

*Both the worlds are by the revelation of God.
Look upon the Beauty of Truth from whichever side you want.*

Ibn ÑArabÊ

COOMARASWAMY IN CONTEXT:
UNDERSTANDING THE ISLAMICITY OF THE
TRADITIONAL PHILOSOPHY OF ART

BY

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ABSTRACT

Even an amateur appreciator of the Islamic arts is not hard-pressed in trying to find books and collections on Islamic art. Nevertheless, though scholarly discussions on the question of what constitutes Islamic art abound, there seems to be a great lack in literature posing the issues of art philosophy and aesthetics within the Islamic framework. Apart from the landmark work of José Miguel Puerta Vilchez, contemporary writings touching upon the philosophical side of Islamic Art are scarce. Puerta Vilchez was one of the first to bring to light aspects of Islamic thought that generally did not get discussed, as such, compiling examples of how Muslims in the past deliberated on issues pertaining to aesthetics. Though the logical approach would be to collect the ideas of classical and contemporary Muslim thinkers on art, and construct an "Islamic" philosophy of art, I adopted a rather unorthodox method of examining the writings of an early twentieth century scholar by the name of Anand Kentish Coomaraswamy. Writing expertly on topics ranging from Indian art history to comparative studies on religion, aesthetics and philosophies of art, he was a staunch defender of the traditional understanding of art. He was a consummate scholar whose broad and deep understanding of both Eastern and Western philosophies, and whose command of up to 36 languages allowed him to put forth an understanding of art that is far-reaching, comprehensive, and pertinent even today. Due to his incisive understanding of the modern secular worldview, and his formidable responses to it, Muslims, too, have a lot to gain from the writings of Coomaraswamy. It is in this vein that this study was undertaken to explore his writings and reveal the very readily applicable and in that sense "Islamic" aspects of his holistic theories. Aiming to put Coomaraswamy in context, Western writings on art philosophy were first consulted in painting the backdrop. This was followed by a cursory look at some Muslim scholars both past and present, establishing a point of reference for the evaluation of Coomaraswamy. The writings of Coomaraswamy was lastly paraphrased and compared to the writings of Muslims earlier discussed. In examining this last portion where Coomaraswamy and the Islamic spirit are simultaneously discussed, hopefully, Coomaraswamy's value in fostering a more "Islamic" view of art would have become evident, perhaps encouraging Muslims to benefit from the ideas of a scholar colossus normally not associated with Islam.

