

Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts (IGNCA)

Kala Nidhi division

presents

INTERNATIONAL WEBINAR

ON

Ananda K. Coomaraswamy: Reconstructing

Post- Independence Indian Art-history

(September 9th, 2020)

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The Concept

The IGNCA acquired the AKC Collection in 2008 from the legal heir of Ananda Kentish Coomaraswamy that represents diverse forms of visual expression that encompass modern art, including paintings (Rajput Paintings, Bengal School of Arts, sculptures, photographs, Line drawings, books, correspondences (present in these papers is typescript drafts, proofs, and revised published copies of many of his articles and a few of his books), slides, musical records etc.

The proposed whole day webinar aims to explore the multifaceted character of *Kala Guru* Ananda Coomaraswamy and his interpretations of Indian Arts towards construction of principles of contemporary Indian Art history based on the classical texts. His most prolific service to India was revival of philosophical interpretation of Indian art and a scientific criticism of the Western art. He actively participated in several meetings organised by Indian nationalist leaders fighting against the British imperial powers and the British were closing watching his association with freedom fighters. The circumstances compelled him not to settle in Britain. That was the biggest loss to British academia in general and Indian history in particular. His love and passion for deep rooted Indian ethos could be felt in the following quoted;

My own father, for example, was cremated in Cyclon: another member (grandmother) of the family had to convey the ashes to the Ganges, and performed the ceremonies there; thus every Indian is bound by religious ties to the holy soil of India. The holy land of India is not a far-off Palestine, but the Indian Land itself.- Ananda Coomarswamy, *The Life and Writings of Sir Muttu Coomaraswamy* by S. Durai Raja Singham, 1973.

He intended to retire from his position as Curator, Boston Museum of Fine Arts, America in order to return to India, where he planned to complete a new translation of the Upanishads and to take *Sanyas* (renunciation from the world). These plans, however, remained unimplemented due to his sudden and untimely death on September 9th, 1947. However, the ashes of Ananda Coomarswamy were immersed in the Ganges by his wife Dona Luisa Coomaraswamy.

His essay, *Indian Idols with Many Arms* tears apart western art critics' contempt for Indian sculptures rooted in their ignorance of Indian traditions. Ananda Coomaraswamy set the tone for examining Western scholarship on Indic traditions almost a century earlier. Ananda Coomaraswamy pioneered the current scholarly efforts in this area—challenging Eurocentrism in Indology and the rest. Coomaraswamy's *History of Indian and Indonesian Arts* was to become a magnum opus and a significant landmark in Indian Art History. In this, he comprehensively described the development of Indian painting, sculpture and architecture. As we know in his later phase, he focused on comparative philosophy & religion, culture and music. His *Introduction to Indian Art* is itself a masterpiece, mandatory reading for anybody interested in the subject. His seminal work *Dance of Shiva* is one of the numerous expositions on the subject: wherein he has presented an unparalleled description of the symbolism of **Nataraja**.

Coomaraswamy was one of the first to recognize and condemn the far-reaching disastrous consequences of the Macaulayite education system. In *Education in India*, he writes,

“I cannot think that European teachers and educationists quite realize how far “English” education as it is given in the East is crushing all originality.. in the unfortunate individuals who pass through the mill. Yet the “Babu” and the “failed B.A.” upon whom the Englishman looks down so contemptuously are the fruit of his own handiwork, the inevitable

result of the methods of education which he himself has introduced. Broadly speaking, you take a people, and educate its children in foreign subjects, and do so in a foreign language, ...ignoring their own culture—and then are surprised at their stupidity! Suppose that England was governed by Chinamen, and a premium set on Chinese culture; English children taught Chinese subjects in the Chinese language, and left to pick up the English language and traditions anyhow at home—would there not be some “failed mandarins?”

The study of Indian art history was initiated between the mid-19th century and early 20th by Western scholars who applied European norms and methodology to Indian art. More recently, this Eurocentric bias has diminished. Increased familiarity with objects of Indian art and their aesthetic language has led to attempts to understand and explain such objects from the point of view of those for whom they were made.

Most of the 19th-century scholars of European art, who had little access to Indian art objects, derived their dismal view of the art of the subcontinent mainly from exotic travelogues. They saw Indian architecture as subject to no rules, Indian sculpture as dominated by obscene or monstrous forms and Indian painting as a mere exercise in crude, bright colours, lacking such Western techniques as perspective and Hegel (1835) and John Ruskin (1859) saw Indian art as irrational or unnatural, flying in the face of ‘Classical’ (Hegel’s term) and Christian values, having reached this state by degeneration from rational origins in ancient Greece.

However, it was Coomaraswamy who, in a series of remarkable books and essays written in the first half of the 20th century, greatly advanced the study of Indian iconology. Coomaraswamy explained Indian art as a fusion of technical function and symbolic meaning, affected by the interaction not of Indian and foreign techniques but of the linear northern spirit with the plastic southern one. He discovered the Rajput style of painting and analysed it in relation to developments in Indian literature. The stylistic studies of painting have been furthered since the 1950s by the perceptive connoisseurship of Stuart Carey Welch, Robert Skelton, W.G. Archer and B.N. Goswamy. However, significant progress was made in the first half of the 20th century by Manmohan Ganguly, Nirmal Kumar Basu and N. V. Mallaya, and in the second half by Prabha Sankar Sompura, K. R. Srinivasan, Krishna Deva and M. A. Dhaky. These scholars clarified the technical vocabulary of Indian architecture and gave focus to the analysis of regional styles.

Now the Indian art history has reached a point where it has begun to reflect its indigenous merits. The new trend of awareness is evident, for instance, in Promod Chandra's *On the Study of Indian Art* (1983). Chandra emphasizes the need to study form (in terms of both its origins and its meaning) as well as motifs, to use Western tools for visual analysis as well as Indian manuals of art, to combine traditional and modern scholarship and to define style in terms of time and space rather than power and patronage. After his seminal works, there is art historian Bhuvanendran whose book, *Interpretations of Indian Art*, equally talks about the aspects of Indian Art History.

The webinar proposes not only to explore Coomaraswamy's understanding of Indian Arts, his interaction with Mahatma Gandhi and other freedom fighters as well as to explore his role in the propagation of perennial philosophy of Indian Cultural life, that is philosophically called *Santandharama*. It proposes to analyze the influence of his works on other Indian art historians.

The scholars from across the world will be requested to synchronized their ideas on the following identified sub-themes of the Webinar;
