of poetry implies the idea of the word *rasa*. As they say so often : « the soul of a poetical text is the *rasa* ».

5. The aesthetic emotion is born of the accord of the soul with the permanent mood, and therefore by empathy (*sadharana*) and recreation of the imagination.

6. A work of art is an affirmation to which the *rasa* has given form ; in the final analysis, its value is measured by the delights of the aesthetic emotion and not by the information that one can get out of it. One savours the *rasa* through a consciously beatific, unifying mystic experience, but it is not brought about by a specific pleasure, by a particular quality of the work of art or by an agregate of delectable qualities : it manifests itself spontaneously, and it is altogether independent of other mental activities, such as association or curiosity.