ملخص البحث

إن الإنسان الشاغف بحب الفنون الإسلامية، لن يستطيع مهما حاول أن يجمع كل المؤلفات، والبحوث المتناثرة حول هذا الموضوع، ولكن رغم ذلك ورغم الجدل العلمي حول السؤال المطروح: ماذا يعني الفن الإسلامي؟ فإن الحقائق تثبت أن هنالك نقص كبير في المؤلفات التي تناولت موضوع فلسفة الفن وفق الإطار الإسلامي. إذا ما طرحنا العمل الجليل الذي قام به (جوسي ميغول بيورتا فيلشيز) فإن الكتابات الحديثة التي تطرقت إلى الجانب الفلسفي للفن الإسلامي ضئيلة جدا. لقد كان (بيورتا فيلشيز) من أوائل الذين ألقوا الضوء على مضمون الفكر الإسلامي المتعلق بهذا الموضوع، والذي لم يناقش بعد بشكل واسع، قام في عمله هذا بجمع الأمثلة حول كيفية قيام المسلمين في السابق بمناقشة القضايا المتعلقة بالفنون. رغم أن الطريقة المنطقية هي أن أقوم بجمع آراء المفكرين الإسلاميين الكلاسيكيين، والمعاصرين حول موضوع الفن، ثم بعد ذلك أقوم بصياغة فلسفة الفن الإسلامي، إلا أنني أفضل إتباع المنهج الأكثر شفافية في اختبار كتابات أحد علماء أوائل القرن العشرين الماضي وهو باسم: (أنند كنتيش كوماراسوامي). لقد كتب هذا العالم بخبرة حول مواضيع كثيرة ابتداء من تاريخ الفن الهندي، ودراسات مقارنة الأديان إلى مجال الفنون الجميلة وفلسفة الفن، وكان من المدافعين الأقوياء ضد المفهوم التقليدي للفن. كان من العلماء المتقنين إلى درجة كبيرة، وقد ساعده فهمه الواسع، والعميق للفلسفة الشرقية والغربية، وكذلك إتقانه لأكثر من ٣٦ لغة أجنبية لصياغة مفهوم جديد للفن شامل، وبعيد المدى لا زال صالحا إلى يومنا هذا. ثم بسبب فهمه الدقيق، والواضح للتصور العلماني الحديث، وردوده المقنعة عليه، فإن المسلمين يمكنهم أن يستفيدوا كثيرا من كتابات (كوماراسوامي). وبناء على هذه القناعة أجريت هذه الدراسة من أجل اكتشاف كتاباته وتقديم ما يمكن قراءته وتطبيقه منها حسب وجهة النظر الإسلامية لنظرياته الشمولية. ومن أجل وضع (كوماراسوامي) وفق مفهومنا هذا، فإن البحث تناول الكتابات الغربية الموجودة حول فلسفة الفن والتي بدأت بتلوين اللوحات الفنية، ثم تبع ذلك النظرة الفاحصة في أعمال بعض العلماء المسلمين القدماء والمعاصرين لبناء نقطة مرجعية لتقييم (كوماراسوامي). لقد تم إعادة صياغة كتابات (كوماراسوامي) ومقارنتها بكتابات العلماء المسلمين السالف ذكرهم، ومن خلال إختبار الجانب الأخير، فإن (كوماراسوامي) والروح الإسلامي في كتاباته نوقشت بشكل متتالي، نأمل أن تسهم قيمة أعمال (كوماراسوامي) في تعزيز النظرة الإسلامية حول الفن، وأن يصير دليلا، وسببا في تعديل المسلمين وجهة نظرهم حول طريقة وأسلوب حياتهم.

APPROVAL PAGE

I certify that I have supervised and read this study and that in my opinion it conforms to acceptable standards of scholarly presentation and is fully adequate, in scope and quality, as a dissertation for the degree of Master of Arts in Islamic Civilization.

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DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this dissertation is the result of my own investigations, except where otherwise stated. I also declare that it has not been previously or concurrently submitted as a whole for any other degrees at IIUM or other institutions.

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To my daughter, Mahnoor.

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TRANSLITERATION

Letters of the Alphabet

ا	a
ب	b
ت	t
ث	th
ج	j
ح	í
خ	kh
د	d
ذ	dh
ر	p
ز	z
س	s
ش	sh
ص	Î
ض	Ì
ط	Ï
ظ	Ð
ع	Ñ
ف	gh
ق	f
ك	q
ل	k
م	l
ن	m
ه	h
و	w
ي	y
ء	Ò

Vowels and Diphthongs

اَ	a
اُ	u
اِ	i
اَءَ	É
اَءِ	á
اَءُ	È
اَءِو	Ê
اَءِو	aw
اَءِو	ay

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INTRODUCTION

Occasionally, a book, an essay, a poem, a painting, or any work of art pulls you in. Upon reading the pages, you find yourself establishing a deep connection with the author. Spanning a vast gap in time and tradition, you feel as if he is an intimate friend you have known for a long time. Over and over you nod your head in agreement with the written word, and begin to realize that the author is saying exactly what you wanted to say. Soon enough you are struck by the work, by the truth so eloquently conveyed. Some may brush this off as mere happenstance where two minds coincide by chance. Granted, we do come across numerous authors with whom we tend to agree, but perhaps the experience I am referring to here is different. It seems more to do with the nature of the message, the truth therein. In describing this phenomenon, I am tempted to get ahead of myself, and use the words of Coomaraswamy where he discusses aesthetic shock. The above reaction to a work of art or literature is perhaps similar to what Coomaraswamy refers to as the “shock of conviction that only an intellectual art can deliver, the body-blow that is delivered by any perfect and therefore convincing statement of truth.”¹ He goes on to make the point that “a

¹ Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, *Figures of speech or figures of thought* (New Delhi: Munishram Manoharlal, 1981), 205.

liability to be overcome by truth has nothing to do with sentimentality; it is well known that the mathematician can be overcome in this way, when he finds a perfect expression that subsumes innumerable separate observations.”² This shock, however, is not felt by all us, but can be if we learn “to recognize truth when we see it.”³ I am not making the presumptuous case, however, that upon reading Coomaraswamy an aesthetic shock, a *samvega*, was experienced, for clearly learning to recognize truth in itself is a life-long process. A connection, however, at some level was indeed felt, and that is what drew me to Coomaraswamy in the first place.

Coomaraswamy’s writings were only recently introduced to me, and I certainly cannot claim I had been enamored with his works for years. Nevertheless, it felt familiar, something that I had been waiting to read. What is more is that I felt a deeply spiritual and almost Islamic spirit driving his writings. Having read only one article, it became clear that Muslims, too, have a lot to gain from the writings of Coomaraswamy. Hence, it became the impetus for this present study. The aim, therefore, was to evaluate Coomaraswamy’s perspective, to understand why he felt the way he did about art and its decline, and why he felt so strongly about rediscovering the true philosophy of art. Though the task was to also involve a certain degree of an

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

Islamic evaluation, it was never the scope of this task to “Islamize” Coomaraswamy, as it were, or to critically analyze his writings from the point of view of Islamic theology. Such an endeavor could have been the logical follow-up to this study, but the first step, as was the intention of this inquiry, was merely to introduce, in a non-critical nature, Coomaraswamy to a Muslim audience and highlight his pertinence in understanding the position of art in our own Islamic worldview. In doing so, it seemed the greater philosophical landscape had to be contended with first. Hence, it seemed a survey of some of the philosophies regarding art that had gained prominence in the West ought to be a place to start in understanding what exactly Coomaraswamy was trying to address. A cross-section of the Western philosophers on art therefore has been provided as the backdrop for this study, not only as a means of understanding what prompted Coomaraswamy to embark on his journey, but also to get a taste of some of the current trends in the philosophy of art in the dominant Western culture. Therefore, not only past scholars such as Plato, Hume, or Collingwood are briefly summarized, but contemporary philosophers such as Goodman and Dickie were thrown into the mix. The views even among the Western tradition are numerous, and clearly it was not possible to touch on all ideas, and even when a selected few were chosen, their ideas were severely truncated for the purposes of the study. Paraphrasing

the ideas of such great scholars clearly does not do proper justice to their works, but leaving them out all together would have been a greater injustice. Hopefully the paraphrases have not distorted in anyway what the original authors had intended to say.

However, as it is our purpose also to understand Coomaraswamy along Islamic lines, it was necessary to somehow arrive at what one might loosely term an Islamic philosophy of art. In addressing this issue, what becomes clear is that few Islamic scholars and even Orientalists even wrote specifically on the topic of art philosophy. Therefore, the ideas that have been patched together come from portions of the greater philosophical issues that Muslim scholars indeed did deal with. As an aid, the monumental work of José Miguel Puerta Vilchez was taken as the point of departure. In his book, *Historia del pensamiento estético árabe*, Puerta Vilchez analyzes aspects of different classical Arabic scholars dealing with the topic of aesthetics. Philosophers such as Ibn ʿazm, Ibn Rushd, and even Ibn ʿArabî are discussed at length in his work. Taking a similar approach, therefore, a few of the thinkers mentioned in his book are looked into briefly to portray some of the aesthetic philosophies advanced by Muslim scholars. Various ideas are put forth by the classical scholars, but the inclusion of contemporary Muslim and even Orientalist writings helped bring together

some of the classical ideas and put them in a current context. Therefore, writings of the likes of Seyyed Hossein Nasr and Titus Burckhardt have made their way into this study. In discussing the ideas of such scholars, again it is impossible to make a mention of every pertinent remark that was every made, let alone even covering all the thinkers that even touched on the subject. It goes without saying, that the selection of scholars made is only a crude cross-section which in no way represents an exhaustive picture of the complete landscape of Islamic aesthetics. Thus, we will have to make do, yet again, with rough paraphrases that hopefully catch the gist of the issues discussed by such weighty scholars.

Coomaraswamy's ideas, thus has been examined last, as it is the principle subject of the study. In trying to condense most of his ideas into a few pages, it is inevitable that certain points, aspects, and nuances may be left out. Needless to say, the aim was to try and bring across the spirit of Coomaraswamy through some of his key ideas that recur within his works. To call this an exercise in reiterating Coomaraswamy's philosophy may disturb the writer himself, for he so fervently mentioned over and over that what he was offering was not his own ideas, but a reiteration, a rediscovery of the traditional way of life. He never claimed any such ideas as his own, claiming rather that they were all age-old traditional truths, and

therefore though in practice we looked into Coomaraswamy's writings and philosophies, we should say, in true Coomaraswamian terms, that we were in fact delving into the true, or traditional philosophy of art. In this way, our reassembly, reconstruction of this traditional philosophy was built mainly on three of Coomaraswamy's collection of essays, namely *The Transformation of Nature in Art*, *Why Exhibit Works of Art?* (later published as *Christian and Oriental Philosophy of Art*), and *Figures of Speech or Figures of Thought*. In delving into the topics discussed in these books, the relevance of Coomaraswamy to Muslims will hopefully begin to appear. Keeping in mind that Coomaraswamy was sincerely looking for what he called the true philosophy of art, perhaps his ideas will begin to reveal a broadly universal, deeply spiritual, and therefore fundamentally "Islamic" core. A core which we refer to as being "*Islamic in spirit*."

The final portion of this study deals precisely with illustrating why we can refer to Coomaraswamy as "Islamic in spirit" and how his writings may help Muslims both lay and artistically inclined around the world. The traditional way of life, which Coomaraswamy advocates so passionately, was not only taken out of Western societies, but uprooted even from Asian and Muslim societies. The dominant modern industrial, materialistic lifestyle has eroded most traditions and has dug its ever

expanding roots deep into all societies. Coomaraswamy was well aware of the effects of such a Godless, traditionless worldview, and hence tried with single-minded intensity to educate people about the ravages of such modes of living. In his mission, he assumed the vehicle of the traditional view of the arts to bring back some of the core traditional values that were lost. In portraying this sense of urgency of Coomaraswamy, it is hoped we, as Muslims, can take away a valuable education. Perhaps we will begin to appreciate truth as truth, be able to recognize it, and uphold it no matter where it comes from. And perhaps we may remind ourselves of the Divine Love so universal and so deeply a part of Islam, that we have come to overlook due to our increasingly polar attitudes of either outright materialism or narrow-minded dogmatism.

CHAPTER ONE

LIFE AND WORKS OF ANANDA K. COOMARASWAMY

COOMARASWAMY'S LIFE

A “Modern Plato”⁴, the “Universal Man,”⁵ “not a man, but a phenomenon,”⁶ are but some appellations used to edify the art historian, critic, theologian, and philosopher that was Ananda Kentish Coomaraswamy (*b* 1877, *d* 1947). In the consciousness of many an art historian, he is perhaps the single most influential exponent that has dominated the current understanding of Indian art.⁷ To this note, numerous accounts of this hugely talented individual begin with a tribute given by the highly respected English artist-philosopher Eric Gill (*b* 1882, *d* 1940) in his autobiography. It only seems apt to make a mention of it here:

...There was one person...to whose influence I am deeply grateful; I mean the philosopher and theologian, Ananda Coomaraswamy. Others have written the truth about life and religion and man's work. Others have written good clear English. Others have had the gift of witty exposition. Others have understood the metaphysics of Christianity and others have understood the metaphysics of Hinduism and Buddhism.

⁴ S. Durai Raja Singam, *Ananda Coomaraswamy: remembering and remembering again and again* (Kuala Lumpur: Perchetakan Khee Meng, 1974), 11.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 212.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 363.

⁷ *The Dictionary of Art*, 1996, “Coomaraswamy, Ananda Kentish.”

Others have understood the true significance of erotic drawings and sculptures. Others have seen the relationship of the true and good and the beautiful. Others have had apparently unlimited learning. Others have loved; others have been kind and generous. But I know of no one else in whom all these gifts and all these powers have been combined. I dare not confess myself his disciple; that would only embarrass him. I can only say that I believe that no other living writer has written the truth in matters of art and life and religion and piety with such wisdom and understanding.⁸

Little did the world, much less Gill, know that such a man was to be born on the island of Ceylon in the Indian Ocean on August 22, 1877. Though his father, Sir Mutu Coomaraswamy was a great Oriental scholar of prominent Tamil lineage, his mother was an English lady named Elizabeth Clay Beeby, daughter of a respectable Mr. William John Beeby of Kent (hence Coomaraswamy's middle name "Kentish").⁹ His father was a scholar in his own right, who was not only the "first Hindu to be called to the bar, [but] the first Asian to be knighted."¹⁰ One could argue that it was the British colonial rule of Ceylon, now Sri Lanka, that brought together his otherwise very different parents, but it is of no doubt that as a writer and a thinker he was a product of the "cultural nationalism" that grew to resent this very rule. His early writings, begun at the start of the 20th century as a revaluation and unapologetic defense of the Indian and Eastern art, were a reflection of this pervading attitude. However, coupled with a

⁸ Eric Gill, *Autobiography* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1940), 174.

⁹ Raja Singam, 370.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 212.

deep understanding of traditional Western philosophy and the shortcomings of the modern industrial West, his works were to become “witty expositions” of “truth about life and religion and man's work.”

Though his living in Ceylon during British rule may have been the impetus, he did not grow up there. He, in fact, had moved to England at the tender age of two after his father's death. His early trainings were in geology and botany and having received the degree of D.Sc. for research completed when he was only 22, it was as director of the Mineralogical Survey of Ceylon that he returned to his native island in 1903. It was the following four years in the land of his birth that altered his focus from geology to that which was to become his life's work. Though the first thirty articles he published were on geology, his interests soon shifted and he left the position of director after only a few years.¹¹ He could not help but be perturbed by the ill effect western civilization had on the local cultures. Not only were these Asiatic cultures misrepresented and misunderstood in the West, he realized, but most regrettable was the aping of superficial western ideals by the peoples of Ceylon and India at the expense of their own far more profound traditions. In this vein, his first non-geological publication was appropriately entitled *Borrowed Plumes*. In this work, by

¹¹ Ibid., 99.

revealing the ridiculous nature of adapting the western dress, he “embarked with missionary zeal on the onerous task of not only exposing to the West the truth about Asia, but to restore to [the people of Asia] the sense of values and self-respect that [they] had lost.”¹²

It was not just the passing up of traditional apparel, but more significantly the decay of the ancient arts and crafts of Ceylon that was of deep concern to the young Coomaraswamy, and in the spirit of preservation he published his first monumental work in 1908, *Medieval Sinhalese Art*.¹³ The work was a culmination of a study undertaken to record the age-old arts and handicrafts of Sri Lanka in the Kandyan period (17th – 19th centuries) which was fast disappearing in the wake of the destructive impact of colonial rule. Despite his love for Ceylon, he knew his mission would not be best served in remaining there permanently, and it was his move back to England in 1907 that made this publication possible.

Upon his return to England, he joined a little band of like-minded philosophers led by C.R. Ashbee (*b* 1863, *d* 1941).¹⁴ Having shared in the work of the Chipping Campden Guild and School of Handicraft established by Ashbee, it is of no surprise that *Medieval Sinhalese Art* (1908) was published by Morris’s (*b* 1834, *d* 1896)

¹² *Ibid.*, 212.

¹³ *The Dictionary of Art*.

¹⁴ Raja Singam, 218.